

In Fortaleza - Brazil

Ceu: A Place of Hope

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Twenty-three movements and associations are living and working together in Fortaleza, Brazil, to form a 'fazenda' (plantation) animated by a life of spirituality, prayer and concrete charity. Each of the movements and associations form their own entity with their own unique characteristics and together they make up a 275-acre (112 hectares) reality in which one can experience that differences can be lived in harmony and become a shared patrimony for the good of all.

"When we are dreaming alone it is only a dream; but when we dream with others it is the beginning of reality." This well-known phrase from the late Bishop of Recife (Brazil), Helder Camara, whose life was lived in service to the poor, seems emblematic of the story we share here.

Fortaleza, capital of the State of Ceará (Brazil), has 2.5 million inhabitants and is one of the nation's most violent cities. Poverty, lack of health care, and poor education destroy families and leave them vulnerable to the effects of drug trafficking, prostitution, AIDs and other social inequalities. The Craveiro de Macedo family owned the 275 acre 'Uirapuru' farm, an enterprise known for producing the highest quality milk in the region. Located in the heart of the city, the family had a dream: that this land could be developed for social initiatives to support the poor, ex-prisoners, drug addicts, street children, the sick, and other marginalized groups. They hoped the project could involve not only Catholic-based communities but also those of other denominations as well. Having known the work of Frei Hans Stapel (founder of the *Fazenda della Speranza* - 'Hope Farm') in assisting young people recovering from drug addiction, the family approached him with the idea of his using the land. Sensing that the property would be too large for him, and because of its location in the heart of the city, he invited other movements to be a part of the project.

Charisms – Together on the Frontline

Like much of Latin America, the Church in Brazil has undertaken a long journey focused on resolving the many social problems plaguing its peoples. Not surprisingly, numerous movements and associations came to life in the latter half of the 20th century with precisely this scope. More recent decades then saw the birth of different movements oriented towards prayer and evangelization. Interestingly, many of these initiatives -- both social action and spiritual -- trace their earliest roots back to Fortaleza which is historically among Brazil's most Catholic cities. Thus, it was not hard to find a group of first 'pioneers' to begin this newly born 'fazenda'. It was christened, *Condominio Spirituale Uirapuru*, or 'Ceu' ('heaven' in Portuguese), for short.

Thus began a unique, joint experience of charisms "for" the others through a powerful

Gospel-based witness. Frei Hans envisioned a place where “people find hope and feel at home; a place of brotherhood, where love is lived, where everyone is a brother or sister.” And this is precisely what has happened. Ceu strives to be a space of communion, a place of relationships, of coexistence without prejudices or exclusion. It wants to encourage a climate that allows for an encounter with God and one’s neighbor. In fact, when visiting one frequently hears expressions like: “Here you arrive with nothing to offer but everyone is here with open arms to love you and respect you.”, and “No matter who you are, you are welcomed and you are loved.”. Or, “Here we touch God.”

Without Fear of Diversity

Prayer and charity in action characterize this special place in which twenty-three charisms dwell together, each with their own unique characteristics. Differences are not seen as a threat but rather a wealth to be shared with others and an invitation to walk together in the search of truth, justice, and love. At Ceu, for example, one finds the ‘*Camino*’ project for the reintegration of former prisoners; AIDS patients building a new future for themselves through the *Rising Sun* initiative; and teen victims of violence regaining their personal dignity through the *Santa Monica* home. Other young people discover their calling to a life of contemplation through their experience lived at the Carmel or the Benedictine monasteries present there. There are associations working on educational and training programs for children and families. The *Nuovi Orizzonti* (*New Horizons*) association assists homeless teens and victims of drugs, prostitution, alcoholism and other crimes, while the Catholic Shalom Community promotes evangelization and human development initiatives. Among the latest works is a home for elderly priests and a clinic focused on cleft palate and facial surgeries. Other organizations, including a center for psychological training and the Aid to the Church in Need foundation supporting thousands of pastoral projects worldwide, are both present at Ceu, too. The *Focolare Movement* and its charism of unity contribute to overall administration and operations. The central offices serve as a point of encounter for all of Ceu’s many realities. Priority is given to assuring the interconnectedness of everyone through a network of mutual love lived by all, and through periodic encounters rooted in the life and practice of the Word.

Robust spirituality and concrete service

Ceu is a non-profit organization with a shared governance structure based on a common set of values (protection of human dignity, fraternity, mutual respect, trust, commitment to inclusion), together with a strong Gospel-based spirituality rooted in a relationship with God and in concrete service to others. Approval to join Ceu is voted upon at its annual General Assembly each November. Organizations must demonstrate self-sustainability, as well as commitment and effectiveness in their work and mission. Now several years old, the project continues to grow. Spaces are being created for the community, including a meeting square, sports complex, and welcoming centers for families, youth and others who want to visit Ceu. The newly built church is a natural meeting point: Jesus in the Eucharist, the bond of unity, strengthens the life of its inhabitants, enabling them to be a true community of communities.

Home and school of communion

Obviously, sharing the same land while tasked with very different responsibilities is not always easy. Although this dream of living together in communion between charisms can be a challenge, the success of the ‘experiment’ seems apparent. After his 2013 visit, Stanislaw Cardinal Rylko, then president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity wrote: «I have

appreciated the beauty of the many charisms awakened by the Holy Spirit in the Church today, and most especially in the Church in Brazil. The missionary nature of the new charisms in Brazil (movements and new communities) is well expressed through your witness of communion. I was also very impressed by the richness and variety of initiatives promoted by different communities. They are great signs of hope for the Church in Brazil and beyond. My hope, as was the desire of Blessed John Paul II, is that you may be a true "home and school of communion".

In fact, the first invited meeting of movements and new communities with John Paul II in May of 1998 in St. Peter's Square comes to mind. On that occasion, the Pope - after confirming that the moment of ecclesial maturity had come for the charisms - spoke of his hope that they may give a decisive contribution to the fulfillment of Jesus' prayer, "That all be one". In Ceu, one senses this dream is becoming reality.

