

# The Signs of our times: The Contexts of the CPPS Ministries

## A Testimony from Brazil

### I. THE NEO-LIBERAL AND NEO-CAPITALIST SYSTEM

Neo-liberalism is a system which seeks to dismantle the Social Welfare State, eliminating everything and whatever trace of the socialist tradition and the reduction to the minimum of the interventionist role of the State in the economy. The market and the free enterprise take over the role of the State, taking on some functions, such as:

**Political and ideological:** the market justifies every and whatever initiative with the only condition that it produces and presents results. All national, popular and democratic interests should be submitted to it. All State intervention in the economy is considered as old-fashioned.

**Psychological:** the market transforms desires into needs searching for the advanced technology which awakens desires and creates new necessities (consumerism).

**Ethical:** the market decides which values orient social welfare relationships: competitiveness, productivity, efficiency, modernization, profit and growth are emphasized in detriment to other values such as communion, participation, solidarity, social justice...

**Religious:** the market takes over the role of convincing the poor that his/her situation is the effect of his/her incapacity, and the rich that he/she is blessed by God due to his/her personal efforts.

From all of this, exclusion results in all its forms: exclusion from work, from material goods and from symbols, from knowledge, from civic life, from politics. In a word, social exclusion in its widest meaning. And thus, while in the decade of the '70s social inequality was talked about, in the '80s poverty, and now in the '90s exclusion and marginalization. Yesterday, the poor were "an army of reserves", today they are "a disposable product".

### II. THE SOCIAL-POLITICAL-ECONOMIC-RELIGIOUS REALITY IN WHICH WE WORK.

We are living, therefore, in Brazil today the phenomenon of SOCIAL EXCLUSION, that, even though it is not only limited to our reality, it is notorious and scandalous. Scandalous because while modern reason pretends to solve all the problems with the resources of science and technology, it does not manage to assure a minimum of material resources for the majority of the Brazilians. It is scandalous also for the Christian faith, which sees the mass of the excluded grow bigger en this traditionally Christian country.

A poem of Manoel Bandeira (Brazilian), written in 1947, describes this situation. It read thus:

### THE INSECT

YESTERDAY I SAW AN INSECT  
IN THE FILTH OF THE PATIO  
SEARCHING FOR FOOD AMONG THE RUBBISH.  
WHEN IT FOUND SOMETHING,  
IT DIDN'T EXAMINE IT OR SMELL IT,  
BUT WOLFED IT DOWN WITH VORACITY.

THAT INSECT WAS NOT A DOG,  
NOR WAS IT A CAT,  
NOR WAS IT A RAT...

THAT INSECT, OH MY GOD!  
WAS A HUMAN BEING!

The Basic Document of the Campaign of Fraternity-1995, created by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, presents some data about the harsh reality that our people lives.

--Brazil enters the decade of the '90s with a population of 14.4 million families (64.5 million people) in conditions of real poverty (a per capita income equal to or less than a half of the minimum wage (the minimum wage in 1995 was equivalent to USD\$ 107.00). Of those families, 6.9 million persons are in the situation of indigence or misery (their per capita incomes is equivalent to 1/4 of the minimum wage, or USD\$ 26.75). And so, en 1990 of each 10 Brazilians, 4.4 were poor and of these, 2.3 were destitute.

--The hunger map, according to IPEA, cites: "32 million Brazilians, a population equal to almost half of Argentina, daily confronts the problem of hunger.

--According to the Report of Human Development-1993, of the Plan for Development of the United Nations (PNUD), Brazil occupies the 70th place in the world as far as conditions of life is concerned.

--Brazil is the "champion" as to the bad distribution of income: in 1990, 1% of the population earned 14.6% of the brute income, while 50% of the population only earned 11.2% of that income.

--The IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) shows that the buying power of the salary of workers experienced real losses of 31.7% between 1979 and 1990.

--As far as Education is concerned, from a list of 120 countries, Brazil occupies the 74th position, with an illiterate rate of 17.6% of those older than 15 years, according to the official data of the IBGE-1990.

--As to the work map, according to OIT, only 30% of the active population is integrated into the formal work market. Of the other 70%, 30% do not have any work, 22% are under employed and 18% are under employed(?). It is necessary to say that in Brazil unemployment benefits are practically non-existent. Furthermore, according to IBGE of the 64 million Brazilians economically active, half do not have any type of Social Security.

--As for health care, 45 million children and adolescents live in subhuman conditions, 25 million live in high-risk situations, 15 million suffer from chronic malnutrition, 10 million are obliged to precocious work and 7 million suffer from physical-mental deficiencies. The infant mortality rate reaches 60 for every thousand, while the first place in the world is 20 for every thousand. Of every 1,000 Brazilians that are born, 90 die before the age of five years, due to hunger or chronic illnesses.

--As for prostitution, a Parliamentary Investigatory Commission of the National Brazilian Congress, brought forth the following data: 500 thousand young girls resort to prostitution on the streets of Brazil; 11 years is the age at which the young ones are initiated into prostitution; the youngest prostitute found by the CPI was only 8 years old; and there is a big trafficking of minors for prostitution.

--The Brazilian penitentiary system, as is the case with many other institutions, is in a degrading situation. Of the approximately 130,000 prisoners in 297 prisons, with a capacity for 437 prisoners average for each one, there are 1,092 prisoners. This represents an over-population of 2.5 times. This is what causes constant uprisings in various prisons, which results generally in the death of rebellious inmates.

--According to official data, in 1940 the rural population in Brazil was 68.76% and the urban, 31.24%, while in 1991, the rural population lowered to 24,53% and the urban rose to 75,47%, which brings with it the deterioration of the standard of living, with immense masses living in the "favelas" (slums), in flooded regions, without any basic sewage infrastructure, without drinking water, a rise in unemployment and criminality and other social plagues.

--This situation is in part responsible for the sharp upsurge of the fundamentalist sects, which offer cures and false solutions for these hungry and sick peoples.

We could continue with frightening figures which describe the social and economic situation of our country, but what has already been referred to is sufficient to paint a palpable picture of the challenges which this situation puts before the Church and Religious Life in Brazil and also to us, Missionaries of the Precious Blood of the Brazilian Vicariate.

### III. THE CHALLENGES TO OUR MISSION

In the light of the crude reality of our People and guided by our Charism, by our Missionary Profile and by the Spirituality of the Precious Blood, which speaks so nobly where so much human blood is shed and so many lives cut short, we discover some CHALLENGES which are common to the Church and to Religious Life in Brazil:

1. The Evangelization of the **Indigenous Peoples** (Xingú) which emphasizes the defense of life, of the land and of the culture of the various Indigenous Peoples which inhabit the territory of our Xingú Premature.
2. Special attention to the victims of **exclusion**, such as the poor and migrants of Altamira, the marginalized: the poor, the victims of AIDS in Rio de Janeiro, the Street Children, the Gangs, the Prisoners, the homeless, which occupy lands and dwellings constructed by the State or by private enterprise in Belém of the State of Pará.
3. The **Vocational Animation** in order to increase the number and the quality of our presence in Brazil, and also to be able to support more the Xingú Mission.
4. The better articulation of the **Urban Ministry** (Río, Belém, Altamira) in order to confront the challenges of Modernity and of Neoliberalism, especially in the cities and in the megapolis.
5. To deepen and to share our **Spirituality** with the lay people, so that animated by the ardor of St. Gaspar and by the voice of the Blood, they too choose to make a real option for the poor and the impoverished.
6. Make a greater effort to **Inculturate the Gospel**, knowing, appreciating, respecting and promoting the various cultures, such as the indigenous, black, mestizos and others.
7. Make our **liturgies more alive and inculturated**, as a response to the thirst of spirituality, and which respond also to the religiosity of our people, thus creating conditions in which our Christians avoid looking to the fundamentalist sects for that which we should be offering.
8. Convert our houses into **Hospitality Centers**, offering places of gathering, of support, of prayer and reflection.
9. Intensify even more **Collaborative Ministry**, collaborating with the Local Church in all that is within our reach, but also from our charism and our missionary identity.

### IV. ACHIEVEMENTS:

Some of these challenges are being confronted by us:

1. **BUILDING PROJECTS.** The Xingú Prelacy and along with her, our fathers and brothers of Altamira, develop the Project LOTAP which on her lands and together with the people, construct popular housing for the homeless.
2. **PROJECT OLAP.** It helps the unemployed of Altamira, promoting community pottery projects in which the heads of families along with their children make bricks and tiles in order to earn a minimum family income.
3. **PROJECT "INDIGENOUS PEOPLES"** through which the CPPS Missionaries, in coordination with the Xingú Prelacy and with other Congregations, support the indigenous peoples in the defense of their lands, their cultures and their lives.
4. **PRISON MINISTRY.** The Parish of Our Lady of Buen Remédio, in Belém, serves the imprisoned and their families in social matters, and in juridical and religious fields.
5. **ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY PHARMACIES.** With the sights set on preventive and curative medicine, the parish in the Satélite has established in several base communities, alternative pharmacies where, based on the rich Brazilian flora, the parishioners themselves create medicines to cure the most common sicknesses of the people.

**P. Lucas Rodríguez, C.PP.S.**

Belém, 20 August 1995