



## LA SALLE TEN YEARS IN THE AMAZON

08-B-37

### **Necessity and Hope**

Two reasons can be adduced to define the presence of the Brothers of De La Salle in the Prelature of Xingu: one of local character and the other provincial.

The Prelature of Xingu with an area of 350,000 km<sup>2</sup>, more or less, has the biggest territorial extension in Brazil: It is rooted in the State of Parana, between 05 and 9.8 degrees south latitude and between 53.5 and 55.6 west longitude. It extends from the majestic Amazon river to the State of Mato Grosso. In Brazilian terms it means a territory four times bigger than the State of Santa Catarina. In European terms, it surpasses in size all of Italy and a good part of Austria.

In 1975, this vast pastoral region was governed by a bishop with the help of 8 priests and a little more than a dozen religious sisters, the majority of whom were working in the school. With the designing, construction and opening of the Transamazon Highway, in September of 1972, which divides the Prelature of the East from that of the West, along an extension of more than 500 kilometers, many cultural, social, and pastoral problems began to arise. There was a veritable avalanche of immigrants from various parts of the country, giving rise to many serious problems: each family entrenched along the highway or its surroundings, came with its own peculiar customs and with its popular religiosity deeply embedded in their heart.

It so happened that the loneliness of the virgin forest unleashed a tremendous nostalgia for the homeland. The hopes of many immigrants were transformed into phantasms of poverty and misery and a spectrum of ignorance. In all this immense territory there was only one secondary school, situated in the city of Altamira at a distance of many kilometers. The improvisation of teachers was such that the families, in an almost desperate gesture, were confiding their children to a semi-illiterate whose pay was so ridiculously low that it hardly covered his transportation costs and his stay in Altamira where he had to go each month to collect it.

If these and other needs suffered by the people of Xingu brought us to the Mission, it is not less certain that these were not only reasons. Brother Francisco Alberto, Provincial, and a good group of Brothers of the Province looked upon this project as a sacred dream. They knew that it would awaken in the Brothers an impulse of renovation and would withdraw them from the routine of everyday life in the School.

### **The Church Brothers**

Another factor which contributed and facilitated the choice of the Lasallians in the Province of Porto Alegre for the Mission in the Church of Xingu was, without doubt, the recent plan created by the Church Brothers. In Brazil, this movement originated in the Diocese of Caxias do Sol. In 1972, conscious of the soundness of this innovation, the CBNN took up the plan of approving the sending of missionaries of the South and Central region to the Amazon, totally deprived of anyone to care for their pastoral needs. The Archdiocese of Porto Alegre was able to adopt the Prelature of Xingu. In June of 1974 they sent the first two missionaries to Xingu.

The Lasallian Province of Porto Alegre, belonging to the *March-Misionera-Interna*, Movement for Local Missionaries, in March of 1975 sent its first contingent of missionaries to the city of Altamira in the persons of Brother Adelino Ferranti, student, Vanderlei Marostica, and Brother Pedro Bohnenberger, who was in charge of this small community.

The duties of the three were to serve in the formation of a faculty in the Maria de Matias Institute and to assume the pastoral and vocational care of the youth. In the latter work, for many years we accepted the direction of the Minor Seminary which was given over to the Clergy in 1981.

### **Missionary Anguish**

The years passed by and with them we discovered that the activities in mission lands are ample and absorbing. The number of priests and religious have increased since 1975. Still, the 19 priests and the few dozen religious are hardly enough to attend to a population of 220,000 inhabitants scattered among 7 municipalities and 17 local towns. We Brothers are no longer 3 but 6 and we are totally submerged in, and in communion with, the local church, the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Here where the various and spectacular contrasts of nature live in harmony, a union of heart and mind are not always found among the people. The poverty and ignorance of the oppressed majority are the result of the ambition and the accumulation of wealth by some few privileged individuals. We feel that it is difficult to say «no» to the continual new pastoral needs. In fact, one cannot easily resist the pleadings of the heart when it is enamoured with the cause of the Kingdom. We have come to the point of discovering that the committed missionary, rather than sinning by omission, feels himself tempted to sin by the accumulation of pastoral tasks and activities.

## Education

In the city of Altamira, the Brothers have a headquarters whose administrator is Brother Beno Benemberger who also renders his services to the Community of Our Lady of Nazareth, in one of the sections of the city. His brother, Brother Pedro is committed to pastoral work at the Cathedral and also takes care of the Means of Social Communication of the Prelature.

In 1977, Brothers Waldemar Wolmann, Beno Benemberger, and Lucio Pauli opened a new community 180 kilometers from Altamira, close to the Transamazon Highway, in the very heart of the forest. There they took charge of the new public school, Malvin Jones. The then simple hamlet is today a respectable city with strong leanings toward political emancipation in a short while. Brother Ilirio Bertuol, who is in charge of the school today and who is assisted by Bro, Raimundo Zandomeneghi, has the responsibility of directing the 40 teachers and administrators and a school population of a bit under 1,000 in the complete elementary school and in the lower section of the secondary school.

Since 1978, in addition to his responsibilities at the Melvin Jones school, Brother Waldemar took over the supervision of the schools along the Transamazon Highway and Alrededores from kilometer 180 to 235. Today, Brother Renato Thiel is in charge of this work. Since 1983, Brother Raimundo Zandomeneghi has been fulfilling the same function as supervisor in the State schools from Kilometer 130 to 180. These two Brothers serve a total of 57 schools, 145 teachers, and 3,023 pupils.

## Upgrading Teaching

This contact with the teachers led Brother Jerónimo Brandelero to a new endeavour, starting qualifying courses for teachers during the summer months. They needed courses to complete their elementary education in order to facilitate their being admitted for secondary education. More than 100 students took the Basic Course and of these 68 qualified as teachers. These studies were offered at the La Salle Formation Center in Uruara, km 180, which had been constructed by Brother Francisco Alberto. Other courses given there were those of «Literacy», Art Education, leadership, Hygiene, Secretarial, and Administration.

Keeping in mind the minimum value which the public authorities give to the teaching profession and the lack of solidarity among the teachers, Brothers Renato and Marino Testaolin dedicated themselves to organize the teachers and parents for the defense and restoration of their rights for the amelioration of the schools and of education. This work reached its zenith with the creation in 1985 of the Association of Educators of Uruará, ASSEDUR. Another Association of Parents and Teachers was organized also for the territory between km 130 and km 240.

## Various Types of Evangelization

All the Brothers are engaged in pastoral activities outside of the schools. In Altamira, Brother Pedro gives courses on the «Christian Mystery» and partly cares for the finances of the Minor Seminary, Sao Joao Vianey, and since August 8, 1980, he has been daily directing the morning radio program, «Praying the Ave Maria». On Fridays, after the homily by the Bishop, «The Voice of the Pastor», Brother Pedro gives a brief commentary on the Sunday Gospel and gives a brief news report about the local, National, and Universal Church. The Brothers of the two communities are engaged in the formation of catechists and in catechesis for children, youth and adults, they animate the Bible Clubs for groups of youth in the neighborhood. In the absence of the priest, they lead the Sunday services.

In spite of the various types of work which do not facilitate the matter, nevertheless, the promotion of vocations is not neglected. This work for vocations is done through personal contacts in the Melvin Jones school and in the supervised schools.

## Difficulties

During the year there are only two regular seasons, the rainy season and the sunny season. During the six months of rain, in the older houses, like our house in Altamira, the walls are damp, the whitewash comes off the walls, the roof becomes black, the floor begins to rot, and day and night the house has a mildewed smell. The streets, all of the land, are rarely in even a reasonable condition. In winter (the rainy season) there is much water erosion which enormously damages the surface of the streets.

In the summer there is soil erosion everywhere. There is clay and dust everywhere. A bus ride between Altamira and Uruará, which normally should take seven hours, can sometimes drag out for an entire day or more, but finally you make it. During the months of the heaviest rains, the only transportation company withdraws its vehicles from service. The sick, the sale of products, the buying of materials of prime importance, urgent messages, etc., all have to wait for their due time. The Air Transport Company, TABA, which brings the missionary to Belém, Para or to the Mission at Xingu, does so in old and poorly maintained planes. It is so bad that recently TABA deserved to have its name mimicked as Transporte Aereo Bastante Arriestado, Air Transport Rather Dangerous.

There is one factor which we cannot omit: Among the good will of all those working in the pastoral mission in order to assume the «Preferential option in favor of the poor», and to put into practice liberating evangelization, there have arisen certain internal tensions which have caused a bit of difficulty in the work of the some of the Brothers. But we can say that this problem is now practically overcome. The 5000 or some kilometers which separate us physically from the other La Salle Brothers of the Province of Porto Alegre and the 200 kilometers full of difficulties which make our more frequent meetings between our two communities rather difficult, have in no way diminished our love, union, and enthusiasm for the Brothers, the Province, or the Congregation.

**Brother Pedro BOHNENBERGER**