



friends

a publication of *The Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle*

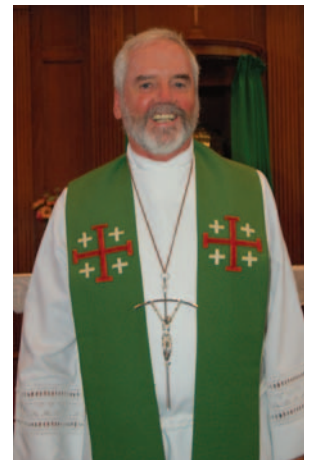


October, 2011

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

It's always a happy occasion when the Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle celebrates the departure of a missionary to South America. It reminds me as well of that Sunday at the end of June in 1997 – the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul – when I received my mission cross and prepared to head off to Peru. In those days the “Sending Masses” were celebrated at a local television studio and broadcasted live. I actually prefer St. Stephen's Church. This past Labor Day weekend, September 4th, Bishop Robert Hennessey, Auxiliary Bishop of Boston and former member of the Society commissioned Fr. Dennis O'Brien to work once again in Ecuador. I assigned him to work there and the Country Coordinator has assigned him to work with Fr. Liam Reilly. Two days later he left for Guayaquil, from where he sends his reflections.

“Twenty two years ago in September I packed my bags in Pensacola, Florida and flew to Ecuador. This was a big step for a boy born in New York City. I lived in Manhattan as a child and then moved with my family to Jersey City, NJ. My father was a letter carrier and my mother was a stay-at-home mom. My father was born in Jersey City and my mother in County Leitrim, Ireland. I was one of three children, Kevin, Dennis and Margaret. I felt a calling to the priesthood and was ordained in 1981 for the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee. The first



From left: Fr. Dennis O'Brien, Bishop Robert Hennessey & Fr. Kevin Hays.

time I traveled to South America was during the Missionary Awareness Trip to Peru in 1988 which was sponsored by the Missionary Society of Saint James the Apostle. After consulting with Father Jim Cashin, the Coordinator for Ecuador, I found myself living at the Church of Saint Maryanne (Santa Marianita) in Duran with Father James Ronan and Father Brendan O'Sullivan. What a different world Duran was for me! I was a priest of eight years and my pastoral experiences were parish work in Pensacola and serving in Pensacola Catholic High School as a chaplain and guidance counselor. In the assignment at Duran there was inner city work and traveling to the countryside to celebrate Mass in



A typical bamboo shack in the area where Fr. Dennis is working.



Flooding during the rainy season leads to mosquito infestations.

villages. For the first year every day was brand new for me and it was difficult to establish a routine. Serving in Duran meant serving the poor. Inner city work meant celebrating Mass, working with the catechists and youth group, visiting the sick and attending people with needs at the rectory door. In the morning people came to the office door requesting a funeral Mass for the early afternoon. Since the poor could not afford to embalm the deceased loved ones, they requested a funeral within 24 hours. Since Duran was close to the massive Guayas River, there were times when a canoe from a nearby island with 2 or 3 people would arrive to inform us that in 2 hours a family with a deceased relative will be arriving in another canoe. They wanted a funeral Mass when the canoe arrived.

Serving in the countryside meant driving on primitive, bumpy dirt roads to isolated areas but there was so much natural beauty there! Driving through banana plantations, passing by lemon and mango trees and spotting colorful birds were some of the joys when celebrating Mass there. However, there was also abject poverty in the countryside. Children suffering from malnutrition, children unable to pay the fees to start another year of school and a lack of medical attention describe some of the conditions the people had to endure. I went with a team from the parish in Duran to the countryside. There we had religious education classes and Mass. At times the car could not go any farther because there was not a road. We walked and at times crossed a river in a canoe to arrive at a village.



Fr. Dennis and the parishioners after Sunday Mass.

After five years of missionary work I returned to my diocese in 1994. My five years in Ecuador prepared me to serve the Spanish speaking people in my diocese. At first I celebrated a weekly Mass in Spanish at Good Shepherd Church in Tallahassee. When I was assigned to Saint Rita's Church in Santa Rose Beach, FL, the pastor at St. Dominic's Church in Panama City asked me to travel an hour for a monthly Mass in Spanish in his parish. In 1998 my bishop asked me to be pastor of the predominantly Spanish-speaking parish of Saint Thomas the Apostle in Quincy, FL. My ministry to the Spanish speaking grew when I regularly celebrated a bilingual Mass in federal and state prisons. My bishop asked

me to be Director of Hispanic Ministry for the diocese and this lasted ten years. Even though I was serving the needs of the Spanish speaking in my diocese, I still had a longing to live in Ecuador. There was a greater need in Ecuador than in the United States. Yes, there is a need for priests in the United States, but the need in Ecuador was greater. The ratio of priest to parishioner in the USA is estimated at 1:1500 while in Ecuador the ratio is 1:25,000. In parts of Ecuador there is no presence of a Catholic priest. During the past seventeen years I visited Ecuador and Peru and the longing was as strong as ever. I finally started a dialogue with my bishop. He gave me the green light to start the process of returning to the missions in South America.



Despite the extreme financial poverty, the people are rich in faith and spirit.

Now seventeen years later I packed my bags and I once again am serving in Ecuador. I'm living in the newly erected (2009) Diocese of San Antonio De Yaguachi or simply the Diocese of Yaguachi. It was part of the Archdiocese of Guayaquil until 2009. One of the churches where I am serving is San Bernabe (Saint Barnabas). The Church of San Bernabe has a great need. The area is not experiencing poverty; it is experiencing misery. People have recently settled there on land allocated by the government. They live in bamboo shacks on wooden stilts with no indoor plumbing. The houses have to be on stilts because there will be flooding during the rainy season of January, February and

March. The area is always infested with mosquitoes and I mean infested. A driver in a water truck passes by and sells the people water by filling the people's water barrel outside their home. The water has to be boiled. The streets are made of dirt with plenty of ruts and holes. The church building is small and also made of bamboo. The collection last Sunday for the one Mass was \$5.98. I hope to develop a plot of land to build a church, a rectory, a school and a clinic.

I am 60 years old now, I speak Spanish like a "gringo", but I still have that longing. I will not be serving far from my first parish in Duran, Ecuador. What is more important is that I will still be serving the poor by sharing my faith with them and accompanying them on their spiritual journey. They also will be sharing their faith with me and accompanying me on my spiritual journey."

Let's keep Fr. Dennis in our prayers as he continues on in this spiritual journey of missionary work. Let us pray as well that the Holy Spirit will inspire more priests to join the Missionary Society of St. James the Apostle. And thank you for your generosity, which enables us to work among the poorest of the poor.

Yours in Christ,

Kevin Hays

**Rev. Kevin Hays
Director**



Families in San Bernabe prepare for the rainy season and construct their houses on stilts.

FR. O'BRIEN'S SENDING MASS

ST. STEPHEN'S CHURCH - SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2011



Upcoming Event: The Boston Banquet - Sunday, October 23rd, 5pm, at Boston College High School.

Honoring Mr. William L. Burke, III, Sr. Janet Eisner, SND & Rev. John J. Unni. Mass in the chapel at 4 pm for those who wish to attend.

For ticket and sponsorship information, visit www.socstjames.com/upcomingevents.html and print a reply form or call 617-742-4715.

For the purposes of wills and bequests, our official name is:
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