

A "life-changing experience" in Brazil, where I have lived since 1963

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I have been able to experience the harsh reality of 5 consecutive years of drought in the diocese of Crateus in Ceara, located in the most arid triangle of the north-eastern Brazil. The rural workers without crops had to face famine. For working on public works on the roads, claimed by the authorities, often with much repression, negotiation and humiliation.... they were paid a small salary, but not enough to live allow them to live with dignity. With several Pastoral workers in the grassroots communities, we found ourselves in great desolation of unknowing and with no way of renewing hope, until a Scripture Scholar delved into the Bible looking for a little light. And it was in Isaiah, in the 4 songs of the Servant (Deutero-Isaiah 40-66) that a hope arose. Especially during the lent of sharing: "bread for the hungry, and fraternity yes - violence no!" We tried to bring the poor people together in small groups of 7 to read these songs of Isaiah and see together what could come out of it to help them survive.

I saw marvels emerge from a reality of oppression, ungratefulness and humiliation: when a word of God touches the heart: "You are the one in whom my heart delights ... you who do not cry out in the street, who do not break the crushed reed, nor extinguish the smoldering flame (Is. 42) " then the eyes light up, the head suddenly straightens up, someone understands. "So I, a starving, humiliated person ... I am the one who delights of the heart of the Living God "... a resurrection, as the simple people have named it, had occurred. They began to organize themselves with the means at their disposal, they contacted lonely neighbours, isolated without hope. They did extra little works together, to challenge the authorities in their own way, e.g. inviting the mayor to come and eat the community soup with them and many other initiatives. These same wonders I saw during a Lent of sharing afro-brazilian culture (descendants of slaves) and amer-indians (the few remaining indigenous people, passed over in silence and declared dead). It is when you think you are weak that you are strong. Life is reborn; the little people recognize themselves as worthy ... and become Light.

From these years of extreme suffering was born "the Fraternity of the Suffering Servant" already actively present in 19 Brazilian states and 4 European Countries, North America and Canada.

Through 54 years of presence in Brazil I have tried to bear witness to the Breath of Life and Hope, to shed light on the harsh realities that the oppressed people must endure.

"It's dark but I sing," says a Brazilian poet, like the psalms that have arisen throughout the history of the People of God.

