

Mission Reflection and Observations from the Eyeglasses Dispensing Station

The ability to travel on numerous mission trips to our sister parish in the Dominican Republic and work with people at various stations in the basic eye care clinics have truly blessed my life. These opportunities have been inspiring ways to witness how missionaries teach our faith and demonstrate Christ's love, broaden my perspectives, learn about another Catholic culture, and see how partnerships can address community concerns in a developing country.

Many from St. Mary's and other Catholic parishes have journeyed to La Sagrada Familia Parish since 2006 to share their gifts, experience a different way of life, create bonds, and establish friendships with host families. We receive far more than we give when we visit mission communities, move outside our comfort zones, and acquire a new understanding of living as Christians. Each pilgrim gains unique perspectives and has many cherished experiences on these trips, but what brings so many back are the faith-building opportunities, uplifting Masses, and positive, life-changing encounters with Dominicans of all ages and with each other.

Everyone receives guidance and training prior to a mission trip. Those not involved with the health care professions can work at many of the clinic stations, and all are assisted by interpreters, Father Juan Manuel, our guide from the Community of Saint Paul, members of the local Lions Club, and young parishioners. Procedures are explained to patients so they feel more at ease. Sheets with basic Spanish phrases are also available in each area to assist participants. The people's patience, kindness, gestures, and sense of humor transcend language barriers. Smiles, hugs, handshakes, and expressions of gratitude are common while greeting and helping people from villages throughout the parish and the city in which pilgrims stay.

Memorable observations from the dispensing station over the years ...

- A teenage boy with extremely poor distance vision (objects at arm's length were blurry) who was amazed and overjoyed when a pair of glasses was found that could improve his vision that day. He needed to sit for a period of time so his eyes could adjust. He would also get special order lenses filled by an optical business located in the nearby provincial capital.
- An elderly couple in which the wife gently helped her husband understand our questions and follow instructions as he tried on glasses and eventually selected a pair that worked well for him
- The middle-aged teacher who selected an appropriate frame for special order bifocal lenses and shared that she needed readers, until that pair arrived, so that she could read and more effectively prepare lessons for her students
- The return to the clinic of a smiling, more confident young father who was seen by the doctors the previous year. He had been blinded in one eye during a work accident, became unemployed, despondent, and was discriminated against, even shunned. Special funds paid for surgery in the capital city of Santo Domingo in which he received a prosthetic eye, thus transforming his life and giving him hope for the future.
- The petite, cheerful octogenarian who needed to stand on blocks for her eye exam and enjoyed engaging with individuals at each station she visited
- A shy elementary school girl, sitting with her mother, finding an appropriate pair of glasses for her small face
- Fashion conscious young adults, needing corrective lenses, taking time to choose attractive frames
- A daughter good-naturedly working with us and helping her mother choose from an array of glasses with the necessary prescription
- The relieved expression of a woman, who needed sunglasses, when she was told that she did not need to pay and could select what she wanted from the table
- A touching, generous act by older woman, who warmly greeted us and wanted to express appreciation for the good care and eyeglasses she had received the year before: she came into the clinic and gave our group a heavy bag full of fresh papayas and mangoes from her yard. She may have traveled there on foot or by motorbike with her parcel and waited in the sun for some time before being admitted inside.

In conclusion, thank you for your prayers, support, and continued generosity for projects benefiting our sister parish. Please consider traveling to the Dominican Republic in January, 2015. There will be many learning and service opportunities--for students of various backgrounds, with numerous talents, and adults of all ages. God bless you.

----Patty Bajabir, St. Mary Parish