

**CATHOLIC MISSIONS**

# Street children's plight overwhelms mission efforts

By MARK PATTISON  
CATHOLIC NEWS SERVICE

**WASHINGTON** — Father John Drexel didn't enter the priesthood to help poor Brazilian children. His vocation just worked out that way.

The 59-year-old Oblate of Mary Immaculate priest, a native of Rochester, had hoped for an assignment in Japan, Laos, or the Arctic Circle. His superiors chose Brazil instead.

When he arrived there in 1962, he was shocked by the condition of street children. "I never saw misery in the United States," he remarked. "I saw poverty, but I never saw misery."

Twenty-nine years later, he is still working to improve the lives of Brazilian children. The six Sao Paulo homes he established have gotten 72 children off the streets. He also has co-written two books — *Poverty Child: A Case of Life or Death* and

*Walking Together* — about his work on the children's behalf.

"One discovers the mission of a priest is to be concerned about people," Father Drexel observed during a recent interview in Washington, D.C. The priest was on a two-month U.S. trip to visit his mother and promote his work.

"We not only have to be missionaries of the sacraments; we have to be missionaries of friendship, hope, compassion," he remarked.

Father Drexel said his efforts have won the support of Sao Paulo's Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, but also have earned him unwelcome attention from the local authorities. "If you work with street children in Brazil, you're going to receive threats from the police," he said.

The missionary priest estimated that 600,000 children live on the streets of Sao Paulo alone. Many of them are offspring of poor, rural fami-

lies who migrated to the cities in search of a better life they had seen on television.

Once such families realize poverty in the city is no better than poverty on the farm, they frequently send their children to the streets to beg, the priest said. But if the children don't bring home enough money, they often become abused and abandoned. Idling away their hours on the streets, many of these children sniff glue or nail polish, Father Drexel said. They are forced to beg, borrow, and steal for their daily bread.

Worse yet, the priest said, the street urchins also exist under the threat of punishment — and even death. Concerned that street beggars will impair the tourist trade, businesses hire off-duty police and security guards to erase the human blight, Father Drexel said. Often, he noted, children are executed for such minor crimes as petty theft.

"The punishment does not fit the crime," the priest remarked.

The vast numbers of street children overwhelm efforts to help them. "All the combined efforts (to help street children) — be they governmental or be they ecumenical — I'd say maybe less than one percent" are helped in Sao Paulo, Father Drexel said.

Twenty years ago, girls made up 10 percent of the street population, the priest said. Today, boys and girls populate the streets in almost equal numbers, and prostitution is common among 10-year-olds of both sexes, Father Drexel noted.

According to the missionary priest, 36 million Brazilia children are impoverished and abandoned; seven million of them live on the nation's streets.

The odds of ending up among the street beggars are higher for darker-skinned children, Father Drexel pointed out. "Black is the color of the poor."

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Information on Father Drexel's work may be obtained by writing to: **The Maria Helen Drexel Association, Father John Drexel, OMI, 26 Breckenridge Drive, Rochester, N.Y., 14626.**

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