

## *Water*

**M**anmi Dèt and I had just started climbing the hill to St. Clare's Church for Mass. I was thrilled to be able to go to a service before Luke and I returned to Berkeley. Thick, black clouds were moving quickly over the mountains and seemed to be racing us to church. We grabbed each other's hand and dashed for the sanctuary, while vendors rushed to cover their fruit stands, and those walking in the street ducked into the nearest shelter. Kids playing soccer with a crushed soda can stopped and took cover, too. Within seconds, the fierce storm drenched the whole neighborhood and turned the road into a river.

A young boy, about 13, walked casually across the churchyard, undisturbed by the wind and rain. He was carrying a bar of soap in his hand. I watched him stop at the corner of the church, and position himself directly under a stream of water that poured off the pitched roof. The water rushed down at the perfect angle for an outdoor shower. There, in the middle of the afternoon in the midst of thunder and lightning, he stood in his shorts and washed his hair, face, and body, rinsed off, and walked back home.

No one in the neighborhood had running water. Fr. Gerry told me the water pipes broke five years earlier, and the city couldn't afford to fix them. Instead, women and children spent their days walking back and forth on the rugged roads to get water from a pump.

Most of the diseases that kill Haitian children come from drinking contaminated water. Bacteria thrive in untreated, unfiltered water, rusty pipes, and dirty faucets. Some of the kids I saw carrying water on the side of the road were using old paint or oil containers as their buckets.

It's even harder to find potable water in the countryside. People climb up and down the mountainside to dip their jugs in rivers and streams. During part of the year, some of these natural water sources dry up, making the search for water even more difficult. Deforestation has turned much of Haiti into a near desert, where the rainy season is no longer predictable. No wonder Fr. Gerry said that water is the most precious, needed resource in Haiti.

The storm moved through quickly. As I sat next to Manmi Dèt in the second pew on the left, I looked at the women seated with us and wondered if they felt as thirsty as I did. They must have. Sweat poured down their faces and necks, but they sang and prayed and followed the liturgy with an attention and devotion that rose above thirst. I waited patiently for the service to end, wishing that I could stop thinking about water. But it was so hot, the humidity was thick, and the fans weren't working. Later when Manmi Dèt poured me a tall glass of bottled water in her kitchen, I thought about the little girl in pink sneakers and wondered whether the water she was carrying was safe.

The next morning, Luke and I flew home. The scenes of the gift distribution, the schoolroom, the orphanage, and the afternoon storm remained fixed in my mind. I'd only spent a few days in the Tiplas Kazo community on my trip with Paul and my trip with Luke, but I felt a growing connection to it. There was something about Fr. Gerry, the Dépestre family, the children, and everyone at St. Clare's that nourished me and fed my soul.

As I watched the Haitian coast disappear beneath my airplane window, I wondered where it all would lead. I had no idea. But uncharacteristically for me, I didn't feel the need to know at that time. I was content to accept the mystery.