

Jesuit mission priest describes a Jamaica tourists seldom see

By Teresa A. Parsons

A dream vacation — that's what most people think when they hear "Jamaica." Except for an encounter with an occasional beggar, few visitors to the island have seen more than a paradise of sun, sea and sand.

One of those who has is Father Joseph Brennan, a Jesuit missionary who's been posted there for nearly 30 years. Last Sunday, during a visit to St. Theodore's Parish in Gates, he described the island he knows.

"Behind the facade is another Jamaica, a land in which there is a great deal of poverty and unrest," said the 60-year-old missionary priest.

While the Jamaican situation is not as desperate as that of nearby Haiti, the story of the Jamaican economy is depressingly similar. Massive foreign debt left over from the oil price hikes of the 1970s has combined with the rising value of the U.S. dollar in contrast to falling demand for the country's major exports — bauxite and sugar. A shaky tourist trade and a fast-growing population with rising expectations further complicate the situation.

Because of the foreign debt, the conservative government of Prime Minister Edward Seaga has been forced to impose severe austerity measures required by the International Monetary Fund. After one such measure triggered a 21-percent rise in gasoline prices in January, 1985, Jamaicans rioted and seven people were killed.

Social conditions — including unemployment that stands at 25 percent and the rising cost of living — have kept political tensions high since 1984. Most recently in March, 1986, 60,000 Jamaicans demonstrated against the government's policies.

While much of the turmoil of the last two years is in response to political and economic conditions, Father Brennan believes it is without a coherent direction.

"When people get desperate or greedy or fearful or hungry and without hope, sometimes they lash out," he said. "I think it will continue to exist as long as social conditions remain poor."

Meanwhile, the effects of a rising level of violence hit Jamaicans hard. "It almost always touches very close by. You either know the victim or the perpetrator," he said.

A native of Boston, Mass., Father Brennan decided to become a missionary and a priest simultaneously — in grammar school. Assigned by the New England Province to Jamaica straight from the seminary in 1957, he began teaching in at St. Michael's Major Seminary in 1961 and was given a parish at Aquinas Center in 1976.

"Jamaica is like the world in miniature, and the Jamaican Church is like the Church in miniature," he explained. "I can become involved in many different areas that wouldn't be possible elsewhere."

At St. Michael's, which is affiliated with the University of the West Indies, Father Brennan teaches theology and philosophy.



Hurriyet Necdet Aydogan

Jesuit Missionary Father Joseph Brennan visited St. Theodore's Church, Gates, last weekend to share his perspective on 30 years of mission work in Jamaica. Father Brennan is spending three weeks in the U.S. visiting his mother in Boston.

He also helps prepare prospective priests, as well as deacons and lay persons for ministry.

In 1982, Father Brennan became pastor of Immaculate Conception Parish in Stony Hill, where he has remained till now. Stony Hill is a small suburb of Kingston, the capital city of Jamaica, located on the island's southeast shore.

"There is not the stark poverty of West Kingston, but we have plenty of poor people," he said.

In addition to the main church, Immaculate Conception parish encompasses four small mission churches in surrounding rural areas.

As beautiful as the subtropical countryside is, it provides a meager living for subsistence farmers who live in the small towns and rural areas. They must scrimp and save for the money to buy books and clothing to send their children to school.

"The children come to school with the expectation that they will be fed," Father Brennan said. "Also, if they do reasonably well, they see it as their way out — otherwise they're in pretty much a terminal condition."

Since he became involved in pastoral work, Father Brennan has tried to concentrate his own efforts on self-help programs that tap the people's natural gifts — such as sewing and embroidery for the women.

"To give money to the poor without any hope of effecting change can be a thankless exercise. But when I see poor people trying to do something for themselves ... I want to work along with them," he said.

Both Father Brennan's efforts and those of other church workers in Jamaica and Haiti have been vastly compounded by Ferdinand Mahfood and a charitable trust he established, known as Food for the Poor, Inc. A wealthy Lebanese Catholic who grew up in the Stony Hill parish, Mahfood has devoted himself to "begging for the poor" ever since a conversion experience he had on an airplane in 1975. Last year, he visited St. Theodore's Parish during a week-long parish renewal.

Father Brennan illustrated Food for the Poor's impact on his parish with an example. Teachers at one of the three schools in Father Brennan's parish had modest aspirations when they began donating a portion of their

salaries to a pool with which to buy food for their students. When Father Brennan told Mahfood of their efforts, he agreed to double the 100 Jamaican dollars they were collecting — but with 100 U.S. dollars worth six times as much.

"It doesn't buy all that much food, but it does buy enough to feed these children five days a week ... and it has made a difference in their learning, in the brightness of their faces, in the whole tone of the community," Father Brennan said.

Only seven or eight percent of Jamaicans are Catholic. But thanks to the many schools and outreach programs established by church workers, Roman Catholicism has a disproportionately large effect in the country, according to Father Brennan. "It's considered right along with other mainline churches.

"Jamaica is kind of an ecumenical showcase," he said. "The people have a greater sense of Christian identity rather than Catholic identity. In social events and social outreaches they are drawn together comfortably."

That open atmosphere has suffered to a degree from a recent influx of Pentecostal preachers, who have adopted a strong anti-Catholic bias, he said. "It's had a very shocking effect on the people ... it corrupts one of the beautiful qualities of Jamaican life."

Friendliness and hospitality are high on Father Brennan's list of those qualities. "People are very community-oriented," he said. "After Sunday morning Mass, people stay around for a half-hour or more. It's not like here where people make a beeline for their cars.

"You get very involved with a lot of people in a very short time," he said. "What is really remarkable and what I think is the greatest hope for the future is the care and concern people have for one another. Whatever they get, they share."

He recalled a little old woman to whom he gave a 20 lb. sack of rice, expecting it would last "forever."

"Two or three months later, she was back and I started to kid around with her a little bit. I found out she was sharing it with the whole community," he said.

State grant

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northeast and southwest inner rims of the city.

Through counseling, education and referrals, Step will assess the needs of the family members and try to see that they are met by existing services.

Eleven other county programs were funded by the state grant. Among them are a media campaign to promote responsible sexual behavior, legal assistance, additional daycare services for teenage mothers and expanded family planning services.

A separate \$30,000 state grant will fund a team of social services workers who will deal directly with pregnant teens and teen parents. "The purpose of the team is to work intensively to reduce both short- and long-term need for public assistance," Farie said.

Communities targeted by the county's proposal are the City of Rochester, which has the highest number of teen pregnancies; Greece, the suburb with the highest number of teen pregnancies; and Parma, which has few services available to teenagers.

Because the state was not satisfied that there had been a sufficient assessment of needs in Greece and Parma, a subcommittee of the Monroe Council on Teen Pregnancy

— the Suburban Strategy Group — will further study and identify the resources and services to be provided.

"There will be focus groups of (service) providers, parents and teens invited to meetings to get their input," Wobus said. "Along with the other agencies, we're recruiting parents and teens now for these groups."

Wobus hopes to hire staff and to have Life Step underway by July 1. "We can't do in 11 months what we could in 12, but we hope basically to operate the core of the program," she said. "If the projects are judged successful ... there is some assurance of second year funding."

Parenting specialist to speak on children and marriage

Marital and family therapist Dr. Dennis Boike will speak on the topic: "Do Parents Cause Children's Problems or Do Children Cause Marriage Problems?" Thursday, May 8, at 7:30 p.m. in Edison Technical High School, corner of Emerson and Colfax streets.

Sponsored by the Dreikurs Association of Rochester, the lecture is open to the public. A \$1 donation will be requested from non-members of the association. For more information, call (716)225-0312.

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