

9/5/2024

Mission...

Recently, my daughter was looking through a calendar filled with images of cats. These felines had been rescued from various circumstances. And the calendar was one of those you get from those good rescue organizations, with a letter asking for your support. Each of the kitties had a little backstory. We were reading one of them together, about a little fur-ball from *Caye Caulker, Belize*. And suddenly, I was back there! Memories flooded my mind.

You see, before I was a priest, I was very involved in my home parish back in Virginia. It was also called, St. Clement's, interestingly, but was named for the other St. Clement (there are two). Anyway, I was active there, running our cold weather shelter and serving on our vestry. I'm not sure if I was yet the Senior Warden, which was a tremendous honor, but I don't think so. I think I was the outreach chair. At any rate, an opportunity came to our attention when a representative from Episcopal Relief & Development visited our parish.

We learned that ER&D was at that time beginning work on rebuilding homes on Caye Caulker in Belize in the aftermath of Hurricane Keith. We signed up and began to form a team. After several months of planning, twelve of us went down to share our gifts. This was a transformative experience! From the planning within our parish, to our arrival in Belize City, our worship at the cathedral there (made from ballast stones from trade ships), to staying in the humble diocesan house, considering the long lines of people waiting patiently for rice and beans for their daily sustenance, and then riding out by boat to Caye Caulker (a small island off the coast), everything was meaningful.

The relationships we formed with local people, including the families who would eventually live in the houses we were constructing, and the conversations that we had, were priceless. All of us learned a great many things (not the least of which, for me at least, was about construction). We got calluses, we sweated. One of our team members was an RN and was recruited to work in their local infirmary. We were making these homes in partnership with the Church, with the local community, and we were attempting to make them hurricane-proof, or at least, hurricane resistant. In short, we were trying to make a better world.

One of the younger people on our journey, who had only just graduated high school, went on to join the Peace Core and later to work on clean water projects in Central America with another relief organization. I'm positive this experience had something to do with those

decisions. Because all of us were transformed by it.

Every day on our journey, after working hard, we gathered for prayer in the evenings. We would come together at a picnic table near the beach, which was under a palapa. It's kind of hard to describe but the palapa was held up with unfinished poles and had a grid like pattern of intersecting wooden beams covered by a palm thatched roof. Between those beams and the thatched roof was a space. And there were some flattened boxes forming a layer of cardboard upon the beams. We didn't think anything of it.

Night after night, we prayed there. I believe it was on our last night, when three men approached us from the nearby roadway. One was leading the other two. When they got to us, we greeted them. And the man in front said, "I'm sorry to interrupt your prayer. I just wanted to show my friends here my home." He climbed on the table, slid one of the pieces of cardboard aside and explained how he lived up there in that palapa, under that thatched roof. He invited us to take a look. He added that he had heard us praying every night, and he felt upheld by our prayers. It is a moment I will never forget, and I don't think any of the others will either.

We put the finishing touches on one of the homes we were working on there, and a family was able to move in to it. We made some headway on another home as well. Well, you may be wondering why I am telling you all this.

In recent years, such mission experiences have come under some scrutiny. They've been perceived as a waste of resources in comparison to just sending money to places of great need and supporting instead their local workforce and labor. There is certainly something to that position. However, what we lose is the relationships that can be formed, and which are deeply meaningful. We also lose the transformation that can take place both for those communities and for our own. We lose the opportunity for people to be changed for the better, as they work *together*.

On Sunday, I asked one of our parishioners to stand up, and explained that she had just returned from a humanitarian mission to Poland and Ukraine. We are planning a forum for her to share more about that experience with us. Coincidentally, I also happened to reach out to some people I know recently, who have attended St. Clement's from time to time, and found that they were at that moment on a mission trip in Kenya. What I can say from my own experience is that all of these people will be transformed from those missions. They will never be the same.

I wonder if God may be calling us in such a way? And to where God may be calling us to go, to form meaningful and lasting relationships in this world of need? Maybe not very far at all.

As always, I welcome your feedback: frpatrick@scbythesea.org

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Patrick