

Medical Mission to Jamaica:

An Ignatian Journey by Anthony Compagnone, MD

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When my parish, St. Ignatius, announced its second annual service mission to our sister parish, St. Anne's, in West Kingston, Jamaica, I jumped at the chance to go. I had wanted to visit and serve in a developing country since medical school, but work constraints and other commitments always seemed to get in the way. A gentle nudge from our pastor, Fr. Robert VerEecke, SJ, convinced me to exchange vacation time for service time.

Along with Fr. Bob, I would be joining 11 other parishioners for the weeklong, mid-January journey. As a physician I would be part of a five-person medical team that would provide consultative care primarily to school-aged children. Because of fairly strict Jamaican regulations regarding provision of medical services, our team would be arriving in Jamaica as volunteers with nothing in hand but our stethoscopes and penlights—no vaccines, medications, or sophisticated equipment to help us. I'd have to rely once again on old-fashioned physical-diagnosis skills.

I believed the trip would dovetail nicely with the spiritual journey I was engaged in at the time: the 19th Annotation of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which I had begun at St. Ignatius the previous fall.

In advance of the West Kingston



The author with children from St. Pius.

mission, I spent two days resting and recovering from a grueling winter office schedule at a resort in the Blue Mountains about 40 minutes north of the city. From my perch at Strawberry Hill, I settled into the beauty of the Jamaican landscape and its welcoming, friendly people. At dusk across the valley, I observed the expanding glow of the lights of Kingston far below and the shimmer of the blue Caribbean beyond. I couldn't help being reminded of a powerful contemplation of the *Spiritual Exercises*—that of the Trinity hovering benevolently above and gazing at the beauty of all creation.

I was ill-prepared for what I would experience over the next five days of work among the Jamaican poor.

Our host, Fr. Peter McIsaac, SJ, pastor of St. Anne's, shuttled the medical team on a bright and steamy

Monday morning to our first of two days' work at St. Pius School and clinic across town. (Others of our group would head off to the classrooms at St. Anne's or to community assignments.) I was shocked by the squalor of the urban landscape—makeshift “homes” thrown together with corrugated metal and other detritus; animals roaming the streets, rummaging through heaps of garbage; the

pervasive, acrid odor of smoke from roadside fires.

Our clinic at St. Pius, while poor, was nevertheless welcoming—a happy oasis in the urban blight. However, when the waiting room quickly filled with a hundred grade-schoolers, I knew that our exams were going to be cursory at best. We would be seeing children triaged by their classroom teachers for established medical diagnoses—asthma, allergies, attention disorder issues. However, there would be no medical records to review, no parents to answer questions. We had to make do with the equipment we had brought, bolstered by a few medications and first-aid supplies of St. Pius's minimally stocked pharmacy.

Despite the number of children alarmingly malnourished and with



Members of St. Ignatius parish and the Canadian Province with Fr. Bob VerEecke, SJ, center back, and Fr. Peter McIsaac, SJ, center front. Tony Compagnone is in the front, far right.

very poor dental hygiene, I was happy to see that very few required advanced or urgent medical care. We made careful notes of those children in the hope that we might trigger access to specialty attention. What surprised me most was how happy the children were, how unfazed by their circumstances, how eager to be engaged and to play.

During our evening meetings at our residence at St. George's College, group members reflected on our various experiences during the day and shared insights. Pre-dinner Mass provided the opportunity to voice our prayers and hopes for one another and our Jamaica acquaintances. After-dinner presentations on Jamaican educational, economic, and health care issues stimulated further discussion. I struggled in those first two days with what I might possibly offer these children in the midst of such extreme need, and my very limited resources. In the end, I decided that all I really could do was pray for them, and intentionally bless them with the laying on of my hands, tracing on them a sign of the Cross with my penlight as I examined their eye movements.

On Wednesday morning, my focus shifted to St. Anne's, where I would not have the luxury of an established clinic. Instead, Fr. Peter arranged

for medical exams to be done in the church sacristy, with the church itself serving as the waiting area for the schoolchildren. There I met Sabrina, a frail seven-year-old with a tumor of her spine that had weakened her legs and prevented her from lying comfortably on her back; and Mary, a mentally handicapped teen who was being repeatedly assaulted by local hoodlums while her mom was at work.

In the afternoon, I accompanied Sr. Beverly (St. Anne's equivalent of Mother Teresa) on targeted rounds of adults who she felt needed special attention: Erica, a beautiful 23-year-old wasting away with AIDS and tuberculosis; 93-year-old Mr. P., languishing with dementia at home in his bed, lovingly cared for by his extended family; Miss S., at 77 with still-penetrating green eyes, carefully locking her front door before she yielded to my blood-pressure cuff in Sr. Beverly's van. All poor, all with so little for me to offer, I thought.

That evening at reflection, I was so choked with emotion that I couldn't

utter a word of insight. At Mass, I was overcome by such a flood of tears that I thought I would not recover. I knew instantly that I was experiencing deep Ignatian desolation. I had completely lost the reassurance of prayer; even the Eucharist seemed to offer no consolation.

As the evening progressed, I began to process my experience, grateful for the support of my fellow travelers and the conviviality of the community meal. But real consolation came in the form of a dynamo named Margaret Bolt, former principal, now under-secretary for Jamaica's Ministry of Education, who offered our after-dinner presentation. The story of Margaret's loving but no-nonsense turnaround of her elementary school, coupled with her positive, forward-looking attitude, made me feel less despondent about Jamaica's needs and more hopeful about its potential. More reassurance came on Thursday night with guest lecturer Margaret Campbell, newly appointed (and the first woman) principal of St. George's. Her unabashed witness to the consolation of the Spirit in her life and work, despite tremendous adversity, was nothing short of inspirational.

The Spirit-filled conviction and commitment of these women, along with that of our Jesuit hosts at St. George's and St. Anne's, helped me realize that in my great desire to give, I had completely lost sight of the opportunity to receive: to receive the

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insight, hope, and confidence of viewpoints broader than my own, and the fortitude of a people I had only just come to know.

On Sunday evening, during our final group reflection, still energized by the roof-raising liturgy we had participated in that morning at St. Anne's, we had the chance to hear Fr. Peter's perspective on his experience as pastor. We asked Fr. Peter what kept him going in the face of such seemingly insurmountable challenges. He told us quite simply, "God is with the poor. In being close to the poor, I feel I am closer to God."

As I reflect again on my Jamaica journey, I better understand what it means to find God in all things. I have experienced the loveliness of a tropical paradise and the beauty of a people wounded by poverty and neglect. By God's grace my heart has been opened to the possibility of hope even in a world fractured by despair. Consolation has replaced keenly felt desolation, and a greater appreciation for the necessity and power of prayer.

From this vantage point now eight months following my trip, I believe I will always see Kingston as a glimmering city set upon a beautiful blue sea, full of joyful children and smiling, forthright people. Jamaica will stand for me as one of the Mountaintops of my life, that rare meeting place between God and his beloved, a place of revelation and transfiguration. Far from conjuring up images of poverty and despair, my mission to St. Anne's will always evoke the essence of what it means to be a contemplative-in-action, and the grace of having drawn achingly close to God.

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Over the summer, Ms. Margaret Campbell, principal of St. George's, visited the provincial office, during time off from her course at Harvard University. She is pictured here with Fr. Bill Russell, SJ, and Meg Florentine, provincial assistant for Secondary education.

New England Parishes Combat Poverty in Haiti

Like St. Ignatius Parish in Chestnut Hill, two other New England parishes served by Jesuits sponsor programs that combat poverty in the Caribbean, specifically in the desperately poor country of Haiti.

In 1990 St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, staffed by Jesuits on the campus of the University of Connecticut at Storrs, began offering financial aid to a church in Lilavois, Haiti. Five years later a Haiti Committee was formed in Storrs to administer a sponsorship program for poor children at Ecole Agape, a free school started by a Haitian parishioner at Lilavois. Today St. Thomas, under the leadership of its pastor Fr. Paul Sullivan, SJ, has almost 90 sponsors who make annual donations to support the school. In addition, the parish helps support a clinic in rural Haiti and a family in Jeremie. Through the Jesuit-run campus ministry program, UConn students participate in an annual ten-day immersion trip to Haiti.

In Portland, Maine an integral part of Sacred Heart/St. Dominic Parish's mission is its Haiti Project, according to Jesuit pastor, Fr. Richard Bertrand, SJ. Led by William (Bill) and Ursula Slavik, parishioners raise almost \$10,000 every year through various fundraisers to support a Catholic church and grade school outside the nation's capital city of Port-au-Prince. The Slaviks along with other parishioners, have themselves traveled to Haiti to promote the Project. In February of this year *The Portland Press Herald* featured a story about the parish's work in Haiti.

In addition to the works and contributions of these two parishes, the New England Province of Jesuits has one of its own members currently working full-time in rural northwest Haiti. Fr. Perard Monestime, SJ, a native Haitian, directs a program sponsored by Jesuit Refugee and Migrant Services, and he also serves on the staff of a Fey y Alegria School.