



*Irmã Johanna's Primer on
How to be a Missionary Overseas*



*Sisters of St. Francis
of Mary Immaculate*

1433 Essington Road • Joliet, IL 60435 • (815) 725-8735
www.jolietfranciscans.org



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After 43 years of ministry in Brazil, Irmã Johanna Didier returned to Joliet, Illinois, in 2009. In early 2012, she traveled back to Santa Helena to witness and participate in the February 4th Final Profession of Vows of Irmã Débora de Castro Alves, whom she had known from the time the latter was a young girl. On March 6th, while still in Brazil, Irmã Johanna died. She is buried in Santa Helena, a city whose people she served and loved.

Irmã (Sister) Johanna Didier wanted to be a missionary from a very early age. At 48 years of age, she finally realized that dream in becoming one of the earliest Joliet Franciscan Sisters to begin serving God and His people in Brazil. The impact of her ministry is felt all over Santa Helena. In 1984 the City Council of Santa Helena officially named Irmã Johanna an honorary citizen. She was the first woman to ever receive that honor in Santa Helena.

What follows in her own words is her Missionary Story.

We think you will agree that she is indeed the “pebble” who created hundreds of ripples.

My Missionary Story

By: Irmã Johanna Didier

Early Dream Unrealized

Ever since I was a child in grade school, making and selling popcorn balls to raise money to adopt abandoned Chinese babies, I dreamed of being a missionary. When it was time to make a vocation decision, my pastor assured me that it was not necessary for me to look for a religious community of sisters who had foreign missions. He told me to enter the community I knew and loved and if it was His will that I be a missionary, God could turn the convent upside down to accomplish this.

I never regretted entering the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate. I loved teaching and exercised my missionary zeal by making my students more world conscious.

In the course of time, I was asked to work with our candidates in initial formation, girls of high school age in our aspirancy program. During my fourteen years with these young girls I did what I could to instill a missionary spirit. Even though I was not chosen to go to the missions when we finally opened a mission in Brazil in 1963, it gave me great joy to see that three of the first four chosen for this mission had been my aspirants. I was not asked to go to Brazil at that time even though I volunteered and my desire for working in the missions was known by the Superior of the Congregation. I was told that at 45 years of age, I was too old to learn a new language and adapt to a new culture. This didn't upset me. I just put my efforts into doing what I could to make this new Congregation endeavor a success. As principal of a large co-educational high school, I encouraged the students to do their part as well.

My Dreams Realized:

A Call to go to Brazil; Learning to speak Portuguese

Three years after we opened the mission in Brazil, I was asked if I still wanted to go there because my experiences with the aspirants in the United States would be useful in the House of Formation the Community was opening in Goiânia.



Of the 14 Didier children, four of the sisters entered the Joliet Franciscan Congregation. Pictured with their mother, Emma, are: Sisters Ambrose, Peter, Johanna and Mary Therese. Sister Johanna is wearing a white habit because she was a "missionary sister."



Sister Johanna in 1966 before being sent to Brazil.

Learning Portuguese was not easy. At 48, it was not possible for me to shed my American accent so I never satisfied the young teachers, who knew no English, but just taught us by making us repeat useful phrases. One day, completely discouraged, I told God it was His fault that I couldn't speak without an American accent. I wanted to come earlier when my ears were more attuned to differences in sounds, but His Will was otherwise. So now I pleaded for the gift of tongues. Instead he gave me a different, very profound, lesson.

I was sitting in the garden outside the convent in Anapolis, Goiás, where I was studying Portuguese for three months, the time allotted to learn the language. A small child came and began speaking to me in Portuguese. With the little Portuguese I knew, I explained to her that I didn't understand her, that I didn't speak Portuguese. She looked at me with the love and compassion only a child can give and said, "Coitadinha," which means "You poor little thing," and then proceeded to point out objects, giving the name and asking me to repeat. My accent didn't bother her. The next day she checked if I remembered the previous day's lesson and continued her mission of teaching. It made me laugh. I could finally laugh at myself and humbly accept my lack of perfection in the language. I also believe being relaxed helped me to improve my pronunciation because the teachers seemed more satisfied.

Some time later, when I began my mission in Goiânia, this lesson was enforced. I had asked an elderly Brazilian Sister of another community for help with the language. She willingly offered her help, but remarked that she thought I was too concerned about how well I pronounced the Portuguese words. She assured me that I communicated well because I communicated with love. She told me that when I was first introduced to the Sisters in her convent, they remarked, "That Sister really loves us."

Goiânia: Experience in a Large City

In 1963, our Sisters began their mission in Santa Helena, a small rural community in the interior. When they decided to accept candidates into the community, it was necessary to move the House of Formation to a place where it would be possible for our future Sisters to get an adequate education.

One of my many tasks was to drive the candidates in our "Kombi" mini-bus to their various schools since we couldn't get them all in the same school. With my limited Portuguese it wasn't easy to understand



Sister Johanna with her catechism students in Goiânia, Brazil in 1967.



Children worked in the fields, but also spent time playing near their homes.

their directions, especially when they all tried to talk at the same time. After safely depositing them in their respective schools, I made a dry-run so I didn't need to depend on their directions. The next morning I paid no attention to the jumble of language and serenely drove them to their classes.

After a year, we closed the high school section of our House of Formation and I began work in Pastoral Ministry. I visited homes and had classes to prepare children for First Communion. I often thought that short attempt with the formation house in Brazil was just God's way of opening the door for me.

My stay in Goiania was just a little over two years. In March, 1969, I went to Santa Helena. When I arrived there I knew that this was where I was meant to be.

Santa Helena 1969-1986

When I first began my work in Santa Helena, I noticed that the people I worked with had a very low self-image. Many were illiterate and most did not recognize the talents they had, so I began work teaching in a literacy program.

I remember the day when an older man finally was able to form the letters necessary to write his name. He jumped up from his seat and left the open air classroom waving the paper in the air, shouting with joy, "Eu sou Jose," I am Joseph!" What joy just the simple ability to write their names gave these people.

I planned and gave many short term courses, always making sure that at the end of each course a certificate was given in a simple ceremony so that people would have recognition. To many of them, that simple formal paper said they were someone.

For whatever need arose, I organized a course to prepare people to fill that need. And in that small developing town of Santa Helena, many new needs presented themselves.



Here Sister Johanna studies the map of Santa Helena looking for the different construction areas.

When cattle were dying for lack of vaccination, I organized a course for cattle vaccination. That meant visiting all the farms and convincing the owners to send at least one ranch hand to the course and also making sure the classes were taught on Saturday and Sunday so it would be easier for them to be dispensed from regular work. It also meant going to the nearest big city to find a veterinarian willing to teach the course, as there were no veterinarians in Santa Helena.

When electricity finally came to Santa Helena and I saw people trying to do their own installations, I feared they would kill themselves. So I organized a course for simple electrical installations. I convinced a man from the electric company to teach the course. Today one of those first students is in charge of the electric company in Santa Helena.

The same thing happened when tractors became widely used. I saw that farmers were losing their top soil, so I planned a course in soil conservation. Then the tractors needed repairs, so I planned a course in tractor repairing. More cars in Santa Helena created many needs. As a result, we had courses to prepare mechanics, body-repair men, painters, etc. with a diploma at the end and more young people with an opportunity for a new type of work.



As the city grew, so did the classes Sister Johanna created to help the people become knowledgeable in those areas.

The sudden development of this small rural community was due to the fact that the capital of Brazil was moved from Rio de Janeiro to Brasilia in 1958. With the growth of Brasilia, roads were built to all the capitals of the states in the undeveloped interior. Roads meant the possibility of getting produce out to be marketed and that meant more planting and making better use of the very fertile soil in this part of Brazil. It also meant the use of agricultural technology which had not been a necessity before with small farms.

As the community grew, so did the need for construction. So we had various construction-related courses: brick-laying, painting, plumbing, etc. Sometimes the men and boys would start the classes but drop out before the end of the course. Even though they were aware that the new knowledge could give them better wages, the need for bread on the table “today” caused them to leave the class and take any job they could get to survive. We arranged that whoever had perfect attendance at the end of the week received a half of a minimal salary for the duration of the course. That helped attendance and today many of our brick-layers and other construction personnel date their first introduction to that work to the course I organized.

From the beginning, poor nutrition and sickness caused by lack of proper hygiene concerned me. I offered classes in hygiene and those who had perfect attendance were told they would receive a water filter. After they prepared the hole, the students of the brick-laying course would build the superstructure of an outhouse. Before any building was done, I checked to see if the hole was deep enough and in the right place in relation to their well. My brother Herb was visiting me in Brazil at the time that I was working on this project and I asked him to go with me to inspect the holes. He enjoyed that experience and at the end remarked, "I was just thinking, it sure was a good thing you got your master's degree before you came down to Brazil!"

I realized he was speaking with his tongue in his cheek, and that there might be others who also questioned the type of work I did with the scholastic preparation I'd had. But I'm convinced that none of that education went to waste. My university preparation gave me the tools to help me recognize the needs and ability to discover the means to resolve the problems of the poor. I believe a well-educated person is one who can fit into any situation and work at any problem even if it is not directly related to the content of the course one has pursued.

Developing Playgrounds in Santa Helena

I used to have meetings with small groups of people in the "villas" to give them a chance to speak freely of their concerns and dreams. At one of these meetings they expressed concerns about the bad behavior of the children in the neighborhood. I pointed out that the children had never really learned to play together. It had always been my concern that there just was no place for children to play, nor did they have any equipment to play with. The group finally reached a point where all agreed they could work together to make a neighborhood playground. We picked out a place and I discovered who the owner of the land was. He lived in Goiânia, so I went to visit him, asking him either for the donation of the land or a permit to use it for a given number of years. He agreed to let us use it for ten years and gave us a written contract to that effect.



Sister Johanna knew that in order for the children to get along, they needed to learn to play together. So she got people involved and her idea of building a playground soon became a reality.

We all worked together building sand boxes and putting up monkey bars. We found material strong enough to be supports for swings. The city donated six large sewer tiles which we painted with bright colors and arranged so the children could crawl through. It turned out to be a very colorful and delightful place for children to play. It wasn't long before the politicians (looking for



Often times participants would stop what they were doing to give Sr. Johanna a big hug.

votes) were putting up playgrounds in other parts of the city. Ten years was a long enough time for this idea to take hold and our playground was no longer needed.

Cooking and Sewing Classes Begin

In my effort to improve nutrition I helped the people in the villas plant backyard vegetable gardens. When the vegetables came up, they brought them to me. I told them it was for them to eat, but they told me they didn't eat that kind of food. So I got the children to taste a raw carrot and a radish. Then the idea emerged that we needed to start some cooking classes.

When the people started to plant soybeans, I thought I ought to offer a course so they would know how to use soybeans and benefit from the nutrition they provide.

I was told there was a Japanese lady who knew how to make many delicious foods with soybeans. I visited her and asked her to help me give a course on soybean cookery. She protested and said that she could never teach. She was illiterate and shy. I told her I just wanted her to do the demonstration part of the course. I'd have other teachers helping as well.

When I asked for her recipes, she had none. They were all in her head. So for the next two weeks I met with her, armed with my measuring cups and spoons. When she showed me she used so many handfuls of this and a pinch of that, and a little of something else --- I measured each item and wrote down the recipe. We made a book, tested the recipes and then she gave the demonstrations. The course had to be repeated many times as everyone wanted to know how to make milk, cheese, meat patties, etc. from soybeans.

This experience also gave Sakika Yakahoma Ushira confidence in herself and she lost her shyness. Recognizing her natural cooking



Sister Johanna could always find volunteers to teach or to help whenever she asked. There was always someone coming forward to say "yes!"

talents, she opened one of the first restaurants in Santa Helena. It was just a small rented building, but became a very popular place, especially for visiting businessmen and truckers. After a few years she was able to build her own place and extended it to have overnight lodging as well. It is still one of the largest and most popular restaurants in Santa Helena. Sakika, who is affectionately called “Hilda,” always credits those early days of teaching soy cooking for getting her started. She is just one example of the people who were helped by just convincing them that they had talent and ability.

My experience with Sakika confirmed my observation that the women were not using all of their God-given talents and that I could help them grow in self-esteem as they developed their own gifts.

I organized sewing classes in which they learned to make their own dress patterns, as well as sew. We also had classes to teach crocheting, knitting, embroidering, textile painting, pottery and glazing and even doll-making.

Often my search for teachers led to helping very talented women grow in confidence and give more meaning to their lives.

Neusa was an example of this. She earned extra money washing clothes for those in better financial conditions, but someone told me she was a talented seamstress. I asked her to help me with the first sewing classes. Noting her natural talents, I had her take courses in textile painting, artificial flower making and flower arranging as well as other related artistic classes to pass on to others as the different needs arose. As her talents developed she spent more and more time at our training center. She had two grown children so she wasn't needed at home. Nevertheless, I feared her husband might object to the time she spent away from the house. I spoke to him and apologized for taking her away from their home for so many hours. He assured me that no apology was needed, but that he owed me thanks for all I did for Neusa. He said, “Before you found Neusa, I had a sickly, unhappy wife. Now she no longer needs the doctor and is a very joyful person in our home. Thank you for helping her realize her God-given gifts!”



Neusa, (left) her daughter and her baby are pictured with Sister Johanna in Neusa's gift shop. Neusa had so many talents and she used them to help others.

Sister Johanna knew she needed to start a club to get the elderly together.



When I saw the need for typing classes, I got a loan of typewriters from Goiânia and found capable teachers in Santa Helena. Soon these classes were provided in the high schools or at special schools. After graduating three groups, I left that work for others to do.

Caring for the Elderly

Visiting homes, I discovered so many listless aging people. So I formed a club we called the “Golden Pioneers.” Once a month I got the help of a few men in Santa Helena to pick up the elderly and to drive them to the Training Center for an afternoon of fun. They danced, they sang, they played cards and bingo, and prayed together, too. How they looked forward to that monthly gathering!

This opened the eyes of our pastor as well as of the parishioners. They soon saw that these aged people had no decent home and some just needed a little special care. The parish built a home for the aged. Until there was someone prepared to take over the care of the Home for the Aged, I gave my love and attention there and continued to have the monthly gatherings of the Golden Pioneers at the home. So there was a big celebration once a month that added life to the place.

The work of the Training Center continued under lay volunteers with my supervision. This was possible because the two buildings were quite close.

Organizing a Parish

In 1986, I was asked to organize a priestless parish in Goiânia. This suburb, called “Parque Atheneu,” grew up in front of our school and Center House, and the Sisters felt responsible for these people who were without a church or pastor. They opened their chapel for them to attend Sunday Mass with the Sisters, but soon realized that they needed someone to administer this developing parish.

This was a huge challenge for me. There were over 400 families already living here and many families belonged to the military police. The projected plan



Everywhere she went, people loved Sister Johanna for her gentle spirit and kindness.

was to have housing for 10,000 families (before I left there were almost that many homes completed). I knew the priority was to get a piece of land in the area so that we could build our own parish center. I spent many hours in the mayor's office asking for some land. A law was finally passed granting my request.

Since I didn't have experience in building, except for what I learned while organizing courses in Santa Helena, I had to put a lot of this responsibility on the people. Within a year after we got the land, we built a large multi-purpose Community Center which was used for Sunday Masses as well as other activities.

Through home visits I won the interest, respect and cooperation of the people. We developed a large Couples Encounter group and I soon had many volunteers to help with all the parish needs.

Our next project was to build a simple building with three classrooms for Catechetical classes and other meetings.

Since Goiânia has a Catholic University run by Jesuits, I could get the help of priests to celebrate Mass and hear confessions on weekends. However, I knew the people needed and wanted their own parish priest. I prayed that the Archbishop would soon be able to provide a priest for them. When that finally happened after six years, I returned to Santa Helena.

Return to Santa Helena

During my absence from Santa Helena, the work at the Training Center continued with the help of involved lay people. The Home for the Aged had a good staff, too, so I turned my attention to the poor in the fast growing villas on the outskirts of the city. Santa Helena is basically the commercial center for a large rural community.

During my first stay in Santa Helena, the rural workers and their families lived in small colonies on farms. There were rural schools that provided classes up to the fourth grade. I used



Sewing classes helped expectant mothers make their own layettes for their babies.



In 1984, Sister Johanna became the first woman to be made an Honorary Citizen of Santa Helena, Brazil.

to visit these colonies and schools, helping the teachers with the Catechetical programs for the children. The priests also traveled regularly to these areas to celebrate Mass.

Now there are no longer these colonies on the farms. These poor families now live in the eighteen villas on the outskirts of the city of Santa Helena, and the rural workers are trucked to the farms early in the morning. Many of these homes are very primitive with dirt floors covered with plastic. There is a constant effort to improve the conditions, but there is also a continuous influx of people arriving from poorer areas of Brazil with the hope of better living conditions.

Pastoral of the Child

I worked with these families visiting their homes and organizing the Pastoral of the Child. Ten years ago the bishops of Brazil, concerned about the high infant mortality rate in Brazil, organized the Pastoral of the Child on a national level. The purpose was to train the women to be instruments in their own socio-transformation.

As I visited the homes, I discovered natural leaders whom I trained to help other mothers improve their home conditions. There was a need for better hygiene and nutrition, as well as combating dehydration in its earliest stages. The leaders encouraged breast feeding and made sure that all children were vaccinated. Pregnant women were given special attention and encouraged to get pre-natal care and vaccinations.

Each month the children under six were weighed to make sure they were not underweight. Undernourished children received free milk and the leaders taught the mothers economical means to



Classes filled up so quickly with women wanting to learn to sew and to take care of their new babies, that Sister Johanna made sure that even those women who could not attend were also taken care of by the local Coordinators.

improve nutrition. As the parish coordinator of this program, I worked with twelve organized communities, each with its own coordinator. We had a total of 68 community leaders with a definite number of families who lived near them under their care. All of them were volunteer workers. To get this many volunteers, I visited homes to discover natural leaders, whom I convinced to give time and service to their people.

After their basic training, we continued with training sessions in order to keep them up-to-date and enthusiastic. If I had anything to give to the poor, I always did it through the leaders or coordinators of the groups. The leaders knew who in the group had the greatest need and could easily get it to them. Not only did it give them personal contact with each family, but it also gave them a certain prestige and importance within the group. I did everything I could to make the leaders and coordinators respected members of their community.

We had over 900 families in this program, with over 1,200 children under six years of age. The number of pregnant women varied from 70 to 90. They received special attention from the leaders.

Twice a year we had a course for the pregnant women, during which they receive classes that helped with their development and taught them to take care of the expected child. To run this course I had a coordinator and staff of volunteer men, women and doctors. During the course, the women spent time each day working on baby clothes. A group of volunteer women helped them with this. By the end of the course they had made a complete layette for the baby.

There were always women who could not fit into either of the two courses, either because of timing or employment. For them we furnished a simpler layette and the leaders tried to give them extra personal attention.

First "Midwives Convention"

As I write of these pregnant women, I recall an early experience I had. It was during the time I was organizing so many professional training courses. One day a doctor approached me and asked if I could organize a course for midwives -- not to prepare new midwives, but to give better



Leaders for the Pastoral of the Child program were sought by Sister Johanna so that they would receive the necessary training to help others in need. Sister Johanna is pictured third from the left.

training to those who were already practicing. The doctor complained that they were not all using sterile techniques and oftentimes women arrived with severe problems and they were too late to save the child.

I knew I'd never get the midwives to take this course so instead I decided to call it a "Midwives Convention." Doctors went to Conventions, so why shouldn't Midwives have a convention?

I visited all the rural areas and got the women excited about the upcoming convention which would have a special speaker from the United States.

I asked a Franciscan Sister who was trained as a midwife in the USA to teach the course. The midwives each received a folder with "First Midwives Convention" printed on it. I also got help so that at the end of the conference each attendee received a kit with basic materials needed for her work. I had local doctors talk to them and to explain when it would be necessary to call in a doctor for help on problem cases. The convention was a great success. Because of this there was a better relationship between the doctors and midwives.



Sister Johanna gave special attention to the little children and they loved her.



When she had a bit of free time, Sister Johanna spent it helping in the day care center.

Things I Have Learned

1. There must be mutual love and respect if anything is to be accomplished.
2. Working with the poor is a mutual learning experience. One cannot come into a different culture to implant one's own. One must first see what is of value, how and why they do things, and then offer suggestions for improvement.

3. Believe in people, recognize their talents and help them develop those talents so they can be instruments in their own transformation.

4. Be patient. Everyone has a right to learn by mistakes. Just help, if you can, to reduce the number of mistakes.

5. Person-to-person contact is of the utmost importance; home-visiting is indispensable. It tells people you really care and consider them important.

Looking Back

I recall that when I first landed in Brasilia to begin my mission in Brazil, I looked out at all the people who were there and was surprised that they didn't seem any different from the people I knew in the USA. I thought, "Why that man could be my brother" and "That woman my mother or sister" and I smiled and looked on them all with love. It is the same love that has stayed with me all these many years in Brazil.



*Irmã
Johanna
Didier*

Fé e caridade se unem, na descoberta do mistério de um Deus, que se faz presente na alegria da vida partilhada com os irmãos.



For her 90th birthday, the above invitation was sent to parishioners in Santa Helena. It reads: "Faith and Charity are united in the revelation of the mystery of God, who is present in the joy of a life shared with others." Inside the card: "At the age of 90 she still is ready to serve with a happy smile, which makes clear the significance of a life dedicated to the service of God."



Pictured with Irmã (Sister) Johanna Didier are (from left) Irmãs Izabel Lopes dos Santos, Lúcia Martins Ferreira and Ruth Berry.



Declaração de Missão

Guiadas pelo Espírito,
nós, Irmãs Franciscanas de Joliet,
abraçamos a vida evangélica
comprometendo nos com os valores franciscanos
e respondendo as necessidades do nosso tempo,
através da oração, comunidade e ministério.

Mission Statement

**Led by the Spirit
we, the Joliet Franciscans,
embrace the Gospel life
by commitment to Franciscan values
and respond to the needs of our time
through prayer, community and ministry.**

