

Pastor's Corner
November 29, 2009

Walking the Way of Christ in Haiti – Part II

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 second of a 3-part series, which I hope will give you a snapshot of our latest Operation Starfish mission trip.

On our first day in Haiti we visited the 102 handicapped orphans at the Little Children of Jesus Home, saw a basa fish project, fed hundreds of people in line for rice and beans, celebrated mass at Nativity Village I, and had dinner with Fr. Rick Frechette, a physician and Passionist missionary. We gained new insight into our blessings as we prepared for Thanksgiving Day in the U.S.

Our second day began with a very early flight in a very small plane. It took more time to navigate the 3 miles to the airport through crowded and broken streets than it did to fly across Haiti to Cap Haitien on the Atlantic coast. "Au Cap," as the Haitians call it, is the 2nd largest city, with 1 ½ million people. Fr. Duken Augustin, who visited Nativity Parish this past April, greeted us warmly at the airport and took us to our small hotel for a little breakfast before we began a full day of ministry.

We had told our group that there would be a surprise event on this trip. The only preparation they needed to make was to bring hand towels with them. At our first stop the surprise was revealed. As the bus pulled up to a Haitian prison, Delane Bailey-Herd from Food For The Poor read the following: *"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and **release** from darkness for the **prisoners.**"* (Isaiah 61:1) We then announced that we were going into the prison to release several inmates and start them on a new life. We also were going to visit all the cellblocks, feed all 563 prisoners and provide them with new shoes and toiletries. Those who were being released would receive a package of gifts to help them start anew. The most powerful moment came when we brought out the men, told them they were being freed and then washed their feet and put new shoes on them. We gave them toiletries and a

little money that Judy, one of our parishioners, had provided for “whatever need God put in our path.” I asked one of the men what he was going to do first when he left the prison. He told me “I’m going to get a ‘tap-tap’ to my village and give my Mom a big hug and kiss.” I thought immediately of my own Mom. Then we walked with them to the gate and watched them leave their captivity behind and walk into freedom.

The prison visit was a journey into hell. Many of the people are there, without due process, for months before their cases are heard. One man stole a chicken to feed his family and he had been in jail 8 months without a hearing. The inmates are packed 15, 20, 30 to a cell that is no bigger than our typical living rooms. They sleep 2 to a bed in bunks 4 levels high. One toilet fully exposed serves the entire cell. Women have the same conditions. Jim McDaniel said his first thought was of the slave ships carrying captives from Africa. My own mind went to the movie, “Turkish Express,” that exposed the conditions of Turkish jails. Prison is not the issue; inhumane conditions are. The inmates are allowed outside the cell for 5 minutes a day for an outdoor shower or exercise. They receive 2 meals a day – a small container of flour and water in the morning, and a bowl of beans in the evening. There is a small opening in the cell door, about 12” x 12” for passing food. As we walked along the corridor, people struggled to get their arms out the opening, hoping for a touch from us. They wanted us to know they existed. They yearned for human touch. Most heart-wrenching were the young teens who stole food because they were hungry, or the pregnant women, or the ones who were jailed because they can’t pay their debts.

Linda Lenertz, Madeleine Arzt, Meredith Daukz, and Denise Firestone talked to several of the women about their children and their families. Jim speaks a little Kreyol, so he translated. The jailed women seemed excited to be able to share some of their family details with the American women. It was a bright moment. Rich Eustis, a former military prosecutor, was horrified at the lack of legal representation and the primitive justice system. He pitched in, however, and organized the distribution of 563 meals of rice, beans, chicken and “Peeps” for dessert. Then we all packed bags of toiletries and pairs of Crocs to distribute to each prisoner. We spent about 3 hours working in hot, difficult conditions, but we brought a ray of sunshine to each prisoner that day. I was so proud of Fred Artz, Terry Stupka, Maxine Gordon and everybody who worked until they were soaked with sweat and aching with pain in order to

serve these poor prisoners. I said to myself we have now touched on every element in Matthew 25.

We took a brief break for our own lunch, then visited Nativity Tilapia Farm, where we did a test harvest. The farm has 5 large ponds, a fruit tree nursery, and raises chickens and ducks. This project and our housing villages, along with our fishing village co-ops, our agricultural projects, reforestation and fruit tree planting efforts, we at Nativity have brought a better life to hundreds of people in this part of Haiti.

All day, and again during our reflection meeting in the evening, the passage from Isaiah kept coming back to me. Ironically these were the same words I put on my ordination card 43 years ago. Never did I realize how prophetic those words would become. Never did I realize that a parish community would put these words into action the way you have with your pastor. There are no coincidences in life – only steps in God’s plan.

(Next week, Part 3 – “Through the Swamp to the Promised Land.”)