

Sisters provide hope for Brazilian people

By Richard A. Kiley
News editor

After spending their early days of mission activity in Brazil directing schools in Mateira and the neighboring town of Canal Sao Simao, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Rochester have since become more involved with developing Christian leaders among the Brazilian people.

December 18 will mark the 25th anniversary of the sisters' mission in Brazil. The Sisters of St. Joseph were the first and the largest contingent of Rochester diocesan to move into Latin American mission work. They opened their first foreign mission in the Diocese of Jatai, Brazil, in December of 1964.

The apostolate, which began with just one sister, numbers 16 today.

The decision to begin a mission in Jatai came after Mother Agnes Cecilia, who was then mother general of the community, visited the diocese in response to the invitation of its bishop, Dom Benedito Coscia, a Brooklyn-born Franciscan.

The community's action also came in response to the request of the Holy See, which urged all religious communities to send members to the vast, unattended number of Catholics in South America.

Before the arrival of the sisters, the parishes in the region of Jatai were cared for by the Irish Oblate Fathers, who have continued to work closely with the Sisters of St. Joseph.

Sister Rosalma Hayes, SSJ, the foundress of the mission, said the mission has grown tremendously from its early roots. After she settled in Brazil, Sister Hayes was joined by four more sisters in August of 1965.

They all studied at the Intercultural Institute in Petropolis, a city not far from Rio de Janeiro. According to Sister Hayes, their courses included the Portuguese language as well as those on the history, customs and contemporary needs of the Brazilian people.

"At first we wanted to assist in education and health care ... but at the same time there was apostolic work," said Sister Hayes, who was chosen to direct the mission because of her administrative background — she was principal at the former St. Agnes High School — and her proficiency in foreign languages. "Illiteracy among the adults there was around 90 percent," she reported.

Sister Hayes said it was unusual for Mateira to have foreigners running its schools, but the sisters were asked to do so by the mayor of the community because only one out of the 48 teachers in the area had been educated beyond the fourth grade.

"We were involved in teacher training, not teaching children," she said.

The sisters also acted as advocates for the schools, making sure buildings had adequate supplies. To help lower the high infant-mortality rate, they also opened two health clinics offering pre-natal and post-natal care for women.

Since then, the mission's activities have expanded. Over the last five years, the sis-

Directory now available for hearing impaired people

The Monroe County Association for Hearing Impaired People (MCAHI) has announced that its 1989 directory of Services and Organizations Around Rochester for Hearing Impaired People (SOAR-HI) is now available.

The directory consists of the Rochester-area's most comprehensive listing of agencies, medical facilities, government offices and other services of interest to the 55,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing residents.

Call 716/473-6750 for information.

ters have taken Brazilian women as candidates into the congregation, expanded to new and needier areas of the country, and become an integral and recognizable part of many villages and communities.

Now the sisters have moved into six different cities — Uberlandia, Goiania, Curitiba, Itaguacu, Paranaiguara and Ribeirao-Cascalheira — and serve about a half dozen parishes.

Sister Jean Bellini, SSJ, who lives in Ribeirao-Cascalheira, said the sisters and two priests there are responsible for an area that is bigger than Long Island but inhabited only by about 11,000 people.

"A lot of the roads are not paved yet; many are just gravel," said Sister Bellini, 46, who noted that the condition of some



Sister Jean Bellini, SSJ, (right) goes over a report with the wife of a rural worker.



Sister Christel Burgmaier, SSJ, one of 16 religious serving in Brazil, visits the home of some parishioners in Paranaiguara.

roads makes traveling nearly impossible. "We get to the smaller places about three times a year, and the larger places about once a month."

Much of the sisters' work today is pastoral, and they attempt to encourage people through reflection groups and assemblies. Hence, she said, the Brazilian people are becoming more involved in establishing standards for baptism, confirmation and religious-education programs.

Sister Bellini, who has spent the last 13 years in Brazil, said that more recently the sisters have joined "squatters" in their efforts to gain legal title to the land they have cultivated for a long time.

"We've gotten into some of the social problems in the country and away from ... the more institutional areas," Sister Bellini said.

Sister Catherine Foos, SSJ, serves in Uberlandia, a city about the size of Roches-

ter. Sister Foos, who has been in Brazil for nine years, said the people in her region have become desperate.

"People there are rather hopeless. Because agricultural care is becoming more mechanized, people are moving to the city but they're not finding jobs," Sister Foos said.

Sister Foos said there is very little hope that the election of a new president in November and a newly drafted constitution will improve economic and social conditions in the country.

Sisters Bellini and Foos both commented on the terrible poverty they see in Brazil, a condition that has led to disease and suffering among the people there.

Still, their work continues.

"We try and show people why there is suffering ... because there are injustices in the world," she said. "We try and give them hope."

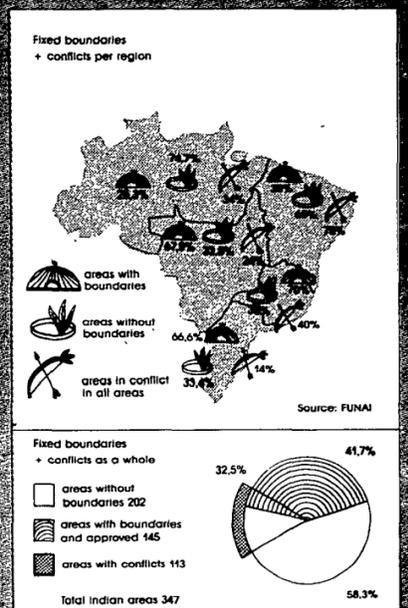
Book details suffering of Indian children

The above section, taken from the book *Poverty Child — A Case of Life or Death?* exemplifies the harsh life that the vast majority of Brazil's impoverished children suffer.

The book's authors, Rochester native Father John Drexel, OMI, and Leticia Rea-trous Iannone, have devoted their lives to working with poor children in Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city.

Father Drexel, a missionary priest, has lived in Brazil since 1962 and founded the Maria Helen Drexel Association, which houses and educates abandoned boys. The association operates five foster homes in Sao Paulo. The priest also coordinates Pastoral de Menor, a program which works with children like the one who live on society's outskirts.

Instead, a woman and educator, has developed educational projects with the Drexel Association and works with Father Drexel in Pastoral de Menor. She published the book, *Os Menores de Sao Paulo* (The Little Ones of Sao Paulo).



A map shows Brazil's Indian status.

she discussed the real-life situations of street children in Sao Paulo.

The authors' collective experience and research make *Poverty Child* an interesting read. For example, the book states that 65 percent of the nation's population lives below the poverty line. In Sao Paulo, 80 percent of the population lives on a shantytown, known as favelas.

As the authors note, the government's failure to provide basic services to the poor is a major cause of the suffering.