

## **A Message to My Fellow Haitian Lay Ministers**

During the National Haitian Apostolate conference that took place on June 11, 12 and 13, 1999 at Aquinas College in Spark Hill, New York, some ideas occurred to me as a result of the emphasis placed on reading and getting involved in one's community. Because of time constraints I did not try to share them at the conference. I am glad I waited, for this gave me time to read some of the sources the presenters referred to, and to revisit some other materials I had read before. I am happy to share these ideas with you now.

I hope you can take the time to read my thoughts. Like many of you, I have a family, a full-time job, and a busy schedule. Many of you don't have time to spend at least an hour in a day reading -- perhaps not even an hour a week. You can imagine, what it is like to squeeze in 30 to 40 hours in the last two weeks of June to read, prepare and write this text.

### **Finding time to read is a constraint. How can we overcome it?**

One technique is to read while waiting for and riding in the train or bus. During long-distance trips to Haiti, Europe, Egypt or Israel which many people take during the summer, bring along a couple of books to read on the plane and while waiting in airport lounges.

When going on pilgrimages, instead of saying 1,000 Hail Marys in the bus, pray, say the rosary, and bring along books to read about the life of the saint whose church or chapel one is visiting. A discussion of the book can be part of the whole group conversations that take place during Haitian trips.

Rather than spending hours on the phone, say what needs to be said in five minutes and then devote the time saved to reading. Have books or articles near your bed and make a habit of reading before falling asleep. For married couples, reading together can be a turn-on. For singles, it can be a relaxing way to fall asleep. Do not make watching TV or viewing a lot of videos a regular habit. Read instead.

Increasing number of Haitians are attending health clubs. You can read while on the stationary bike, the stair master, the treadmill, the crosstrainer, or while in the sauna.

### **Where can one get books?**

For books in French about the Church, call or write the Haitian Apostolate in New York: 1-718-856-3323. 455 East 29th St. Brooklyn, N.Y 11226

Your local diocese carries books, pamphlets and newspapers. Call to find out how to get them.

Ask your local library to buy books about the Catholic religion and its doctrines if they don't have any on their shelves. Remember, you are a taxpayer -- your money buys the books. Your local book store will almost certainly have a section on religion. For those who use the Internet, there are on-line book stores like Amazon.com.

You can also read books, journals, and newspapers in the libraries of your local universities or colleges, but you cannot take books out if you don't attend that school.

When one travels to other countries such as Haiti, Canada, France, Israel, Egypt or Italy (countries that Haitian parishioners often visit), make time to go to bookstores in those countries.

#### Establish book clubs in various groups

**Légion de Marie** (Legion of Mary): instead of saying 1,000 Hail Marys and holding a three-hour prayer meetings, have a 45-minute prayer celebration involving songs related to Mary , a rosary, and other meaningful prayers. Spend the rest of the time reading books about Mary (*Les dévotions Mariales*, for instance).

**Charismatic group leaders and prayer groups:** instead of having 3-hour meetings, make it one or one and a half hours, then read about the Holy Spirit and Pentecost. Read books about prayer -- For example, *Ce que dit le Pape sur la prière, Prions le Seigneur* .

**Groups who meet from midnight to 6 AM:** pray and sing for two hours. During the next four hours, select books on various topics to be read for a period of time. One example: for six months read books about the Bible, such as *Kle Pw Louvri pot Bib la* by André Sylvestre. At other times the group could read *Comment Evangéliser les Baptisés* by José Prado Flores. Do the assignments at the end of each chapter. This is similar to what the Jehovah's Witnesses do.

**Youth and young children leaders** should read about adolescent and child psychology, recreational activities for youths and children, youth magazines, and literature about youth in the Church. Keep informed about activities of Young Catholic Organizations, be it Haitian or non-Haitian. Get involved and do joint activities with neighboring or other parishes' youth groups.

**The liturgy committee** can also set time aside to read. When they manage to have an hour-long mass, they can read together books like *La Messe, C'est fete chez nous* for an hour. Depending on the liturgical period, they can read different books. For instance, *La Réconciliation et la Pénitence* can be read during Lent. Or, they could alternate meeting topics. One meeting could be to plan the liturgy for the month, while the other could be devoted to reading about the concept, the history and the meaning of various liturgical celebrations. The second part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (numbers 1066 to 1690) is a good source of reference. Liturgical concepts are very complex. I would even recommend a semester or a year-long introductory course on liturgy.

**Musicians and choir members and directors** can read about hymns, choir, choral practices, aligning the music with the voice during accompaniment, and music theory. Those who play instruments can read about the instruments they play -- guitar, drums, saxophone, etc. Singers can read about voice, voice tone, and vocal pitch.

**The Parish Councils** should try to read all the above-mentioned types of literature. Members should read various articles in the canon law like those Ms. Desvarieux, a lay presenter in the June 1999 conference, referred people to. They should read books about the role of lay workers, such as *Apostolat des laïques*, *Mission des laïques*, *Koman anime*, and *Recrutement et formation aux nouveaux services*. They should read their local diocesan newspapers and the religion section of major newspapers and magazines. They should attend local and national conferences and workshops. In other words, they should keep themselves constantly informed.

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Our hearts were burning with the us (2009)

All groups should also read about group dynamics as well as literature and books about Haitian culture, and make the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Canon Law* part of their church's permanent reference library.

Parishes should establish an educational fund. They should do fundraisings for on-going educational activities. Such activities can take the form of workshops, lectures, and attendance at conferences. Communities can also purchase books, journals, and newspapers to read. They might organize field trips, concerts, and dinners. People or groups who organize profit-making activities in a parish should consider contributing some percentage of the profit to their parish's educational fund.

**Some thoughts relating to the social responsibilities of the lay worker, a subject that various presenters stressed.**

They should call their children's teachers and get involved in the schools and

their local communities. Call or write legislators about issues that affect their community -- immigration, refugees, pollution, housing, municipal voting rights for immigrants, for instance. To get things done in a community, one has to be politically active. Politically active in the United States does not mean criticize the President or the government. It's about making your voice heard about issues that need to be addressed in your community, from pot holes in the streets, to housing needs, to schools.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 2, chapter 3 # 1915, refers to the needs of Catholics to be active in their community. The first sentence of the French version is: "Les citoyens doivent autant que possible prendre une part active à la vie publique," or in English, "As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life."

**I believe the time has come for making the education of lay workers a top priority. The spiritual values of Haitians are cultural and ingrained. Our work now should be to gain knowledge on how to do what we are doing in a more professional manner, to keep and maintain the liveliness and motivation of committed lay ministers who are involved in catechism, and one way or another are transmitting the faith and bringing conversions.**

For those of us who went to or are in school, we learned about prehistory, the Medieval period, the Classical age, the Industrial era, and so on. **The current period is designated as the Information Age.**

To be an informed, educated, involved and creative Catholics is to be a contributing member of the society one is living in. The United States of America is made up of many generations who have contributed in many large and small ways to make it a country where we Haitians can come to and have a better life. There are an estimated one million Haitian and people of Haitian descent in the United States. However, as a group we have not done much to prove (besides paying taxes) that we are creative, informed, and contributing members of this society. We are like one million voiceless invisibles in this country. Policy makers and decision makers do not see small entities. They see numbers. They see things as a whole; because of that we need to collaborate, share our good efforts, good ideas. Group work is more productive than individual tasks. Don't you notice that major businesses, banks, hospitals, telephone companies are merging? They form big corporations instead of functioning by themselves? The Haitians' lack of working together, limited participation, creativity, and involvement in the life of the United States may have long-term repercussions on decisions such as the number of Haitians that are allowed to come to this country.

Aren't being informed and educated attributes of a good Catholic also? Catholic education is well respected throughout the world, and we Haitians strive for it.

Many Catholic schools in large cities such as New York, Miami and Boston are attended primarily by Haitians. Let's work with our pastors, our religious leaders and our dioceses to make educating and informing ourselves on Church issues and our roles and responsibilities as active lay ministers a priority.

Furthermore, being informed is not only being included in the *Information Age*, it is also beneficial to the new generation. If those of us from the first generation are not inclined toward learning, are not involved and do not understand many issues in the society and the Church, we will not be able to transmit our spiritual and cultural values to the next generation. An example of this is the growing number of young Haitians who are incarcerated. Others have been sent to Haiti and become the authors of many crimes we hear of in the news. This tragic phenomenon might have been prevented if those of us involved in the Church knew how to keep young people in youth groups rather than in the streets.

As I go around to conferences, I encounter many young priests and religious people. I think if young Haitians are organized and activities are provided so they can meet other young, intelligent and well-versed religious people in non-liturgical settings, they (the priests and nuns) can be role models and a call for vocation. When I look back, the young priests and nuns I had a chance to learn from outside of Masses influenced me to be active in the Church today, and despite all the obstacles I have met, I still serve my community. Today we have many fewer religious people than we used to. In the past they had the knowledge and the know-how. We lay workers are doing many jobs that priests and nuns used to do. However, we have to be honest with ourselves: we may have the willingness, but too often we don't have the knowledge about how to do these jobs well.

Another issue - the Catholic Church appears to be losing a large percentage of those 300,000 Haitians who were born in the United States, especially those over 14, the college-educated, the individuals with salaries over \$50,000 and families in the six-figure income range. It is in the financial interest of the Church to know what to do in order to attract and keep Haitians in these categories.

From what I have learned, as a Haitian who attended high school and universities in this country and who is a parent of teenagers, the young Haitians are interested in maintaining the cultural and spiritual identity of Haiti. They organize Haitian clubs in high schools and on college campuses. They buy and carry the Haitian flag during graduations and non-Haiti related parades and events. They organize Haitian events in their schools. They join in campaigns for Haitian causes. In their continuous church for spirituality, young Haitians join other non-Christians religions such as Muslims, as well as A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) churches, Baptists, and other Christian denominations. A small number of

Haitians are in Black Catholic communities, but not enough, or not organized effectively enough, to have an impact on the Haitian community as a whole. Again, the spiritual and cultural needs are there. However, we lay workers need the educational tools to target the young of this generation.

We should learn from the experience of previous immigrants, such as Irish, Italians, Poles and other European settlers. Their offspring are no longer active in the Catholic Church. They went to school, have moved out of the city and are considered successful. But many of them are now in search of their cultural roots. They are blaming their parents and particularly their mothers who did not teach them their language. They are not satisfied with their financial successes. They are in search of something else -- identity and spirituality. No wonder why there are so many sects. Such searching has led many of them to spend a lot of money on psychological counseling, group therapy, and the like. We Haitians have that sense of spirituality and identity. Let's not lose it. Let's learn how to transmit our cultural values and help the next generation keep these important elements of our heritage.

Finally, I firmly believe that we Haitian lay ministers cannot avoid the issue of education any longer. Systematic structured ways to inform the laity about the vast riches of our Catholic religion as well as effective techniques for passing this knowledge on is a must.

Nekita Lamour (6-30-99)

