

# My First Visit to Incredible Haiti: March 10-16, 2017

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Haiti is a beautiful Caribbean country with a population of over 10 million. For most people everyday life is a struggle. Few have electricity or running water. The people care deeply for each other and have faced poverty and disasters together. They celebrate life with joy, laughter and dancing. Catholicism is the official religion but voodoo may be considered the country's national religion. In the 1700s thousands of West Africans were shipped as slaves to Haiti. They were baptized as Christians upon their arrival as their traditional African religious practices were seen as a threat to the colonial system and were forbidden. Both Christianity and voodoo venerate a supreme being and believe in the existence of invisible evil spirits or demons and in an afterlife. In voodoo there is no freewill or personal choice. During lent people dance down the streets in costume following rara bands. The rara festivals give the people of Haiti a chance to celebrate their voodoo beliefs in combination with the resurrection of Christ. From slavery to economic turmoil the Haitians have found strength in the rara festivals of their island.



Frs. William Kaliyadan, Joe Gosselin and I flew to Port-au-Prince for my first visit to Haiti. Fr. Joe served as our guide and translator as Fr. William and I spoke neither French nor Haitian Creole. We were met by Fr. Robinson Alexis, the pastor of St. Claire of Assisi parish in Dessaline which for over twenty years has been the sister parish of Our Lady of the Cape Parish in Brewster MA. After a good night rest we visited the market in Dessalines which gave me a good sense of what life was like for the Haitian people. Everything is sold in the market. Men and women carry heavy barrels of tomatoes, bananas, meat and fish on their heads. Others push wheel barrows or lead donkeys loaded with vegetables, fruit or coal. The poor hungry beat on their stomachs to indicate they need food and ask for money. It was explained to me the very poor hardly eat one meal a day, some may have two meals a day and only a few eat well.



The intent of my visit was to get a feel of the life and ministry of two La Salette missionaries working in Haiti since 2009. Frs. Evariste Ralohosty and Herve Rafalimanatosa are both from Madagascar are now in the diocese of Gonnaives. Fr. Evariste joined the La Salettes when he was seventeen and was ordained in 1996. After working in Antsirbe and Ambolotara Madagascar he left his family and friends to be the first La Salette to arrive in Haiti. After learning Creole the transition was easy for him. His greatest challenge was to adapt to the rhythm of Haitian life. Nothing, he says, moves fast in Haiti. He soon learned to be patient and he says that he became a simple instrument of God in serving His people in Haiti. He is the pioneer of the La Salette mission in Haiti.



He established a rectory surrounded by beautiful mountains in Bionnais with hope it would become the La Salette Center in Haiti. After 3 years, he moved to St. Ann and St. Joaquin parish in Haute Feuille (High Leaf), known as the breadbasket of the country. Besides the parish there are two mission chapels and two schools. On Sunday about 175 people dressed in their Sunday best attended Mass at the parish and 75 at Our Lady of La Salette mission chapel. Every one participates in song and prayer. At the offertory procession everyone brought their offering to a basket in the front but they can give only from the little they have. Ten to fifteen dollars was collected at St. Ann and about five dollars at the mission. The church of St. Ann does not have a sacristy and they dream of building a small parish hall when funds are available. Maria Goretti school has 657 students. The second floor of the school is almost complete with help from Our Lady of the Cape parish. It only needs some paint and finishing touches. A second floor for the rectory requires another \$8,000 for its completion. The second mission has about 50 people attending Sunday Mass and the school serves the 154 students through 4<sup>th</sup> grade. For classrooms they divide the chapel into two rooms. Soon a new building will be needed for the kindergarten classrooms.



An hour and fifteen minute drive on unpaved and winding roads brought us to reach Bayonnais, a remote village known for voodoo worship is the home of the second La Salette Parish. Fr. Herve, the pastor now after Fr. Evariste was ordained in Madagascar in 2008 and after serving in the diocese of Ihoosy he came to Haiti in 2016. Initially it was a difficult adjustment but now he feels very relaxed and at home in Haiti. He learned Haitian Creole easily. There is a beautiful rectory and the church can seat 600. Four to five hundred attend Sunday Mass. There is a school with 30 students including kindergarten. They certainly need more classrooms and a kitchen for meal preparation since every school in Haiti has lunch programs funded by different

charitable organizations. The parish has two mission chapels about 10 miles away but it takes a long time to reach them due to poor road conditions especially during the rainy season.



We visited schools in Dessalines and Fabias. St. Claire school has 1,020 students and is run by the Salesian Sisters from Madagascar. They also have a medical clinic that serves 50 to 60 patients a day. The school and the clinic are supported by Our Lady of the Cape Parish in Brewster where Fr. William is pastor. St. Claire Lumiere School has 670 students. Fr. Robinson has started an electrical engineering vocational school with 30 students with hopes of adding additional plumbing and nurses aid programs. In the remote village of Fabias there is a school for 260 students which was partly destroyed by the hurricane last year but is being rebuilt by the parishioners of Our Lady of the Cape. The people are very thankful for the support they receive and believe education will bring a brighter future for their children. It is common for education for students from poor families to end their education after six years of primary school and generally schools lack qualified teachers who sometimes go long periods without pay.



A Haitian meal may consist of roasted or fried goat, rice, beans, wild mushrooms and a variety of fish. Fresh mango, pineapple, guava, bananas, and melons are available along with juices made from passion fruit, oranges, grapefruit, cherries and papaya. The people of Haiti depend on coconut, plantain trees, rice and sugarcane for food and livelihood.

As we returned to Port- au- Prince to fly back home I thought of the many people I had met who live in dire poverty, some without even a home. The road to recovery and to rebuild this nation will take many years but the healing has begun. Jesus said, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded". I am moved by this country and its people. Our Lady of Cape parish and the North American La Salette Province through its Mission Office will continue to collaborate and support the needy in Haiti with the hope of a better and brighter future. \$20 buys a school lunch for one student for one month. This is often the only meal they will get in a day. Just \$30 will buy a child school supplies for a year. \$50 buys a goat for a family. \$12 will pay a child's school tuition for one month. For me it is not merely about money but participating and sharing in the life of people who are less privileged and less fortunate.



Haiti is a Caribbean country boarded to the east by the Dominican Republic. Haiti's capital is Port-au-Prince and their official language is Haitian Creole and French. Haiti has a population of 10.32 million. The majority of Haitians are Roman Catholic with 80% Protestant 16% but much of the population also practices voodoo. Haiti lies in the middle of the hurricane belt and is subjected to severe storms, occasional flooding, earthquakes and droughts. It has been seven years since the catastrophic earthquake that devastated Haiti on January 12, 2010 and wide destruction left behind by another tragedy –Hurricane Matthew last year in October 2016. The earthquake took away the lives of 316,000 people, about 3 percent of Haiti's entire population perished and 2.8 million people went homeless. Haiti is a beautiful nation with beautiful people but extremely poor as well. Everyday life is hard for most people. Their houses are so tiny with one or two rooms made of mud and rock, wood logs, banana leaves or cement. Electricity is very rare, only a small portion have access to electricity. Access to clean and running water is even less common. They have their pride despite all they have had to endure. They have together faced the disasters. Nobody feels alone. They feel for their brothers and sisters who have gone through the same terrible tragedy. They want to be a symbol of strength to others. My first visit to Haiti proved that Haitians are a very dignified people. Their warm culture, their contagious and friendly smile; their country's natural beauty and their resilience are what set them apart from the rest. Their hospitality is clear from the way they treat their guests.

Haitians will always accept gifts. But they will almost always stand straight, look you in the eye and repay you with a sincere "Mesi" thanks. No matter what society's conditions, Haitians celebrate life with joy, laughter and dancing. I noticed that personal greetings are very important to Haitians. Haitian men usually greet others by shaking hands and women throw kisses on each cheek when meeting a new acquaintance. The Haitian Gourde is the currency of Haiti. The exchange rate for one dollar is 68 gourde. For 5 gourds they call it a Haitian dollar. Haitian rum is well known. Barbancourt 5 star is a top drawer drink. Prestige is the most popular beer and is of good quality and excellent taste.

Roman Catholicism is the official religion of Haiti but voodoo may be considered the country's national religion. The central and key aspect of voodoo is healing people from illness. Beliefs include zombies and witchcraft. Animal sacrifices are common during voodoo practices. Voodoo singing and dancing are common today. It tells the future and reads dreams. It began as an underground activity. During the 1700s thousands of West African slaves were shipped to Haiti to work on French plantations. The slaves were baptized as Christians upon their arrival. Their traditional African religious practices were viewed as a threat to their colonial system and were forbidden. Practitioners were imprisoned, whipped and hung. But the slaves continued to practice in secret while attending masses. It was easy to meld the two faiths, because there are

many similarities. Both venerate a supreme being and believe in the existence of invisible evil spirits or demons and in an afterlife. But there are differences. In Haiti the spirits are as real as your wife or your dog. In voodoo, there is no free will and personal choice. Voodoo is elusive and endangered but it remains the soul of Haitian people.

Rara: Every weekend during the season of Lent and the week leading up to Good Friday many streets of Haiti are filled with rara bands. Fr. Joe and I followed the rara procession down the streets of Dessalines which concluded in the plaza one evening. Rara is a form of festival music used for street processions. Rara festivals most important purpose is to give the Haitian people strength and unity within their nation. The performances of the rara bands utilize instruments, costumes and dance to show the strength, wealth and unity of the group. The rara festivals of Haiti gave the people a chance to celebrate their voodoo beliefs in combination with the resurrection of Christ. Their experiences create stronger bonds and promote unity among people in tough times. From slavery to economic turmoil the Haitians have found strength in the rara festivals of their island.

I was surprised to see their cemeteries that contained brightly colored above ground tombs. Interestingly, the Haitians graveyards are comprised of mausoleums, which make the cemeteries look like miniature villages made of concrete. Honoring the deceased is incredibly important to the Haitian people. Haitians celebrate their culture by giving thanks those who have lived before them. They believe their culture depends on the ways they honor their ancestors. Regardless of the economic situation or religious beliefs, Haitians strive to make sure their legacy is preserved and their culture is portrayed with dignity even after death.