

One Good Priest Can Make A Difference

BY ELISABETH DEFFNER

When Oblate of Mary Immaculate Father Marc Boisvert first visited Haiti in 1997, the suffering of the people hit him like a wake-up slap in the face. "I was overwhelmed by the poverty, especially what it was doing to the children of Haiti" he said. "Kids were always in the street begging for money, for food or medicine. Some were blatantly offering sexual favors in exchange for food."

It was a shock, especially since Father Boisvert believed he already understood the Haitian people. As a member of the Navy Chaplain Corps, he'd been assigned a few years earlier to work with Haitian refugees at the U.S. base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, because he spoke French. "The Haitians' ability to be joyful in the midst of overwhelming poverty attracted me," he said. At that point, he thought about moving to Haiti, but hesitated to give up the security of a military career.

"It took me five years," he said, "to finally give in to God's call to work with the poorest people in this hemisphere."

So in 1997 Father Boisvert took a leave from his post as chaplain of Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in Orange County, Calif., to experience life firsthand in Haiti. In January 1998, after resigning his Navy commission, he moved to the Caribbean island.

Father Boisvert started off assisting a priest who served two churches, 15 chapels, and 12 schools in a small southern Haiti town. After eight months working with the priest, learning Creole, and immersing himself in Haitian culture, Father Boisvert got permission from his religious superior to start a ministry serving the street children of Les Cayes, the largest city in southern Haiti.

"By October of '98, I had 37 boys living in a small house in the city," he said. "We needed more space so I went to see the local bishop, Alix Verrier, who offered me a rundown and abandoned former minor seminary." It was infested with cockroaches and rats and flooded with each rainfall — but it was a shelter. A Maine native with a French-Canadian background, Father Boisvert traces his vocation to an event that changed his life. When he was 11, his sister Rachel died at age 6. "Everything changed," he said. "The world made no more sense. The typical questions came up: Why would a loving God allow this pain?"

In his journey to find answers, he turned onto the

road to the priesthood. As a deacon he joined the Knights of Columbus, following the example of his father, a Fourth Degree Knight. He is a member of Arthur Joyal Council 4225 in Dracut, Mass.

"I really liked the fact that all Knights got involved in concrete projects that benefit the less advantaged," he said.

While serving as pastor of two coastal churches in Maine and chaplain at the Maine Maritime Academy, he joined the Navy Chaplain Corps, serving with the Marines, the Coast Guard and the Navy. "I joined the Navy because I love the sea and ships — so, of course, my first assignment was with Marines in the desert of Saudi Arabia for Desert Shield/ Storm," he quipped.

"Learning to put aside personal comfort for the mission was the lesson I learned with the Marines," he added. "My mission has changed, but the sacrifices remain."

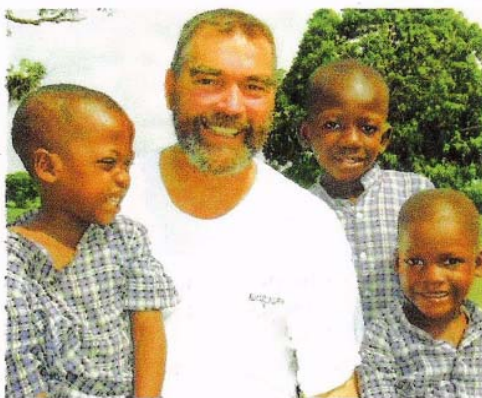
Father Boisvert's Haiti mission has grown into a project of expanding proportions, called *Pwoje Espwa* (Project Hope) in the local Creole. The project includes a shelter and orphanage, three schools, a dispensary, a vocational

training program and a farm where more than 350 children live. But there is much still that he wants to do, and many more children who need help.

"He's almost a modern-day Father Flanagan for Haiti," said Bill Breen, a member of Bishop Johnson Council 9487 in Lake Forest, Calif., referring to the priest who founded Boys Town. Breen met Father Boisvert when he was stationed at El Toro, and is a volunteer for Theo's Work, a U.S.-based nonprofit group that supports *Pwoje Espwa*.

"*Pwoje Espwa* provides the kids with options," Father Boisvert said. "They can go to school. We treat them when they are sick. They eat well every day. We care for them, and all this leads to a sense of security, which allows hope. It is this hope that makes all the difference in their lives. Some of my older children even dare to dream."

For more information about *Pwoje Espwa*, visit www.theoswork.org, or call Jack Reynolds, board president of Theo's Work, at 336-272-9376. »



Father Marc Boisvert with three Haitian boys enrolled in the orphanage and vocational training program he operates.

Elisabeth Deffner is a freelance writer whose work has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *National Catholic Register* and *Catholic Digest*.