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In Brazil, a Catholic Mass you'll never forget

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Padre Marcelo Rossi

São Paulo, Brazil

I realize this is a bold claim, but I'm going to make it anyway: If you haven't been to Mass with Padre Marcelo Rossi, you haven't really been to Mass.

Theologically, of course, that's ridiculous, because every validly celebrated Mass has the same spiritual value. Sociologically, however, I guarantee that a Mass with Padre Marcelo is an experience you won't soon forget.

Rossi may not be a household name elsewhere, but he's easily the most famous priest in Brazil, and by a huge margin. In fact, the typical Brazilian probably couldn't pick the cardinal of São Paulo out of a lineup, but they all know the handsome, tall, wildly charismatic Padre Marcelo, a 42-year-old former aerobics instructor whose CDs with pop-style songs of praise have sold in the millions and earned him a Latin Grammy.

He's also starred in a enormously popular movie about Mary, in which he plays a parish priest telling the Madonna's story to a little girl. His Masses routinely draw tens of thousands of people to a former glass factory on the southern edge of São Paulo, and he once actually celebrated a Mass for some two million people on a Formula One race course.

Rossi is usually referred to as a "Catholic charismatic," and the sprawling faith community he's created is widely seen as a sort of Catholic answer to the dynamic Pentecostal movements that have mushroomed across Brazil and Latin America.

One can learn all of the above, however, just by Googling the name "Marcelo Rossi." To truly appreciate Rossi's effect, you have to see it for yourself. I did just that Thursday evening, and while I'll write a more serious journalistic look another time, here I'll just try to describe the experience.

I had made arrangements to interview Rossi through a priest friend, and we arrived at his factory-cum-sanctuary

a little before 6 p.m. Mass didn't start until 8 p.m., but already the sanctuary was filling up. One of the roughly 2,000 volunteers who act as ushers, ministers of communion, and so on, told me that people usually start arriving around 4 p.m., about the time they get off work. Prior to Mass they pray the rosary, visit the sanctuary's eucharistic chapel, browse the tables of religious paraphernalia outside, and otherwise connect with friends and family.

I spent roughly an hour talking with Rossi backstage before the Mass began. Afterwards, I was led to a special front-row seat on stage, and was stunned to look out at the crowd. By that point there were at least 10,000 people crowded onto what was once the factory floor, with thousands more flowing into a chilly, rainy night outside.

The crowd was in the middle of a song when Rossi stepped on stage. Though some pious souls might be ambivalent about the obvious pop feel of much of the music, I can at least report that it's really, really good pop, the kind of music that runs through both the body and the mind, and that stays with you afterwards.

Rossi led the assembly in a couple more rousing numbers, and most people obviously knew the words by heart. If you've ever been to a Bon Jovi concert when the band goes into "Livin' on a Prayer," you get the idea of what it was like: thousands of people singing with one voice, swaying and waving their arms, some crying and some looking like they're on a natural high.

Rossi would flash the crowd a thumbs-up, cup his ear to indicate that he wanted the volume pumped up, and tap his heart to signal gratitude for the response. At a few points he put his finger to his lips to tell the people inside to be silent, allowing the thousands of voices from outside to be heard.

In some ways the Mass was like an emotional roller coaster ride, repeatedly building to a fevered crescendo, only to come back down for moments of deep reverence. People were respectful of the key moments, such as the proclamation of the gospel and the eucharistic prayers, but they also seemed to know when it felt right to send up a chant of "Hey, Hey, Hey, Jesus is King!" (which sounds much more lyrical in Portuguese) and when to offer raucous applause.

When it came time for the homily, Rossi first walked over to a glass partition on one side of the stage and leaned against it while he spoke; the effect was to suggest a chat between two friends at a bar, even though his "friend" in that moment was a throng of thousands. Later, he plopped down on the edge of the stage, and told a story illustrating something about charismatic worship. (He was trying to explain why charismatics lift their arms during prayer, and compared it to a small baby raising its arms for its parents. It's a humble gesture, he said, one of childlike simplicity.)

That point made, Rossi introduced a couple of his guests. To my surprise (and, I'm sure, that of virtually everyone else in attendance), I got top billing over a well-known player from one of São Paulo's professional soccer clubs. Also to my surprise, Rossi motioned for me to join him on stage. We linked arms and waved to the crowd to thunderous applause ... I felt for all the world like I had just accepted the vice-presidential nomination at a political convention.

Rossi explained that I was there to learn something about the community around the sanctuary, and he then asked all the women present to raise their hands, followed by all the men. (He was making the point that he gets an astonishingly high number of men by the usual Latin American standards of religious practice.) He next asked for all the babies, and hundreds of infants suddenly shot up into the air, held aloft by beaming parents.

Looking around, it was striking how diverse the crowd seemed -- by age, by gender, and by race, even by socio-economic status. Judging solely by the naked eye, it would be tough to pin down Rossi's target "demographic"; he seems to have a fairly universal appeal.

On impulse, Rossi then thrust the microphone into my hands, asking me to say a few words. In what will likely go down as the shortest speech of my career, I blurted out: *Grazie e buona sera.* (My theory was that I had a better shot at being understood in Italian than in English, since I don't speak a word of Portuguese. If nothing else, the crowd seemed to appreciate the brevity, sending me off with another hail of applause.)

The Mass proceeded, punctuated by the same alternating cycle of pop-music exuberance and deep reverence. At the end, Rossi and the priest with whom he concelebrated placed a large host into a gleaming monstrance.

All the lights were turned off as people lit small candles, producing a shimmering sea of light. As a haunting ballad played in the background, Rossi slowly came down from the stage and made the rounds of the hall, holding the monstrance aloft. It was the most spiritually evocative moment of the evening, with the vast crowd silently riveted on the monstrance as it followed its course back to the altar.

Bear in mind that this was by no means a special occasion. Mass is celebrated like this four days a week at the sanctuary, with three Masses on Sunday.

Hearing about all this second-hand, I suppose it's possible to look askance, regarding what I'm describing as more Lollapalooza than liturgy. In the moment, however, one can't help but sense a spirit that's incredibly powerful. In the first blush afterwards, my unreflective reaction, voiced to no one in particular, was: "There's a church that's alive!"

At the moment, work is underway on a gorgeous new sanctuary to replace the dilapidated factory, which will be named for Mary the Mother of God. (Word is that the nuncio in Brazil gently suggested to Bishop Fernando Figueiredo of the Santo Amaro diocese, where the site is located, that a sanctuary of the Latin Rite church named for the Byzantine Rosary probably doesn't make much sense). The new sanctuary will have a capacity of 60,000 inside, with room for another 40,000 outside. It's expected to be ready sometime in 2010.

When that happens, Catholics from other parts of the world might want to consider making the trip. Whether you're charismatic or not, whether you speak Portuguese or not, the experience is like Jolt Cola for the soul ... and every now and then, that really hits the spot.

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