

## St. Vincent's Parish in Vallieres, Haiti

Our Lady of Mercy Parish (OLM) has a "twinning" relationship with St. Vincent's Parish in Haiti. OLM is part of a program called Parish Twinning Program of the Americas or PTPA (formerly Haiti Parish Twinning Program or HPTP). PTPA has been operating for almost 30 years and has involved approximately 400 churches and other organizations with poor parishes in Haiti and several Latin American countries. PTPA was started by Theresa Patterson, from Nashville TN, and Harry Hosey. Mr Hosey is now deceased.

OLM began its twinning relationship with St. Vincents in 1996, after our then Social Justice group was approached to consider this by Fr. Jack Martin. We began by sending money (\$1,000 a year at first) to the pastor of St. Vincents. Fr. Jack and Normand Varieur (Grandpapa) from the Haiti Solidarity Network of the North East (HSNNE) suggested that it would be beneficial for representatives from OLM to visit Haiti to understand the situation and the relationship better. In 1998 Judy Reilly made the first trip to Vallieres accompanied by Fr. Gene Squeo and then seminarian (now Father) Steven Toth.

In 1999 the second group from OLM went down as a medical mission. Two doctors, Dr. Steve Zoretic and Dr. Vicki Perez, led the group of eight, which included Fathers Charlie Granstrand and Ken Herbster and Sister Kay Coll, as well as Georgette Delinois who served as the translator. They worked with the clinic "auxillaire" in Vallieres, Philipp Augustin and saw about 300 patients each day. Through the years, a delegation from OLM has visited Vallieres at least once a year, and often two or three times. There was a second medical mission and Dieudonne Bazile served as the translator. The yearly commitment to the pastor of St. Vincents increased to \$4,000. Other needs and programs developed and additional money was contributed by OLM parishioners to support them. Examples: the Christ Roi elementary school, a nutrition program for mothers and infants, payment for catechists in the outlying chapels, scholarships for tuition for secondary school students, leadership formation for the peasant group, micro credit loans, purchase of three donkeys for the peasant group, adult literacy program, agronomy program. Some of these programs continue on and others have ended. Generators, computers, a motor bike, medical supplies, school supplies, sports equipment, household appliances and supplies, church equipment and sound systems, clothing, shoes, seeds and other items have been donated by OLM parishioners and friends and have been shipped to Vallieres by sea container, which is coordinated by PTPA and sometimes by HSNNE.

During the ten years of the relationship, Vallieres has had seven different pastors. The relationship has been better with some than with others. This situation has led to the development of a strong relationship between the visitors from OLM and the people of Vallieres and the surrounding chapels. (Chapels are more remote small communities which are part of the parish of St. Vincents. There are about 7 or 8 of them.) Clauvice St. Hilaire and Judy Reilly approached a small group of 6 people in 2000 to come together and work for a better community in Vallieres. This group grew into the peasant group of Men Kontre Valye (Men Kontre), which now has over 200 members. It is organized into small groups of approximately 8 to 14 people, usually from the same community, that work together for their mutual benefit. They elected an executive committee, applied for and received legal status from the Haitian government, drafted bylaws and have

regular meetings. It is through this group that OLM instituted its micro credit program. The group also extends small loans to its member groups from the membership dues and interest that it collects.

Members of Men Kontre requested that OLM help them with an adult literacy program. Through OLM support we located a facilitator/trainer who got the program started. OLM provided the materials for the classes and pays the teachers. There are currently 5 centers operating, teaching about 100 people to read, write and learn basic arithmetic.

The scholarship program grew out of a few individuals requesting that OLM visitors help them send their children to school. We do not believe that singling out a few people for help is good for the community. Therefore, we suggested that they form a committee to set up a program to benefit all children eligible to attend secondary school (equivalent to high school in the US) and we would try to find sponsors in the US to support a child. The cost is about \$250 per child per year. OLM currently sends about 200 children to secondary school. As a result of this scholarship program, a group of young men in Vallieres, qualified as professors, were able to open a secondary school in the village of Vallieres, called College Union Vallieres. Before the students had this choice, they all had to leave the village and live away from home to attend secondary school, which was not a good situation. This program has been in affect for 4 years. We were also able to find 7 OLM families/individuals who now sponsor 7 of our graduates from secondary school to study at a university in Haiti. This costs \$2,500 a year per student, with a four year commitment from the donor in the US.

Our newest program (1 year old) is the agronomy program, which grew out of our concern for the problem of deforestation which is severe in Vallieres. The majority of people in Vallieres are farmers. Often crops barely support the family needs. Many people cut down trees to make charcoal, the major source of fuel to cook food throughout the country. The result is devastating erosion, flooding and loss of top soil. This enforces a subsistence economy. OLM hired Rene St. Hilaire (younger brother of Clauvice), with a graduate degree in agronomy to work with the community through Men Kontre. Rene has started a tree planting project and already has 14 small nurseries set up with seedlings to be distributed to people willing to grow them and maintain them. He works with the small groups of Men Kontre to teach them better farming techniques, such as crop rotation, organic fertilization and pest control. He has also started a sanitation program with the building of latrines and a clean water project. He also works with the farmers to raise their awareness of different crops that may provide them with greater income than the usual crops grown and marketed by most farmers.

Our journey with the people of Vallieres has not always been smooth and easy. We have made many mistakes and learned many lessons along the way and continue to do so. We have a few general principles that we try always to keep. They are:

- Always communicate with the people first (as many of them as possible) to identify needs and programs. They know best. Don't impose a program that we think is good for them, because we want it.
- The relationship should be based on respect and collaboration.
- The people must always put their "sweat equity" into any program we are involved in.
- Don't deal with or favor individuals, it creates resentment and jealousy.
- Always deal with a group, in the open. Let as many people as possible know what we are doing. No secrets or intrigues.
- Be honest and require honesty in return.
- Be dependable and consistent.
- Don't promise things that we cannot deliver.

OLM parishioners who have visited Vallieres are Pegie Doll, Fr. Charles Granstrand, Dr. Victoria Perez, Ethel Prusha, Chris Reilly, Judy Reilly, Kim Zoretic, Dr. Steve Zoretic and Kevin Carroll. Friends of OLM who have visited Vallieres are Dieudonne Bazile, Sr. Kay Coll, Georgette Delinois, Jack Egan, Fr. Ken Herbster, Fr. Jack Martin, Dr. Sue Morrison, Fr. Eugene Squeo, Clauvice St. Hilaire, Pat Torracco, Fr. Steven Toth, Tim Watters, Matthew Watters.