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## Brazil: Memories of a mission

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# Memories of a mission

Cathal Barry

In 1963 a group of six Irish Spiritan priests set out on the long missionary journey to Brazil to work in a number of already established parish communities in the country's interior.

The move was in response to Pope John XXIII's appeal for missionaries to Latin America to combat communism and counteract the inroads of evangelical sects.

## **Newness and adventure, but not all plain sailing**

Among the first group to arrive in Brazil was Fr Patrick Dundon CSSp. "There was a real buzz about Latin America at the time," the Dublin-born missionary told me, admitting that he had secretly hoped to be one of the newly ordained Spiritans chosen to go. "I was fired up by the Pope's call and the new need for missionaries to that continent, so I was really thrilled when I heard the news I was going. It was the sense of newness and adventure that excited me. It really was pioneering at the time."

Despite the 22-days long boat journey and the difficulties of communication upon arrival, Fr Dundon claimed "home never entered our heads." Then the arrival of a further 32

Irish priests during the 1960s contributed to establishing "a tremendous family spirit." The veteran missionary described his time in Brazil as "a gift." "It was a joy to have lived to see the church being what it was called to be," he said.

It was not all plain sailing, however, for these Irish missionaries in Latin America. Two revolutions were brewing when the Spiritans arrived on the scene: one on the political level, the other in the Church.

The political revolution occurred suddenly. In a bloodless coup d'état, the army supported by the middle class and backed by the USA, overthrew the government on April 1, 1964. Human rights were severely violated under the oppressive military regime for the following twenty years. The Spiritans, however, were to take a stand for social justice and, in doing so, earned the respect of the poor and oppressed as defenders of their rights.

## **Extreme poverty, but great spirit**

At last year's gathering in Sao Paulo, Dubliner Fr Phil Doyle CSSp was reunited with confreres for the first time in over 35 years. He remembered living in the country during the military

dictatorship. “In those days people who worked with the poor were considered subversive. They did not want us making the poor conscious of their reality,” he informed me.

Fr Doyle spoke about the great spirit of the Brazilian people despite many of them living in extreme poverty. “The people I worked with often had nothing other than four pieces of cardboard in a favela. It was poverty at its worst, but

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— Phil Doyle CSSp

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despite it all, they had hope. We were just another link in the chain to help them continue,” he said.

The years of dictatorship were paradoxically years of growing influence for the church with the Brazilian people. The welcomed return of these much loved missionaries following decades pursuing mission elsewhere is testament to that fact, as is the people’s unceasing affection for Irish Spiritans who never left.

### See – Judge – Act

Fr John Horan CSSp arrived in Brazil after the close of the reforming Second Vatican Council, when “changes were just

beginning. They were exciting years to be a missionary,” the Tipperary native admitted.

Latin America was quick to implement the new model of church as “the people of God” proposed by the Council, which saw the laity as co-responsible for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps more important again was the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellin, Columbia in 1968. That meeting committed the Latin American church to the “option for the poor” and denounced oppressive social structures.

Fr Horan noted there was also a move away from theorizing theology, towards a more practical method. “You saw the reality of a situation, judged what was happening and then you would try to act.” he said. See – Judge – Act.

The retired missionary spoke about the difficulties he experienced during the early stages of the Spiritan mission in Brazil. After just two years in the country he was thrust into a community as parish priest, which, in his opinion, was too early. “I didn’t have the pastoral experience in a foreign country just yet. I wasn’t able to read certain situations, or the culture or politics,” he admitted.

However, looking back now, he believes strong relationships with parishioners helped him survive. “Brazil is a place where everyone suffers, even the priest. You can’t be afraid to get your shoes dirty,” he said, “It was all for the service of the church.”



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## From rural parishes to large cities

Early in the 1970s a decision was taken to gradually phase out pastoral work in rural Brazil and move to serve migrants in the rapidly expanding periphery regions of large cities such as Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paolo and Recife.

“It was a case of moving to where the need was greater,” according to Fr Vincent McDevitt CSSp who arrived in Brazil in 1971. “It was difficult at first, but the reason for the move was to meet the challenge of suffering in the cities. City life was a totally new experience for most of our priests who were of rural origin. In the small towns where we had been you were immediately recognizable, whereas in the periphery of the big cities it was easy to become lost in the middle of it all,” he said.

In those early years, Irish Spiritans in Brazil participated primarily in pastoral work in small basic communities. These would be handed over to the relevant diocese at a later stage once certain standards had been met.



## Evangelization

Further developments in later decades saw the Congregation specialize in other methods of evangelization: formation, spirituality, youth leadership and counseling, all the while continuing their ministry to the poor.

The Spiritans have now been out of direct parish administration in Brazil since 2012. “This has allowed the Congregation the flexibility and availability to see mission outside the box,” according to former Formation and Group Leader of the Irish Spiritans in Brazil, Fr Maurice Shortall, recently appointed a member of the Spiritan General Council in Rome. “The role of the Spiritan today is not to do the work of a diocesan priest,” he said, “but rather to see new areas of mission in the world.”

Looking to the future, Fr Shorthall believes the Congregation can continue to make a significant contribution provided there is “closer collaboration and integration with the Brazilian Province. I think we can bring a lightness and a missionary dimension to the Province and a certain creativity to seek out new missions for the Spiritans.”

The former Brazil based Superior is unconcerned by a shortage of vocations. “It’s not about how many parishes you are able to staff or territories you are able to hold down. It’s

about people who are attracted to living as a religious missionary in the Spiritan tradition,” he said.

## Lay Leadership

Spiritan vocations Director, Fr Brendan Foley CSSp agrees that “it’s not a numbers game.” Rather, he sees it as “small mission steps towards sowing seeds of vocational awareness to the Church and missionary life.” Fr Foley is more concerned with “the quality of leadership in the church that leads to ministry formation for lay people. The quicker we get into that realm of faith-based living and allow lay people to come forward to assume their roles, the quicker the church will breathe on two lungs,” he said.

Lay leadership has been at the heart of the Irish Spiritans’ mission in Brazil and has been one of the greatest contributing factors in the Congregation’s successful evangelizing efforts.

From what I have witnessed during my time in Sao Paolo, the Irish Spiritans have an unrivalled ability to engage lay

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people in active ministry within the Church and to animate young people in such a way that they are not merely products of mission, but become agents of mission themselves,

The Irish Spiritans have given a voice to the laity in Brazil over the past 50 years and, in doing so, have contributed to liberating the Latin American church from the crisis of clericalism that has infiltrated the Church elsewhere.

## Hope

The Church in Brazil has admittedly transgressed in recent years under consecutive conservative hierarchies. However, the hope among the Brazilian people now is that under the current papacy, the church in Brazil can return to its foundational roots, which Irish missionaries have been instrumental in developing.

Irish Spiritans have been present in Brazil during some of the most vitally important junctures in the country’s struggle for enlightened faith, freedom, justice and peace. Their immense contribution to date will undoubtedly ensure their presence there for years to come. ■

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