

Haiti. A country where 80% of the population lives below the poverty line. A country where the capital city, with over a million inhabitants, does not have trash collection. A country whose history is dominated with un-welcomed rulership, ownership and dictatorship. Yet a country that takes pride in being the first black republic. A country of resilient people in body and spirit. A country where the children, without food or shoes, still find God, and smile.

St. Paul's in Léon is the sister Parish of St. Francis of Assisi in Gaithersburg, where I am currently the director of Music. Along with providing funds from our Parish through collections and our Benefit Concerts, we also fund three annual medical missions. After performing in a Benefit Concert that raised over \$1,200 for the mission, I decided to take the voyage to meet our brothers and sisters in Christ that we provide aid to.

What struck me immediately upon arriving in Port-au-Prince were two things. As I had expected, the poverty was alarming. The electricity blinking on and off at the airport: the heaps of trash burning on what seemed like every street corner: not one traffic light (of the few I saw) was functional. Clothes and shoes were sold on the abandoned cars that littered the streets. Their equivalent to our malls. Yet somehow I expected to finally turn a corner and find the grass a bit greener, the streets cleaner and paved. But that corner never came. I have never seen poverty so widespread.

After absorbing Port-au-Prince, I noticed something even more unexpected. When one imagines a poor, third-world country, the image is immediately and unconsciously associated with crime and danger. But as we rode on the local transportation called "tap-taps" (the beds of pick-up trucks) and walked the streets leading to the Cathedral and Palace, I did not feel threatened in the least. As a matter of fact, people were quite friendly, willing to make room for us to sit, and glad guide us in the right direction. As someone who was an obvious outsider to a country struggling with poverty, I found the people surprisingly welcoming and inviting.

Arriving at the Jeremy airport and traveling to Léon was yet another foreign experience. The town of Léon, which you cannot find on any map of Haiti, is inhabited mostly by agricultural workers and farmers. Most of the town does not have electricity and water is available at random, and usually not sanitary. The streets are simply where the rocks and pebbles collect to form a path. The rectory, with electricity and semi-consistent running water, where all 16 guests resided, was the most luxurious stay in town.

The first day, by eight in the morning there was gathered a crowd of more than one hundred patients at the clinics' door. Some of them had walked up to six hours from neighboring villages to be seen. On an average day, the staff saw about 150 patients, in sweltering heat, no electricity, no fans, no lights. What the group accomplished in one week was awe-inspiring. And that these doctors gave their vacation time, their gifts, their time, all at their own expense, was truly to see the nature of charity that Jesus intended for all of us to have.

Through the years that we have worked together with St. Paul's we have managed to build a second story to their local school and help with construction and repair on the Church's Sacristy, building structure, and Rectory. I thought to myself, what could I possibly do? But even the short week I was there, I was able to help merely by being there and having a few creative ideas. God has given each of us the opportunity of charity; it just may not always be obvious.

On a larger scale, there are currently 20 parishes in the Archdiocese of Washington in the "Twinning Program". ADW sent a delegation to Haiti to form what is now the Haiti Twinning Committee who is now working actively to invite other parishes to twin with a sister Parish. Eventually the goal is to have a Diocese-to-Diocese partnership.

From all that I experienced in one week in Haiti, it seems that this would be a very constructive project. We can help with donations and charity, but when we can address the bigger and more fundamental problems on a larger scale, our cost-efficiency could improve, and we could together help build the infrastructure Haiti needs, especially to develop the ability to help their own.

Our parish website, www.sfadw.org, will have information updates about our Missions, sister Parish, Twinning Programs, and Benefit Concerts. Also, for information on the twinning program, you may e-mail Nora Collins at collinsn@adw.org.