

Dear Applicant to our Mission in the Dominican Republic:

Greetings from Santo Domingo! We are Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus who coordinate this missionary program, and we'd like to explain what it entails. Take your time reading this – and re-read it as often as you need to, so that its many points seep in! How we would like to have a relaxed conversation with you, but since that's not possible at this moment, please consider this epistle as our part of the conversation!

1) First of all, as the name indicates, this is truly a missionary program for lay persons who wish to share in the mission of Christ – and in the mission of our religious congregation which is “to help others believe and understand that God acts in them and in our world and to rejoice in God's presence.” Does that resonate with your desires?

2) To keep alive and cultivate this faith dimension (which, when the going gets rough, is sometimes our only light and strength!), we regularly reflect on the message of Christ (several times a week, taking different texts from the Gospel or other sources, and sharing our insights – and our struggles). One night a week we open up our community prayer to any neighbors who wish to join us. On another night, we have a “review of the week” among ourselves, when each one shares how God has been present to her during the week, what graces/gifts and/or difficulties there have been, etc. We take turns preparing these community prayers which are essential to the program. Also, at least two weekend spiritual retreats per year help fortify the spiritual aspect of our missionary effort.

3) We are associated with *Fe y Alegría* (*Faith and Joy*), an organization sponsored by the Jesuits which has schools for poor children throughout the DR and many other nations of Latin America. (Our duplex house belongs to *Fe y Alegría*.) Ever since we began our work here in 1995, we have helped out in various areas: working in the nearby *Fe y Alegría* School as teachers, teachers' aides and “librarians”; teaching in a weekly literacy program for adults and youth; going once a week to a Haitian worker camp (batey) to help out in educational efforts there. (There are tens of thousands of Haitians in the DR.)

4) In 1998 *Fe y Alegría* asked us to concentrate our efforts in the batey, for it is well known here that the Haitians are the poorest of the poor in the DR, victims of racism and exploitation. We now devote most of our time to helping Haitian children in a structured tutoring and “homework help” program in our batey library, and also work with adults (literacy and parenting). We have a modest primary health care center in the batey too.

5) The day for arriving here to begin your missionary program would be the Friday after Labor Day in September; departure would be around the 15th of June.

6) **Important! Missioners must be able to communicate in Spanish!** You must take responsibility for this, studying in the USA or here in the DR (before our program begins). If you choose to take a short two-week refresher course here in the DR, the cost is shared equally among the missioner herself, the Response-Ability Office, and our own DR funds. The RA Office can give you more information. (Creole is not necessary, but if you have studied Haitian Creole, great! If not, concentrate on Spanish!)

7) We share all community tasks, each one taking her turn shopping, cooking and cleaning. Since the water is not on continuously, we all pitch in when it is turned on, filling pails and buckets (so as to have a reserve supply for when it is turned off again!). Our meals are simple; in our neighborhood we can buy eggs, bread, cheese, ham, canned tuna, rice, beans, noodles, potatoes, lentils; there are quite a few fresh veggies available such as carrots, tomatoes, green peppers, eggplant, squash, cabbage, onions, garlic, plus others peculiar to this tropical climate (yucca, plantain, yams...). Fruits include pineapple, papaya, oranges, bananas, mangoes, tangerines, grapefruit, lemons, melons, etc. In the large supermarkets (about an hour from us) we can buy all kinds of meat and poultry. All of us usually start out with good ol' American recipes, adjusting them to whatever is available; some missionaries have then branched out and have become quite expert in Dominican specialties!

8) What are some of the difficulties we have experienced?

a) The heat is tropical and during some months can sap one's energy.

b) Extreme caution is needed with regard to water, fruits and vegetables, meat and fish. (We need to disinfect all vegetables and fruit!) We buy meat only at the large supermarkets and never buy fish!

c) Every Dominican home, including ours, is host to flies, ants, mosquitoes, cockroaches, spiders (and, once in a great while, tarantulas!), toads, lizards – and others of God's creatures!

d) As of this writing, the situation regarding electricity has improved, but there are still power outages frequently. Flashlights are a necessity, and our several kerosene lamps are still very much a part of our lives.

e) The water problem was alluded to above; further, we do not have hot water.

f) Up to now, each one has had her own small room (with one or two beds, small desk and chair, mosquito netting, fan, small closet with two small drawers or shelves). But we have had to double up when visitors come, and would have to do so on a regular basis if we had more missionaries than bedrooms. Think about how you feel about that....

g) Public transportation here is unique – and sometimes stressful. One has to adapt to very crowded public cars and busses, with drivers who are not always careful.

h) The noise level (music blaring simultaneously from various houses, loud greetings and friendly conversations shouted to and fro) is quite high on our street, sometimes late at night and/or before dawn. There is loud early morning revving of cars and motorcycles – plus the barking of dogs, meowing of cats and the crowing of roosters! Several missionaries have been glad that they have brought earplugs!!

i) Many Dominican men are fascinated by girls from the USA (especially if they are white), considering them much more beautiful than their (truly beautiful) Dominican counterparts. (Racism and obsession with sex are realities that will become increasingly apparent to you during the year.) You will be called after, whistled at, stared at, spoken to quite suggestively or offensively, proposed to by all sorts of men, married or otherwise. All this requires of you a maturity and level-headedness beyond your years. If you seem to lead them on, you'll likely be sorry. You might go to a bar or discotheque alone in the States, but not here!

9) What are some lessons we have learned?

a) Continuing the topic of male-female relationships, you should know that there **are** opportunities for friendship and fun; you will meet young people whom you can safely go out with! We encourage you to socialize in a group setting; experience has shown us that entering into an exclusive kind of romantic relationship distracts the missionary from her goal and can be detrimental to community life. Think about this...

b) We “Americans” can be paternalistic and can create dependencies on ourselves without intending to. Giving things away to people (candy, pencils, crayons, money, etc.) causes them to love us (great for the ego!), but puts us in the superior position of those who have, while it keeps them in the inferior position of those who have not. We do not want the image of “Lady Bountiful” or cultivate dependency on us.

c) Informal attire acceptable in the USA for going into town or to Church is often seen as inappropriate here. We have been criticized and told, for example, that shorts are OK for around the house, but are not appropriate for going out. (We normally wear slacks and blouses, or T-shirts, to the batey.) Although USA styles are seen more and more here, we ask our young women to dress modestly and professionally, remembering that you are seen as missionaries and represent a religious group.

d) Experience has shown that to do our kind of missionary work and live in a faith-based community, one must enjoy good physical and psychological health, have normal energy levels, and be without unusual dietary needs that cannot be met here.

e) You will definitely go through a period of adjustment, the length of which varies from person to person; be patient with yourself and don’t waste time worrying about how things will be: we’ll be here to help you with all that is new and unfamiliar, and you’ll learn by doing – one day at a time! We have e-mail which is a great help!

f) One of the greatest truths that we are still learning is that we are here to “walk with the people”, to do things their way and not to impose on them our (supposedly) superior way. The Latin Americans put people and personal values over efficiency – and this can be both inspiring – and frustrating! The Dominicans suffer from a collective inferiority complex and therefore tend to defer to an American or other foreigner (except a Haitian!) as knowing much more than they do. We want them to see that we are here to humbly learn and work with them, and that we have not come with solutions to their many problems. This applies to a much greater degree to the Haitians.

Thank you for taking the time necessary to read this as it needs to be read. If you decide to apply to this missionary “adventure”, please return the enclosed response form (along with the other parts of the application packet) to the Response-Ability Office. Your response to each point need not be long; it can be as brief as “That’s fine”, “OK”, or “That would be difficult for me” – or whatever response expresses your honest reaction.

Finally, be assured of our prayers as you discern what your next step should be and where God is leading you. If you’ve gotten this far through all this verbiage, you have already shown something special about yourself!

Affectionately yours in Christ,
Sister Ann-Joyce Peters, SHCJ

Name: _____ Response Form (Your part of the “conversation!”)
(Please continue any answers you wish on the reverse side.)

1. Does this description (#1 of the letter) resonate with your desires? _____

2. How do you feel about Community Prayer and reflection? _____

3. Does this Paragraph (# 3) give you an adequate idea of our past activities? _____

4. How do these activities (#4) seem to you? _____

5. Comments about arrival and departure dates? _____

6. How is your Spanish? Can you make yourself understood? _____

7. How are you about sharing all these community duties? Can you cook? _____

8. Difficulties:

a) tropical heat: _____

b) extreme care about food: _____

c) insects, spiders, toads, lizards, etc.!! _____

d) frequent electricity outages: _____

e) water shut-offs; no hot water: _____

f) possibly sharing a room: _____

g) public transportation: _____

h) noise level: _____

i) Macho Dominican men: _____

Name: _____

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9. Lessons we have learned:

a) Latin lovers: _____

b) Our American paternalism: _____

c) A modest “dress code” : _____

d) How is your physical health? _____

...your psychological health? _____

...your energy level? _____

Any eating requirements? _____

e) How do you see yourself adjusting? Easily? With difficulty? _____

e) How do you feel about “walking with” and “learning from” the people? _____

Anything else you’d like to say to us? _____

Thank you very much for sharing your thoughts with us. If God means you to participate in this lay mission, we can assure you that it will be an experience that will change your life forever! It is a great privilege to serve the poor and to live life more as they do. Our values slowly are transformed, our interests change and we see how true are the words of Christ: “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God...and all the rest will be added unto you.”