

With the Poorest of the Poor – March 16, 2015

Bishop Eugenio Rixen, now 70 years of age, has lived in Brazil for 35 years, amongst the poorest of the poor. On March 16th, 2015, he arrived in Winnipeg for the first time, to share his experiences.

He came at the invitation of Development and Peace, in solidarity with the Lenten Share Campaign. Bishop Eugenio Rixen, known as Dom Eugenio in Brazil, spoke to and with about 70 people of his missionary work.

“Development and Peace supports certain projects in Brazil, such as family farms,” explained Most Reverend Rixen. In my diocese of Goiàs, there are many small land-owners who benefit from this aid.”

“It is a real gift for us to receive people who live with the realities of those areas”, joyfully commented Janelle Delorme, facilitator of Program Services in Canada for Development and Peace. We come to realize that our efforts have real impact on people and their projects. That’s important.”

Originally from Belgium, Dom Eugenio, through the Pastoral Land Commission, has been a tireless advocate for the small land-owners threatened by agribusiness giants.

He deplores the fact that “In Brazil, 55% of farmers are small land-owners, but that accounts for only 25% of the agricultural land. Agribusinesses own 75% of the arable land. Thousands of people, expelled by agribusinesses, have lost their land and they want it back.”

Furthermore, agribusiness does not feed the population. Fewer and fewer “...small family farms are still responsible for feeding 75% of the people, whereas agribusiness uses productive land to grow sugar cane to make biofuels destined for alcohol fueled cars, or produce soybeans to feed pigs in Europe and China”, he says with indignation.

Dom Eugenio is the spokesperson for the land-owners expelled from their lands since 1983. “In Brazil, religion and social commitment are one.” he says.

“My first duty is to work for the landless people. I help them get their land back. I welcome them, I celebrate the Eucharist for them, I visit them and I accompany them when they meet government officials or governors to give them more negotiating power.



For those who have already regained their land, I help them persevere and teach them to farm in an environmentally friendly way, contrary to agribusinesses that dump thousands of liters of pesticides on Brazilian land and destroy biodiversity and microorganisms.

While in Winnipeg, Bishop Rixen took the opportunity to speak of some 900 000 Brazilian natives: "... because their situation is similar to that of the aboriginals of Winnipeg. Contact between the white and the native population is difficult and leads to alcoholism and prostitution." he says.

Threatened by agribusiness, many native groups simply disappear, especially in Amazonia, he concluded. Dom Rixen and his Diocese struggle with them to regain their rights to the land.

"I have chosen to be with the poorest of the poor," he concluded. "I left Belgium because I wanted to be with them, to learn from them. Along with Pope Francis, I want the Church to **BE WITH** the poor, not only be there for them. It is up to them to determine their future, but we must be there to support them. We must hear their cry, look at the world through their eyes. We must go back to the Gospel. Jesus Christ chose to be poor and He lived **with** the poor."

