

Homily
May 7, 2023
5th Sunday of Easter
22:22-32:58

I was ordained a priest of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis many years ago, but I won't tell you how many. – Long enough to retire. But you know, even when I was in the seminary, I had a desire to be a missionary. And so, a few years ago when I retired from parish ministry, I did just that. I joined a group called Food for the Poor.

I remember my first mission trip was with a medical team: Two doctors, a dentist, three nurses, five pre-med students and myself. We traveled to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to live and to work with the missionary Sisters of Charity, Mother Teresa's Sisters. Before we went, they sent us instructions and they said that when you come, only bring enough clothes for three days – three days change of clothes. They said, don't wear a watch. Don't wear any kind of jewelry or chains or anything like that. And don't bring cash.

We stayed in what is probably one of the worst parts of that city, an area called City of the Sun. But that name is kind of a misnomer because it's not really a bright spot in Port-au-Prince. The streets are probably about twice as wide as the aisle of this church. I use the term "street" kind of loosely because they were more like dirt paths. And on either side of them ran a trench where the raw sewage from the homes ran.

The houses were probably about as wide as this cut out area of these pews in the front of the church. About 10' x 10'. They weren't houses anything like we're used to. They were made of all kinds of things, whatever people could find: cinder blocks, tin, cardboard...whatever. They always had a dirt floor. Usually there'd be between five and ten people who would live in that little house.

Of course, you know it's impossible to fit five or ten people in that little space. So they would actually come and go in shifts. Some would be there during the day. Some would be there at night.

During the days, our team would visit various locations throughout the city and do clinics. We'd help the doctors to treat tropical wounds, which are very prevalent in Haiti. They don't heal very well, or very quickly. So we'd apply medicine and put on bandages. We might help the dentist to fill cavities or pull teeth. We would dispense medicine.

Other days we might go to the orphanage that was run by the Sisters. They had about forty or fifty, or so - kids there. Every morning when we would walk up, the kids would all come running up to the front gates. They were excited to see us. You could tell they were kind of hungry for attention. We'd go inside and we'd help the Sisters to bathe them, dress them, feed them and then we'd spend the day playing games with them. Or, they'd spend the day playing games with us.

All these children had been abandoned by their parents. They weren't abandoned because their parents didn't love them, but because their parents could not afford to feed them, or to clothe them. So, they entrusted the children to the care of the Sisters of Charity because they knew that they'd take care of them.

After being there for two or three months, I kind of did a self-reflection about this experience and how it affected me. And one of the things I really noticed was how little I really needed. I lost all sense of time. I found I didn't need a lot of clothes. I didn't need a big house. I didn't need a lot of comforts that I thought I did.

Food for the Poor, who I represent today, works in 21 of the poorest countries in Central and South America, countries that sometimes sound like they're far away from us, but really they're pretty close. Places like Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Places like Venezuela, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Colombia.

Our name, I think, is a little bit misleading. Yes. We do feed people. We do give drink to people. But we try to do more than that. We're trying to lift people out of poverty. We're trying to give them dignity and self-respect, to make them self-sufficient. We empower people to begin cottage industries, using the local resources of their area to make things that they can trade and barter. Many of those are sent here to the United States, where Food for the Poor sells them for these people.

We help people to build solid, strong homes. We provide the materials. And they build these houses. Houses that are safe and secure.

We help the people to dig wells and provide water purification systems. Because a lot of the time they don't have pure water like we do. They can't just go to the bathroom or the kitchen and turn the spigot and out comes the water.

One project we did in Honduras was, we sent twenty single mothers to a truck driving school to learn how to drive semis. It's not a common thing for women in the United States. But the thing is that in Honduras, it's a high-paying, high-demand job. There are not enough truck drivers. And so by paying the tuition for these women to go to the school, learn how to drive a truck, their families then, became self-sufficient. - This week, as a matter of fact, tomorrow, I am going to Honduras and I'm going to visit this school where we sent these women.

I'd like to share with you just one other brief story of another mission trip that I took to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Again, we were staying with the Missionary Sisters of Charity. One Saturday morning a bunch of lay missionaries and priests were going to travel to a village, or town, about twenty or thirty miles away. So, we all got in the back of this pick-up truck. The Sisters gave each of us a brown bag lunch and we took off.

As we got close to that town, we came upon a huge trash dump – probably five or six times the height of the ceiling of this church. And all over this dump, there were kids rooting through trash and garbage. They were looking for food. But they were also looking for things they could take home and repurpose to use with their own families.

When the truck stopped, one of the lay missionaries jumped out of the back. He began to climb up that hill of garbage. He came upon a boy who was probably about ten years old. The missionary reached into his brown bag lunch, pulled out a sandwich and gave it to the boy, who immediately shoved it under his shirt. The missionary was surprised

and he said, "Aren't you going to eat that sandwich?" The boy said, "No. I'm going to take it home to my brother because it's his day to eat."

Sometimes when I tell these stories, people say, "You know, these are very sad stories," and they are sad stories. But they are also stories of hope because I've seen people's lives changed. Changed by having a safe, secure place to live, by having good clean drinking water, by learning a trade by which they can help their own family.

Today I have come here to ask you to partner with us – Food for the Poor. You'll see in the pews these brochures. They tell you a lot more than I can ever tell you about the work that we do. Five or so minutes is not enough to share with you all the work we do in these various countries. We invite you to take one of these home with you today, to read it. We don't take a second collection. If you want to make a donation today, there is an envelope attached – self-addressed, postage paid. You can tear that off. You can make a donation. You can put it in the collection if you wish. You can hand it to me as you leave today. Or you can take it home with you. Read the material. Then if you feel moved to make a donation, like I say, it's self-addressed, postage paid. You can mail it in later.

Saint Teresa one time wrote and said, "Christ today has no physical body. Christ no longer has hands. Christ no longer has feet. Christ only has your body, your hands, your feet to show kindness and compassion to the poorest of the poor."