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Notable Brazilian Catholic doctor dies in Haiti

by Lise Alves



SAO PAULO, Brazil

Dr. Zilda Arns Neumann, 75, a pediatrician who founded the Brazilian bishops' children's ministry, was among those who died in the Jan. 12 Haitian earthquake.

She was in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, to participate in missionary meetings and to help the Caribbean country consolidate its children's ministry and create a methodology to combat malnutrition.

Cardinal Geraldo Majella Agnelo of Sao Salvador da Bahia, who helped her create the children's ministry in 1983, said Neumann lived a life dedicated to others.

Neumann was known throughout Brazil for her dedication to improving the health and quality of life of children.

She was the sister of Sao Paulo's retired archbishop, Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns. In an interview with Agencia Estado news agency, Cardinal Arns was quoted as saying that his sister died a "beautiful death, because she died for a cause she always believed in."

Mother of five and grandmother of 10, Neumann was a member of the Brazilian bishops' permanent council, Brazil's National Health Council and the National Economic and Social Development Council.

In her work with the children's ministry, Neumann found that the best way to combat infant mortality was through community agents, who could be taught the basic notions of health and nutrition and pass on the knowledge to their communities. The ministry now has more than 260,000 volunteers.

In 2004, the bishops asked Neumann to create a similar ministry for the elderly. Currently more than 129,000 elderly are helped each month by approximately 14,000 volunteers.

Michel Temer, president of the lower house of the Brazilian national legislature, said Neumann was "synonymous with giving -- in her fight for the poorer population, in the combat of infant mortality and in her fight to improve the quality of life of the most needy."

For her work, Neumann received recognition and awards from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Opus Prize Foundation and Lions Club International, among others. She was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize three times.

Auxiliary Bishop Dimas Lara Barbosa of Rio de Janeiro, secretary-general of the Brazilian bishops' conference, was expected to fly to Haiti with other Brazilian officials to retrieve Neumann's remains.

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