

Dominican Republic Experience

In Canada, we think of the Dominican Republic as a beautiful place with great weather, comfortable resorts, and fun relaxing beaches...and when you or I go on vacation there, we feel right at home with as much food as we like, air conditioning, and TVs and toys to keep us satisfied. However, the reality is that just outside the gates of the resort, a world of extreme poverty exists.

As a grade 10 student of St. Marguerite d'Youville high school, I had the opportunity to go to the Dominican Republic about one month ago. Beyond what the average tourist experiences on this beautiful island, I was exposed to the harsh reality of what life is like for the people of this country. I learned immediately upon arrival how fortunate we are to be living in Canada. Less than 1/5 of the world lives the way we do. More than 80% of the world's population lives in conditions far worse, and in poverty. I got to experience life in a third world country for one week, touching the hands of the elderly who have suffered all their lives, and holding in my arms children who have little hope for the future.

This trip was called the Dominican Republic Exposure Experience. I didn't know what I was getting into when I signed up last year, but I believe that it was in God's plan for me to do this. Five students ended up coming from our school, along with Mr. Whelan the Chaplain: Lynn Sheehy, Michael Onabolu,

Monique London, and Aminah Haghghi. We sat separated from one another on the plane so I had the chance to think about what I was about to go through – although I couldn't prepare myself for it, I remembered to trust in Providence. Providence means "God will provide" and so that's what I thought about, as well as our school motto, "To Trust, To Risk, To Love, To Serve".

As today's Gospel talks about Jesus being driven by the Spirit out into the wilderness, I had the opportunity to step out of my comfort zone. As Jesus encountered wild beasts, I faced conditions that I feared. And as the angels waited on Jesus, I knew that God was looking out for me. Mr. Whelan, the Chaplain at d'Youville high school told me that stepping outside of your comfort zone is the only way to grow. I now know what he meant.

I will now share with you some the pictures from the trip.

We traveled with students from two other schools. Here we are as we arrived on Dominican turf, not knowing what to expect for the intense week ahead of us.

The journey from the airport to the town of Consuelo was about an hour of empty, dry land with some tiny stands selling a few small items... but nothing for miles. People walking for hours to work, children walking alone on the side of a highway in the hot sun for long

distances to get to school, cows so thin you could see their ribs, kids trying to sell oranges to us through the bus windows... these are all things that are hidden from the average tourist as they make their way to the resort.

This picture, a personal favourite, captures a moment in these children's lives. Three caring siblings sticking together, perhaps walking home from the market with something to cook.

I was very fortunate to be billeted with a great host-family. When they first greeted Michael and I, I knew that God had placed me in the right home.

I found our visit to the local elementary school particularly interesting because it was called Divine Providence, and I attended Our Lady of Providence elementary school. This school was started by the Grey Sisters, the order that St. Marguerite d'Youville established. It operates by running three sets of classes each day. Over eleven hundred students attend each daytime session of school.

This mural was created by a Canadian artist, depicting the history of this school. It includes Anna Nolan, the founding sister who ran it for 45 years, as well as Marguerite d'Youville, baseball players, and the town of Consuelo. This mural is a reminder of how St. Marguerite D'Youville's presence is felt there. Wherever I went there was faith present. Even in the bateyes isolated from cities, the children recognized my crucifix around my neck. I was amazed to learn that the Dominican Republic's population is 95% Roman Catholic!

This is the government-provided Maternity Hospital and emergency room of Consuelo. The conditions are absolutely horrible and I had a difficult time accepting that this is their public health-care system – these great, hard-working, up-beat people.

Baseball is a huge part of Dominican culture. It was from this very town that the successful pro-major-league baseball player Sammy Sosa came. Being a good baseball player provides the opportunity to leave Dominican and make some real money in the U.S. American talent scouts come to these fields in search of the best players. We met a teenaged boy who had been scouted already by the Boston Red Sox, and he will be going there for spring training camp this year.

These boys wait around on the streets all day for customers, because they are shoe-shiners. They charge 5 pesos per person, which is about 1 and a half cents Canadian. For almost no money, these young boys will put their best effort into cleaning your shoes. The unemployment rate in Consuelo is 90%.

Another employment issue here, and all over the Dominican Republic, is sugar cane factories. These sugar-making plants operate for part of the year and pay very little wages for long hours under risky conditions. The problem is that once the government sold this plant to a private owner, employees' wages began to drop and paychecks were distributed further and further apart, until after two years the plant closed and the owners took off with their money. This left the workers unemployed, with no other jobs available in the town and with the elderly too old to be hired again. I found it upsetting that men who have worked all their lives are not able to receive their pay or their pensions after all their dedication and struggles of working here.

One day we were fortunate enough to have the Bishop of the Archdiocese come to our group session for an interview, as well as the newly placed priest whose first mass in the Dominican, we attended.

The bateyes are villages, away from the more developed towns such as Consuelo, which were formed around the sugar-cane industry. Cane cutters move to these towns, close to the cane fields where they cut all day for barely enough pay to cover one meal a day. With these meager wages they must try to support their families.

Almost all of the people here are unemployed since the sugar cane factories closed down or moved. Sadly, there is little hope for the people here. The government does not assist these people as they struggle to find work that doesn't exist. It is very sad to see so many children who aren't in school – the only reason is that they cannot afford a uniform. It's that simple.

This woman who doesn't even know her own age (she's in her eighties) sits in this little chair day after day, with no hope for the future and nothing to celebrate. She came from Haiti 40 years ago with her husband, for work and a better life. Her husband is now too old to work, and she simply sits outside each day – eating only if someone finds a bit of food for her to cook in her little pot.

On a second batey that we visited, known as Batey Las Pajas, we joined the schools in a march around their community in honor of their country because it was a national holiday celebrating the Dominican Republic's independence from Haiti. Although their conditions are very poor and their government may not provide aid for the people, Dominicans are proud of their country.

I learned that the children here just want to be loved, held, and talked to – that's what I think is missing here in Canada – many of us would

not be satisfied with just holding someone's hand, not unless that hand had a \$20 bill in it for us. These children brought on special feelings inside of me that are difficult to describe. I felt accepted, welcomed, and valued, especially when they wouldn't let me go.

While walking through this batey, a woman who appeared very elderly and perhaps ill, walked by slowly and put out her dirty, work-worn hand to me. I stuck out my hand and grasped hers, as she passed quietly by, with a smile on her face revealing her damaged teeth. I admit that I hesitated to touch this woman's hand, but I knew I could not refuse a friendly welcome – then it hit me. What if this was God? Everyone is created in God's image and is equally important to God. This was a very unique encounter for me.

One of the most unexpected moments of the trip became my most memorable one. When we had a free afternoon in the batey, I went to the park – and several little boys followed me, holding my hands silently. One of them smiled, two of them never did.

While in the park sitting area, I was fortunate enough to have brought my English-Spanish phrasebook, and so I started communicating. Other children caught on and I taught them some basic words. These boys did not go to school so they knew no English. However, we kept entertained by taking turns wearing my sunglasses, taking pictures of each other and seeing them on the screen, using the dictionary, and drawing in my sketchbook.

I noticed that in the bateyes, the children are generally very happy and excitable, even though they have practically nothing. No toys, markers, or cards, not even tennis balls...an XBOX 360 or a Playstation 2 would not even be close to the tiniest thought in their minds. Yet, they're happy although they have a tough life –it's their parents that have to worry about where their next meal is coming from.

Although the bateyes are isolated from any major towns, and contain very sick dogs, no running water and terrible shelters, I saw much worse when we took a trip to the capital city, Santo Domingo.

Santo Domingo is an interesting city, and its population is typical for Dominican Republic. I found it shocking to learn that out of a population of 3 Million in this city, over 2 Million live in poverty – not just poverty like we have here, I mean extreme poverty. Then there are half a million who are very rich, and half a million form a middle class – which is not nearly as wealthy as our middle class.

In the capital we visited a poor barrio – the worst areas of the city, where innocent people are forced to live due to poverty. These areas

are filthy, full of crime and gang activity, corruption, unemployment, poverty, and suffering. I observed that many of these people saved up everything they had, sacrificed so much to move from the bateyes to a place in the city to find a better life – but when they get there, they find nothing but greater problems; and now their safety to worry about as well as food, education, shelter, and employment.


As I mentioned before, there is a very small middle class in this country and so there is a huge wall between the extremely rich and the extremely poor people. Literally, there are walls, which I saw with my own eyes. Standing in the poor barrio, literally a couple hundred meters away were the thick stone walls around huge clean clay shingled roofs with satellite dishes on them. These are in fact the homes of the wealthiest people in Dominican Republic. Directly across the street from the poorest area in the country.

Sweatshop owners, Generals from the army, and Sugar Cane field owners all enjoy their gated mansions with pools, satellite dishes, air conditioning, guards with rifles, and more. You would think that these people would feel a huge amount of guilt when they look out their window every day to see the suffering in the poor barrios...but do they really care? I won't speak for them. However I will say that perhaps we, here in this very church, are no better or worse than the rich people in Santo Domingo. Yes, we live in luxury while there are people starving with no homes. It's just that we can't see them as clearly. Like the wealthiest people in Dominican, we tend to be blinded to the poverty around us and all over the world – the majority of the world in fact.

Also in the capital city of Santo Domingo, we visited the Metropolitan Cathedral Basilica: Our Lady of the Incarnation, the first ever cathedral in the western world.

From this trip I became aware of the harsh realities that much of the world faces. God's people are suffering every day as we here buy luxury vehicles, huge homes, and expensive toys to distract ourselves. Parents work around the clock in sweatshops making the minimum wage of \$37.92 Canadian a week, a third of which is required for transportation. Elderly Dominicans spend long hours in the sun and heat cutting tons of sugar cane for subsistence wages. Meanwhile, I can stand at a store in the mall making \$45 in only 5 hours, no sweat, no sun, no heat, and sell the very jeans made by these virtually enslaved Dominicans.

Thanks to people like Sister Katherine, a Grey Sister from Ontario who has been in Dominican teaching and volunteering for 9 years, there is some hope.



But more has to be done. I got a taste of the life that these people are forced to live with – trapped with no opportunities or power.

Because of what I witnessed on this trip, I have changed in many ways, and I am sure that my experiences will continue to affect me in years to come. However I know that I will do my part and take initiative to do what I can. And so I am starting a charity, which will collect school supplies and money for uniforms – so that children can have a chance to get an education and move on, out of the bateyes and provide for their families. That is my current project, and with the help of the community I am positive that this will be a success.

I thank you for your patience as I shared with you an experience that I wish all of us could have. Thank you and God bless.

Written by Daniel Francavilla, March 2006

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