

Sister M. Paulette Nugent – My Antigua Story



In the spring of 1995, Donald J. Reece, D.D. Bishop of St. John's, Basseterre, made a request of our Leadership Team, that they send a sister to Administer the Catholic Diocesan Primary School. Upon reading this Letter of Request, I felt a stir within me. It was as if God called me aside and revealed His Mission for me to minister among the people on the Island of Antigua. I felt an energy release in me to answer God's Call, with the response, "Here I am, Lord, send me" and "If I could be of service in any part of the world, I would do all in my power"

Having spent some time in discernment, and having no idea what the future there, held for me, I responded to the call of mystery in my life. On August 19, 1995, Sister Elizabeth Kennedy and I set off with generous hearts and loving willingness to work among the people of Antigua.

Upon arrival to the Island we were welcomed by Bishop Reece, Father Kevin O'Toole, Vicar General, Christian Brother Paul McNivan, Representative from the Diocesan School Board, and Father Edward Lawlor, Administrator of Holy Family Cathedral.

Like all new beginnings we, too, experienced many inconveniences and, dare I say, hardships, shortly after we arrived. We were inundated by wind and water from the many Hurricanes and Tropical Storms which descended upon us. Needless to say, I had to adjust to many things - the Culture in general and in particular the very hot humid climate, the Antiguan Language (Dialect), the food, the frustrations of learning about the gas stove and the water pump, etc....

It was just nine days after we arrived that the beautiful Island of Antigua was devastated by Hurricane Luis. After three days of terrible destruction and torrential rains, we were able to return to our Convent, having spent three days and nights in a Science Lab at the Christian Brothers School. We met with more destruction when we reached our Convent - screens torn from windows, windows blown off their sills tremendous flooding everywhere. The school buildings met with the same fate. Many of the exterior walls were crumpled to the ground, roofs blown off and trees and branches destroyed.



Despite the painfulness of these situations, I was blessed with the graces to remain present to the people for whom and with whom I was to work. It is amazing how one's values, re the material, can swiftly and meaningfully shift to the more important values of Life, Love and Concern for the others. My prayer throughout the whole ordeal was one of deep gratitude to God, for life and friends - nothing else seemed to matter much - no running water and electricity for two months, very little food that could be

purchased from the stores - yet we all survived and somehow felt we were none the worse off as the result of such an experience.

The clean up and rebuilding began and within a month, thanks to the many parents and neighbouring friends, from as far away as the Island of Montserrat, we were able to open the school one month after the passing of Hurricane Luis, to our 600 Students and 32 Staff Members to get back to some kind of normalcy after their ordeal. As an Island person I could identify with and appreciate the devastation and ravages wrought by the Sea, as it laid claim to their land, their livelihood, and the people. Because of their resilience, they were able to quickly rise above the destruction and continue in hope of a better future for their children and themselves.

The School Programs were very similar to those in our Newfoundland School System. One of the challenges I faced was working with the many teachers who were not formally trained as teachers. Sister Elizabeth and I conducted Workshops and Learning Stations and helped the teachers with their Lesson Planning etc. The Teachers were very supportive of and receptive to our help, as evidenced by their response with open hearts and minds. Their dedication was commendable. Through financial help from our Congregation, we were able to set up a Scholarship / Awards Program for the Teachers and Students, for their dedication and hard work throughout the school year.

Outside the regular School Day, I visited some of the people who were in need - the poor and abused - and I was a Pastoral Presence to the sick and elderly, bringing them the Blessed Eucharist. I received so much more myself, from them, when I went to minister among them.

One of the most powerful prayerful moments for me was when in 1998, I first set foot on the Island of Montserrat where so many Irish Immigrants had settled, possibly bringing the spirit of Nano to the people there. I felt I was reliving the moment. I didn't know then that soon I would be visiting Montserrat many times, as I worked with the Principal and Teachers to help start a Missionary Childhood group and to work with the School Board, Principal and Teachers, in my role as Diocesan Director of Catholic Education.

I retired as Principal of St. John's Catholic Primary School in 2005 but continued in Educational Administration as the Director of Education and the Bishop's Representative on the Catholic Diocesan School Boards in Antigua, Montserrat, and St. Kitts. In addition to my work in Education, I served as Diocesan Director of Pontifical Mission Societies from 1999 - 2015; Diocesan Development Officer from 2000- 2019 and a member of the of the Diocesan Finance Council from 2011 - 2019.



Sister Paulette (Centre) at Diocesan School Board Meeting

Besides the many highlights throughout my Educational Ministry in the Diocese, I share with you my experience of witnessing a Rare Eclipse. Antigua had been cited as the best spot to see this Rare Eclipse, which would take place on February 26, 1998. Since this phenomenon was one in a three-hundred-and-sixty-year event, and would last for three minutes, I was anxiously waiting for the day to arrive. However, my heart was really heavy when I woke in the morning to a dull cloudy sky. I headed for the car to try and “find the sun”. Imagine trying to find the sun in **SUNNY ANTIGUA!!!** Elizabeth and I had travelled only a short distance, when we chose the spot where we felt we could get a good view. The last thing we wanted was to miss this once in a lifetime experience.

I knew that God hears the pleas of the sinner, so I prayed, “Lord, if viewing the Total Eclipse is not going to cause me any blindness, **PLEASE** remove the clouds.” Miraculously, the clouds drifted and there in all its slender, the Eclipse came into view. At the precise moment of full alignment of Moon, Earth and Sun, we were able to take off our shades. What an awesome view it was!!! I could clearly see Bailey’s Beads, the Perfect Diamond, and the three Planets moving in space. Finally, the brightest of the brightest stars appeared directly above. At this sight, Elizabeth and I broke into song at the wonder of what we had just witnessed. “Praise God from whom all Blessings Flow” filled the air from our voices. Indeed, “The Lord had done marvels for us “. God’s grandeur, in all its magnificence, right before our very eyes.

My life has certainly been a rainbow of colours, each working together on the Canvas of my life - the bright shades of my rising and the dark shades of my dying - the ebbs and flows of my life.

Although I faced many challenges and the journey was not always easy, throughout my time spent among the people of Antigua and throughout the Diocese of St. John’s - Basseterre, I felt the smiling faces and happy spirits of the children; the acceptance and loving support of the Bishop , Clergy, Parents, Teachers, Christian Brothers, Religious Sisters of other Congregations, and the School Staff , as well as the Sisters back home deepened my love for the mission, my love for the children and the reason I was able to carry out my ministry with dedication and love as we strived to weave God’s Reign in our lives.



Sister Paulette as Principal presenting books to the children and their teachers



I am deeply grateful for the rich experiences I was privileged to have. This love of the people and the friendships I experienced, did not end with my leaving Antigua. The memories and experiences will live on in my heart forever. “What we have once enjoyed we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes part of us.” Helen Keller

My story is just a tiny cog in the wheel of Charism and Ministry, but an important part of God’s unfolding dream that he had in mind for me.