

# W. Mass. Catholic Voices Blog

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## [Haiti Plunge spans temperatures and worlds](#)

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Spanning an approximate 100 degree temperature difference, a team of high school students from Mary, Mother of Hope Parish in Springfield and St. Mary's Parish in Longmeadow, along with Sister of St. Joseph Eunice Tassone and Fr. Matt Alcombright, journeyed from the blustery cold of New England to the warm Caribbean climate of Haiti. The journey was not meant for the group to bathe in a bit of warmer weather for their winter break from school but one of service and mission. The 10 students journeyed with the "Haiti Plunge" program to work with and serve the people in the mountain regions of Haiti.



Driving from the Port au Prince Airport to the mountains of Haiti is always an experience of profound humility and amazement. Coming from a world that has everything at its fingertips to a world that visibly struggles to meet any daily necessity or want takes its toll quite quickly. Once at our destination the group takes time to unpack and use the remainder of the day to acclimate and get settled in to the work that awaits. We share our first simple meal together of rice and beans and following the meal gather for prayer and for Mass. Beginning with the Mass and receiving the Eucharist remind everyone of the teaching of the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest of people.” (CCC, 1397) That “daily bread” of which we partook each night reminded us and committed us to the real mission of this group and that was to be committed to the service of our brothers and sisters in need.



Falling asleep to the sounds of crickets singing was only second best to the sounds that we heard most nights coming from the local church where the local community would gather to sing, pray and give thanks to God for all that they have — even though to us the seemingly little that they have. It’s a reminder of Pope Francis’ reflection at the beginning of his *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel): “I can say the most beautiful and natural expressions of joy which I have seen in my life were in the poor people who had little to hold on to.” (EG, 7) One of the opportunities we had was to attend part of their Sunday Worship which the community, the entire community, gathers to read Scripture, sing, pray, preach and reflect for approximately 5-6 hours in pure thanksgiving to God for the blessings that He has poured out upon them.



This is a truest and most profound sense of joy we saw during the journey. Sydney Walt, a junior at Longmeadow High School and parishioner of St. Mary's in Longmeadow reflected saying "Every year I realize that the Haitians teach me more than I could ever teach them. They made me realize that there is so much more to life than material things. Family and God are huge parts of their lives, and I think it's important for us to realize that because we have more resources, that gives us more of a reason to praise God every day and love our families."

One of the tasks entrusted to the team was to teach and to do educational assessments for the children in the village of Tima. The team worked one on one with the children to assess the needs of each child and gauge an appropriate educational grade level based on the student's knowledge of numbers, letters, shapes and writing abilities. This is such an essential part of the team's work because education is not something that is offered to all but something that each family must pay for and, because of that, something which most families cannot afford and are not able to educate the children but will try to do anything possible to make that happen.



Emily Coughlin, a junior at Longmeadow High School and a parishioner at St. Mary's in Longmeadow says "This trip has made me more grateful for my education, my opportunities, and especially my family. Seeing all the children in the school in Tima I realized how grateful I am for having two parents who love me and would do anything for me. The children in the schools prove how their families do everything for them to have the best life possible and how I take my family and my education for granted."



One of the other major tasks of the team was to design, construct and implement a raised garden project. The raised gardens are meant to be a way to empower the women of the villages to grow, harvest and sell crops that can be grown right next door to their home. The gardens are raised due to our biggest enemy, goats and cows. The team constructed the beds to stand approximately 5 feet tall inhibiting animals from grazing. Once the team constructed the first “demo” bed it was time to fill it with soil and educate the women from the surrounding villages on gardening techniques such as planting, caring for crops and composting. This is another essential part of each teams mission...to provide opportunities for sustainable development and progress to take place after the teams have left.



The journey to Haiti was one of great joy and service. The team always manages to take home much more than they went with. While the team is ready to return home there was no sense of “homesickness” because we are always made to feel like family. Anna MacDonald, a junior at Longmeadow High School and a parishioner from St. Mary’s in Longmeadow reflects “It was hard to be homesick, as we were surrounded by people who so willingly took us in and treated us like their family. It was enlightening to see the pride of the Haitians as they showed us around the houses, churches, or schools that they have built because they are so grateful for the little that they have.”



It is truly from the little that the people of Haiti have that they are able to give so much of themselves first and foremost to God but also in service and love to God's people. Megan Senecal, a junior at South Hadley High School and a parishioner at Mary, Mother of Hope Church sums up this journey "Haiti is a beautiful country, and traveling there opened my eyes. It made me more appreciative for my education and the all the things I have in my life." It seems as though while using Pope Francis to reflect on the needs of our brothers and sisters this team truly took on the call of St. Francis of Assisi... "Make me an instrument of your peace...for it is in giving that we receive."