BEACON in a DARK WORLD

PHOTO: DAN VAUILLACOURT
Fr. Rick Frechette, C.P., D.O. ’74, Hon. ’11

Bringing Light to the Lives of Haitians

By Troy Watkins

A

Passionist priest and passionate doctor, Fr. Rick Frechette, C.P., D.O. ’74, Hon. ’11 has tended to God’s work for more than three decades. With immense responsibilities to spiritually guide and heal children in Haiti, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, he accomplishes his tasks and fulfills his order’s mission with incomparable courage, dignity and grace.

Eighty percent of Haiti’s population live below the poverty line on less than $2 a day. Fr. Rick is director of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH) International’s programs in Haiti and directs the Passionist order’s missions there. He oversees an orphanage, schools, mobile clinics and a pediatric hospital, St. Damien Hospital. St. Damien provides long-term care to critically ill children and outpatient services to more than 30,000 patients annually, all at no charge. After the island was devastated by the 2010 earthquake, which claimed more than 200,000 lives, St. Damien opened its doors to the injured. Fr. Rick’s days often began by providing a final blessing and funerals for those who had died.

The vast majority of Fr. Rick’s time is spent either helping, healing or praying for people. In 2004 he started writing about some of the incredible, and often times deplorable, incidents he encountered. It was therapeutic for him, using prose as an outlet to reflect and release these experiences. He shared them with friends via e-mail and his distribution list grew.

After creating a Web site for NPH and housing these recollections on the site, it piqued the interest of Transaction Publications, which worked with Fr. Rick to publish Haiti: The God of Tough Places, the Lord of Burnt Men, in 2010. The book is a collection of detailed essays, written between 2004 and 2008. The harrowing stories are astonishing, but his perseverance and that of the undeniably strong Haitian people, is inspiring. The pearls of his wisdom and that of the Haitians flow throughout its pages.

Quoting from his book, Fr. Rick writes, “In the face of darkness (ignorance), the intensity and shape of light (understanding) is changing all the time. Light reveals itself in different ways, in the darkness. Those who believe in God go through life trying to see how God is present in any moment, and what God’s presence is saying. We look for light, and its message. This is harder to do in times of darkness. When things are especially rough, light can seem absent. It is never totally absent, but it takes an eye trained in God’s school (prayer) to recognize its shape and intensity.”

When asked about the source of his strength, Fr. Rick said, “Part of it is calling. In other words, I feel as if this is what I am supposed to be doing. There is strength in feeling as though you are on the right track.”

Fr. Rick grew up in West Hartford, CT, and began thinking about the priesthood as a high school senior. “The Passionists were near me in West Hartford and Assumption College had a formation program where you lived with several priests and others interested in the priesthood,” he said. “Assumption’s strong religious tradition was really important to me and the Assumptionists in particular were rigorous in their studies. It was terrific preparation for later when I was in seminary in Queens, NY. My fellow Assumption students were idealistic, wanting to set out and change the world and there was a great spirit of camaraderie.”

He possesses a deep admiration for an Assumption College education. “People should treasure Catholic education and support what

“As a priest and a physician, I have known the body, mind, heart and soul of many people, especially in the most anguishing circumstances of their lives. I have carried out my twin ministries mostly in settings of extreme poverty, social upheaval and natural disasters. The back drop of my profound encounters as priest and doctor has often been the crucible.”

—FR. RICK FRECHETTE, C.P., D.O. ’74
FROM THE INTRO OF HIS BOOK,
HAI TI: THE GOD OF TOUGHI Places,
THE LORD OF BURNT Men, PP. 1–2
Assumption College has to offer,” he said. “It’s fruits are deep and long-lived. It’s so important to find every way to keep the faith dimension strong and challenged by reason. Without the Catholic formation that I had, I never would have entered a vocation like the priesthood and never would have had the stamina to do the kind of things I’ve been required to do. I hope people recognize what a treasure an Assumption education is and work hard to cultivate and preserve it.”

After earning a degree in mathematics and philosophy from Assumption, he went on to St. John’s University as a seminarian and was ordained a Passionist priest in 1979. He was doing inner city work in the New York area and was sent to Mexico to learn Spanish, in order to return to New York to work with Cuban refugees. While in Mexico, he started working with vulnerable children with NPH and was asked to stay by its founder, Fr. Bill Wasson. The Passionists needed Fr. Rick in New York, but within a year he was granted permission to work with NPH.

Fr. Rick worked with Fr. Bill to open an NPH program for vulnerable children in Honduras, which was the poorest of Central America and the only country at peace at the time. After four years there, Fr. Rick recommended to Fr. Bill that NPH go to Haiti. Today, in addition to being the NPH director in Haiti, he is also NPH’s regional director of the Caribbean and a member of the NPH International Health Services Team, which oversees the medical needs of children in nine countries.

He explained the difference in the services NPH offered in each country. “In Mexico, it was mostly 6- and 7-year-olds coming for help,” said Fr. Rick. “In Honduras, many were malnourished toddlers. In Haiti, NPH was helping babies, many of whom were dying as AIDS victims.”

With social upheaval it was very difficult to keep medical professionals in Haiti and the need for medical professionals and supplies was enormous. Fr. Rick suggested to his provincial that he be allowed to study medicine. He returned the United States and earned a degree from the New York College of Osteopathic Medicine. Upon his 1998 graduation, he returned to Haiti to apply his medical expertise and assist the children.

He has received many honors, including the 2009 Hollywood Humanitarian Award, for “his dedication to fighting injustice and for creating social change for the improvement of humanity.” At last year’s Assumption Commencement, he received an honorary degree for his “extraordinary, sustained efforts to improve the lives of the children of Haiti against all odds.”

Fr. Rick credits the Assumptionists with providing the mental toughness to persevere and never settle for an easy answer to a prob-
lem, “because the true answer is there and it’s profound. Many people think, ‘If there is this much suffering, either there is no God, or God is deplorable,’” he said. “That leads to cutting contact with religion and cynicism. I analyze to the man-made part of each problem.”

His personality, a support system and a good sense of humor also sustain him. “Fortunately I don’t tend toward negativism, depression or cynicism by my personality, a trait I share with my mother. Also, you could not find better friends than the people that I work with, especially the Haitians. And I try to be a good friend to them too because we work through very difficult situations and we stick together. And the last piece that gets us through is humor. Of all the ways to deal with stress, humor is the highest one. When you can laugh, you can stay and work and be positive. We should add humor as one of the true gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

Fr. Rick has a clear vision of the future. “We’re still in high gear with both reconstruction and improving our programs to provide more assistance than we did before the earthquake,” he said. “I’m trying to help people remember their commitments to places like this to make them ongoing.

Personally, I’d like to write a novel about prayer to reawaken people’s interest in the power of prayer. I would use phenomenal examples of stories in which prayer has worked to produce amazing results.”

Fr. Rick concluded, “Life is not fair. But what can we do? We can be faithful to those whose sufferings are difficult, and steadfastly show them friendship. We can give witness to faith, hope and love, which are deep human valves and spiritual treasures, and the only three things that will last. What can we do? Nothing and everything.” He believes in doing everything. ♦

To learn more about Fr. Rick and his causes, visit www.nph.org.