INTEGRAL ECOLOGY IMMERSION · PEDRO II, PIAUÍ · 2026

Not as Tourists, but as Pilgrims

Educators, Ursuline Sisters and lay collaborators from across the world look back on ten days of listening, encounter and ecological conversion at the Saint Angela Foundation in Brazil's semi-arid Northeast.

Some journeys are measured in kilometres. Others are measured in what they change. Between 26 July and 4 August 2026, a group of Ursuline Sisters, school leaders, teachers, pastoral agents and lay partners from Brazil, Peru, Venezuela, Mexico, the Caribbean, Ireland, South Africa and Australia gathered in Pedro II, a small highland town in the state of Piauí, for the Latin American Integral Ecology Immersion. Hosted by the Saint Angela Foundation, the gathering was part of the Ursulines' worldwide formation in Integral Ecology, a response to the 2019 General Chapter and to Pope Francis's encyclical Laudato Si'.



Weeks after returning home, participants were invited to answer three simple questions: How did you arrive, and how did you leave? Did the experience change your practice as an educator? Which moment stayed with you most? Their answers, written in Portuguese, Spanish and English, form the heart of this article. Read together, they tell a remarkably consistent story. People came expecting a course. They left describing a conversion.

> *"I left not as a tourist, but as a pilgrim; not to take, but to listen; not to speak, but to learn; and not to return unchanged, but transformed."*
>
> — Sr. Shelly Jhetoo, Ursuline Sister and school principal, Caribbean Province

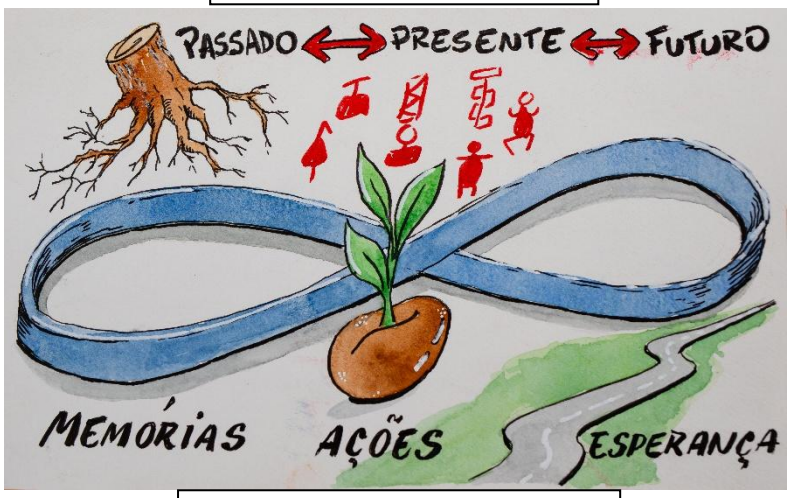
“I thought I was coming for a course”

Many participants confessed that they arrived with modest, even practical, expectations. Kelson Braga de Andrade Júnior, a teacher at the Santa Ângela Agricultural Family School (EFASA) in Lajedo, admits he “thought I would be taking part in an ecology course. That is not what happened.” Instead, he says, “I dived into a practice. I lived ecology, and I learned it in the simplest and purest way — from the children, from the way they speak and explain what it means to live integral ecology. I left profoundly changed, full of ideas, my head buzzing with change.”



Franciane Rodrigues, a natural sciences teacher at the same school, had the same realisation almost immediately: “I expected a course, but as soon as it began I understood that this was something much bigger.” For Fábio Alexandre da Silva, director of Colégio Santa Ângela in Resende, the image was even simpler: “I arrived with an ‘empty cup’ and came home with my heart and soul overflowing.”

Past -- Present --- Future



Memory --- Actions --- Hope

Not everyone felt the shift right away. Inês Maria Ocke de Freitas, pedagogical director of the Instituto Nossa Senhora da Piedade, writes with striking honesty about her first days:

> *“I confess I arrived without great expectations. Until the second day I felt a little lost, asking myself what the real point of being there was. Little by little, though, I began to sense a deep purpose in every moment. The experience shook me profoundly and provoked a necessary upheaval.”*
>
> — Inês Maria Ocke de Freitas, Instituto Nossa Senhora da Piedade, Brazil

Others came carrying ideas they had studied for years. Pam Paton-Mills, of the Integral Ecology Core Team, arrived “with a concept of alternating pedagogy as something of an idol, on a pedestal,” and left “in awe of how something so simple can impact systems.” Fernanda Michele de Oliveira Silva, vice-principal of Colégio Santa Ângela in Paraisópolis, had travelled mainly to look after a colleague who was flying for the first time. “I went with the mission of caring,” she writes, “and I, too, was cared for and transformed by those encounters.”

Listening to the land and its people



The programme took the group out of meeting rooms and into the homes of students, rural settlements, seed banks, beehives and an Indigenous museum. Again and again, participants named the visits to the land-reform settlements as the moment when integral ecology stopped being a concept and became a face, a name and a story.

Geize Miranda, of EFASA in Pedro II, remembers a farmer named Francisco describing how Sister Celina had accompanied his community in its long struggle for land: “He told us how that changed his life and the lives of so many families when they finally won their land — that through struggle, perseverance and faith, everything can be achieved. It was very moving.”



Deraldo José Bastos Neto, a teacher known to his colleagues as Derô, witnessed a similar scene:

> *“In one community the leader began to cry as he described how important the school had been, and how what he learned there served the economic and environmental transformation of his community. Everything the community produces today is the fruit of a seed planted at the school, learned from the Sisters. I learned that we can teach beyond content — that we can form human beings who transform, who try to turn inhuman realities into human ones.”*
>
> — Deraldo José Bastos Neto, Instituto Nossa Senhora da Piedade, Brazil

For Patrícia Carlos, educational counselling coordinator at Colégio Santa Úrsula in Ribeirão Preto, hope took a very concrete shape: a meliponary, a stingless-bee apiary, built by a former student of the Foundation on his family's settlement. "I left that experience deeply touched by the certainty that hope is something built in history, by people's hands, in the unity of a community and in everyday resistance," she writes. "There I recognised a spirituality that becomes ground, that becomes presence, and that turns into a commitment to life."



The bees also left their mark on Edgar Contreras, rector of the Academia Merici school in Venezuela. Observing the different hives, he saw "a wisdom of the species, translated into structures that reproduce life, care for the hive and produce the honey that guarantees life." Each species, he noticed, made honey of a different colour and flavour: "It reaffirmed for me the importance of accepting diversity — a great lesson learned from something small."



"There is abundance, even where, from the outside, we often see only scarcity."

At the Pedra Branca community, the group met the young Guardians of the Seeds, who keep and share the native seeds of the region. Sister Mairead O'Regan, of the Irish Province, was "moved by the passion and confidence of the young Guardians of the Seeds, whose leadership deepens the lived reality of Integral Ecology and builds hope for the future." Franciane saw in Pedra Branca "integral ecology happening, from the elders to the children: everyone is aware that each person matters, that each plays a fundamental role in the community." Pam Paton-Mills summed it up in four words: "Food sovereignty in the flesh."





Gabriela Azevedo Rocha, a teacher at Colégio Santa Ângela in Paraisópolis, found that the semi-arid hinterland overturned her assumptions:

"What struck me most was realising that there is abundance even where, from the outside, we often see only scarcity. There is an abundance of care, of solidarity, of knowledge, of faith, of exchange and of willingness to help one another. It became very clear to me that no one would survive alone."

— Gabriela Azevedo Rocha, Colégio Santa Ângela, Paraisópolis, Brazil

…wherever life plants us

The day spent with Indigenous communities and at the Museum of Indigenous Peoples was, for several participants, the most powerful of all. Fernanda Michele was especially moved to learn that the community's recovery of its Indigenous identity began with girls — now young women — "who had the courage to question what had been presented to them as truth and to seek out the history of their own people." Their courage, she says, "taught me that recognising where we come from also transforms how we understand who we are and the future we can build."



Turning the gaze inward

If the visits opened participants' eyes to the world around them, the moments of reflection turned their gaze inward. For Inês, the turning point came on the afternoon of 31 July, during a group reflection built around a few probing questions: **What is the ecosystem of my pedagogy?** Does my practice bring together all the elements — seed, soil, roots, water, nourishment? What ecosystem am I creating, as a leader, that allows this seed to take root and multiply?

> *"Those questions made it clear that the reflection was not about the outside context, but about me."*
>
> — Inês Maria Ocke de Freitas

Much of the work of the immersion centred on deep listening and dialogue — on what participants repeatedly called "suspension": setting aside one's own certainties in order to genuinely meet the other. Leandro de Arruda Machado, pastoral agent at Colégio Santa Úrsula in Ribeirão Preto, describes the experience as a watershed:

> *"I arrived carrying many preset patterns, some convictions, and so many things in me that needed to be transformed and that perhaps I could not yet even recognise. I feel I came out a better person, a better husband, a better father and a better professional. More than learning new concepts, I learned a new way of being in front of people."*
>
> — Leandro de Arruda Machado, Colégio Santa Úrsula, Ribeirão Preto, Brazil



Together in the mission, to serve and transform.

Teaching is more than transmitting knowledge; It is about shaping lives, planting values, and sowing hope.

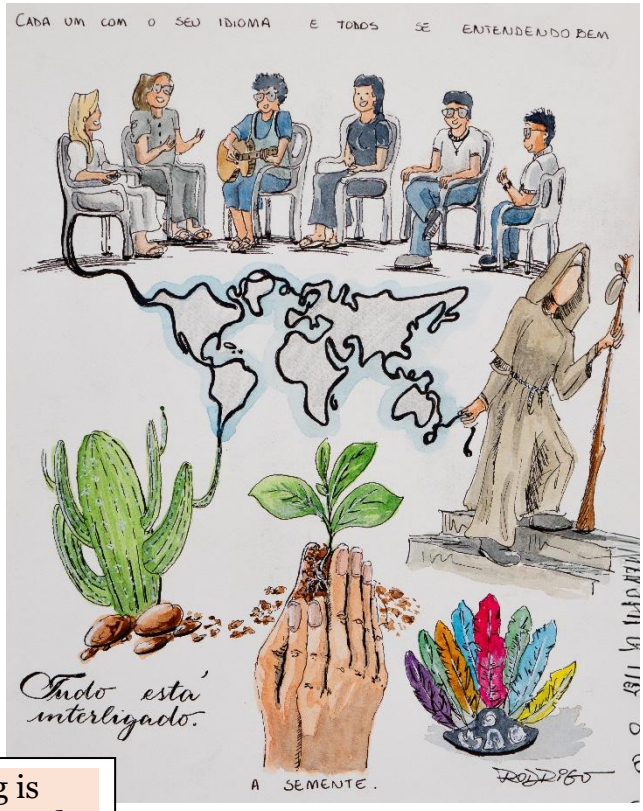
André Luiz Manarin, who travelled from the communications team of Colégio Santa Úrsula to document the immersion on camera, found that his role itself was transformed. "More than an audiovisual record, the immersion became a personal transformation," he writes. "Today I try to be more present, to listen more, and to understand before simply recording or telling a story."

Some of the most intimate moments are hard to put into words. Leandro recalls one in particular: kissing the feet of Christ in the person of Sister Teresia. "In that moment I felt that something in my heart was healed. Then, in her embrace, I experienced a deep love, as if Christ himself were welcoming me and holding me close."

For Rodrigo Costa Carvalho, a geography teacher from Paraisópolis who sketched the journey every day, transformation came at dusk. After a visit to the Sete Cidades National Park and an unforgettable sunset at the Morro do Gritador, his small group stopped in a square in Pedro II to share how the immersion was changing their lives. "In that moment I connected 100% with my group — Marcos, Gabi, Valeska and Michele. We shared experiences, we laughed and we cried a lot, and I feel that the transformation in me happened exactly then."

One language of the heart

The gathering was deliberately multilingual, with Portuguese, Spanish and English spoken side by side and no professional interpreters. What might have been an obstacle became, for many, part of the grace of the experience. "Languages were not a barrier," writes Kelson, "because the love of God spoke louder in our hearts."



Each with their own language and all understand well.

Everything is interconnected

Marcos Daniel Costa, pedagogical coordinator of the Santa Ângela Municipal Full-Time School (EMTISA) in Pedro II, discovered that his small corner of the world was not as isolated as it sometimes seems:

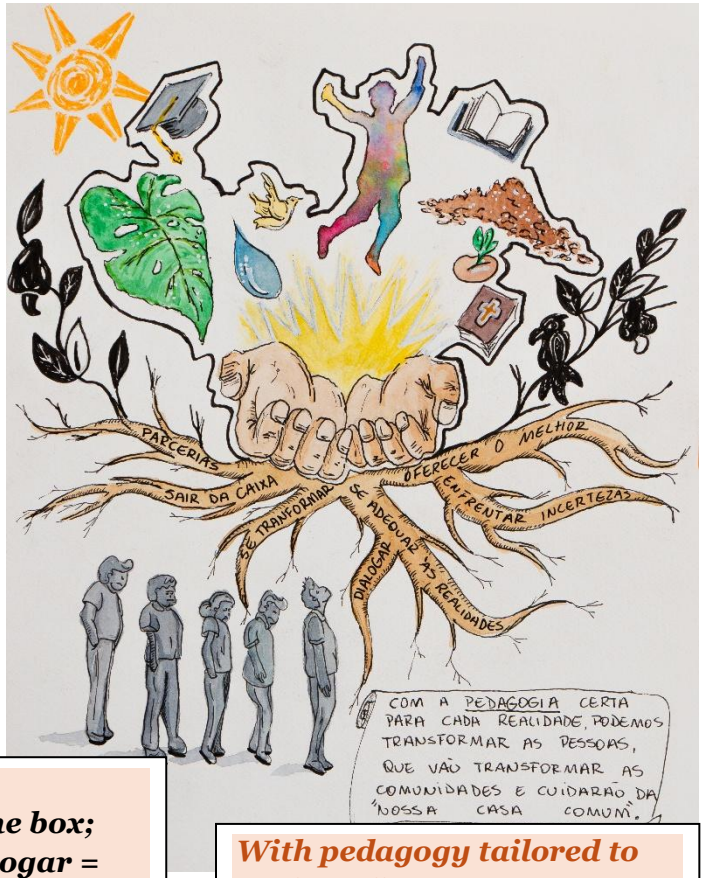
> *"Even though I am here in such a "small" place, perhaps hidden from the rest of the world, I am not alone. On the contrary, we are more than connected with our brothers and sisters all over the world. Still alive in my mind and heart are the exchanges with brothers and sisters from other countries who, even without speaking the same language, made themselves understood."*
>
> — Marcos Daniel Costa, EMTISA, Pedro II, Brazil

Martha Isabel Pineda Prado, a primary teacher at Colegio San José in Lima, Peru, felt the same sense of belonging: "We may have different realities and cultures, but we are united by the same mission — the mission Saint Angela left us: to be attentive to the needs of our time and to respond with love." Jacqui Remond, co-convenor of Integral Ecology immersions, for her part, says the immersion "increased my confidence when navigating multiple languages." Sister Mairead was touched by Rodrigo's artwork portraying Saint Angela "connecting centuries, continents and cultures — she is indeed more alive than when she was on earth!"

Back in the classroom

The survey's second question asked whether the immersion had changed participants' practice as educators. Nearly every answer was an unequivocal yes — and many were already able to point to concrete changes.

At Colégio Santa Ângela in Resende, Fábio and his team returned and immediately reopened their school's Political-Pedagogical Project to embed care for our Common Home and the perspective of integral ecology. "We have already begun some practical changes, such as reducing the use of stationery and looking for alternatives to polluting materials like balloons and EVA foam. They are small changes, but they are part of a larger process. Educating for the care of our Common Home must also begin with our own attitudes."



Parcerias = Partnership; Sair da Caixa = Think outside the box; Transformar = Transform; Dialogar = Dialogue; Oferecer O Melhor = Offer the best; Enfrentar Incertezas = Facing uncertainties; Se Adequar as Realidades = Adapt to realities

With pedagogy tailored to each reality, we can transform people, who will transform communities and care for the common good.

In Lima, Martha now turns everyday classroom moments into lessons in care. When her pupils learn about water, she wants them to understand more than turning off the tap: "We talk about water as a gift we share, and about how our actions have consequences for other people and for nature." Before throwing away a box or a sheet of paper, the class asks, "Do we really need to throw it away?" Even conflicts between classmates are now treated differently:

> *"Little by little, the children are understanding that caring for our Common Home also means caring for the classmate sitting next to me."*
>
> — Martha Isabel Pineda Prado, Colegio San José, Lima, Peru

Rodrigo now looks at the topics he has always taught — environment, territory, sustainability — "in a more integrated way, relating environmental issues to human, social and community relationships." Franciane plans her lessons by asking how to bring her students' own reality into the classroom, teaching them "that caring for future generations begins in our today."

Fernanda Michele came home questioning how much schools focus on entrance exams, diplomas and future careers, at the expense of giving learning real meaning in students' lives. At EFASA, she observed, "what students learn turns into actions that benefit their families and their community." She returned determined "to strengthen the bond between learning and

serving — an education in which prayer is also expressed in ACTION, written in capital letters and lived in commitment to others."

Edgar Contreras returned with a more demanding vision of integral ecology, one that "goes beyond the superficial proposals I have seen in schools, which reduce ecology to the use of recyclable products but never question how people relate to nature, to their surroundings and to one another, or what fruit we are bearing, if we see ourselves as a seed."

Others spoke of renewed hope. Sister Ma. de la Cruz García Macías, from Mexico, admitted that educators sometimes lose heart under the pressure of parents and institutions, "as if we could not see the fruit. But now I know that we put in our effort, and the harvest depends only on God. We are already sowing something in the lives of these children." Valeska Marques, a teacher from Paraisópolis, described a feeling of "hope and disappointment at the same time — hope, because I saw a model that works, and that makes me believe it is possible to build a partnership between school and families, between school and community."

For Sister Shelly, the change is above all personal witness: "to extend more care, being a better listener, to inspire and being the mirror by bearing witness by my own life to the values I wish to pass on."

Seeds of hope

If one image runs through almost every testimony, it is the seed. Rodrigo wants to be "a seed of this transformation." Martha sees her pupils as "true seeds of hope." Derô saw a whole community's livelihood grow from "a seed planted at the school." And Sister Mairead describes the ongoing work of conversion as learning "to be more drawn than driven — seeking to be more open in mind, heart and will, so that I see more clearly what needs to be let go of, so that something new may come."



Gabriela speaks for many when she writes: "I came full of curiosity and longing. I left with many more questions, but also with more faith, more sensitivity, more awareness, and one very deep certainty: I am not the same person after everything I lived in Piauí."

Perhaps the last word belongs to Martha, whose reflection on a slow walk through the streets and landscapes of Pedro II captures what so many participants tried to express:

"Piauí taught me to stop.
To contemplate.
To give thanks.
To listen."

Persevere faithfully and joyfully in the work we have begun (St. Angela)

The immersion has ended, but, as Fábio put it, “when we allow ourselves to step out of our own reality and open our hearts to the other, we can come home completely transformed.” In classrooms from Lima to Ribeirão Preto, from the Caribbean to Pedro II, the seeds gathered in Piauí are already beginning to grow.



Thank you very much to Brazil !
Muito Obrigado Ao Brasil !



Piaui, Brazil