Brazil’s Mother Teresa is No More*

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George Plathottam, SDB

Among the thousands of people who lost their lives in the tragic earthquake in Haiti was Dr. Zilda Arns Neumann, the Brazilian pediatrician, nominated several times for Nobel prize and one who is commonly referred to as the Mother Teresa of Brazil.

In October last year I had the privilege of listening to her address at the Signis World Congress in Chiangmai, Thailand. She shared about her work among children and pregnant mothers in several countries of the world. She spoke with the heart of a compassionate mother and a caring doctor and above all a person of deep faith in God. She made a deep impression on the more than 600 delegates who listened to her with rapt attention. I had then intended to write about her commendable work. With this in view, I had collected some materials about her work for my article and took a few snaps. Little did I realize then that I would be writing this tribute to her memory within three months from that memorable address.

75-year-old Zilda Arns, founder of the International Pastoral da Criança, (Pastoral Care for Children) was killed in the earthquake that struck Haiti. She was in Haiti studying the implementation of her programme. Born to German immigrants, Arns was the 12th of 13 children. Her brother, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, retired archbishop of Sao Paulo, Brazil, was one of the five siblings who had priestly or religious vocations.

In a note, Cardinal Arns stated, “I received with sorrow the news that my very dear sister has suffered with the good people of Haiti the tragic effects of the earthquake. May God in his mercy receive in heaven those who on earth fought for children and the defenseless. It is not the moment to lose hope.”

A mother of five and a widow since 1978, Arns dedicated her life to Christian charity. In 1983, she started the pastoral care of children programme at the request of the Brazilian bishops’ conference. The programme has one of the
greatest success rates worldwide in reducing infant mortality rates. It currently has some 261,000 volunteers in Brazil (the majority women), who take care of more than 1.8 million children (from birth to 6 years of age), and 95,000 pregnant women, in more than 42,000 communities and 4,066 municipalities.

Dr. Zilda Arns Neumann

In her talk in Thailand, Zilda told us how her love story began in 1982 in Geneva, in a conversation between James Grant, executive director of UNICEF and the Cardinal Archbishop of Sao Paulo, Paulo Evaristo Arns, during a meeting. James Grant was convinced that the church could save thousands of children, if the mothers were taught simple actions like preparing an oral rehydration solution made at home to prevent dehydration.
The Cardinal, on returning to Brazil, called his sister Zilda, a pediatrician, to talk about the proposal. She says: “I felt I was called by God for a great life mission. I explained to him that according to my experience in public health as a pediatrician and sanitarian medical doctor, it would be not enough to teach the mothers the use of oral rehydration solution but would be necessary to teach them about the prenatal checks, breastfeeding, nutritional vigilance and vaccination, so they would know how to take care of their children for them to “grow in wisdom and grace” (Luke 2:52).

The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (CNBB) approved the proposal and appointed the then Archbishop of Londrina, Cardinal Geraldo Majella Agnelo, to follow the development of the project. The slogan chosen was “I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). The pilot-project was implemented in Florestopolis, a municipality belonging to the Archdiocese of Londrina, which had a high mortality rate of 127 deaths per one thousand children born alive.

Zilda developed a community methodology inspired by the Gospel of the two fish and five loaves (John 6:1-15), that would feed as many as five thousand. She described the work as the simple and inexpensive actions of education and promotion of health, faith and citizenship performed by volunteer leaders, who organize the communities into family groups with pregnant women and children below six years old, and with whom they share knowledge and solidarity. They also aim at strengthening the social bonds and improving public policies mainly in the areas of health and education, reduction of social differences, child and mother mortality, malnutrition and violence.

Zilda felt convinced that the quest for a fair and fraternal world is born in the heart of every person and in the positive attitudes towards one’s neighbour, mainly the children. One of each community members is to be available for volunteer work. The Pastoral da Criança, since its foundation became inclusive, ecumenical and beyond religion. It does not make distinction of race, complexion, political party or any other.

The project was initiated in other countries too. Today it is present in 20 other countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. The Pastoral da Criança is a communitarian organization which acts nationally and internationally, whose work is based on human solidarity and knowledge sharing. The methodology and experience of 26 years in several countries, has contributed to the effectiveness of the project globally. Its extraordinary results are due to the methodology that joins Faith and Life, to the promotion of women, to the non-centralized qualification system, to the Information System, to the quality of the education material and so on. The concerted efforts and partnership ensure the sustainability of the project.

In Brazil, the Pastoral da Criança relies on the financial support of the Federal Government through the Department of Health. For its credibility the programme also won support of the state and municipal governments,
companies and others. UNICEF is usually one of the first entities to support and help financially the *Pastoral da Criança* when it is initiated in a new country.

The *Millennium Declaration*, approved by the United Nations in September 2000, established eight targets to be reached by 2015. Among them are eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, the reduction of child mortality and an increase in autonomy for women. These objectives can only be accomplished with the joint efforts of governments, non-governmental organizations, religions, companies, communication media and society in general.

Promoting the full development of the children, from the mother’s womb to the age of six in his/her family and community context, means participating in the construction of a fairer and fraternal, world in the service of life and hope. The project aims at the full development of the child, from the time he/she is conceived till he/she reaches six years of age, within the context of the family and the community. This is done by promoting the integration between the family and the community. The main characteristic of the *Pastoral da Criança* is the voluntary work, performed mainly by the people of the community who instruct and guide on matters of health, nutrition, education and citizenship plus basic interactions in the communities. Each volunteer of the *Pastoral da Criança* does more than just work with the families; he/she follows up and monitors progress.

Social difference is a worldwide problem. As consequence of poverty and lack of quality education, mothers and their families suffer from diseases and violence which could easily be prevented. Malnutrition and child mortality rates are high in many countries around the world. The countries of the southern hemisphere are the ones with the highest concentration of child mortality rates, malnutrition and violence.

The qualified leaders put into practice one set of actions for the education, citizenship and spirituality. When a family is followed by the leader of the *Pastoral da Criança*, its members feel supported and strengthened to search for solutions to the problems. The leader belongs to the same community, knows the family and its situation well. They instruct the family on its rights and duties, contribute to prevent domestic violence with messages of peace, love and solidarity. They prepare pregnant women for breastfeeding, prenatal care, nutrition, hygiene, vaccination, and provide psychological support and help strengthen self-esteem. Mothers are instructed and helped after the childbirth through immunization, orientation for the prevention and treatment of diarrhoea and breathing infections, preparation of home serum to prevent dehydration. Dr. Neumann says that: “If the families are well, the child is well.”

There are complementary actions which also help reduce child mortality and promote improvements in the family and communities to which the child belongs. These include literacy programmes, providing toys and games,
advocacy and liaison with the government. Wherever needed he volunteers initiate adult education programmes, control and elimination of leprosy, tuberculosis, etc. The volunteers express their solidarity through three monthly activities: the Home Visit, the Life Celebration Day - the Weighing Day (when the children are weighed and the bonds of friendship among the families are strengthened) and the Evaluation and Feedback Meeting.

During the visits, he/she has the opportunity to get to know the family better and to share knowledge and experiences on health, nutrition, hygiene, citizenship, pregnancy, disease prevention, child education, faith, and life, among others. The Leader also evaluates what improvements can be made in the care of children, during pregnancy, in nutrition and in family relationships. In Brazil, each leader follows on an average 13 families and works 24 hours per month.

The life Celebration Day is the moment in which the communities gather the children followed by one or more members of the families, to be weighed. This fraternity moment is enhanced with the exchange of experience, information and the enjoyment of a delicious snack. Each community has its own way to organize its Celebration Day. It can be held at the leader’s home, in the open air, under the trees or in other spaces and food can be served. The children are weighed in party environment, celebrating the achievements and searching for solutions to improve the quality of life for each one of them. On the Life Celebration Day all are invited to understand the importance of faith and fraternal relationship between the churches, in an ecumenical dimension and beyond religion.

Each child’s weight is written down on the Child’s Card and in the leader’s notebook. The information is sent to the office of the Pastoral da Criança, where it is recorded and becomes an important indicator of health and well being. During the meeting, the leaders assess the progress of their actions, using the methodology of See, Assess, Act, Evaluate and Celebrate. In this meeting, they observe the reality of the families that are followed, evaluate the causes and consequences of a certain situation, gather efforts and evaluate which alternatives can help the family or the community.

The major victims of social difference in the whole world are the children and the women. Millions of children die due to diseases that could be avoided. In the poorer countries, there is acute shortage of basic health services, water and sewage treatment, and lack of information about proper nutrition, hygiene and disease prevention. Many suffer from malnutrition, dehydration, pneumonia, malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases that can easily be prevented. In countries like Angola, Africa, East Timor and several countries of Asia, the child mortality rate exceeds 100 children per thousand children born alive. Simple hygiene care, access to proper food and essential public policies, such as those of basic sanitation and correct water treatment, would save thousands of lives every year.
Dr Zilda Arns Newmann is no longer with us. She died in action, but she has shown a way to save and promote the lives of millions of children all over the world. Her vision and method for giving life in all its fullness to children must now be continued across the world by many more people who care.


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Cheers to Gandhigiri*

The 53-year-old Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal at Tardeo has been spreading the message of Gandhi. Team TSM gets you more details:

“The hype over Munnabhai staying in the Yerwada Jail that once housed Gandhi has made many journalists call me up to find out about Gandhi’s life. Some even asked us if Sanjay Dutt would be appearing for the Gandhi exam that we will conduct later this year. Brand Gandhi does make news,” says TRK Somaiya, programme convener of the Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal.

No wonder the Gandhi bookstore, located on the ground floor of the pink Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal building adjacent to Grant Road’s bhaji gully, is seeing a surge in demand for Gandhian literature. Somaiya notes, “When the Mandal was constituted in 1956 by Vinoba Bhave, there was little interest in books on or by Mahatma Gandhi. We literally had to force people to buy books outside cinema theatres during Gandhi’s centenary year celebrations in 1969.

“But after Lage Raho Munnabhai launched, we’ve sold more than nine lakh copies of just Gandhi’s autobiography, My Experiments with Truth and Mangal Prabhat with the film, Gandhi — My Father, we’ve seen a demand for books on Harilal Gandhi too,” says Harilal Gandhi’s great-grandaughter Sonal Parikh who’s a proud Gandhian.

In its bid to spread Gandhi’s words of wisdom, the books at the store are priced really low.

A paperback version of Gandhi’s autobiography that may cost Rs 500 at a swanky bookstore, comes for as little as Rs 30 here. “Gandhi didn’t want to make money on education. By pricing books high, not everyone will be able to avail them. This is not a profit-making venture. We want to put up as much information as possible and are even using the internet to do so.”

Keeping up with the times, the bookstore has also developed a website www.mkgandhi.org. In all its 53 years, members of the Mandal have had to compulsorily adhere to the Gandhian way of life — khadi is the preferred choice of fabric for office-wear and self-sacrifice for the good of others (sarvodaya) is a way of life. Staffers get a monthly salary of no more than Rs 10,000 and all programmes are conducted with the help of donations.
With Gandhigiri becoming increasingly popular, the Mandal aims to make this world better.

Source: Bombay Times, dt. 21.01.2010
* Received by e-mail from info@mkgandhi.org on Jan 21, 2010.