

Trip to Brazil offers glimpse into mission life

Twenty-one years ago this month I visited our missionaries in Latin America for the first time. On that trip — and on all subsequent ones — I visited both our Sisters of St. Joseph in Brazil and our Sisters of Mercy in Chile. This year I am visiting Brazil only; next year, God willing, I'll be visiting Chile.

This is my sixth visit, as best I can recall, and I have enjoyed every one of them. Such visits are an opportunity for me to express your affection and support for our sisters who minister here and, through them, to the people they serve. They also afford me the opportunity to thank you on behalf of our sisters and their beloved communities for the support you have offered to them for the 37 years they have been living and ministering here.

The basic pattern of all the visits I have made has remained unchanged. I try to spend time with the sisters, to talk with them about their ministries, to share about life here and at home. Another central element of all these trips has been meeting the people whose lives our sisters share. Over the years I have been in the homes of many of the people. Through such visits I have learned more about their faith, their struggles for a better life, their care for one another and their warm hospitality to the stranger. I certainly have come to know their affection for our sisters and their appreciation for the richness the Sisters of St. Joseph add to their lives. The affection and respect in which they hold them is unmistakable.

Another of the great joys of the experience over the years has been the opportunity to visit and pray with communities to which the Sisters of St. Joseph offer so much of who they are. I have been to prayer meetings, to novenas held in churches and in homes, to youth gatherings, to organizational meetings and sessions at which people reflect on their cultural, economic and political situations in the light of their faith.

It is a special joy to celebrate the eucharistic liturgy with the people here. They are most tolerant and gracious with my pronunciation of the Portuguese language; the sisters are unfailingly generous in doing all the difficult work of translation that allows me to share in conversation with the people.

As I write now on the eighth day of our stay I realize that we have followed the basic pattern. I say "we" because my niece, Grace Early, is traveling with me, just as she did in January 1999.

In our first days we stayed in Goiania with Sisters Katherine Popovich and Anne Marvin. We also spent time with Sisters Sue Wills, Ellen Kuhl and Joana Dalva Alver Mendes, who live in a nearby section of the city. It was good to spend time with all of them, to hear of their experience of ministry and to meet their people.

Katherine is much engaged — and has

along the way

BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK



been for years — in promoting a better life for her people. In recent years, she has worked hard for improvement in education and health care. On this visit we were able to tour a modern maternity hospital whose innovations attract health-care professionals from many parts of Brazil. Katherine doesn't tell me — others do — that her contribution to the success of this project was significant.

Anne and Sue kindly took me to pray with their respective communities. With Anne, we celebrated the eucharistic liturgy. With Sue we joined a neighborhood group that is reflecting on the story of Cornelius in the Acts of the Apostles. They are engaged in a seven-week program, touching each week on an important biblical theme. I was fascinated by the ways in which they related the Cornelius story to daily life. It is obvious that Sue has done much to encourage this kind of interest.

Ellen Kuhl does lots of work in the care of children. Grace and I accompanied her to the homes of two young mothers where she taught them the technique of infant massage. Neither of us had ever seen it done before and were totally taken by the way the infants responded to it. It was a beautiful experience.

All through our stay in Goiania, Joana — one of the Brazilian women who have joined the Sisters of St. Joseph — served as our kind guide and interpreter. I met Joana here some years ago and came to know her better when she came to Nazareth College to study for her bachelor's degree. I admired her achievement because she knew very little English when she came north to do her undergraduate work.

After Goiania we went by bus to Uberlandia. There we stayed with two other Brazilian sisters, Marie Jose Monteiro de Oliveira and Ireny Rosa da Silva. Ellen, who accompanied us to Uberlandia, translated for us until she returned to Goiania. After that Ireny stepped to the fore. She knows more English than she lets on, and was most helpful to Grace and me when we really needed her language skills.

Ireny is a religion teacher in the public school system — something unheard of in our country. Marie Jose is in law school. Both are also deeply involved in pastoral service in their parish communities. I presided at liturgy at Our Lady of the Abbey on the Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul. Marie Jose preached very beautifully on that occasion.

I write on Sunday, January 27, in Paranaiguara, where Sister Chris Burgmaier works in health care. Ireny and her colleague Father Jorge, drove us halfway here; Chris met us and took us the rest of the way. We are staying here with Chris, who has been serving the people of this region since she came to Brazil in 1968. She is totally at home here. The people are completely at home with her.

Last night we went with Oblate Father Gerry Donovan to celebrate a first Communion liturgy in Itaguacu, where Sister Barbara Orczyk serves as pastoral minister after a long career in health care.

It was a wonderful experience of faith. The kids were a little older than they normally are for first Communion in our part of the world. The youngest was nine years old. A few things I noticed: The children ranged from light skinned to very dark skinned, with many shades of color in between. They all wore the same, simple, ankle-length white garments. None of them wore shoes. Some cannot afford shoes. No one wanted that to be a cause for embarrassment or discomfort. After Mass we were warmly received by friends of Barbara, who included us in their family celebration of their daughter's first Communion.

We just returned from the 9 a.m. Mass at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, Chris's parish. The church was full, but Gerry told me that, because it is summer vacation time, there were fewer present than usual. I think I'll join them for the 7:30 p.m. celebration. I'm told that most of the young people come to that one. It will be good to join in prayer with them.

Tomorrow, Barbara, Grace and I are going to spend a picnic day at a nearby resort area. It will be good to do that. We have moved around a lot, and on Tuesday we head home.

Our first stop on the return trip will be at Hidrolandia where all of our sisters will be meeting for a few days to plan and coordinate their pastoral activities for the next three years. I look forward to being with the whole group, even if for a short time. And it will be good to spend even a little time with Sisters Jean Bellini and Maureen Finn, who work in Mato Grosso. I had a chance to see Maureen for a while in Goiania, but have not yet seen Jean.

I hope that the paragraphs above give you some sense of the places we've been and the people we've met on this wonderful journey. Next time I'd like to share some reflections on the experience, what it meant to me and what, I hope, it can mean to our diocese.

You and all of the people of our diocese, our hopes and joys, our sorrows and concerns have been in my prayers these days. And our sisters and brothers in Brazil have embraced you in theirs.

Peace to all.

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