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## VOLUNTEER MINISTRIES IN HAITI

February 2009

A monthly newsletter to report on developments of the Volunteer Ministries in Haiti, a program of the Xaverian Brothers supported by the Diocese of Richmond. Further information is available from the Haitian Ministry Commission, Diocese of Richmond, 7800 Carousel Lane, Richmond VA 23294 (telephone: 804-359-5661) (fax: 804-358-9159) (e-mail: pschwermer@richmonddiocese.org) (website: [www.richmonddiocese.org/haiti/hat111.htm](http://www.richmonddiocese.org/haiti/hat111.htm))

### LETTER FROM BROTHER HARRY ECCLES

SECOND MONTH of the year already, and we just celebrated the Fortieth Day of Christmas, remembering how Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to God to begin the work of salvation which Simeon and Anna spoke of in glorious yet sobering words (Luke 2:22). Other reminders include the now-tattered blossoms on the poinsettia tree at the Cathedral. A street banner still promises a T-Vice holiday special (a no-show; they went to a larger city.) A poignant reminder is the arrival of yet another Christmas card, welcome regardless of date, but Brother Mike and I wonder how many more. If you didn't get my greeting, let me know!

THE GIFT OF VISITORS is welcome regardless of dates, more welcome than partridges in pear trees. Our first visitors were students from William and Mary, a lively group making a side-trip from Thomonde. Soon afterwards we happily hosted a dynamic group from Randolph-Macon College: Ben Burrell, Chuck Leska, and Andrea Gonzales had even the younger boys doing magic in the computer room and gave some welcome assistance to my computer capabilities (I looked on in wonder and envy). R-MC is already planning their third annual workshop week. Our most recent guests were two Penn State alums, Mary Bryson and Steven Camilo. PSU holds the record for visitors, and we're looking for twenty or so more next month. Other visitors come and go so much that they don't fit the "visitor" category, more like extended family: Bro. Cos Rubencamp, Chip Wirth, Leo Blumle, Patrice Schwermer, Kathy Gross, Paul Fuhs, all regularly working for Maison Fortuné or some other project in the diocese—a parish, education, sustainable development. Virginia and Haiti are well connected! One visitor was a special gift to me, Tom Coohill of Siena College, was one of my students fifty years ago at St. Michael's Diocesan High School, Brooklyn. No, he did not come with a weapon to settle old scores, but his wife and he made a 100-pound bag of clothing for the children. It was good catching up with Tom, and I think we have one more Haiti supporter! Another recent visitor was Peter Dirr, a Stepinac High School student of Bro. Alois O'Toole (RIP). Alois had told Peter about the Xaverian presence in Haiti, and he tracked me through the web-site. He's not only a member of the Xaverian family, but he shares my interest in plants that can benefit the country, currently "jatropa", an oil-producing berry, which could reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.

OTHER SIGNS OF THE TIMES: The period between Christmas and Mardi Gras is marked by exams for many of the older students, and more than ever you can see and hear them memo-

rizing from their notebooks under whatever light they can find. You can't call it a housing boom, but I'm surprised at the number of large homes between here and Pandiassou, probably financed by relatives in the States or by employees of the UN. One of our friends is more typical: a disabled widower living with his mother and two sons in a house that was quite literally falling down. Thanks to people like you, that situation is being remedied. A less severe seasonal sign is the cold weather, in the low 60s at night! You who endure more severe conditions may smile, but today's daytime 70 has me wearing a sweater. Our kittens have grown, and one has a new home now; the other will go with me to Sant Zaverien when I visit the students there next week. Another sign of the times: my visit will be a social one; Brother Mike is taking more responsibility for the operation of the Sant, for which I am immensely grateful! We expect three young men to complete their studies this summer, and now we begin the selection process for replacements, while we worry about financing them. While we worry, Jana Robbins, a volunteer in 03-'04, dreams of making the Sant more financially stable—and opening another Sant for young women! Lead me to my Lazy Boy!

NOT QUITE READY for the all-day recliner, though; a group of Sisters from the Normal School in Papaye (twinned with Our Lady of Nazareth parish, Roanoke, Virginia) have asked for an English class. The old teacher is still in the classroom!

A FINAL SIGN OF THE TIMES: this is my second draft of this letter. I lost the first! One more miracle for you to pray for—and for me to work for. May God bless us all in our varying needs!

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### LETTER FROM BROTHER MICHAEL McCARTHY

"...there is a time for everything under the heavens."

And how life in Haiti reflects the kaleidoscope of events and emotions reflected in that famous line from Ecclesiastes. The last Monday of January we buried Robert, a patient at the Azil, the residence sponsored by the Missionary Sisters of Charity for over 160 abandoned or malnourished or sick men, women and children who need some medical attention—for some a matter of weeks, for others a safe and comfortable place to prepare for death. However, Robert's death was

## LETTER FROM ABDIEL VOLMAR

unexpected. He seemed to be slowly responding to the medical treatment he had been receiving over his months of stay there. He even visited his family over Christmas and returned with a certain spark in his eye and gait. He was a bright 20-year old young man who rejoiced greatly in the little English he had learned in his eight years of schooling, yet had little else in which to rejoice. He was suffering from high blood pressure, TB and a weakened heart, which limited his energy and reduced his appetite to almost nothing.

Often I would sit on his bed, encourage him to eat and try to get him to respond with a bit of conversation, laughter or whatever. Frequently he was on an I.V. The Saturday before he died, he was particularly weak and quiet; had pulled the sheet over his head and just slept. I sat with him; held his hand, uncovered his head and tried to get him to eat the egg that lay beside him. I didn't know that would be the last time I'd see him. When I visited on Monday morning, Sister Benita told me that Robert had died—something for which I was not prepared. She told me they were going to bury him that afternoon because his family couldn't come and take his body. When the coffin was ready, the driver would take him to the cemetery in Hinche, to the plot the Sisters have for patients like him. I went to a back room where they had taken him and said my final good bye. It was a sad moment for me: my first experience of death in Haiti; a loss of a young man with whom I had been building a relationship; and another reminder of the tragic effects of a life-style and diet that contribute to problems with high blood pressure and the prevalence of diseases which many other countries have nearly eradicated. I returned to Maison Fortuné reminded of the very short life-expectancy in this country.

At the orphanage I was greeted with gales of laughter as recess had just begun and many of the elementary school children raced for the swings! Their laughter reflected the exuberance of youth and the joy of the many people like them in this country who rejoice in all they receive from their God whom they unabashedly praise and thank on many occasions in word, song and gesture. Gratitude for the simple things of life is a gift of the Haitian people; they are very aware of the present moment and love sharing that with family and friends.

This month especially people here are enjoying Carnival, the month-long anticipation of Mardi Gras. Sunday afternoon at the park attracts many of the young and not-so-young folks to show off their costumes and especially their devil masks. They crack their whips and entertain all who will give them the attention they covet. The young men who cover themselves with oil look particularly menacing as their skin glistens in the sun and they approach passers by, asking for a small donation to prevent their being hugged! It's all in fun, innocent fun, and a wonderful outlet for creative expression and an opportunity to laugh and enjoy the light side of life, a life that reflects both sides as promised in Ecclesiastes: birth and death; joy and sorrow; laughter and tears.

*We continue with our series of letters from young men living at the Sant Zaveryen in Port-au-Prince, a Christian community setting for young men studying at universities in Port-au-Prince.*

I am Abdiel Farage Volmar and am a 26 year-old young man with two brothers and two young sisters who live with my mother in Croix-des-Bouquets, near Port-au-Prince. As for my father, he died while I was in secondary school.



Abdiel Volmar at the Sant Zaveryen

I studied at Louverture-Cleary School for six years until I graduated in June 2003. Now, I live in the Xaverian Center in my last year of study in electro-mechanical engineering at the State University of Haiti, one of the best engineering schools in Haiti.

The best memories that I have from Louverture-Cleary and from the Xaverian Center are: “They inspire me a huge dream for my native land Haiti and they influence my behavior wherever I pass, in school, at church, or in my mother’s house.”

Life at the Xaverian Center is a continuity of the life at Louverture-Cleary. They have same priorities: **prayer, community service, and study**. Jesus is the best leader that I’ve ever known, a model of love, forgiveness, fraternity, and charity. He has taught us through his action and his words—as he says in the holy Bible, “Serve as I serve.”

An awesome idea came to me: there is a place where they shelter homeless children. We are planning on a program to go there to teach them civics and the moral code so that they can know their mission toward Haiti. We could also teach them the math, physics and so on. In my opinion, it’s our joy to do community service, and our life here makes the house very special.

Despite coming from different parts of Haiti, we all met here and quickly understood that our difference is our strength. In order to be useful to the country, some of us enter medical school, others in school of engineering or

school of management or accounting, because Haiti need competent and responsible persons.

Right now, I am in the step of preparing my final thesis, a project about alternative energy (wind) in Jacmel. Now all the richest countries incline toward the alternative energy sources of wind or solar and they are spending much money in it. Because of the high price of the oil, their goal is to reduce the dependence on the countries producing oil. We Haitian people should also think in this way because it will be for a better economy for the country. After presenting my thesis, I would like to have a master's degree in energy, I pray God for that.

Finally, I want thank you for your precious help in Haiti. I want to let you know that you are spending for special Haitians who have the dream of rebuilding this special country, Haiti.

## FORMER VOLUNTEER NEWS

*Jana Robbins, who with her husband Benjamin, served as a Xaverian Volunteer in 2003-2004, sends us this note. They now have two children and live in Seattle. This fund-raising effort is one more illustration of the ongoing commitment made by our former volunteers!*

The First Presbyterian Church of Snohomish, Washington (the OTHER Washington) raised \$1,429 in support of the Sant Zaveryen at their annual December Alternative Gift Market. Snohomish First Presbyterian is the church of my childhood, and my parents still attend there. The church has always been very interested in and supportive of the time Benjamin and I spent in Haiti with the Xaverians and is still active in helping us remain involved with projects there. This year they invited us to share and host a table at their Market.

The Alternative Gift Market is held at the church every year to give members an opportunity to buy Christmas gifts that support domestic and international organizations working to improve the lives of all. Some organizations have items for sale, and some are donation only. I showed a slide show from our past visits to the Sant and made bookmarks for donors to give as gifts showing that a donation had been made to the Sant. Donors were very impressed by the commitment of the students to use their education in service to Haiti. Ben and I are grateful to Snohomish First Presbyterian for their support and heart for the Xaverians' work in Haiti. We hope to do this again!

## NEWS ABOUT A SANT ALUMNUS

*What follows is an excerpt from an article in the Oregon Catholic Sentinel by Tom Cordato about Dr. Bélimaire Emmanuel, who lived at the Sant Zaveryen while attending medical school.*

After graduating from Catholic-run Louverture-Cleary School

near Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 2000, Bélimaire Emmanuel competed with 3,000 applicants to gain a seat in the Faculté de Medecine et de Pharmacie, the national medical university of Haiti. Fewer than 4 percent of the applicants were admitted. He was one of the successful 100.

Today, Emmanuel is the medical director at the Doctors Without Borders' Center for Rehabilitation in Port-au-Prince, where he treats infections, diabetes, lacerations, gunshot wounds and other medical afflictions. The Center for Rehabilitation, on average, holds 45 victims of car accidents, sexual violence, muggings and other traumatic experiences. Many of Doctors Without Borders' patients are brought in for emergency surgery and sent to Emmanuel for rehabilitation. Services are provided free of charge. The clinic also keeps social workers and psychologists on staff to help traumatized patients re-enter society.

Emmanuel says he would like to continue his work for Doctors Without Borders because they are different from other medical clinics. He respects the independent commitment to victims of poverty, violence and natural disasters. "They are working so all human beings can have access to health ... equality with no discrimination," he said.

Fifteen years ago, Emmanuel never would have believed he would become a doctor. While attending Louverture-Cleary, he lived in Cité Soleil, which he calls "the biggest and most miserable shantytown in Haiti." Many people look down upon the residents of Cité Soleil, considering them dishonest and uneducated. Emmanuel wanted to obliterate the stereotype. All he needed was the opportunity to prove himself.

"When I was in high school, I always said I would like to study something for which Haiti is in great need of," he said. Medical school seemed perfect to him. In a place like Haiti, it is easy to feel there is no hope. But through his continuous work with victims of violence and tragedy, Dr. Bélimaire Emmanuel avows, "I'm still an optimist."