



Father Mike Knipe, left, and Father Townsend with children in the Cite Soliel.

**Haiti** *Continued from page 1*

and I met during our stay. Cite Soliel is known for a tremendous amount of violence: rapes, murders, kidnappings. It is so dangerous the United Nations armed patrols stationed in the country and the Haiti police will rarely enter. There is no electricity or running water.

As we turned onto the road that leads to Father Tom's neighborhood, our driver accelerated to more than 70 m.p.h. for a mile or so because, we later learned, this was the second "road of kidnappings." Days before, an American had been kidnapped at gunpoint.

Entering Cite Soliel means going into a war zone. On its outskirts, your eyes are quickly drawn to the light blue helmets of U.N. soldiers from Brazil and Pakistan in their tanks and armed personnel carriers with their guns pointing outward, aimed at us and everyone else walking or driving by.

Our jeep maneuvered through barbed wire placed there by the U.N. patrols and rocks and pieces of wood placed there by the residents of Cite Soliel. We arrived at the first school that Father Tom runs and passed through the armed gate.

Although it lacked glass windows or doors, the school was like any school you might see elsewhere. It was clean and filled with small desks, blackboards announcing in Creole a Happy Epiphany!

The one striking difference were the numerous bullet holes in the walls, inside the school and out. Most buildings in the neighborhood feature the same.



A child stands on a rooftop where a woman puts out cakes made of mud, butter and salt. The mixture is a primary source of food in Cite Soliel, especially for the children.

A total of 10,000 students are provided with an education at these schools, and they are fed twice each day. For most, it is the only food they receive.

Also, as many as 750,000 meals are given out each month to the people who live in Cite Soliel through "Hands Together." These come in large sacks of rice and beans donated by the U.N and various charities.

Leaving the school, we met Reginald, the first of many "chefs" in the area. After a quick walk around an area of small shacks made of

tin or concrete, he led us to the top of a three-story building where several women were mixing in a large tub what looked like melted caramel, but we were to learn was instead a mixture of salt, a little butter and mud.

The women spoon out onto the roof in small pancake-like patties to dry and later sell. This is one of the main sources of food for many of the poor in Cite Soliel, especially the children, which is one reason why 50 percent of all children born here die before reaching the age of 5, and the average life expectancy for a man

is 41 and for a woman is 42.

As we moved toward another part of the Cite, we could see people digging ditches in the middle of the streets and were told this was done to keep the U.N. patrols from coming into the area.

This also was when we met with Amaral, the leader of all the chefs. He is thought to control 13,000 armed men and effectively controls Cite Soliel. He was playing dominoes as we met him, greeting us with a huge smile and a warm handshake. But nearby - in full display - were several men with guns and huge knives protecting him.

After meeting Amaral, I had the most interesting meeting I have ever had. Several of the gang leaders wanted to have a sitdown meeting with Father Mike and I, so we sat on a concrete walkway, sipping Cokes and Sprite. We listened to the "chefs" tell us - almost pleading with us - that they wanted us to know that yes, they did bad things, at times even horrible things, but they were not bad people.

They were people who had learned how to survive in the worst of places, and at times this survival meant doing horrible things so they and the people of Cite Soliel could at least exist.

I could not help but wonder if the men were really trying to say - more to themselves - that they were men, not the animals they are made out to be, and that they are someone.

Here they are born, live and die without ever having any record that they ever existed. No

birth certificate, no government I.D., no baptismal record. And when they die, there's not even a marker to say they ever lived. They are truly people who have no identity in the eyes of many.

We also met about 30 Mother Teresa sisters and brothers who run orphanages for young children. Father Mike and I spent an unforgettable afternoon feeding these children, who had been left starving at the sisters' doors. They were starving not only for food but also for attention, a human touch and love.

As we walked among their little beds they would hold out their arms wanting to be picked up and held.

On our last day, we were invited by the gang leaders to offer Mass in a chapel they had just finished painting and cleaning. The local parish priest, a Haitian, will no longer come for Mass since his brother was kidnapped.

There were about 300 people, mostly children. This Mass was an experience of God's divine sense of humor and also it provided a moment of intense fear.

The humor came from Father Mike's and my attempt to offer Mass in Creole. Also, when Father Mike was assisting in the pouring of the water and wine into the chalice, something alive came out of the wine cruet into the chalice.

Quickly pulling it out and adding water, he was told by Father Tom to go easy on the water since it comes from the ditches in the street.

Fear came when four U.N. tanks and troop carriers drove by and stopped at the front gate of the church. I have never experienced the look of fear in the eyes of children and adults as I did at that moment. We were to learn later that only three weeks earlier, the U.N. forces had entered Mass with guns blazing and killed several children and adults.

This was the only time I felt I could have been shot or arrested while celebrating Mass.

Isaiah says that no longer will you be deserted, no longer a land shall be desolate. Haiti is a land of tremendous poverty and violence, and for many it has become desolate because of corruption, greed and the thirst for power.

Is there hope for Haiti? I do not know. Father Tom, who has been ministering there for more than 25 years, says things have changed and only for the worse.

Answers? I have none. I have more questions than before.

The memory of having a U.N. soldier aiming a gun at me and the irony of having a gang leader who has killed many people getting things ready for Mass, helping lead children in songs of worship and offering me a huge hug during the sign of peace still are working in my mind and heart.

The changes that have taken place for Haiti may only be for the worse, but for this Oklahoma priest, the changes that have taken place and are still taking place in my soul - if I am wise - can only be for the better.

*Father Joe Townsend is associate pastor of the Church of St. Mary in Tulsa.*



The interior of the parish church in Cite Soliel where Fathers Knipe and Townsend celebrated Mass. Three weeks earlier, U.N. forces entered Mass and shot to death several children and adults.



People mill about a street market in Port-au-Prince.



Father Tom Hagan, who has ministered to the people of Haiti for 25 years, says things there only have gotten worse.



Father Knipe feeds babies at the Missionaries of Charity Orphanage.