

HAITI TWINNING: DIOCESE OF RICHMOND – DIOCESE OF (mostly) HINCHE
An early history of the first 25 years: 1980-2005

By Adele DellaValle-Rauth

BISHOP WALTER SULLIVAN – READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES:

Richmond Diocese Haiti Twinning came about from various influences, not the least of which was the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). How is that? The council's admonition to "read the signs of the times" was the spirit that led to Latin America Bishops adopting a "Preferential Option for the Poor," (Medellin 1968). Bishop Oscar Romero became a voice for El Salvador's poor and paid the price with his martyrdom in 1979. Around that time, 1980-81, Haitians were fleeing oppression under Jean Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier and began a great exodus of boat people. Sisters of the Holy Names, Adele DellaValle and Rose Gallagher, ministered to men in the migrant camps around Chilhowie VA. Bishop Sullivan met them and purchased the House of Hope in Roanoke as a Refugee Resettlement Center. In 1983 the Christian Children's Fund, of which Bishop Sullivan was a Board member, was considering a presence in the Caribbean. Xaverian Brother Cosmas Rubencamp, Director of Diocesan Campus Ministry, recalls that what may have concretized the "twinning" concept for Bishop Sullivan was an event in El Salvador, around 1983, which included the Bishop of Cleveland that had a long twinning relationship with a diocese there. Thus, the idea of diocese-to-diocese twinning was born and openness to the signs of the times moved Bishop Sullivan to act on behalf of the poor beyond our borders.

Diocesan voices: Catholic campus ministers, including Ed Gerardo of VCU and Father Ron Seguin of W&M had been sending students to Haiti on immersion retreats. Missionhurst Father Bill Quigley of Harrisonburg was "on fire" with a love for the poor on the Island of LaGonave. In 1983 Bishop Sullivan brought together a small group that included Mr. Gerardo, Father Seguin and Brother Cos and requested a pastoral plan that would link the Richmond diocese with a diocese in Haiti. In 1984 Bishop Leonard Laroche of Hinche invited Bishop Sullivan to Haiti. On June 21, 1984, our bishop, Brother Cos, and Sister Cora Marie Billings of the Office of Black Catholics went to Haiti. The two bishops concluded that "twinning," offered an opportunity "to live the universality of the church." Bishop Sullivan said: "Twinning with Haiti gives poverty a name, a face, a place," and a formal covenant was entered upon.

Diocesan Haiti Outreach took on a 4-point structure: 1) Twinning relationships between parishes in Richmond and Hinche. 2) Three Immersion Retreats each year. Sister Cora and Br. Cos, and eventually others, led the retreats, which included a mandatory overnight orientation and debriefing. 3) Long and short-term missionary volunteer opportunities in Haiti, and 4) Advocacy and support of US policies and actions that improve the quality of life for Haitians.

1991-1994: Coup in Haiti: Diocesan-sponsored travel to Haiti was temporarily suspended. Background: Haitians became fed up with the oppressive regime of Jean Claude Duvalier who was expelled on February 7, 1986. Chaos ensued. Grassroots movements in Haiti and abroad facilitated a democratic movement leading up to the election, in 1990, of Jean Bertrand Aristide. Aristide was exiled by a military coup 9 months later. Life in Haiti became dangerous; the US State Dept issued travel advisories. During these years diocesan Solidarity took other forms of participation: Immersion trips to DC for lobbying and training in advocacy, led by Kathleen Kenney, OJP, Civilian Observer Missions, and the Pax Christi USA Campaign "Cry for Justice". Our diocese listened to the Signs of the Times and stood in Solidarity with our Haitian sisters and brothers. We now knew many of them by name.

1993: A major structural adjustment in Haiti Twinning evolved following a joint meeting of the Haitian Ministry Commission, Haiti Justice Issues Committee, and Haiti Experience Committee. It was determined that justice was so integral to twinning that it would be incorporated into all committees and programs. Result: Haiti Justice Issues and Haiti Experience Committees were merged and a new Haiti Solidarity Committee (HSC) was created with Adele as Chair and Kathleen, as Liaison. Brother Cos continued as Liaison to the Haitian Ministry Commission (HMC).

1995: A New Position: Kathleen posed the idea of a Haiti Resource Person to coordinate the Twinning. Bishop Sullivan appointed Adele. His dream was "that every parish in the diocese enter a twinning relationship with a community in Haiti." Adele began by gathering a database, developing a Twinning Start-Up Packet, and with her husband Bob (full-time appointed volunteer) to transverse the diocese with the goal to "grow the twinning". At that time approximately 20 parishes were formally twinned. The HSC also began a process of writing Guidelines for Twinning, adopted in 1996, key elements of which serve us to this day, most especially the emphasis on relationship vs. money.

Many, many forces contributed to the ongoing health and continuance of twinning, among these, significantly, "A Haiti Update," the bulletin for announcing and exchanging news; "Action Alerts," which focused on current calls for Advocacy; "Kreyol Rapid," One-Week Basic Immersion Courses in Haitian Creole, managed by Brother Cos; the diocesan vehicle and Thimothee Samuel who safely steered us over Goat Mountain and through many a river. In 1998 Adele formed, with Theresa Patterson, a coalition with the National Haiti Parish Twinning Program. In time, diocesan groups evolved that focused on vital twinning concerns of education, health care, and child welfare: the Haitian Education Fund, the Haitian Health Care Ministry Fund, and the Maison Fortune Orphanage Foundation.

1997: Annual Haiti Gatherings - A tradition is begun. The first was held on April 19, at Holy Comforter Church, Charlottesville. Kathleen came up with the name: "A Haiti Gathering". Drums were used throughout the day. Keynote Speaker was Father Tom Caroluzza. Tom was quick, in 1981, to open his rectory as a home for those first Haitians in Roanoke and had all the credentials to speak of the parish as a school for missionaries. Over 60 people, from Norton to Tidewater attended, including 12 Haitians from Roanoke – some of whom shared stories of their perilous boat exodus. At that time 22 parishes were twinned with 16 in process.

Second Haiti Gathering - April 18, 1998 - St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Charlottesville. Keynote: Dr. Marie Racine (Haitian) "Keeping the Flame Alive". Attendees were invited to create a Parish Twinning Banner. The Bishop Sullivan Recognition Award was presented to Frisnel Joseph and Jean Marie Cotis, representatives of the Haitian Association in Virginia. We never forgot our roots.

Those first Haiti Gatherings harnessed enthusiasm, joy, and solidarity and that spirit set precedence. Bob DellaValle-Rauth became known as "Advocacy Bob". Haitians were always included as participants and speakers. The Gatherings read like a history of Haiti and reflect our accompaniment.

In 2005 Adele and Bob left the position of Haiti Twinning Resource with 58 parishes twinned.

2005: Patrice Schwermer was appointed. 2010: Jay Brown, Director OJP, continues the journey...



Twinning relationships have always been the heart and soul of our Solidarity with the people of Haiti. The Internet now plays a large part in the dissemination of information but twinning was born out of personal encounters.

The early disciples were never the same after meeting Jesus. So we in the Diocese, after meeting the people of Haiti.

We stand on the shoulders of all who seek justice. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, saints and martyrs. "Kite Ayiti Viv" – "Let Haiti Live"!

Haitian refugees – 1981 – House of Hope, Roanoke

3/16/2013