

Ex-Rumford Resident Works among The Poor

RUMFORD — The Rev. Rene (Roland) Gaudin, a former Rumford resident who has been working with the poor in the Bahamas, finds his work with these deprived people to be rewarding.

Fr. Gaudin, who serves as pastor of Sts. Mary and Andrew Catholic Church, Treasure Cay, Abaco, Bahamas, wrote to The Sun in hopes the newspaper would publish an account of his work with the 700 Haitian parishioners he serves.

The Bahamas is a mission diocese in the Catholic Church. Fr. Gaudin has been pastor for 10 years in Treasure Cay on the island of Abaco in the Bahamas. The parish in this 120 mile long island consists of the northern half.

Fr. Gaudin's main church and home is outside the gate of the resort of Treasure Cay. Most of those attending Mass there are tourists. However, Fr. Gaudin lives in two worlds as he also serves a mission church at a 3,000-acre farm where more than 700 Haitians live and work.

Fr. Gaudin says these poor Haitians comprise 95 percent of the parishioners. The mission church is a shed measuring 20 by 40 foot. The Maine native dreams of expanding the building and repairing the interior to accommodate more people in a suitable worship environment.

Poor Living Conditions

Fr. Gaudin's chief work is with the poor Haitians. In describing their living conditions he says "they live in shacks made from scrap boards found in the dump eight miles away. The company-built shacks where 12 people live are smaller than a one-car garage. There are no tables and chairs..."

He added that hundreds of Haitians "live in shacks that are the size of a large walk-in closet. They work just from December until late March picking vegetables." Often, he says, they work only two or three days a week, the men receiving \$1.20 an hour and the women \$1. Since food prices are double what they are in the United States, the people eat very poorly. Malnutrition, especially of children, is a common and serious problem.

Even though the Haitians are industrious, Fr. Gaudin relates, there is never enough work. They often walk miles, going from house to house asking for work. They never ask for food or money. Father Gaudin said he has told them that they are always welcome at his rectory where he will give them some food and drink. "Still they are very hesitant to ask. Most of the time when I see them on the road or when they come to my home, they do not ask for food even when they are very hungry. I tell them they should not be ashamed, that they are poor as it is not their fault."

Friendly Natives

Fr. Gaudin finds the Haitians to be a friendly people. "Life on Abaco is like it was in the United States many years ago," he says. "People can leave their homes unlocked, cars unlocked and with the keys in the ignition day and night." Trust is so great, he relates, that "I



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always offer a ride to anyone I see walking. You can do this on Abaco, day or night, as there is no danger of being hurt. People do not have to stick out their thumb but just stand in place and walk along and people will stop and offer a ride.

Since Fr. Gaudin counts affluent tourists as well as impoverished Haitians among his charges, he often takes the tourists to see how the other half lives. "You can be told about it and see movies or pictures, but nothing compares to seeing it with your own eyes. One man was crying on his way home after seeing it."

Maine Nuns Help

There are other Mainers serving on missions in the Bahamas, Fr. Gaudin points out. Several Sisters of Mercy from Maine staff missions on Andros, The Bahamas largest island. Along with the pastor, the sisters spend 10 weeks on one island and 10 weeks at the other.

Commenting on the work of the Sisters, Fr. Gaudin said, "I was very impressed with their work and spirit in spite of difficult living conditions. The Sisters he visited are Sisters David Mary Duncan and Mary Miller of Portland, Kathleen Smith of Bar Harbor and Phyllis Marton of Fort Kent.

Hardships

He spoke of the hardships of the Sisters. "They can only have electricity from the time it begins to get dark until bed time as they cannot afford to run the generator any longer. Because of this limitation, the Sisters and their pastor do not even have fans to cool them in the torrid weather.

Through various people and companies, Fr. Gaudin acquires supplies for his poor parishioners. Every Sunday, he asks the tourists for their left over food and anything else that can be used.