

Hope emerges from encounter of Brazilian communities

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ
 Aptly named "the Vatican II of the poor," a four-day national encounter of Brazilian base ecclesial communities itself seemed to be a realization of "The Struggle for a New Society," the title of one of the sessions on the July meeting's agenda.

Trinade, in the state of Goias, was the site of this sixth national encounter. There, cardinals stood in food lines chatting with Indians, brick layers and office workers. Bishops took instructions from housewives on the best method of washing dishes, and everyone sat on the grass, balancing plate and cup, eating together in a "foretaste of the society of equals" envisioned by the members of these base communities.

According to Sister Dolores Turner, a Sister of St. Joseph of Rochester who participated in the encounter, these base ecclesial communities are "modeled on the example of the first Christian communities described in the Acts of the Apostles. But they are strongly marked by the reality of Latin America, arising as they have from a

political, social and economic context marked by oppression.

"They have sprung from a situation in which millions of Latin Americans are daily crushed by hunger, sickness, lack of access to land, insufficient salaries and violence of all kinds," Sister Dolores relates.

Sister Dolores, who lives and works as a pastoral agent in Goiania with Sister Ellen Kuhl and three Brazilian novices, writes that this new way of being Church is a people's expression of Christian experience. It is strongly rooted in scripture and is multiplying throughout Brazil. These groups, she says, "are not simply communities of faith and study. Each one is a community of life which overflows in mutual help, interest in community problems, involvement in popular movements for human rights and solidarity with international problems, particularly the struggle in Nicaragua."

An important element of the "struggle for a new society" in Brazil is the matter of land distribution. Without such reform, "the cycle of violence, which has seen landowners sending hired militias against landless peasants, will not end."

Sister Dolores Turner's comments are in a similar vein. She writes of the third day of the encounter, at which participants considered the land question. As she listened to the small farmers recount their stories, Sister Dolores realized that the land reform initiated by the new Republic of Brazil does not begin to respond to the urgent needs of a landless people.

Nearly 2,000 representatives comprised the encounter, including 800 lay delegates — farmers, factory workers, laundry women and housewives. Nearly half of those present had suffered persecution because of their commitment to work for peace and justice, Sister Dolores writes.

In spite of the problems, persecution, and the recent deaths of land-reform advocates and parish priests who have worked with farmers seeking to gain legal title to their land, the encounter concluded in a spirit of hope.

Sister Dolores' description of the participants' nighttime march to Trindade's Basilica of the Divine Eternal Father is testimony to that spirit. "The night was filled with the joyous explosion of fireworks and bells," Sister Dolores writes.

When participants rose each morning at 6 a.m., "groups from the Northeast and the South would circulate among the people, providing a joyful atmosphere with their regional songs and instruments," she relates.

"colorful banners decorated the streets, and on the walls of the stadium, 30-foot-high banners recalled the annual gatherings of the past five years."

At the closing celebration, soil from each state of Brazil was mixed in a large vessel and placed before the altar as a symbol of the mission to which these base ecclesial communities have pledged themselves: to transform Brazil into a true "Land of God, Land of Brothers and Sisters."



Sisters Dolores Turner (left) and Ellen Kuhl, SSJ, stand outside their convent in Goiania in the Brazilian state of Goias.

People of faith seek justice through non-violent action

Sister Katherine Papawick has worked in Brazil since the foundation of St. Joseph of Rochester in 1964. During a recent visit to Trinade, she observed the movement of base ecclesial communities.

"This movement," said Sister Katherine, "has grown out of a strong faith conviction that God is with the people. It is a dream of a new society." The sixth national encounter of these communities, she said, is an effort to connect the communities around the whole world, very much in a faith context, as you can see from the title of the encounter, "The People of God in Search of a Promised Land."

Sister Katherine explained that for a year or more this theme has been the topic of reflection in all the base communities throughout Brazil.

According to Sister Katherine, the term "land" refers to more than agrarian reform and land rights. It includes the concept of basic human rights — medical care, education and just wages — the simple human dignity to which a person is entitled simply because he or she is a child of God.

Is this philosophy — also called "liberation theology" — merely a political movement? Is it Marxism and socialism "using" the gospel to achieve political ends? Sister Katherine seems certain that this is not the case. "Remember the biblical orientation of this," she said. "We are not Marxists ...

The basic intent is non-violent action."

She related a story about a group of 20 families who occupied an area of open, virgin land not far from Trinade, where Sister Katherine has been living. As much as they did this, the police refused to get them out.

The action was disciplined and well organized. The families camped out in the area for eight months, living under plastic tents. Church personnel mobilized to send in food and medical supplies for this extended stay. Finally, the families were granted legal title to the land by Brazil's highest court.

Throughout all of this, Sister Katherine said, "the camp was organized around daily prayerful reflections, community living and the use of all legal channels open to them. There was no sense of arming to get their rights."

Such people, she notes, appreciate the presence of priests and sisters who accompany them in their journey to "assume one's life as agent rather than as subject."

Perhaps to understand this inspired sense of hope and possibility coming out of Latin America, we in the United States should reflect upon our own history as an immigrant Church. The same desire for a life of self-respect and human dignity was the impetus that called our predecessors to engage in a struggle for the sake of a newer, fuller life.

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