

Chile, Brazil leave treasured memories

It is not easy to absorb, much less to convey to others, experiences like the one I had in Chile and Brazil in the last two weeks. I have tried to do both through the memories of the specific events and people who impressed me deeply. It is around memories that I understand the whole experience; it is through them that I look for the values and insights special moments like these hold for us.

For example, one afternoon in Vina on Chile's beautiful Pacific Coast, I stood hand-in-hand in a circle of prayer with Sister Jane Kenrick, a few of her co-workers and a group of AIDS patients among whom they minister. In the circle were straight people, gay and lesbian people, and there was a transvestite among us.

In the moments of quiet and prayer, so much ran through my mind: how very warmly these men and women greeted one another when they arrived, how kindly they treated one another, how easily they had included me in their company. I thought about what Jesus had to say about being present whenever two or three gathered in his name. And I knew he was there loving every one of us.

To me it was a striking experience of the kind of community we are called to be — welcoming, reconciling, always respectful of the dignity of the person. I had the sense that this group could teach much about how we really can help one another to grow, about how the foundation for that growth is a community that welcomes people as they are and walks with them as they strive for new life and growth.

I confess that part of me was dealing with prejudices and fears I had never had to face before in quite the same way. But I found that their emergence allowed me to appreciate more clearly that both fear and prejudice become enfeebled when we can see the faces of the people toward whom we bear them and when we come to learn something of these people's human stories.

When we can finally see their faces and come to know their stories, the reality that each of us is a child of God takes new meaning. So does the scriptural truth that we're judged not by how we look or by what we own, but by what is in our heart and by how we have treated those among us most in need.

I remember, too, sitting in the modest home of a Brazilian family. Sisters Sue Wills and Ellen Kuhl and I stopped because Ellen wanted to speak with a friend of hers. The friend, who had raised her own family, was now raising one of her grandchildren. And, although she has little by way of material goods, she fed us and sent us on our way with a generous supply of vegetables she picked from her garden.

The woman in the Gospel who gave her penny? I'm not sure about that. But her way of acting, her very demeanor in the offering of her kindnesses, convince me that this woman has a deep, co-natural sense that God gave us the earth and its goods. And that we honor God when we generously share those goods with our sisters and our brothers.

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If the people of Chile and Brazil teach the traveler much, so do our sisters. We presently have eight Sisters of Mercy of

along the way



By BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

Rochester serving in Chile: Sisters Janet Caufield, Jane Kenrick, Margaret Mungovan, Anne Marie Mathis and Joanne Deck, who come from our diocese; Lía González Sandoval, Soledad Cantillana Calderón and María Inés Olgún Caro who are Chilean. They are much involved in the life of the people. So to walk with them and talk with them is a privileged introduction to the life of the church in another nation. There is an extra dimension to the Mercy presence in Chile: Sisters Joan Doyle and Patricia McDermott hail from Australia, Margaret Milne from New Zealand, Judith Frikker from Detroit, Louise Dantzig from Brooklyn and Josephine Twoomey from Ireland.

In a similar fashion I was able to enjoy a small glimpse of Brazil through the eyes of our Sisters of St. Joseph. I went first to Uberlandia. There I spent some time with Sisters Kay Fobs, Ellen Kuhl and Ireny Rosa da Silva who work in the area; and with Sue Wills, Barbara Orczyk and Chris Burgmaier who were kind enough to come there from their places of ministry to spend some time with me.

Next, Ellen, Sue and I went to Goiania and enjoyed the hospitality of Katherine Popowich, Marlena Roeger and Janet Conorton. Katherine, in her 32nd year of ministry there, is senior among our sisters in years of Brazilian service. Janet, in her second year, is the newest member of the group.

On the day before I left Goiania, we had a wonderful picnic. Jean Bellini, Maureen Finn and Dolores Turner had joined us by then, as had Marie José Monteiro de Oliveira, a delightful Brazilian woman who is the newest member of the community.

I don't know just how many years of service these women and their predecessors have amassed among the people of Brazil and Chile. I do know that they work very hard and that they are held in great affection by the people. It would have been wonderful to have you along on the journey so that you might have seen firsthand the good work you support by your gift each year to our Diocesan Mission Collection. You can be sure that our sisters are deeply grateful to you for your generosity over the years. So am I.

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They told me that Dona Antonia is 80. I believe it because she shows the years of care in her leathery face. But her eyes are young. They show life. They search for life. I saw that life when I looked into her eyes and said, "Amen!" to her "Corpo de Cristo" when she gave me Holy Communion.

The Communion service came at the end of an evening in Jardim Curitiba, which included a service of the Word and a prayer of the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Marlena Roeger invited me to share this important piece of the life of the communi-

ty she serves. I was so happy that she did — and not only because it afforded an opportunity to meet those warm and hospitable people.

It also became an experience that connected me with similar realities in Chile and with a number of issues we are thinking about in our own country and, certainly, in our diocese. Among these are such questions as the dignity and power of baptism, the deepest meaning and greatest gift of ministerial priesthood in this age of church life, the importance of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the life of the community, and the implications for our communities of the changes we are making in response to a diminishing number of priests available for their service.

A priest comes to Jardim Curitiba — and to many other areas of Latin America — only once a month, and sometimes the interval stretches to two. In light of that reality, lay leaders call local communities together for Sunday worship, for catechesis in the community and for the whole range of activities we normally associate with life in a Catholic parish.

The people are actively engaged and have a deep sense of ownership in the life of their faith communities. My guess is that, although they work in cooperation with the bishop, the days are gone when they will be satisfied with anything less than a full and active voice in those matters that affect them.

I think that is the way it should be, but I am also aware that such changes in a community like ours do not happen without some difficulties. I think of the understandable reluctance among many priests to go from community to community celebrating the Sacraments. In their view such a "circuit rider" existence makes it difficult to develop the kinds of relationships that give life to both the priest and the community. And, I think, they see it conveying a notion of sacrament less full than we would all like it to be.

The other side of that coin relates to the experiences of some communities. Having no regular priest makes them more subject than they would like to be to the theological opinion and/or personal preferences of the men who come to serve them. Some priests tend to value their own insights and preferences more highly than they value those of the community they are sent to serve. When that happens, they tend to be seen as persons who come to rule rather than to serve. It just doesn't go well for anyone.

We are not yet near the place where our neighbors to the south find themselves. Indeed, compared to the number of priests they enjoy, we have a rich abundance of ordained pastoral leaders. But we will be wise to learn from their experience. They have much to teach us about the adjustments we are facing and about the development of Small Christian Communities.

Thanks for reading this. I hope these words convey some small sense of a trip to Chile and Brazil, which was truly a blessing for me.

I close by fulfilling a promise I made to our sisters in Chile and Brazil. That is to convey to you their love, prayers and deep gratitude for your support of them.

Peace to all.