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Haitian activist priest Jean-Juste dies at 62

by Bill Frogameni



Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste

Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste, prominent leader for Haitian immigrants, advocate for the poor and a rumored candidate for the Haitian presidency, passed away Wednesday, May 27, in his adopted hometown of Miami.

For over three decades, Jean-Juste put his liberation theology beliefs into action, working for various causes both in the United States and his home country of Haiti.

Jean-Juste had been suffering from cancer over the last few years, although the 62 year old died from unrelated respiratory complications, friends said.

Speaking in a July 2008 interview, Jean-Juste talked about being born in Kavayon, Haiti, and having to attend a Canadian seminary in the late 1960s because the Duvalier regime had shut down seminaries in Haiti. He was ordained in New York City in 1971 but, by the end of the 1970s, had made his way to Miami to work with the exploding Haitian immigrant population.

As the first executive director of Miami's Haitian Refugee Center in 1978, Jean-Juste led a number of high profile legal and political fights to bring greater equality for those seeking asylum. The priest remained affiliated with the center through the 1990s, often taking his battles to the street and demonstrating, recalled the center's long-time attorney, Ira Kurzban.

"The government in the late 1970s was attempting to deport all the Haitians as quick as they could," Kurzban said. But Jean-Juste's high profile strategies "totally changed the dynamic."

Though immigration laws remain unfair and Haitians continue to face discrimination, Jean-Juste's work was seminal in making the system much better, he said.

"Generally, I think he was a very self-effacing, sweet person who spoke with a great deal of passion and advocated non-violence," Kurzban added. "He was known as the Martin Luther King of the Haitian community."

After Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president of Haiti in 1991, Jean-Juste returned to the country. Jean-Juste was a close friend and supporter of Aristide, a fellow exponent of liberation theology and one time Catholic priest himself.

Aristide fell out of power later in 1991, but Jean-Juste remained in the country, hiding until Aristide resumed his presidency in 1994.

In 2000, Jean-Juste started a food program at St. Claire's, his parish in Port-au-Prince. The program now typically feeds 1,500 children, five days a week, said Margaret Trost, who established a foundation in the U.S. to fund the program.

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Trost met Jean-Juste on a trip to Haiti with a Christian missionary group. Jean-Juste spoke to the group about the dire poverty facing the Haitian people.

"He talked about how the children came to him and asked if he had any food," Trost said. "He described how it just broke his heart that he had no food."

Shortly after that talk, Trost scrounged together \$5,000 and sent it to Jean-Juste. Three weeks later, he had the food program was up and running. Since then, the foundation Trost and Jean-Juste started has grown to provide 7,500 meals a week and also helps to school over 200 children a year, she said.

Prisoner of conscience

In late 2004, Jean-Juste was thrown in prison by Haiti's interim government that replaced Aristide after another coup. He was freed after seven weeks, but imprisoned again in July of 2005 and accused of murdering a Haitian journalist.

Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience and pled for his release. Jean-Juste and others speculated that the real reason he was locked up was because of wide public support calling him to run for president as head of Aristide's leftist Lavalas party. He maintained that he never sought the presidency, though he said he would consider it if the people wanted it and God called him.

He spent about six months in prison before he was released to the U.S. and allowed to seek medical treatment for cancer. The charges against him were eventually dropped.

However, while in prison the second time, Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot of Port-au-Prince suspended Jean-Juste from ministry. Miot never reinstated Jean-Juste, friends said.

In July of last year, Jean-Juste said he thought that Miot was in a difficult political position and had to distance himself from Jean-Juste because of pressure from both the Haitian government and the Vatican, which disliked his embrace of liberation theology. Even so, Jean-Juste said he maintained a warm private friendship with Miot.

The Archdiocese of Miami wouldn't give Jean-Juste faculties to minister, either, since he was not in good standing with his home bishop, said archdiocese spokeswoman Mary Ross Agosta.

Agosta acknowledged that Jean-Juste tested the institutional church over the years, but she nonetheless spoke warmly of his legacy.

"Certainly we were saddened by the news of the passing of Father Gerard Jean-Juste," she said. "He was known for his love of the poor and his commitment to them both here in Miami and in Haiti. He was a strong voice for those who have no voice."

On May 28, the day after his passing, hundreds gathered in the heart of Miami's Little Haiti to mourn and remember Jean-Juste. They met at the headquarters of Veye-Yo, a long-time grassroots organization Jean-Juste co-founded to advocate for a number of issues of concern to Haitians both here and on the island nation.

Marleine Bastien, vice chair of the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition in Miami was among the mourners. As a young woman coming to America, Jean-Juste was the first person she met when she went to the Haitian Refugee Center. Bastien went on to work for the Center as a paralegal for five years.

Now, almost three decades later, she recalled the man who helped her and so many others.

"Father Jean-Juste was not only a champ of Haitian rights, he was a champion of people around the world," Bastien said. "We lost an icon, we lost a champion. We lost a champion of the poor."

[Bill Frogameni is a reporter living in South Florida.]

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