



## OPERATION STARFISH® FACT SHEET

1998 26 YEARS OF SERVICE 2024



### BEGINNINGS...

The story of Operation Starfish® began in 1998 with a late evening stroll by a man and his dog. Father Dick Martin, pastor of Nativity Catholic Church in Burke, Virginia, and his pooch, “Pete,” were walking one night before Lent “chatting” about “what-ifs.” *What if each family in the parish would forego one order of french fries? What if they would subtract one topping from their weekly pizza?* How much money could they raise to help those in need?

Fr. Martin couldn’t believe the numbers when he calculated them: 2,500 families saving just 50 cents a day for the 40 days of Lent could donate \$50,000 to make a difference in the lives of the poor. What a significant result from such an insignificant sacrifice!

This simple program of sacrifice was far more successful than Fr. Martin predicted. That first year, Nativity parishioners raised over \$67,000! They decided to use the funds to build 27 simple houses in Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, working through the international Christian charity, Food For The Poor, Inc.

### THE OPERATION STARFISH NAME...

The name, “Operation Starfish®,” came in the second year. In February 1999, a dozen Nativity parishioners accompanied Fr. Martin on a mission trip to Haiti, sponsored by Food For The Poor, to see the results of their work.

Bright smiles and beaming faces greeted the travelers as they reached the small enclave at Canapé-Vert, in the hills near Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince. They had hiked from the end of the dirt road across the hillside to see the one-room wooden houses their parish had built, and to meet the families who were now living with real roofs over their heads and dry floors under their feet. The Nativity travelers were overjoyed at what their compassion had accomplished for the new home owners, who welcomed the Americans with open arms and full hearts.

Despite the progress at Canapé Vert, the Nativity parishioners knew there was much more to be done. They had also visited Cité Soleil, a slum with over 300,000 people living without clean water, sanitation or decent shelter. At a reflection meeting the Virginians spoke of being overwhelmed with the scope of the problem. *“How can we possibly make a difference?”* one asked. Searching for an answer, Fr. Martin told his parishioners the story of the young child and the starfish:

*As a young child walked the beach at dawn, he noticed an old man ahead of him picking up starfish and tossing them into the sea. Catching up with the man, the child asked why he was doing this. The old man explained to the child that the stranded starfish would die if left in the morning sun. “But the beach goes on for miles and there are millions of starfish,” exclaimed the child. “How can you make a difference?” The old man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it safely into the waves. He turned to the child and said, “**It made a difference to that one.**”* (based on the writing of Loren Eiseley)

A parishioner spoke up after Fr. Martin finished the story. “Why don’t we call our work ‘Operation Starfish?’” he asked. Heartened by the Starfish story, and renewed by their mission trip, Nativity parishioners recommitted themselves to helping the poor, at home as well as in Haiti.

### THE NATIVITY VILLAGE CONCEPT...

Each year, Nativity Catholic Church has taken on additional projects to ease the suffering in Haiti. By 2024, that first project at Canapé-Vert, with 27 houses, has grown into 12 completed “Nativity Village” developments, with over 1,500 homes. The 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> villages are underway. Each of these “Nativity Villages,” located in different geographic areas of Haiti, starts with basic needs like shelter, sanitation and clean drinking water. Then education and health care are addressed with schools,

clinics, and vocational training programs. Each village also includes a self-sustaining component such as sewing co-op's, ocean fishing co-op's, fresh water fish farming, agriculture or animal husbandry to generate jobs and a revenue stream.

In 2014, Fr. Richard Martin succumbed to complications of diabetes. His successor, Fr. Bob Cilinski, has continued the work of Operation Starfish at Nativity. Fr. Bob led a parish mission trip to Haiti in October, 2015 to dedicate Good Shepherd Village in memory of Fr. Martin. In 2017, Fr. Bob returned to Haiti to dedicate Nativity Village at Despuzeau. Fr. Steven Vaccaro and Nativity young adults began mission trips to Jamaica in 2019, when they built a home for a needy family. Parish mission trips to Haiti and Jamaica have been suspended due to unrest, but a trip to Honduras is planned for July, 2024.

### **FISH4HOPE AND STELLA MARINA...**

Two groups have branched out from Operation Starfish: **Fish4Hope**, which has built 3 fish farm projects, and **Stella Marina**, which supports midwives in Haiti with birthing kits, training materials and mission trips.

### **OPERATION STARFISH® PROJECTS**

- **CANAPE VERT HOUSING**, 27 homes, sanitation, drinking water, soccer field – dedicated 1999
- **MOBILE MEDICAL VAN**, clinic on wheels for the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince, providing health care to remote areas – dedicated 2000
- **LITTLE CHILDREN OF JESUS HOME**, rebuilt an orphanage for handicapped children after a fire – dedicated 2001
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT MERGER**, near Port-au-Prince, with 250 homes, sanitation blocks, water wells, primary school with scholarship program, community center, vocational training, clinic, and chicken farm – dedicated 2004
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT PROLONGE**, near Cap-Haitien, with 400 homes, individual latrines, central water distribution system, primary school with scholarship program, community center, vocational training, and sewing co-op – dedicated 2006
- **NATIVITY FISHING VILLAGE AT PETIT-ANSE**, near Cap-Haitien, was the first fishing village project in Haiti (there are now 30), with 12 families operating four deep-sea fishing boats, with housing, sanitation, water wells and solar street lighting. In addition, Nativity funded the "*John B*," a larger boat used to map fishing grounds and train fishermen. – dedicated 2006
- **NATIVITY TILAPIA AND AGRICULTURE CENTER**, near Cap-Haitien, with five tilapia ponds, wells and pumps, fruit tree nursery and chicken and duck production – dedicated 2006
- **ST. ANTHONY HEALTH CENTER**, located within Nativity Village at Prolongé, this facility provides health education, first aid, immunizations and ongoing treatment of illness, including cholera, for a population of 10,000 – dedicated 2008
- **NATIVITY FISHING VILLAGE AT MADRAS**, near Cap-Haitien, with 12 families operating another four deep-sea fishing boats, with housing, sanitation, water wells and solar street lighting – dedicated 2008
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT EL CORTÉ**, in a remote mountain region near the Dominican Republic border, with 50 homes, individual latrines, water wells and pipe distribution system, community center, chicken farm, goats, cows and fruit tree nursery – dedicated 2008
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT LOZANDIER**, near Jacmel on Haiti's south coast, this project includes 52 homes, sanitation, water wells, fishing village and animal husbandry – completed 2009
- **HAITI HURRICANE RELIEF**, following four major hurricanes in Haiti in 2008, Nativity parishioners raised over \$100,000 in one weekend for emergency relief funding for Food For The Poor.
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT DEMIER**, between Cap-Haitien and Fort Liberté, this project includes 100 homes, water wells, the first indoor toilets in a Nativity Village project, and a large lake for aquaculture – completed 2009
- **NATIVITY GREEN TREE PROJECT**, funded by the Matthew 25 Foundation, planted 5,000 fruit trees and installed two water wells in Cap-Haitien in 2008
- **NATIVITY AGRICULTURAL FARM**, a 100-acre, pump-irrigated vegetable farm producing commercially marketed crops and providing employment for the local population east of Cap-Haitien, near Caracol – completed 2010

- **HAITI EARTHQUAKE RELIEF 2010**, after a major earthquake in Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010, Nativity raised \$300,000, filled two sea containers with relief supplies, worked with other churches to pack 144,000 meals, and supported a medical mission to Haiti – completed 2010
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT CHASTENOYE**, a major relocation effort to move hundreds of families out of the tidal canal area in downtown Cap-Haitien. Nativity built 50 homes with sanitation, a primary school and library, and a community water chlorination system; other organizations, including the Florida Marlins baseball team, and a group of churches in Rockford, Illinois, built more houses in ChastenoYE. Completed in 2010.
- **HAITI CHOLERA RELIEF**, Responding to a major outbreak that took 10,000 lives, Nativity sent 2 sea containers of medical supplies and obtained 2 containers of oral rehydration salts from a manufacturer in Kansas City in 2010.
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT MAZERE**, relocated another 100 families from the Shada Slum in Cap-Haitien into housing with sanitation, water chlorination systems, community center, school scholarships and an agricultural farm in 2012.
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT MADRAS**, with 47 homes added to the original 12, has an agricultural component and a large sewing vocational training center. Clean water, sanitation, and other services were also provided, along with a six-room primary school. The village was dedicated in 2013
- **NATIVITY FISH 4 HOPE VILLAGE**, was dedicated in 2014. Four tilapia ponds and 15 homes were built by Fish4Hope Foundation; 40 additional homes were built by others.
- **NATIVITY GREENHOUSE AT PEDRO SANTANA (DOM. REP.)**, a 10,000 sq. ft. structure with irrigation that produces approximately 9,600 pounds of vegetables in four crops each year. A portion of the profits are used to replicate greenhouses in additional locations. This was our first Operation Starfish project in the Dominican Republic and was dedicated in 2013. A second greenhouse was built in 2014.
- **GOOD SHEPHERD VILLAGE (IN MEMORY OF FR. RICHARD MARTIN)**, completed in 2016, with 120 homes, a new primary school serving 900 children, and community social development programs. The project also includes a 150-stall regional market, community center, water distribution system, pre-school program, health clinic and agricultural assistance program.
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT DESPUZEAU**, completed in 2018 and includes 80 homes, community center, primary school, vocational training school and animal husbandry business co-op.
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT BALAN**, begun in 2019, includes 70 homes, community center, primary school and small business component. All 70 homes completed in 2021, but crime/unrest has caused work to be suspended. Resources transferred to Nativity Village at Bas Fossé to renovate two schools there.
- **NEW HOPE HOSPITAL GENERATOR**, delivered in 2020, provides standby power for the entire hospital, thus allowing X-Ray, MRI, respirators and other equipment to function without interruption.
- **2020 FOOD RELIEF**, Nativity's first matching grant project, provided \$25,000 in seed funds which generated over \$250,000 in gifts from Catholic churches who are part of the Parish Twinning Program of the Americas.
- **POWER OF ENCOUNTER**, Nativity's second matching grant project, provided \$75,000 to develop the village of Meyer, with additional funding from churches that participated in a national "Power of Encounter" program in July, 2021– completed in 2022.
- **HAITI EARTHQUAKE RELIEF 2021**, Operation Starfish provided nearly \$25,000 to Food For The Poor for emergency relief after an earthquake killed over 2,000 Haitians in Southwest Haiti on August 14, 2021.
- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT BAS FOSSE**, begun in 2022, includes 75 homes, 2 schools and a community center – anticipated completion in 2024
- **JAMAICA MEDICAL SCHOLARSHIP**, begun in 2017 in partnership with Food For The Poor and the University of the West Indies, awards full academic scholarships to promising medical school students with verified financial need. A 4<sup>th</sup> scholarship has been awarded to Ms. Keonie White, who will graduate in 2025.
- **HAITI MEDICAL SCHOLARSHIP**, begun in 2022 in partnership with Food For The Poor and Université de la Fondation d'Aristide, made its first award to Mr. Ben Sumao Jean-Pierre.
- **EL COLIRIO CLINIC, HONDURAS**, a 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary project, completed in 2023 provides a 1,700 sq. ft. health center in a rural Honduran community. Nativity provided the facility and medications which is operated by CEPUDO and serves the immediate community of 3,500 and outlying areas.

- **NATIVITY VILLAGE AT BOIS-LOUROUX**, will begin development in 2024 with Phase I including 20 homes, water well and treatment system and solar street lighting. Phase II will follow with 20 more homes and additional components.
- **CARDINAL LEGER LEPER HOSPITAL**, is supported by Operation Starfish through donations to the Crocheted Starfish program. Leper patients crochet starfish Christmas ornaments which are distributed at Nativity Catholic Church. Begun in 2002, this program has yielded more than \$67,000 to support the patients and staff.

Since 1998, Nativity parishioners and friends have contributed \$8.6 million in cash and \$2.9 million in goods to care for the poor through Operation Starfish®.

**For More Information Contact:**  
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#### **WEB/SOCIAL MEDIA**

<https://nativityburke.org/operation-starfish/>   [www.foodforthe poor.org](http://www.foodforthe poor.org)

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