

Jamaican Journal

Reflections by St. Joseph, Hanover parishioners Dick Arigo and Deacon Tom Aumen on their recent mission trip to Jamaica to work as Volunteers with the Missionaries of the Poor.

Part 1: "The Poor Among You"

"There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be open-handed toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land." (Deut. 15:11)

Jason...Kishare...Olivia...Andrew...Kelroy...Betty...and hundreds of others...the humanity behind the faces reads on in the never-ending cycle of Jamaican cast-offs whose common bond is the daily reception of nurturing love and compassionate hearts from the Brothers of the Missionaries of the Poor in Kingston, Jamaica.

Bethlehem Home...Lord's Place...Faith Center...Good Shepherd...Holy Innocents...Beatitudes Home...Jacob's Well. Biblical connections? Of course. These are the Apostolates where people are 'discarded' to the open arms and perpetual care of the MOP---sent from the police station, hospitals, homes, the streets. The MOP asks for no payments. The Gospel is their mantra: "Whatsoever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me." (Matt. 25:40) They serve Christ by serving His children with servants' hearts.

Orphans, physically and mentally crippled, the abandoned, AIDS sufferers, the destitute, the disfigured, the blind and deaf, sufferers of leprosy, cerebral palsy and hydrocephalus. There are so many that the Brothers have a difficult time accepting everyone who is brought in due to the lack of space (beds). Of those under MOP care, few will ever return to Jamaican society---nobody else would want to care for them. Beds do open up for 'new' residents - one day, two coffins were given a final coat of paint before taking the bodies of two deceased residents to the burial area. Prayers are offered daily for all the residents under the Brothers' care. Prayers are offered daily for the souls of those who touched the lives of the Brothers and Volunteers through their pleading eyes, their grateful smiles, their unharnessed joy, their faces that emanated the love of Christ within them.

The commitment from the Brothers is for a lifetime. They are Christ personified. The personal-care work of Volunteers lasts a week, maybe two. Anyone who has been a personal care-giver to a family member or friend can relate to the need for compassion, and understanding, and love, and tears that Volunteers provide to those living under MOP's care. The plane ride home tugs at the conscience of the Volunteer to ponder: "there but for the grace of God" Away from the smells, the screams, the unsightly sores, the seeming degradation of God's people - leaves one with memories that stir the heart, and causes one to ask: "Why God? Why do these people need to suffer like this? Why can't something be done for them?" And God's response will always be: "I did do something; I sent you."

Part 2: "Washing of the Feet"

"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." (John 13:14-15)

Monday: Dick and Deacon Tom are assigned to work in the 'young boys' ward. "Go around and get acquainted with the boys," says Brother Jay. Then, Miss Carmen, the ward matron, tells us: "prepare the boys (about 20, ages 3-23) for their baths." This would be easier said than done! The boys were not ambulatory, lying in cribs until they were assisted. They initially seemed afraid of these 'strangers'. They were afflicted with a variety of physical conditions: blind, diseased, deformed, and crippled (with arm and leg muscles so taut and disfigured that it pained us to take the clothes off, and put fresh ones on). Some limbs were no bigger than the width of 2 fingers. With comforting words and a smile, with compassionate love and guidance from the Holy Spirit, the clothes were removed, the boys carried to their bath, and then re-dressed, and then they patiently awaited their turn at being fed their lunch.

Through the rest of Monday, and for the week throughout the MOP apostolates, Dick and Deacon Tom would be feeding the people, wiping faces/hands/arms, providing water to quench thirsty mouths, shaving the men, massaging and putting lotion on dry bodies, clipping finger nails, sweeping and mopping floors, cleaning out smelly drains, interacting with the residents, and providing hugs, smiles, and understanding love.

When a person thinks of the most humbling action he or she has ever experienced, a personal care mission such as this one to Jamaica brings the person to a new depth of humility, one rooted in the love of Christ, who demonstrated divine humility through His death upon the cross. Away from the people and the volunteer team, it makes one cry to reflect upon the condition of life that these poor endure. And when one begins to cry, the Holy Spirit sends a little girl to come and sit on your lap, lay her head on your shoulder, and with a hug, quietly hum sounds of re-assurance. Jesus' words are never truer: "you should do as I have done for you." "Now, go back inside, and care for my people!" Amen! to that!

We felt blessed every day for the opportunity to pass along God's love for His people.

Part 3: "Growing Your Faith"

"I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ." (Philemon 1:6)

As the adage goes: "when climbing the mountain to its summit, does one stop a third of the way up, or halfway up, and exclaim: 'I'm satisfied. I can be proud of my accomplishment. And then proceed to sit down until one dies?' The analogy might also be applied to our faith, with one mighty exception: God doesn't expect us to be satisfied with a partial ascent, when the summit (the Kingdom of Heaven) is yet to be reached—for everyone!

People express pride and joy when discussing their active faith lives, and to a degree, rightly so. However, one might reflect upon this question: "how do we intend to grow our faith?" We've heard the phrase: "love isn't love until it's given away" - now, substitute faith for love!!

While working amongst the poor of Jamaican society, it is easy to express understanding and love—until, like a cold, evening Jamaican shower, one is faced with washing a body covered with sores; or cleaning up feces; or, looking into the eyes and attempting to shave the face of a 'possessed' man. That is when one closes his own eyes, and prays from the heart: "Come Holy Spirit. This isn't what I bargained for. However, you called me to be your faithful servant. Despite my discomfort, be with me now, and strengthen me to do your will."

How do we intend to grow our faith? Do we sit on what we've achieved in faith, or do we ask God for more challenges, for another way to live lives of faith in Him? Working among the Jamaican poor affects one's faith life - in a very real way - to continue its ascent to the summit of God. In the peaceful presence of the Blessed Sacrament in chapel, one remembers the words of Fr. Richard Ho Lung, MOP's founder: "People need to recognize the Kingdom of God in you." May we always let our light shine before all, as we continue the climb on our journey of faith.