

January 4, 2024

Dear friends,

Greetings from Boa Vista and Happy New Year to all of you!

I arrived here on Jan. 1 in the late afternoon, from my 11-day visit to Raposa (Fox Leg) Village and the surrounding area. That's 3 hrs away by truck: one hour on paved road, one hour on gravel road, and one hour on the savannah track. It was an intense time of Masses on the weekends, making house visits to pray for the sick, and hanging around with all who dropped by the mission house. It hit 36 C every afternoon and I was glad to have a fan for siesta (no air-con)! I stayed with the two Consolata priests serving the area, Fr. Joseph from the Congo and Fr. Juluis from Kenya. I first came to the Raposa area in 1993...30 years ago!! Many friendships go back to that time...I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the gift that God has granted me, to live among the Makushi people and learn their ways and their language.

Now it's catch-up time with church people here in the city (Boa Vista, the state capitol, population 420,000) and with linguists at the Federal University of Roraima.

The new Bishop, Dom Evaristo Spengler, OFM, is an easy-going and welcoming man. He spent 10 years in mission in Angola – and got malaria 27 times!!!! What a hero! He is very much into the social pastoral issues.

This morning, I worked on my 2023 finance report, tracking down receipts for some projects here at the Diocesan center. I am grateful to our benefactors whose generosity reaches people here.

At lunch, we had a full house, with at least fourteen people counting visitors, among them Prof. Antonia Costa, journalism professor at the UFRR (Federal University of Roraima) (she based her M.Ed. thesis on our 2004-2008 Makushi and Wapichana radio programs) and radio show host for the Diocesan Radio (she will interview me Sat. morning), as well as Cordi-Marian Sisters Margarete and Caterina from the interior, and the soon to be new bishop of St. Gabriel of the Rapids (he's a local diocesan priest and church historian)...all in all we had a lively conversation hosted by Bishop Evaristo, very Franciscan in his ways of welcoming people with his great sense of humour!

After siesta, I made it to the UFRR to meet with linguist Prof. Paulo Jeferson Araújo to catch up on his research news. He published an article last year in the *International Latin American Studies Review* on the language vitality of Makushi and Wapichana, using our radio programs as a case in point for reversing language shift. I plan to translate the article into English.

At 6 pm, I was back at the Diocesan house to meet with Bishop Evaristo and his young cousin, Mayá, and her two children. They are all of German descent from Santa Catarina State, south of São Paulo. Mayá's parents, Egydio Schwade and the late Doroti, worked among the Waimiri-Atroari people in the Prelacy of Itacoatiara in the 1980's. When I first arrived in Brazil in 1986, I

met them at the many Prelacy meetings. Mayá was only 3 years old at the time! It was nice to remember Bishop George Marskell and how he gathered and inspired so many of us to be a church of the people of God.

Tomorrow, Michael Swan and his wife Yone (originally from São Paulo) arrive in Boa Vista for ten days to do interviews concerning the crisis among the Yanomami People. Michael has retired from *The Catholic Register* and is now free-lancing; Yone is a profession interpreter in Toronto (Portuguese-English). They will be hosted by Consolata priest Fr. Bob who works among the Yanomami. Michael was here in 2019 to report on the situation of the Venezuelan refugees.

Saturday, January 6, marks the 20th anniversary (Jan. 6, 2004) of the kidnapping of three missionaries (Fr. Ronildo, Fr. César, Bro. João Carlos) at the Surumu Mission by the Makushis against the “one area” reserve. They were held for three days and released unharmed, thankfully. The then Bishop Aparecido would not allow any of us to return to the indigenous area for almost a year, for fear of more kidnappings. The one-area land reserve was voted into law on April 15, 2005, by Pres. Lula, meaning that all non-Indigenous had to leave, allowing the Makushi people to have a “one area” continuous reserve. A few months later, on Sept. 17, 2005, in an act of revenge, Makushis against the reserve attacked the mission center, beat up a teacher and some students, and burned down the health clinic, part of the housing area, and the chapel. The challenge now for Makushi leaders is to teach new generations about the land struggle that began in 1977... and not to take for granted that they possess their traditional land.

After my activities here in Roraima, I fly south to visit with friends in the São Paulo area before heading north. I will be back at Presentation Manor on Friday, January 26, God willing!

Sending you waves and waves of heat, and blessings and good wishes for 2024,
abraços,
Ron



After Mass at St. Sebastian Church, Xumina Village, Dec. 31, 2023.