

OPERATION STARFISH NEWSLETTER

SPECIAL LENTEN EDITION

MARCH, 2006

Dear Friends of ***Operation Starfish***:

Let us start with a prayer...

To you, O Lord,
I entrust all my hopes,
All my trials and miseries.
May all my actions be ordered and disposed
According to your will.
As I toil for peace and unity in your vineyard,
Make me strong and faithful
To praise you evermore.
And may nothing ever cloud my conscience
Or hinder my progress
Until the day of Jesus comes.
Amen.

(Prayer courtesy of Fr. Dudley Adams who, after 25 years as a Jesuit brother, decided to become a priest to preach the word of God and bring Jesus Christ to people more directly. Fr. Adams is carrying out that mission as pastor of a parish in inner city Kingston, Jamaica.)

NINE YEARS OF OPERATION STARFISH AT NATIVITY CHURCH

Lent, 2006 marks the ninth year that parishioners of Nativity Catholic Church in Burke, Virginia have turned their faces toward the poor during the weeks leading up to Easter Sunday. Lent is not the only time that Nativity parishioners serve the poor. Indeed, all year round, Nativity organizations and individuals are feeding the homeless, building houses for storm victims, collecting winter clothes, school supplies and canned goods.

But Lent is that special time when the “starfish basket” sits at the entrance to the church and the photo wall graphically depicts the needs of the poor and the accomplishments of the faithful. All during Lent, prayers, notes, crayon drawings, checks and plastic bags of coins find their way into the basket. The greatest joy belongs to the volunteers who empty the basket of its gifts, treasures and heartfelt expressions.



The first year of Operation Starfish was 1998. Since then, over \$1 million has passed through the simple starfish basket at the entrance to the church. Working through Food For The Poor, Inc., a Christian charity, Nativity parishioners have used these funds to:

- Build a small village of houses in Canape Vert, near Haiti's capital
- Outfit a mobile medical van for the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince
- Rebuild an orphanage for handicapped children at Croix-des-Bouquets
- Build a large village of 500 houses, with wells, community toilets and showers at Merger (renamed "Nativity Village").
- Start construction of a primary school for 300 children at Nativity Village
- And replace the roof on the parish church at Nativity Village

In 2006, the ninth year of Operation Starfish, work on the original Nativity Village in Merger will continue, with emphasis now on sustainability:

- The primary school will be completed in about 3 months
- An existing building will be converted to a secondary school – we are arranging for donated school furniture to be shipped in
- A job training program will start
- A chicken farm will be developed
- A sewing co-op will begin
- And a partnership between Food For The Poor and Catholic Relief Services will bring a feeding program to the children of Nativity Village

Also in 2006 Nativity parishioners are expanding beyond Port-au-Prince to the north coast of Haiti, where a second "Nativity Village" development will take place.

Aside from the tangible difference Nativity parishioners have made in the lives of hundreds of destitute people, many blessings have come back to them through their interaction with the poor. Parents talk of how their children have learned to share and to avoid waste after learning about conditions in the Third World. Parishioners who have traveled to Haiti on parish pilgrimages with Food For The Poor have come back spiritually re-energized, ready to take their faith to a new level of holiness and activism. Nativity School students have learned about the lives of their counterparts through a "twinning" relationship with L'Arc en Ciel orphanage in Kenscoff, Haiti. The giving nature of the parish has spread in many ways to inspire others to serve the poor, close to home and in far away lands.

In nine years of helping the poor, Fr. Richard Martin's message has never wavered. His call to action is simple, but compelling. He repeated his plea again on the Fourth Sunday of Lent:

"This Lent please make your prayers come alive by simply helping others, in this country or with your sisters and brothers elsewhere that are in need. We must never forget that we are all God's children, in Haiti, in Africa, as well as in Springfield and Burke."



HOW OPERATION STARFISH BEGAN

The story of Operation Starfish began in 1998 with a late evening stroll by a man and his dog. Father Dick Martin, pastor of the Church of the Nativity in Burke, Virginia, and his pooch were walking one night before Lent "chatting" about "what-ifs." What if each family in the parish would forego one order of French fries? What if they would subtract one topping from their weekly pizza? How much money could they raise to help those less fortunate?

Fr. Martin couldn't believe the numbers when he calculated them: 2,500 families saving just 50 cents a day for the 40 days of Lent could donate \$50,000 to make a difference in the lives of the poor. What a significant result from such an insignificant sacrifice!

This simple program of sacrifice was far more successful than Fr. Martin predicted. The parish family was enthusiastic when the idea was presented to them. That first year, Church of the Nativity raised nearly \$67,000! They decided to use the funds to build 27 simple houses in Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, working through the international Christian charity, Food For The Poor, Inc.

The name, "Operation Starfish," came in the second year. In February 1999, a dozen Nativity parishioners accompanied Fr. Martin on a pilgrimage to Haiti. They wanted to see for themselves what their parish had done to relieve the suffering of some of that country's most destitute people.

Bright smiles and beaming faces greeted the pilgrims as they reached the small enclave at Canapé Verte, in the hills near Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince. They had hiked from the end of the dirt road across the hillside to see the one-room wooden houses their parish had built, and to meet the families who are now living with real roofs over their heads.

These families had barely survived the horror of Cité Soleil, a slum clutching 500,000 of the poorest of the world's poor in its grasp. The Church of the Nativity pilgrims were overjoyed at what their compassion had accomplished for the new home owners, who welcomed their visitors with open arms and full hearts.

Despite the progress at Canapé Verte, the Church of the Nativity pilgrims knew there was much more to be done for the poor of Haiti. At a prayer meeting on the first night of that pilgrimage, parishioners spoke of being overwhelmed with the scope of the problems. "How can we possibly make a difference?" one asked. Searching for an answer, Fr. Martin told his parishioners the story of the young boy and the starfish:

As a young boy walked the beach at dawn, he noticed an old man ahead of him picking up starfish and tossing them into the sea. Catching up with the man, the boy asked why he was doing this. The old man explained to the boy that the stranded starfish would die if left t in the morning sun.

"But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish," exclaimed the boy. "How can your effort make any difference?"

The old man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it safely into the waves. He turned to the boy and said, "It made a difference to that one."

A parishioner spoke up after Fr. Martin finished the story. "Why don't we call our work 'Operation Starfish?'" he asked. Heartened by the Starfish story, and renewed by their pilgrimage, Church of the Nativity parishioners recommitted themselves to helping the poor, at home as well as in Haiti.



2006 OPERATION STARFISH TACKLES HAITI'S NORTH COAST

This year's Lenten project will begin development of a second "Nativity Village" near Cap Haitien, Haiti's second largest city. Cap Haitien is a seaport on the Atlantic Ocean along the north coast of the island. Tens of thousands of people live in horrible conditions, subject to tidal flooding and storm surges. Malnutrition is common and many children succumb to parasites, diarrhea and infectious diseases. Illiteracy is high, schools are few, and work is hard to find. But crime is very low – these people are not bad, just poor.

In 2006, Nativity parishioners will begin to implement a major development articulated by Robin Mahfood, President of Food For The Poor, Inc. Mr. Mahfood is planning to move his organization in a big way into solving the hunger problem in Haiti. He wants to ring the country with fishing villages, tilapia farms, and fruit trees. Nativity's 2006 Starfish project will be the first in a series of developments that will continue west from Cap Haitien.

We are calling this project...

“Nativity Village at Petit Anse”

BACKGROUND

Cap Haitien, Haiti’s second largest city, is located on the coast in the country’s Northern Department. As with most large cities in developing countries, many people from the rural areas migrate into the city looking for a better life. This results in high unemployment, with many people barely subsisting on small commerce or modest crops grown on the outskirts of the city. The Cap Haitien area is beset with hunger and disease. There is a lack of shelter, education, clean water and sanitation.

Since 2001, parishioners at the Church of the Nativity and students of Nativity Catholic School have been making a significant, long-lasting difference in the lives of 500 families living in the town of Merger, near Port-au-Prince. “Nativity Village at Merger” now has over 500 single-unit houses, clean water and sanitation facilities, and a new, two-story primary school is almost complete. A lunch program for children, a sewing co-op and a chicken farm are funded and under development. In 2006, an unused building will be converted to a secondary school with used school furniture and a well for drinking water and sanitation. Nativity’s partners in this effort are Food For The Poor, Inc., and Fr. Jean Printemps, Pastor of Ste. Marie Madeleine parish.

Now, Nativity Church and School will turn its attention to the needs in Cap Haitien. A new development, “Nativity Village at Petit Anse,” will commence in 2006. The planned work includes a fishing village, construction of housing, planting of fruit trees, wells for drinking water and sanitation, and a tilapia farm. Nativity’s partners include Food For The Poor, Inc., the International Cooperation and Development Fund of Taiwan, R.O.C., and Fr. Duken Augustin, Pastor of Our Lady of Altagrace parish.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

I. Nativity Village at Merger

While funded work continues on the primary school, sewing coop, feeding program and chicken farm, the new 2006 funding will cover freight and transportation costs for school furniture for the renovated secondary school. The building is in place and 300 desks have been donated by others. In addition, a well will be dug and sanitation block constructed to provide drinking water and toilets for the secondary school.

II. Nativity Village at Petit Anse

- **Housing Village and Sanitation:** This project will build 28 double, concrete block homes with concrete foundations, front porches and metal roofs. In addition, 14

toilet-and-shower sanitation blocks will be constructed; one for every two houses. Each new home will receive mango, avocado and breadfruit trees.

- Fishing Village: Adjacent to the new housing, on the coast, we will establish a fishing village to provide residents with the ability to reach the deep-sea fishing grounds beyond the reefs. The fishermen will work in small cooperatives, with 3 per co-op sharing one boat and accessories. They will learn deep sea fishing techniques and will be trained in business practices, environmental protection and engine maintenance. Each group will be expected to donate a portion of their catch to assist the sick and elderly in their community. The fishing village will provide a decent living for 12 families – an average of 60 people – and help them to become productive members of their community.
- Tilapia Farm: Just a few miles inland from the coastal sites selected for the housing and fishing villages, we will establish a tilapia farm. With techniques that have proved successful in Latin America and Asia, we plan to construct 3 ponds that will provide food for the needy, and for sale at reasonable prices to local residents. Enough income will be generated to pay the operating expenses of the farm and reinvest back into the production process.

BUDGET

The total cost for all the work above is about \$200,000. A detailed budget is available on request from info@starfishmission.org.

DELEGATION VISITS CAP HAITIEN

On March 15, 2006, Nativity Church Pastor, Fr. Richard Martin, and Jim McDaniel, Operation Starfish Coordinator, joined Food For The Poor President Robin Mahfood and staff members Barbara Fazekas and Delane Bailey, on a trip to Cap Haitien to meet with clergy and residents in the areas where they will be working. They saw first hand the needs and the possibilities.

The visitors from Nativity and Food For The Poor were welcomed by Archbishop Hubert Connant, who is responsible for 5 dioceses in northern Haiti. Archbishop Connant is most enthusiastic about the development plans and offered his support with obtaining land and other assistance. Following mass in his chapel, he held a dinner at his residence for the group and provided encouragement to their efforts to assist the destitute.

Fr. Duken Augustin accompanied the group throughout their visit, which took them to Petit Anse, where the housing and fishing villages will be located. Petit Anse lies right on the shore and stretches for a distance into the salt marsh. About 250 families live here in shacks. They will be relocated to dry



land where wells can be dug for safe drinking water and simple houses built.



The group also visited Prolongé, near where the tilapia ponds will be constructed. A technical team from Taiwan had inspected the area the previous week and determined that the tilapia farming operation is feasible. The Taiwanese will be donating their expertise to construct and stock the ponds, and to train the Haitian managers of the operation.

The group also traveled to Blue Hills, site of a planned orphanage, and inspected a new warehouse and office complex being built by Food For The Poor to serve the people of Cap Haitien.

There were many compelling human situations that the travelers experienced:

- A woman who had to take in 6 children in addition to her own 5 because their mother - her sister – died of cholera;
- A woman who was carrying a pot of hot soup on her head when it slipped and severely burned her chest and arms, leaving her to be carried several miles on men's backs to find treatment;
- A little 3-year-old boy whose mother thrust him into Delane's car asking that he be taken to a better life;
- A woman who lit a charcoal fire and placed an empty pot on it, hoping and praying that food would somehow come to her so she could feed her family;
- A woman who told Fr. Martin that her dream is to learn to read and write;
- A boy with a little bottle of tiny fingerling fishes who was happy that he had a meal he could now share with his family;
- Children lined up at a well waiting to fill buckets which they will then carry long distances home;
- A man trying his best to teach lessons in a small twig structure decorated with toilet paper. This shed serves as both the village school and church.

This trip was a very powerful journey through the Gospel – full of human misery, but full of hope and promise...

AUGUST PRAYER REQUESTS

Our readers have submitted the following prayer requests for this month:

† For those who live with physical and mental handicaps, and for their families and the compassionate souls who care for them;

† For the repose of the soul of Mrs. Eleanor Coyle, and for her family;

† For the Lunney family;

† For the Fischl family;

† For the DeFusco family;

† For Terry Moore, that God wrap His loving arms around Terry and his family as they care for each other during Terry's illness;

† For individuals who are hurting, families that are divided, and nations at war, may the peace of Christ be felt by all those who struggle;

† For all our friends at Food For The Poor, and for all those who work here and abroad to alleviate suffering;

† For the people of Haiti, who struggle against all odds to get back on their feet and to bring their land back to life;

For these and all our intentions, hear us, Oh Lord...

HAITIAN WISDOM

Malgre nou manke yon rad
Pou ale legliz,
Nou manke manje lakay nou,
E nou gen sèlman disk ob nan pòch nou,
Gras Jezi sifi.
Ak gras sa a, nou rich.

Although we lack a dress
To wear to church,
Lack food at home,
And have only two cents in our pockets,
The grace of Jesus is enough.
With this grace, we are rich.

---Courtesy of Baptist Haiti Mission

VISIT US ON THE WEB

Please visit us at www.starfishmission.org . We would appreciate your comments and suggestions. Feel free to contact us at info@starfishmission.org.

For information on Food For The Poor's programs in Haiti, contact Barbara Fazekas at 954-427-2222 x6258; barbf@foodforthe poor.com. Web: www.foodforthe poor.org.

CLOSING THOUGHT...

The question, you see, is not to prepare but to live in a state of ongoing preparedness so that, when someone who is drowning in the world comes into your world, you are ready to reach out and help.

-- Henri J. M. Nouwen (Leadership, Spring 1982)



NEW SUBSCRIPTION? If you have a friend who would like to receive this newsletter, go to www.starfishmission.org to sign up, or send a note to Operation Starfish, Church of the Nativity, 6400 Nativity Lane, Burke, VA 22015.

CANCEL YOUR SUBSCRIPTION? If you no longer wish to receive OPERATION STARFISH NEWSLETTER, send an email to info@starfishmission.org or send a note to the address above.

OPERATION STARFISH NEWSLETTER (Vol. V, Issue 2), March 2006: 0603LentSE.doc
Edited this month by Jim McDaniel (info@starfishmission.org)

OPERATION STARFISH: MAKING A DIFFERENCE, ONE PERSON AT A TIME

As a young boy walked the beach at dawn, he noticed an old man ahead of him picking up starfish and tossing them into the sea. Catching up with the man, the boy asked why he was doing this. The old man explained to the boy that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun.

“But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish,” exclaimed the boy. “How can your effort make any difference?”

The old man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it safely into the waves. He turned to the boy and said, “It made a difference to that one.”

--Based on the writing of Loren Eiseley