

Une messe en enfer

Par Jean-Marc Potdevin, 4 novembre 2015

A Mass in Hell by Jean-Marc Potdevin



CRACKLAND, or "Cracolandia", in Portuguese. The land of "crack". Sao Paulo district. The streets are teeming with homeless and drugged people. There reigns a terrible filth. Faces are emotionless, cadaverous, with empty eyes. They look like zombies; sick, thin, vegetating there, on cardboard, mattresses or old blankets, in the midst of trash and garbage, some lying on the asphalt.

Those who are not limp and bent over, or lying down and unresponsive, are sitting on the ground trying to heat a pebble of crack with their lighter (cocaine retreated with kerosene) at the end of a thin and long pipe. Crack is one of the worst drugs, addictive from the first use, a real chemical prison. Children thrown into the street, often from slums of Sao Paulo (the "community" they say, not to pronounce the infamous word "favelas"), start the drug sometimes very early, from 7-9 years of age. There are as many people in this street, lying on the ground, as people lying on a stretch of beach of our Riviera in July. These two images are telescoping in my mind.

In the midst of this vision of hell, there are those who are well known in the neighborhood: the Fraternidade O'caminho. (Fraternity the Poor of Jesus Christ) Franciscan spirituality. Consecrated young people, their faces radiating a joy that we hardly ever see on the faces in our country, living in the greatest poverty (chosen) near Crackland. They go out every week, every day, to Crackland to go "fishing" these men, women, and children, and try to get them out of hell. "Recover", is the word they use, explaining the global nature of their action: getting them out of the street, off of drugs, and restoring them physically, psychologically, socially and spiritually.

We have lunch with Douglas, a "recovered young man" formerly a drug addict and on the street, in one of the soup kitchens of The Fraternity, where several hundred men and women from the street come to take their daily meal. He is now a part of the Fraternity's family, helping others as a volunteer and witness. He stands up straight, proud to be there, a visible cross around his neck. "When a person comes to us after deciding to get out of the streets and off of drugs, we have a very simple method: 1. The testimony of the former drug addicts of the street, like me. 2. The promise of a spiritual recovery ("to find Jesus") ". And that's all ... neither medicine nor doctors. He does not say it, but we can feel it in the air here, a strong presence ...; love. The men who arrive here are welcomed warmly, loved unconditionally. We believe in them, he says.

And that figure ... 70% success rate, he claims proudly. I am not sure that the detoxification programs in our post-modern hospitals have such performances. Listening to Douglas, I remember the titles of our French newspapers ... the polemics of the moment ... the experimentation of "shooting rooms". At home, death is administered. Properly. Officially. In a white coat. A bit like euthanasia. We are still civilized.

Above the hall of the soup kitchen, on the first floor, is a huge chapel. It is the heart of the place where they receive us. The building, a former temple, was offered to the fraternity by the Buddhists when they left the place.

In the afternoon, we follow them on foot, in Crackland, under the nervous gaze of the numerous policemen who encircle the whole neighborhood. The place is quite dangerous. The portable altar is erected, in the middle of Crackland, close to a garbage can. A speaker, a microphone, a guitarist. And then Mass begins.

MASS! There, in full enemy territory, behind the front line ... the Kyrie, then the readings. In the distance, behind me, a row of a dozen policemen with helmets and truncheons in their hands slowly advance, clearing all this little world. They are followed by a dump truck and men in cleaning clothes, breathing through a mask, recovering all the abandoned things there in the haste of departure. Then comes a tanker truck and a water lance, which pulses a jet of disinfectant foaming water from one side of the street to the other. The paten and the chalice shine on the altar, impeccable; the beauty of the liturgy and the presence of the bishop who brought us from France here, presiding over this mass, push the contrast of the situation to its climax. The consecration begins. I kneel with the others ... in the juice of the trash that was next to me. The police advance, more and more hesitant as they approach our Mass, then stop about 10 meters behind my back. The dump truck stops. The water lance too. Elevation of the host. Time suspends its flight. The host is held high, pure, beautiful. It is He who reigns, in fact; poor among the poorest. The drug addicts being scattered by the security forces approach our group and surround us, understanding that the police would no longer move forward. At the end of the communion, just before the final blessing, a man of the street gets up, approaches us, trembling, moved, asks for the microphone and makes an announcement, with us as his witnesses. An articulate announcement, a public and strong act: "Today, it's decided, I want to get out of here, take me with you. I want to stop the drugs". He cries with emotion, astonished by his courage. Many cry. A second man approaches in his turn, takes the microphone, and in turn makes the same announcement. After the final song, the youth of the fraternity quickly repack their mass paraphernalia, and leave with the miraculous catch of the day: two men (almost) saved. The power of the Eucharist, in action.

A young Religious brother is the local leader of this Fraternity. The guys in the street call him "the angel", and immediately specify, laughing: "the bearded angel with a brown dress".