

Fr. Martin
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School of the Month

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Nativity Catholic School, Burke, VA

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To Haiti's "poorest of the poor" Operation Starfish, originated by the Church of the Nativity in Burke, VA, brings safe houses, healthful food, clean drinking water, education, health care, and more. For the Nativity parish and school, it gives reality to the concept that "we are our brother's keeper."

It all began on the day before Lent in 1998. Pastor Fr. Dick Martin conceived the idea of a Lenten sacrifice of 50 cents a day per family to help the needy. Funds raised exceeded expectations and were used to build 27 simple houses in Haiti. The following year Operation Starfish, which works in conjunction with Food for the Poor, was born. The name comes from the Loren Elseley story of the old man who threw stranded starfish back in the ocean, knowing that though he couldn't save all, his effort was making a difference.

In the last 10 years, working through Food for the Poor, Operation Starfish has given \$2 million to aid Haiti's needy, along with countless hours of dedicated support. To date, five Nativity villages have been built in Haiti. In an area frequently hit by hurricanes, the houses are built of concrete blocks so only the roofs would need to be replaced. Jim McDaniel, who has worked closely with Fr. Martin, reports that this year Nativity parish, school, and CCD raised over \$263,000 to begin development of the fifth Nativity Village project. "It will include a combination of aid and development projects: 80 houses, sanitation, clean drinking water, school, community center, sewing co-op, and a 60-acre farm."

Both he and Bill Hummel, a parent of students at Nativity School, visit Operation Starfish works in Haiti at least once a year. In all, nearly 100 people—parish staff, school parents, and parishioners—have visited the villages. Paige Robertory was the first parent to visit Haiti, giving a presentation on her return. "Basically as a Catholic school in a Catholic parish, part of our mission is to give to other countries as well," she notes.

Fittingly, Nativity School has Operation Starfish as its priority during Lent. According to Principal Maria Kelly, students use Operation Starfish Lenten workbooks and collection boxes produced by Food for the Poor. Using Fr. Martin's original suggestion of saving 50 cents per day per family, school and CCD students raised enough money to allow 80 Haitian children to attend school for a year! Nativity School in Burke sends school supplies to



the two-story school built by Operation Starfish in Nativity Village 1.

The fourth grade of Nativity School enjoys a "twin" relationship with Rainbow House (L'Arc en Ciel), an orphanage for children with HIV/Aids, ranging in age from 3 to 18. The impetus for this special connection came when Bill Hummel, returning from a visit to Rainbow House, brought the fourth graders information about the 36 children living there. He carried back to Haiti personalized cards from the Nativity students. A videotape of Haitian children opening their personal cards led to the development of a lively relationship. Children in the two schools have become pen pals, sharing photos and interests. Long-distance friendships have developed. A unique project facilitated by art teachers in both schools is the designing of Christmas cards as a fundraising project for Rainbow House. Artwork of Haitian children is often included in the cards, with the Haitian "artists" receiving a small cash bonus from the proceeds.

Fourth-grade teacher Donna Feary reveals that one year her class enjoyed a visit from Danielle Penette, director of Rainbow House. Her talk was so inspiring that then fourth-grader Beth Van Hooser said, "When I get older I'm going to Haiti to see my boys." Adds Donna Feary, "I have no doubt that she will."

Of the total Operation Starfish program, Principal Maria Kelly declares, "It is a life-changing experience for everyone involved." ▲

A special thanks to Jim McDaniel and Bill Hummel for their input.