

Haiti's Many Contrasts: Voodoo and Catholicism; Poverty and Repression With Rich Tradition of Liberty; Death in Youth

By Agostino Bono
NC News Service

When Pope John Paul makes his scheduled stop in Haiti March 9, he will set foot on the poorest country in the western hemisphere, a nation ruled by a family dynasty since 1957.

It is also a country where Catholicism is listed as the majority religion but Voodoo, based on African animist beliefs, is what most of the people practice.

The pope plans to visit Haiti on the last day of an eight-day trip that will also take him to seven Central American countries. Haiti was included on the itinerary because at the time of the pope's visit the regional Latin American Bishops' Council will be holding its meeting in the capital of Port-au-Prince. The pope plans to address the bishops attending the meeting on his one-day stopover.

Haiti, about the size of

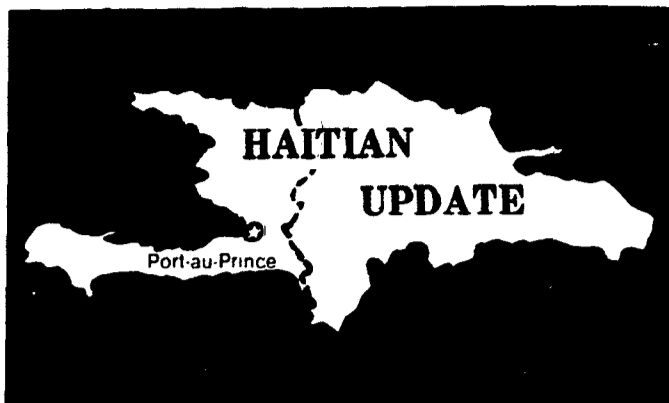
Maryland, shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Statistically it is the most underdeveloped nation in the western hemisphere. Annual per capita income of the 5.7 million people is \$260, but for the majority of rural dwellers, the figure is \$55. More than 80 percent of the population is illiterate. Life expectancy is 45 years and the infant mortality rate is 130 per 1,000 live births, about 10 times that of the United States.

Agriculture, basically sugar cane and coffee, accounts for about 80 percent of the economic activity. Much of the terrain is mountainous, causing most of the people to crowd into coastal areas and valleys. The population density on the arable land is 1,000 people per square mile.

At the same time the country has one of the richest histories in the western hemisphere. It is the oldest independent state in the western hemisphere after the United States. It was the first country in the world to gain independence because of a black slave revolution against white masters. Its independence dates from 1804.

Haiti's colonial history began in 1492 when Christopher Columbus landed on Hispaniola and declared it a Spanish possession. In 1697 Spain ceded the western third of the island to France which began sending black African slaves to the area to work coffee and sugar plantations. In 1791 a major slave revolt began and by 1804, the French fled in defeat.

Since independence, the political life of Haitians, 95 percent of whom are black, has been dominated by authoritarian leaders. Haiti had 22 dictators from 1843 to 1915, when the U.S.



invaded, saying this was needed to protect U.S. lives and property. The U.S. occupation ended in 1934.

Since 1957 the country has been ruled by the Duvalier family. Francois Duvalier, known as "Papa Doc" because of his adherence to Voodoo practices, was elected president in 1957 and used his office to gain iron-handed control of the country. In 1964 he declared himself president for life. On his death in 1971, his son Jean-Claude Duvalier assumed the office of president for life and became popularly known as "Baby Doc."

The Duvalier dynasty has had periodic problems with the Catholic Church involving church criticism of the human rights situation and church efforts to organize the rural and urban poor as a means of improving their economic conditions.

In the 1960s Francois Duvalier began expelling foreign-born priests and Sisters and considered the Catholic Church as the main institutional threat to his authority. The government began asking that native-born bishops be named to replace those ousted. Currently all seven bishops in Haiti are natives.

When "Papa Doc" died his son inherited a country where political dissent had become a rarity because of the control over the country established by his father. Under "Baby Doc" the bishops have periodically protested the human rights situation but have not presented the institutional threat that worried "Papa Doc" in the 1960s.

A month before the pope's scheduled arrival, the bishops issued a joint letter criticizing the government's arrest without charges of a Catholic lay leader, Gerard Duclerville.

"We will pray to the Lord that our stony hearts be transformed to soft hearts and that the hearts of those who are governing us be instilled with the respect for life and the respect for man as a whole being and for man in general," said the letter, read in Haiti's parish churches Feb. 6.

The government released Duclerville Feb. 7. It had given no reason for his arrest.

Church sources in Haiti say they fear the arrest of Duclerville could mean a return to harsh measures against Church people involved in community development work after a period of relatively calm relations in the 1980s marked by little public criticism by the bishops.

The sources also fear that Duvalier will use the papal visit as an indication that the

pope supports the government. As the Vatican and Haiti have diplomatic relations, protocol requires that Duvalier and the pope meet.

If they meet, church sources fear that the government will plaster pictures of the pope and Duvalier all over the country.

Haitian exile groups opposed to Duvalier have said that they cannot guarantee the safety of the pope if he visits Duvalier. Church sources in Haiti take the death threats seriously but add that these exile groups do not have a following inside Haiti.

According to the Pontifical Yearbook, 83 percent of the population is Catholic. Church sources in Haiti, however, say that Voodoo is the religion most practiced by the majority.

The practice of Voodoo has positive values according to some Church sources, who distinguish between white Voodoo and black Voodoo.

Voodoo is based on the animist belief that spirits inhabit living things and natural phenomena. Church sources say white Voodoo has positive value as a natural religion because it tries to understand the relationship between the natural and the supernatural.

Because of the heavy influence of Catholicism, many important Christian figures such as the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints are intermingled with the spirits worshiped by the white Voodoo practitioners.

Black Voodoo is devil worship. Church sources say it is practiced by a small minority, but are worried that it may be growing.

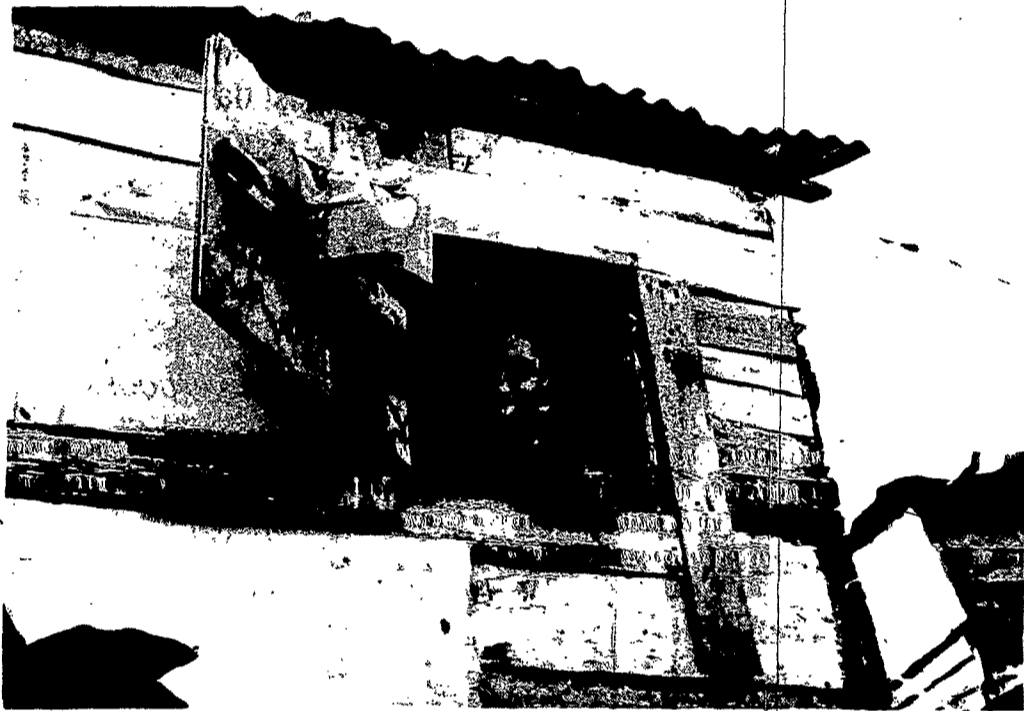
185 BKers Take to The Slopes

One hundred eighty-five Bishop Kearney High School students joined in the all-day annual ski trip to Swain Ski Resort sponsored by the Kearney student council, Jan. 31.

The trip, an annual event since the early days of the school, was organized by student council officers Lynette Manuse, Colleen Sullivan, Ted Oberlies and Dan Viola. The moderators of the event were Sister Ann Habershaw and Brother John Costello, both members of the Bishop Kearney faculty.

Deadline

Items intended for publication must be typed and in the Courier-Journal offices by noon Thursday before the Wednesday publication. The Courier-Journal is located at 114 S. Union St., Rochester, N.Y. 14607.



Beside a canal, built by slave labor, a Haitian woman smiles from the window of a wooden hut. (NC photo)

'Rochester Situation' Gains 'National Interest'

By John Dash

Judge Eugene Spellman is "particularly concerned about the Rochester situation," of the Haitian refugees, both local and national attorneys said last week. Judge Spellman presides over the court of the Southern District of Florida, and last summer ordered the some 1,800 Haitian "boat people" freed from federal detention in which they had spent a year.

The "Rochester situation" is the attempt by the Haitians' volunteer attorneys to move the legal proceedings through which the Haitians must go from Immigration and Naturalization Service offices in Buffalo to Rochester.

The Rochester attorneys originally asked INS administrative judge Gordon W. Sacks for a change of venue for the proceedings. He denied that request; and, subsequently, the Rochester group filed an appeal of that denial with the INS appeals board in Washington, D.C.

In the meantime, a special committee, headed by American Bar Association president Chesterfield Smith, charged by Judge Spellman with monitoring the progress of the Haitians' efforts to find refuge in the U.S., became aware of the situation, and recommended Judge Spellman hold hearings and make determinations on the "assignment of immigration judges to areas where a significant number of class members (Haitian refugees) reside."

Hearings are now under way on that second move in Florida, the outcome of which is expected to be announced Friday, March 4.

Both Ragna Henrichs, a Rochester attorney who is heading the local courtroom effort, and Arthur Helton, executive director of the Lawyers Committee for International Human Rights in New York City, agreed last week that the Rochester attempt to have the proceedings in Rochester is being used by the Spellman committee to exemplify what is seen as a national problem.

In addition, Mrs. Henrichs said in an interview last week in her offices at Nixon, Hargrave Devans and Doyle that the

Spellman committee is also looking into problems caused by "secondary migration" of the Haitians, or the refugees moving on their own to areas other than where their first sponsors live.

She indicated that there may be a problem here because of that. She said that there may be two additional Haitians here now who were not here for the start of the legal process of Rochester's refugees.

Although the Haitian refugees in Rochester only number about one percent of the national number, the Spellman committee "is quite impressed" with both the problems and the solutions being sought to those problems here, Helton said last week.

The New York University Law School graduate was in Rochester to speak to a group of about 50, assembled by the Monroe County Civil Liberties Union, and including Haitians, their lawyers and their supporters.

Also on the bill with Helton was Father Michael Sullivan, the assistant pastor in internship at St. Michael's Church in Newark.

Father Sullivan's program was a narrated slide presentation of daily life in the slums around Port-au-Prince, Haiti's capital. Picture after picture was of corpses in the streets and in the makeshift facilities devised for the dying by missionaries there.

Father Sullivan also had pictures of the sumptuous palace of president-for-life Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, and pictures of the dynast's security forces.

The Haitian refugees here, Mrs. Henrichs said, must counter the federal government's contention that they are economic refugees rather than political refugees. As economic refugees they are unwelcome.

She said each Haitian refugee will have to prove he is "unable to live in Haiti, because of a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group."

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