Brazil: A presence in the favela

Cathal Barry

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When western Catholics visualize the church in Latin America they very often picture a vibrant scene full of bright young people bearing witness to their faith. This is true, to a certain extent, at least in poorer areas of South America. However, the Latin American church is not without crises.

In Sao Paolo, Brazil, I visited projects established and run by Irish missionary priests working in what is one of the most densely populated cities on earth. There the Spiritans do phenomenal work, evangelizing some of the world’s poorest in the city’s slums, tenements and prisons.

I was in Sao Paolo as part of the jubilee celebrations of the Irish Spiritan mission to Brazil. There was a great deal of talk about the past. The priests enjoyed being reunited with old friends. Old memories came back to life again — they were not merely retold, they were relived.

Youth rally — all not well

On Mission Sunday last year I attended the national youth rally in Sao Paolo along with around a thousand other young Catholics. Wowed by the large numbers at first, the unimpressed faces of my guides informed me that all was perhaps not so well. Apparently the thousand or so youths that turned out for the march to Sao Paolo’s Cathedral da Se was disappointing compared to the previous years when up to 15,000 young people thronged the city’s streets celebrating their faith.

Questioning the falloff, I was told the overly conservative hierarchy just do not appeal to the masses in a country so steeped in liberation theology. Out in the peripheries, Sao Paolo’s poorest are used to a different type of church — a church, as Pope Francis has said, “for the poor.”

“There is too much distance between the cardinal and the people,” one young man from the peripheries told me. “He needs to walk with the poor,” another girl said.

However the hope here is, now that Pope Francis is on the scene, that his understanding of Latin America and love for the poor will eventually filter from the top down. That, combined with the continuing work of missionary priests such as the Irish Spiritans, will surely provide the perfect antidote to clericalism in South America.

Football and the favelas

Hosting the FIFA World Cup this year followed by the Olympic Games in 2016 will undoubtedly do great things for the Brazilian economy, generating a fortune for the tourism industry at least. However, intensive construction to revamp the country’s infrastructure before these events begin has seen slums demolished and communities displaced after literally being bulldozed out of their own homes.

Sao Paolo’s favelas are some of the slums being leveled in Brazil by civil authorities attempting to clear the way for the construction of massive stadiums, shopping malls and multi-storeyed car parks to meet FIFA’s lofty demands. These slums are homes to some of the world’s poorest — people whose lives could be drastically improved if even a fraction of the substantial investment, to make the Sao Paolo World Cup worthy, was redistributed and invested in them.

The slums of Sao Paolo are like no other place on earth. They are home to some of the world’s poorest, living in harsh conditions against a backdrop of violence and corruption. Drugs and disease are rampant within these Brazilian shanty towns, while cramped living conditions ensure there is no presence in the favela.

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Maze-like streets narrow as you navigate your way further into the heart of the favelas. The reverberating sounds of samba coupled with the wafting smell of Brazilian barbecue begin to dim the din of traffic and the outside world. As these slums seem to swallow you whole once you are inside, a sharp pinch is regularly needed to remind yourself that this is reality.

### A dream come true

The favelas of Vila Prudente on the outskirts of Sao Paolo’s city centre are shunned even by the Brazilian police. They don’t dare enter. However, for Spiritan missionary Fr Michael Foody, these slums are a second home.

The Aparecida favela is all-consuming. Closely stacked iron containers and wooden shacks prevent any sunlight from penetrating the slum’s flimsy walls. The damp darkness inside seems to engulf you and gives the impression you have just stepped into an underground community.

However, deep inside the shanty town, at the heart of the community, is a small Spiritan-built chapel. Here the favela’s faithful come to celebrate Mass. Here too young Spiritan seminarians provide catechetical classes for slum children.

In a similar Spiritan project in the Sao Jose favela, the congregation has built a large church and community centre dedicated to the much loved Oscar Romero.

Despite the graffiti-daubed slum walls, the church and community centre have been left untouched, such is the respect for the work of missionary priests like Fr Foody, who considers the opportunity to work with some of Sao Paolo’s poorest a dream come true. “Having a presence in the favela is very important, so I spend a lot of time visiting families and making friends with the people,” Fr Foody told me. “Through my work I’m realizing my dream of an option for the poor in the context of my congregations. Having the ability to do that at this stage of my life is extremely fulfilling,” he said.

### Protecting and supporting the slum dwellers

While work at the coalface remains a priority for Irish Spiritans in Brazil, many toil tirelessly behind the scenes constantly campaigning for improvements to the standard of living in Sao Paolo’s city slums.

The Movimento da Defensa da Favelada (MDF) is one such Spiritan project established to protect and support Sao Paolo’s slum dwellers. Founded on the three principles of presence, resistance and solidarity, the Movimento works with over 5,000 people from 50 urban slums. The project engages in a number of activities such as training for community teachers...
and supporting the setting up of local committees in the slums to campaign for their right to decent living conditions.

The organization was the result of a “flash of inspiration” to Dublin-born Spiritan, Fr Patrick Clarke, in the aftermath of his first favela experience. He was struck by the poverty people were forced to live in and immediately set about trying to form an organization that could bring about some much-needed improvement to people’s lives.

Hesitant to burst on the scene with a readymade solution, Fr Clarke first established contacts with slum areas and facilitated prayer for various communities. The willingness of participants to open up meant the prayer meetings provided the ideal forum for listening and, in time, Fr Clarke became ideally placed to ignite solutions generated from within the favela — solutions that had the input and agreement of the entire community.

Close to the people

“I wanted to be part of the solution rather than the instigator,” Fr Clarke told me. “The idea was to help people become empowered and let them gradually make the changes that were appropriate and necessary for their own lives,” he said.

Since its foundation MDF has been responsible for a drastic improvement in living conditions particularly in fighting for land rights and improved housing for many of Sao Paolo’s favelas. Since then the project has developed, embracing education, literacy, civil rights and culture.

“MDF is a grass roots movement that’s very close to the people,” Fr Clarke said. “It fills the vacuum between an absent state and a people whose representatives are in many cases corrupt or not even present. It’s an important space where people can have a voice and be listened to.”

Ecology is another project close to Fr Clarke’s heart. He notes the ecological question is a lot more complex in the peripheries of large cities like Sao Paolo where “people living in squalor are condemned to die.”

Sao Paolo, according to Fr Clarke, is a city “ready to blow up with so much injustice, impoverishment and marginalization.”

Retreat Centre

In an attempt to shed light on the question of ecology in a city like Sao Paolo, the Irish Spiritans have also built a rural retreat centre, Sitio dos Anjos, just outside the city. This city of angels is availed of by shanty-town dwellers and local basic communities for days of relaxation, prayer and ecological experience. Here groups of slum children and adults alike can come and be inspired by nature and other simple things many of us take for granted.

Sitio dos Anjos provides a space to develop an awareness of the world and of a life of hope beyond the reality of severe poverty and extreme violence the slum dwellers are constantly subject to.

Youth leadership

Fr George Boran is another Irish Spiritan who has provided an invaluable service to the poor in Brazil for decades. In 1976 he initiated the youth leadership foundation centre, Cento de Capacitacao de Juventude (CCJ). This project contributes to the education of youth living in social exclusion in Sao Paolo and other urban areas throughout the country. Its main objective is to train committed and capable leaders in their parishes and to gradually develop a countrywide network of committed faith leaders.

At present, CCJ supports a network of 25,000 youth groups. It contacts youth through social networking sites, as well as through face-to-face opportunities and outreach. CCJ is staffed by a large network of lay volunteers, in addition to a small coordinating team. Hundreds of young people from parishes across the country participate annually in its courses. The courses strive to improve job prospects for unemployed youth, enhance their self-esteem, their participation in community life and their enjoyment in proclaiming their faith to their peers. Among their main activities are vocational and skills training workshops on leadership and social responsibility as well as faith formation and pastoral skills. It is hoped that through this youth network young people get a second chance and divert away from ant-social behaviour, unemployment, alcohol addiction, drug trafficking, teen pregnancy, bullying and leaving education prematurely.

It was an exceptional privilege to witness firsthand the phenomenal contribution of the Irish Spiritans not only to the building up of the church in Brazil, but to the lives of so many of the country’s poorest as well.