

(This article first appeared in the April/May/June issue of the Assumptionist magazine, L'Assomption et ses oeuvres. Br. Gwenaël Petton spent forty years as a missionary in Brazil. He speaks here about "his" Brazil: the initial difficulties in learning Portuguese and adapting to a new culture and then his pastoral work in a favela, the experience of living through a military regime, and finally the renaissance of Assumptionists vocations in the 80s.)

I arrived in Rio on October 8, 1963, after a thirteen-day transatlantic voyage on the *Louis Lumière* of the Chargeurs Réunis line out of the port of Le Havre. Four religious were waiting for me on the dock. The welcome was warm and fraternal. I was only 29 years old and timidly began to know this community that awaited me.

Learning Portuguese

Usually young religious arriving in Rio for the first time were stationed there for a while. Our parish, La Santissima Trinidade (Most Holy Trnity), founded in 1945 and located in the Flamenco section of the city, quite close to downtown, was our home base. I had arrived in another world. First order of business – learn the language, Portuguese, fast. No specialized language center for young foreigners. I learned it on the fly, a copy of Assimil in hand, as I went along. One day I was asked to accompany a religious with poor sight to the new seminary in Portela. On our way the train derailed. The coach we were in, made of wood, simply fell apart. We escaped practically unscathed….but had to walk the rest of the way to the seminary! It was my first contact with our young Brazilian students. We spent two weeks there. Upon my return to Rio, I learned that I would be sent to Eugenopolis in the state of Minas Gerais to learn Portuguese. It was a lonely time. The rest of the community worked all day while I "learned" Portuguese. I had a lot of time on my hands, so I organized all the slides I had taken and whenever the community gathered I would rush down and give them a show speaking in my massacred Portuguese. They were patient. Sometimes I caused them to break out into laughing

jags. I also gave them a chance to practice their French. In the end everything turned out fine. After a few months I was sent back to Rio.



Responsibilities

I was given the responsibility for a development office ----that didn't exist yet!!! Everything had to be started from scratch. We already had some benefactors in the Rio area, so I began by visiting them. Even that is difficult when you don't know the language well. However, the people were extremely gracious and welcoming. Actually, they liked me a lot and "adopted" me as one of their own. After two years of catechetical formation, I launched a program for teenagers in the parish. The development office continued to take up much of my time, but soon I was asked to assume more and more administrative duties in the parish and then the secretariat of the

Assumptionist region (which gave me ample opportunity to visit all of our communities). Then it was regional treasurer.

Very early on in my stay the Second Vatican Council took place. It was an exciting time but I have to admit that the changes that were decided upon did not always take place smoothly in parishes…..



Coup d'état

It was also a time of uneasiness in the country in general. In 1964 the army seized power. The situation got very complicated. One morning military police took away four Assumptionists, three priests and a deacon (currently the bishop of the diocese of Juazeiro) because they were suspected on plotting another coup d'état! Suspected, that's all; no hard evidence.

Nevertheless, we were under constant surveillance. The federal police in Brasilia warned us to stop speaking in Breton, a language “for which we have no translators,” they said. It reminded me of my childhood days when back in Brittany we were prohibited from speaking our mother tongue. We often communicated with our religious in other communities in this language to give them updates of what was happening. The police even accused us of preparing the students at our minor seminary in Eugenopolis to join us in this supposed coup d’état that we were organizing. It was clear that throughout Brazil the military police were trying to put an end to the authority of the Catholic Church, which did not approve of the military regime. So we were accused of being “Communists.” There we were, 20 Frenchmen, “threatening” the powers that be. It was a little ludicrous.

In Rio we waited to be expelled. But the military was surprised by the strong reaction of the Church, starting with the archbishop of Belo Horizonte who called for prayers appealing for the release of the four Assumptionists in custody. At Christmas-time 1968 Pope Paul VI sent them, through the mediation of the apostolic nuncio, a basket of food as a sign of his own support. Finally, they were released in February. It should be said that other religious like the Dominicans, diocesan priests, and many lay-people faced the same trials. The bishops were quite upset. This tension lasted twenty-one years. Unfortunately, during this period, the number of vocations nationally (and also to Assumptionist religious life) dropped off dramatically. It would take years before the situation would turn around.

New vocations

It didn’t place until 1982 when we opened a residence for young men in the city of Campinas, some 100 kilometers from São Paolo, a collaborative effort with Dutch Assumptionists who were also working in Brazil but in a different region. Vocations began to arrive, especially from the state of Minas Gerais and our parish of Eugenopolis. The cradle of most of these vocations was the small Christian community movement. Thanks to these small Christian communities a Brazilian Assumption began to take shape.



