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# TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE OF MAGIS IN BRAZIL

By **Brendan P. Busse, S.J.**

**T**he Jesuits of Amazonia were gathered together in 1759 in the college chapel of São Francisco Xavier in the port city of Belem at the mouth of the Amazon River. They were tied together and marched to a nearby ship to return to Europe after their expulsion by the Portuguese crown from all its territories. Some 250 years later, four Jesuits returned to that chapel along with 30 young people and celebrated mass to begin their MAGIS pilgrimage just prior to the recent World Youth Day gathering with Pope Francis in Rio de Janeiro. It was the first time Jesuits had celebrated mass in that chapel since their expulsion from Brazil.

I left that Eucharist in the trunk of a small car – a hatchback, technically, so not as cramped as it may sound. I was being taken along with four companions to a local family's home for dinner. It was a tight fit but much better than being tied up and thrown onto a prison ship! But the parallel was hard to ignore: Centuries ago Jesuits left that chapel crammed into ships as exiles, but this summer we left crammed into compact cars as honored guests.

This narrative could be one of a triumphant return or a tale of hospitality. I'll follow Pope Francis's lead and take the latter tack. The people of Brazil were a true embodiment of Francis's image of a humble church of mercy and service. Again and again they seemed to say, "By any means necessary, we'll make room for you!" The one word every pilgrim was sure to learn in Brazil was *obrigado. Thank you!*

About a week later I was in another tight spot: crammed onto Copacabana beach with 3.5 million young pilgrims from around the world. Pope Francis smiled and waved an arm, and the people came. They found a place on the sand and made space for each other.

Pope Francis's homilies were straightforward calls to Christian charity. With his trademark simplicity, he drew three points from the readings at mass: *Go. Do not be afraid. Serve.* Each of these gospel imperatives captures a glimpse of Francis's vision for the Church, a vision that was deeply attractive to the cheering young crowd.

**"Go."** Francis is showing his Jesuit roots here. Perhaps nothing defines the life of the Society of Jesus more than this simple imperative, "Go!" *To the missions, to the frontiers, to the poor, to the powerful ... for the greater glory of God just go!* In his Contemplation to Attain Divine Love, St. Ignatius tells us that there are two things we should know: Love is active and it is mutual. We show our love more in deeds than in words, and we give to one another whatever we have, whatever we are. In this sense, Copacabana was not so much a destination point as a missioning station. And as at any eucharistic liturgy, we were gathered there to be sent out.

**"Do not be afraid."** Francis has repeated many times his preference for a Church that takes risks "in the streets" over one that protects itself behind closed doors. In very plain language he has told theologians to do their work passionately and without fear of a call from Rome. He's also said that we need a deeper theology of women - a statement I find to be more encouraging of young feminist

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theologians than dismissive of the womanist theology already on the shelves.

In Brazil Francis said again and again that he wants the young to make noise, to stir things up, even to “make messes” in their dioceses. Strange parenting? Perhaps. But he encourages the obvious: Theologians shouldn’t fear the Church; women shouldn’t fear the Church; young people shouldn’t fear the Church. Each of these claims speaks to both sides of the fence: You who think you’re “inside” stop scaring people away; you who think you’re “outside” find yourself welcomed.

**“Serve.”** A central duty in the Christian faith is quite plainly the duty of love. When people fulfill this duty, Francis presupposes that they will work to answer all other questions. The call to service is particularly attractive to young people because it’s active, it’s real work, and it’s not a foregone conclusion.

Young people want to participate in the work of the Church, and they largely understand this to be work of justice and love. Ours is a faith to be lived. Christ is a person to be encountered. Strangers and enemies are guests to be welcomed. Differences of culture or creed are opportunities for dialogue. For the young, the Church may be a rock on which to stand, but it is also a body to be moved.

Ministry to young adults is a risky endeavor. I think they are sometimes feared because they’re a marginal population, a liminal people; they live *between* one place and another. Their youthful imagination meets the reality of adult responsibility, and this begets a crisis. Francis has repeatedly called for a culture of encounter, and World Youth Day was certainly that. In the streets or on the sand you literally couldn’t help but run into people. It was chaotic to be sure, but the joyful spirit was one of encounter more than crisis.

Walking with young pilgrims, I heard many naming their desires. It’s impressive how vulnerable you become once you expose your hopes. Along with any desire comes the fear that it won’t be satisfied. All the noise and dancing and general high energy of this youth gathering was layered above some very real hopes and fears. Young people live with youthful energy and mature concerns and the combination of these is experienced as anxiety. They’re worried. They don’t need correction. They need encouragement.

They wonder what happens when the high energy of youth is no longer available to them, when their friends leave or grow up, when the dancing stops and the silence starts. They need to know that they can still find joy. They need companionship. To be with them is to risk not having answers, to be open to change, to surrendering control. Pope Francis affirms their joy. He listens to their fears and concerns, and he speaks with confidence directly to their hearts: *“Go. Do not be afraid. Serve.”*

Thinking back on the mass in that old chapel in Belem, one final image comes to mind. Belem, you see, is Portuguese for Bethlehem. With such a name my heart would be foolish to forget the defining moment of Christian hospitality. Long before we were welcomed back into that chapel as Jesuits, long before Francis was welcomed back to Latin America as pope, a young migrant family was welcomed as guests into a small space behind the inn of their census-crowded hometown. That poor young couple welcomed a fresh blue baby into the world with their own sweat and blood and tears. He cried for milk and love just like the rest of us. In that place they knew something of God, and what they knew they shared with all. May it be so for each of us. ■



Pope Francis at World Youth Day 2013, Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco\\_Papa\\_Jornada\\_Mundial\\_de\\_la\\_Juventud\\_Rio\\_de\\_Janeiro\\_Julio\\_2013\\_C.JPG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Francisco_Papa_Jornada_Mundial_de_la_Juventud_Rio_de_Janeiro_Julio_2013_C.JPG)