

## Tribute to José Alberto

Massimo Livi Bacci<sup>1</sup>

I will miss José Alberto, Zé to his friends; I will miss his profound humanity, his melancholic sense of humor, his baritone voice, his facial mimicry, his peaceful attitude, his willingness to listen to others' opinion, his firm beliefs and principles. My first encounter with him was in the late 70s, at a meeting of the organizing committee - of which we were both members - for the IUSSP General Conference, to be held in Manila in 1981. The voyage between Brazil and the Philippines had been long and extenuating, with stopovers and changes of aircrafts, in cramped economy class. José Alberto was exhausted by the long trip and unfamiliar with the formal, semi-diplomatic rituals of that particular international meeting. He was perhaps intimidated by the presence of personalities well known in the international population circles, such as Ansley Coale, who was President of IUSSP, Nafis Sadik soon to become chief of UNFPA, and Léon Tabah, Director of the UN Population Division. José Alberto and I were seated next to each other at dinner, and were often together during the long meetings over the following two days. I think he drew some comfort from the presence of Georges Tapinos and myself, who belonged to the same generation and were also from "Latin" countries.

Our friendship was shaped in those days: I learned about his family, his birthplace, São Vicente de Minas, the hard times of his infancy and adolescence, the rigidity of the religious school in which he was educated, the philosophy of fishing, his first steps at the university, the beginnings of his academic carrier, and his not-so-easy but intense and formative years in England.

I remember that we discussed and compared similarities and differences of the demographic transition patterns in Mediterranean Europe, Brazil and Latin America. Even José Alberto, who was an acute observer of demographic dynamics in Latin America – and who was one of the first scholars to detect, analyze and interpret the first signs of fertility decline in Brazil – had not anticipated such a rapid transition as that which took place in the following decades. In the '70s and '80s, many Latin American intellectuals were not concerned with the region's high rate of population growth and were moreover suspicious of family planning policies, or indeed of any policy that might involve even a tenuous hint of coercion. José Alberto thought that, without strong socioeconomic development, fertility would remain high, or decline too slowly, and he was convinced that the high rate of growth of Brazil was unsustainable.

Brought up in a family of modest resources, the elder of 11 children, José Alberto had personally experienced the hardships of a society with a buoyant demography. In his intellectual career, as a scholar, teacher and administrator, he brought a very human understanding of society and of its intimate mechanisms.

After 1981, I had frequent opportunities to meet with José Alberto, either at ABEP's meetings, where I have been frequently invited (and I am grateful to my Brazilian friends and colleagues for it), or at IUSSP events, or on other occasions offered by the international population circus. I was particularly happy with his election as President of IUSSP, an organization that needed to be guided by an expert and conciliating personality such as José Alberto's, and to see him conclude his mandate with the successful General Conference held in Bahia in 2001.

---

<sup>1</sup> Università di Firenze

In 1999, I was invited to Cedeplar as a visiting professor and spent two months in Belo Horizonte. One of the highlights of this very happy period in my life was an invitation to José Alberto's fazenda in São Vicente de Minas. We were five in the family's car, a not too spacious Fiat 147, José Alberto at the wheel, Nazaré his wife in the front passenger's seat, Juliana and Daniela, two of their daughters, and myself in the back, for the 4-hour trip. At the fazenda, a large, comfortable, simple building, I had been assigned a cool and pleasant room. Nazaré and daughters were busy with various domestic chores, José Alberto, in the nearby shed, was conferring with his vaqueiros and contemplating with loving eyes his twenty or thirty well-fed and apparently happy cows. Later, he proudly guided me on a visit of the fazenda and adjoining fields, naming the trees, extolling the richness of the fishing grounds of a nearby stream, answering my questions and warning me of the possible, but very rare, presence of snakes (how poisonous, I abstained from asking). Dinner was tasty and abundant, Nazaré was a very good cook and her conversation was lively and entertaining; José Alberto presided over the table, transfigured in his role of fazendeiro. I made a toast to Nazaré "Queen of the fazenda": "Rainha do fogão!" she promptly replied. Over those two days, the words demography, population, and other terms of our common disciplinary parlance were never pronounced. It was during that weekend that I fully appreciated the complex personality of José Alberto, a man of thought, but deeply rooted in his mother earth.