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On Haiti earthquake anniversary, a papal full-court press

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Bishop Guire Poulard is pictured in Haiti Oct. 9. (CNS photo/Barbara J. Fraser)

On the one-year anniversary of an earthquake that left an estimated 300,000 people in overwhelmingly Catholic Haiti dead, with another 300,000 injured and more than one million homeless, Pope Benedict XVI is offering what amounts to a full-court press of financial, ecclesiastical and spiritual support.

One year to the day after the quake claimed the life of Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot of Port-au-Prince, the pope moved to fill the vacuum atop the Haitian hierarchy by naming a successor: 69-year-old Archbishop Guire Poulard, who spent most of his priestly career in pastoral assignments in Port-au-Prince before serving as the bishop of two smaller Haitian dioceses.

Speaking on background, church observers said Poulard is in some ways a bold choice. He was among the most outspoken Catholic critics of human rights abuses under former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, especially his second term from 2001 to 2004. At the time, the Haitian bishops' conference sometimes

attempted to position itself as a mediator ? a choice that did not go down well with Poulard, then the bishop of Jacmel in southern Haiti.

?If the church had taken a strong position from the very beginning, this catastrophe would have been avoided,? Poulard said in a 2004 interview.

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