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A Highway Pastoral in Brazil

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A Concrete Act

It happened on the Sunday afternoon of April 27, 1997. I descended from north to south on the Autovia Transbrasilena (Brazilian Highway System). The temperature exceeded thirty degrees centigrade. I was coming from Jaraqua and passed by Goiania, the capital of the state of Goias, from there I went to Goiatuba. This 300 kilometer journey was part of a fifty-day pastoral trip. The trip began on April 6, 1997, as I departed from Carreteaba. My return was scheduled for May 25, 1997. Between April 6th and 27th, I had traveled about 3500 kilometers across the states of: Parana, Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais, Distrito Fedreal, and now I was going to finish my pastoral work in the state of Goias. Only 100 kilometers remained until I reached my destination in Goiatba on April 27th. Suddenly at an altitude of 1340 kilometers along the highway, one of the tires blew out. I was scared when I heard the blast. I struggled to regain control of the vehicle, which landed on its side in the middle of heavy undergrowth. I turned off the motor and got out of the car to assess the damage. Then I got the wheel-jack out of the car. With the wheel-jack in hand, I struggled to get underneath the car to turn it upright. I tried for twenty minutes but to no avail. I was tired and frustrated. My face, arms, and clothes were covered with sweat and dirt. Several cars and trucks passed near me on the highway. I tried to signal for help but no one stopped. Since I was so dirty, they probably thought that I was a bandit. Even people who knew me probably would not have recognized me. I was not offended because I knew that people do not stop on the highway for fear of being robbed. However I was worried because it late and nightfall would soon set. I got back inside the car, yet another frustration. Desperately, I got out from under the car and went to see if anyone would stop to help me. After fifteen minutes, someone finally stopped. I went to introduce myself but the truck driver said he recognized me from the truckers magazines. I then explained my situation to him and asked if he had a better wheel jack. He did. We were able to get the car upright. Then I proceeded to take off the blown out tire. While we were working he said, "The only fear I have is that some nut will run off the side of the road and hit us." Thanks to God, that did not happen. After he helped me change the tire, I tried to pay him for his assistance but he would not accept it. In parting he said, "Hey Father, I admire your work based on what I have read in the magazines. I like your work I am not Catholic. I am a believer and member of the Pentecostal Church." Thinking back on his words, the parable of the Good Samaritan always comes to mind.

Comparisons

The act, which I have just presented, illustrates at least in part, the reality of the traffic and transportation in Brazil, bears many similarities to our pastoral work. Brazil is a country with more than 8,000,000 square kilometers. It has a myriad of roads and highways, that across the country in all directions. Ninety percent of all transportation occurs by truck on the highway. The truckers, there are over one million registered truckers, travel day and night without stopping, tired, hot, despite inhumane hours, pay, dangerous roads, with the threat of being robbed, separated from their families for weeks and sometimes even months at a time. About 50,000 people die each year on the road. It is in this framework that we insert our Highway Pastoral. We accompany the truckers on their travels throughout the highways of Brazil. We bring solace of the Word of God, the opportunity for prayer, the sacraments, the presence of the Church, and our friendship. However the main focus of our work at the end of the day is the Highway Mass. Mass is usually celebrated at the service stations, although it is sometimes celebrated at restaurants or garages. That is why along with the truckers, we also attend to the needs of the people at these establishments.

Something Of History

The Pastoral on the Highway is a religious service of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church for the Highway Community (truckers, bus drivers, cab drivers, their passengers, also the personnel at service stations, automotive repair shops, restaurants, etc...). The Highway Pastoral was initiated in 1976 in the state of Parana, under the authority of D. Geraldo M. Pellanda, Archbishop of Ponta Grossa. Since the start, Father Marian Litewka C.M. assumed the work. Until 1981, the Highway Pastoral was limited to the state of Parana. In October 1981, the pastoral was extended to Santa Catarina and Rio Grande, two states in the south. In 1982, we began serving the states of Mato Grosso, Goias, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Espirito Santo, and Bahia. Since 1985 sisters from the religious mission of Our Lady of Sorrows have assisted us in our Highway Pastoral.

In 1988, Father Jose Carlos Chacorowski C.M. joined the Pastoral Highway. He developed the Highway Pastorals in the states of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Espirito Santo, and Bahia. Father Jose Carlos also initiated religious services along the highways of Northeastern states and the states of Tocantins, Maranhao, and Para. In 1993, Father Miguel Staron C.M. joined the mission and he reinforced our work

in the states of Mato Grosso del Sur and in Mato Grosso. He also developed the Highway Pastoral in the state of Rondonia. In 1996, Father Germano Nalepa replaced father Jose Carlos who was given another assignment within the Church and our congregation. We travel on all the highways in the Brazilian States except for those in the states of Amapa, Roraima, Amazonas, and Acre. Along the way, we visit about 7000 service stations and other road side establishments each year. We work 220-250 days on the highways each year. Masses are celebrated at over 1400 service stations across the country.

Our Lady Of The Road

We selected the Virgin Mary, with the title of Our Lady of the Road, as the patron of our pastoral work. The original portrait for Our lady of the Road is in the Del Gesu Church in Rome, Italy. It was painted by an unknown artist around 800 years ago.

Since 1976 we have distributed, after every mass, images of Our Lady of the Road on posters and flyers. We have placed more than 300,000 copies of the image in the hands of the people.

Is The Highway Pastoral Viable In Other Countries?

There is no doubt. For our part, we would like to see the Highway Pastoral in Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile. In Brazil, we help many truck drivers from neighboring countries; we also know that thousands of Brazilian truck drivers travel on the highways of neighboring countries. It is important that the truck drivers in all Latin America, at least those in South America, feel the friendly and comforting presence of the Church in their lives, work, and on their journeys.

I believe that the Highway Pastoral is viable in other countries if it is tailored to the individual characteristics of each country. For me, it was an inspiration, excellently organized, although different from our "Pastoral of the Rout" in Spain. Who knows if our twenty-two years of experience can be utilized in other pastoral situations. For example, when I visit Paris, France and travel on the metro, watching the multitudes of dehumanized people I think: what an excellent missionary assignment it would be to have a priest treat travelers as friends, brothers, distributing flyers with Evangelical messages, giving his undivided attention to whoever needs it. But that would require an enormous amount of humility, patience, and hope.