

# Frei Henri, champion of justice for Brazil's rural poor

*Obituary of French Dominican priest Fr Henri Burin des Roziers, defender of landless workers in Pará*

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December 5, 2017  
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**A** chapter in international solidarity with Brazil's embattled rural poor closed on Sunday 26 November with the death of Dominican priest and lawyer, Henri des Roziers. Henri had worked in Brazil since 1978, using his skills as a lawyer to defend rural workers' unions and to bring to justice the landowners who ordered the killing of so many of their leaders.

The tributes paid to Henri at his funeral in Paris on 1 December put his commitment into a broader context. Born into what the French call a family of the *haute-bourgeoisie*, Henri showed very early that he wanted to follow a different path by visiting poor families in Paris slums, an example of what was later called the 'option for the poor'.

*Video (in French) by Les Editions du Cerf: Frei Henri is persuaded to relate the chronicles of his struggles and his motives for persisting in them.*

He studied philosophy and law at the Sorbonne and later in Cambridge. In Cambridge, he met a French Dominican theologian, Yves Congar, who had been banned from speaking by the Vatican and was in a kind of exile in Britain. Congar's influence made Henri decide that the Dominican order would enable him to develop his Christian commitment to justice; he became a Dominican and was ordained priest in 1963. His first post was as a chaplain to students at the Centre Saint-Yves in Paris, the only student centre that did not close during the student revolts of the 1960s.

He later became a priest worker, a lorry-driver and a worker in a chemical factory in Besançon. Later, in Annecy, he had a job inspecting and closing the squalid accommodation to which North African migrants were condemned, using his legal skills to defend them.

## Defending rural workers in Pará



Dozens of men, women and children from the Frei Henri Burin des Roziers settlement, blocked highway PA 275 from 2:00 to 7:00 pm on 23 August 2011, to press the Prefecture of Curionópolis, Pará, to build a school for the 130 children living there. Photo: Blog do Vela Preta

His contact with Brazil came through Dominicans opposed to the military regime, among them fellow Frei Tito de Alencar, who was given refuge in France after being tortured in Brazilian prisons. Henri began work with the Pastoral Land Commission, defending the land rights of rural workers. Frei Henri, as he was always known in Brazil, got his French legal qualifications recognised in Brazil and became a member of the Brazilian Bar Association, the OAB. In 1991, after the murder of union leader Expedito Ribeiro de Souza, he moved to Rio Maria, in the south of the state of Pará, the epicentre of landowner violence against rural workers. It was in this region that he was to spend the rest of his time in Brazil, later moving to Xinguara.

Henri's success in prosecuting the so-called *mandantes* intensified the loathing in which he was held by the landowners, and a reward of R\$100,000 (£27,000) was offered for his murder. Perhaps the only thing that saved him from the fate of Sister Dorothy Strang was being forced to accept body-guards from the federal police, 'or be expelled from Brazil', he said later.

## Denouncing slavery

The other cause in which Henri was successful was the exposure of slave labour, the system by which unemployed workers, often from the North-East of Brazil, end up in ranches in the Amazon, being charged for their food and clothing and prevented by force from leaving. Thanks to the pressure of human rights groups including the Pastoral Land Commission, in 1995 a federal task force was created to seek out situations of slave labour, and since then 50,000 people have been freed from slavery. At Henri's funeral the president of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Roberto Caldas, declared that part of Henri's legacy was the Court's declaration in December 2016 that slave labour is a crime against humanity.

Henri was forced to return to France for health reasons in 2013. He continued to follow events in Brazil, reportedly commenting on the situation under President Michel Temer: 'Everything has to be started again'. As if in confirmation of this, the Pastoral Land Commission reports that 61 people linked to the land rights movement were murdered in 2016. Nevertheless the patient work for justice continues: on 30 November a retired police officer was convicted of ordering the killing of missionary Vicente Cañas in 1987. Cañas had worked with the Enawenê Nawê indigenous people.

The coordinator of the Pastoral Land Commission, Jeane Bellini, described Frei Henri's legacy in these terms: 'His attitude, at once pedagogical and prophetic, but also discreet, encouraged and motivated women and men to dedicate themselves to giving legal support to families and communities, and to pursue carefully and competently cases involving land rights and slave labour.' Those of us who met him will also remember his simplicity, his passion, the French accent in his Portuguese that he never lost, and his marvellous smile.