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'We live by miracles'

by Bill Frogameni

One woman's encounter with the Haitian people

When Margaret Trost was suddenly widowed at 34 and left with a young son, she never imagined how her grief would entwine her with the people of Haiti and their suffering.

Trost's search for meaning in the face of spiritual devastation led her from her comfortable American life to a Haitian mission trip in 2000. Trost established a charitable foundation that, prior to the earthquake, was feeding 7,500 meals a week to children in Port-au-Prince. It helped hundreds more to go to school.



The journey Trost recounts in her memoir, *On That Day, Everybody Ate* is

deeply personal. But never far from the center of her narrative is Haiti's history, its complex politics, and one of the most dynamic recent figures in Haitian and Haitian-American politics -- the late Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste.

When she met Jean-Juste during her first Haitian trip he was pastor of a Port-au-Prince church. A strong

proponent of liberation theology, Jean-Juste was an advocate for the poor and a fighter for immigration rights in his adopted hometown of Miami. He was a rumored candidate for the Haitian presidency, a close friend of former Haitian president Jean Bertrand-Aristide, and once an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience designee.

It is not surprising he emerges as the second major character in Trost's narrative.

"There was something about him that elicited trust and hope. I could sense his strong leadership and his ability to make things happen," Trost writes. "He described how he 'saw' the roads paved, the people fed, employed, healthy, educated and housed. He believed in a future for Haiti's children and was committed to help make it happen." His already substantial reputation must surely have grown after he inspired Trost to marshal seed money for their feeding program.

Jean-Juste was ordained in New York City in 1971 -- reportedly the first Haitian ordained in America -- but, by the end of the 1970s, he had moved to Miami to work with the exploding Haitian immigrant population.

He served as the first executive director of Miami's Haitian Refugee Center in 1978, and he remained affiliated with the center through the 1990s, as he continuously moved between America and Haiti, always fighting for a cause.

When Aristide's 2000-2004 tenure as Haiti's president ended with what he claimed was a U.S.-supported coup, Jean-Juste was thrown in prison by the interim government. Freed after seven weeks, he was imprisoned again in July 2005, accused of murdering a Haitian journalist. Many speculated that the real reason he was locked up was because wide public support called on him to run for president as head of Aristide's leftist Lavalas Party.

Jean-Juste spent about six months in prison before he was released to the United States and allowed to seek medical treatment for cancer. The charges against him were eventually dropped.

When released from prison in 2005, Jean-Juste's bishop suspended him from active ministry. Until his death in 2009 at 62, Jean-Juste often stood outside the institutional church, just as he often stood outside political establishments. Trost, so obviously influenced by him, paints Jean-Juste as a man who seemed more comfortable on the margins, close to the people and causes he championed.

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Over her near-decade of involvement with Haiti, Trost watched the situation degenerate as violence and instability kept driving people onto rickety boats, and if they were lucky enough to reach the United States, their pleas for political amnesty were continuously disregarded -- more so than any other foreign group. The island also endured a series of hurricanes. In 2008, food riots broke out after prices soared and the country's ports were logjammed due to corruption and ineptitude.

Now there's the earthquake.

As of this writing, Trost reports that the food program is still alive, but just barely. Volunteers have managed to truck in food from the Dominican Republic yet the situation remains very fragile and the need is greater than ever.

Still, thanks to what she learned from Jean-Juste, Trost is more committed, more attuned than ever to the

spiritual. Jean-Juste told her, "God is the first and the last resource [in Haiti]. We feel God's presence more and more, because there is nobody else some days who can sustain us to allow us to survive. So we live by miracles, and as we live by miracles, we need faith. Our faith sustains us."

Trost has learned to live by that faith, the belief that miracles are routine and abundant. She learned how to show up, do her best in the face of staggering human limitations and to take joy in small victories.

Now, with Haiti facing its worst catastrophe yet, the miracles for Trost and her ministry are certain to be even more abundant.

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

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