

Spiritan Magazine

Volume 38
Number 3 *Summer*

Article 6

Summer 2014

Brazil: Fr John Baptist Doyle CSSp: A Different sort of visitor to Brazil

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Recommended Citation

Stanford, P. (2014). Brazil: Fr John Baptist Doyle CSSp: A Different sort of visitor to Brazil. *Spiritan Magazine*, 38 (3). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol38/iss3/6>

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Fr John Baptist Doyle CSSp

A different sort of visitor to Brazil

Peter Stanford

There are lots of figures plucked out of the air to justify the huge cost of global sporting events such as the football World Cup in Brazil. Before and after our own London 2012 Olympics, weighty reports totaled up billions and billions of pounds supposedly generated for our economy as a result of the pageant but, with too many, the link was tenuous, to say the least.

Another argument made for the hefty price tag was that the competition focuses the world's attention on the host nation. And, to be fair, there have been more reporters on the streets of Brazil than girls

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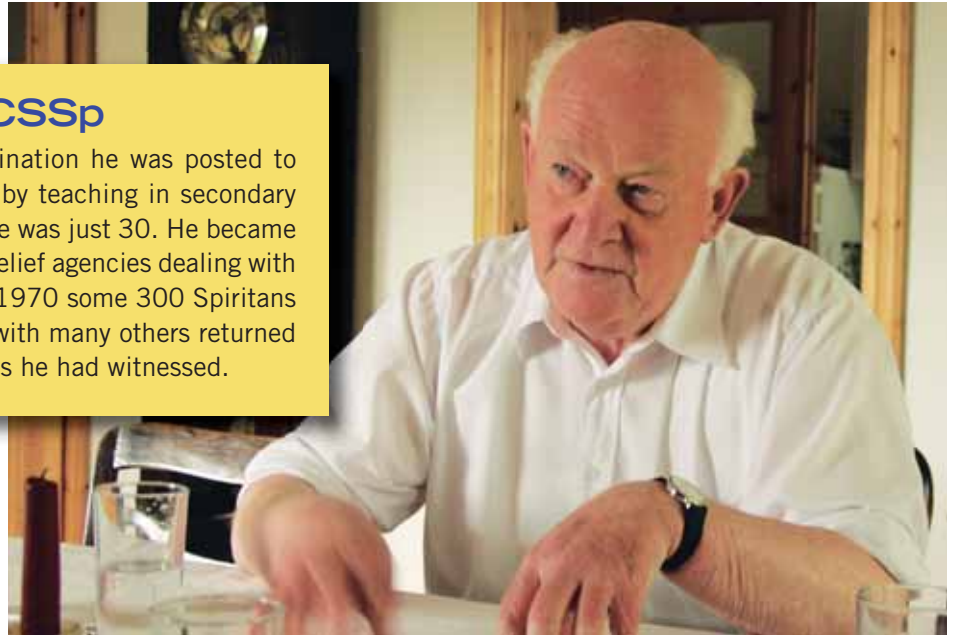
on the beach at Ipanema, all looking at the reality behind the economic miracle that has seen the country promoted to the champions league of developed nations. But it is all so fleeting and superficial, a warm-up for the great event, those 90 minutes on the pitch.

A different sort of visitor to Brazil was Fr John Baptist Doyle, a member of the Irish province of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. J.B., who died at the end of April, spent 23 years there.

Had the climate not been so bad for his health, he told me recently, he would probably have stayed there until he met his maker.

Fr John Baptist Doyle CSSp

Always J.B. to his confreres, after ordination he was posted to Nigeria. A science graduate, he began by teaching in secondary schools. When the civil war broke out, he was just 30. He became a liaison officer for French and German relief agencies dealing with the aftermath of dreadful atrocities. In 1970 some 300 Spiritans were expelled from Nigeria. J.B. Doyle with many others returned home, traumatized by the ghastly scenes he had witnessed.



I visited J.B. 20 years ago, thanks to Cafod, in his parish of Nossa Senhora Aparecida in Rolim de Moura, a wild west town that had risen rapidly from an area of cleared Amazon rainforest in the far-flung state of Rondonia.

Tumbleweed in balls really did roll down its main (and only) street between the wooden buildings.

None of the World Cup matches has ventured into such remote territory, no camera has recorded how first the loggers came and stripped away the forest, followed by a flood of poor migrants (120,000 had arrived in and around Rolim de Moura in the blinking of an eye), lured by the fool's gold of land that

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turned out to be barren and unyielding once the canopy of trees had gone. It was to these desperate, betrayed folk that J.B. ministered.

He picked us up in a battered jeep at a lonely bus stop on the one main road that ran through Rondonia. It was dusk as we headed off down the dirt road, pushed through what had been virgin forest by the logging companies.

We drove for what seemed like hours in plumes of red dust, without seeing a soul or another vehicle.

Then a set of headlights loomed up behind. J.B. explained, very casually, that his work in standing up for the new migrants against the loggers, and the ranchers who often came in their wake, had made him unpopular. There were people — armed, ruthless people — who wanted to intimidate him into silence, drive him off the road and out of Rolim de Moura. 'Padre João Batista' as he was called had earned death threats for his prophetic work.

It turned out, on this occasion, to be a false alarm, but in that moment I had a glimpse of the danger he lived with daily. Later, as we toured the outlying rough settlements of his dirt-poor parish — mud houses without a stick of anything in them, corrugated iron churches where the men sat on one side and the women on the other, makeshift schools where the children stood wide-eyed staring at the strangers in their midst — I saw too how loved and needed he was, the one outsider willing to devote his life to such outcasts.

He took us in his battered truck to one of the outlying settlements. The track was so rough that we had to stop a good mile before we got there, but the village had come to greet us. He led the way, on foot, at the head of a colourful procession as we walked through this barren landscape, through great puddles of red mud that swamped my shoes, to the makeshift church for Mass and then a feast to celebrate our arrival.

It was an experience I will never forget, and I still think of J.B. often, especially when another dreadful abuse case surfaces in the news and causes me momentarily to despair of my church, and to wonder if there really are any good priests.

Here, surely, was one good man who exemplified the best tradition of service and self-sacrifice.

And he has been in my thoughts as I have curled up on the sofa with my teenage son to relive the watching-the-World-Cup-together ritual that I used to do with my dad.

Hidden from view by those vast modern stadiums, by the panoramic views of Rio, by the players who are regarded with an unhealthy reverence by their adoring fans, by the whole shabby billion-pound business that is football, is that other Brazil that J.B. embraced, that is still out there today, and to which this modest unassuming man gave his life in imitation of Christ. R.I.P. ■

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