News
News
Ministry



Sr. Rosario Fumnal, a member of the Religious of Jesus and Mary from Spain, teaches preschool students in Haiti. (Patricia Dillon)



by Alecia Westmorland

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

May 13, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As Srs. Jacqueline Picard and Patricia Dillon sat outside their quiet house in Gros Morne, Haiti, in mid-April, the two members of the Religious of Jesus and Mary grieved for those living 100 miles away in the capital city of Port-au-Prince.

There, the sisters said, Haitians fear for their lives daily in the midst of rampant gang violence now consuming the city.

"They are literally in hell. There's no other way to describe it," said Picard, 76, a trained nurse who has ministered with Dillon in Haiti for 27 years. "When you can't go out your door and know whether you'll find bodies laying across the street, when you don't know how to protect your children who want to go to school, when you don't know how you can get to food — if you have the means to buy food — that's a terrible sense of helplessness."

Need has always remained prevalent across Haiti, a country long embattled with violence, poverty and social upheaval, where nearly 59% of the population lived below the poverty line in 2023, according to UNICEF.

That's why the U.S. province of the Religious of Jesus and Mary has prioritized its ministry in Haiti for nearly 30 years, Dillon said, with a long-term commitment to aid and support the country's struggling communities through a constant presence there. Sisters of the Religious of Jesus and Mary from several other countries have also ministered in Haiti to help their efforts.



Haitian children of the Eucharistic Youth Movement attend a party organized by Mary-Jo Desir, a Haitian postulant with the Religious of Jesus and Mary. (Patricia Dillon)

"The movement in the church's social justice understanding is 'walking with people' and acting in communities," said Dillon, 82, who worked as an educator and a community organizer before coming to Haiti. "The longer you walk and talk, the more you understand."

Their efforts now face numerous obstacles, however, during one of the greatest crises in Haiti's history.

Although Haiti has faced a humanitarian crisis for years, especially since a devastating 2010 earthquake, recent months saw waves of attacks by armed gangs and the collapse of the Haitian government.

Today, criminal gangs control 80% of the capital, with nearly 1 million Haitians facing emergent levels of food insecurity and the airport closed to commercial

traffic, according to the U.N.

But even though the Religious of Jesus and Mary have removed their sisters from Port-au-Prince due to the raging violence there, six sisters still remain in Haiti to minister in the rural communities of Gros Morne and Jean-Rabel.



People take cover from gunfire near the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, March 21. (OSV News/Reuters/Ralph Tedy Erol)

They can't imagine leaving the locals they have lived alongside for decades, Picard said, partnering together on programs to improve Haitian lives.

"We have accompanied the Haitian people who want to have an impact on their country," Picard said. "They are family to us."

Three decades of impact

Sisters of the Religious of Jesus and Mary have significantly helped address needs in Haiti since they launched their ministry there in 1997, eventually spawning three

missions in Port-au-Prince, Gros Morne and Jean-Rabel.

Often partnering with other religious communities, nonprofits and government agencies, the sisters have built and taught at schools, created health and wellness programs, operated a shelter for seniors, and conducted workshops for making and selling art pieces.

They have further created a children's summer camp and afterschool program, combated deforestation, taught sustainable agricultural practices to locals, opened a prosthetics clinic to help those who lost limbs in the earthquake, and directed numerous philanthropic funds to help Haitians thrive.



Haitian preschool students watch a stick puppet show in Haitian Creole written by Sr. Liz Cornejo, a member of the Religious of Jesus and Mary from Peru. (Patricia Dillon)

"We've been very careful in most of the projects that we started to train Haitians to keep it going," said Religious of Jesus and Mary Sr. Vivian Patenaude, now retired in the U.S. after ministering in Haiti alongside Picard and Dillon for 16 years.

Nongovernmental organizations that visit Haiti often "come, do a project and leave," she noted, which leaves no one to help Haitians when resources dwindle or infrastructure fails again.

"We've been careful to do projects the Haitian themselves could continue with the support of us as missionaries," Patenaude said. "So they become the active agent, and we become the supporters."

Struggles amid growing violence

The sisters have always faced potential danger from violent crime in Haiti, Picard said, as tragically proven in 2016, when Religious of Jesus and Mary Sr. Isabel Solá Matas was robbed and murdered in her car in Port-au-Prince.

"Isa's death was a complete shock, because while there were armed robberies occurring in Port-au-Prince at the time, there was not the level of lawlessness that there is now," Picard said of the sister, who founded the prosthetics center and helped build several schools. "She had such a desire to help support poorer schools and the handicapped, it seemed impossible to imagine her zeal cut short as it was."



Sr. Jacqueline Picard, with microphone, gives a certificate to a counselor at a summer camp created by sisters of the Religious of Jesus and Mary in Haiti. (Patricia Dillon)

While the town of Gros Morne is relatively safe, Picard said, the community is experiencing an influx of people fleeing from the chaos of Port-au-Prince.

Nearly 95,000 men, women and children fled the capital between March 8 and April 9 to escape surging gang violence, according to the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration.

"We see the impact of the people who have come, and we're feeling the violence," Picard said, adding that these displaced people stay with friends and family in the

community. "Many of them fled with just the clothes on their back. People have fled to wherever they feel they can."

Gros Morne and other rural areas currently face desperate circumstances, Dillon added.

With the ports closed, food isn't being imported, she said, and food currently in Haiti isn't distributed because of gangs blocking off roads.

"Predictions for how much food is left in the country are pretty dire," Dillon said.

Many are experiencing malnutrition, Picard added, which she said resulted in the recent deaths of three local teenagers.

Another salient issue stems from Haitian farmers missing a season of selling mangoes, Dillon said, one the country's top cash crops sold primarily to the U.S., according to the U.S. Embassy in Haiti.



Residents who fled violence gather to receive meals at a school being used for shelter in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, March 4. (OSV News/Reuters/Ralph Tedy Erol)

Farmers have been unable to export mangoes because Haiti's insecurities have shut down the nation's infrastructure and caused the U.S. to close its inspection process. Dillon said some farmers chop down their precious mango trees to sell the wood.

"If they can't sell their crop, they don't make money," she said. "These families are less able to provide for themselves."

Sisters pursue solutions

Even in the midst of such uncertainty, the sisters continue ministering in a variety of ways.

Dillon is pursuing potential solutions for the farmers' crops, including possibly partnering with food-relief organization Food for the Poor to purchase the mangoes and simply distribute them among the country's own malnourished residents.

"We're looking at, 'What's the infrastructure that exists?' " Dillon said.

Picard still helps maintain a shelter for elderly individuals and community members with mental health issues. She also applies her nursing skills by helping coordinate medical care for patients at the overburdened local hospital.

"One of the public health workers from the hospital will come on a fairly regular basis with cases that the hospital can't handle, and come to us to help facilitate," Picard said, adding that two Religious of Jesus and Mary sisters in Jean-Rabel also operate a mobile clinic. "We've created a few networks with other health care institutions, so we can call and find out how to help such a patient at this time, do they have the specialist that this patient would need, and is there somebody who can help us follow up once the patient is there."



Residents walk past roadblocks as they evacuate the Delmas 22 neighborhood to escape gang violence in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, May 2. (AP/Ramon Espinosa)

The blocked roads reduce access to specialized care, however, she added, and the country is experiencing a shortage of medical supplies.

"We can't get people to the care that they need," she said. "Even blood is not available, and even more recently, insulin."

The sisters further partner with multiple communities to support a child protection program.

"What people are turning up are children on their own," Dillon said, adding that one child was found sleeping in a tire. "The communities are trying to gather together to support those children."

With minimal orphanages available and no foster care system, Picard said, locals invite these children to live with them.

Still others take in orphaned infants whose mothers have died, she added. Many community members, "barely able to provide for their own families," ask the sisters for funds to pay for the infants' milk.

Advertisement

"There's a Haitian saying, 'A cooked pot has no master,' meaning that cooked food can be shared by anyone who's there," Picard said. "But a newborn can't share in that cooked food. A newborn needs the special milk for the first six months of its life at least, so that's an added financial challenge to a family."

When families approach the sisters with such requests, she said, they provide what they can.

"Our funds are all outspent," Picard said, noting that the country's turmoil has also prevented the return of their many volunteers who were required to leave during the pandemic. "Medical and food, those are the two big categories [of spending]."

Hope for the future

Patenaude believes Haitians' resilience will see them through, especially after the generosity she witnessed while living among them.

"What I saw among [Haitians] is the wonderful, loving sharing that the poor do with one another," she said.

Haitians continue to find strength in their faith, Dillon said.

"The churches are full," she said, adding that the city's Good Friday procession stretched two city blocks long.

Haitians simply hope for stability, Dillon and Picard agreed.

"They want to stop the violence," Dillon said. "They want to live and love, and take care of their families."