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Editorial

When Nothing Is Left

During the last 15 years, I have translated articles out of the *Martyrs Mirror* and published them in our Portuguese Messenger. Faith and I have gone back and clipped all these articles out of the *Mensageiros* and organized them into a 352 page book—*O Espelbo dos Mártires (Condensado)*.

We are now reading the proofs, checking the formatting and making final corrections in the text. Repeatedly I find I have slipped out of proofreading mode and have been drawn into dungeons where day and night merge into endless darkness and stagnancy for a dear brother in the faith.

I find myself in a courtroom listening to the clear testimony of brothers and sisters as they counter each charge brought against them with scriptures they have hid in their hearts.

I shudder as I see molten lead being poured on the bodies of my brethren, as red hot nails are pressed into their limbs, as they are stretched out on the rack and beaten with rods and cudgels, as their members are torn asunder.

I hear them forgive their executioners before giving their lives for their faith; I hear them sing and encourage their brethren as they are being consumed in the flames at stake.

I see the Savior, the apostles, and others, being nailed to a cross.

All this and much more.

Yes, it's hard to proofread the *Martyrs Mirror*. (Maybe isn't even necessary. As readers learn to know these valiant brothers and sisters, I suspect that grammar and incorrect formatting will be of little importance.)

We today, creatures of the twenty-first century, stand dumbly by and wonder how these brothers and sisters, some of them but mere youth, could view life on earth in the prism of eternity. They were deprived of father and mother, of children, of house and

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home, of possessions and livelihood, of even the few comforts afforded to ordinary criminals, indeed, at times of their raiment as their bodies were shamefully exposed to their tormenters, who mercilessly beat and abused them.

Then finally, they faced their executioner with nothing earthly left to call their own, except their blood and their breath, which they cheerfully surrendered also.

In the year 1533, a sister, named Christina Haring, was apprehended, taken to Kitzbuehl, and there fastened to a chain; she, however, remained steadfast in the faith. But as she was with child, and was soon to be confined, they let her go home until she should be delivered of her child; and though she knew that she would be apprehended again, and might have escaped ten times, or even more, she did not flee, but boldly remained. When she saw the officer coming, she went out to meet him, and asked him what he desired. He said: "I have come to take you away again;" and thus they again took her to the town of Kitzbuehl, where shortly afterwards she was executed with the sword (which is not usually done with a woman), for the faith to which she steadfastly adhered. Her body was afterwards burnt. Matt. 24:13. This courageous, heroic woman or sister in Christ, who forsook her husband, infant, house and home, and all temporal things, strengthened her womanly heart with such valiant manliness, and by the grace of God so armed herself in the faith, that she paid her vow unto the Lord, and joyfully went to meet Christ her bridegroom, with her lamp burning and her light shining so that many were filled with astonishment. Matt. 25:1. (MM p. 441)

In today's society hanging and the electric chair are considered "cruel and unusual" punishment for evil doers—too painful; thus the lethal injection, by which the prisoner is able to sleep his way out of life. The martyr brethren knew they would be afforded no niceties.

At the time of Zwinglius there was also one Balthasar Hubmor of Friedberg, whom the papists called a doctor of the Holy Scriptures, a learned and eloquent man... Through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, the abomination of popery was made manifest to him, in consequence of which he, according to the counsel of God, separated therefrom. Subsequently he rejected, together with other errors, the self-invented infant baptism, and taught with all his might the baptism of believers, as commanded by Christ. But as the eyes of this dark world can not bear the clear light of the holy Gospel, and since in this way their false faith and evil works are testified against, the above-mentioned Balthasar Hubmor, together with many others, was hated and persecuted by the world. After many temptations, expulsions and imprisonments, he came to Nichlasburg, in Moravia. Afterwards they apprehended him and his wife, and brought them to Vienna, in Austria, where, after manifold trials and long imprisonment, he was burned to ashes, suffering it with great steadfastness, and his wife drowned; and thus both steadfastly confirmed with their death the faith which they had received from God. Eph. 2:8...

This Balthasar Hubmor published a small book, in which he complains of Zwinglius and his followers. He writes that they brought about, that at one time twenty persons, men, pregnant women, widows, and young girls were miserably cast into a dark tower, and this sentence passed upon them that they should never more, in their lifetime, see either sun or moon, and conclude their last days on bread and water; so that they all, dead or alive, should remain and decay together in the dark tower, until none should be left alive.

Thus some did not taste a morsel of bread for three days in order that the others might have something wherewith to sustain their lives.

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“O God,” he further writes, “what a terrible, severe, and rigorous sentence against pious Christian people, of whom none could say any evil thing, only that they, according to the command of Christ, had received water baptism!” (MM p. 465)

As men accumulate wealth and by the sweat of their brow build up small empires, they often spend their last years of life worrying about what will become of the fruit of their earthly labors. To them death is a detested beast to be held at bay by medical science until nothing more can be done.

The martyr brethren had no such worries. Rather death was seen as the final opportunity to witness for their Savior and bring honor and praise to His name.

About this time, a brother named Damian, from Algau, was apprehended at Ingolstadt, in order to draw him away from the faith; but when he could in no wise be turned from it, he was condemned to death. On his way to the place of execution, he admonished the people, and gave answer concerning his faith, so that a student said that one of two things was certain: that this man had his faith either from the wicked devil, or from the Spirit of God, since his knowledge was so extensive, because to all appearance he was a simple man. Someone also admonished him, and asked him whether he would die as a pious Christian.

He replied, “Yes.”

He again asked him: “What sign will you give us by which we may know this?”

The brother said: “Pay attention when they burn me; the smoke shall ascend straight to heaven.”

This also came to pass.

When he was executed, the executioner inquired the direction of the smoke, whether he had justly executed him. The judge answered: “You have executed him according to your pleasure; I did not judge.” Thus this witness of God and Christ obtained the martyrs’ crown. MM p. 466

In many segments of society, traditional matrimony—not to mention holy matrimony—has ceased to exist. Men and women no longer see their partner as a spiritual being, or as one with whom they hope to constitute a family. Matrimony today, if that term can even be used, has become “conditional matrimony.” Togetherness is dependent on a series of conditions which each partner imposes upon the other. Since most of these conditions are selfish and sensual, and neither sees the other as a spiritual being, such marriages are stillborn. Together with Cain each cries, “Am I my spouse’s keeper?” And they separate.

Following is a letter which John Claess wrote to his wife in A.D. 1544:

Know, my dearly beloved wife, that it is my will and testament to you in no wise to depart from the word of the Lord, but always to comfort yourself with it; for the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us, if we continue in the faith. Oh, let us thereby overcome, and not turn away, and we shall receive the crown which the good Lord has promised unto all that love His appearing. 2 Tim. 4:8. If we desire to remain here, we do not love His appearing; but if we ask Him for the Holy Spirit, the same will teach us in all things and comfort and strengthen us through His grace. O let us pray; for through prayer we must receive everything. Hence, my dear wife, take no thought for the things that concern the body; but seek the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you. Herewith I

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commend you to God, and to the word of His grace, which is able to strengthen and keep you in all temptation. The grace of the Lord be with you and us all. Amen. Bring up my dear children in the admonition of the Lord, this is my will to you; and associate with the good, for they prosper. Care not for temporal things; for that which is visible must perish. What you can get take with you, and commit the rest to faithful friends; and remove with your little ones far enough to be out of danger, from men. Bring them up in the admonition of the Lord, and keep with those that fear the Lord. Deut. 6:29. My dear wife, be well contented; if the Lord had taken me away by a sudden sickness, it would have been your duty to thank Him; do so now. I leave you this as a testament. Watch every day of your life for the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Tim. 6:14. The grace of the Lord be with you. Amen. (MM pp. 468-469)

We believe that small children should be taught to sit still. This teaching is more than a simple exercise in self-discipline. It should prepare the child to become a youth who knows how to “sit still,” and finally an adult who understands the value of holding still so that the voice of the Lord can be heard.

The injunction to “Be still and know that I am God,” when ignored, results in a sad counter-truth: “Be constantly on the go and forget that I am God.” Too many of our youth have either lost, or never developed, the ability to sit still. For them Bible reading is a duty, prayer a “get-it-over-with” thing, going to church a social event and Christian witness a future possibility. They must go, go, go... And forget.

About the year 1550, it happened in the bishopric of Bamberg, that two young girls espoused and received Christ by faith, were baptized upon their faith, according to the doctrine of Christ, and arising from sin, sought to walk in newness of life with Christ. On this account the antichristians sought to hinder them in this good resolution, and to quench their good intention as much as lay in their power. They therefore cast these two young lambs into prison, where they tortured them with great severity, and sought also with other unchristian means to cause them to apostatize; but as they were firmly built upon Christ, they remained faithful and steadfast during the entire trial. Col. 2:7; Rev. 2:10. Hence the authorities, who herein generally follow the advice of the false prophets, condemned them to death; at which they were joyful and undaunted. When they were led out to execution, their persecutors, by way of reproach and mockery, placed wreaths of straw upon their heads; whereupon one said to the other: “Since the Lord Christ wore a crown of thorns for us, why should not we wear these crowns of straw in honor of Him? The faithful God shall for this place a beautiful golden crown and glorious wreath upon our heads.” Thus these two young branches armed themselves with patience, according to the example of their Captain Jesus, remained faithful unto death, died steadfastly, and obtained through grace, the glorious crown with God in heaven.

To these girls their adversaries accord the praise, that they died quite undauntedly and steadfastly, and that they had the true foundation and ground of the Christian faith in their Redeemer Christ Jesus, whom they openly confessed, and called upon in their distress, wherein they steadfastly died with a firm hope; so that doubts were entertained among their adversaries, as to whether they themselves were not in greater error before God, than these young girls, though they were Anabaptists...

At the same time a lad of fifteen years was put to death, suffering it with great steadfastness, at Leenwaerden; whose faith is compared to that of the aforementioned two girls put to death at Bamberg. (MM pp. 500-501)

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We are an enlightened generation. Knowledge is measured in megabytes and gigabytes. The common man today with an inquisitive mind knows far more about science and geography than great scholars of past centuries. We are undaunted by complex problems; we set our minds to mastering new technology. And we succeed. But we stumble when asked about our hope of salvation. We find it difficult to articulate a coherent explanation about the new birth, about separation from the world, about non-resistance. . .

O my brethren, knowledge or talk is of no account here [in prison], but a living faith which is adorned with the power of love, patience, hope and with obedience, and that through the power of faith one can say with the three men Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve, is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee (O antichrist) that we will not serve thy god, nor worship the image, or the two golden calves which thou has set up. Dan. 3:16-18. And that, if they should attempt to instruct one with high-sounding words of human wisdom, yea, with soft words and entreaties (Col. 2:4, 8), we could say through the power of faith: "Begone, I want none of your advice . . ."

For my dear brethren, in this trial a dead faith is of no account, however glorious the same may seem in the eyes of men, and with however many Scriptures it may be clearly demonstrated, and professed with the mouth; much less will it avail before a strict God and His righteousness; for whatever is to stand here and there must be done through a living faith which works by love. And such a faith is not in him who does not firmly grasp God and believe and confess that heaven and earth, and all creatures, the sea and all that therein is, owe to Him praise and blessing, thanks and honor (to Him alone, and to none else, I say, it is due); and who does not write it in his heart and inmost thoughts, and learns to know himself that he is preeminently the image of God and after His likeness, a possessor and ruler of the things that in the world are created for Him; yea, adorned and endowed with reason and knowledge to discern between good and evil, and to know Him who is the Creator of all things. (MM p. 691, 694)

We are very sensitive to criticism, and especially to derision. We believe that our lives are above reproach, and thus immune to injustices, which should be reserved only for transgressors.

Jacob de Roore was burned to ashes at the stake on June 10, 1569, after lengthy sessions with a pernicious priest who exhausted his supply of imprecations. In the following excerpts taken from the official record, note Jacob's respect for his interrogator, Friar Cornelis.

Friar Cornelis: Well, I've come here to see whether I can convert you (Jacob, I believe is your name) from your false and evil belief, in which you are erring, and whether I cannot bring you back to the Catholic faith of our mother, the holy Roman church, from which you have apostatized to this damnable Anabaptism. What do you say to this, eh?

Jacob: With your permission, as regards that I have an evil, false belief, this I deny; but that through the grace of God I have apostatized from your Babylonian mother, the Roman church, to the members, or the true church, of Christ this I can confess; and thank God for it, who has said: "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins and that ye receive not of her plagues." Rev. 18:4; Isa. 52:11.

Fr. Corn. Is it true? And do you call our mother the holy Roman church, the whore of Babylon?

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And do you call your bellish, devilish sect of Anabaptists the members, or the true church of Christ? Eh! Hear this fine fellow once. Who the devil has taught you this! Your accursed Menno Simons, I suppose.

Jac. With your permission, you talk very wickedly. It was not necessary that Menno Simons should have taught us as something new, that the Babylonian whore signifies your mother, the Roman church, since John teaches us enough concerning this in his Apocalypse, or Revelation, in the 14th, 16th, 17th, and 18th chapters.

Fr. Corn. Ah bab! What do you understand about St. John's Apocalypse? At what university did you study? At the loom, I suppose; for I understand that you were nothing but a poor weaver and chandler, before you went around preaching and rebaptizing out here in the Gruthuysbosch. I have attended the university at Louvain, and studied divinity so long, and yet I do not understand anything at all about St. John's Apocalypse; this is a fact.

Jac. Therefore Christ thanked His heavenly Father, that He had revealed and made it known to babes and hid it from the wise of this world as it is written, Matt. 11:25.

Fr. Corn. Exactly; God has revealed it to the weavers at the loom, to the cobblers on their bench, and to bellow-menders, lantern-tinkers, scissor-grinders, broom makers, thatchers, and all sorts of riff-raff, and poor, filthy, and lousy beggars. And to us ecclesiastics who have studied from our youth, night and day, He has concealed it. Just see how we are tormented. You Anabaptists are certainly fine fellows to understand the holy Scriptures; for before you are rebaptized, you can't tell A from B, but as soon as you are baptized, you can read and write. If the devil and his mother had not had a hand in this, I do not understand any thing about people.

Jac. I can well hear that you do not understand our way of doing; for you ascribe to Satan the grace which God grants our simple converts, when we with all diligence teach them to read. [...]

Fr. Corn. Bah, Jesus, Jesus, how well you can talk, how well your tongue is hung! Bah, never in all my life did I hear the Scriptures expounded so strangely, contrary to the views of our mother, the holy Catholic Roman church, and the ancient teachers and fathers. Bah, now I am not surprised that the Anabaptists have made you their teacher, preacher and bishop... But I must ask you one more question: When you Anabaptists have children that remain simple or idiots, and they grow to twenty, thirty, forty, yea, eighty or ninety years old, do you allow them to die unbaptized, because they cannot comprehend your belief and doctrine? For one that remains all his life simple, or an idiot, can certainly not be taught. What do you do with them at any rate? Let us hear once, but briefly; for your long talk begins to be very irksome to these good sirs, as well as to me, and it is getting late, and I am tired, that I am.

Jac. To such innocent, simple and childish persons belongs the kingdom of heaven, as Christ says, Matt. 19:14. [...]

Fr. Corn. Well, I have no desire to dispute any longer with you. I shall go my way, and let the executioner dispute with you with burning fagot and afterwards the devil in hell, with burning pitch, brimstone and tar, see.

Jac. No; for Paul writes (II Cor. 5:1) "If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens."

Fr. Corn. Bah! In hell, in hell. Expect nothing else than to go through this temporal fire into the eternal; hell yawns and gasps for your soul, you accursed, damned Anabaptist that you are, see. (MM pp. 774-785)

During most of the story of humanity, pain and suffering were accepted as part of life. Today, all this has changed. Modern medical facilities are prepared to alleviate even the most intense pain. We are born in a hospital, we return to a hospital whenever sickness, accident or pain come our way, and we die in a hospital. We are comforted by the antiseptic of hospitals. The mere thought of suffering intense pain causes us pain.

The Martyrs Mirror could be called The Book of Pain—or better, The Book of Pain and Loss. As we browse through its more than one thousand pages, we wonder how these brothers and sisters could so courageously endure the most terrible atrocities.

The answer is not complicated. Exactly that which we today avoid at all costs—pain and loss—they accepted as part of Christian life. More than that, they often *expected* pain and loss to be part of Christian life. When we have nothing left, we feel defeated, downtrodden; that is when they felt the true meaning of life.

We now insert the last paragraph of the Martyrs Mirror:

This outward exercise, ye blessed, the Lord has not permitted to enter the world to no purpose; but for our sakes, to warn us, thereby, that we shall be put to shame and confusion at the last day, if we are afraid of suffering for the sake of truth unto salvation, that which others have endured for the sake of vanity, unto perdition, etc. And in conclusion, let us consider the end or design of the creation of man, at which we must arrive, that such reflection may stimulate us to prepare ourselves resolutely to endure those calamities which equally befall the willing and the unwilling, (namely, the punishment of death, etc.), There is no person who would not still suffer for man's sake; why then should we hesitate or fear to suffer in the cause of God, who will recompense us with the purest love, and with joy and everlasting glory? Meditate this, ye blessed. (MM p. 1141) ▲

Life in Brazil

Sunday School

It's true that some of the greatest pleasures in life are free. Sunday School is one of them.

Last Sunday our lesson was Preparing the Way, with the account of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, in preparation for the Lord's ministry.

I have the privilege of teaching the Portuguese sisters' class. This Sunday there were only eight Brazilian sisters present, ranging from one in her early twenties to another in her early sixties. Usually there are 12-14 present, but being only eight didn't keep us from having a good class—in fact, it was the best I have ever attended in my life.

I began by asking my class how many of them knew about Dr. Gordon...

As those of you know who live, or have lived in Brazil know, Dr. Donald Gordon and his wife Helena came to Brazil as missionaries in the 30s. By the time we got here in 69, they had gone into retirement in Campinas, São Paulo.

Back in the 30s, Rio Verde was a typically Catholic Brazilian town. Evangelicals were almost nonexistent, and certainly not highly esteemed. Dr. Gordon and Helena, she a nurse and teacher, changed that all. They built a small hospital and a small chapel and

administered to both the physical and spiritual needs of the people. Contrary to the Catholics who disdained evangelicals, Dr. Gordon and Helena disdained no one. They had but one goal and that was to help.

The results were predictable; the people of Rio Verde began seeing evangelicals in a new light. Those who were converted had a higher standard of honesty and morality than people in general. Thus when we arrived in Rio Verde, the way had been prepared.

When I asked if anyone knew *about* Dr. Gordon, I believed a few might say they had heard about him. But one sister, the oldest one, with a big smile on her wrinkled face said, “He was my doctor when I was 15 years old!”

I explained to the class that Dr. Gordon was the Mennonites’ John the Baptist, that he prepared the way for us. Since only the two youngest ones in class were raised in the church, I asked the others who the John the Baptist was in their lives, that prepared their way to the church.

They lost no time. One told about her unconverted dad who helped her in every way possible to get converted and come to the church. As each one spoke, new memories were stirred in the others, and at one point five of the sisters were talking at once. No, they weren’t being rude; only inspired.

It was evident that the conversion experience of these dear sisters is very precious to them; it is a memory that I believe they cherish above all others. It is something solid that has not only changed their outlook on life, but on eternity as well. And that of their children and grandchildren.

Read on...



I Take a Neighbor to Town

On my way to town several days ago, I gave a young man a ride. In the 30 minutes we spent together, there wasn’t a quiet minute in the car. The young man had a lot to say. But it was so different from what the sisters had to say in the Sunday School class.

He told me that he was going to live on the Colony with his stepfather, who works on the place that used to belong to Eldon Penner. Each day he would catch the bus at the highway and go to work. By the time we got to town he admitted he was going in for an interview, that really he didn’t have a job yet.

He was very religious, constantly quoting Bible verses. I suspected he was an evangelical, but soon found out he was half-priest, that is, he dropped out of a Catholic seminary (or they dropped him out) half way through his sacerdotal studies.

Much of what this young man said coincided with our belief. The verses he quoted were right on. I don’t like to antagonize people of other religions by waving a red flag in their face. If the conversation can be steered in such a way that they feel free to ask questions, it is easier to get next to them.

I asked the young man—Fernando, is his name—how he understood the final destiny of man; what would happen with someone who died a sinner.

The young man answered wisely. “Every soul must appear before the eternal Judge; sinners will be cast into hell.”

“So you believe that unrepentant sinners will be cast into hell?”

That is where the first crack in the wall appeared. “Well, *cada caso é um caso*—every case will be judged on its own merits.” It was evident he didn’t want to categorically state that even an obdurate sinner who died in his sins would have no hope of salvation. So I tried another approach.

“Let’s suppose you’re a priest...” Here the young man interrupted, “Oh, what a wonderful dream! Oh, that it would be true...!”

“Yes, let’s suppose you’re a priest and one of your parishioners is suddenly killed in an accident. You know that he was living in sin at the time and had no chance to make things right. You are called upon to speak at the funeral and say words of comfort to the family and friends. How will you handle this situation?”

He now gave me an explanation on how Catholics are baptized at birth and confirmed when reaching the age of accountability, giving to understand this would have an influence on his parishioner’s salvation.

So I repeated the question: “I understand that your parishioner has been baptized as an infant and later confirmed. But you know for an absolute fact that when he died, he died in sin...”

“*Cada caso é um caso.*”

I didn’t insist. I invited Fernando to come to pay us a visit at work, which he did. He has promised to come to church. I believe we will have more opportunities to speak with him.

The worst uncertainty in life is to be uncertain about eternity. The unrepentant sinner finds a certain comfort in believing he has a chance in spite of everything. But for the seeking soul, *cada caso é um caso* is a haunting uncertainty; a tormenting question mark.

I wish Fernando could have been in my Sunday School class last Sunday. Those sisters, at least one illiterate and the rest with eight years of education, or less, would have left a clear witness as to what it means to have a deep assurance of salvation. There was no *cada caso é um caso* uncertainty in their witness.

We hope that Fernando can lay aside his dream of being an earthly priest and receive a vision of another priesthood to which he can belong here on earth and be sure of a home in heaven. ▲

Colonization

The Seed, the Graft and the Tree

Colonization is “The act or process of establishing a colony or colonies” (AHD). In the early history of the United States, settlements were referred to as colonies. Even as these colonies grew and became virtual states, the name Colony stuck, so much so that today we study about the original Thirteen Colonies.

To establish a successful colony, especially in foreign territory, is no mean task. In the conquest of the North American continent, the hardships encountered, defy our imagination. The first English settlement, organized by Sir Walter Raleigh in 1585, was on what is now known as Roanoke Island. The first group of colonists, overwhelmed by the odds, returned to England a year later. The second group mysteriously vanished without a trace.

In comparison with the colonization of North America, in which we include our ancestors who came from Europe, our experiences in central Brazil pale. And yet, given the modernity of the environment left, the original colonists to Brazil did their share of trailblazing.

These thoughts were brought on by Clifford & Naomi Warkentin's recent 50th wedding anniversary celebration. Because of a friendship that goes back to Mexico some 40 years ago and then being neighbors in Brazil for a number of years, I was asked to give a few thoughts at their celebration, some of which follow here:

There are basically three ways in which the gospel is spread: 1) by the printed page, 2) by missionaries, 3) by colonization. All three are worthy, and certainly stand up under Biblical scrutiny.

The printed page. Tracts are sent out by the millions. Each is a tiny seed. As happens in nature, for each one that sprouts and grows, thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands are lost. Each towering Redwood was born of one seed. We stand at the base of a tree that dates back to the time of Christ and look at its mighty circumference; we crane our necks to see its lofty crown. We exclaim in wonder. And never once do we think about the tens or hundreds of thousands of seeds that never made it.

Of the millions of tracts sent out, there are possibly a thousand, or more, replies. Only a handful of these prove to be fertile. And of these, after the fowls of the air, the rocky soil, the hot sun and gushing rains have taken their toil, we see only several trees.

Yes, we believe that more trees sprout and grow than what we see, but even under the most optimistic projections, too few survive. So do we quit spending tens of thousands of dollars to send out millions of tracts? Did the Lord command Redwoods to cease to produce seed, knowing perfectly well that only a few would survive?

Tracts can be tossed out of an open car window, out of an airplane or hot air balloon. Tracts can be placed in a rack or handed out one by one. They can be smuggled into forbidden areas where missionaries can't set foot. A tract is a miracle of God...

Yet, tracts cannot establish congregations, they can't baptize the converted, they can't ordain ministers and deacons. A tract points the way, it points to Calvary, it points upward, but it cannot reason with the reader. That should not discourage us. Only eternity will reveal how many souls will inherit a mansion because of a tract.

The missionary. The missionary is able to preach a different sermon each day; he is able to answer questions. The missionary is able to knock on people's doors and say, "I bring you good tidings of great joy." He is able to start congregations, baptize and ordain.

But a missionary is at a disadvantage. Often he must learn the language to speak to

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the locals. He must learn their customs. He must spend what appears to be mountains of money just to support himself and his family, for he is not genetically prepared to live on the level of the locals.

And so, when it doesn't rain and the little half acre corn patch of a local begins to wither, the missionary pays him a visit.

“Good morning, Pedro.”

“Good morning.”

“How is it going, Pedro?”

“Well, if it doesn't rain in the next few days, my corn won't make it.”

“Pedro, you must have faith in God. He has promised to take care of His children and He will take care of you, just like His Word teaches...”

Pedro gravely agrees with the missionary. But after he is alone again in his corn field, he somewhat bitterly reflects, “Have faith! If I lived in the house the missionary lives in and drove the car he drives and could spend as much in the grocery store as he spends, I'd be going around telling people to have faith in God too...”

A missionary has a big advantage over the tract—the seed. He is able to graft into the seeker his own example, teachings and answers. Needless to say, the survival rate is infinitely higher than when seeds are randomly scattered in unknown territory. It's true that professional denominational missionaries find our statistics distressing. And always will. Numbers and spiritual housekeeping seldom have a peaceful coexistence.

Colonization. When we moved to Brazil we had to go through the same throes to which missionaries are exposed. We had to learn the language and become acquainted with the customs of the people, with an additional complication. Unlike the missionary, we had no guaranteed income, nor promise of survival in the interior of the South American continent. This did not have a soothing effect on our nerves.

The first years went by. A tremendous effort went into clearing and tilling the soil, and then learning what it would take to coax crops out of it in a tropical climate.

These first years were our “40 years” in the wilderness, a time in which some of the strange spirits brought with us in our “household stuff” had to be revealed and trampled underfoot.

Those were difficult years, but mercifully short. And even through them the Lord's blessings followed us, albeit often in disguise.

From the beginning the welcome mat was extended to neighbors and acquaintances. An effort was made to interpret services into Portuguese for the benefit of visitors, who were present in many of our services.

As locals became converted and were added to the fold, we hit some of the exact turbulence that missionaries usually hit on a new field. We had some distressing losses. Too many—not all, by any means—got the Living Bread mixed up with the bread of living. They dropped out. Sometimes with a resounding thud or crash.

Just as we had to learn how to farm in South America, we had to learn how to understand the South American culture. While we certainly don't have our walls decorated with diplomas and certificates, as we began to learn the language, become acquainted with the culture and believed we could make a living in this new country,

our approach to spreading the gospel took on a new dimension. People finally began to believe that we were not being sustained on loaves and fishes (read as: dollars) imported from N America.

So, when it didn't rain and our crops began to wilt, people watched us closely to see our reaction. They wanted to see what kind of faith we had. When we had to go to our machinery dealer and ask for more time to pay a note because our crops didn't do as well as expected, they took note that we weren't trying to get out of paying. They learned that the day we came up with the money, we were there to pay.

In a word, people looked at us—trees—and saw how we grew on South American soil. They saw how we reacted in times of drought, when it rained an inch a day for a month, and yes, how we reacted when we had a bumper crop and prices were good. What they saw they didn't attribute only to our being *Americanos*, but also connected it with our religion.

To plant the Mennonite culture in a foreign land is not easy. Our standard of honesty, integrity and diligence is often just as foreign to them as snow in a tropical country. When the locals get converted, we naively assume that all the Mennonite virtues have been part of the package. Since most of them have occupations with which we aren't acquainted, we ask them if they are able to fit their job into the Mennonite doctrine. Yes, they tell us, oh yes, there is no problem.

We believe them. They likewise believe themselves. But as time goes on and we become better acquainted with the workings of the land, we discover that there are some broad gaps between their standard of honesty and ours.

Here in Brazil a case in point would be the attitude toward paying taxes. Because of governmental corruption, it is believed that taxes paid will end up in the pocket of corrupt politicians. So why pay taxes if there is a way of getting out of it?

When the missionary tells his charges it is dishonest to not pay taxes, they mutter to themselves, "You don't understand how things are here." When the colonist tells locals the same thing, they watch to see if he, who believes in paying taxes, is managing to prosper.

Over a period of years, a colony in a foreign country takes on the characteristics of a space station. The multinational space station that is slowly taking shape a number of hundred kilometers above the earth is to eventually be the way station for space exploration. Similarly, the colony in Rio Verde has become the way station for evangelization, not only in Brazil, but in the South American continent.

Evangelization through colonization has the additional benefits of being able to further the work through both the printed page and missionaries. In addition to a good selection of tracts being printed here in Portuguese, we have begun printing tracts in Spanish as well for other S American countries, with the Rio Verde address. Missionaries in Brazil are now all from Brazil (some Brazilian, some American), which means they speak Portuguese and are acquainted with the culture. This means that: 1) there are no expensive plane fares to be paid from N America, 2) no time is lost studying the language and becoming acquainted with a new culture, 3) once missionaries have left the field, it is possible to maintain a close contact and continue to make visits.

If you, good reader, feel like I have been giving the work in Brazil a bit more attention and credit than it deserves, you have missed the point. Think of how wonderful it would be if we could have colonies in Australia, in Europe and Asia—a number of them.

But alas, like a space station, a colony doesn't become functional the moment a number of families settle in a new area. It takes years, even decades.

You brothers and sisters who have a warm spot in your heart for the work of the Lord, but feel you aren't cut out for literature work, nor for being a missionary, how about becoming a colonist? Be a tree. Be part of a space station that will help launch souls far beyond the sun and the stars. ▲

Thinking Out Loud

The Gift

Recently I walked into a business establishment in town and was greeted by the owner. We have been friends for over 20 years, so we always find something to talk about when we get together.

On this particular day, we hadn't talked very much when he handed me several objects, one of them a new tape measure. "What's this all about?" I asked.

"A gift," he replied.

"And just why?"

"Because today is my birthday and I'm giving my friends gifts."

It doesn't come natural to truly feel that "it is more blessed to give than to receive." We see the gifts we receive as an indicator of the esteem which the giver has for us. The better the gift the higher the esteem. And the better we feel.

After gift exchanges, some are at times heard sourly commenting, "I gave an expensive gift and this is all I got."

It is possible to liberally give an expensive gift, knowing nothing will be received in return...if we are sure others will find out about our generosity.

But to give a gift that requires a sacrifice, a gift that "hurts," that no one will ever know about, that is another story.

The one with the true spirit of giving expects nothing in return. Not even a tiny little bit of recognition. No one is unworthy of his gifts. He attaches no tether to his gifts, so that if the receiver is not sufficiently grateful, he can jerk them back.

A mother who sits up with her sick child night after night doesn't later on in life remonstrate son or daughter, "After all I did for you, after sitting up with you nights on end when you were sick, how can you treat me this way?"

A gift that comes from the heart leaves no imprint on the giver's hand.

We are impressed by a businessman who gives his friends gifts on his own birthday. It is ocular proof that truly it's more blessed to give than to receive. The difficult thing is to apply this beautiful example to our own lives and to instill it in our children.

To go through life believing that others owe us something is frustrating. To give gifts to those who give us gifts, or from whom we have a reasonably good chance of receiving favorable recognition, saps the blessing out of the giving. That is human giving, with no heavenly value.

We say that everyone is born equal. In a very limited sense this may be true. But it's a fact that many children are born to poor parents who have very little to offer them in terms of material comfort, while others come into this world as heirs to a fortune, or even to a crown.

Before coming to earth, Jesus was the glory of heaven. His place was at the right hand of the throne of God. Our finite minds cannot begin to grasp the vastness of His riches.

We don't know what Joseph and Mary were able to offer to Jesus materially. We believe it was very little. Seen from this perspective, we can say that Jesus was born poor. And by our standards, He was poor all His life.

Jesus expected no gifts on His birthday. He did receive a few gifts in His 33 years. The Wise Men brought Him precious gifts, which it is believed were used by Joseph and Mary to sustain them during their sojourn in Egypt. Equally precious was the gift of the disreputable woman who washed His feet with tears and dried them with her hair, as a sign of contrition for her sins.

No, Jesus didn't receive many gifts. But that didn't keep Him from giving gifts. Every day He gave gifts—gifts to the sick, gifts to the blind, gifts to the halt, gifts to the leprous, gifts to the possessed, gifts to the hungry, gifts to the dead.

Jesus' gifts were not limited to His life. His greatest gift He gave in His death.

As the Titanic was sinking and lifeboats were being lowered away, a father rushed to the rail holding a small child under each arm. He made no attempt to find a place for himself, but cried to the passengers in the boat, asking that they take his babies. Immediately arms were raised. He dropped the first baby and when he saw it was safe, dropped the other. As the boat continued to descend, he waved to his small children, and shortly thereafter died in the gelid waters of the Atlantic.

“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life.”

The Titanic had enough lifeboats for one third of the passengers, to say nothing of the crew. Because of the belief that this ship was unsinkable, these lifeboats were ill-equipped, in most cases without water, provisions or any kind of light. Would it not have been for the foresight of one of the stewards, who had been in two previous shipwrecks, who brought a green lantern aboard, the casualty list would doubtless have been even longer.

The lights on the Titanic remained aglow until it stood on end for the final plunge and the machinery dropped, smashing bulkheads and extinguishing all light.

For the sixteen lifeboats afloat, the only point of reference in the moonless night was the steward's green lantern which he held aloft. Slowly they converged on this light and when several hours later the liner Carpathia arrived to pick up the survivors, the boats were all in a small area.

Tonight is Christmas Eve. You will read these words when Christmas 2004 is history.

Brazil News

May your Christmas have been blessed. May you have had the privilege of sharing the gift you received from the Man of Galilee. May your heart have inspired you to hold up the green lantern of hope, showing the way to those who are perishing in the icy darkness.

If this has been your lot, you will have had a blessed Christmas. This is what Faith and I desire for each of you. ▲

This & That

The Rio Verde School had their end-of-the-year program on Dec. 3. There were three graduates. Their playday and churrasco was at the Monte Alegre School on Dec. 11.

The Rio Verdinho School had their Christmas program on Dec. 17.

The Monte Alegre School had their Christmas program on Dec. 21.

The Monte Alegre youth girls made cookies and candy on Dec. 18 to distribute in town on the 20th, when they caroled for different ones. The youth boys served a churrasco.