AN IRISH MISSIONARY LOOKS BACK ON HALF A CENTURY IN BRAZIL

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My name is George Boran. I am a Spiritan (Holy Ghost) priest from Castlecomer, Co. Kilkenny and I have been on mission in Brazil for over half a century – 52 years to be exact.

On arriving in Brazil 1969, I was met with wanted-notices, in different parts of the city, of young people who were wanted as terrorists. I had arrived in the worse phase of a 20-year military dictatorship in which censorship, torture and disappearances, were common...

It was also the beginning of liberation theology which received a major impulse with the approval of the revolutionary Medellin document by the Latin American bishops, in1968. The Latin Americans were discovering that they too could develop their own theology in order to illuminate their own social, political and cultural reality without having to import a readymade theology from the First World countries. The word Liberation Theology is usually replaced today with the term Latin American Theology.

**In this text I will select a number of happenings and events that stand out during my half century in Brazil.**

1. On holidays in Ireland in 1976 I suggested to Fr. Dermot McCarthy of **the RTE Radharc Team** that they shoot a film on the new revolutionary church that was emerging in Brazil. The following year the team arrived in Brazil and in 5 weeks had made 4 documentaries, without being detected by the ever-present supervision of the military regime. I**n 1977 Radharc showed the four films on RTE.** The documentaries were a major success and later were shown around the world, on different television stations and in many church groups.

The principal documentary, **“New Day in Brazil’,** was the first documentary about liberation theology in South America and showed young Irish missionaries (Spiritans and Kiltegans priests, and the Holy Rosary and Medical Missionary sisters), in the shanty towns and abandoned suburbs, building a liberating church which had moved away from an alliance with elite classes, marked by over 380 years of a society divided between while owners and African slaves. They were insisting on putting the moral force of the Church on the side of millions of oppressed people and restoring their dignity and their role as protagonists in the Basic Christian Communities. The TV documentary communicates, in an extraordinary way, the energy and vision of both the missionaries end the lay people envolved and is still worth watching. Link:

<https://www.rte.ie/archives/exhibitions/1378-radharc/355620-new-day-in-brazil>

1. The following year, **in 1978, in the large working-class parish of Vila Alpina,** where I worked as PP, a parishioner knocked on the door and asked to have a chat with me. He presented himself as Janjao and started the conversation by saying, “today the military arrived and closed our trade-union and our leader, Luiz Anácio da Silva, (nicknamed, Lula), has been jailed. Janjão was himself one of the directors and had been best man at Lula’s wedding. **This was the first major strike during the military government.** Strikes were forbidden. Later Lula was to become the principal popular leader in Brazil and Latin America and also a world leader. It was the beginning of the reaction of civil society to the oppressive military dictatorship installed in 1964.

As a result, our parish of Vila Alpina was drawn into the movement of solidarity with the striking workers, organizing food parcels for their families. The parish also became one of five parishes in São Paulo city, that opened their doors to the leaders. **The trade-union leaders slept in the parish house at night-time, for fear of being arrested by the military**, and in the mornings slipped out to organize pickets at the gates of the different factories. The belief was that the Church was offering sanctuary and it would be a serios move for the military to invade a church. They also used our parish mimeograph to run off the leaflets they distributed. Fr. Pat Coughlan, a young Irish Spiritan in the parish, worked closely with and would often accompany the workers on their pickets.

The experience of being thrown into the midst of this important social conflict and the exchange of ideas with the leaders **produced a major change in my way of looking at the world.** Gone was the naïve attitude that poverty could be solved with handouts and food parcels. **Charity is important, but the struggle for social justice is also key.** Poverty is primarily caused by political, economic and social structures that can push large sectors of the society over the edge. In **Brazil, for example, six wealthy people (yes, six) have an income larger than 100 million people, or half the population.** So, the conviction grew that the Church needed to support political, economic and social policies that provoke inclusion rather that exclusion of the poor. The change in my outlook came also from a **personal history of having been born into a working-class family in Castlecomer, Co Kilkenny**, where my father worked in the local coal mines and my uncle, Nixey Boran, the miners´ leader, lead a successful 11-month strike (one of the longest in Irish history) to improve workers´ wages. As an eight-year-old child, I remember my father telling us that the strike was coming to an end, and he would be able to give us pocket money again. Previously, in 1932, my uncle, Nixey Boran, had been denounced publicly for his communist ideas by the bishop of Ossory, Dr. Collier, in the local church of Moneenroe.

Further involvement in the Latin American Church also led to the conviction that throughout history almost all evolution in society and conquest of human rights have come through struggle and pressure from underneath. The previous alliance of the Church with elite classes so that some of the crumbs that fall from their tables could be given to the poor, no longer made sense. Latin American **theology points out that economic policies can kill many people.** A different way of reading the bible was taking hold in Latin America, a Bible that reveals a God who is clearly on the side of the underdog. Religion should not legitimate power and privilege but put its moral weight on the side of the excluded. The central message of the New Testament is also the formula for true human happiness. It’s the triangular message to love God, love others and love one´s self.

1. **To fast forward to 2002, the previous metal worker, Lula, was elected president of Brazil** in 2003 and re-elected in 2006, finishing his time in office with an 80% approval rate. During the period he had lifted over 25 million people out of poverty, gained world recognition for his effort to eliminate hunger and replaced the external debt with a considerable surplus. Before the 2018 election that elected the present far-right and populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, Lula was put in jail on trumped up charges, by a corrupt judge named Jude Moro. As a reward, Judge Moro was made Minister of Justice in the new government.

Since being elected, **president Bolsonaro has adapted a policy of eliminating most of the social advances** of previous years, supporting those who are burning down the Amazon Forest, attacking the indigenous population and selling off the riches of the country. Elected on a policy of fighting corruption, both he and his family now face an ever-increasing number of charges of corruption. With regard to the **covid-19 pandemic, which has caused the death of almost half a million** people, with about 2000 deaths every 24 hours, he has adapted a negationist policy, by denying the need for social distance and masks, promoted large gatherings, and in the past is seen as not having facilitated the purchase of vaccines. The negationist policy also has de advantage of making it more difficult for people to take to the streets to protest for fear of contamination. Bolsonaro has survived the over 100 requests of impeachment as he is able to get the necessary votes of politicians in exchange for advantages.

Lula has since been cleared of the charges against him and surveys indicate he will be elected the new president in 2022 to replace Bolsonaro and open **a new chapter of hope in Brazilian history.** However, Bolsonaro, an ally of Donald Trump, follows a similar neo fascist, right wing political approach and with his hard core of cult-like followers, is expected to try some form of “insurrection” if he is not re-elected in 2022. He has given signs he will try use sectors of the military and police for this purpose.

1. During the half century I have been working as an Irish missionary in Brazil, **the main thrust of my work has been with young people.** Early on, I figured that young people were important because that´s where the energy was, they were the next generation that needed to be prepared to take over soon, the underlying idealism and desire for transformation could be more easily awakened and, also, youth is the stage in human life when major decisions are made that usually determine the road taken in life. After having worked to build organizational structures that guaranteed continuity and a protagonist role for young people on parish, diocesan and state levels, I was appointed, in 1984, **as National Youth Coordinator for the Brazilian Bishops**´ Conference with its over 300 bishops and 10 000 parishes. It was an incredible experience visiting this vast country that is larger than Europe (including Eastern Europe) and larger than the US (leaving out Alaska) and working with very rich and very different local cultures: in the south more European decent, in the northeast more African decent and in the Amazon more indigenous decent.

It was a very rich experience to be **part of a movement in which young people increasingly took on a leadership role**. I found myself **like a Kilkenny hurling couch**, as an adult helping from the side-line. It was also a time when the mobilization of civil society, with strong participation of youth, was provoking the end of a 20-year military dictatorship. The **young people could look up to a prophetic Church** built on the theology of Medellin and Puebla, that had been the seed bed for many prophetic bishops, like bishop Helder Camara of Recife and Cardinal Evaristo Arns of São Paulo and an immense number of lay people who had died as martyrs in the fight for justice and peace.

The Latin American bishops in Puebla, in 1979 had targeted **two groups as priority for transforming the Church and society, the poor and the youth.** A new generation of political and social leaders were formed during this time, many adults and young people getting their initial motivation and formation from the basic communities and youth groups.

**The following story illustrates how a mix of liberation theology and popular religiosity often produced dramatic changes.** Some years ago, I was invited to participate in a TV programme. Shortly before the programme began, I had a chat with the interviewer, **Edinho da Silva**, who had graduated in Social Science and was also a politician. He shared his story with me. At the beginning of the eighties, he was part of a youth group in Araraquara, a city in the interior of São Paulo, at a time in which the military dictatorship was facing oppositions from different sectors of civil society. The group decided to study a new book I had just published, called, **“Juventude, O Grande Desafio” (Youth, the Great Challenge) – studying a different chapter each week. In 1985 the group decided to start a branch of the Labour Party which had just been founded by Lula. In 1992** Edinho was elected city councillor for Araraquara, won a second mandate in 1996, in 2000 he was elected mayor of the city and won a second term in 2004. In 2010 Edinho was elected state deputy. In 2015 he was nominated Minister of Communication by President Dilma Rousseff for the federal government. In 2020 he returned to local politics and was re-elected for a 4th term as Mayor of Araraquara. This year, 2021, the city, under his administration, has become a model on national level, for how to handle de combat against the corona virus, by insisting that immunization only comes from following the by following the scientific evidence and orientation available, while at the same time investing in vaccinations. This in the context of a president who has adopted an anti-scientific attitude of denying the gravity of the pandemic, encouraging mass gatherings, denying the need for masks, the need for social distance and promoting Chloroquine (a medicine for malaria) – against the scientific evidence - as an early cure for the disease.

**The above is the story of the power of a small group of highly motivated and informed young people to bring about change, an experience which was replicated in many parts of Brazil.**

1. **At the moment,** I coordinate a **National Youth Institute** called, Centro de Capacitação da Juventude (CCJ), which I founded and which among other things, promotes four levels of **youth leadership training courses** in different dioceses in Brazil and Latin America. The courses are given to church and non-church groups and adopt a strategy of **training trainers**. Eight Latin American countries have also been part of the experience. Young people who do the courses are trained to give the courses to others. As a result, there is a multiplying effect of reaching an ever-larger number of people. The Centre has over **400 trainers** from different parts of the country who work as volunteers reproducing the courses in order to strengthen local youth organizations.

Some people had this to say about the courses.

* The course brought us together, oblivious of status, age or origins. The bonding through the activities created community.
* The course itself was fabulous. I enjoyed the ethos of the course. The ethos of “learning by doing” is I believe the most powerful method of learning.
* I discovered what I was doing wrong at parish level with other groups, i.e., badly managed meetings, time management, delegation of tasks.
* I discovered how to make the Gospel message relevant to today´s society.
* The course was most enjoyable – no dull moments. I enjoyed the fun aspect and the exercises. I enjoyed making new friends, because the people involved in the course were of like mind, it was so easy to form new friendships and hopefully keep them

**The internet plays a vital role** in the growth of this work. The extraordinary work of young people can be accessed at some of the following links:

Fanpage CCJ in Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/centralccj?fref=ts>

Profile Jorge Boran in Facebook:<https://www.facebook.com/jorge.boran> Webpage of our Centre (CCJ): <http://www.ccj.org.br/>

An important part of the experience of working as an Irish missionary in Brazil, during the last 50 years, has been developing writing skills and publishing a number of successful books that have reached a wide audience. The original inspiration came from a talk given by an **Irish journalist during my seminary days in Dublin**. She insisted that everyone can write and publish. The books originally published in Portuguese have been adapted and translated into different languages.

Today I have double nationality, Irish and Brazilian. I **return to Ireland** for a short visit every year to keep in touch with roots and an ever-widening ripple of new generations of family members. I keep in touch with Irish news through TVE, Irish Times, etc. to be able to compare and contrast 1st World and 3rd World experiences in the belief that the future of our planet depends on our capacity to face and solve our common challenges together. **It´s a privilege to have a foot in both worlds and to be able to contribute to a better world**.

In Brazil I am known as Jorge Boran, among the youth usually just, Boran. The name is easily remembered and seems to fit easily into Portuguese and Spanish. It is supposed to come from the Irish for a deaf man. Our in-laws would say, “it’s not that they can´t hear; they don´t want to hear”!

Having **completed my eightieth birthday this year**, I still get up every morning with enthusiasm and energy to face and overcome new challenges. I believe in the **threefold formula for a happy life** that a priest friend passed on to me before his death: have a balanced diet, exercise is important and have a project (and any project will do if it works for you). I am always grateful for the foundation I have received from the different aspects of my Irish experience. I plan to retire to Ireland when my health no longer allows me to continue the present work I enjoy.

**Background Information**

George Boran is a specialist in the area of leadership training and youth work. Has a doctorate from Fordham University in the US, in the area of community leadership, and has given conferences and courses in Latin America, the United States, Europe, and Africa. He is the author of important books in Portuguese, Spanish, English, German and Ukrainian