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Easter in the Amazon

by Barbara Fraser



Fr. JosÈ Amaro Lopes de Sousa preaches during Palm Sunday Mass at Santa Luzia Church in Anapú, Brazil.. (Photo by Barbara Fraser)

Anapú, Brazil -- One of the paradoxes of Easter is the cross ? a tool of death fashioned from a tree, which should be a symbol of life.

Nowhere is that contradiction driven home more starkly than in Pará, Brazil, where Notre Dame de Namur Sister Dorothy Stang was murdered in February 2005 for standing with small farmers who were trying to defend Brazil's rain forest against large landowners who simply wanted to clear the land for ranching and sell the timber.

The tragedy of death is mixed with the hope of resurrection as smallholders in Boa Esperança, the community where Stang was shot, block the nearest road to prevent loggers from hauling timber away, despite threats that they will be killed or their homes burned.

The drama is illustrated in a mural in the sanctuary of the church of Santa Luzia Parish in Anapú, next

door to the small, green, wooden house where Stang lived. On Easter Sunday, Fr. José Amaro Lopes de Sousa, who began working with Stang when he was a seminarian and is now pastor at Santa Luzia, will celebrate Mass before the painting that shows a small farmer, hands upraised, over a stump ? symbol of death for his people ? but against a backdrop of trees where the sun is rising. To the left, standing on a stump, is Stang; to the right is Fr. Josimo Moraes Tavares, who was assassinated in 1986, also for defending smallholders.

Men, women and children -- smallholders and indigenous people -- gather around as a house burns in the background, a reminder of the Way of the Cross that these people experience every day.

[Barbara Fraser, a Peru-based free lance journalist, is on assignment in Brazil for *NCR*. Watch this space for more of her stories.]

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