

Walking with the Poor

Frt. Rafa's Path of Service and Hope in Jamaica



My name is Frt. Rafael Yescas, SVD. I am 26 and was born in Oaxaca in Southern Mexico. I have been in religious formation for eight years with the Society of the Divine Word (SVD). Divine Word Missionaries have been working in my home parish since 1982, so I grew up surrounded by priests and brothers from across the world. It was amazing to experience their diverse cultures. However, the most important action that caught my attention was the way they showed us Jesus as a brother, father, and friend. They showed us that God walks alongside the poor and the needy.

After the first two years of theological studies, SVD candidates in formation participate in a Cross-Cultural Training Program, where they experience a different culture, learn a new language, and engage in pastoral ministry. That's why I went to Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa to learn English before moving to Jamaica for my pastoral experience.

However, now that I've had some distance from DWC, I

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see that my time there was a period of grace. I didn't just learn a new language — I also gained experience in making true and strong friendships, living and leading with different cultures, exploring paths of understanding the Catholic faith, and encountering different mindsets.

Due to immigration issues, my time in the U.S. was extended — which turned out to be a blessing. It gave

me an opportunity to work with immigrants from all over the world at the Lantern Center in Dubuque, Iowa. Now, I realize God was preparing me with human, spiritual, emotional, relational, psychological, and missionary tools before sending me to the Caribbean.

Since coming to Jamaica, I have encountered the God whom Jesus speaks about in the Beatitudes — our God, who especially loves those who have nothing and who is present in the smiles of children, the handshakes of the hungry, the tears of a mother, and the SVD brothers who reach out to help everyone — Catholic and non-Catholic alike — unafraid to get their hands dirty in service. I've seen the SVDs serve in many ways: feeding the poor, driving the sick, visiting the homebound, sharing the Bible, and helping parishioners attend Mass.

I've been working with Bro. Bernie Spitzley, SVD, Fr. Bernard Latus, SVD, Fr. Shadrach Ketiga, SVD, and the Holy Spirit Sisters. I've experienced the same feelings I had when I went to my first SVD mission. I was 16 and excited to share my encounter with God with everyone. It's hard to express, but I know it's God confirming his mission in my life.

Visiting the sick touches my heart deeply. Many of them do not have food to eat, enough money to see a doctor, a

wheelchair, or anyone to take care of them. They often live in small houses built by Food for the Poor or in shacks. Nevertheless, every time we visit them, they welcome us with big smiles and a joyful “Wah gwaan?” — which means “How is it going?” After that, we sing Jamaican hymns and share the Word of God for a little while. They love doing this.

It is impressive to see that, even though they suffer from illness and poverty, their faith remains strong. They truly trust in God’s love. These moments have taught me to be humble and to approach them with love, because they are the presence of God for me, and I am the presence of Him for them. They often pray for me and offer blessings while holding my hand. These moments fill me with gratitude.

When I’m with the children at the Bambu River during Bible sharing — in one of the poorest neighborhoods — I become like a child again. They run to hug me and touch my hair, which for them is something new and a bit strange. After sharing with them, my clothes are always dirty from lifting them up and carrying them on my shoulders. These children really enjoy playing and dancing with me, and even teaching me some words in Patois.

Nevertheless, the most important lesson they have taught me is to be happy and grateful for what I have. Despite the poverty they experience, they keep smiling, playing with their friends, and trusting in God. I hope you, dear reader, can one day experience something like this.

In Jamaica, I have also started to evangelize simply through my daily walk. Only about 2 percent of the Jamaican population is Catholic. Because my appearance is different from most Jamaicans, people are curious about me. They often stop me to ask, “Hey man, who are you? What kind of business do you do here?” or “How do you like Jamaica?” When I tell them I am a Divine Word Missionary from Mexico, they’re amazed and want to know more. That gives me the perfect chance to invite them to join us for Sunday Mass.

However, not everything has been easy. Missionary life requires me to leave behind my own culture, my understanding of the world, my comfort zone, my food, and my family and friends. That is a huge challenge because I have to humble myself before the people here and become like a Jamaican to better understand them. This is what God did through Jesus — and also what our first missionary to China, St. Joseph Freinademetz, SVD, did.

Still, this is a slow process that requires patience and openness. So, I am trying to become one of them — someone who enjoys dancing to Jamaican gospel songs, preaching, singing Jamaican hymns, eating jerk chicken, patties, fish, rice and beans, and, most importantly, learning to see God through their eyes.

In this spirit of joy and hope, as we journey through the Year of Hope, I want to thank all the SVDs who have made this experience possible, my family in Mexico and the USA, my friends who have encouraged my vocation, and all the benefactors whose prayers and financial support have made it possible for me to be a Missionary of the Divine Word.

I encourage you not to be afraid of following Jesus’ call and mission. If He is calling you, He will give you the grace to find your joy and your purpose in Him.

May the Heart of Jesus live in your heart and in the hearts of all people.

Blessings!

Frt. Rafa Yescas, SVD

