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Haiti, desperate poverty even before the earthquake

by Tom Roberts



Celine Fabre, a 26-year-old Haitian studying international relations and diplomacy at the Catholic University of Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic: "Individualism is at the center of the problem." (Photos by Dennis Sadowski)

Editor's note: Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, traveled to Haiti and the Dominican Republic in October with two other journalists, winners of Catholic Relief Services' Eileen Egan Award for Journalistic Excellence. The trip was sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, which prepared the itinerary. As such, it serves as a backgrounder to the current disaster.

HAITI and DOMINICAN REPUBLIC -- Our small group and several dozen other people, most of them presumably from Haiti, embarked on a trip from the ground level of the Fort Lauderdale, Fla., airport in late October. No one opened or inspected any of our bags or the various boxes going on board the small propeller-driven commuter plane. No one was required to go through any screening devices.

It was the first time since 9/11 that any of us -- three journalists and two staff members of Catholic Relief Services -- could recall leaving a U.S. airport for anywhere without having to go through even minimal security. In a later phone call to the airline counter, a man who claims he'd been loading passengers there

for five years said the airline never conducted any security because it was small and isn't considered a threat.

The point is not about air travel, but more about Haiti and what it might mean when the modifying clause that commonly follows its name is "the poorest country in the hemisphere." One could justifiably extrapolate another reason for lax security: There's nothing left to threaten in Haiti. It is its own threat.

We landed in Cap Haitien, a city of 180,000, located on the northern finger of Haiti's third of the island of Hispaniola, on a strip too small and narrow and bumpy to accept jets. At the end was a shack that served as a terminal. Two women sat at small tables outside the terminal. They were the customs stop. They stamped our passports as motorbikes zoomed around the terminal and alongside the runway.

Haiti, a country of nearly 10 million where 80 percent live in poverty, 54 percent in abject poverty, according to the CIA World Factbook, can be an unrelenting misery tour, one scene of chaos and gut-wrenching poverty worse than the last. If there is creativity somewhere in the mix, it seems to be in the multiple expressions of poverty -- from the land itself, denuded of trees turned into cooking charcoal; to the shantytowns that have open sewerage, no running water, and that keep heaving themselves higher up the mountains surrounding the capital city of Port-au-Prince; to the seemingly limitless "neighborhoods" of stick and tin shacks where dozens of malnourished, ill-clothed kids at a time present a bleak harbinger of the future.

Karel Zelenka, recently arrived from Zimbabwe to head the Catholic Relief Services program in Haiti, is an old hand at assessing some of the world's grimmest circumstances. During a discussion at a point in our first two days in Haiti, he said he had "not seen anything like this before," adding that it would take an effort on the level of a Marshall Plan to begin to move Haiti beyond its current desperate circumstances. The assessment took on an even more poignant edge with the news at press time that a 7.0 magnitude earthquake had struck near Port-au-Prince.

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On a street in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, several levels of a modern Haitian narrative, bits of which have revealed themselves along the route from Cap Haitien, came into sharp relief in the stories of two women.

Celine Fabre, a 26-year-old Haitian studying international relations and diplomacy at the Catholic University of Santo Domingo, is here to serve as interpreter for reporters interviewing Olga Theodore, one of the nearly 2 million Haitians living in the Dominican Republic. Many of the Haitians are undocumented, and in a situation very similar to the undocumented in the United States, live in squalid conditions working at low-paying, menial tasks that others refuse to do. Exceptions, some notable, exist. Some have acquired residence status and many have student visas. Some have succeeded in business or education despite a prevailing racism against Haitians that occasionally turns violent.

Fabre came from the slums of Haiti, but in her case, she said, her area had running water and her parents both were employed, her mother as a seamstress working from home and her father in construction, so there was always food for her and her two siblings and money for school supplies. Fabre is elegant and articulate. She is here on a student visa and lives in student housing with a younger brother. In conversation, she raises a point that has been made by several other Haitians -- one a middle-aged relief worker from that country's tiny upper class who was educated through university level in the United States; another young interpreter who had done his high school studies in Florida and is now pursuing further studies in Haiti; and an educator who ran his own language school in the Dominican Republic and is currently teaching at an exclusive girls' high school.

All of them described Haitians as "individualistic," with little interest in large-scale organizing projects or concepts such as solidarity. The prevailing consensus, hardly scientific, among these interviews, is that at least two major factors motivate such individualism: First is the daily need for survival that begins in the desperate poverty of most of the population and that seeps into its institutions and politics, and, second, the residue from the brutal era of dictatorship by the Duvalier family, a period during which any hint of political organizing could mean death.

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"Haitians don't want to unite," said Fabre. "They don't want to work for the community. Individualism is at the center of the problem." It's a problem she understands, and it's not a matter of selfishness, but of survival. Like others who have come to the Dominican Republic, her focus is on completing her education and beginning a career, so that she might help her family.

"I sometimes think about going back to help change things, but wonder if it's possible," she said.



Olga arrived midmorning with two of her daughters, Sabine, 13,

and Estelle, 10, to set up her wares on a rough platform, one of the ubiquitous Haitian street vendors working here. And with her came a reminder of why it might not be possible for someone like Fabre to return, or at least to change things. After Olga had stacked tubes of toothpaste and packets of underwear, children's clothing and rubber flip-flops, she began telling her story.

She had a son, 23 at the time, who was working in the government of since-deposed President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Her son was an activist in Aristide's reformist Levalas party, which last November was banned from elections on a technicality, and he worked for a senator. Haitian politics are notoriously corrupt, unstable and often violent. The senator was assassinated and her son was burned alive.

Olga pressed for justice, and a suspect was arrested but was eventually released. She received messages that if she didn't let up, she'd be burned alive as well. The pressure became so great that she decided to leave her other five children with relatives and make her way to the Dominican Republic. Eventually her children followed, as did the nightmares of the undocumented. The family is fortunate in one respect. Unlike many others, they have Haitian documents and can prove they exist. Some don't have such documents, including, often, children of Haitian parents born in the Dominican Republic. Olga and her children don't have passports.

One evening one of her daughters went out to buy groceries and was caught in a roundup of undocumented Haitians and deported back to her home country. It took two months and the help of Jesuit Services for Immigrants in the Dominican Republic to locate her daughter, who finally received a passport and visa.

A second daughter was raped by two men in the Dominican Republic. With the help again of the Jesuit Center, which provided a lawyer, the men were eventually arrested, convicted and jailed. Since then, her daughter has faced harassment from relatives of the men.

Olga, who was divorced from her husband following the death of her son, is now surviving on the sales of goods at her street stall with the help of the Jesuit Center and with microfinancing provided by Catholic Relief Services.

There is a brutal reality to Haiti that, to this outsider, seems to permeate most sectors of civil society. That brutal edge makes it difficult to imagine, even for those who escape or rise above it, how things might change.

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On Oct. 1, about three weeks before we landed in Haiti, former President Bill Clinton met with leaders from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean in Port-au-Prince. He gave a speech worthy of someone running for president of the hemisphere. It was a familiar Clinton combination of broad visionary goals cast in the language of human uplift and progress twinned with laundry lists of specific projects. Haiti, he said, was on its way to becoming a very different place.

Perhaps Clinton is the one person who can gather the governmental and private sector resources to leverage a Marshall Plan-type effort for Haiti. In May, Clinton was appointed as the U.N. Secretary General's Special Envoy for Haiti. Three months later, he appointed Dr. Paul Farmer as his deputy. Few North Americans have as much credibility regarding Haitian issues as Farmer, a Harvard-educated physician who now teaches medical anthropology there and is an attending physician at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Farmer founded Partners in Health, an international agency that promotes health care in such places as Haiti, Rwanda, Russia, Mexico and elsewhere.

Clinton has called Farmer "the Albert Schweitzer of his generation," referring to the famous physician, religion scholar and Nobelist who spent most of his adult life establishing health care in Africa.

The United Nations' project in Haiti is not yet a year old, so there's not much of a track record, but as a U.N. news release announcing the establishment of the project points out, the Clinton Global Initiative's 2008 Call to Action on Haiti had already generated more than 20 projects valued at more than \$130 million.

In his speech, delivered to an international gathering at the Karibe Hotel, a rare oasis of calm and luxury, Clinton made a remark that described the situation of some of the young Haitians we met who had managed to move beyond the slums and were able to study abroad. "I'll tell you an interesting statistic," Clinton said. "In the United States of America, 11 percent of all African-American physicians are Haitians. Only about 1.5 percent of African Americans are Haitians. The Haitian people are doing great everywhere else and they will do great in Haiti if we help them and support this plan. Which means that we need due attention here to the potential of small- and medium-size businesses." The former president appealed to those physicians as well as other members Haiti's diaspora who have succeeded in other countries to find ways to work to rebuild their native country.

He also mentioned the airport at Cap Haitien, first referring to a successful airport at Punta Cana, a facility built with private funds in the north of neighboring Dominican Republic. "All I can tell you is, I have never landed in an airplane in Cap Haitien. I have been in an airplane in Punta Cana countless times. É The Dominican government earns a fortune out of that airport every year in fees and revenues, and I

believe that more than one-third of all the foreign exchange earned by the entire country goes through that one airport. That could be the case with an airport in Cap Haitien.?

He proceeded to launch into discussions of agriculture, reforestation, the potential for imitating Brazilian success in producing cane ethanol energy, rebuilding or simply building infrastructure that is mostly nonexistent, and proposing education initiatives in a way that any local school board candidate would envy. He spoke of the need to "build back better" in the wake of the tropical storms that battered the country in 2008, so that new structures could withstand the wind and the rain. Now he'll have to add a 200-year earthquake.

Clinton's got big plans and a lot of hope for Haiti.

* * *

If there is a counterbalance to the misery in Haiti it is that the country is teeming with the goodwill of ordinary people -- an enormous number from the United States. Catholic orders and dioceses have made substantial investments in Haiti; parish groups from all over the country conduct annual missions to build homes and schools and other facilities; medical missions, comprising doctors and nurses and dentists, make regular visits, often to the same villages, year after year. One gets the impression that the island is virtually crawling with women and men Catholic religious as well as evangelicals and mainline Protestant groups. Unlike religious orders and organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, which maintain a permanent presence and have been in Haiti for decades, much of the goodwill is offered on a sporadic and temporary basis. Such groups come through customs with huge boxes of supplies and they boost the informal economy by purchasing cartons upon cartons of bottled water, and by hiring interpreters and drivers.

But no one knows exactly how much all of this is worth. As Zelenka and others pointed out, there is no centralized system for distribution, for determining who needs what or how goods are distributed. It is all done on an ad hoc basis and as individual groups are able to provide aid.

In an earlier speech on the Haiti situation -- given at the Trump International Beach Resorts at Sunny Isles Beach, Fla. -- Clinton spoke of the difficulty presented by the massive presence in Haiti of well-intentioned individuals and agencies. Part of his effort, he said, would be to not duplicate scarce resources and to also make sure that the money is spent, "insofar as humanly possible, in a way that is consistent with the priorities of the Haitian government's development plan. Now, this may not seem like a big deal," he said, "but Haiti has 10,000 nongovernmental organizations doing something there.

"As nearly as I can figure," he said, "there's no central list -- with the exception of India, you have more NGOs per capita operating down there than anybody else, but nobody's got a list, nobody really knows what's going on."

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If survival is first priority, no organization is as deeply involved in providing a safety net as the church. But even there, it appears, cruelly arbitrary forces can take over.

Sr. Mazulie Monpremier is a member of the Sisters of St. John the Evangelist, known as the Juanistas Sisters, an order that operates a center for outreach to women and children in Ouanaminthe, a town on the border with the Dominican Republic.

It is a city of 80,000 people, horrible poverty and little work.

The sisters here regularly go into the slums to try to pull the net under the neediest of cases, a distinction that, to this visitor, was akin to the difference between drowning in a pond and drowning in the ocean. We followed Monpremier into one of the slums and a waist-high sea of heads looking, begging, trying to say something with their eyes. One of the children had a severely burned arm that had not been treated. She's fortunate since she was spotted by the Juanistas and was to be seen at their health clinic the next week. Most of the children, we were told, eat only once a day. They were oddly silent. This is the kind of neighborhood where, as Zelenka said in another location, you can sense the intense population pressure that makes relief workers feel as if "you are basically running to stand still."

At the Juanistas center a young woman played with her baby. The sisters highlight her story because the young woman refused the urgings of her boyfriend to have an abortion. Unlike the children in the nearby slum, her toddler giggled and mimicked sounds and appeared well nourished and happy. It was impossible not to wonder what fates decide who gets nourished, who remains in the slum where there are countless other teenage mothers who will give birth to infants that will face early lives of little food and few giggles.

At the same center, 15-year-old Lucien, a slight boy who looked at least five years younger, sat on a patio in tattered clothes. He shined shoes for a living, earning the equivalent of about 50 cents a day that he hands over to help support his family. He's the oldest of six children. His parents don't work. Just before our visit, he had been assaulted by men along the border with the Dominican Republic, an incident that is being investigated, we are told, by the United Nations Peacekeeping force.

Former President Clinton said he thinks the current moment "is by far the best that Haiti has had in the 35 years that I have been acquainted with it, to slip the bonds of the past."

The question, of course, is whether it is a good enough and long enough moment to allow Haiti to move beyond its identification as the poorest nation in the hemisphere; whether the hemisphere, in this time of global economic downturn, can create the space and the stability to allow Haitians to do as well at home as they've done in the diaspora.

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"A disaster of the century?"

The Jan. 12 news that a 7.0 earthquake had hit Haiti near the capital city of Port-au-Prince broke as this story was going to press.

Haiti is one of Catholic Relief Service's largest operations and includes dozens of international staff and more than 200 Haitians. The agency has been working in Haiti for 55 years. John Rivera, director of communications for Catholic Relief Services in Baltimore, said Jan. 12 that all of the staff in Haiti appeared to be safe.

Karel Zelenka, a CRS country representative in Haiti who has had experience bringing relief to war zones and areas affected by natural disasters, released a communication calling the earthquake "a disaster of the century."

Sr. Rita Larivee, former publisher of *NCR* and now general superior of the Sisters of St. Anne, an order based in Montreal, was awaiting word Wednesday morning, Jan. 13, about the status of more than 50 members of the religious order based in Haiti, most in Port-au-Prince.

She said she had received no communication from any of the sisters, about 20 of whom (including six novices) live in a motherhouse located on steep hillside overlooking the capital city and within a mile or two of the National Palace, which collapsed in the quake. I had stayed at the house during a trip in May 2008, when I spent about 10 days in the country researching a story on Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Martha Vanrompay and her work rescuing restavek children, youngsters caught up in a system that amounts to domestic slavery (*NCR*, May 2, 2008).

Larivee said she had been in communication with international aid groups such as Oxfam, who said many of the roads, including the one to the motherhouse, were impassable immediately after the quake. Other sisters are located to the south of Port-au-Prince in the town of Les Cayes, along the Caribbean Sea, where significant aftershocks were felt, she said.

One of the order's schools, attended by 1,000 students, had collapsed, she said, but she was unsure of the fate of another school, accommodating 1,700 students. At press time she also was awaiting word about other houses occupied by Sisters of St. Anne throughout Port-au-Prince.

Update

On Jan. 18, Larivee told *NCR* that one sister, a student at the university, had died in the quake. The order has lost five schools, one dispensary, and three residences. The provincial house and novitiate were so badly damaged they are uninhabitable.

A total of 19 sisters and 6 novices are currently living outside in makeshift tents.

"Our sisters from the south province have brought supplies to those in Port-au-Prince," Larivee said. "We are looking for a way to send 2 people to Port-au-Prince. We have not yet found a solution."

-- *Tom Roberts*

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