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Haiti: Sustaining hope in suffering hearts

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It's not about building back better — but building with a vision created by Haitians.



Formerly all priests came from the middle class. But my generation comes from out there in the slums and from the country. Our way of being priests reflects that new situation. Myself as a priest — I know the problems of these poor people. I come from them.
— Pierre Chery CSSp

Haiti

Sustaining hope in

Bernard Kenol CSSp

Life is so precious and so fragile. Death and life are so close to one another. On January 12, 2010 a 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit my native country. It was a tragedy without precedent in our history. I could not believe what I saw in the media. I wanted to think of it as a bad dream. Unfortunately, it was all so real and so graphic.

One of my relatives living in Haiti said to me, “The weird thing is that afterwards you would swear it lasted twenty minutes. It really lasted less than forty seconds. But at that time, it seemed like it would never stop. It just kept getting stronger and stronger.”

Port-au-Prince, my cherished native town

It was so painful and frightening to see the complete collapse of buildings that were reference points in my memories of Port-au-Prince — our national palace, the parliamentary

buildings, the United Nations buildings, the national cathedral, my elementary school, Collège Saint Martial (where my grandfather and uncles were educated) partially destroyed, my cousins’ houses ...

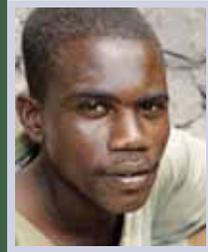
I learned to love my native town with its imperfections and dysfunction. But from now on nothing will be the same.

Chronic injustice and enormous inequality

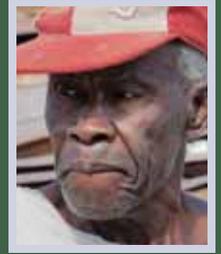
The Haitian poor have never been considered as human beings with the right to live in dignity. They have been forced to accept their accursed living conditions in slums with frail houses vulnerable to any disaster. 90% live in extreme poverty.

Those in authority have never used their power to bring about a bright future for the Haitian people. Rather, they have used it to make enormous profits and as a weapon of domination and injustice.

For those of us left, right now there is only pain. We have to build again to be able to live together. It must be done in a way that gives rise to solidarity and an open spirit. ... We have a chance to build a better Haiti.



We make ourselves the advocates, supporters and defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them.
— Spiritan Rule of Life



We are trying to be with the poor and for the poor. They need a voice. If you wish to be advocates for the poor, you must deal with the structures that cause their misery. All we ask is that the Haitian people be given a chance to live humanly and decently. In all of this we take the gospel as our guide.
— Antoine Adrien CSSp 1922-2003

suffering hearts

How communities rebuild after disaster

However, history gives Haitians reason to hope. In 1751 and 1771 two major earthquakes struck Port-au-Prince. In 1847 Cap-Haitien was demolished. These and other towns have been rebuilt — no matter how poor they were or where they were located. Disasters have brought forth leadership from ordinary Haitians in the hardest hit areas.

When people act they shake off their stupor. Things start moving. Roads are opened up. Order comes to chaos and people start to speak to each other. They begin to have hope. They say, “It’s not going to last like this forever.”

Hope for the future

Yes, in the course of this apocalyptic event, there is hope that Haiti will revive from its ashes and dust. After so many troubles and tragedies the Haitian people remain very resilient and refuse to give up. We continue to sing despite the harsh



Collège Saint Martial now.

Haiti



The women in the markets and the mothers of Haiti are the real symbols of life and the great signs of hope in this country.

— Fr William Smarth

No one ever thought that creating Haiti's first rural university would be a breeze. Making the university of Fondwa work again is going to take sacrifice and determination, but it means too much to the young people of this country for it not to succeed.

— Brian McElroy



difficulties. After this disaster we can give birth to a new Haiti. We can change the face of this country.

In our struggles we are not alone. The response of the international community to the cause of Haiti promises a new beginning. This catastrophic event has touched the hearts and minds of people all around the world. All spheres of international society have been mobilized: government officials, Hollywood, the media, humanitarian organizations and big corporations.

Relief efforts are essential as a first step to save lives, but a serious program of reorientation of our economy needs to be thought through, with an economic plan to respond to the needs of the whole country.

I also hope that we will try to build earthquake-proof buildings in the new Port-au-Prince. This technology is available nowadays.

What needs to be done?

First, we need to establish the rule of law.

Secondly, we need to come up with a long-term economic plan and vision for the future of the country. We will need to rebuild our political, social and religious institutions, get rid of corruption, strengthen our legal system, invest in agriculture

and technology, provide jobs for the people, get Haiti back to life.

Thirdly, we must restore and even improve our educational system. Education is the key. I stress the necessity to rebuild the damaged schools as fast as possible. Education has to focus on creating better citizens, better human beings, qualified people who can use their minds and skills to invent and produce for the country and for the world.

Fourthly, we need to learn from this catastrophe. We need to bury our differences and look up to the motto on which this nation was founded: "L'union fait la force, United we are strong." A change of mentality is necessary. Our government must care for the people. Our economic elite must be less selfish.

Finally, this catastrophe must help us understand that we cannot repeat the same mistakes over and over. We cannot let our past destroy our future. Despite all our differences, personal advantages, or selfish accomplishments, we are all one people.

Our mission as Spiritans

An early picture showed the cathedral in ruins. Many churches in the centre of Port-au-Prince collapsed. The nuncio, Arch-

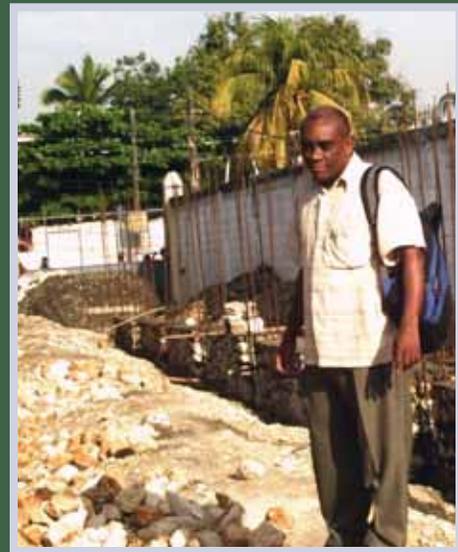


Nothing is more gratifying than to see thousands of children in Haiti eagerly pursuing the education they so obviously cherish.

— Fintan Kilbride

I chose to work alongside the organized poor. If the priest becomes responsible for the project, the enterprise will cease as soon as he is gone. This must remain the people's project. We want them to become as independent as possible.

— Joseph Philippe CSSp



bishop Bernardito Azzuza said: "...it will take decades to replace what we have lost." In the long road to recovery, the Catholic Church and all the Christian Churches have to play a crucial role. But what happens when those very institutions are victims of the earthquake?

I believe the answer is *we have to sustain hope in the hearts of suffering Haitians*. The Haitian people are very

We cannot let our past destroy our future. Despite all our differences ... we are all one people.

religious and the church is the heart of their community. Their resilient spirit has always been their best resource.

Our Spiritan confreres are living a major challenge, a challenge that is probably similar to the crisis they experienced when President Duvalier expelled them from Haiti in the 1960s. They are trying to work for the Haitian people by being present among them.

It took a month for international aid to reach us. ... We hire 150 people a week to clear the rubble; we give them a meal. We bought sledgehammers and shovels. We also bought 5,000 pounds of seed — red beans, black beans — because now we are in the planting season. This is therapy. It gives us confidence.

— Joseph Philippe CSSp

I know that some fund-raising initiatives for Collège Saint Martial have already started. Considering the need for education, such initiatives have to be greatly encouraged. What will happen with Fondwa University?

Love — the force that will help us triumph

But also I ask you, don't forget us in your prayer. I remind you that Fr Libermann, who brought the Holy Ghost group back to life, used to be so enthusiastic for challenging missions. What would be his attitude or behaviour if he were with us now? I leave that for your reflection.

Love is the supreme expression of our faith. Love is our vocation. Love overcomes all fears. Love is a call to heroism. Love suffers the assault of doubts but perseveres in its mission. Love was the deepest motivation of Jesus' mission. Love summarizes the whole law. Especially in these days of sorrow, love is the force that will help us triumph over all obstacles. The reconstruction of Haiti is a challenging task that demands from us a great amount of fearless love! ■

Bernard Kenol gave this talk to the Spiritans on the feast of Francis Libermann, February 2, 2010