

Haiti's ongoing Good Friday

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The news cameras have moved on to other tragedies (and to the Oscars). People have texted their donations. Anderson Cooper is back in New York chasing domestic ambulances. But in Haiti, the nightmare continues. It shall continue for a very long time.

A delegation of U.S. bishops visited Haiti in early March to survey the needs of the people and to assess what more can be done by the church to alleviate their suffering. Archbishop José Gomez of San Antonio has set up an ad hoc committee to lead the relief effort, and he and Cardinal Sean O'Malley of Boston led the mission.

O'Malley has written of the desperate circumstances he saw but of the enormous and deep reservoirs of faith he encountered. "We were all very edified by the faith, resilience, and the spirit and determination of the Haitian people in the face of such tragedy," O'Malley wrote on his blog last Friday. "The Haitian people have such great faith. They've suffered much in their history, yet the spirit that motivates them is their love for God and trust in his providence."

The church is playing an integral role in the recovery efforts. The nunciature is serving as a hotel for doctors who have come to tend to the victims. Haitian Ministries of the diocese of Norwich, Conn., lost its mission house in the quake, but it has built a temporary facility that is providing food to a nearby slum as well as assistance to two orphanages. Archbishop Roberto González of San Juan, Puerto Rico, told *NCR* that his archdiocese has set up a clinic at a Vincentian parish in Port-au-Prince. Three or four doctors from Puerto Rico travel to the island every week to staff it.

As Catholics from a wealthy nation called to help the people of that impoverished nation, it is critical that we first understand the central role the Catholic church plays in Haitian society. Only 10 percent of Haiti's schools are run by the government; the rest are run privately and mostly by the Catholic church. The same goes for orphanages, poverty relief, hospitals, and a variety of basic social services. The government of Haiti is notoriously inefficient, and people turn to the Catholic church whenever they are in need. In Haiti, a perpetual state of desperate need was exacerbated when the earthquake struck, further straining church resources that were already at the breaking point. Very little infrastructure existed on the island before the quake, and what infrastructure did exist was as often as not under the auspices of the Catholic church.

Fr. Andrew Small, director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' national Collection for the Church in Latin America, accompanied the delegation of U.S. bishops and highlighted the need to focus on education. "Schooling is a priority and will be very expensive to sustain if it's to be done well," Small told *NCR*. "Schools are not even open yet, but getting every kid that wants it a decent education has to be priority No. 1. There's no limit to the budget needed for schooling." In the near term, Small recommends that efforts to rebuild churches and school buildings focus on an adjacent gymnasium "that can double as a hurricane refuge center should it be needed. People would know where to go, and the gym could have a small kitchen or dispensary with supplies pre-positioned for times of emergency. At least people would know where to go, and would have somewhere to take shelter during the annual hurricane season." The church is also working to get its radio station up and

running so people can feel connected again.

No one should underestimate the difficulties that continue despite the outpouring of aid so far. Catholic Relief Services has raised some \$90 million, but they are still focused on meeting immediate needs, and Fr. Small worries about the long-term planning that must take place. "When the rain came early a couple weeks ago," he said, "at one point the displaced people were advised they would be better off returning to the rubble from where they came -- a real Lenten image for us all to reflect upon."

There is indeed much to reflect upon for U.S. Catholics as we consider the plight of the Haitian people. Those reflections lead to a fundamental question and an apt image for the Lenten season. Facing such overwhelming circumstances, we must ask, "What does it mean to be a Catholic Christian?" The question, of course, leads us to ponder what it means to be a neighbor, to love our Haitian neighbors, to stick with them, to continue to give. It also means sending more doctors and teachers and lay missionaries to help the people survive, to make sure Haitians are put to work, to express the solidarity that befits a Christian.

Haiti is an ongoing Good Friday image, a modern crucifixion that can lead us either to awful despair or to a deeper realization that the God we proclaim, especially this season, the God who allowed the sacrifice of his son, understands suffering intimately. The hope beyond this contemporary cross -- Haiti's resurrection -- is a project that requires something from all of us.

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