

7th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME -- B (February 22, 2009)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

In today's second reading, Paul reminded the Corinthians that Jesus was always 'yes'--'yes' to the Father's plan for our salvation, especially through his own suffering, death and resurrection. In turn, Paul speaks of his own "amen" or 'yes' to Jesus' call to holiness and discipleship--implying, of course, our own personal call to echo that same 'yes' when we are challenged to love God above all things to and love neighbor as self.

God wants us to say 'yes' to the call to holiness and service that is extended to us personally and as individuals. But we are also called as Church, as a parish to give our 'yes' as well. I've said it before and I'll say it again: this parish does a wonderful job of saying 'yes' to that call to Christian love and service. We're surely not perfect--far from it--but many good things happen here because of your goodness and generosity. One of the prime examples of the St. Edward 'yes' is our ongoing relationship with and outreach to our twin parish: St. Theresa in Grison Garde, Haiti--a connection that is 10 years old now (quite a milestone!). As you know, a few of us went there earlier this month to see how things are going there and to help out in any way we could. It was the first time there for a number of us (myself included), while others had been there before. It was a tremendous experience; I'd like to share with you a bit of it.

As you know, Haiti is in the Caribbean, just east of Cuba (a two-hour flight from south Florida). It is the western third of the island of which the Dominican Republic is the eastern two-thirds. It's a very mountainous country, about the size of our state of Maryland. This island was discovered and claimed for Spain by Columbus in 1492, but the French established themselves in the western part which became the colony of Haiti in 1697. The French worked the land with slaves brought over from Africa (just as slavery was established in our own early history). Those slaves revolted in the late 1700's and on January 1, 1804, Haiti became the first republic of former slaves to declare independence. To this day, the Haitians celebrate January 1 for the same reason we Americans celebrate July 4. The historical connection with France still shows itself--French and Creole are the official languages of the country. Being so much closer to the equator and surrounded by water, Haiti has a tropical climate--warm and wet pretty much year-round. We did not see that much sun while we were there: it was at least overcast if not raining heavily almost that whole week.

For most of its history, the people of Haiti have lived under the burdens of political instability and violence. Since 2004, UN peacekeeping forces have been in Haiti; we saw them regularly in their jeeps, and they were fully armed. The people also live in crushing poverty--Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and one of the poorest countries in the world. Of its total population of some 9 million, about 80% live under the poverty line; over half the population lives in abject poverty. Unemployment and underemployment is widespread. About two-thirds of the population depends on agriculture, mostly small-scale subsistence farming--raising what little crops and livestock they can. We saw daily and regular evidence of that poverty, esp. in the countryside--very small and simple homes, small plots of land, often no running water or sanitation facilities or other services we just take for granted here.

We stayed in a hotel in Cap Haitien, a city of about 110,000 (about the size of Cedar Rapids). One of the most amazing things to me: I didn't see a single stoplight or even a traffic sign--no traffic lights, signs or lane markers on the streets. Now, just imagine driving along San Marnan, or Kimball or University or Ansborough Avenue without any traffic controls at all--well, welcome to traffic in Cap Haitien! Fortunately, we had a driver who took us to Grison Garde each day--he knew how to get around, how to nose his way in and out of traffic flow (with lots of toots on the horn). In the midst of

the chaos, all the cars (and broken-down cars), trucks, bicycles, motorbikes, pedestrians and yes, livestock wandering around, it was almost a miracle that anyone got anywhere at all! Grison Garde, where our twin parish is located, is about 12-15 miles away from Cap Haitien. However, it takes at least an hour if not an hour and a half to get out to Grison Garde, and the same amount of time to get back to Cap Haitien at night. There are two main reasons for that: 1) the amazing traffic situation in the city I already mentioned, and 2) the amazingly horrible condition of the roads. One of the references I checked said that about 3/4 of Haiti's roadways are not paved--I would have guessed more like 95%! The holes and ruts were everywhere; they could be quite deep and very large--sometimes covering the whole width of the roadway. No wonder there are auto parts and repair stores all over the place there! We were often going no more than 3-5 mph--you simply couldn't go any faster. And the driver would go wherever the road was least awful: left side of the road, right side, sometimes into oncoming traffic. It was amazing...I told Mayor Hurley last Sunday that I'll never say another word about any potholes in the streets of Waterloo.

One of the real highlights of the trip for me was the opportunity to concelebrate Mass on Sunday morning at the cathedral in Cap Haitien. Cap Haitien is the seat of an archdiocese, just like Dubuque is the seat of our own archdiocese. Catholicism is by far the predominant religion in Haiti (reflecting its French-Catholic heritage); about 80% of the population is Catholic. I was very fortunate that the priest at the cathedral knew some English since I don't know Creole at all. He allowed me to read the gospel and say a few words at homily time--which were then given in Creole by one of our translators, and to do part of the Eucharistic prayer. I offered that Mass for you, the people of St. Edward and it was a genuine privilege to do so. It was a tremendous experience of the fact that the Church is truly catholic (with a small 'c')--it truly is universal, and is intended by Jesus to embrace the entire human race (that's the original meaning of the word 'catholic').

Well, I've gone on at some length here, and I've barely even mentioned our twin parish in Grison Garde. I will speak in more detail about that next weekend--how we tried to help the good people there, and the nature and extent of our ongoing St. Edward's involvement with the church and the schools there. But for now I thought it would be helpful at this point simply to give this more general background on Haiti as a country with a history and a culture radically different from our own. Being a bit more aware of the extent of the extreme poverty there, we can understand more the needs of the people and therefore why we as a parish heard the call to connect with Haiti back in the late 1990's and to be of service to our brothers and sisters in Christ who live there. Please remember them in your prayers. May we continue to echo the 'yes' of Jesus and of St. Paul to God's call to discipleship and to loving and generous service to his people.