Centro Cultural: The Soul of the Slum

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The Soul of the Slum

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“Be a fly on the wall till you know what the people are talking about. Then use your teacher-learner skills to help them become empowered.”

A favela called Vila Prudente

It was in one of these places, a favela called Vila Prudente, with a population of 18,000, that Pat Clarke began his missionary career in Brazil. A maze of alleys and lanes winding their way through shacks built of discarded wood, tin or cardboard, Vila Prudente is one of an estimated two thousand favelas in the city of Sao Paulo.

The favela population is a phenomenon of the post 1964 military coup which saw the acceleration of the process of industrialization and hence the overwhelming need for cheap labour. Thus, hundreds of thousands of people began to migrate from the impoverished North East of the country to work in the factories of the south, swelling the city of Sao Paulo to its inordinate size.

Luiz Inacio da Silva, together with his mother and his eight brothers and sisters, was one of this multitude of migrants. He was a shoe-shine boy on the streets, a factory worker, a union leader. He is now in his second term as President of Brazil.

Sao Paulo, the largest city in South America and the third largest in the world, has the worst and the best of everything. It is a place of fear and a place of welcome. It is made of concrete and steel yet it has a generous heart. It has the amenities and the wealth of a modern metropolis side by side with strident and heartbreaking poverty.

Spiritans have taken their motto “Rag-pickers of the Church” to heart, and gone out to disaffected youth, to slum dwellers, to factories of striking and underpaid workers, to those in hospital and in prison, to children on the streets, to women caught up in prostitution, to the homeless and the landless in search of a roof or a plot to call their own.

Spiritans from Ireland have been living and working in this city since their arrival in Brazil in the mid 1960s. They are to be found mainly where the majority of the people struggle with unemployment, inadequate housing, crime, corruption and a chronic lack of leadership.

It is in these places, where no one wants to stop, that Spiritans have taken their motto “Rag-pickers of the Church” to heart, and gone out to disaffected youth, to slum dwellers, to factories of striking and underpaid workers, to those in hospital and in prison, to children on the streets, to women caught up in prostitution, to the homeless and the landless in search of a roof or a plot to call their own.
And where could all these people live, who earned only slave wages? They found their own solution: the shacks and the slums, built on waste land, under bridges, on the slopes of hills.

It was there that they made their homes and re-created their close knit sense of community and its religious and artistic culture that they had brought from the rural North East. And they needed it, because they were despised and rejected by the common citizen of Sao Paulo who regarded them as primitive and dangerous intruders.

Paulo Freire

It was into this that Pat Clarke stepped somewhat unwittingly, 30 years ago, not knowing really what to do or where to begin. He was conversant with the educational theory of Paulo Freire, the well known Brazilian philosopher, and they were later to become good friends. They had met at a seminar in Paris in 1974, so when Pat was appointed to Brazil two years later, Paulo’s advice was; “Don’t begin with ready made answers and ready made projects. Be a fly on the wall till you know what the people are talking about. Then use your teacher-learner skills to help them become empowered.”

Reflecting on his early years in Vila Prudente, Pat remarks; “The favela has been a place of learning, a university, a street school. Sitting in a wooden shack with a sewer flowing under the floorboards, rats hopping around somewhere in the background, conversation flows in a way it rarely does in our self-satisfied ‘suburbanity’. Here, some of life’s most important truths have been spoken. And unspoken.”

Coincidently, many of Paulo Freire’s key ideas coincided with a time of great excitement in the Brazilian Church. The time when Liberation Theology was in the ascendant. When, to be among the poor was a privilege and challenge to personal conversion. The time when the great Latin American Episcopal Conferences of Medellin, Puebla and Santo Domingo had given the Church important new insights regarding the preferential option for the poor and the spiritual integrity of the human person.

Centre for Culture and the Arts

All this was in the air and in the books. But, it needed some concrete expression. Pat hit upon

Fernandez Peira de Silva, 21, lives in the Vila Prudente favela in Sao Paulo, Brazil. When he was six months old his parents moved from the mountains of north eastern Brazil to Sao Paulo, the country’s biggest city, looking for work. Fernandez has three brothers and a sister.

When he was ten, a friend invited Fernandez to join him at a painting group for children and young people at the Centro Cultural run by Movimento de Defesa (MDF). Students learn portrait painting and are encouraged, through art, to learn to really know the other person. Here young people learn to be proud of where they live, and learn that they all have gifts to offer the community.

There is always hope

Fernandez now teaches at the Centre two days a week, at a graphics shop for three days and he also takes English classes. He believes that art can be used to change the community. “There is always hope. Look at me, at ten years of age I went to the Centre to learn to draw. I hardly spoke and was very shy. I have come to respect myself as a human being and to value the gifts I have to offer others,” he says.

Drama is taught as well. The Centre has a special purpose for teaching drama. Groups perform role plays in the community to educate those who are unable to read and write.

“If there is little hope for change. The Centre is like an oasis, where we learn self-respect, respect for others and where we develop a sense of dignity and self-worth,” Fernandez says.

Now that he teaches, he wants the children who come to the Centre to feel that same love and respect that he was shown by his own teachers at the Centre. He says, “I hope my young friends feel the warmth, the love and care that was given to me so that they will feel and live the dignity that can be achieved as an artist.”

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the idea of a Centre for Culture and the Arts when instinct might have suggested a soup kitchen or food handouts.

He saw that transformation had to begin not only from without, but also and fundamentally, from within. That culture was food too. Food for the heart and the soul. And that though the material needs of people were essential to the preaching of the gospel, on their own they were completely inadequate. Even a betrayal.

Thirty years later, the Centre for Culture and the Arts is the soul of the slum. It is a place of joy and of learning. A place of challenge and of hope. A place where a child can have his childhood returned to him. A place of celebration and of faith. A place that many will look back on and be able to say, “It was here that my life changed forever.”

Of course, the police still come regularly to the favela to collect their protection money from the drug dealers, who are armed, operate openly and arrogantly, and check out through their communications system, every person that enters the community.

Years ago, though there were more gang wars and bullets, it seemed, ironically, less forbidding than now. Now, the smaller gangs have been taken over and incorporated into a kind of globalized parallel power that exercises control within the prisons and on the streets, and is capable of striking at any place or time, over a large area of the city.

A fair degree of protection

Fortunately, at the Centro Cultural, the staff and the children enjoy a fair degree of protection, mainly because of the role of the church in the lives of the people, and also because a fair number of the children in the project know or have relatives connected with the drug trade. It may not be the best kind of protection, but at least it is based on a certain respect and trust.

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Centre has spread its wings

Despite all that, and for many good reasons such as dedicated staff, doggedness in the face of adversity, donors who have given what they did not have, the Centre has spread its wings well beyond the favela.

It is now regularly invited to put on exhibitions in schools, colleges and art galleries around the city. It has also been involved in major international events like the World Social Forum and the Brazilian National Arts Forum. The impetus for this came from a number of different sources.

One is the availability of art galleries displaying examples of classical and modern paintings and sculpture, to which the children of the project are regular visitors. Another source is the interest on the part of schools and colleges, who have got to modeled on what he observes in Vila Prudentes. Some pieces from the centre hang in galleries around Sao Paulo.

Building a new future

And in Vila Prudente a new building is arising. The bottom floor is an open space for circus, band, dance, judo, and theatre. The top floor is a chapel for meditation and yoga. The design is architecturally unique, with stained glass windows made from discarded wine bottles. The ideas of Brian Maguire and Pat Clarke CSSp have fallen on good soil and are yielding a hundredfold.

Paulo Freire wrote “The future is not something hidden from us. The future is something we build in the present.” Twelve years after his death, the future of Brazil is being built in Vila Prudente.