

Ministering to the Poor and Marginalized

Haiti has the dubious distinction of being the poorest nation in the Western hemisphere where 80% of the population lives in poverty and 50% of children die before the age of five. It might be located near vacation destinations like the Bahamas and Jamaica, but in reality it is worlds apart.

Sister Fidelis Rubbo, OSF has made a habit of seeking out the forgotten and isolated in her ministries as a Sylvania Franciscan. She has worked in rural parishes in Virginia and Mississippi where there was no pastor, just a visiting priest, serving as church administrator and spiritual leader. In 1999 she took a small group of parishioners to visit their “twin” parish in Haiti and saw what “forgotten and isolated” really looked like. She returned a year later and spent three months working in a home for malnourished children. A year after that she came back again and has been there ever since.

“I’ve watched frail children come in near death, and leave two or three months later healthy and vibrant,” said Sister Fidelis. “We teach mothers how to care for their children because thousands die unnecessarily each year from things as simple to cure as dehydration and diarrhea. We have set up clinics where mothers can come to get the medicine needed to stop these deaths.”

Sister Fidelis lives in the mountains above Pestel, a village of 36,000, about 100 miles west of Port-Au-Prince. Haiti is very mountainous, made up of a combination of red clay and rocks. The primary mode of transportation is walking. It takes Sister about an hour and a half to walk down to Pestel from her house and two and a half hours to walk back up. While the view from her front door is breathtaking, you quickly get a sense of the degree of elevation and how challenging it is to live there.

The greatest need has been providing health care for the residents. She works with 14 chapels—or villages—of people living in groups of as few as 300 to as many as 1,600 in an eight-mile radius around Pestel. The first few years, she lived with the residents right in their homes so she could get to know them and learn about their needs. Only six of the villages can be reached by road. The other eight have to be walked to. This limitation has given Sister Fidelis the opportunity to live like Francis, very close to the people.

“These are my sisters and brothers,” said Sister Fidelis. “I walk with them in their pursuit of the dignity they deserve. They teach me the oneness of us all. I feel Francis’ presence here very much. I have always tried to live the Franciscan ideal of poverty. In Haiti, that’s easier to do.”

When Sister Fidelis first got to Pestel there was no organized medical care in the mountains. Now they have two clinics open one day each in different locations to examine and treat patients. Those with serious conditions are sent to Port-Au-Prince for testing and surgeries. Three times a year the clinics sponsor an eye doctor. Sister Fidelis has gotten into the habit of asking visitors to bring as many pairs of dollar-store reading glasses they can carry.

A registered nurse, an LPN, and an assistant visit all 14 villages to examine residents and teach health education. Prevention is the key to reducing the death rate. Sister Fidelis said often times it is a case of not understanding some simple things that leads to the deaths of these children. She said the mothers want to protect their children; they just need more knowledge and the means. While she has come a long way, Sister Fidelis said there is still much work to do to reduce Haitian mortality.

There are no natural sources of drinking water, so one of the other problems facing these mountain dwellers is the lack of water. The spring and the fall are the rainy seasons, but in January, February and March the Haitians consistently run out of water. Building cisterns to collect rain water is one solution, but not easy to accomplish. Sister Fidelis said to get the rock and mortar needed to build traditional cisterns is done one stone and one bag of cement at a time. The villagers have to carry these materials on their heads and shoulders up to the location where the cistern is to be built. Portable, one-piece plastic cisterns have helped solve the labor problem to some degree. They are awkward, but lighter to carry, and are cheaper, only costing \$1,000 and capable of collecting 400 to 600 gallons of water. In comparison, the stone and mortar cisterns cost about \$1,600 to \$1,800 for materials, but they are four to five times larger in their water-holding capabilities. Having a steady source of clean water is crucial to reducing the number of cases of dehydration, a major cause of childhood deaths.

Sister Fidelis enjoys living close to the people of Pestel. She has a new house with a cement floor, corrugated tin roof, and lots of windows so she can see the sea. She has no electricity, just kerosene lanterns, and outdoor plumbing. She recently got a cell phone that works, but only if she walks 15 minutes to a higher elevation.

Walking in the steps of Francis among the poor and marginalized is hard work, but it has given Sister Fidelis the most precious gift possible—the awareness of God’s presence and the ability to share his love with all people.

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