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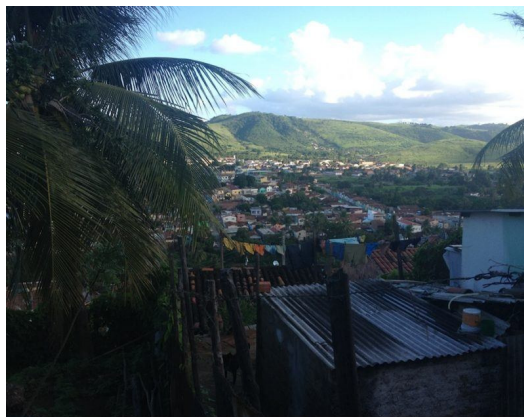
by NANCY SCHEPER-HUGHES

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Memoir: A Liberation Theology Stations of the Cross in Northeast Brazil

Padre Andreas, a Jesuit priest from Spain, came on a radical mission to the impoverished hillside shantytown of Alto do Cruzeiro in the municipio of Timbauba, a sugarcane market town in Pernambuco Brazil. At the time, 1989, I was living on “the Alto” (the hill) with the rural workers, sugarcane cutters, and fishermen and women while writing my book Death Without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil. As a dedicated liberation theologian Padre Andreas declined an invitation by the local elderly Monseigneur to sleep in the local rectory, which itself I can assure you was not so great. Instead, he spent each night in a different hovel of the Alto listening to the stories of the residents of the stigmatized community.

Andreas recorded oral histories, mapped the obscure paths on the hill with names like ‘the vultures stench’ and ‘murderers ledge’ in an attempt to recover what he called ” the lost history and invisible geography” of the shantytown.

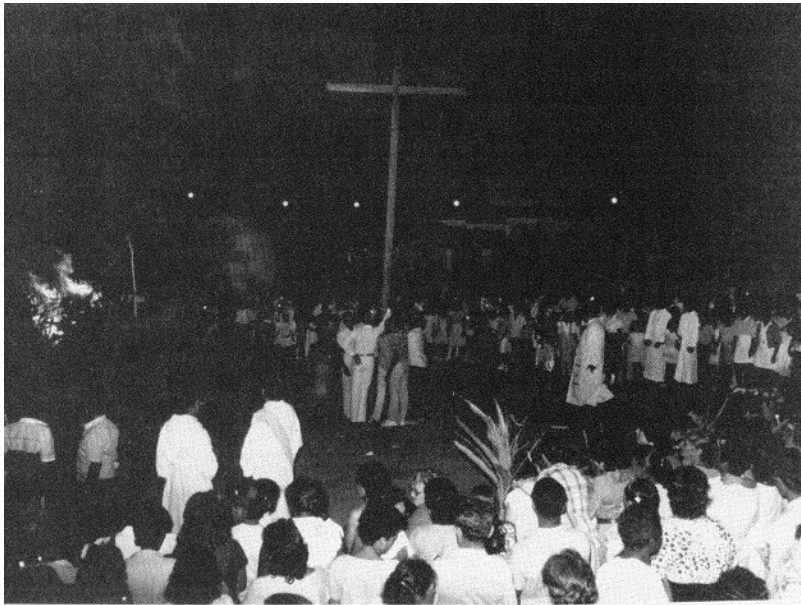




The good priest delighted the impoverished hillside community with his radical ideas, dark humor, and radical hope inspired by Brechtian tactics of theatre of the oppressed, and rituals of protest. He introduced participatory Masses in which the distinction between the priest as sacred celebrant and the 'faithful' as followers was ended. He invited midwives, sugar cane cutters, fishermen, and garbage collectors to give sermons. Their shyness and their illiteracy got in the way, but Padre Andreas told them that they were more precious to Jesus than their cruel sugar plantation bosses who took all that was sweet out of their lives. All they had to do was to speak from the heart, which they did after a while.

When Holy Week arrived there was a meeting on the Alto about how to bring liberation theology into the Stations of the Cross, the procession of the fourteen events honoring the passion and death of Jesus? How could the shantytown create a different and existential reflection on the poverty, oppression and everyday suffering of the people of the Alto? There had been other attempts with traditional bonfires to honor Saint John, a beloved saint in Timbauba. The ritual was turned upside down when the people of the Alto decided to burn schoolbooks (of all things!) that their ignored children had never been taught properly how to read. "What good to us are these maps to a world we do not know

if we cannot read these books?” a local leader protested as the damned books were burned in a bonfire.



On another occasion the annual blessing of automobiles on the feast day of Saint Christopher set the stage for rituals that questioned the grotesque inequalities, racism, police violence, and exploitation, the unacknowledged mortal sins and social sins of greed and indifference that required ritual exorcisms. So, on the day of the annual Christopher's parade of sugarcane trucks, bourgeois cars and jeeps, police vehicles that circled around the market town as they were blessed by the parish priest on an impromptu stage. A plot emerged when a dozen or more Brown and Black women of the Alto, who daily carried polluted water from the river each day, stepped up on the stage to join the priests who were confused and yet welcoming the women. But before they knew what was happening the women shaking and carrying buckets of dirty water from the local river on their head dumped their pails on the parade of decorated cars amidst screams and curses by the elite and very white car owners.

As Holy Week arrived Padre Andreas and the people of the Alto quickly organized an early morning Via Sacra (Stations of the Cross). The procession began in front of the straw hut of Ze de Mello, one of the oldest residents of the Alto do Cruzeiro. Ze's doorstep was decorated with garbage where feral pigs and wild goats often foraged.

The priest called on the cane cutters to be the first group to carry the heavy cross on their shoulders that would lead the people in a liberationist Stations of the Cross.



As one group grew weary another group – garbage workers, domestic cleaners, street kids, fishermen, midwives, traditional healers and finally mothers –was each called forward to take up the cross.

At each designated “station” Andreas reflected on a crisis. At the open manioc market, he spoke of food shortages and the crisis of the roçados, the small private vegetable and bean gardens that were ‘undocumented’. A rural union leader called attention to the laws that were supposed to protect the rights of the peasants and rural squatters.

One of the “stations” took the procession to the police precinct where the priest and his people reflected on police brutality and lack of social justice. The police acted independently like a mafia, and an older mother called out “you are not peacemakers”.



The next Station of the Cross-was the local jail where the padre reflected on the social conditions that forced a hungry population to commit “crimes of hunger”. “Blessed are the hungry who steal bread to feed their children”! Blessed are the street people who are jailed without justice!



Street Kids in Jailed without Justice but with plenty of Bias.

The procession formed in front of the town hall, the prefeitura. The Brazilian government had given stipends to local bakers so they could distribute bread during Easter to all families that could not afford it. But the bread had not yet come to the Alto do Cruzeiro. “Bread”, Padre Andreas said, is life itself”. The mayor and his assistant listened with anxiety. If the bakers would not comply wit the program, would there be a food riot?

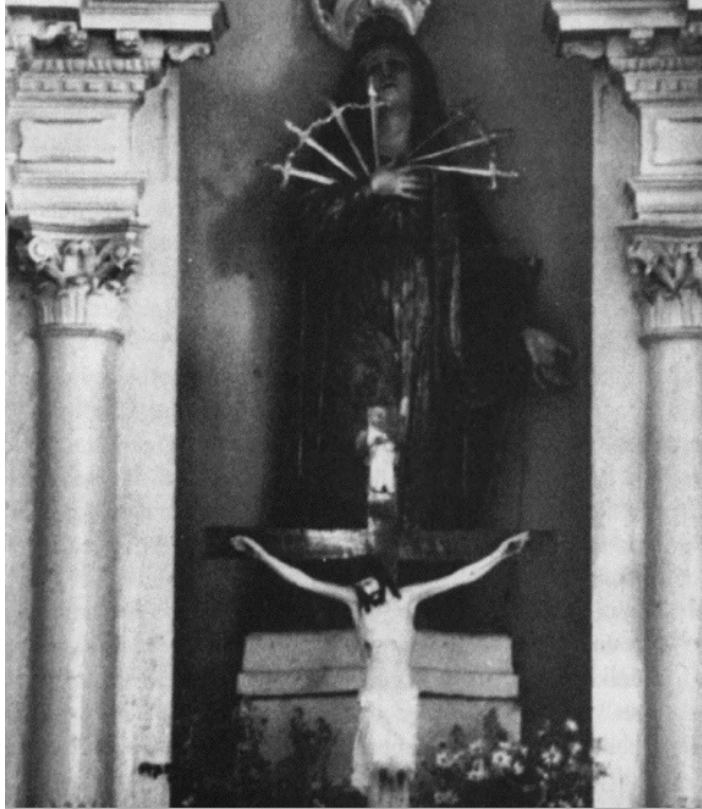


As the procession continued on the main street local working class people joined the poor. It was the first time this had happened. The next Station of the Cross was the local hospital where women spoke of fainting in the hospital hallways unattended. Where was a Simon of Cyrene or a Good Samaritan to wipe the sweat from the fevered brow of a man dying from dengue or Chikungunya? There were no tests. Where was Saint Bridget, the patron saint of midwives to help women in labor? Woman were giving birth on the floor of the hospital without even a cot to lie on or a nurse to offer a taste of water or wine to dry and fevered lips.



“Our Stations of the Cross represent your Calvary!” Padre Andreas announced through a bullhorn that someone in the crowd had handed to him. Our Stations will allow you to reflect on the painful steps of your own crucifixions, the useless suffering and premature deaths that all of you have experienced in your families”.

Next, the procession moved indoors to the altar of the local Basilica of Nossa Senhora das Dores where the Stations paused at the feet of Our Lady of Sorrows. Together they reflected on the suffering of women so many of whom had lost their children as babies and as adolescents. “‘Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.’



A nun came forward to reflect on the Pietà, the thirteenth Station of the Cross when the dead body of Jesus is taken down from the cross and laid in the arms of his mother. “What is before our eyes”? she asked. “Here is Mary, our mother, receiving the lifeless body of her son. What torture! The hands that received him at birth, full of life, full of grace, and love. Now, silent, dead. What mother here has not felt those same daggers stab her breast? Today motherhood has become a burden, a punishment, even a curse. Like the Holy Mother the women of Alto do Cruzeiro know the weight of a dead son in their arms.”



The death of a son killed by gangs Irene and her sister had each lost sons to local death squads.



Finally, the procession ended at the municipal cemetery to reflect on the last traditional Station of the Cross when Jesus was laid in his tomb. "If Jesus died today in Timbauba" Padre Andreas reflected, "what rich man, what Joseph of Aramathia would come forward to offer him a tomb? Here our dead are wrapped in a tattered bedsheet and dumped in a common grave among the anonymous dead.



The Bone Depository: "They have counted my hands and feet; they have numbered all my bones."

Those who died poor can sometimes beg the mayor for a month in a proper grave so that they could bring flowers, candies, and clothing to public plot. Xoxa wanted to bring a pair of socks to her little sister, Mercea, who was buried quickly and in bare feet. Leonardo wanted to know who would be the next to die?





On the procession's return to the Alto do Cruzeiro, Padre Andreas called for a miracle. "Yes, I want a miracle. I want all the women to come forward and carry our cross home to the very top of the Alto do Cruzeiro." The women were beaming with pride, they were like the women of Jerusalem... and so they were.



All photos by Nancy Scheper-Hughes.

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