

# Haitian parish in need of support from a 'twin' parish

BY DENISE FEDOROW

Two hours from Florida by plane. Sometimes the country of Haiti seems far away, but it's actually a neighbor — a neighbor in desperate need of help, creating an opportunity for a local parish to live out the corporal works of mercy and help its Catholic brothers and sisters to celebrate their faith.

Mike and Denise Wack of Sacred Heart Parish in Warsaw have come to know Haiti well. Their relationship with the country began through Sacred Heart's twin parish there, St. Nicolas, which it has been supporting through the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas for 31 years. In 2013, the couple made their first trip to St. Nicolas, situated in Kenscoff — a town in the mountains south of Port-au-Prince.

While there, Mike met Father Raynold Telusmas, a seminarian assigned to St. Nicolas. They began corresponding and are now friends. "We text daily," Mike said.

Father Telusmas was ordained in December 2013. In September 2016, he was assigned to Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours, a new parish in Grande Source on La Gonâve Island in Haiti. The parish consists of three small, very remote chapels and a small school that at the time Father Telusmas was assigned to the parish was not open. A month after he arrived, Hurricane Matthew hit the island and damaged parts of the parish.

Parishes in Haiti get no financial support from the diocese, so each parish has to support itself. Since Father Telusmas' parish is unable to do that, Mike and his wife immediately began providing funds to repair the damage and obtain some basic necessities for Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours. That financial support has been augmented by donations from family members and friends. Because of their support, the school was able to reopen in September 2017. It currently educates 90 students and employs 11 teachers.

The financial support from the Wacks and their friends also has permitted gradual improvements to the school and parish, including a cistern, solar electrical system and kindergarten meeting center, and has provided school uniforms for the children and allowed for improvements to the rectory.

Mike's brothers, Father Neil Wack, CSC, and Bishop William Wack of the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee, Florida, provided vestments and church supplies.

Funding has been secured to keep the parish and school running through May, but Father Telusmas and the Wacks are "desperately seeking a sustaining relationship" for this parish and its many needs.

## Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours

The parish is located in a remote mountain region. Once visitors arrive at Port-au-Prince, there's an hour drive to the wharf, then an hour to an hour-and-a-half boat ride to La Gonâve Island, which is 12 miles from the mainland — followed by a one-hour truck or motorbike ride from Anse-à-Galets to Grande Source over less-than-ideal terrain.

"I hesitate to call them roads," said Mike. They're so rough, the truck was constantly bouncing up and down. We had to go so slowly. A motorbike is the best means of transportation."

An estimated 400 parishioners belong to the three chapels. Father Telusmas goes to each chapel at least once a month to celebrate Mass.

Santé Rose de Lima—Nan Café is one of the chapels. It has a fairly solid structure, and about 75 people attend Sunday services — more when Mass is said. The second chapel is St. Pierre Claver—Plaine Mapou, a big, sturdy building that holds about 150 people. The third chapel is Notre Dame du Mont Carmel—Herbe Guinée, the farthest away. It's a long trip by motorbike to Notre Dame du Mont Carmel, on a road that is impassable if it rains. The building consists of sticks in the ground covered by tarps. About 35 people attend Sunday services, and they're very enthusiastic about their faith, according to Mike.

He noted that because of its remoteness, the Catholic population of Notre Dame du Mont Carmel is especially underserved. Young people tend to walk over an hour, using a shortcut, to Mass in Grande Source on the first Sunday of the month. On the Sundays when Father Telusmas can't be present to celebrate Mass, he has been told that the faithful gather to read Scripture and pray.

"They're very dedicated," said Mike.

The parish school is called Institution Scolaire St. Cyril and has seven classes — kindergarten through grade six — with students aged 4 through 16. School hours are 7:45 a.m. through 12:30 p.m. There are 11 teachers, three of whom do double duty as drivers, cooks and office workers. "They're paid \$66 a month (in U.S. dollars) and they're ecstatic to get it." Everyone is fed a basic lunch provided by the Feed my Starving Children organization.



Denise Fedorow

Sacred Heart parishioner Mike Wack, Warsaw, is shown above in his home office with a picture of him and his wife, Denise. Wack and his family members and friends have been supporting a parish and parish school in Haiti and hope to find a lasting solution for their needs.

**For more information about twinning with Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours Parish, email Mike Wack at [wack2112@comcast.net](mailto:wack2112@comcast.net). To learn more about the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas visit [www.parishprogram.org](http://www.parishprogram.org).**

"Some go three days without eating. And if there's no wood to make a fire to cook the food, the children don't eat then either."

The school building has two classrooms, with blackboards used as dividers. There's a small office and an outhouse, according to Mike, but all the buildings are in a state of disrepair.

He said there is also a public school on the island, but it's closed more than it's open because of insufficient funds. Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours parishioners are proud of their parish and school, so much so that if the kids don't have shoes to wear their parents won't send them to school out of respect.

## Specific parish needs

Mike has an estimated monthly budget of the parish's expenses and needs. Fixed costs include salary for a custodian, school cook and a cook for Father Telusmas; television, phone and driver at a cost of \$250 a month (in U.S. dollars),



Provided by Mike Wack

teacher's salaries come to \$700, and they need juice, canola oil and spices for lunch — a variable cost of approximately \$132 monthly. Then there's gas, food, medicines, transportation, church expenses and maintenance and miscellaneous costs of approximately \$250, for a total of \$1332 a month. Mike said \$1500 would help cover the most basic needs, but many unforeseen and unexpected needs also arise.

A parish wishing to become a twin parish with Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours would need only 15 people committed to giving \$100 a month, 30 people committed to giving \$50 a month or 75 people committed to giving \$20 a month to meet those needs. If a parish had 1,500 parishioners and each one gave \$1 a month, this would support Father Telusmas' parish.

Benefits, in the form of friendships, would be plentiful for

the donors, Mike said. He noted that the need on the island of La Gonâve is so great this island is called "the Haiti of Haiti." But its residents are a beautiful and proud people, Mike said, whose life circumstances are no fault of their own. Their lifestyles are far more destitute than that which even the poorest in America endure. "I bathed with a 5-gallon tub and a ladle while there," he remembered.

Yet, the people are always joyful. "They're so beautiful, so hopeful, so proud — and they love Father Raynold."

In addition to the needs of the parish and school, the priest on the island has to fulfill additional roles such as mayor, doctor and police chief. He settles disputes and gives basic medical care, as the nearest hospital is two hours away.

"There are very sparse medical supplies on the island. They didn't even know what a bandage was," he said.

As the Wack family has become more involved, they've seen and have tried to answer other needs as well. They helped one woman get a prosthetic leg, helped another get medical care for untreated burn wounds and sponsored a nurse through nursing school and attended her graduation.

"These people are constantly on my mind. I'm frustrated I can't help more people," Mike said.

## How to help

Mike said he would be happy to travel to any parish and give a presentation that would help connect it with the Parish Twinning of the Americas program. He has approached the organization for help, but was told there are 45-50 parishes in need ahead of ahead of Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours. If support can be found independent of the organization for Father Telusmas' parish, however, Parish Twinning of the Americas will assist in setting up the relationship.

"I work two jobs, Denise works one. If I have to get a third job and her a second, we will," said Mike. "I can't turn my back on these people."

Even if he is able to find a parish willing to partner with Notre Dame de Perpétuel Secours, the Wacks say they will still contribute support to the parish as well — but it will be less of a burden on their mind.

For about the cost of monthly satellite television or a cell phone bill a parish of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend can keep the remote Haitian parish and school open for its Catholic brothers and sisters. Parishioners are also likely to find that the blessings of their generosity will outweigh the sacrifice.