

Children's Homes in Brazil: Chances and challenges

In Brazil, EBM/MASA began its work by supporting a children's home, in close cooperation with the Convenção Batista Pioneira.

As a matter of fact, the history of MASA in Brazil is closely linked to the history of this home, the "Heinrich Liebich" Children's Home. It is not difficult to assess this ministry. In the past 30 years there have, of course, been changes and corrections in orientation, which always helped us to keep a clear and objective view of this God-given ministry. Yet one thing has not changed: our loving concern and our desire to give a new meaning to the lives of orphans, abandoned or neglected children and to provide for their security and education or to allow their mere survival.

I am often asked if children's homes are the best solution to the problems. My answer is "No!" It would be ideal if every child were given care, love, respect, and allowed a humane existence by his or her parents and if each one of them found the conditions for a healthy physical, mental and spiritual development in his or her home. But this is miles away from the reality of thousands of Brazilian or other South American children: They are abandoned in the streets during their very first days or months of life, they don't have anything to eat, they are shown no love or tenderness whatsoever, their life is constantly threatened, their soul has already been broken by the violence surrounding them, and they don't have the faintest notion of what the word "family" means. Many of them don't know their father, often not even their mother. If they do, their parents consider them as goods, force them into prostitution among other things or use them for dirty work in drug trafficking. The question remains: What chances do these children have to become mature people with high values as to life or family, able to live in healthy relationships, and motivated to grow in character and personality? The foundations for such development have been withdrawn from them, their self-esteem degraded, their emotional life destroyed. This description also makes it very clear that reconstruction and renewal of these biographies are by no means easy. They are possible only through God's mercy and love, and deep compassion on our part. Providing a roof over their heads and a plate of food will not do.

Hundreds of children have already been admitted to our two MASA homes in Brazil – the "Heinrich Liebich" home in Ijuí and the "Criança Feliz" home in Cotia. Many of them grew up there and have long since been adults. We have to say that it didn't work for all of them. Some did not commit their lives to Jesus. But they all received our love and loving care and had the opportunity of getting to know family life, of going to school and preparing for a trade. They were given a chance for a better future. We are very happy about those numerous former children who have now finished their vocational training and founded their own families, who are dedicated Christians in their churches, who are steadfast and have found fulfillment in life.

In evaluating this ministry we mustn't forget that this kind of initiative always has a past – long before any particular organization gets into the boat. Institutions are beneficiary and necessary; so the work can be done on a larger scale, and incoming resources can be administered in a responsible and transparent way. Yet this truth remains: Only the love of individuals makes this kind of "rescue" possible and life-giving: individuals, from the sponsor whose donations make supporting this work possible, to the foster parents who offer family life to the children. Originally the children's home in Ijuí had originated as a result of the Liebich family's practical Christian love. This family of farmers, who already had several children, took more than thirty orphaned and other impoverished children in, in addition to their own. And this was the framework for MASA: Pastor Horst Borkowski promised Heinrich Liebich, who was already old and ill at that time, that these children would not be homeless after his death. The story of Cotia is pretty much the same. Up to now this work has been feasible only thanks to the personal commitment of people who love children and are prepared to make sacrifices, whether they do so by working in the homes or by praying and giving money from abroad.

Administration, working methods, and perspectives – they all need to be continuously evaluated and adapted to new realities. Society, politics, culture and financial requirements influence the work as well. But there is one thing, which must never change: the clear understanding of the gospel Jesus has given

us. This understanding includes our responsibility for these children, which leads us to offer them a fair chance of leaving their material, mental and spiritual misery behind.

Of course, we cannot possibly help all the children in such distress. But this fact mustn't slow down our involvement nor excuse any indifference of ours. This kind of mission work always asks for sacrifices. Jesus has not called us into a comfortable and easy life. We are called to love those who are lost and to be God's tools to save many people.

You may also ask: Would it not be better to integrate these children back into their families, as far as this is possible? Certainly. But often the parents are dead or imprisoned, or their whereabouts are simply unknown. If they can be located, the home tries to reach out to the family and to help them improve their living conditions in such a way that they can take their children in again and provide them with loving care, under humane conditions. But all too often, reunification with their family would mean another big threat to the children. And this would then be an even greater trauma.

The following stories emphasize the value of this work, as I have described it above:

1. Tais and Tainara are twins and were just 10 months old when they were admitted to the children's home in Ijuí in December 2001. They were absolutely malnourished. For one month they had to get hospital treatment. Their blood had to be completely exchanged. They were cared for with love and dedication. Today, two years later, especially Tainara still shows some lasting effects. But thanks to God we can now say that they are out of the woods. They have experienced two dramatic years, but they slowly begin to blossom.

2. Lucas is the name of another child. He had never worn shoes. He had never seen a bath, let alone dishes or cutlery when eating. Instead of speaking he grunted. A completely intimidated child. He collected anything he found, even food, in a bag made of cloth, which he always carried with him and kept like a treasure. After four years of devotion, teaching and, above all, motherly love, he now says a few words, writes his name, he can pray, sing in his own language, and has become a happy boy. How wonderful is our God, who gives new hope to children without hope!

3. Tamires Gomes de Souza arrived at the Cotia home at the age of six months, together with her two older sisters. Before admission she had been taken care of by her two sisters, the oldest being only seven! The three children had to fend for themselves in a hut. In the home, Tamires finally was given good care and love and developed in a positive and healthy way. Nobody knows who her father is. Her mother seldom comes to see her. As her parents have abandoned her she has now been put up for adoption. The care we have given her in this phase will certainly influence her further life.

4. The question from Luke 1:66: "What is this child going to be? For it was plain that the Lord's power was upon him," may be applied to Antonio Gelado Cabelo Junior. He has grown up in the children's home. Today, at 17, he is taking A-levels and getting ready for university studies. His prospects are exceptionally good. It is wonderful to see in which way our home has contributed to his development. His life so utterly differs from that of children and youngsters who live in the streets, without any perspectives at all.

The children's homes are a successful chapter in EBM/MASA's history. Without them something would be badly missing in the overall work. Jesus said: "Let the children come to me." The ministry of the children's homes is a way to offer neglected children security and to make them experience Jesus' love.

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