**Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart**

Good (afternoon, evening, morning) good people of the \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ faith community.

A special thanks to Father for allowing me to share my story with all of you. I am very happy to be here to tell you about my mission experience in the Amazon area of Brazil and my people. But I promise not to try and tell you everything!

First, let me introduce myself. I am Sr. Nancy Schramm, FSSH and have been for 47 years. About 32 of those were spent in the Amazon area of Brazil, from 1978 to 2010. When I was asked to go to Brazil by our Major Superior at the time, she asked me to make a 6 year commitment. But those 6 years turned into 32 years.

For this first part of my reflection I would like to share two thoughts from Pope Francis’ beautiful writing called, **The Joy of the Gospel**. Isn’t it so inspiring to have a Holy Father like Pope Francis? First let me ask a question. How many of you are baptized and proud of it? How many of you are missionaries? If you answered Yes to these questions, you are absolutely correct!

Pope Francis writes much on being a disciple of the Gospel, but he is very clear in saying that we are no longer disciples or missionaries, but we are “missionary disciples”. All baptized persons are not just disciples but also are sent to share God’s love in all the places where there are people. All places, all times, all moments are ones of evangelization, that is of making God’s love real for others. At home of course, on the streets, in the store while you are waiting in line, in school, at work. We are always called to be missionaries of love.

Pope Francis also defines solidarity in such a powerful way. He says: Solidarity is “a spontaneous reaction by those who recognize that the social function of property and the universal destination of goods are realities which come before private property.” In simpler terms, Christians recognize that their individual wealth is not just a blessing for them and their families, but an obligation to help the poor to have a dignified life.

 There are so many ways that you and this community can come close to the poor, so many projects that can be developed to help those in need, but one special way is through your solidarity with the foreign missions by your support both spiritually and financially.

And now Brazil!

My religious community has celebrated over 50 years of our presence in the Amazon area of Brazil. We decided to do this in the 1960’s when another Pope, John XXIII, asked religious communities to help the poor in developing nations. Throughout these years we, as a congregation, have made a conscious choice to be with the poor on the periphery of the capital city of Belem of the state of Para. Over the years we took on different ministries, especially to help with diocesan and parish projects, but we always made sure that we stayed physically near the poor to allow them to teach us what God’s love meant to them and to share our experience of God’s love.

Today we are in four poor areas, Icoaraci near Belem which is the state capital of the state of Para, in Ananindeua, in Barcarena which is about three hours up the Amazon River from Belem and on the island of Marajo, the largest island in the mouth of the Amazon River.

Now our first project:

We accompany the Church base communities where the living of the faith is decentralized in neighborhoods near a small chapel. We are involved in faith formation for adults, youth and children. The people are hungry to know about their faith, the Scriptures and how to live them. I can’t emphasize how important this formation work is. If we are to be a vibrant and life-giving Church, we must have good and inspiring leaders. We are literally building the Church of the future in these small communities. One of the ways that we use the donations given to us is to support the formation work that is done with our lay leaders. In Barcarena, for instance, the people come from the jungle communities, from the island communities and from the village itself to learn about our Catholic Faith; to learn about what it means to be a leader. They make sacrifices to get to the parish and need to be fed; materials need to be developed and distributed. Even a simple weekend for Bible study costs money which the poor people do not have. You may ask, well what about the parish, can’t it help? As you well know the parish is supported by its parishioners, so the little money Father receives, has to be used to pay other important bills. It is truly a vicious circle.

Our second project is the Street Kids’ Ministry which I co-founded where the poor children can go to received tutoring or learn other skills. They learn computer skills, manual crafts, dancing and music according to the volunteers and their skills. We also have a community garden where they learn to care for Mother Earth and reap the healthy benefits. The Brazilian children only go to school four hours a day, we take in about 200 children during the week when they are not in school.

But much more important than the extra schooling and the meal that the children benefit from, it is the love of God that guides our actions there. Many of the parents are dysfunctional for many reasons: drug and alcohol, addiction, prostitution, extreme poverty, little or no support for single parents. At our ministry they feel safe and loved. Their lives do change.

Our third project is the formation of our Brazilian Sisters. I was the last American Sister to work in Brazil, and now they all are Brazilian. It is our greatest joy that Brazilian women wanted to become part of us. They are very dedicated women who are completely committed to their people and living our Franciscan charism among the people of Para. At this point we have young women in every stage of formation discerning their vocation. We are able to continue our presence among the people because of our benefactors who literally pay for the bread on our tables. These women came from poor families themselves and want to give back to the less fortunate. They come to the US for meetings, but they always want to go back.

Sometimes people will ask me how much the Brazilian people contribute to our ministries, and I have to say that only one parish is able to offer a small stipend to the sisters. The reason is the poverty of the people themselves. One of the saddest things that I experienced as I was getting ready to leave Brazil was the realization that, although our presence as consecrated women does make a difference among the people, they continue to suffer due to so much corruption, unequal distribution of income and the violence due to drugs and human trafficking. Our sisters join with other religious communities to work against human trafficking which is so rampart in the world today.

But I don’t want to take this time to just cite all the horror and poverty stories that are part of Brazil. I don’t want anyone to feel guilty because you have a comfortable home and make a decent living. At every moment we need to thank God for all the blessings that we have as a people. To live in American is a dream that many people have. I know many of you struggle, too, and have had to make many sacrifices in your lives to raise your children and prepare for retirement. But I ask you to be generous in your solidarity: generous in your prayers for all those who suffer from hunger and lack of the basic necessities of life. And generous with your financial support because you want to contribute to making a difference in the lives of others, especially in the lives of those people with whom my sisters work.

I would like to close remembering the Gospel that we heard today. The disciples tell Jesus: “This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.”
Jesus said to them, “There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves.” Jesus tells them that they must care for the people. All of us must do something to help those who have very little. Please don’t think that your contribution is too small. Whatever you can give, it will sustain our sisters and their ministries. It will mean very much, not only in how we use it, but especially because of your spirit and love. You are missionaries with us. Thank you for caring and may God bless you and yours!