

Haiti Revealed.... continued

Right away, electricity was turned off right after the bells rang this morning. So the cold shower was a welcome relief from the heat. After breakfast of typical Haitian food, our morning was spent at our sister parish's Catholic school. We met with the teachers and saw the conditions of the classrooms and the needs of the students, but most of all, we watched the joyful and enthusiastic faces of the children as they sang songs for us after we gave them candies and chocolates. Though the buildings in the school grounds are viable places to teach and learn, they do not offer much space and comfort to the students. The classrooms are well ventilated and not air-conditioned, because there were open-air doors and windows. There was only basic furniture to be seen, like a small teacher's desk, an old fashion chalkboard and rugged student desks. There are usually two to three students to each desk. Seeing this situation first hand makes me feel so blessed and grateful to have so many gifts and amenities and life from God, but it also humbles me to think that these poor people are much more deserving to have all the extras to enjoy, but do not really need.

Our evening concluded with a dinner at the beach under the canopy of stars and bright golden moon. This day was a day of discovery and of strengthening our ties and friendship with our sister parish. Tomorrow, we will bring more revelation and I just can't wait! --Shirley

A Whole New World

Father Herve (pronounced: Air-vey) peered into the rearview mirror. "Are you scared?" he said with a cheeky grin. I glanced at the speedometer. The dial hit 72 mph. We maneuvered our way around four grown men on a motorcycle. I shut my mouth and closed my eyes, praying we would arrive at our destination soon...

As mentioned, the roads are in poor condition and unbelievably chaotic. It was a long journey to get here, which made our arrival to our week-long home at Laborde that much more of a relief. It has been quite an adjustment from my normal routine in just about every way possible. I wake up in a knotted mosquito net to the sounds of stray dogs, roosters and church bells every day at 6:00 a.m. Food has been one of my biggest obstacles. Although I do not claim to be a picky eater, it is tough to find anything very tempting around here. Let's just say, I did not know there were so many ways to cook a goat. The Coca-Cola and plantains are fabulous though!

My favorite part of the trip thus far has been visiting the school. Notre Dame de Lourdes is located just across the street from our parish. It is basically an open field with about six concrete, tin-roof buildings. It was amazing to see the condition of the school; especially after visiting my nephew's Kindergarten class at Kuemper last week. No, there were no iPads being used by these 5-year-olds. What we found were dilapidated chalkboards and homemade books. The children were all dressed in a uniform and appeared very eager to learn and interested in interacting with our group. It was amazing to see the school, but evident that more aid is needed in order for these children to fully achieve their potential. --Maureen White

Final Days

I've been slow at blogging the rest of our trip because of bad internet connections and busy days there.

The weekend was a succession of three great Masses. Anyone that thinks a 10 minute sermon is long ought to try listening to a 45 minute one in Creole. There were many exotic dishes to try at the feast. I guess I wasn't careful enough because I had some GI problems afterwards. Shirley got a good look at the kitchen conditions and decided not to eat much. After the Sunday Mass I had the honor of baptizing two babies.

Monday was the highlight of my trip. After being on the parish grounds for most of the past three days we had the opportunity to drive around the area. We started with the local dispensary that cares for minor health problems. We gave them an electronic thermometer and some first aid supplies that were donated. We gave more of the same supplies to the new home for elderly women, that was built with our parish's donations. When we looked for a supervisor a young woman volunteered that she could help us. When her talk seemed strange Fr. Al told us that she was a resident that had gone crazy in the midst of the earthquake. The building is small but is home to 8 women and serves lunch to others like the elderly blind man we met. Bernard was our translator for the day. He wants to go to college and study English but needs assistance since his father died in the earthquake.

Next we went to Gouin and met some of the people that go to the small chapel made of palm branches there. A priest comes to the several chapels served by the parish once or twice a month for Sunday Mass. Building a permanent chapel here is Fr. Herve's next goal. The parishioners took us to some of their homes which are in the foothills. A lady grabbed each of Shirley's hands as we walked the cow paths along the steep slopes. We saw a typical mud hut that is smaller than most of our bedrooms which is home to 6 people. A man knocked down some coconuts and opened them with a machete for us. We had a good laugh as an older lady tried to teach Shirley a Haitian shimmy. We saw two more chapels; one was also a palm branch cathedral that hopes to start a better building by their tenth anniversary later this year.

That evening we went to a beautiful beach. Haiti does not attract the tourists that other Caribbean islands do because of the lack of adequate services and the instability of the poor nation.

Tuesday we visited some of the students again, handing out toothbrushes and a couple of soccer balls that lit up the eyes of the young ones. Then we headed back to Port au Prince. Slowed by town markets that filled the highway and the big city rush hour it took us 5 hours to go 90 miles. We would spend our last night in Haiti in rooms at the national Caritas center which administers many types of Catholic charities. Fr. Herve provided a Valentine meal at a nice restaurant in the company of the national director of Caritas, the Chancellor and auxiliary bishop of the diocese. It was an American style restaurant but the doorkeeper with the 12 gauge shotgun reminded us we were still in Haiti.

Our flights home were delightfully uneventful and filled with the joy of being on home soil again. It had been great to see the progress we have been a part of in our sister parish. Many like the new high school building were only a dream 9 years ago. It was also good to reconnect with the people there and introduce them and their very different world to Shirley, Jim, and Maureen. We look forward to sharing our pictures, videos, and stories. --Deacon Tim

