

Hearing the cry of Brazil's people of the land

When Padre **TIAGO THORLBY** arrived in Brazil, a land of plenty, in 1968, he was shocked by the opulent wealth of the elite land-owning minority and the hunger and exploitation of the majority of people. Working with landless peasants, sugarcane cutters and homesteaders, he saw how agribusiness with its monocultures and toxic chemicals and huge land accumulation brings death to the land and hunger and exclusion for the people. Industrial 'biofuel' production adds to the destruction. For agribusiness, food and energy production is for profits not people. More ancient traditions in many cultures celebrate a belief in sharing and the big banquet, with food being central to the common unity of life.

'Eat up, children. I like to see you enjoying your food. Don't waste it. You don't know what it means to go hungry.' These were my father's words to encourage us to clear our plates. 'To go hungry' — he certainly knew the meaning of the words. When asked by others, 'What did you do during the [1939–45] war?' he'd sometimes reply 'I was a guest of the Japanese,' or, just to annoy: 'I was in prison.' He was, in fact, in a Japanese POW camp, as he put it 'next to the *boxing-up* room,' literally dying of hunger. This survivor certainly knew the value of food.

From childhood into youth, I never gave food much thought. There were days when 'I could eat a horse' and days when I complained about school dinners. School history told us about the privations of the Highland Clearances and the Irish Potato Famine. Queen Victoria sent Five Pounds sterling to alleviate the suffering of the Irish, as well as Five Pounds to the Battersea Dog Home to show she wasn't biased.

I experienced a change in *food culture*, going from Scots Broth to Irish Stew, when I went to Ireland while finishing my studies. Some years later, more *food culture* changes were in store: ordained a priest at Easter, 1968, I was soon off to Brazil. I've been here ever since, celebrating the Faith with the people of the land, or with those who were expelled from the land. I arrived in a Brazil immersed in the shot and shell of a military dictatorship which was established in 1964 and continued until 1985. The military were backed by the US and its CIA/Pentagon military-industrial complex, as had happened in Guatemala 10 years previously,

and as would happen in Chile 10 years later, and any other time the US felt its *Monroe Doctrine* was being challenged.

Land reform denied

A principal reason for the military dictatorship was *food*, the Brazilian people wanted land reform and land to produce food. The Brazilian elite wanted land also, to shore up their power and of course, the US wanted the elitist dictatorship to strengthen its interests. In the 1950s, hunger for food and land had brought people together in *Peasant Leagues* which the military dictatorship from 1964 singled out for special treatment. The Brazilian elite showed a great thirst for revenge against those who threatened their land power-base.

Among the lasting memories of my early days in Brazil are my

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Padre Tiago Thorlby tries to improve lives of field workers by practising good religion, bad religion he says in plantation churches promises workers better life in the next world.



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shock at the obscene opulence of the elitist minority at the expense of the humiliating exploitation of the vast majority. I asked myself: 'where does *Genesis 1:27* fit into all this?' or *Exodus 3:7*? I remember too the surprise of finding that beans for 'food hand-outs' in the shantytown favelas, spilled from a sack in the boot of the parish car, had begun to sprout on their own, even without the fertility of the soil. These impressions helped establish the dialectic in which I worked as summed up by Dom Helder Câmara: 'when I hand out food, everyone says how charitable I am. When I ask why are they hungry, they call me a Communist.'

Food was high on the agenda during the ten years I spent on the northern periphery of São Paulo city. One hundred and fifty people hourly were pouring into the metropolis, part of the 'rural exodus' from North-east Brazil, a euphemistic expression for land clearances. The Peasant Leagues were smashed after the 1964 military coup, peasants were evicted from the land for development projects: large industrial plantations, cattle farming, roads, etc, the process of commercialization of agriculture and the ensuing concentration of land in fewer hands.

*'I have heard the cry of my people'*¹ was a statement signed by N.E. Brazilian bishops in 1973. How and why can people be hungry in a land so bountifully plentiful? So I went off to the Amazon and the solitude of the watered ways, the vast lakes, mighty rivers and the devastation of the Forest. Even in those days, the late 1970s, the Forest was being burnt off at the rate of ten thousand hectares daily. During the burning season, it was difficult to sleep at night: the smoke, the smell of the Forest going up in flames. Here again, the food problems. Commercial fishing fleets cleaned out the lakes of their fish stocks. Local communities were reduced to eating tinned fish or hunger, their staple diet exported to foreign tables. Hunger taught the people to defend their lakes. It was years, however, before fish stocks returned to normal. Some communities vanished.

Working with the people

In the mid-1980s, I began to celebrate the Faith with the people in the coastal 'forest zone,' the best land in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco. 'Forest' it used to be! 97% of it has been devastated to plant sugarcane monoculture plantations with all the agro-

toxins this entails. The land is peopled precariously by homesteaders, landless peasants and sugar cane cutters but controlled almost entirely by the sugar barons and their monocultures with a conniving legislature, an obedient judiciary and a subservient executive at their beck and call. Rich, lush, well-watered coastal land: you wouldn't expect to find problems related to food in this region. Yet this region has a Human Development Index on a level with that of Haiti. The sugar barons control 95% of the agricultural land.

There is plenty of land in Brazil to produce food to satisfy the needs of its own people, which is called *Food Sovereignty*. But those who control the land initiate laws that make access to land nearly impossible for those who need it to live, work and draw their sustenance from. 'We respect the law,' a sugar baron said to me 'because it is we who make the law.' Josué de Castro, the Brazilian sociologist, summed up the situation: 'one part of the population can't sleep because they are hungry; the other part can't sleep because they are afraid of the people who are hungry.'

I invited the people with whom I work: homesteaders, landless peasants, sugar cane cutters, to share their ideas on food. There was no mincing of words. Some was straight dialectic, others, words with an Old Testament ring. Some celebrate the ability to produce an abundance of food, and to be able to share it.

- 'The land is going to die because of the poisons they are putting on the monoculture crops'
- 'If we don't have a place to plant in, we're going to be hungry'
- 'Without work, there's no food'
- 'When I thought of giving up the struggle for land, I thought: but if I do, what will I eat?'
- 'They call us all sorts of names – but it is us that produce food for the city'
- 'The youth are fleeing from the countryside because work on the land is not given its value'
- 'Bad and all as the situation may be for us here on the land, for those who left, the situation is even worse'
- 'I used to plant sugar cane but packed it in: only the sugar barons profit from it. ... Now I plant everything: all sorts of edible crops and fruit trees. There's no future in sugar cane and soon, everyone will be dying of hunger'
- 'I'm proud to produce *my* food'

Nothing can hide the fact that those who live on the land are those who are most threatened by hunger, hunger which is purely political: lack of political will to support those who produce decent food at decent

prices. When I arrived in Brazil in the 1960s, seventy percent of the population lived and worked on the land. In 2010, 80% live in urban situations. Little wonder that Brazil is now importing its staple diet of beans and rice, equivalent to New Zealand importing lamb and dairy products.²

Food, who produces it – local farmers or the monoculture, industrial farming conglomerates? Big agribusiness and its media cohorts blast us regularly with the message that only industrial farming can provide for the the population's food needs. Having 'phased out' most of the rural population industrial farming now has the brass neck to say peasant farming doesn't produce! Brazil has gone agribusiness, 'farmageddon,' at the service of the Chicago Stock Exchange, where abundance is anathema, sharing is stealing their profits, diversity is damned. Welcome to the Brave New World of Food: scarcity is profit, selfishness is smooth, monoculture is mighty.

The day that agribusiness plants to provide for real human food needs is the day hell freezes over. The food production model of industrial farming wreaks havoc in the countryside. Monsanto minions and the Adventis advocates say: 'We've a remedy for the rural catastrophe we create' and they bring out the agrotoxins and GMOs from their carpet-bags. 'Land,' the land baron says, 'the only reason I need it is to keep the stalks standing straight.' Industrial farming

does the rest, thousands and thousands of hectares of land, vanishing into the monoculture mists. Not a bird to be seen, not a bee or a butterfly, not a weed or a wild flower. Einstein was asked: what happens when the last bee vanishes? 'We've ten days to live', he said.

If those who apply agrotoxins to the crops knew what the effects of this activity meant for them personally, they would denounce their place of employment as a serious 'health hazard.' So much for the agrotoxin sprayers. For the rest of us, there's the five plus litres of poison we consume in our food annually. Adventis-Bunge-Cargill-Dupont, etc, the whole satanic alphabet of them must be thinking of getting into health insurance as well, and what do they produce? Decent food at decent prices? Or plastic, petroleum products that get points and praise from the Chicago Stock Exchange?

I like eating seasonal, tropical fruit here where I live in North-east Brazil. Before going on a journey to the US, friends said: 'Eat plenty of fruit while you can, you won't get any there.' I saw lots of fruit on sale there and ate it but it all tasted the same. I swear I got a background taste of gasoline in the food.

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STABLE PRICES TRIPLE AS MUCH OF THE WORLD'S FOOD SUPPLY IS DIVERTED TOWARDS FUEL CONSUMPTION



KHALIL BENDIB

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Food: how is it produced? Don't ask 'the man from Delmonte,' be it in Kenya or Brazil, he won't tell you the whole story. He just wants you to consume, consume, consume, in season and out of season. But why do they have armed guards and barbed wire round their latifundary sized, monoculture plantations? They are there because people were thrown off the land. The TNCs get the 'required' legal paper work, proving they are the owners. No attention is given to the farmers who took care of the land for generations, using employment-generating techniques and centuries-old wisdom to produce food, 'our daily bread.' The laser wire and armed men are there because those 'exiles' might just want to come back to the land, as no one can really become reconciled to life in a shanty-town slum where petty crime, prostitution, drug-trafficking is a way of earning 'our daily bread.' People have their dignity.

Wherever you see the monoculture agribusiness production model, you can be sure that misery is just a short journey away. I visited a Brooke-Bond tea plantation in Kenya, hearing glowing praise for the way the mono-plantation was laid out. I saw how the workers were housed in mono-pattern housing. 'Tell me,' I said 'is there a town up ahead that is marked by violence, petty crime, prostitution, drugs and so on?' 'Yes there is – but how do you know? You've never been here before.' Once you've seen one monoculture model of soya, sugar cane, eucalyptus, you've seen them all. A violent model, producing violent (vile!) food, and violent people.

Much of the sugar cane grown in Brazil is now used to produce ethanol biofuel, or 'bio-energy.' 'Bio' means life. So it's 'life-energy' then? No, not after what is done to the soil of the impacted land and to biodiversity in the monocultural sugarcane fields and to the the soul of those working in the fields of the feudal latifundary model to produce 'clean-green energy.' This is 'necro energy,' meaning death energy, guaranteeing full tanks at the expense of empty bellies, guaranteeing land-grabs while denying land reform for people who need land to live, work and produce food on. This necro energy guarantees commodity profits while denying a nation its right to Food Sovereignty.

Creation & the Garden

Creation began without us. In our consumer-crazed quest for energy and food, it *might* just end without us as well! Creation began in a Garden, a garden of Eden and will end in a Garden, the New Earth.³ No matter what the faith persuasion: amerindian aztec, bantu plainsman, maori tribe, viking beserkers, all have a belief in how it started, how it will end. There is an ages-old belief in the 'big-banquet,' the 'messianic meal,' for all of us who want to take part in the sharing and solidarity that food for the community, common-unity, signifies. Our traditions have much on the subject of this meal, its place of celebration and how to unite and organize to bring it about.

'I saw a New Earth,' said the Prophet Isaiah.⁴ No mention here of Climate Change, Food Sovereignty, IMF, WTC, World Bank, TNCs, land-grabbing, etc. We must have learned how to resolve these issues before in the Garden, when we first shared with others and the other creatures of the Earth. 'Tears have been wiped away.' The food at the banquet has a proud Isaiah, 'I made it/taste/we share it' flavour. Abundance is not lacking. Nothing, however, is left over since 'everything left over on my plate was stolen from the poor.' What a banquet! The food of fraternity for brothers and sisters with a common father: 'Our Father' and 'our daily bread.' But 'don't let us give in to the temptation' of individualism, selfishness, to consume and consume, to possess and possess. Food is a right, not a commodity. Food production is to feed people, not profits.

Further food for thought: www.grain.org/seedling www.etcgroup.org www.rodaleinstitute.org www.farmlandgrab.org www.brewsterkneen.org www.pesticideactionnetwork.org pacificecologist.org issue 17.

Padre Tiago Thorlby works near the sugarcane zone in Pernambuco, north-east Brazil with the Ecumenical Church organisation Comissao Pastoral da Terra, Land Pastoral Commission (CPT). He visited Wellington, New Zealand in April 2010, invited by the Pacific Institute of Resource Management, (publishes of *Pacific Ecologist*) to talk at public meetings on *The Reality Behind Brazilian Biofuels in New Zealand* - see www.pirm.org.nz for link to his talk.

REFERENCES

- 1 'I Have Heard the Cry of My People,' a powerful statement/manifesto signed by 18 Catholic bishops of North-east Brazil, 6 May 1973, discussed widely internationally.
- 2 Beans and rice Brazil's staple diet began to be imported to Brazil after southern Brazil where beans used to be grown was overtaken by industrial plantations of soybeans for export crops, often used to feed cattle, pigs in Europe etc
- 3 Book of Revelations (Apocalypse): chapter 21, verse 1, - the new earth
- 4 The Prophet Isaiah, the Liberation Prophet, chapter 65, verses 17 to 25.