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Ruined for Life

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“Each of us is a word of God spoken only once.”

—Sr. Peg Dolan

This is my account of an experience that completely changed my world view. My Ignacio Companion trip to the Dominican Republic (DR) was incredibly fulfilling, and showed me the love of Christ in a way I had never experienced before. I don't want to talk about the countless mosquito bites scattered around my legs, the ice-cold showers I had to take on a daily basis, or the unbelievable amount of spiders and cockroaches we found on bathrooms and bedrooms. Rather, I want to be a voice that represents all the people I encountered. I want to share the words of God that were spoken to me, through the lives of Fina, Kristina, Pablo, Carlos, Fr. Guillermo, Gustavo, Fr. Mario, Hanglet, Frankeli, Joseph, Evenson, Yafreisi, Aleibi, Emilia, and all the other faces that in some way or another left a mark in my heart. Maybe I cannot accurately describe all the issues that exist between the DR and Haiti, but I can give an account of the emotions that I felt while I first hand experienced the problems of migration, education, environment, bi-nationality, and spirituality between these two countries.

...and we gathered in a circle for one last time. The sounds of the crickets in the silent night abounded, and three flickering candles sat and the center of our circle during our very last reflection. I slowly raised my sight from the ground, and caught a glimpse of the faces around me. My heart filled with joy, acknowledging how close we had become in these past seven days. Maureen, Kristina, Savannah, Alanna, Kimmy, Christiana, Myles, Francisco, Chris, Fina, Joaquin. I cannot describe how much I learned from every single one of them, and how inspired I am by the depth of their sincerity, faith, and hunger for justice. As I grabbed one of the candles and felt the warmth of the fire press against my skin, I remembered every single day of the past week. All I could do was to thank God for the beautiful journey that He had put me through, and the gleaming expressions of all of the people that I met, which reflected my own visage, produced by the warm feeling of love this community had poured on me. The following day, as the plane took off, I lost sight of the city of Santiago in the midst of the clouds. With a smile on my face, I closed my eyes and fell into a deep slumber, reminiscing how my experience in the DR and Haiti had “ruined me for life.”

The journey begins.

Go for everything not expecting anything. After so many meetings I'm finally on the plane, only a few hours away of living an experience that may change me completely. *Go for everything not expecting anything.* I keep repeating

to myself these words that we said on our very first meeting. Am I ready? I don't know. But this is the time. I'm never going to be as ready as I am now. My excitement is slowly building up, as the weight of my bag of fear for the unknown slowly decreases. Just put everything in the hands of God. I pray that I will see His face and be touched by His love, present in all the people that I'm about to meet. *Go for everything not expecting anything.* Let God do the rest.

As we got off the plane, the overwhelming heat slightly reminded me of the weather back home, making me feel as if I were back in Uruguay, for a split second. However, upon crossing customs, there was a handful of men and women, dressed in the DR's traditional clothes, dancing to the typical Dominican merengue. The bright colors of their garments perfectly matched their smiling countenances, and I once again remembered: Go for everything not expecting anything. As soon as we stepped out of the airport, two ladies, Kristina and Fina, welcomed us to the city of Santiago, in the warmest way possible. After introductions, Pablo, our driver, took us to CEFASA (Centro de Formación y Acción Social y Agraria), where we learnt about the history of the Dominican Republic, and where we would sleep on our first night of our trip, before we headed to Dajabón the next morning. After the first of many candlelit reflections, I went to bed, eagerly awaiting for what this journey had in store for me.

God is compassionate and merciful.

We started off our second day in the DR by going to early Sunday mass. There was an indescribable sense of community within the walls of the temple, which was very visible in the faces of the people that attended the service. Upon chanting the psalm, the words "God is compassionate and merciful" kept repeating inside my head. I bowed my head, and thanked God for this incredible opportunity I was living. I prayed that I could be empowered by His compassion and mercy, so that I could be a channel of His love for others during the upcoming week. After mass, we got to meet Carlos, a living example of the compassion and mercy of God. Towards the end of the day and after a two-hour drive, we arrived to Dajabón, a border city between the DR and Haiti.

After mass, we walked to a novitiate house nearby. I couldn't help but noticing how much the DR reminded me of home. Dust and litter filled the streets we walked on, political propaganda stamped in light columns made out of cement, mini markets on every other corner, with handwritten signs indicating what each market sold, the loud reggaeton blasting on the streets, the elderly and the youth chilling on their porches, waving as we passed by, the sound of motorcycle gears produced by reckless drivers, and, obviously, the unbearable humid heat. But I was not home. As soon as we arrived to the novitiate house, we got a tour of the finca, which is a sort of small farm, which was attached to the house. I was

amazed by the amount of green that surrounded me. There are so many sensations that arise when thinking about that beautiful place. The sound of cracking leaves and branches below our feet. The sweet taste of guayaba, recently cut off a tree. Balancing our bodies as we walked, in order not to step on the growing ahuyamas. Our tour eventually led us to a small, cozy chapel that seemed to be hidden from the street view. The quincho that served as a physical temple exalted the figure of Mary. Not too far from the chapel, we sat down to listen to the story of Carlos, a nineteen-year-old Jesuit novitiate, whose life was not only a source of inspiration for us, but also an example of how to share the love of Christ with others. Carlos, who enjoys writing rap songs, shared some of them with us. The lyrics that accompanied the melodies beautifully conveyed the love of Christ in Carlos' life, and filled the environment we were in, with the ever-flowing spirit of God.

A bridge of division.

I think this was the first time that I sensed a bridge as an element of division, rather than unity. I opened my eyes in a new city: Dajabón. It was early in the morning, and I couldn't forget the loud noise coming from the streets the night before. I made my way to the rooftop of the parish where we were staying, and caught a glimpse of the sun, slowly rising from the East. I found myself overlooking the beautiful city. This place that the night before was blasting music, was just starting to come alive again. Towards the West, over in the horizon, sat a country with a completely different reality from the one I was living, awaiting our arrival: Haiti. I immediately thought of the song *East to West*, by Casting Clowns, and silently asked God how Haiti and the DR could be so spiritually separated, when they lie so close together physically. After breakfast, we went to the Market. The Market is an economical source of income for the Haitians, and it only opens on Mondays and Fridays. These are the only days Haitians are allowed to cross the bridge that divides their country and the DR, to literally try to make a living.

We walk along the streets of Dajabón. We arrive at the Market pretty early, and the gate on the Haitian side doesn't open until 8am. Since there is no gate on the Dominican side, we start to make our way along the bridge, over the Masacre River, to get a better view of what is about to happen. Beyond the still closed gates there's a huge crowd of people. The bright colors of their clothes somehow perfectly blend with their dark tones of skin. All these Haitians have been gathered behind the gate for God knows how long, impatiently waiting to cross the bridge at 8am, and strive to make a living by selling different kinds of products on the Dominican side of the island. The time comes and the gates finally open. I find myself completely shocked by the scene that happens immediately after. Like an uncontrollable wave, a sea of people start to make

their way through the bridge. Some of them with bags over their heads, some of them carrying carts, some running, some pushing others out of their way. This chaotic scene clearly depicts the importance of the Market for the Haitian people. A quote by Sr. Peg that was said during our reflection the night before crossed my mind: "The heart and the head are only 18 inches apart, but the journey from one to another takes a lifetime." The bridge that unites the DR and Haiti is probably a quarter of a mile long. Yet since the DR's independence from Haiti in 1844, the two intrinsically connected countries have found no unity whatsoever.

I must admit I felt somewhat uncomfortable in this scene. Every now and then, someone would make eye contact with me, and they would show perplexed countenance, as if wondering at what I was staring. And they were correct. Who am I to witness, as if I were a spectator, this horrible reality that some people have to go through, literally to maybe bring food to their houses on a given night? After the intensity with which the people flowed decreased, we mixed with some late comers, and went inside the Market. The smell of sweat, wood, and dust crippled through my nostrils as I, with great effort, fought my way through the tumultuous crowd inside the market. The bags that minutes ago were on top of the Haitians' heads were now exposed, and an abundance of shoes, kitchen supplies, and purses, among others, were now on display.

We walked around the Market for a while, but when the time to leave came, I witnessed a scene that left me speechless. It is worth mentioning that there are two entrances/exits to the Market: one for Haitians and one for Dominicans, each guarded by armed men. The way in which they control who is Haitian and who is Dominican is, for the most part, solely based on the color of someone's skin. An apparently Haitian woman, probably in her late twenties or early thirties, tried to leave the Market through the Dominican door. After trying twice and being turned away, she tried a third time. This time, the guard grabbed her by the shoulder, and threw her on to the ground, as if she were nothing but a piece of trash. The expression on her face, while still on the ground, was one I will never forget. Sorrow, misery, surrender, fear... The guard, however, didn't even notice it. His numb, expressionless face resembled the way in which he had so savagely treated the woman only a few seconds before. How can someone completely fail to acknowledge the humanity in others? That element that unites us all, Haitians, Dominicans, black, white. As we were leaving the market, with every step I took in Dominican soil with complete liberty, I kept thinking of all the Haitians that longed for that freedom, yet could not attain it.

Kinship.

I made it a habit to go to the rooftop of the Church center we were staying at every morning. It was a foggy Tuesday morning. I wondered if the fog around

me was a reflection of the confusion within me, after experiencing such puzzling scenarios the day before. I looked up to the sky. The moon was still illuminating the still dark firmament. It was literally a light in the midst of the darkness. It reminded me of a song, in which the composer compares that thing which he most longs for with the moon. Gleaming, and most beautiful than anything he's ever seen, yet always so distant, so unattainable. I wondered if this is the way in which people like Gustavo or Guillermo, two activists for the union between the DR and Haiti, felt about reaching peace between the two countries. If there is one word I would use to describe what I felt on my fourth day on the island that word would be kinship. I finally felt a connection, not only within the group, but also with the community of the Dominican Republic. The first instance in which I felt that way occurred in CEFAGUIS, a center for physical and spiritual accompaniment, especially for underprivileged women. We had the opportunity to share a meal with the nuns that run the center, and some of the women who have benefited from its services. The second instance, was even more spiritually fulfilling.

3000ft above ground level, lies Rio Limpio, a hidden natural treasure which is home to one of the most lively, energetic communities I have ever encountered. They hosted us for the night, and we stayed in a secluded mountain area, enveloped by trees. We had the chance to break bread with the people who lived there, and it was one of the most enriching experiences I've ever been a part of. People from Finland, the DR, Uruguay, and the US, all enjoying a meal together. The Spanish, English, and Finish conversations that filled the air at the same time showed how language is not a barrier, as long as love is the bridge that connects us. After our dinner, we sat around a small bonfire, and took part in one of the community's rituals.

We were introduced to palos, an old, joyful dance from the area. Thus, to the rhythm of the güiro and tamboriles, we all united in harmonious dance and joyful singing. While the light of the bonfire cast our dancing shadows all around us, a light drizzle showered our faces, washing away all preoccupations from back home. In between each song that they played, the sound of a choir of crickets filled the atmosphere, and the scent of burning wood filled our nostrils. When my tiresome legs reminded me how unfit I am after a couple of songs, I looked for a chair, and simply sat down and observed the spellbinding scene in front of me. The shades of people tirelessly moving in front of the fire as if there were no tomorrow is an image that I hope to never forget.

After our daily reflection, a few flickering candles led the way to the now almost extinguished fire, its white smoke ascending in a manner so delicate that it seemed almost magical. I followed the smoke with my sight, and found myself awestruck by the beauty of what I saw. The usually dark dome above us was now fully illuminated, as a plethora of shining, shimmering stars adorned the night sky. Isn't it beautiful how God shows his divinity in such unexpected ways? It was

a miracle. After all, a miracle is nothing but God's ordinary truth, seen with surprised eyes.

Spirit lead me where my hope is without borders.

This was the day we crossed the border to Haiti. I tried to prepare myself as much as I could for what I was about to witness, but no time would have been enough for me to even grasp the reality that people experience on a daily basis on the other side of the bridge. Inside the van, I was eagerly trying to learn Creole, the language spoken in Haiti. After my unsuccessful attempts to recreate the words to say “how are you,” “pleasure to meet you,” and “what’s your name,” in the language, I took a look out the window. We drove through the unpaved streets, with countless potholes every couple of feet. The detrimental condition of the houses was so bad, that there are no words to describe it. Wood, metal sheets, and very rarely metal wire were among the materials in which these houses were built. I remember silently asking God for a glimmer of hope in this hopeless road. Suddenly, we drove by two small kids wearing school uniform, cheerfully hugging each other and waving on our direction when they saw us driving past them.

We kept driving through the tremendously dirty streets of Haiti, which would go up and down. For what I remember, there was little to no difference between driving around Haiti and being on a roller coaster. We were going to *Fe y Alegría*, a middle school in Haiti. As we approached, we encountered more and more kids, who were also on their way to the school. When we were only a couple of feet away from the entrance, little boys and girls started to run behind our van, with joyful expressions in their faces, saying incomprehensible Creole welcoming words. Inside the school, we visited all the classrooms.

It was beautiful to see such jubilant kids, who would stand up to greet us every time we entered their classrooms. Most of them also sang to us beautiful songs, describing their love for their precious country and their joy for seeing us there. One of the most meaningful experiences was in one of the classes, where the kids sang to us a bit of *Silent Night* in Spanish, and we were able to sing back with the English version. I tried putting into practice a little bit of my newly acquired Creole abilities, which resulted in laughs and giggles from every kid to whom I would talk. In that evening and back in the Dominican Republic, I had one of the most spiritually moving experiences during our trip.

Hogar de Cristo en Dajabón is a shelter for little boys who experience homelessness in this border city. It was established by Fr. Mario, a Jesuit priest from the area. Upon his arrival, he was shocked by the amount of children sleeping on the streets, so he decided to do something about it. He started by taking food to the boys as a way of earning their trust. Eventually, he found a

place that would host and shelter these kids during the dangerous nights of the DR. These Haitian migrant boys, most of them between the ages of seven and seventeen, now tell each other about the Hogar, and find their way to the shelter that additionally provides food, hot showers, education, and physical and spiritual accompaniment.

As soon as we entered the shelter, I noticed a lot of kids sitting down, watching music videos. I sat next to them, thinking to myself how on Earth I was supposed to start a conversation with someone who spoke a completely different language than I did. However, this difference didn't prevent me from connecting with Joseph and Evenson, two fifteen-year-old Haitian kids. They were ecstatic about teaching me Creole, so upon a few minutes of our arrival I found myself being dragged around the entire shelter, where the two kids would point at different elements saying their name in Creole, impatiently waiting for my repetition of the word. The proud smile that slowly painted on their faces when they realized that they were teaching me something I didn't know provoked a feeling of warmth in me I still cannot explain. When the time for dinner came, we sat in a circle, and broke bread together. And it was then when it hit me, and I felt as if a thousand daggers were piercing my heart.

As I moved my sight around the room, I looked at every single face in the circle. The kids looked so joyful to be where they were, but there was something hidden behind their visages of cheerfulness. As I stared at a seven-year-old devouring the food on his plate, I realized that the reason why all these boys were there was because they had been sleeping on the streets until they found that shelter. All of them knew what it is to feel invisible, unwanted, unloved, uncared for, worthless. The pain in my chest gnawed all the more sharply into my soul, and the next thing I remember is myself, sitting outside the circle, tears rolling down my eyes as I processed what I was experiencing. Tears of impotence, despair, sorrow.

As we were leaving, all the kids gathered around us, and we united in a heartfelt hug. I could absolutely feel the presence of Christ within them, and I remembered what Fr. Mario said: "This shelter has literally turned into the House of Christ, because I can see Christ in every single one of those kids, sleeping here every night." This experience is something I pray to God that I will never forget, and that will remain engraved in my heart and my soul for as long as I exist.

The end of the journey.

I spent our last whole day in the Dominican Republic reflecting on our journey, thinking back to the week that so rapidly passed by, and the impact that it would remain to have on my life. I remembered all of our nightly reflections,

sitting in a circle, facing each other, getting to know each other. It was incredible how close I had grown with these people that a week before I would have considered strangers. It is unbelievable the extent to which service unites people, out of deep love, compassion, and humility. As a beautiful sunset occurred somewhere in the horizon, I packed my suitcase, getting ready for our flight the following morning. And then the night fell, and we gathered in a circle for one last time.

*I've seen God in the sun
I've seen God in the rain
I've felt God when I'm glad
I've felt God when in pain*

*I've seen God in others' faces
I've seen God with my own eyes
I've felt God in many places
I've felt God and that's my prize*

*I've seen God in times of struggle
I've seen God when I'm at peace
I've felt God when I'm in trouble
I've felt God in life's abyss*

*I've seen God from time to time
I've seen God here and there
I've felt God with all my heart
I feel God is everywhere*

And I felt God in the Dominican Republic.