

## Reflections on a Trip to Haiti

**Wednesday, July 14, 2010**

Finally the day has arrived. We took off from Reagan National for Miami at about 6 a.m., and then made a transfer to our flight headed to Port-au-Prince. It was a huge plane, a 767, and was packed with missionaries and Haitians. What a strong sense of connectedness I felt.

Immediately upon our arrival I quickly realized how different this experience would be from life as we know it in the US. The airport was destroyed by the earthquake. There are makeshift structures, which are not air-conditioned, now serving as the terminals and security check points. It was loud and busy and vibrant and a bit intimidating at first. Being in a foreign country, not speaking the language, surrounded by hundreds of people bustling about filled me with a sense of excitement. I felt so blessed to finally be fulfilling this dream and longing I have had for so many years. I knew my life was about to change, in a direction that God has been calling me. After connecting with just one other member of our group, Bianca and I headed through the maze of the 'airport' down an escalator, to the sounds of Haitian music. As we rounded the corner, there they were, welcoming us with the sounds of the land. We just followed the crowd outside, boarded a flat platform bus, where we crowded in like sardines, and were driven to the customs area and reconnected with Dr. Mortel and the rest of our group. After all our bags were gathered we headed out to meet Maxi, a friend of Dr. Mortel's, and our driver for the week.

It was hot; really, really hot. As we headed for the parking area the scene was one of sensory overload. There was so much to take in. Hundreds of people greeting one another in a foreign language, offers to take our luggage by so many hoping for a small tip, people just beyond the fences begging for food and water, others offering to sell things, all the while being moved along with the crowd and trying to keep an eye on Dr. Mortel! Packing the van with 10 people, our entire luggage collection, and several additional suitcases was no easy feat. We were soaked with perspiration from the effort. Imagine our surprise when Maxi started the van and we were greeted by air-conditioning!

The airport is on the north side of the city of Port-au-Prince and we headed north from there, to Dr. Mortel's hometown of St. Marc. The epicenter of the earthquake was on the south side of the city. Even so, the damage we saw was devastating. There were tent cities housing thousands of people stretching for miles. They were not really tents, but tarps, pieces of sheet metal, held together with sticks, or just propped up precariously with whatever could be found lying around. These tent cities on the outskirts of the city have no water, no electricity, no port-a-potty, and no sense of organization whatsoever. Children stood on the side of the road begging for food and water. It was heartbreaking. I can only imagine what happens to these dwellings when the heavy rains come, or even worse, the hurricanes.

As we headed north some of our passengers were pleased with the conditions of the road compared to visits three years prior. Apparently, the paved road to St. Marc is twice as long as then, but it is still rough in many places. Coming off the paved areas we encountered not dirt or gravel roads, but rock. The wear and tear on the vehicles and tires is incomprehensible. Evidence of the earthquake is everywhere, many crumbled buildings and piles of rubble alongside the road.

There is much contrast in this land. Many of the mountains are bare, with little vegetation, the result of deforestation by the people, the wood used as the only source of fuel for cooking. These areas have suffered terrible erosion during the rainy season and the hurricanes which are so prevalent in the region. Much of the damage we saw, collapsed chapels, ruined villages, and barren fields are from the hurricanes not the recent earthquake. Other mountainous areas are lush and beautiful, breathtakingly beautiful. At times the road took us along the Caribbean Sea. We were astonished yet again with the incredible beauty of the land. How can a land be

so beautiful and so unforgiving at the same time?

We arrived in San Marc, Dr. Mortel's home town, late in the afternoon. Dr. Rodrigue Mortel was only one of a multitude of children growing up in the overpopulated, impoverished country of Haiti in the 1930s. He was born into abject poverty, in a small rented house of wattle and daub, lacking even the minimal necessities of water and electricity. When they were evicted from this meanest of dwellings because his parents could not pay the monthly rent of \$4, young Rodrigue vowed such an indignity would never again be permitted against his family. "This would not have happened if I had been educated," his mother acknowledged. The words his mother spoke were permanently etched in his heart as he silently pledged that he would finish his education and someday build a house for his mother. He could not have known that he was destined to accomplish much more for his country.

In 2000, he built a school, Les Bons Samaritains, in memory of his mother. It is a private school founded to serve the poorest of the poor children of San Marc. These children receive the most progressive education available in Haiti. The school is one of very few in the country with a computer lab, science lab, and library. Also on the grounds is a residence quarters which served as our home during our stay. Our accommodations were simple, neat, and clean. Although there is little reliable electricity in the entire country, Les Bons Samaritains has a generator to provide electricity and reservoirs of water on the rooftops to provide 'running' water. My favorite space was an open air balcony overlooking the main street in St. Marc; a bustling street filled with people selling their wares, motor scooters honking, dogs barking, goats bleating, roosters crowing, children playing, a hubbub of activity.

**Thursday July 15, 2010**

**Visit to St. Laurent, Bassin Mangnant**

Thankfully, Pere Wilner escorted us to the next church or I, for one, think we might still be driving, or bouncing along! This drive was crazy and covered all kinds of terrain. After returning to Gonaives, a 1.5 hour drive, we continued on for what is just a 30 minute drive in a 4 X 4, but much longer and exciting in a van! We went through desert like areas, across river beds, through lush jungle countryside, up steep hills on rock road - one so steep we all had to get out of the van so Maxi (our driver) could make it to the top. To no one's surprise we got a flat tire and people came from all around to assist us. What a gracious people the Haitians are. We finally did make it to St. Laurent and met the pastor, Pere Jacques Rony Alexandre. Pere Rony introduced us to some Lay people of the parish. We met with them briefly as it was late afternoon; we were tired, and ready to get to our home for the night. Imagine our surprise when Dr. Mortel pointed it out to us, way high up at the top of a mountain nearby, and then said, "That is where we will stay tonight, but the van cannot make it there." We were a bit alarmed at the thought of having to walk to the top of the mountain! Gracious as the Haitians are they had rounded up a couple of 4 X 4's to bring us up. It looked so far but we arrived quickly. It takes no time at all when you are driving vertically up the mountain!

We arrived at the Bassin Ecological Center, the first Catholic Ecological Center in the world. The center was built by Hands Together and is the residence of the director, Fr. Gerard Dormeville. It was a magnificent structure, three stories high with a large center courtyard area. The entire top of the building was an open balcony and we were literally on the top of the mountain with simply amazing views which stretched for miles and miles. It is so easy to experience the gift of wonder and awe surrounded by such beauty. We shared another delicious meal of fish, rice and beans, a scrumptious dessert of warm oatmeal with Haitian vanilla and cinnamon and anise.

Although beautiful, the retreat house was very hot inside and there was no electricity, so no fans to circulate the hot air. Dr. Mortel suggested to me that we sleep up on the roof which I quickly agreed to, joined by Bianca and Maxi. So we carried our mattresses up the steep flight of stairs and settled in. Well, it was cool but I did not sleep. How could I surrounded by such beauty? With no electricity and no lights, the stars were brilliant, the sounds of the night intriguing. I had to keep opening my eyes to look around! The wind picked up during the night so it was quite cool and the sounds reminded me of the ocean surf. I finally dozed around 4:00 a.m. then woke shortly after 5:00 to the most amazing sunrise with rays streaming from the clouds atop the mountain. Pretty darn close to heaven I feel.

### **Friday, July 16, 2010**

Fr. Mike celebrated Mass for us before breakfast in the small chapel. We had a wonderful breakfast of spaghetti, bananas, papaya, and more delicious Haitian bread.

We headed back down the mountain to begin our tour and discussion with Pere Rony and the lay people. St. Laurent was a mission church of St. Theresa, along with two other missions, until just one year ago. Pere Rony was assigned pastor of St. Laurent, and the two missions, just six months ago. He spent the last ten years as a principle of a secondary school. He is literally starting with nothing, no vestments, no altar linens, no sacred vessels, and very few pews for the 500 who come to worship each Sunday, not even a rectory. As Dr. Mortel said, "The birds and animals have a place to live but there is no bed for the Son of Man."

The lay people shared their challenges with us. Some are life long parishioners who spoke of truly wanting to do all they can to assist Pere Rony. When it was time to prioritize the needs of the parish Pere Rony had great difficulty. The church building is large and sturdy but will need repairs for the roof is leaking. There is a large, beautiful school on the grounds built by Hands Together. The lay members were happy to meet us, very thankful that we were guided by the Holy Spirit to come meet them, and expressed their desire for a future relationship. We did see a group of children leaving the school as we sat under the tree having our discussion, but they quickly left the grounds so we did not have an opportunity to meet with them. The only other people we saw were behind the stone walls on either side of the church grounds

We spent the rest of the day traveling to the two missions. We used two 4 X 4's pick up trucks, with the parishioners bouncing along in the back. And I do mean bouncing! I find it admirable that they spent this much time with us in such conditions. The first mission, in Declin, was down a very steep rocky road. It is a 40 minute walk for Pere Rony, as he has no vehicle of his own to make the drive. There is a sturdy chapel in which two levels of preschool meet for lessons. There was another rudimentary plywood classroom for the kindergarten class, then 4 cinder block classrooms, measuring 10 X 12 for 50 students each. Many people were gathered to greet us, and many were getting water from the well in front of the chapel. We continued to the second mission, in Sedren, a copper mining town. This is an 80 minute walk for Pere Rony. The chapel is set into a very steep hill. Above the chapel were many children looking down on us. Sadly, these children too showed signs of malnutrition with their swollen bellies and reddish tinted hair. But they smiled warmly for us and eagerly posed for pictures.

Pere Rony joined us for lunch at the retreat center as he has no place to offer us a meal or to sit for that matter. He is a quiet man, introspective, and has many challenges ahead of him. That being said, I sense that he is well aware that he is in good hands ... God's! After lunch we were back on the road again, headed home to St. Marc.

I have been forever changed. Although I feel a strong desire to remain in this country I feel the Lord is calling me to share this experience with others. I feel I must tell my story for all to hear. If the Lord has called me, is He not also calling my parish at home? I will go home to Maryland, physically. My heart and my spirit will remain in Haiti. And I will return.