Beans for Father Bean

The story of one Dutch priest who, true to his Salesian tradition, runs an extraordinary network of primary schools for the poorest children living in the desperate streets and slums of Port-au-Prince

by M. BASIL PENNINGTON

He is fairly stocky and greying; but you would never suspect that he is 70 years old. Maybe 50, 60 at the most. He wears crinkled grey slacks and a soft blue sports shirt. His sockless feet slip easily out of his shoes when he sits in conversation or takes the command seat in his rather battered van. His appearance does not readily betray the fact that he is a Salesian priest, but the way his stern Dutch countenance melts when children press around him marks him as a true son of Don Bosco.

Lawrence Bohnen was a very successful and happy teacher in Holland. His love of his students and his good humor made him popular even in Greek classes. It was his love for the young that persuaded him at the age of 30 to dedicate his life to them in the Society of Don Bosco. After the long Salesian formation, he was ordained and sent at the age of 41 to serve in the Haitian mission. There began 28 years of trekking through the streets of Port-au-Prince.

Father Bohnen came to be an administrator of the large technical school that stands within the borders of what was in 1955 Haiti's worst slum, LaSaline. One of the things Father Bohnen quickly noticed was that, although the school was situated in the poorest section of the city, there were very few poor among its students. Most were middle class, coming in from other parts of the city. He discovered that very few among the poor were able to get a primary education, a prerequisite for a technical school education, and he decided to do something about it. He conceived an ambitious plan to begin enough small primary schools within the streets of the slum area so that every child could receive a primary education. If this plan seemed ambitious in the beginning, it was to grow into a mammoth impossibility — for anyone with less faith, hope and loving dedication. For in the ensuing years the situation was to deteriorate beyond human conception.

'. . . the homes and the hovels of the poorest were obliterated.'

To beautify the inner city and make it more attractive to tourists (tourism is a very significant factor in most Caribbean economies), the homes and hovels of the poorest were obliterated. Masses migrated to the only open land near enough for access to the city's few jobs and street trade, the low-lying land on the swampy shore northeast of Cite Militaire. Thus were born the worst slums in the New World, if not in the entire world. Brooklyn and Boston are the names the people gave them. I have made two long trips to India, visiting almost every section of the country and its cities. I have spent time in the Philippines and Africa. I have never seen anything worse than these Haitian slums. Most homes are 10-by-10 corrugated metal huts with no windows, only a metal door and a metal roof. Ten or even twenty people will sleep on the hut's mud floor. The tropical sun beats down on the roof, no cooling breeze can make its way through the maze of shacks to allay the high humidity. In most places there is barely room to squeeze between them. Where there is a street, it is about three feet wide, and half of that is an open drain where sluggish refuse sits on the level terrain until rain washes it over the sides and into the huts.

The main street is wider, but so is its drain, and more foul. The shiny new street signs, green and white, atop their high metal poles, worthy of any American city, show the strange benevolence of a benevolent dictator. What it cost to make and import one of them from the United States could have replaced the shack below it with a sturdy, airy, cement-block home. In these "cities" of innumerable people (no one keeps record of how many are born in the huts and how many die; there could be a hundred thousand or many, many more) only few rows of such houses have been built.

If the housing is bad, that is only the beginning. Unemployment in Haiti stands officially at 80 percent, actually higher in terms of real jobs. Many create work for themselves. The streets of the larger city are lined with entrepreneurs, men, women and children, who have bought a few pieces of fruit, some sweets or nuts or some bottles of soda and seek to sell them at a little profit. Many hawk the labor of their own hands. Outside the shacks men carve and whittle, weave hats and bags, work with leather. The Haitians are not a lazy people. They are a peaceful people who work as hard as their opportunities and their debilitated bodies will allow. Many a little body, stunted by malnutrition, carries the burden of a distended stomach. Boys as old as 10 or 12 go about naked. They have only the one school uniform issued each year. Necessary for school, it comes off after school in order to be preserved. The Government will not allow the church or other agencies to bring in used clothes for the poor.

It is this vast cesspool of human degradation that Father Bohnen adopted when the refugees from the inner city migrated. His vision of education for all has led to the establishment of 125 primary schools among the shacks. For the best of the students there are four central schools that will graduate men and women into the technical school. His 476 teachers, drawn from the slums themselves, attend classes three afternoons a week to make them better teachers. One of their weekly classes is in Christian Social Justice.

The obstacles have been many. Disease. Thirsty children were drinking from the open drains. Sores were quickly infected when left open and unwashed. So at each of the central schools, a well, water towers, a source of drinking water and places to wash clothes and children and to bathe. Clinics and a nursery were developed. More universal than disease was hunger. How can a child learn if he is literally starving? "Empty stomachs have no ears." Few children come to school with any food in their stomachs. Many have never known a good meal.

'Can you imagine what it is like to distribute food to 3,000 children?'

Father Bohnen began feeding his children when they came to school and when they left. Today he feeds 12,000 children every day. When they come in, it is some grain, corn meal or rice. When they leave, a small container of milk and a roll. The children gather at the central schools to eat, 3,000 of them. Can you imagine what it is like to distribute food to 3,000 children? The day I distributed the food we ran out of milk and then out of bread. The last children received dry army biscuits from 1968. That was their nourishment for the day.

On one of his begging tours in the United States (this immense project depends entirely on the funds that he can raise) Father Bohnen discovered pork and beans. A few cans of them can flavor a big caldron of grain or corn meal and also add protein. His name, Bohnen, in Dutch means bean. There began "Beans for Father Bean," friends in Europe and American collecting cans of beans or money to buy them and what goes with them to feed "Father Bean's" 12,000 children.

America is a land of surpluses. We try to find ways to dispose of vast surpluses before the cheese molds and the potatoes and grain rot. We reward farmers for not producing. Large processors plow under vast quantities of unsold foodstuffs or those that the machines did not package just right. A dedicated Catholic exporter, Ferdinand Mahfood, heard of Father Bohnen's poor and their needs. With the blessing of his three brothers, his partners in the business, he used their business facilities to inaugurate Food for the Poor, an organization dedicated to bring something of America's bounty to the poorest of the poor. At the brothers' own expense, anything that anyone in the United States wants to share with the poor in Haiti is shipped and safely delivered to Father Bohnen and other priests and sisters laboring with him there. Ten tons of beans for Father Bean were shipped in the first year. I have seen a lot of poverty and misery in this world, but it was a shock for this priest from Brooklyn, N.Y., to find the worst but one hour from Miami in Brooklyn, Haiti. As I walked through its "streets" dozens of little ones clung to my fingers, my hands, my arms, my pants' legs. How I wanted to gather those little naked bodies up into my arms and hold them close. I can only hope and pray that with the help of Father Lawrence Bohnen, "Father Bean," they can escape some of the devastating effects of malnutrition, receive an education and in a renewed social order have an opportunity to work and live with Christian dignity. Yes, beans for Father Bean can mean all of that.

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"As often as you did it for one of my least brothers, you did it for me." — Matthew 25:45

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