

Brazil trip: Jan. 16 – 25, 2014

Abbot Peter Novecosky

Thursday, Jan. 16

I left the abbey at noon and drove to Saskatoon. It was a beautiful, sunny day – quite a contrast to the wind yesterday with gusts of 100 Km/ hour. I drove to Arnie's and got there about 1:50 and then he took me to the airport. I left the Smart Car at his place.

The plane left Saskatoon at 3:25 and I arrived in Toronto 3 hours later. Agnes was already there. She had quite an experience. She booked the 11:00 plane from Vancouver, but she got to the airport early. She found out her plane was cancelled because of mechanical problems, but she was early enough to get on the 10:00 flight. That way we were able to connect in Toronto airport. We were in email contact, so I knew where she was waiting for me.

We went for a supper and then waited about 2 hours for our Air Canada 090 flight to Sao Paulo, Brazil. This was close to 11 hours through the night. It was 9 seats across the plane and I was in seat 52G.

We got to Sao Paulo without incident. We had supper on board and then there was time for sleeping and then we had breakfast an hour before landing at 12:30 local time. I figured I got about 4 hours of sleep. Agnes said she slept well.

Friday, Jan. 17

There was no trouble getting through customs. We had to fill out a card on the plane and we have to keep it and show it when we leave. It struck us how young were the people in charge of the passports checks.

After we got the suitcase Agnes checked in (with stuff for Sr. Claire), we went to put it onto the plane to Maceio and got our boarding passes. We took a quick trip outside the airport, to see what 28C felt like!

Our plane left from Gate 15 and we went there to wait. I was able to get onto Wifi and work on some Prairie Messenger articles. I also emailed Sr. Claire to tell her we had arrived safely and would see them shortly.

All the announcements were in Portuguese, so we couldn't understand. We were to board at 4:50 PM, and when that time passed, we got a little concerned. I went to check the gate and luckily a gal sitting across from us was able to speak English. So she told Agnes that the gate was changed to Gate 17, which was downstairs. I couldn't believe they didn't announce it. Anyway, when we got there, they had started to board already and we just got in line.

I was in the front row and Agnes was in the second row, aisle seats, just like we wanted. The plane was pretty full. It's a 3 hour trip back north to Maceio. We had passed it on the

way to Sao Paulo, so it was an extra 6 hours on the plane because AC doesn't land in Maceio. We were a little confused by the time schedule, but discovered that Sao Paul is on fast time at this time of the year and Maceio isn't. So we landed pretty well on schedule at 7:30 in Maceio. Maceio is 5 hours ahead of Vancouver and 3 hours ahead of Saskatchewan in time.

Srs. Claire and Louise were at the airport to meet us. That was a relief and pleasure to see them. But they noted that it had taken them 2 hours to get to the airport because of the traffic. The trip back to the convent in Santa Rita only took about an hour. It was past 7:30 so it was dark already. They had supper waiting for us and we enjoyed the pea soup and buns they had made for us. Agnes brought along some jars of peanut butter and jam for them. Also some chocolates and she put a lot of clothing to fill up the suitcase we had checked in. She got a lot of this stuff at the thrift store in Ladner.

We were a little tired, of course, and so after an hour or so we went to bed. Both of us slept well. We didn't have to use the mosquito net provided as there's not too many mosquitoes in the heat of summer. But I got a few bites.

Saturday, Jan. 18

We slept in today and so had breakfast around 9:00. We got our first taste of taking a shower without any hot water. Water heaters are expensive here and so we just use "cold" water, which has been heated by the sun. It wasn't as bad as I expected. And you don't discard any toilet paper into toilets here. That goes into the paper basket provided. You use a water hose to clean up instead.

First day of having papaya fruit for breakfast. We had it every day and it was good.

We took a trip to the Farm of Hope. Sr. Claire goes here regularly on Saturdays. There are about 40 boys, all involved in drugs. The farm is about an hour away, past the town of Marechal. It's a beautiful location, on the edge of a lake (the lagoon). The plantation owner had built it up as a place to party for his guests. There's a nice swimming pool on site. He lost it to the government for unpaid taxes, and the diocese got it to rehabilitate druggies. There are over 30 Farms of Hope in Latin America. It was started by a German Franciscan priest who wanted to help street people in Brazil hooked on drugs.

He built the movement on 3 principles: work, Catholic spirituality and community living. We met the whole group after we arrived and some of them shared their stories of being on drugs for 15 or more years and how happy they are to get off of them. A new group of 16 just arrived 4 days ago, but 2 left 2 days later. They couldn't take it.

The boys work in the garden and do their own cooking and housekeeping. They have horses and pigs and other animals. They start their day at 6:20 a.m. with rosary and all have to show up, if they are Catholic or not. The boys said they find community life the most challenging. They are supposed to be 18 before they can come to the farm, but one of the fellows was only 17. The oldest was in his mid 50s.

After the sharing, we got a tour of the place. What a beautiful location, overlooking the lake. They sleep 4 to a room and there is no TV.

We then went to have dinner with them, though we ate by ourselves. The food included rice and beans and beef. No desserts. We had a nice juice to drink, and coffee.

We took off after the meal and went to Marechal by a shortcut. But halfway there, we ran into road construction, so we had to turn back and go the long way around through the cane field. Fr. Sylvester was pastor at Marechal when he got killed in 1992. I had stayed with him there when I visited in 1991. We went to visit his housekeeper and one of her 2 girls who is now married. Then we drove by the rectory and church. We also stopped at the oldest church in the state, 400 years old. It has a 400-year old painting of Christ, which is unique because it's a black Christ in honour of the slaves. This church is an historic site because the first president of the state of Alagoas was born here and baptized in this church.

On the way home we stopped at a roadside "store" where Sr. Claire picked up some fresh carrots for supper. Before supper she showed me some of the history she has collected in scrap books with pictures taken over the past 40 years.

After supper Sr. Claire and I drove to French Beach to pick up Fr. Marcus, a Carmelite, who celebrated 7:30 mass in Ouricuri for the festa of St. Sabastian. That's their patron saint and they have a novena of 9 days of masses in preparation. They had a lively mass and a good singer to lead the music. A lot of people remembered Sr. Claire who used to work in that parish some years ago. We were given a lunch after the Mass. Some of the ladies were concerned over my ankle, which was bleeding from when I scraped it on the sidewalk when we picked up Fr. Marcus.

We took Fr. Marcus home and then got back to the house by 10:00 – a little later than we expected. Meanwhile, Agnes and Sr. Louise had walked to the local church in St. Rita where another Carmelite celebrated the mass. There were a lot of young people at this mass – under 30.

We had a bit of lunch and then off to bed. No time yet for cards!

It was so hot I couldn't fall asleep. So I finished my work on the Prairie Messenger and read a magazine Agnes gave me. The last time I checked my watch it was 4:30 a.m., then I finally got a few hours of sleep. The mosquitoes were bad.

Sunday, Jan. 19

We were up for breakfast at 8:00 today. I was a bit late. We had some Mamao fruit and some boiled banana, topped with some syrup and cinnamin. Also had some bread and cheese.

After breakfast we met Cicero who came to wash the car and to cut down some coconuts from their coconut trees. He climbed the tree barefoot, with a simple rope harness and

when he got to the top of the tree (c. 25 feet), he cut down a cluster of coconuts. He then lopped off the tops and poured the milk inside into a jar for drinking. Sr. Claire said this juice is so clean, it was used to give as a blood transfusion during the war when blood was scarce. We also ate the soft inside of the coconut fruit which was easy to scrape out.

We had a leisurely morning as we had gone to Mass last night and the 3 Carmelite priests were coming for dinner, plus a family of 5 from Forteleza who are visiting them. They came shortly after noon and we had an enjoyable meal outside. Some of them spoke a bit of English, since the family has a brother living in Seattle. However, the kids learn English from the video games they play. Then it was time for a siesta, but I only slept about an hour.

Later on Sr. Louise and I played Agnes and Sr. Clare in canasta. We won the first game, then Clare went to make supper and we played farmers rummy. We had a good supper from leftovers (a kind of fried parogy full of cheese) and good noodle soup. Then we played more canasta till 11:00, when it was time for bed.

Monday, Jan. 20

Breakfast was at 8:00. I used a mosquito net last night, and it made all the difference in having a good sleep. I should have used it from the first, but I misunderstood Sr. Claire to say she didn't use one and it wasn't needed. The mosquitoes don't seem to bother Agnes. But in the first 2 nights I got full of bites. They kept me awake too.

The visitors from Forteliza stopped in unexpectedly before I was even up. Too bad, but they have a long way to drive home.

We went to Rosilda and Jose Lima for lunch. She worked with Fr. Syl on the farm and she was in Canada a couple of times. They live in downtown Maceio and it took a good hour to get there. She put on a lovely lunch, with several kinds of fish on the table. She remembers working with Fr. Leander too, and I send him an email with her greetings.

On the way home we stopped at some craft shops in downtown Maceio, close to the beach there. Agnes bought a nice purse made from donkey leather. I wandered the beach and took some pictures of the crowds. (Unfortunately I mistakenly erased them later in the day.)

When we got home we had a nice nap and then had a leisurely meal and time for cards and visiting. I tried for some time to download some PM news, only to discover that it was a holiday in the U.S. (Martin Luther King Jr. Day), and there was nothing to download.

Tuesday, Jan. 21

We had breakfast at 8:00 again today. It's St. Agnes feastday today, so we decided to have Mass tonight.

Today Srs. Jeanine and Marie Noel came to visit from Larje. They took a bus to Maceio

and Sr. Louise and I went by car to meet them at the bus depot. We were slowed a bit by a motorcycle accident downtown. Their bus trip took about 2 hours, so they arrived about 9:20. These SMS sisters are also returning to Saskatoon this summer, in July. They used to help minister to the poor in Larje, but now drug gangs have moved into that area of town and they no longer feel safe going there. A shame, but we hear a lot about the problems drugs are causing in Brazil.

We had some coffee and then we went to a restaurant in Santa Rita, across the lagoon. We needed a boat ride to get there. Again, the menu was various kinds of fish, with rice and sauce toppings. Must also mention the cold beer we enjoyed with the meal.

After we got back, I took a nap and Agnes and Sr. Claire drove the 2 sisters to the bus. They stopped on the way to do some shopping, but their journey was extended because they ran into another motorcycle accidents, which slowed traffic down to 1 lane. The computer IT fellow came in the afternoon to fix the computer the sisters here were having trouble with. The scanner now works. He also installed wi-fi, so that they can use the Internet from anywhere in the house.

We had Mass in honour of St. Agnes before supper. Then we ate and played some cards after that. We split 2 games of canasta and then Sr. Claire had some work to do and we three played farmers rummy before we hit off for bed. I was able to use my laptop from my room now.

Wednesday, Jan. 22

We decided last night that today we'd go to the beach – early. So we were up before 7:00 and drove to the beach, about 20 minutes away. The sisters here are used to having the ocean so close, so they hardly think of going to the beach, but Agnes and I were anxious to go.

It's too hot after dinner, so it's wisest to go early in the morning. We spent about 1.5 hours there, mainly walking along the beach. Not many people were out yet, but the staff were setting out the chairs and tables. January is prime time because of summer and school holidays here and the nice weather. It can be dangerous swimming in some places at the French Beach because of the tidal undercurrent and whirlpools, so we didn't go in for a swim. The water was very nice and warm though.

We got home for a shower and breakfast at 9:00. Then we had a relaxing morning till we had an early lunch. Agnes washed some of our clothes meanwhile.

In the afternoon Sr. Claire drove Agnes and I on a tour of the various communities in which they work, or have worked. We spent all afternoon at this and got home at 6:00. We visited several people, including Cicero (103 years old) and Ann, friends of Sr. Yvonne, and Yvon, a friend of Sr. Marian.

After supper I showed the gals the pictures I've taken during this trip. It was a nice review of our activities. Then we played the "rubber" in canasta, but Louise and I had an

easy win.

I tried using the wi-fi before going to bed, but it doesn't seem to be working as it did the first day, so it was a bit frustrating. But I downloaded some news stories and pictures from the direct connection in their computer room.

Thursday, Jan. 23

I was awake by 6:00, so I spent an hour working on the news stories.

We had breakfast about 7:30 then we started planning what to do on our last day here. Sr. Claire showed me some history stuff she wants to send along. We also enjoyed going over the pictures of the skit the novices put on for the Ursuline's 100th last year, which Sr. Louise had missed. She enjoyed them, as did Agnes.

Later, Cicero the maintenance fellow, came with his 3 sons. The youngest one sang for us, as did the oldest. Cicero showed us how to shred coconut from the shell... coconut which grows in the sisters' yard.

Around 11:00 we drove to one of the newer communities, growing up across the highway in the last decade or so. We stopped at a youth centre run by some Italian nuns. They have about 40 "street" boys there, but no one was there today. The place has been built up a lot in the last few years. We visited a cemetery named after Fr. Sylvester and then the home of a doctor Sr. Claire knows, but he was gone for the weekend. Then we went out to a restaurant along the lagoon for a dinner of fish and rice and beans. There was also some donkey meat, which was tasty, surprisingly. Half way through the meal, outside, a duck wandered among the tables, and I fed her some leftover scraps.

The afternoon was relaxing. After a nap, we played some cards (canasta) and then telephone can (a new game for us). We had a late supper (close to 8:00) since we were still pretty full. No cards after supper, but more time to read and relax and early to bed.

Friday, Jan. 24

We were all up by 6:00, after a good sleep. Time for me to pack, after a shower and quick look at the computer. Today it was working, in contrast to yesterday. Don't know why. Agnes packed last night.

We finished breakfast by 7:00 and then Marival, the former social worker dropped in for a visit. She took the bus out from Maceio. Marival, a good friend of Abbot Jerome, now lives around Leopoldino in a hermitage (since Christmas), connected with some religious community. We found out she is 68, a few months younger than me.

Cicero was also at work and we had a chance to say goodbye to him.

We drove off to the airport around 8:00 and arrived without incident an hour later. We had an hour to kill, so we played Kaiser for an hour or so. Some neighbours heard us

speaking English and came and tried theirs out with us. We then went through security and the sisters went to a friend for dinner.

The trip from Maceio to Sao Paulo took 2 and a half hours. (We have to retrace our steps when we fly back to Toronto.) We were unsure where to go to get our Air Canada ticket and a gal in front of us asked if she could help. She spoke both English and Portuguese. This was helpful.

We found the Air Canada book in, but it didn't open for another 3 hours. We had lots of time to wander around and look at the airport. We went to McDonalds for a lunch and then wandered around. I tried the free wi-fi but it didn't work for me. Finally, it did at Starbucks at the international site. It gave me a chance to download some emails and some news.

When we went to check-in at 7:00, the fellow at the counter was very nice. He gave each of us an aisle seat and blocked the centre one, since the flight isn't very full.

Our plane left at 10:30, Air Canada 91 to Toronto. We landed Saturday morning at 5:40 amid a snowy scene. I called it "white sand." We left two and a half hours later. We landed in Saskatoon a bit late, after 11:30 a.m. because we left late and flew into a headwind. Arnie was there to meet us and we had dinner together.

Nieces Marilyn and Michele Zubot came for a visit, while I went off to have a 2:00 Mass at St. Anne's Parish, where we buried the bones of Br. Anthony's parents and a nephew which came in from Vietnam. Br. Anthony's sister from Toronto was also there.

I joined the funeral party for supper at the Red Pepper restaurant then went to pick up Agnes. It was blowing pretty good across the highway on the way home and we ran into two accidents. We got home by 9:00 p.m.

Agnes stayed till Wednesday and she visited brothers and sisters while here.