

BCG and BMA Provincials

Indigenous Mission in Mato Grosso (Brazil) 1894-2014: 120 years of Salesian missionary presence

Note: While the text is being read, some pictures and videos pertaining closely or not to the subject matter will be projected. There are some discrepancies between pictures and words while the text is being read.

“Don Bosco had a dream, the first missionaries started by planning their work according to this dream and we, today’s Salesians, are continuing along the same line”.

Don Bosco. When considering his South American missionary dream of 1883, the indigenous Mission of Mato Grosso, situated between parallels 15 and 20, is one of the proofs that the dream has become reality at the heart of South America.

Brief history. It was Bishop Carlo d’Amour who asked Don Bosco for Salesian missionaries who would undertake the task of caring for indigenous people in Mato Grosso. In spite of many requests, it was Don Rua who sent the first expedition. It arrived at Cuiabá on June 18th, 1894, with at its head Bishop Louis Lasagna who had been named Bishop of all the Indians in Brazil.

After the unexpected death of Bishop Lasagna in 1895 in a railroad accident at Juíz de Fora, in Minas Gerais State, the task of approaching the Indians passed on to Fr. Antonio Malan who, later on, became Bishop of the Prelature of Araguaia Register. He continued to follow up the Mato Grosso Salesian houses.

After having begun their work with the Bororo Indians together with the State government, our missionaries undertook another task, without the government this time, and made forays into the forest in order to create contacts with the Indians. An important impulse to the Mato Grosso missions was given by Fr. Giovanni Balzola, who later founded the Rio Negro Missions in the Amazon.

So, the first encounter with the Bororo Indians took place in 1902, at a place called Tachos, but it was preceded by the Madonna. She had appeared to their Chief in a dream in which his men were closing in on the Salesians with the clear intention of killing them. But when the Chief saw in the Salesians’ wooden shack the image of the Madonna (the same one he had seen in his dreams), he did not give the signal convened upon to kill the missionaries.

As Don Bosco had foreseen in his dreams, work with the Indians of Mato Grosso would not go forward without missionary martyrs shedding their **blood**. As a matter of fact, Frs. John Fuchs and Peter Sacilotti were killed when they tried to approach the Xavante tribe in 1934. Later on, in 1976, Fr. Rudolph Lunkenbein and an Indian, Simon Bororo, were assassinated during the demarcation of the Mururi Bororo Reserve.

The “green grapes of Don Bosco’s dream” about the harvest among the Bororo and Xavante tribes, were, and still are, maturing, not however without the **sweat** of pastoral charity, which manifests itself through tireless self-giving and apostolic zeal of so many Salesians who have come from different countries in Europe and South America, joined by many other religious and lay local missionaries.

With the arrival of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, a complete evangelizing presence among the Indians was achieved, at both the educational and promotional levels. The Salesians worked hard to promote agriculture so that food would be available in order to survive. They also paid great attention to health problems, rendering from the most elementary to the more delicate care. They offered both formal and informal education through their schools and social promotion, as well as civic formation and professional qualifications. They encouraged them to work using their own cultural resources as well as those given by nature.

In view of the future, the first missionaries and their successors did some very competent work as regards scientific research related to ethnography and published an Encyclopedia of the Bororo tribe in three volumes and a systematisation of the Bororo and Xavante languages.

Today. The ISU, and still more so the Don Bosco Catholic University (UCDB), with its services of the Nucleus of Studies and Research on the Indigenous Populations (NEPPI), of the Indigenous Documentation Center (CDI) and of the Museum of Cultures “Don Bosco”, attest scientifically to our work among the Indian tribes.

Our integrated missionary services, in collaboration with the Church in Brazil, and through the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), strongly support the indigenous people in the defense of their civic rights, their right to life, culture, access to land, education and health, thus contributing in no small way to the very essence of the Salesian vocation and mission.

Challenges. The great challenges facing our missionary communities are these: globalisation, which exists even in our missionary territories of the Mato Grosso “cerrados”. While acknowledging its benefits, we have to deplore its dangers, such as undue aggressiveness towards indigenous cultures, the vices associated with post-modernity: consumerism, individualistic subjectivism, hedonism, violence, prostitution, drugs and alcoholism.

At the beginning our missionaries worked with the Indians who lived in our missionary centers. However, nowadays, with the increase of the population reaching up to 20 thousand in Bororo and Xavante tribes, and the fast growing number of villages which number around 250 in the indigenous territories entrusted to the Saint Alphonsus Liguori Province (Campo Grande), our missionary work obliges us to travel long distances. This means that our missionaries have to go and meet the Indians where they are to be found and where they live. Because of these long distances and very bad roads, they need solid vehicles that can adapt to these conditions. But what they need even more is a strong communion ‘*mystique*’ and an elevated ascetical attitude in order to come to terms with the untold difficulties deriving from these situations. A great encouragement for us is the fact that a growing number of young indigenous people join the Salesian Youth Movement, as well as the attraction shown by some of them towards the Salesian vocation.

Perspectives. Our indigenous youth and its Christian and professional qualifications; the renewal of new missionaries; ministry with lay people and the Salesian Family work in favor of Salesian youth missionary voluntary service, having as partners IUS and civil institutions united in the scope of autonomy for indigenous people. These are the new

perspectives for our mission which, either in his vision or because of his zeal, *Don Bosco dreamt, the first missionaries started by planning their work according to this dream and we, today's Salesians, are continuing to show you its visible outline.*

Call and demand. And this is why we call: "Lord, send us workers!". It is also the request we address to the Superiors and the Provincials: "Send us Salesian confreres, because the harvest is abundant, but the workers are few".

- SALESIAN MISSIONS IN THE AMAZON-

Salesian presence in the Amazon goes back to the year 1880, when Msgr. Antonio de Macedo Costa, Bishop of Pará State, wrote Don Bosco a letter asking for Salesians to come and work in his immense diocese which covered the whole of the Brazilian Amazon. In 1882 Don Bosco sent Bishop Louis Lasagna to Bélem to meet Bishop Macedo Costa and see what he had to propose. His proposition was for the Salesians to take charge of an Institute of education near Ananindeua. Bishop Lasagna saw that his proposition was quite feasible and this is what he mentioned to Don Bosco in his letter. The Salesians arrived in Brazil in 1883, but at Niterói, in Rio de Janeiro State.

In 1892 the vast diocese of Pará was dismembered and the new diocese of Manaus was created. It covered the areas of the actual states of Amazonas, Roraima, Acre and Rondônia.

In 1908, Msgr. Federico Costa, Bishop of Manaus, went on a pastoral trip that lasted six months in the areas of the Solimões and Rio Negro rivers. The following year he wrote a pastoral letter in which he gave a detailed report of everything he had seen and done. At the end of his letter, he expressed the hope that the sons of Don Bosco would accept to work in one part or another of his vast diocese.

In 1910 were created the Apostolic Prefectures of Alto Solimões, Tefé and Rio Negro. It proved to be difficult to find religious orders or congregations which would accept to work in the Rio Negro Apostolic Prefecture. Finally, on June 10th, 1914, this Prefecture was assigned to the Salesians and Fr. Giovanni Balzola, missionary in Mato Grosso, received his credentials and took possession of his new mission.

Frs. John Balzola and Joseph Solari together with Bro. Joseph Canuto made the trip from São Paulo to São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Rio Negro's Apostolic Prefecture's see, and arrived on May 24th, 1915, on the Feast of Mary Help of Christians. (By the way, next year we'll celebrate the 100th anniversary of our Salesian presence in the Amazon).

From the very beginning the Salesians were always able to count on the support of the Bishop of Manaus, Msgr. Irineu Joffily, who offered them a central place in the city where they could build a school. As new missionaries arrived, the Rio Negro Prelature acquired new localities and home bases for those who had to travel. With the help of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians, who arrived in 1923, they were able to organize schools, hospitals, dispensaries and board for men and women. In 1956 they opened a new mission among the yanomamis, at Maturacá, and in 1961 at Marauíá.

The Saint Dominic Savio Province was created in 1958 with headquarters at Manaus. Before that it was a part of the Saint Louis Gonzaga Province in Recife.

All through these 100 years there were many outstanding Salesian missionaries. Some were scientists who specialized in the fields of anthropology and natural sciences. Others distinguished themselves by the sanctity of their life, while still others will remain in our

memories because they lived simple and sacrificed lives. But we must also make special mention of those Coadjutor confreres who distinguished themselves through their work, their piety and their apostolic zeal while shouldering priests. Many of them, because they were responsible for infrastructures, allowed for the educational and missionary work to be accomplished for the greater glory of God.

After almost 100 years of work in the Amazon, we see that our presence has borne many fruits, although we recognize that there is still much more to be done in our schools, in the indigenous missions, in the oratories and Youth centers, in Universities, social work and formation communities.

The last few years we've seen an increase in indigenous vocations, and more so, those coming from the 23 tribes living in our area. There still remain quite a few challenges such as geographical distances, number of Salesians, huge expenditures for the maintenance of our works, the increase of problems affecting our youth: drugs, prostitution, abuse of alcohol. In spite of this, we've noticed a remarkable increase in the number of those seeking an education as well as of organizations of indigenous people.

But we still have to deal with a "challenge-opportunity" inasmuch as the first proclamation of the Gospel is concerned, and this with a considerable group of yanomami communities spread all along the Brazil-Venezuela boarder.

Nowadays the former Prelatures have become dioceses. The Bishops are no longer Salesians (except for Jí-Paraná), many houses built at the cost of our sweat have passed on to other missionary Institutes. However, there remains a pleasant sentiment of having done a good job, though we realize that there is still much work to be done, applying new methods, to establish firmly the Kingdom of God in the midst of our youth.

"Salesians in the Amazon": (1915-2015) – one hundred years of mission. The seeds have produced many good fruits. Thank you. May I ask a prayer for all of us!