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Dominican Republic and Haiti: Learning from living overseas

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Learning from living overseas

Robert Di Nardo, Spiritan, Overseas Training Program



Sister Maria is working on an aqueduct project.



Sister Simona operates a medical clinic twice weekly.

The drive from Juan de Herera takes about one hour. In the truck with us are Sister Refugio, one of four Sisters working out of Juan de Herera, and Lucia, a lay Spiritan from Brazil. Beside me is Fr. Baltazar Hernandez, a Spiritan priest originally from Mexico now living and working in the Dominican Republic.

The Spiritan presence here began seven years ago with the arrival of Fr. Jonas Rivera CSSp from Puerto Rico as pastor in Juan de Herera. Frs. Don McEachin (USA) and Werby Mital (Haiti) soon followed. Fr. Baltazar joined the group in January 2011 and I arrived a few months later to complete the overseas experience component of my training program.

We are heading to Banica, a town on the Dominican Republic side of the Haitian/Dominican border. The road approaching Banica offers a wonderful view of the Haitian landscape. One cannot help but notice the difference between the two countries: the Haitian countryside is practically devoid of trees, while the Dominican hills are lush with foliage occasionally giving way to green pastures. Sister Refugio tells me the Dominican government restricted the harvesting of trees, thereby saving the Dominican countryside from the fate that has befallen their Haitian neighbours.

In Mexico, I saw poverty I had never witnessed in Canada. In the Dominican Republic, I witnessed how the poorest of the poor live. Now in Haiti, I thought to myself how much more of nothing can people possibly possess? And yet, in the midst of what I saw as nothing, the people of Los Cacaos were living life.



A Haitian mother and her children outside their hut.



Robert Di Nardo teaches English class.

As we get closer to Banica, military checkpoints increase in frequency, as do the border markers; illegal crossings are common, resulting in the periodic roundup and deportation of illegals.

Sister Maria, a hydraulic engineer from Brazil and Sister Simona, a medic from Italy, welcome us in Banica. Both are Dominican Sisters, who with Sister Refugio and Lucia work on infrastructure and health projects in Los Cacaos, the Haitian community across the border from Banica.

Currently they are working on an aqueduct project to deliver water to homes via plastic PVC tubing. The project is a co-operative, enlisting volunteer families who dedicate their time towards making the project a reality. The water is tapped from a natural source, filtered, deposited in a reservoir and then channeled through a system of plastic tubes delivering it directly to individual homes. It makes cooking and bathing easier and eliminates the need to gather water in containers, a time-consuming and work-intensive undertaking especially under a hot sun.

Sister Simona operates a medical clinic twice weekly, serving a population of approximately 8,000, offering basic medical services and arranging doctor/hospital visits for those with more serious conditions.

Materials for both projects are made possible through donations from NGOs, religious congregations and private donations administered through the Dominican Sisters.

Into Haiti

The drive from Banica to Los Cacaos, a distance of only twenty kilometers, took another hour. After crossing the border the road became rough and winding. Arriving at our destination I was expecting a village type setting with houses situated along a main road. What I encountered was a loose collection of concrete board or wooden walled thatched roof huts with dirt floors, situated either at the summit of, or half way up, a hillside to avoid flooding in the rainy season.

There was no electricity and 70% of the houses had no latrine. In light of recent cholera concerns in the region, I was cautioned to carry a bottle of water, to graciously not accept any liquids offered and to be careful about contact with others. This experience was my first encounter with such extreme living conditions.

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nothing can people possibly possess? And yet, in the midst of what I saw as nothing, the people of Los Cacaos were living life.

It may be a difficult and hard life, but that does not stop them from offering hospitality and, dare I say, hope. When I saw and experienced their desire to better their living conditions and to work towards that goal, my hope was renewed and my desire to be of help was strengthened. I came to realize that it is the people of Los Cacaos who reveal the Beatitudes by making themselves available.

Daily life, very interesting people

Back in Juan de Herrera I work out of Nuestra Señora del Altigracia, a parish with 31 satellite communities. I participate in hospital visits with Fr. Jonas, join the youth group at their

I was introduced to Tito, a young man blind from birth. When I extended my hand to shake his he placed his hands on my forehead and proceeded to run his fingers down my face. Apparently, he remembers people by their facial features and the sound of their voice. After meeting me he commented that I couldn't possibly be Dominican — my nose was too big. Tito's blindness doesn't stop him from giving us directions to a neighbor's house while riding in our truck, or from playing the guitar at Mass.

Among the Dominican people family relations and family unity form the backdrop of the social fabric. They are a tactile people not at all shy when it comes to greeting others. A hug and a kiss on the cheek is a requirement for any and every encounter. It took me a while to get used to hugging everyone I met.



Jonas Rivera CSSp from Puerto Rico is the pastor in Juan de Herera.



Sister Emilia embraces Rosa.



Pedrito enjoys a weekly visit and sharing of bread.

meetings and social activities, give English classes to three different groups and accompany Sister Emilia, one of Sister Refugio's community, on pastoral visits. During these visits, I meet some very interesting people who through our relationships challenge me to transform my relationship with God. In a sense, they are the catalyst of transformation through whom God is constantly working; they are the poor whom Jesus said will always be with us. I have come to live the meaning of His words.

Pedrito is an elderly man and a recluse who belongs to a community called Le Coco. He lives in a tin shed, has no children, therefore no one to look after him. He relies on the community for support. I visit him once a week, occasionally with a bag of bread, and just sit with him for a while. His memories and mental state are sometimes confused and he is difficult to understand, but he seems to enjoy the bread.

Rosa is an elderly matriarch who, unlike Pedrito, is surrounded and supported by her extended family. She is hunched over from lifelong years of hard work, but this doesn't stop her from offering hospitality — she will not permit us leave without a small gift of sweet potato.

Behind the wheel there are few rules, most everything is tolerated and compounding the issue are the ever-present motorcycles. Navigating the chaos they produce is not for the faint of heart.

I continue to struggle with the local Spanish. It differs from what I learned in Mexico — in the same way, perhaps, that someone learning English in Toronto would have difficulty understanding the dialect of Newfoundland. However, as they say here, *poco a poco*, bit by bit.

My experiences here have been fruitful, enjoyable and challenging. I have been exposed to a culture that is in so many ways very different from my own and to a community life that has deepened my understanding and broadened my awareness of what living in common *can* mean.

Building community is difficult work, but my time here has given me the wisdom and determination to realize that what may seem overwhelming can with patience, prayer and support be transformed into a positive living experience. I have made many acquaintances and some friends here — all of whom I will miss. The heat on the other hand, I will be happy to leave behind. ■