

## **Joao Luiz Pozzobon** **One hundred and forty thousand kilometres with Mary**

He had only basic schooling, was the father of seven children and owned a general store and smallholding, yet he started a worldwide movement. His bishop urged him to become a permanent deacon, and the chairman of the Brazilian Bishops' Conference left the Conference to preside at his funeral. Soon after his death the cause of his beatification was opened. Who was this remarkable man?

Joao Luiz Pozzobon was born on 12 December 1904 in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. He started school in 1912, but left again in 1916, because he had to help his father on their farm. At the age of 23 he married Teresa Turcato, who bore two children before falling ill. Joao moved his little family to Santa Maria in the hope of finding proper treatment for her, but she died that same year. Faced with running his shop and caring for two small children, Joao felt the need to provide them with a mother, and when he met Victoria Filipeto he knew he had found her. They married and together they had five children. Joao was able to support his family and ensure their education on what he earned from his shop and the produce of his smallholding. Theirs was a close-knit family united in the faith.

In 1947 he was present when the foundation stone of the Schoenstatt shrine in Santa Maria was blessed, and he became a founding member of a men's group of the Schoenstatt Movement. The founder, Fr Joseph Kantenich, was there at the time and spoke to the people. He told them Brazil needed another Joseph Engling if Schoenstatt was to take root and flourish. Joseph Engling was one of the founder generation and had offered his life to our Lady in World War I for the mission she had given them. His offer was accepted. Joao was captured by young Joseph's love and total self-surrender to our Lady, and felt urged to take up the founder's challenge.

In September 1950 a Schoenstatt Sister asked him and two other men to take three large pictures of our Lady of Schoenstatt to the families of their districts in preparation for the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption. They were to return the picture after 1 November. The two other men did so, but Joao had seen what our Lady did when she visited the families, and he felt urged to carry on. For almost two years his daughter, Eli, accompanied him as his helper because his eyesight was so poor that he had difficulty reading the prayers, but he soon knew them by heart. The picture came to be called the '*Mae Peregrina*' - the Pilgrim Mother. Joao enlarged the title and spoke of his Pilgrim Mother Campaign, or Rosary Campaign. The picture was both heavy (11kg) and awkward to carry, but Joao refused to change it. He became a familiar figure carrying the picture on his shoulder, a suitcase in his other hand.

Joao developed a real family apostolate with the agreement of the parish priests. Night after night, no matter how bad the weather, he carried the picture from family to family, praying the Rosary and other favourite prayers with all present. Often neighbours were invited round. The sacrifices this cost him were given to our Lady to im-

plore a blessing on his apostolate. Countless marriages were regularized, people reconciled with the Church, children integrated into the sacramental life of the parish. The Pilgrim Mother found employment, and helped children continue with their education. Joao drew the attention of the parish priest to the sick. One priest said that when he was at his wit's end with someone who stubbornly refused to return to the sacraments even as death approached, he would ask Joao to take the Pilgrim Mother. The most stubborn sinner could not withstand her presence.

This did not mean that Joao neglected his family. For instance, his wife waited up for him at night and gave him a cup of coffee, so in the morning he took her breakfast in bed. His wife and children wholeheartedly supported his apostolate, and they even took over running the store in order to give him more time for it. Anyway his eyesight was so bad that he could no longer keep the books. Each day he spent an hour cultivating the small allotment behind the house which supplied his family with vegetables and fruit. The more Joao took on in the service of the Pilgrim Mother, the more time he seemed to have for his family and his parish. At the same time his prayer life grew in depth and extent. By the end of his life he was praying 15 Rosaries a day as he carried the Pilgrim Mother to the people she wanted to meet. His day started with Holy Mass. In 1950 he consecrated himself to the service of the Pilgrim Mother. In 1951 he wrote to the founder, sending him a photo of himself to be put in the shrine in Schoenstatt, and was overjoyed when Fr Kentenich sent his blessing and assured him of his prayerful support. Early in 1952 the founder returned to Santa Maria and Joao was able to meet him personally.

At the time Fr Kentenich was on his way into exile from his work, and was waiting for the visa permitting him to stay in the USA. Joao was drawn into his trial. Schoenstatt became suspect, and many priests refused to allow Joao to work in their parishes. One community of Sisters, who had normally welcomed him and the Pilgrim Mother into their school, forced him to leave the school by the back door. Joao wrote to his bishop and informed him about his apostolate. In reply he received the bishop's blessing and encouragement to "carry on and extend your work". By this time Joao was visiting schools, hospitals and prisons with the Pilgrim Mother. Another bishop gave him a twenty-minute lecture on the titles of the Blessed Mother. He wanted Joao to change the picture. Joao replied that he would have to change his heart. The bishop allowed him to continue his work. Joao felt the insults and opposition painfully and often wept at night. In the end there were few who could withstand his simplicity and utter sincerity. And no one could deny the fruitfulness of his apostolate.

Joao did not leave it with prayer. He also tried to help the poor to a more dignified life. In 1954 he founded the Vila Nobre. With the poor people of the area he began the construction of a little wooden house. The better off made generous contributions and soon two houses were completed and occupied. Then he set about planting fruit trees and even flowers. He was also concerned that the children should receive at least a basic education. At the centre of the village was a simple chapel. Underpinning all he did was a hidden life of sacrifice. He covered long distances on foot carrying the Pilgrim Mother and often went hungry, sometimes to the point of collapse. When the weather was bad, he was more concerned to keep the Pilgrim Mother safe

and dry. Nothing was too much for him, because it was for her. And she cared for him, sending help when he needed it, as for instance, when his horse and cart were caught in the middle of a raging river that threatened to wash them away.

In January 1959, when Joao was praying with a group of families, he felt sad that he could only go to them once a year. He got the idea of leaving a small picture of the Pilgrim Mother that would circulate among them – there were about thirty couples present – so that each family would be visited once a month. Soon he heard that this did not happen, because a family kept the picture for a special need, or to help another family, and so he had a second picture made. Each picture was blessed and sent out from the shrine. The fruitfulness of this initiative encouraged him to have more pictures made to circulate among other groups of families. One couple had the responsibility to ensure that the picture kept circulating. In this way he was able to reach far more people, whom he then visited annually with the big Pilgrim Mother picture.

By 1970 the apostolate had been going for twenty years. His bishop began to urge him to become a permanent deacon. He refused until a course was offered in Santa Maria, and then he only attended on condition that he could be free for his apostolate in the evenings. For Joao the greatest advantage of becoming a deacon was that when he brought the Mother, he could also bring her Son in Holy Communion. When he met people of other faiths, he drew them in, saying: “We are brothers, let us pray together.” By the end of 1972 he reported to the bishop that the number of schools, pupils, families, hospitals and religious houses that were visited had increased greatly. On 30 December 1972 he was ordained a deacon. Some felt he should have been ordained a priest.

In 1974 Joao was invited to Schoenstatt, Germany, to attend the diamond jubilee celebrations of the foundation, but he refused because his two sons were in debt after building a filling station. He wanted nothing to disturb their relationship.

By 1978 Joao had been serving the Pilgrim Mother for twenty-five years, and he was seventy-five years old and almost blind. He asked her to send him a successor to carry on the Campaign. On the feast of the Rosary, 7 October, a tall and sprightly middle-aged man asked to speak to him. Joao put him off to the next day until after they had both attended Holy Mass. The man was there with his wife. After Mass Ubaldo Alves Pimentel, a retired Brazilian army officer, offered his services. Joao was so touched that he wept. He told Ubaldo of his request to the Pilgrim Mother. Together the two men returned to the shrine and dedicated themselves to her service.

The following year his wife died, and since his sons were no longer in debt, he agreed to set off on pilgrimage to the place of Schoenstatt's foundation. He wanted to make the Pilgrim Mother known there, to visit the places in France connected with Joseph Engling, as well as the concentration camp at Dachau. Joao informed all connected with the Pilgrim Mother Campaign about his pilgrimage and asked them to accompany him spiritually. He entered the original shrine for the first time on 27

June 1979 – he died exactly six years later. In the 26 days he spent in Germany, he gave 38 talks. Since he was in Europe, he wanted to present the Pilgrim Mother to the Holy Father. On 25 July he met Pope John Paul II, who stopped to look at the picture and bless it. One of the accompanying priests briefly explained the apostolate connected with the picture. It was the highlight of their stay in Rome. On their return journey to Brazil they stopped in Portugal and visited Fatima, and also went to the convent where Sr Lucy lived. Although Joao could not speak to her, the Pilgrim Mother was taken into the cloisters.

Joao arrived back home on 8 August and set off with the Pilgrim Mother on his shoulder the next day. A new element had entered his Campaign. He had seen and admired the many wayside shrines in Southern Germany, and got the inspiration to do something similar at home. He began erecting wayside shrines with the picture of our Lady of Schoenstatt to provide a meeting place for the communities he visited. The people responded and began visiting her there. By September 1980 Joao had been carrying the Pilgrim Mother to her children for 30 years. Two years later he celebrated the ten years he had been a deacon. In that time he had conducted 675 baptisms, 136 marriages, 102 funerals, and taken Communion to hundreds of sick people – all this in addition to his work for the Pilgrim Mother. Yet he was getting weaker and needed a stick.

In March 1983 the first small Pilgrim picture was taken from Brazil to Florencio Varela, Buenos Aires. Soon requests came for 25-30 more pictures – one for each of the shrines in Southern America. Joao was radiant with joy. He had been asking the Pilgrim Mother to spread the apostolate throughout the world. A busload of 29 pilgrims travelled from Buenos Aires to Santa Maria to meet Joao and receive the small pilgrim pictures. Quoting the founder he told them: She is the Great Missionary, she will work wonders! That year the first Pilgrim Mother picture (number 2505) was taken to Milwaukee, USA, and the following year another was taken from Buenos Aires to South Africa.

At the beginning of June 1985 Joao set off to visit the people involved with the Pilgrim Mother apostolate in Buenos Aires. A doctor was present at one of the meetings and noticed that Joao had difficulty with his eyesight. He arranged for him to see a specialist who agreed to remove his cataracts the next day. When the bandages were removed the following day, Joao had recovered 70% of the sight in his right eye. The first thing he wanted to see was the picture of our Lady, then he turned to the people around him and kissed the hands of the specialist in gratitude. He returned home on 20 June.

Early in the morning of 27 June Joao got up before 5 a.m. as usual and left the house for the nearby shrine. It was a very misty day. As he was crossing an intersection, the driver of a heavy truck spotted him too late. The driver braked sharply, but the truck skidded on the wet road and struck him. Ubaldo was walking to the shrine from the opposite direction and noticed that an accident had taken place. He ran to the scene and discovered his friend lying on the ground. He asked the police to help him take Joao to the hospital from where he alerted the Schoenstatt Sisters and

Fathers. As they prayed the Rosary for Joao, the message was brought that he had died. Joao had already prepared for this and had left clear wishes with regard to his funeral. He was buried in Santa Rita Cemetery beside his two wives.

In the years that followed the Pilgrim Mother apostolate has spread all over the world, even to places where the Schoenstatt Movement has not been established. There are Schoenstatt shrines in 32 countries, but the Pilgrim Mother is at work in 96, including Indonesia, Japan, Cuba, and Thailand and many African countries. The first Pilgrim Picture came to England in 1986. The cause of Joao's beatification was opened in his home diocese on what would have been his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.