

Uberlandia . . .

A Long Way From Irondequoit

By MOLLY JUDGE

This Christmas will be something special for Mr. and Mrs. Norman Mayer of Charlton Street in Irondequoit. Their daughter, Sister Mary Ann Mayer, SSJ, is home for the holidays after three years of missionary work in Brazil.

In 1971, Sister Mary Ann left family, friends and an eight-year teaching position at DeSales High School in Geneva to join 11 Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph in the interior of Brazil. Even though a stranger in a foreign country, Sister felt at home in Uberlandia and is anxiously awaiting her return there next month.

Uberlandia is a rapidly growing industrial city of 140,000, which is 250 miles due south of Brasilia. It is on a trade route and steadily gaining a large population of poor Catholics who venture into the town looking for work.

At the Bom Jesu parish where



Sister Mary Ann Mayer, SSJ.

Sister works along with two Irish Oblate Fathers and Rochester's Sisters, Virginia Schmitz and Laurel Davis, SSJ, there are 30,000

Catholics. The Sisters keep busy organizing catechist training classes, gospel discussion groups, sewing classes and with being on hand to help parishioners.

"I really never felt lonesome in Uberlandia. The people are so warm and friendly. They are happy people too. Regardless of their trials and troubles, they are filled with faith and are willing to share all of the little they have with you if you are a guest in their house," Sister said.

Sister applied for mission work in 1965. She was accepted along with Sister Mary Ann Raymond in 1971 and began a nine-week course in the Portuguese language, customs and culture at the Intercultural Institute in Petropolis. She was assigned to Uberlandia, which is one of the four missionary posts that the Rochester Sisters of St. Joseph serve.

"It was quite a struggle to get the people to understand me. But they are extremely patient and were willing to help me along with my pronunciation difficulties," she said.

According to Sister, a majority of the people live in poverty. The families are large and their living quarters small. The father usually is a laborer and earns approximately \$20 a week. As a supplement to this income, many mothers take in laundry or do sewing.

The Sisters lend a helping hand by organizing sewing classes "so they can earn a little extra money. Also clothes can be very expensive. So if the mother makes the family's clothes, they could have extra spending money," she said.

"There is no real social unrest (over poverty) but the poor do feel very inferior to the rich," she said. "So I coordinate a Mother's Club in order to get these two social classes together. At this club, we teach each other arts and crafts and mention methods of personal hygiene. Also, we have Bible discussions among ourselves. In these discussions, we try to help the poor women develop an understanding of worth in themselves.

"I remember at one meeting, the women broke up into little discussion groups. I asked each group to select a spokeswoman to tell the others what their group discussed. One of the speakers, a poorer woman, refused to speak to us. She said she was inferior and couldn't talk. But when I pointed out that I was a foreigner who could barely speak Portuguese, but nevertheless, spoke to the group, she realized that anybody could give a group report if she had confidence in herself."

"The climate is very hot and dry with the temperature reaching 90 to 108 degrees in the warm season," she said.

The people have developed their economy around the high temperatures. Cotton and Zebu cattle, which is a source of meat, milk and cheese, are the primary exports. Rice, meat, chicken and beans comprise the basic diet to which Sister has adapted with ease. "I'm still not a true Brazilian since I always have to boil my drinking water," she laughed.

According to her, the people live in their own private worlds practicing a simple but profound belief that their country is truly democratic. "Television is filled with propaganda. The people believe everything it says and are firmly convinced that Brazil is democratic, which of course, it's not," she said.



Sister Mary Ann, right, congratulates Wilma Helena Martins da Silva, one of her catechists, for managing to get electricity into her home.

When the mission was established ten years ago, the nominal Catholics, who are unofficially 97 per cent of the population, practiced a religion grounded in superstition. "The coming of the mission and the religious orders is changing the old ways. People are becoming interested in the parish and are starting to attend Mass, religious discussion groups and catechism classes. They are realizing that superstition is not a part of the Catholic religion," she said.

Sister's main duty at Bom Jesu is to train women to become catechists who will then teach religion classes to the parish children. According to Sister, this training is part of missionaries' overall goal of giving people an education to carry on parish work without missionary help.

"I can see how things have improved since I first went there and it gives me a great feeling of satisfaction. In fact, I enjoyed my work so much, I signed up for another three years," she added.

Brazil Mission Ten Years Old

Ten years ago, the interior of Brazil was a poor agricultural country with approximately 85 per cent of the adults illiterate. Few families could afford electricity or running water and every day was a struggle for existence.

Although an overwhelming majority of the population professed to be Catholics, their religion, for the most part, was a personal one of bits and pieces of Christian dogma intermingled with superstition and a resignation to fate. A traveling priest usually appeared in each community monthly just in time to perform the baptismal and burial services that the people viewed as the utmost function of organized religion.

It was at this time the Vatican requested that religious communities send a certain percentage of their personnel to serve the millions of nominal Catholics in Latin America who were without priests, religious or a reasonable knowledge of their faith.

The Sisters of St. Joseph in Rochester responded to the appeal in December 1964 by sending Sister Rose Alma Hayes to the small town of Paranaiguara, which is in the isolated interior of Brazil about 500 kilometers south of the capital city, Brasilia. Sister Rose Alma had administrative experience as principal of St. Agnes High School and she also possessed proficiency in the Romance languages, particularly Spanish, which would enable her to adapt to the Portuguese language, customs and history.

Soon other sisters joined her at the Intercultural Institute in Petropolis, near Rio de Janeiro. Here, they took a twelve week crash course in Portuguese to achieve a limited fluency to permit them to deal with Brazilians.

The first problem was to oversee the direction of state schools in the area and in the nearby town of Canal Sao Simao. The sisters served as principals of the schools, whose total enrollment was about 1200, until area administrators could be trained to replace them.

Gradually, the sisters' work expanded. They began to teach religion, English and adult education courses, to open clinics and assume catechetical work. The Irish Oblate Fathers who cared for the area parishes, welcomed the sisters to serve as pastoral assistants and take on duties dealing with social as well as religious apostolates.

As more St. Joseph sisters began joining the mission, new convents opened in Cachoeira Alta and in the rural area of Uberlandia, which is a ten-hour bus ride from Paranaiguara. In Uberlandia, the sisters encountered greater poverty and began performing social services in order to gain the confidence of the people before beginning ecumenical activity.

But since the mission's organization ten years ago, the Brazilian communities have changed. For one thing electricity, running water and even television are becoming a part of even the poorest households.

Uberlandia, which is on a trade route, is rapidly turning into an industrialized city with asphalt roads connecting it to the outside world.

The presence of the sisters has changed the people too. The sisters are getting people involved with their community and the church.

Training women to be catechists and gradually assume the religious instruction of their children in Sunday school, getting the wealthy and poor to work together, and teaching the people to work within the parish so they can overcome their fear of themselves and their religion is all in a day's work for the mission sisters.

Currently, there are nine sisters working in Brazil. Sisters Virginia Schmitz, Laurel Davis, and Mary Ann Mayer are working in Uberlandia. In Cachoeira Alta, Sisters Ellen Kuhl, Marilyn Dewey and Carolyn Cardinal are working. Sisters Katherine Popowich and Christel Burgmaier work at the original mission in Paranaiguara. And Sister Barbara Orczyk serves a mission in Itaguacu.

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mt. 2:13-15, 19-23. (R1) Sir. 3:2-6, 12-4. (R2) Col. 3:12-21.

St. Matthew in the first two chapters of his gospel draws all the parallels that he can between the life of Jesus and the life of Moses. Matthew's purpose was to convince the Jews that Jesus was like Moses and even greater.

Thus Matthew portrays Herod as a new Pharaoh. Moses fled Egypt because Pharaoh sought his life. Jesus fled Palestine because Herod sought His life. Pharaoh ordered the male infants of the Hebrews to be killed. Herod slaughtered the Holy innocents of Bethlehem. Moses returned to Egypt only after Pharaoh had died. Jesus returned to Palestine after Herod had died.

Also, you may wonder why Joseph seems to upstage Mary in the Infancy Narratives in Matthew. Why, for instance, does the angel appear to Joseph instead of to Mary? And in dreams?

Matthew is continuing the parallelism between Jesus and Israel. It was Joseph in the book of Genesis who was responsible, in the providence of God, for bringing Israel to Egypt. And his dreams played a major part in causing this event. So it is Joseph who takes the Child and His Mother into Egypt. And again dreams are decisive.

The liturgy chooses this incident in the life of Jesus, together with the first and second readings, for Holy Family Sunday, to help teach parents and children what their roles in the family should be.

Fathers, like Joseph, are to afford security to the family, to lead, guide and protect it. The story is told of a father who died and went to heaven. He met St. Joseph and said, "Gosh, Joseph, I never thought I'd make it. All I did was support my family and watched over them."

St. Joseph answered and said, "You know, that's all I did too."

Mothers, like Mary, are to impart love to the family. Love means caring for, believing in someone. In a world where pressures pile on husbands at work and where youth is constantly being belittled by a negative element in society, both husbands and children need the love that inspires, that makes one feel ten feet tall. Mary, for instance, never ran Joseph down. She never threw it up in his face that Jesus was her child and her hers alone. When Jesus was lost, tactfully and delicately she said, "Your father and I have been searching for you in sorrow" (Lk. 2:48). And how she must have wrapped Jesus in the swaddling clothes of her love!

As for children, both Sirach and Paul give sound, immutable advice. God demands but one thing of children — obedience! Not a grudging, querulous obedience but an obedience spoken of by Sirach as honoring father and mother. Obedience demands patience. Perhaps a fault of youth is impatience.

Think of this: Jesus was obedient to his parents for thirty years.

Don't you think He knew more than Joseph and Mary? Yet, He obeyed them. Don't you think He often dreamt of leaving home to get out and do His Father's work? Yet, He stayed home for thirty years obeying Mary and Joseph.

In this age of ours, when technology has created a new growth level called adolescence, youth must be on guard against prematurely setting out on His own. The Prodigal Son became prodigal because he left home too soon. Many failures in life are due to the same reason: dropping out of school too soon, marrying too young, and soon. Growth takes time. Toadstools grow overnight, but they are poisonous. It takes an oak 50 years to grow, but then you've got something.

It takes a lot of obedience to grow up. When we were 20, we thought our parents didn't know anything. When we became 30, we began to concede that they might know just a little something. When we became 40, we wondered how they had known so much when we were 20.

Jesus was brought up in a family to teach us to live with others. Love at home should be so fervent that it will fill the home and spill over into the world so that one day all men will learn to live together as a family and the world will truly become our Father's house.