

Pastor's Corner  
November 22, 2009

### Walking the Way of Christ in Haiti – Part I

From November 9 – 13, Nativity parishioners traveled to Haiti with Food For The Poor to feed the hungry, bring water to the thirsty, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned, and follow the Gospel call to serve the poor. This is the first of a 3-part series, which I hope will give you a snapshot of our latest Operation Starfish mission trip.

On Monday, November 9<sup>th</sup>, we flew to Ft. Lauderdale, where Fr. Terry Hazel, Pastor of St. Michael's Parish in Canfield, Ohio, and 3 of his parishioners joined us. Fr. Terry has been doing Operation Starfish in his parish since he and I first traveled to Haiti together in 2000. St. Michael's supports the Little Children of Jesus Orphanage in Santo, near Port-au-Prince – a home for over 100 mentally and physically handicapped children. Also joining us were Dr. Sara Amodio, former Nativity parishioner, now Principal of St. John the Evangelist Catholic School, near Denver, and Rich Eustis, an attorney from Boston.

Following briefings with Food For The Poor's Ceo, Robin Mahfood, Executive Director Angel Aloma and a tour of their world headquarters in Coconut Creek, we had dinner together, reviewed our itinerary and retired early to rest up for 4 days of emotional and physical challenges.

Our first day in Haiti began with a trip to the Little Children of Jesus Home, through pot-holed streets packed with people, "tap-taps," donkeys, street sellers, U.N. troops, noise, smells and dirt. This home is an oasis of love and cleanliness. Over 100 young people, ages 5-15, are living here under the loving care of Gladys and her Food For The Poor staff. Many have deformities, are blind, or have severe mental development problems. In the U.S. these children would have access to physical therapy technology, treatment and medications that are just not available in Haiti. But they do have tender, loving care from a dedicated staff. However, the staff is not enough to keep the flies out of their eyes and mouths, as hard as they try. There are no screens, no air-conditioning. The kids are under a roof, but the walls are open. How frustrating it must be to have insects in your face and not be able to swat them away because your arms don't work.

I was very proud, however, at how our parishioners engaged the patients with smiles, back-rubs, and laughter. I think Cinde Mausolf and Teri Baker would have taken home the little babies who fell asleep in their arms. I remember holding one little girl they thought was about 12 months old. Her mother had an older child ripped out of her arms by the flooding last year. The child was swept away and drowned. The Mom lost her mind and this baby ended up at Little Children of Jesus.

We couldn't speak the language of these children, but we spoke the language of God – the language of Love...

On this first day, we also visited a new site where Food For The Poor will be raising basa fish. The first 9,000 fingerlings are expected this month. We also helped out at a feeding center that provides a hot meal once a day to over 15,000 people. All this before lunch!

After lunch we visited with Fr. Jean Printemps at Nativity Village at Merger, our first "Nativity Village" project in Haiti. Here, some 250 houses, water wells, sanitation, a community center, 10-room school, vocational training program and chicken farm have brought hope to the entire community. We celebrated Mass with the school children. Fr. Printemps, Fr. Terry, our own Deacon Jose Pardo and I shared 2 stoles and 2 albs among us. We vested in our makeshift sacristy – the back door of Fr. Printemps' car! You make do in a third-world country! Whenever I celebrate mass in Haiti, I try a few words in Haitian Kreyol. I stumbled through a message of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves (Mt 22:39), but the congregation seemed to get it – they enjoyed my trying anyway! Although the heat and humidity were hard to bear in the small concrete community center, the 100+ children who filled the room sang their hearts out for us while roosters crowed outside.

After mass, I handed out over 300 lollipops, bought with money a parishioner handed me after mass just before we left for Haiti. Hollis Hunter replaced the kids' soccer ball (a plastic soda bottle) with a real one he brought from home. The children were very curious about us – some of them had never seen a white person before. They loved touching my gray hair – it must have felt so different from their own.

We always have a reflection meeting before dinner when we're in Haiti. This first evening, we were joined by Fr. Rick Frechette. For the past 22 years Fr. Rick, a physician and Passionist priest, has worked to create more human

conditions for the poor of Haiti. He built orphanages, hospice facilities, and the St. Luke Program, which puts graduates of orphanage facilities to work in the slums of Port-au-Prince. He founded and administers the St. Damien Pediatric Hospital, a \$5 million, 45,000 sq. ft. facility with surgery, cancer treatment, radiology, emergency ward, critical care, isolation room, infectious disease ward and dental clinic. Fr. Rick and his staff treat more than 30,000 children and adults each year. He taught us a different side of Haiti – the ministry of the dying. He told us that the median age of Haitians is 17, because people die so young. He said that every night many people die in Cite Soleil, but there is no 911 to call, no mortuary to come retrieve the body. So you just sleep with the dead person until daylight, then you find a man with a wheelbarrow and pay him 10 Haitian dollars (\$1.50 U.S.) to cart your loved one's body off to the public morgue. Fr. Rick's deep faith and his compelling stories had us riveted and we felt blessed to be able to pray with him and share a meal together.

By the end of this first day, I was mentally and physically exhausted. I felt as though we had all walked through the Beatitudes today, with our sleeves rolled up, our hearts open, and our tears flowing. I thought briefly about my upcoming Thanksgiving visit with my brother and sister in Rhode Island. I will celebrate with relatives and friends, just as you will. Our tables will be overflowing with turkey, vegetables and pies. I ask that you give thanks for the many blessings we share. Be grateful for the food that is available to us. Think about our Haitian brothers and sisters, 1 ½ hours away by plane, who walk for miles and line up for hours to get a container of rice and beans once a day to feed their families. Believe that they could make a feast on what we will throw away that day.

May this Thanksgiving Day speak to you about our plenty and their need. May it activate the love and compassion planted by Our Lord in your hearts and move you towards those less fortunate, across the street and around the world.

(Next week, Part 2 – “We Find Ourselves in Prison”)