

Cassie and Rod Ellis, Sharon Humphries and Chris Kapral visited Fr. Murat and our twin church in Haiti, Our Lady's Nativity Parish, in May 2009. The primary reason for our trip was to ensure the funds St. Robert's sends are being used for their intended purposes; those being:

- 1) feeding children through our school lunch program
- 2) educating children via our student sponsorship program
- 3) maintaining the parish through our twinning program

Our delegation had many meetings with Father Murat, who hosted us at the rectory, Sister Judy Vollbrecht from the Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and her team of Haitians who administer the student sponsor program and we also met with numerous principals, teachers, parents and students. We were pleased to report back to the Haiti Committee earlier this week and now to you, the St. Robert's parishioners who generously support these programs, that the funds are being used for their intended purpose. Accounting systems are in place and, most importantly, our dollars are making a difference in the lives of the people of Verrettes, Haiti.

Haiti was hit by four hurricanes this past summer which were especially devastating in the mountain areas. Father Murat told us that because of the availability of the lunches, 50 additional students enrolled in the poorest parish school at Descombes this past fall. (There is no free public education in Haiti.) A highlight of our trip was a visit to one of the parish schools in Allaire. The students encircled and sang to us. Afterward, Cassie and Sharon spoke to them and then handed out candy. Later, we watched the day's beans, rice and sardine sauce being cooked and served. For many students, we knew this would be their only meal of the day.

While this was my first trip to Haiti, others in our delegation who had been there previously were encouraged by the progress they saw. Funds we have donated for church renovation have been put to good use. Formerly muddy entrances are now paved. Crumbling church footings have been reinforced. Entrances and windows have been renovated. And St. Robert's Trade School, the building of which we funded in 2001, is in operation, offering classes in sewing, cooking, masonry, auto repair and teaching. We met a young man who had completed the school's auto mechanic curriculum. He used the skills he learned at St. Robert's to purchase and fix an old motorcycle which he now operates as a taxi. This may seem meager to us, but in Haiti, where unemployment is 70%, it's a way to eke out a living.

We were impressed by the amount of activity we saw throughout all of Haiti. By 5 AM, the streets are bustling. Despite the poverty, we saw very little begging. Father Murat believes that all parents must participate in the funding of their children's education. In fact, at one morning Mass, Father Murat told his parishioners, "The people of Michigan are here to help us, but they cannot solve Haiti's problems. It is up to the people Haiti to solve our problems."

Despite the progress and work ethic, though, the needs are still many. The worldwide economic crisis, exacerbated by the hurricanes, has caused the price of rice to increase by 60%. Therefore, Father Murat has had to cut back on the number of days lunches are served. This is especially unfortunate in the mountains where the walk to school may take over two hours, so some students only attend on lunch days. The need for additional student sponsors, especially at the poorest schools like Descombes, is great. And at the church itself, Father Murat would like to build a community center and at the trade school, a basketball court. The city of Verrettes is sorely lacking facilities and Father has a vision of the church groups and students spending more time in and around Our Lady's Nativity Parish.

Our delegation left Verrettes encouraged. Father Murat is a dynamic pastor. Sister Judy has assembled a team of trustworthy, competent young Haitian administrators who take a personal interest in and monitor the progress of each sponsored student. Yet there is so much more to be done. There are still too many children who go to bed hungry in Verrettes. Too many parents are unable to afford to send their children to school. Church facilities are almost non-existent except for the church itself. The people of Verrettes and the parishioners at Our Lady's Nativity Parish are not looking to St. Robert's to solve all of their problems, but they do need our assistance.

There are cards in the pews inviting you to participate in St. Robert's Haiti programs—be they school lunches or student sponsorships. Please consider taking one. Perhaps there are specific initiatives that are meaningful to you. We met with an amazing young man named Vladimyr Desulme who is desperately in need of tuition assistance. Vladimyr, who helps run the sponsor program, is attending college to be a Civil Engineer and dreams of returning to his hometown of Verrettes to help develop infrastructure. Those of you who are interested in spiritual development may be moved to assist Father Murat in achieving his vision of building a community center adjacent to the church.

A group of us will be manning a table in the gathering area after mass. Please stop by for a few minutes to see our photos, discuss the programs and perhaps to drop off your cards. Also, we encourage those of you who might be interested in joining our committee to come to our next meeting July 7 at 5 PM here at the church. Our group dedicates our work to our mentor and advisor, Sister JoAn Brown, who has been the inspirational force behind our group.

I would like to conclude by sharing a letter written and hand delivered to us at the rectory by one of the sponsored children:

*To Program Sponsor Michigan,*

*We greet you in the name of mighty God.*

*We pray to God for you.*

*Please pray for me that my life can change.*

*I am Saintilus Cleana and I thank you.*

*It is you who send food for me and I thank you again.*

We truly are making a difference in the lives of the children of Verrettes. And they, in turn, are grateful for the help and pay us back in the only way they can: with their prayers. That is what our twinning program is all about.