

1st SUNDAY OF LENT -- B (March 1, 2009)
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In today's first reading, we heard God speak to Noah of the covenant he would establish with him and his descendants. "Covenant" is a very special relationship based on solemn promises made and faithfully lived out. It is how Scripture describes over and over again the relationship between God and his people; God established that bond with Noah, later on with Abraham, Moses...and that covenant came to its perfect fulfillment in the person of Jesus who established the new and final covenant through his suffering, death and resurrection which we recall with special solemnity in this new season of Lent. "Covenant" can also be used to describe in a related way the connection that our parish has with St. Theresa in Grison-Garde, Haiti. After last weekend's brief introduction to the general situation in that country, I'd like to speak a bit today about that local parish and community.

Grison-Garde is a community (with its outlying areas) of about 30,000 people (20,000 are Catholic). The extreme poverty of Haiti that I mentioned last week is certainly present locally here. From what I could see, St. Theresa church appeared to be the biggest building in Grison-Garde; I'd guess it could seat 400-500 people. It's a very attractive building; you can tell that the people there take great pride in it and take good care of it. However, it definitely needs repairs; for example, the roof is made up of sheets of corrugated metal that were very rusty and marked with holes--you could see puddles of water on the floor inside from the rain that came in through the roof.

The parish school building is uphill from the church. We weren't able to see the teachers or students in school because school wasn't in session the days we were there. Because of the very heavy rains, the road conditions were worse than usual (and that's saying something...) and the school building's state of disrepair (water problems)--all of which meant that they couldn't hold classes. You could say that the students there had 'rain days' similar to the 'snow days' we have here. The condition of the school building was very primitive--the students had long wooden benches for seats, and there was one chalkboard on the wall...and that was about it. There were certainly no computers or other modern teaching resources that we take for granted. And there were no screens or glass windows either; like so many buildings in Haiti, the school was open-air because of the year-round tropical climate. That means, of course, that they have to face mosquitoes and other bugs all the time (there are a few advantages to our cold winters here!). Speaking of the school, there was also a team of volunteers from a non-church organization in Canada at Grison-Garde with us; they did a lot of repair and build-up work at the school (staircases, bookshelves, etc.). They also arranged for a shipment of over \$100,000 worth of donated school and other supplies (books, pencils, other classroom resources). They were a great group of very dedicated, hard-working people--we hope to meet up with them again.

Even though school was not in session while we were there, we did see quite a number of children and young people in Grison-Garde. They were often watching us with great curiosity. Other times they were just laughing, mugging for the camera when we were taking pictures, and otherwise playing around like kids do all over the world. There was one little guy there (maybe 8-9 years old) who was wearing an old Minnesota Vikings jersey--obviously a highly-intelligent young man...(I felt right at home--it was great!).

The great majority of our time in Grison-Garde was spent at the clinic. When you hear the word 'clinic', you probably think of a modern doctor's office or medical center. Believe me--that's not what is in Grison-Garde. Instead, the clinic there is a small one-story building with 4-5 small compartments (it reminded me of a sort of 'mini-strip-mall'). Although there was electrical wiring and fixtures in the rooms, there were no light bulbs in the sockets--so we had to rely on natural daylight coming through those open window areas. And given the fact that it was cloudy and overcast almost the whole time

we were there, it was quite a challenge. There were three main areas of activity:

1) the doctors' 'office' where Patricia Connell and Giobana (one of her residents-in-training) saw as many people as they could. Those people came in with wide variety of ailments and sickness. Our doctors brought their own medical instruments since there were none to be had there.

2) then there was the pharmacy--two doors down from where the doctors worked. Because of the generosity of some of our local pharmacists, we were able to take with us a good supply of basic medications and other related supplies. After seeing the doctor who would write out a prescription, the person would bring it to the pharmacy. I spent some time there; and if I do say so myself, I could count out those Tylenols or multivitamin tablets with the best of them! I haven't decided yet if I'm going to go for a degree in pharmacy after that vast day-and-a-half experience...

3) finally there was what we might call "Eyeglasses 'R' Us". People in Grison-Garde are like people everywhere else--they often do not have the best of vision, so many of them could use some glasses. We took down with us a large number of pairs of glasses: simple reading glasses as well as many prescription glasses that had been donated. Cheri Einsweiler and I set up those glasses on two small cots in the room between the pharmacy and the doctors' room (in a space about half the size of this sanctuary). Cheri was great--she knows quite a bit of French and was able to find out what kind of glasses helped and which ones didn't. I, on the other hand, was able to:

--smile a lot,

--offer them a case or holder for the glasses they chose (mainly by pointing to them), and

--hopefully not look too dumb.

I did learn how to say "may God bless you" in Creole, so I could at least offer that ("Bon Dieu bene vous"). And if you are wondering, no--I'm not going to pursue a Doctor of Optometry degree (pharmacy would be more than enough for me at this point)...

All joking aside; it was a tremendous experience and a genuine privilege for me to go along on this mission trip to Grison-Garde, the fifth one undertaken by St. Ed's parishioners since our twinning relationship began 10 years ago (and I could easily see making another trip there in the future). It was truly inspiring to see the dedication, the genuine care and the very hard work done by your fellow parishioners there in all the many ways they did so--it was an honor for me to be with them (I was one very proud pastor!).

Perhaps even more inspiring was to see the quiet strength and the dignity of the people of Grison-Garde. Again, the poverty and the living conditions there are appalling--I truly wonder how long any of us would survive in those conditions. I left Haiti with a whole new appreciation and gratitude for the prosperity we have in this country and the freedom and resources with which to pursue it--yes, even in these relatively tough economic times we now face. But I also came away with a renewed appreciation for the fact that the people of Grison-Garde and the world's poor in general are not just nameless creatures to be pitied from afar, but are instead our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ and are loved by the heavenly Father just as much as we are. They experience needs like we never will, but they also know joy, laughter, love, family and faith--just like we do. We are part of them, and they are part of us--the one family of God, the one Body of Christ, the one Church.

In the gospel for this first Sunday of Lent, we are reminded of the fact that Jesus faced temptations from Satan in the desert. As we confront the dire reality of extreme poverty in Haiti, it's easy to experience different kinds of temptation:

--"we're going to go in there and fix it all up for everyone"--that spirit of zeal and idealism. That lasts for a moment...till you see the enormity of the problem there.

--then comes the opposite temptation, to give up in despair: 'the needs are far too great; we can't even make a dent in the problem--why bother?'

Add to that another aspect of the challenge we faced in Grison-Garde: learning that some of the past

efforts St. Edward's had made on its behalf had not been followed through on. We also came to learn that it was one person at St. Theresa's (the parish in Grison-Garde) who was the reason for those problems. Fortunately, that person has been removed and is no longer associated with the parish. Therefore, we now can and are taking steps to correct those problems.

In the meantime--as I said--it can be tempting to just let it go and give up because the poverty and problems in Grison-Garde are so far beyond our ability to fix completely. Obviously, no one person or parish can meet all the needs of the world--or even of one small community in rural Haiti. But as Blessed Teresa of Calcutta used to say, "God does not call us to be successful--he calls us to be faithful". No, we can't lift all of Grison-Garde out of poverty, we can't cure every illness or promise a good job and prosperous future to every student in the schools there. But every time one person is helped, or fed, or treated, or taught, we are doing what we can--and therefore what we ought to do. Remember Jesus' words: "whatever you do for the least of my brothers or sisters, you do for me." I'm very proud of you, the good people of St. Edward parish, for your ongoing commitment to serve and assist Christ in the good people of Grison-Garde. May we reject the temptations and complacency and despair; may we renew and strengthen our resolve as individuals and as parish to offer as we can our loving service in Jesus' name to those in need--whether they live in Haiti, across the street, or in your own home.