

OPERATION STARFISH NEWSLETTER

JANUARY, 2006

Dear Friends of *Operation Starfish*:

We start this month's issue with an effort to keep Christmas alive in our hearts ...

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.

We beckon this good season to wait awhile with us.

We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.

Peace.

Come and fill us and our world with your majesty.

We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,

Implore you to stay awhile with us

So we may learn by your shimmering light

How to look beyond complexion and see community.

---Maya Angelou

From Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem©

Read by the poet at the lighting
of the National Christmas Tree

December 1, 2005

A SUBWAY MOMENT

By *Jim McDaniel*

As the Blue Line train left Franconia Station on its winding way toward the nation's capital, the morning quiet was disrupted only by the rustle of newspapers. Commuters, deep into their morning rituals, checked makeup, listened to podcasts, dozed and read their papers. One older man, impeccably dressed with Italian leather shoes and presidential cufflinks, glanced through briefing papers, no doubt on his way to an important board meeting.

At the next stop, the silent commute was jarred by a group of young physically and mentally handicapped youth, tumbling onto the train, guided by chaperones. They rolled in wheelchairs, stumbled in leg braces, laughing, gasping and shrieking their way into the front of this, the first car in a 6-car train. You could almost hear the passengers saying "Why me? Why here? Why now?" as their quiet journey was suddenly filled with commotion. Their body language said, "Please give me distance." They threw furtive glances at the group. They wanted to look, but didn't feel comfortable staring. They were the comfortable, being afflicted.

The older man was different, somehow. He was at ease, at peace with the human condition around him. He looked up from his papers, made eye contact with one of the older chaperones, and smiled. A teenage girl from the group sat in the seat in front of him. She pulled off her knit cap, and using the window as a mirror, began to tug at her hair. "Don't fuss, you're beautiful just as you are," said the man, surprising himself, and her with his comment. At first she was suspicious of the stranger, but when their eyes met, they both smiled. The ice was broken and a conversation began. She spoke slowly, deliberately, struggling with her mental limitations. The man was patient, interested, engaged, and eager to learn from her. He asked where the group was going, and where they came from, and she responded with innocent enthusiasm. "We go to St. Coletta School, and we're on a field trip to learn job skills," she explained. "We are building a new charter school; it's going to open soon and it will be cool."

Meanwhile, the train entered a tunnel and the operator sounded the horn. It was very loud, this being the first car. One of the St. Coletta students was sitting at the very front of the car, watching the rails form a single-point perspective into the distance. When the horn blasted, he covered his ears with his hands, bounced up and down in the seat, and pointed to where the train operator sat. The old man watched this reaction. The boy saw the man, smiled, and repeated his gestures. The man did the same and they had great fun together for a moment or two. The girl in front of him, seeing this communication between them, said "He's deaf, you know..." The man said, "He must feel the vibration of the sound." She agreed.

Several more station stops were made, and then the man got up to leave the train. As he rose from his seat, he thanked the girl; "You're a very nice young lady and I thank you for talking with me. I wish you good luck with your school work and your job." She smiled shyly, but with a hint of pride. He took a step toward the door, nodded at one of the chaperones, and received the blessing of her smile in return.

As the man was about to exit, a twisted hand reached out to him from a boy in a wheelchair. The man thought the boy was sleeping during the journey because his head was drooping and saliva dripped from the corner of his mouth. But this boy knew what had transpired and he now offered his hand. The man grabbed hold, and two people, from two different worlds, shared a moment of solidarity.

With a little sadness, and a little joy, the man left the train and its precious cargo and continued on his way. If the boy in the wheelchair saw and was pleased, what of the

other passengers – the ones who felt discomfort, who stole glances? Were they touched in some way? Will they remember what they saw? God knows the answer, not we.

All day, the man thought about his train ride. That evening, at dinner with his family, he retold the story of this experience to his two young grandsons. They had a million questions. It was a “teaching moment” and he took the time to answer them.

The next day, with this human exchange still on his mind, he searched the internet for St. Coletta School, and found it. He wrote a letter to the director, explaining what good ambassadors the students and chaperones were, and he enclosed a gift towards the new charter school.

At a weekly prayer meeting the following Saturday, the attendees spoke about their closest moments with God during the previous week. The man had plenty to share.

NATIVITY VILLAGE UPDATE

On Friday, February 3rd, Fr. Richard Martin will be meeting with Fr. Printemps, the new pastor of Ste. Marie Madeleine Church in Nativity Village, Haiti. This meeting, hosted by Food For The Poor at their Florida headquarters will bring these two pastors together for the first time. They plan to discuss the partnership between Nativity Catholic Church and Ste. Marie Madeleine. Fr. Printemps replaces Fr. Wedner Berard, who has been transferred to Rome. Fr. Martin is looking forward to a first hand update on the conditions in Port-au-Prince and a briefing on the progress of the school construction at Nativity Village. Food For The Poor’s new Eastern Caribbean Coordinator, Ms. Delane Bailey will join the discussions, along with Ms. Sara Amodio from Denver, Colorado. Sara is developing the educational planning component of Nativity Village as part of her Ph.D. in Education program. She is a former Nativity parishioner and school counselor.

Because of kidnapping and violence in Haiti’s capital, Nativity parishioners have not been able to travel there during the past year. This meeting will bring the two groups together in a safer location to discuss the ongoing development work sponsored by Nativity Church.

MEDICAL MISSIONARIES ACTIVE IN HAITI & DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Since 1997, Dr. Gil Irwin of Manassas, Virginia, has led a nonprofit organization of dedicated volunteers who are trying to make a difference in the lives of the poorest of the poor along the Haiti – Dominican Republic border. Following an initial request from a priest in Banica, D.R., a small team spent 2 weeks providing life-saving health care to poor mountain dwellers. Many of them had never seen a doctor. Over the ensuing

years, Dr. Irwin has led additional medical, surgical, dental and construction trips to this border area, where 150,000 people live in desperately poor conditions. Today, these medical mission trips have become routine. A dental clinic, supply warehouse, and solar powered communication system in Banica, D.R. have been built, and construction of a health care clinic in Thomassique, Haiti is underway.

All Saints Catholic Church in Manassas, Virginia has twinned with St. Thomas Church in Thomassique and is a partner in the new clinic construction. St. John The Evangelist Parish in Warrenton, Virginia, is also involved in supporting this development.

Meanwhile, Dr. Irwin and Medical Missionaries have expanded their assistance to several other countries. They maintain a medical supply warehouse in Bristow, Virginia, where medical supplies are collected and distributed to areas of need worldwide.

If you are interested in a short term medical mission, or if you have access to medical or pharmaceutical supplies, please contact Medical Missionaries at 703-361-5116 or medmissionaries@yahoo.com.

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As a grandfather of two boys, ages 5 and 8, I look forward to birthday parties with lots of happy children throwing water balloons and eating cake and ice cream. I take for granted the certain knowledge of the ages of my children and grandchildren because I was there when they were born and we have the birth certificates as proof. So when I first read the following story, just before Christmas, it made me stop and think. I hope it touches you as well. ---Editor

ONE SMALL GIRL AND THE FACE OF HOPE IN HAITI

By Matthew Marek

“How old are you, I asked.”

Beatrice looked a little uncertain but answered, “I’m eight.” One of the other girls sitting on the floor among the group of girls shouted, “Pa vre, sèt ou ye!” (Not true, you’re seven!) And then another cut in, “No, she’s nine. And then someone else yelled, “I’m ten!” Another contested, “You’re not ten, you’re eleven!”

The room soon filled with voices over voices, with everyone trying to figure out their ages. Among them I heard Beatrice agree with another girl that maybe she is seven.

Age is just one of the things we take for granted in the United States. But the girls at City of God Orphanage in Port-au-Prince [Haiti] really don’t know how old they are. In Haiti it is a luxury to know. If a parent has the means to take a child to the local registration office for a birth certificate, that child is fortunate. But even then, maybe the

mother or father can't go until months after their baby is born, and by then they might not remember the exact birth day. Often it is a guess.

When a girl is orphaned at age four, the chances of her having a certificate are slim. The chances of her even knowing her birthday are next to nothing. But then the chances are, too, she won't think a birthday is important in the first place.

In the United States, we can't imagine that to be the case. Most people's birthdays are celebrated before they are aware of them. At ages one, two and three, parties for infants and toddlers happen every day. Birthday festivities for older children are often extravagant, with friends, themes, games and lots of gifts.

This isn't how it works for Beatrice and the other girls at City of God. Though they are deprived by many standards – they have no special day of their own; they don't have lots to eat or many clothes; they can never take school for granted – they still have their joys and delights.

One fall day this year, the rains were pouring down on City of God, and the girls excitedly ran to the roof and stripped down to their tattered shorts and underwear. They played a game of tag, dancing, chasing, and reeling about.

Eventually, Beatrice and the others might have a birthday of their own, forced on them by some system requirement, whether it is voter registration, school, or, possibly, employment. Then they'll need to produce a birth certificate, which they can obtain with the help of a few dollars, a notary, and after hours or days in line at a state institution. But until then, they have no reason to claim a day of their own.

Beatrice came to the orphanage from the City of God neighborhood, one of the poorest in the capital where approximately 10,000 people live on a landmass of strewn garbage. She has been at the orphanage, which has about 60 girls, since 2000. The Haitian Ministries (See note below) has officially supported the orphanage since 2003, though it started helping out Pierre St. Vistal, the founder and manager, about 5 years ago.

Beatrice and some of the other younger girls get their schooling in the orphanage in the mornings. Older girls go elsewhere, if the conditions outside are safe enough for them to be out.

Beatrice and her friends make the most of things at the house. They use the roof as their playground, where they can look out onto the slum they live in, the mountain chain that cradles Port-au-Prince and the Oakwood ravine that carries the garbage into the Caribbean during the rainy season.

When I talk to Beatrice, my questions often cause her to grimace in confusion. She has difficulty understanding my Kreyòl. But unlike most of the girls, she doesn't think it's her fault and mumble some rehearsed response. No, Beatrice is likely to crane her neck toward me, squint her eyes and loudly ask, "What!?"

Only about 40 pounds, she is nonetheless strength personified. She reminds me of the resilience of youth and the hope for a Haiti that is free, economically vibrant, and peaceful.

Beatrice is a strong seven-, eight- or nine-year-old not to be pitied. But it is a fact that she doesn't have as many opportunities, or birthday parties, as most of the children we know. So, as we approach the holiday season and its many celebrations, we would do well to remember Beatrice, the others at City of God, and all the children at the orphanage Foyer des Filles, L'Arc-en-Ciel and Madam Samson's. They are the hope of better lives in Haiti.

NOTE: *"One Small Girl and the Face of Hope in Haiti"* was published in the Winter 2005 edition of The Haitian Times, a publication of the Catholic Diocese of Norwich, Connecticut. It is reprinted here with permission. The author, Matthew Marek, currently lives and works in Haiti as the Mission House Director of Haitian Ministries. Haitian Ministries is a non-profit organization partnering Haitian and American communities through parish twinning and cultural immersion visits to Haiti, and through the support of Haitian-initiated projects such as orphanages and clinics serving the poorest communities in the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince. If you would like more information about Haitian Ministries, contact them at info@haitianministries.org; at 860-638-1018; or visit their website www.haitianministries.org.

Through Nativity Catholic Church's Operation Starfish program, parishioners have visited L'Arc-en-Ciel orphanage, mentioned in the story. Nativity Catholic School students have an exchange program with L'Arc-en-Ciel students. They design and sell Christmas cards, exchange videos and letters, and learn from each other. Nativity's Craft Group has made dresses, shorts, tops and pajamas for all the children at L'Arc-en-Ciel. Nativity has also built an orphanage for handicapped children – The Little Children of Jesus Home, operated by Food For The Poor, Inc. For more information about Nativity's Operation Starfish, or Food For The Poor's work in the Caribbean and Central America, contact Jim McDaniel at 703-455-6874 or info@starfishmission.org.

HAITIAN WISDOM

Sentespri a se chè nou.
Nou konnen ke se sèlman li menm
ki sonje chemen Jezi te fè a.
Donk, nou konnen se sèlman li menm
ki ka montre nou menm chemen sa a.

The Holy Spirit is our boss.
We know that he alone
remembers the route that Jesus walked.
So we know that only he can
show us the same way.

---Courtesy of Baptist Haiti Mission

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 Mrs. Eleanor Coyle, and for her family as they care for her during this period of illness, may God grant all of them a measure of comfort;

† For the Lunney family;

† For the Fischl family;

† For Terry Moore, that God wrap His loving arms around Terry and his family as they prepare for a surgical procedure;

† 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, that the violence may subside, and that the international community come together to help bring the people back on their feet and the land back to life;

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

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...

Hope prevents us from clinging to what we have and frees us to move away from the safe place and enter unknown and fearful territory.

-- Henri J. M. Nouwen (The Wounded Healer)

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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.

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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