

# To Look Through Each Other's Eyes

"COULD A GREATER MIRACLE TAKE PLACE THAN FOR US TO LOOK THROUGH EACH OTHER'S EYES FOR AN INSTANT" —HENRY DAVID THOREAU



Logo by Maureen Servas

## To Be Human in an Inhuman Situation

*"The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." — Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*

By Sister Beatrice Ganley, SSJ

What does a missionary learn from her experience? In a recent interview with Sister Catherine Foos, a Rochester Sister of St. Joseph working as a pastoral minister in the parish of Bom Jesus in Uberlandia, Brazil, I found an answer. Her stacks of pictures, her fund of information, her strong feelings spoke clearly: the missionary learns to love the people.

She spoke to me about a man who, although steadily employed for most of his life, will receive no social security pension or medical benefits when he can no longer work. Of course, there are laws that require an employer, after a period of three months, to pay into a National Health Fund and Retirement program. Brazil, however, has a large pool of cheap labor, and this requirement is skirted by the simple expedient of firing a person just before the expiration of the three-month period. Workers have no recourse. Labor unions are ineffective or nonexistent, and, as far as the system is concerned, these persons do not exist because no payments have ever been entered for them.

Hopelessness and desperation were words that occurred frequently as Sister Kay narrated the predicaments of 11-year-old working girls, barely surviving families, and inadequate schools. It was realities such as these which challenged the General Conference of Latin American



Maria, left, at age 11 started doing housework from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day to help with family expenses. She attends school each evening from 7-11 p.m. With her are sisters Edna and Lucina.

Bishops at Medellin in 1968 and at Puebla in 1978 and which prompted these church leaders to decide upon an "option for the poor." The Church in South America has taken the documents seriously, making an honest effort to place the decisions, directions, and activities of the church in the hands of the people. Since Medellin the consistent message of the Latin American Church has been: you have dignity as a human being, and you can do something to take charge of your life. This is the "good news" that the church can proclaim as it becomes a church "of the poor" rather than "for the poor." The response of the average person to this message, Sister Kay has found profoundly inspiring.

To illustrate this, she described a recent development in Uberlandia. Neighborhood creches or day-care centers have been set up to meet the needs of

the workers' families. In a country with 200 percent inflation, it is the older children as well as both parents who must work just to survive. Younger children and dependent or disabled adults are often left an entire day without proper care. Kay became animated and invigorated as she described how these centers have been set up with all decision making, policy setting — everything being determined by the families of those who come to the centers as clients. She spoke with pride of their commitment to care for the needy and dependent in their community.

It is, she says, in projects such as these that Kay sees a degree of hopefulness. Like many missionaries, she is somewhat reserved about her hopes for change occurring on a systematic level. The problems, she feels, are "too world wide, too entrenched, but on the local level things can happen."

We shared our own form of powerlessness as we continued to look at her pictures of people whose lives were at a dead end, for whom there was no opportunity of breaking away beyond bare survival. Ours was the powerlessness of knowing that the advantages of our standard of living and economic system depend for success upon the inhuman situation experienced by the people that we were talking about. The failures in our capitalistic system, the vested interests that control the policies of the international monetary fund, deciding for example that it is a good thing to maintain a large supply of cheap labor and a high rate of inflation in developing countries, led to the disconcerting awareness that the poverty and hopelessness confronting our missionaries are inextricably intertwined with our present way of life. It is hard to confront our complicity in such a situation. It seems so far beyond our control. But neither can we ignore the human realities presented to us by our missionaries on their home visits.

The individual can do little to right the balance of payments in national debt levels, or to remedy the defects in a capitalistic economic system, but we can come to know the people in "the third world" as persons, as individuals. We can, as Kay reminded me, learn much from those who have little in the way of material goods. We can draw upon our one really inalienable grace, that is, the ability to be human in our relationships with one another. "This is basically what I have learned," said Sister Kay Foos, "I have learned that one can be human even in an inhuman situation."



Hector (Tito) Gutierrez and Lia Gonzalez.

## Salvation Or Enslavement For Unemployed Chilean?

By Sister Kay Schwaner, SSJ

"Aletras" is what the men call their place of work. They refer to the hill where, under prisonlike conditions, they are constructing by human strength, pick, shovel and crowbar, a road to connect a poor area of Santiago with a wealthier area in order to facilitate travel for the rich. There, each work gang of 20 men is supervised by a boss who receives twice the wage of the other workers.

"I feel useless using those tools," comments Hector (Tito) Gutierrez, father of two young children, married twice, and living in a shanty town in Santa Ana, one neighborhood on the poor side of the hill. "The work does not fulfill me as a person. I consider myself a sacred person with my carpentry tools."

Tito, along with about 340,000 other Chileans (14 percent of the unemployed in the country), works in the Program of Minimum Employment (PEM) begun in 1975 as an "original and generous creation," a temporary answer to unemployment. At first, in government-created jobs, workers received a somewhat less than minimum wage for working 15 hours a week, but when unemployment increased, the program became permanent and the hours lengthened to 36-40 hours a week for the same wage.

The salary has changed very little during these nine years, whereas the cost of living has risen tremendously, exceeding that of the United States. For the same basic family basket of food in 1975 for which one would have to work 42 hours a week, today the PEM worker would have to work about 85 hours.

Lia Gonzalez, single, a catechist and member of the Christian community of Santa Ana, lives with her widowed mother in a small two-room house without kitchen or bathroom. Until she was laid off from the program recently, she had earned the same \$1.90 a day, or \$45 a month, as Tito.

Why do so many people accept such unjust wages and treatment? "Because of the situation," says Lia, "out of necessity and desperation." Responds Tito:

By exploiting the misery of the poorest, the unemployed, the government has saved more than \$1.5 billion in the construction of highways and emergency homes, cleaning of irrigation canals, forestry works and agricultural projects. The program is a way of insubordinating the workers into the work system and at the same time maintaining them at the margin of society in the poorer areas, and without any power to avoid their remaining the system of domination by the wealthy financiers and industrialists.

This system of control and social repression has created poverty, fear and a loss of personality among the workers. Lia felt like a prisoner, daily entering the locked work area and leaving her identification card and being supervised by a woman who gave commands by clapping her hands. For the first two months when she was assigned to street-sweeping, she felt "ashamed of the work it was" for women. "The men passing by looked upon them as cheap women to be bought for a price." Then, later, for the first time in her life, she had to use heavy tools and muscle power to clean up a rubbish area and prepare the soil for planting.

Despite the economic frustrations and exploitation, she found good companionship and sharing — of hopes, problems and lunch among fellow workers. "Nobody ate alone — we shared what we had." Lia had the opportunity of "helping adults recognize their rights" through private conversations. She became involved in a political union, which did not work out because of political party interference and lack of worker solidarity and fear. For her, the political party is for the common good — only the party of God, understanding to what Christ asks of me.

She has seen the same kind of work and at the same time seen the same kind of work done in a much better way. She has seen the same kind of work done in a much better way. She has seen the same kind of work done in a much better way.

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Sister Kay Schwaner, SSJ, is a missionary in Santiago, Chile, teaching catechesis for the Santa Ana community.

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