

CATHOLIC MISSIONS



The International Mission Radio Association

Ham radio operators keep far flung missionaries close to home

By Rob CULLIVAN

ROCHESTER — For many people, the political turmoil in Haiti is yet another bloody struggle that journalists report through the newspapers, radio, and TV every day.

But the voices from the streets, villages, and cities of Haiti bring home that Caribbean nation's strife to Joseph and Dorina Agostinelli every day.

The voices belong to Catholic and Protestant missionaries hoping to contact relatives in the United States through the International Mission Radio Association (IMRA). Joseph Agostinelli serves as a ham radio operator for the agency.

For more than 30 years, Agostinelli has listened and talked to literally thousands of fellow ham operators through the radio that now sits in the nursery room for his grandchildren.

"I was always interested in radio," said Agostinelli, a parishioner of Our Mother of Sorrows at Paddy Hill, 5000 Mt. Read Boulevard.

"I had a cousin who was a 'ham' for many years," he added, noting that his children took up ham radios as a hobby before even he did.

Once a week for half an hour, Agostinelli goes on the air to pick up ham radio signals sent by missionaries throughout the world — mainly Latin America. The signals go through a network on the 14.280 MHz frequency, which 70-80 'hams' in the United States man almost daily.

After a caller has contacted the network, a ham radio operator located near the community the missionary is trying to reach will transfer the caller's signal to a phone patch — a connection between the phone and the radio. The caller can then talk on the phone for as long as he or she wants, Agostinelli said.

Started in New Hampshire in 1963 by 50 Capuchin priests, the all-volunteer IMRA became non-denominational five years later. The association currently serves Christian missionaries in 40 countries on every continent. Eighty percent of the nearly 1,000 hams belonging to the IMRA are citizens of the United States.

Agostinelli joined the IMRA after he heard about the organization from a priest during a convention of ham radio operators.

"I met him at a ham fest,"

Agostinelli recalled. "He started telling me about (IMRA). Once I joined, I was hooked."

Agostinelli has talked with many interesting people on his ham radio, including a U.S.-born priest who was present when Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was assassinated while celebrating Mass in 1980.

Agostinelli also recalled how he helped people during several medical crises.

"Quite a few years ago...I picked up a distress signal from Buenos Aires," he said. "They needed medicine for a girl for copper poisoning."

With the help of a staff person at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, Agostinelli arranged medical assistance for the Argentinian girl who needed an antidote available only in the United States.

Arranging such medical assistance has become one of the primary roles of IMRA members, noted Father Michael Mullen, CM, president of IMRA and a retired professor of theology at St. John's University in Jamaica, N.Y.

In a phone interview, Father Mullen pointed out that IMRA has for years

coordinated radio communication for disaster relief. Recently, the agency developed an "Emergency Preparedness Plan" with the cooperation of Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, the Red Cross and the Salvation Army. IMRA has formed relationships between representatives of those organizations with IMRA ham operators.

"We now have a ham in every capital city in Latin America," he said.

This formal arrangement will speed up relief services in the future, he commented, noting that many countries lack developed phone systems. During major natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, ham radio operators are often the only link between the outside world and a beleaguered nation, Father Mullen said.

For information on how to become a member of IMRA, contact Joseph Agostinelli at (716) 663-1178, or Father Michael Mullen at (718) 990-6744.

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