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Chapter 7

Lifting Up a People: Spiritan Mission in the Dominican Republic

On February 19, 2004, Fr. Jonas Rivera Martinez, CSSp, from the circumscription of Puerto Rico, arrived in the Diocese of San Juan, Dominican Republic, to spearhead the formation of a new Spiritan mission. It was a new beginning, the first Spiritan presence in the country, although not the first Spiritan presence on the island. The Dominican Republic (henceforth DR) and Haiti, two distinct countries, with distinct languages and cultures, share the Island of Hispaniola. The Island of Hispaniola along with Cuba, Jamaica, and Puerto Rico form an island chain known as the Greater Antilles located in the northeastern Caribbean.

Spiritans have been present on the Haiti side of Hispaniola since the time of Fr. Francis Libermann, a continuous and storied presence in Haiti since the arrival of Nicolas Eugene Tisserant in 1843. The arrival of Fr. Jonas Rivera Martinez, CSSp, in February of 2004, however, marked the first Spiritan mission on the Dominican Republic side of the Island. Fr. Martinez carried on alone until Fr. Don McEachin, CSSp, of the then US East Province, arrived in August 2004 (although Jonas and I were assigned together, I had to first go to Language School in Bolivia to study Spanish). Some months after my arrival, we were joined by the third member of our team, Fr. Werby Mital, CSSp, a newly ordained Spiritan from Haiti. Fr. Werby did his theological studies in Spain and thus was already fluent in Spanish.

The formation of this new mission in the DR had its origins in the intense desire of the Puerto Rico circumscription to form a new missionary team to work in the Dominican Republic. Spiritans from Puerto Rico had been sponsoring mission trips to the DR for a number of years, involving Spiritan priests, laity, and youth from Puerto Rico. The Circumscription of Puerto Rico in the late 1990's presented to the Union of Circumscriptions of North America and the Caribbean (UCNAC) the proposal for the formation of a collaborative

international mission in the DR, a proposal received very favorably by the respective superiors. Finally, in 2003, the superiors of UCNAC were able to make a commitment of personnel and resources to begin the new mission.



A family in Villa Liberación, November 2003

In November of 2003, Frs. Martinez and McEachin went on an exploratory visit to the DR, to the Diocese of San Juan, in the westernmost part of the Island along the border of Haiti. We chose this diocese because it was among the poorest and least developed dioceses in the country and where there was great pastoral need. The bishop, Most Rev. José Grullón Estrella, received us into his home and personally escorted us for an entire week to the far corners of the diocese. It was very much a mutual discernment process, the bishop asking as many questions about us and about the Spiritans as we asked about the pastoral situation and needs in the diocese. In our exit interview, Bishop Jose made a concrete proposal to the two of us, that we assume pastoral responsibility for two adjacent parishes/missions, to the immediate north of the town of San Juan de la Maguana. They were very different in nature. One, Villa Liberation, was a poor, densely populated urban barrio on the northern edge of the town of San Juan. It consisted mostly of resettled refugees from Hurricane George; a newly formed parish, Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza, would minister to this population. The other mission, a well-developed parish, Nuestra Sra. de la Altagracia, about eight kilometers farther north in the village of Juan de Herrera, was a relatively large parish church center with over thirty village outstations, extending for some thirty miles up into the rural hills and rice farms of the fertile San Juan valley. When we first arrived, there was no real priest's residence in either mission, and so we began to look for a property where we could build a Spiritan Community House so that we could live together while we served both missions. For the first two years we lived in cramped, hot, tiny quarters above the sacristy in the church in Juan de Her-

ra. In August of 2007 we moved into the spacious Casa Espiritana in Juan de Herrera, and frankly it felt like moving from a shack into a palace.

There is one historical note I would like to mention before telling the story of the mission and ministry in Villa Liberacion, and that is about the catastrophic earthquake that struck our neighbor Haiti on Tuesday, January 12, 2010 at approximately 4:45 p.m. The epicenter, about twenty-five miles west of Port-au-Prince, was about 160 miles from us as the crow flies. We felt it only slightly here. But the devastation it caused, with over 200,000 casualties, only became known in the days to follow. Our first trip with relief supplies to the Spiritan Formation House in Port-au-Prince was on Friday, three days later, and what we encountered will never be forgotten. We subsequently became a channel for relief efforts from Spiritans from New York to Ireland to Germany. Fr. Werby Mitial, himself a Haitian and in charge of the Haitian Ministry here in the Diocese of San Juan, played an important role in the relief efforts mounted by our diocese here, and by the Dominican Conference of Bishops, in coordination with Caritas Haiti. It was for us a time of true Spiritan solidarity.

As the years have gone by, we have been joined by a number of other Spiritans, including in 2011, a Lay Spiritan Associate, Mary Hansen, daughter of Lay Spiritans John and Anne Marie Hansen. Mary worked in the diocesan Human Development Office with the Micro-Credit project for women in poverty. Also in 2011, we were joined by Fr. Baltazar Hernandez, CSSp, from Mexico, who spent just over a year with us here. Still in 2011, Spiritan seminarian, Robert DiNardo, from TransCanada came for a year-long Pastoral Experience. In 2014, Fr. Martinez returned to Puerto Rico and was replaced by Fr. José Alamo Villegas, CSSp, also from Puerto Rico. Fr. Werby returned to Haiti in 2014. In March 2018, Fr. Fresnel Alcina, CSSp, a newly ordained Haitian Spiritan, joined us, and Brazilian Spiritan seminarian, Joao Paulo Carvalho, was with us for the year 2020 for his Pastoral Experience.

The Spiritan Mission in the Dominican Republic

The Spiritan presence in the Dominican Republic is a story of two distinct missions: the rural parish of Nuestra Sra. de la Altagracia in Juan de Herrera, and the parish of Nuestra Sra. de la Esperanza (Our Lady of Hope Parish) in Villa Liberación. Both missions have a story to tell over these last seventeen years, but because of space limitations I will be telling the story of Villa Liberación and Our Lady of Hope Parish (Ntra. Sra. de la Esperanza), which has been my mission and ministry for the last seventeen years. And, with apologies, I will have to leave the story of our mission and ministry in the

sprawling rural parish of Nuestra Sra. de la Altagracia, where currently Frs. José Alamo and Fresnel Alcina work, for another time. (It is also a story well worth telling.)

I was installed as pastor of the parish of Nuestra Sra. de la Esperanza in February of 2005. Barrio Villa Liberación, the location of our parish, was a barrio created almost overnight in farmland after the devastating Hurricane George in 1998. This hurricane was a “category five” hurricane and passed directly over the region bringing much death and destruction, not just from the wind but from the torrential flooding which followed. The most vulnerable, the poor who lived in simple wooden houses in the countryside along the San Juan river valley, saw their houses obliterated. The survivors gathered at this site of an emergency tent city which evolved into a kind of shanty town with barracks-like plywood and tin roof houses; it eventually evolved into a barrio consisting of mostly prefabricated duplex houses constructed over the course of several years by the National Housing Ministry. The Housing Ministry constructed two open air pavilions in the central area in the barrio where the pre-assembly of the houses took place, and subsequently, the government donated the land where these two pavilions were located to the diocese with the view of forming a new parish to serve this new population of resettled refugees. The diocese assumed ownership of the property in 2001, but there was no priest available to serve them full time. Priests came for Sunday services in a small plywood chapel and two Sisters of St. Dominic from Puerto Rico, Sr. Providencia Perez, OP, and Sr. Zaida Gonzalez, OP, pioneered a new mission here in Barrio Villa Liberación, planting the seeds of a new Christian community. These Sisters built a convent and a meeting space in the barrio where they taught catechism, did sacramental preparation and adult literacy training. Their valiant and impactful presence was a ray of hope in an otherwise rather dismal reality. Barrio Villa Liberación had early on gained the unsavory reputation of a “no man’s land” under the vice grip of drug gangs, with a reputation of crime, juvenile delinquency, and overweening violence.

This was the reality, or rather the widely perceived reality, when in February of 2005 I became the pastor full time of this new ministry. It was a barrio of the poorest people from the countryside, refugees from the hurricane, who weren’t landowners. Those who had something to go back to, went back, which meant that those who stayed behind in Villa Liberación were the most economically and socially marginalized of society. When the parish was first formed, the people were demoralized and disorganized. They lacked a sense of community. They were fearful and didn’t trust their neighbors. In a traditional Dominican village or society, there is a strong sense of family and community. Most are related in one way

or another to their neighbors and there is a sense of social cohesion. But this was notably lacking in Villa Liberación, mainly because people from many different places were thrown together. With the lack of job opportunities, lack of access to quality education, and little in the way of options for survival, many young men turned to the drug gangs as a way to survive, given the lack of the traditional family and communal structure to rely upon.



One of two pavilions donated to the diocese for the new parish.
This one became the Adult Job Training school and Day Care

Together with these marvelous Dominican Sisters and a core group of determined laity, we joined with community organizations in 2005 in a series of listening sessions with the people, and set our initial administrative and pastoral priorities. The first administrative priority was to develop the physical plant. We were blessed by the government with a large swath of land and two covered open-air pavilions, capable of being enclosed and forming large interior spaces, which provided many good possibilities, ideally located right in the very center of the Barrio. So, we focused on fundraising for the construction of a church, and building out the two pavilions. The pavilion closest to the new church we decided would be enclosed to create space for parish offices, classrooms for catechism and other classes, a kitchen, bathrooms, and a large meeting and assembly hall. The other pavilion would be utilized for the Job Training Center for Adults, and the “Ludoteca” or Children’s Play Center. For the construction of the church we received a grant of US \$15,000 from the Koch Foundation in Florida, and for the parish center, \$10,000 from the Loyola Foundation in Washington, as well as numerous donations from benefactors. We achieved the major part of the construction of the parish complex within fifteen months, and

dedicated the new church, parish center, and Job Training School on Pentecost Sunday 2006.

While all this was going on, we continued our discernment and listening process for establishing our pastoral priorities. The first was without a doubt *evangelization*—the vast majority of the people simply don't go to church. We set out a specific program of home visits, house by house, district by district, and a program of an annual parish census. Then, we began a program of parish missions "in the streets," where we purchased for the parish a very large open-air tent and began our program of Evening Missions for three consecutive nights, in open spaces in each of the six districts of the parish. We would first send out written invitations door to door, and mounted loudspeakers on my pickup truck announcing the mission, with music, singing, artistic presentations, and of course preaching the Gospel *kerygma*, often with dramatic presentations. Each mission would last three nights, each night would conclude with personal testimonies and invitations to join the parish community. We also began two nights a week holding masses in the yards of people's homes, which afforded another opportunity to invite neighbors to join, who maybe normally wouldn't come to Sunday Mass in the church.

The *second pastoral priority* we established was addressing the issue of youth at risk, with emphasis on the religious and human formation of children and youth, and improving access to quality education. We know that with youth it is better to start as young as possible. So, the catechetical programs for children, and sacramental preparation, became our first priority. With the completion of the parish center we now had assembly space and classroom space for catechism, Christian formation for our youth. Our program quickly grew to between 250 to 300 children enrolled each year. We also placed intense focus on the teen and



School Mass, St. Michael's Tech

young adults, with programs of sports development, youth retreats and youth encounters, and also with an emphasis on preserving traditional Dominican culture. We have been blessed as well with wonderful collaboration of our sister school, Colegio San Antonio de Padua in Puerto Rico, and Holy Ghost Prep and Duquesne University in Pennsylvania. Together they have managed since 2006 to fill up our summers with exciting summer camps for youth, each camp tailored to a specific age group. Holy Ghost Prep student athletes and staff run a Sports Camp for eighty adolescents in June, the Dominican Sisters from Puerto Rico and their Colegio San Antonio run a fine arts summer camp for sixty youth in July, and Duquesne University students and staff run a day camp for eighty children, six to ten years old in August. These day camps are for many of our children their only real summer vacation and they live for this experience. Due to the pandemic of COVID-19, this is the second year we have had to cancel the summer camps, and both our kids and the kids from Holy Ghost Prep and Duquesne have been devastated at the loss. And finally, the *third pastoral priority* we established back in 2005 was the education of adults, adult literacy, and job training and job creation for adults. Our parish Job Training Center, San Antonio de Padua Escuela Laboral, was dedicated on Pentecost Sunday 2006 along with the dedication of the new church. The Job Training School offers classes for adults in Word and Data Processing, Beauty Salon Technician, sewing, and bread and pastry making.



Restaurant Management Graduates, St. Michael's Tech



Computer classes, Adult Job Training Center

Over the years, together with the invaluable help of the Dominican Sisters from Puerto Rico and a core group of dedicated lay leaders, we have gone from about twelve people in attendance at Sunday Mass in the parish to several hundred, have built a church, a technical school for job training for both men and women, and a parish center for catechesis, a youth center, a small music school where we teach piano and guitar, and give adult literacy training. In 2008 we opened our “Ludoteca,” a children’s creative play center, a sort of after school day care center for young children from single parent households. And, in August of 2010, after years of planning and fund raising, we finally opened our parish Technical Professional High School, St. Michael’s Fe y Alegria Technical School. Before we opened Saint Michael’s Technical Professional High School, there was no access to high school education for our youth, without taking a bus trip into San Juan. So, this was the realization of a dream for our community, the construction of a Catholic Technical High School, to help prepare the youth most in need for a better future. We do not charge tuition. We started in 2010 with eight classrooms and two labs, and in June of 2015 we inaugurated two pavilions of sixteen new classrooms, including a science lab and computer lab, and a library, and have an enrollment of over 480 students. As in the USA, and most of the rest of the world, COVID-19 has seriously affected our ability to carry on our pastoral ministry. As in so many other places, we implemented social distancing, face masks, and hand sanitation at Masses. The schools are a combination of distance learning and classroom teaching, with one day the boys, and the other day the girls, to maintain social distance. With the vaccine campaign we look forward to the time when we can resume all these pastoral ministries, with God’s help. We have come a long way in these seventeen years, and still have a

long way to go. We expect to have maybe upwards of 800 students within the next five years, and to open up three new technical areas to offer our students. By focusing most of our energy on the youth, we are addressing the problems of delinquency, violence, and drugs, and thus improving life for all the families, adults, and the elderly, not just the youth. As I keep telling our people, our youth are not the problem, they are the solution to the problem.

Don McEachin, CSSp