

Beau-Sejour Visit 9-13 June 2017

Life and work schedules prevented me from visiting Beau-Sejour in May as I had originally planned, but Fr Fernand was accommodating and told me via email to “come anytime!” My only available time prior to the rainy season was 9-13 June, which prevented me from coordinating a travel mate so I traveled alone. Fr Fernand said he would meet me at the airport so my plan was to travel directly from PaP airport to Beau-Sejour and return to PaP on 12 June, remain overnight at Matthew25 and leave Haiti on the 13th. My hope was that on the afternoon of 12 June I could hire a driver and translator and visit the headquarters for the Brothers (Congregation des Petits Freres de Sainte Therese de L’Enfant Jesus) that I knew was somewhere in the hills surrounding PaP. I was blessed that my visit went as planned and it exceeded my expectations. In summary I would define my visit as welcoming, encouraging, rewarding, enlightening, and confident in the possibility of constructing a new church for St Gabriel’s.

Summary

In preparation for the trip I reviewed the on-line parish bulletin of St Margaret Mary (Ontario, Canada) where they stated they agreed to continue supporting the school at Beau-Sejour for a period of time. I also reviewed the video and report from Holy Family parish following their March 2017 visit. I asked Fr Fernand if there was anything he needed and his response was “just come.” Following some email prodding he asked if I could bring some celebration hosts for mass. Fr George assisted me and I took a years’ worth of celebration hosts. Following the great example of Roberto, Debi and I ordered soccer balls and rubber balls, which I took to Fr Fernand, along with hand pumps and extra needles.

Email communication with Fr Fernand was fair prior to the trip and better than I expected based on communication challenges. I was also able to establish text messaging on my mobile with Fr Fernand prior to my departure. Once Fr confirmed he received the arrival information for my flight into PaP I left Tampa with full confidence Fr Fernand would be at the airport sometime between my arrival and nightfall. My back-up plan for after nightfall was move to Matthew25. On landing in PaP and turning on my mobile there was a text from Fr that he was waiting for me. After exiting the airport, a Haitian priest with the biggest smile in the universe was waiting for me. He and Antoine drove me in the Toyota Land Cruiser and we went directly to Beau-Sejour with a stop for gas at the usual location and some roadside stops for items Fr needed at the rectory.

It was a great joy to visit Fr Fernand as a friend and have quality time to talk about a great many items over days and evenings. He pointed out that I was the first visitor in his three years at Beau-Sejour who had come alone to see him. I learned a great deal about Fr and he learned a great deal about me. We talked theology, sports, history, Haitian politics, US politics, agriculture, life experiences and simply any topic of interest that came up to either of us. His cousin Joan (who is a teacher in PaP) had come to Beau-Sejour to cook for us during my visit, and she returned to PaP when I departed.

Fr Fernand had sent me an encouraging email prior to my arrival that things were better in Beau-Sejour since our last visit, and that the seeds Sacred Heart funded were producing good crops. The crops indeed look good and healthy. There was corn that was beginning to be picked, and beans were being harvested and dried out on the roads and in family compounds. I saw pumpkins, sugarcane, and the trees had mangos, coconuts, bananas and breadfruit. One day I walked alone to the very top of the mountain and the crops appeared healthy all the way up the mountain and as far into the valleys as I could see. Alex and Roberto’s goat was nowhere to be seen but the chicken population in and around the rectory was thrice the population it was in December.

Road

Adventurous will likely always be an American description of the road up to Beau-Sejour, but I saw significant progress in the road since our visit just six months ago. I saw men working at three locations in my journey up on a Thursday afternoon. At one or two areas were small numbers of men with picks

and shovels, another area was a small truck delivering gravel, which I saw piled at several areas on the way up, and there were areas that had seen heavy equipment used to grade the road and move earth. The rainy season is upon Haiti and I saw the roads both wet and dry. I was fortunate that most of the heavy rain was in the late afternoon and during the night and caused minimal interference in my wandering.

Church

The “temporary” church has been significantly improved and beautified. The internal walls were removed; it has been beautified with plants, flags and some paint. A simple tabernacle has been added along with Stations of the Cross, an icon or two, and two carved stands used to read the readings and gospels. I counted over 300 parishioners (including children) at mass on Sunday, perhaps more as I couldn’t count the ones who stood outside because they arrived late or there were no seats remaining inside. The number was certainly larger by any measure from the mass we attended in December. A group of 10-20 young people, both boys and girls, known as the Soldiers of Christ, participated in mass activates from holding the collection boxes, to ushering, to keeping the chickens from entering the church during mass. They had the appearance of scouts and each had a similar t-shirt with logo and dark blue pants or skirts with thin white stripes. An extension cord ran from the rectory to the church and allows for a microphone and the use of a keyboard for the choir. The choir used a keyboard, a drum and had 12-20 choir members. Young girls and women read the readings and psalms for Sunday mass. Fr asked me to speak to the parish after the conclusion of the mass and I spoke briefly and Fr interpreted. I told the congregation I was pleased to return, and looked forward to returning in December with my wife and my Sacred Heart friends. I said my Catholic family in Beau-Sejour are in our prayers and that I believe one day my family and I will celebrate mass in a new church of St Gabriel’s. I told them our Catholic Church is the entire church on earth and the mass I love in Tampa is the same mass I love in Beau-Sejour. I always keep in mind that the Parish of St Gabriel’s has celebrated their 20th anniversary and their faith continues to grow. I am always impressed how clean and well-dressed parishioners and school children are. I’ve watched children and adults carry their school/church cloths and shoes with them and change into their clean cloths near the church/school.

Clinic

The medical clinic is an obvious source of joy, pride and hope for the community. I’ll leave it to Holy Family reports from their March 17 visit to Beau-Sejour to speak to the clinic but I was pleased to see improvements which included solid concrete rails for the steps leading to the clinic, clean stocked pharmacy shelves in the former “library,” and a full time nurse with Magdalena’s presence. I met Magdalena and she was delightful. She has planted flowers in front of the clinic and it was nice to see people sit on the porch of the clinic, not because they needed Magdalena’s assistance, but because they could sit in the shade for a few minutes and take pride that didn’t need permission to sit on the porch, in the shade, in the nicest house in the mountains. Her family home is about a 45 minute away from the clinic and her sister resides with her in the clinic, she is truly a hometown girl.

School

I did not visit the school but saw students going to and from the school on Thursday and Friday, observed the school from above the mountain during my wanderings on Saturday, and read of St Margaret Mary’s continued commitment to the school.

Our Lady of Assumption (Chapel)

On Friday I went with Fr Fernand to visit one of his eleven chapels, Our Lady of Assumption. It is 15-20 minutes’ drive down the mountain followed by a 15-20 walk down a path. Our Lady of Assumption serves as a school during the week, with a principle and his wife (also a teacher) who reside on the premises. It serves as a chapel on Sunday. As we walked down the path towards Our Lady of Assumption I could hear children, it was just before noon and they were in class.

Holy Family (?) funds a meal for the school and I counted 250+ children that received a generous portioned meal of rice & beans while I was there. Fr Fernand told me the meal is provided five days a week. Several local women were preparing the meal when we arrived, cooking the rice and beans in three large pans in an open wood-fed fireplace. In addition to the children attending school at Assumption, I saw several older children (and a few teachers) enjoy a noon meal and then walk to the school at Beau-Sejour. Their journey was likely 30 minutes on a path a visiting American couldn't transverse.

The children's uniforms were exceptionally clean. The children they were happy, energetic, and curious. They waited patiently to receive their individual bowls of food and they did not crowd. Little children received their bowls before older children. When a local man heard Fr Fernand was at the school, he walked to the school, sat at Fr's feet and told him how grateful he was that his two children received a meal every school day and that was the primary reason they attended school. His gratitude was genuine and my minimal (zero) French/Creole language ability didn't detract from understanding the tone of the conversation. I saw the man's two daughters at mass on Sunday.

Fr. Fernand told me the "village" has a patron who lives in Canada. She is a 90+-year-old woman who lived in the village at one time and migrated to Canada. Her original home is used as the kitchen to help prepare the meal. Shack would be a generous description of the building in the US, but in the village it is the respected home of the patron, who visited sometime in the last year(s) and was carried down the path.

The school was recently re-roofed with corrugated tin and has an attached 12x20 cinder-block room for the principle/guest. The room has a tile floor, western toilet/sink that is gravity fed by water from a cistern that collects rainwater from the roof. Fr Fernand says the room is for guests and I suspect it was funded and its first use was the Canadian patron. The school has two clean water fountains for the children's drinking water that use Sawyer Water Filters. A single drinking fountain consists of a 5-gallon bucket with a lid in which water gravity feeds thru a pipe, thru a water filter into a 5-gallon bucket underneath with a spout. It is contained in a metal stand. Sawyer water filter is perhaps the best in the world. Water for Blessings, a group of religious sisters in Kentucky has a web page that describes the system used in the school. I took a personal Sawyer Water Filter with me for my trip and was able to comfortably accept water offered to me in my wanderings.

The crops were in good shape near Our Lady of Assumption. I saw corn almost ready for harvest, beans, mangos, pumpkins, and breadfruit trees with breadfruit growing, sugarcane and other grass like grains growing.

The principle, his wife and several teachers asked me to say hello and thank Deacon Peter and Karen (Holy Family Parish). Joyous, laughter, positive experience, promising, are all terms I would use to describe my visit to Our Lady of Assumption.

Brother House and Church Construction Discussion

On Saturday afternoon Fr Fernand, Sr. Micheline (school principle) and I went to the Brother House, a short distance from Beau-Sejour, for mass in the chapel, dinner, and a discussion about the building of the Brother House. In December I was invited to tour the new Brother House but there was a sense of discomfort when I asked questions about its construction. Understandably, the Brothers did not know me and perhaps were not allowed to discuss financial or affairs of the order without permission.

I left Beau-Sejour in December 2016 with the hope a new St Gabriel's church could be constructed "in the future," but uncertain as to the "if and when" requirements to build a new church. **My recent visit left me with confidence that a new church can be constructed within the normal constraints and challenges I would expect with fundraising in the US and construction in a peasant mountain**

village. By nature and profession, I am a realist and my impression was not influenced by emotion, although it is absolutely influenced by faith.

We were met by Brother (Freres) Jean Jeune Lozama who was responsible for building the Brother House, and associated with 15-25 other projects the brothers are building in Haiti. He clearly understood construction and construction processes and comfortably answered any questions I had. He was very patient with my curiosity. His comfort level in questions included costs, materials, transportation, housing and feeding a labor force, and any question that came to mind. He attended mass with us, had dinner with us and answered my questions about becoming a brother and a construction manager. I instantly liked him. He accepted my explanation that I had no authority to commit any person, funds or organization but that I was simply fact finding for an undefined future construction committee. I accepted that his figures and costs would change with seasons, economy, inflations, etc. Brother Jean answered every question with a reference to his laptop and a calculator and his precise answers did not involve public math or guesses. A translator did not obscure his experience, understanding and commitment.

I will prepare a separate report of the discussions with the caveat that any numbers involve challenges with language, emotion, inflation and intentions. They may in fact be totally incorrect but they were in a range I expected for building in Haiti. Transportation costs up a difficult (I forgot, its adventurous) mountain road will certainly be in flux with weather, damage, etc. With that caveat, the Brother House cost approximately 42 thousand US dollars (\$42K) to build, with a large cost savings in labor because many brothers were the labor force. It took approximately six months to build the Brother House. Brother Lozama's estimate is that a similar structure larger than the Brother House could be built for approximately 90 thousand US dollars (\$90K). The structure would hold 800 parishioners for mass. It would be simple, safe and beautiful. Fr Fernand provided the requirement for 800 parishioners', which served as a base number for the size of the building. I suspect the number is based on a gathering of the parish for a feast day and not a routine Sunday (like when we see the parish population swell at Easter and Christmas).

We discussed that it would be safe to construct in three phases:

Phase I - Demolition and removal of the existing foundation, which could/should be done by a parish labor force and at no cost to anyone outside the parish.

Phase II – Construction of foundation, cement columns with re-enforcing wire and cement block walls. (Cost @ 50K USD)

Phase III - Construction of aluminum roof tresses, corrugated tin roof and wiring. (Cost @ 40K)
We discussed that Phase II construction wouldn't necessarily be damaged by weather for a period of a year while fundraising occurred to raise the funds for the roof, and that wood trusses would be less expensive, yet more prone to storm damage. The Brother House has wood tresses. Brother Lozama humored me about costs for solar power and he itemized the costs for me that totaled \$16K USD (10x \$800 solar panel plus inverters, batteries, etc.)

A presentation by a representative of an architectural firm in December in the presence of the parish construction committee, Becky, Steve and myself proposed a metal framed, earth quake resistant, two story structure that was estimated costing almost a quarter of a million US Dollars (\$250,000 USD). I was uncomfortable with the presentation, the facts presented, the drawings presented, the sensitivity to questions or our ability to explain the costs during fundraising presentations for US donors about the need for a simple and safe peasant Haitian mountain church.

Time to visit Beau-Sejour as a friend (mission time is rewarding but work filled and leaves little down time), share coffee, conversation, wandering and discussion has provided me perhaps a better insight to what may have seemed unreasonable in the presentation we received in December.

Fr Fernand is now celebrating his 10th year as a priest. He grew up in an educated family near PaP and knew nothing of the mountains. He spent a year in the seminary in Miami to learn English, having already been ordained a priest. His knowledge of beautiful churches, to include the Cathedral in PaP and local parish churches in the US likely influenced his thought process at the time. Fr. Fernand was in his first year as pastor when he approached Sacred Heart about building a church for his parish. He was a city-raised priest now serving as pastor in a peasant mountain parish with no training in pastoring peasant people who could not read, who have no income and are subsistence farmers. In December I asked Fr Fernand of any local parish that had a church he thought was appropriate for a new St Gabriel's and he agreed to show me the neighboring parish whenever I returned. Our conversation continued via email and on this trip we visited the neighboring parish of St Anthony's (1-2 hours down the mountain) and I saw the parish church being constructed.

Fr Fernand's description of the new church under construction, having lived in Beau-Sejour for three years now, is "this church is too big for Beau-Sejour." It's this church idea that likely influenced the pastor and parishioners of St Gabriel's when they approached Sacred Heart almost two years ago. When constructed, St Anthony's will likely have cost \$750,000.00 - \$1,000,000.00 USD. It's as large as some national cathedrals I visited in Africa and I told Father so. Its 27 paces (@3 feet) long by 19 paces wide with a separate side chapel and has a small crypt underneath. 25 long wide steps rise to the three archway entrances to the church. It's also in a significantly larger town than Beau-Sejour and it has a paved road. Its pastor, until his recent retirement and return to the US was an American and I suspect he likely raised funds for the church over a great many years. I love the idea that the neighboring parish will be beautiful and give some parishioners from Beau-Sejour the opportunity in their lifetimes to attend mass in a grand church. The church under construction at St Anthony's also explains for me why the presentation we received in December surprised me as exceptionally different from a request I expected from a small mountain village.

The Brothers (Congregation des Petits Freres de Sainte Therese de L'Enfant Jesus [PFST] Web site: pfstj.net, Carrefour Haiti, C.P.)

When I visited in December and met with the brothers I suspected they were perhaps larger than a few brothers teaching farming in a small mountain village. Our conversations, and references to other brother houses (including a gift of wine produced at a distant monastery [with identifying information]) led me to an internet search that identified the brothers as a Vatican recognized, 57-year old Catholic religious order founded by a Haitian priest with a mission to minister, educate, teach and improve agriculture for the peasants of Haiti. They support locations throughout Haiti.

After returning to PaP from Beau-Sejour I met a driver and translator (Gaspard) I had arranged for and went in search of the Brothers Headquarters. My intent was that if we considered including the brothers in our building plans then I wanted to give my personal assurances to any potential donors that Petits Freres de Sainte Therese de L'Enfant Jesus was everything my research showed and there was no fraud or deception from comments or internet information. After meeting my party at Matthew25 we went in search of the brothers.

Approximately 90 minutes later (traffic and not distance) we arrived at the headquarters for Petits Freres de Sainte Therese de L'Enfant Jesus. As a surprise American visitor arrived a brother went in search of Brother Emanuel to talk to their surprise guest. Brother Emmanuel was gracious, told me of the order, their work in Haiti, gave me a tour, showed me the church and answered every question I asked. Only much later in the conversation when I asked if I could leave a stipend for a mass to be said for my family did Brother Emmanuel explain that he was Father Frere Emmanuel, Superior General of the Order. He has been Superior General for five years and attended seminary in Belgium. He is recovering from cancer surgery and asked for our prayers. He also laughed and described Beau-Sejour as not a difficult

location and invited me to visit three brothers in a “difficult” location in Haiti when I next returned. Humble, welcoming, organized, sincere, spiritual, humorous, I loved meeting Br Emmanuel.

The compound is large; hosts a dormitory for the brothers, a school, a church (about 300-400 attend on Sunday), there are vineyards and a variety of shops and outbuildings. Br Emmanuel took me into the office that handles all the administrative duties for the order and I met the secretary. I also learned that the brothers recently hosted a medical mission from Queens, NY and other medical missions throughout the year are hosted by the brothers. I can state with absolute certainty that the brothers are the real deal and I have no concerns about the legitimacy, mission, organization and work of the brothers for the poor of Haiti.

Conclusion

I was blessed to have the prayers and support of Fr George and the Sacred Heart team in my visit to Beau-Sejour to show our commitment to St Gabriel’s. I was equally blessed that my bride supports our commitment and the time and resources involved in visiting St Gabriel’s. Debi looks forward to joining the team in December and volunteering her medical skills. By every measurable standard I saw improvements in just six months. Crops were in, people were happy, the church was significantly improved, schools were improved, the possibility of building a church appeared very realistic and the road was significantly improved.

I remain a realist; the parish of St Gabriel’s will remain a poor peasant parish for the rest of my lifetime. Haiti will not improve significantly, and even if it did, the government would not significantly improve the lives of the people of the mountains. The Church however makes a difference in the daily lives of the peasants, from the poor that come to the rectory door for rice, to the sick that use the medical clinic and the children that come to the school. A safe and secure church will absolutely improve the personal and spiritual lives of the people. It can also serve as a safe location to gather and pray when storms and hurricanes come, and they will continue to come forever. My profession prevents me from fundraising or making commitments of any type with an organization outside the US or I would volunteer to serve on a future building committee. I have no experience in serving with any building committee but I believe this is an executable project I could accomplish with my skill level, and if I could do it then others can as well. My wife and I will however continue to volunteer our love, support, commitment and faith that a new St Gabriel’s is a very real possibility.

I welcome any questions at wklddavis@gmail.com
Your Brother In Christ,
Wayne