



FATE OF ST. ROBERT'S FRIENDS IN HAITI

You've seen the pictures and reports on TV. An enormously powerful earthquake (over 7 point) struck Haiti January 12 at the country's population center, the capital Port-au-Prince. It left 230,000 people dead, 300,000 injured and a million homeless. Tom Braak an agricultural agent in Verrettes, Haiti wrote, "(How can I describe) a quake that destroyed so much of Haiti." So many government buildings collapsed that a UN advisor said the capital and government had "essentially disappeared."

The world responded magnificently with planes and ships loaded with food and medical care. Grand Rapids-own Doug Porritt who led St. Robert's first delegation to Haiti in 1996 accepts consignments of charitable shipments to Haiti through his organization Rays for Hope. Since the earthquake his organization has shipped 200,000 pounds of supplies from right here in Grand Rapids and filled 16 convoys of trucks with emergency supplies purchased in the Dominican Republic (next door to Haiti).

St. Robert's established program in Haiti, part of the Twinning Program of the Americas, has raised our empathy for that nation. Within a week our parish collected nearly \$50,000 in relief money dispatching it to Catholic Relief Services, a US organization with staff, warehouses and systems already in place in Haiti.

As days and weeks passed television crews continued to show the ordeal of the search for survivors amid an estimated "25 million yards of rubble" in the capital. According to MCT News Service "the quake response (in food and water) was largely a success," citing no widespread starvation or food riots, but it was touch-and-go since there were huge enclaves of people right in the capital who got nothing to eat or drink.

An AP reporter discovered an old woman, Jacqueline Thermiti, displaced from her nursing home and overlooked for days without food or water. At first she thought her children would come, but then she realized they might have died in the quake. She said to the reporter touchingly, "If the foreigners don't come, it will be up to baby Jesus." Relief did arrive and a British organization has been found to run her nursing home. With so many religious organizations providing disaster relief, it has been duly noted in Haiti that Christ has a lot more clout (and followers) in the world than Vodou.

The Twinning Program runs a guest house in Port-au-Prince where our delegation usually stays on its way in and out of the airport. Matthew 25 lost its 2nd floor. (Most of the other guest houses in town were completely destroyed.) No one on staff was injured and they rallied valiantly. The athletic field next door was turned into a camp for 1500 neighbors to sleep nightly. The staff operated a field hospital there. Medical teams arrived and did several surgeries on the kitchen as well as treat hundreds if not thousands. Twelve days after the earthquake the staff at Matthew 25 was squiring patients around to other field hospitals run by the French, Israelis, Brazilians, Russians and Belgians etc. who had x-ray or neurosurgeons or whatever was needed. Thus overcoming the biggest problem with disaster relief

reported again and again was coordination of their efforts. The American staff at Matthew 25 consists of a retired couple and a nun who just celebrated her jubilee (50 years as a nun.)

With the rainy season approaching , we've been cautioned that shelter and sanitation remain serious issues in the capital.

There was no loss of life and little structural damage in our own twinning town of Verrettes—a three hour drive from Port-au-Prince. Father Murat wrote that In the first few weeks scores of bodies of those who died in the capital were brought home to Verrettes for their funerals. Tom and his Haitian-born wife Fecilte reported the mourning went on “day and night, like one community-wide progressive funeral. “ Verrettes is a town of about 5,000 people. Now, 2,000 refugees from the capital are living with friends and relatives which puts a strain on residents meager resources. There are also about 1,000 school children who have been allowed to finish the school year in Verrettes schools. They need food and books.

There will be a huge need for educated people in the future of Haiti. Nearly 4,000 students and 700 teachers were killed in the capital. Thirty five thousand university students lost their classrooms. Development experts are locked in marathon sessions laying out plans for new industries and the a new capital. The Wall Street Journal reports there's a brisk business in scrap metal in Port-au-Prince. Crushed autos and rebar (used in concrete construction) is hauled to the recycler for shipment to China.

An excellent way to participate in the long term recovery of Haiti would be to sponsor one of 450 to which students St. Robert's is already committed. We have at least 30 children without sponsors right now. We request \$125 a year for elementary children and \$250 for secondary. St. Robert's feeds over 1,000 children school lunch at the parish schools in Verrettes as well. Any contribution to that on-going project would be greatly appreciated. We had hoped that Fr. Murat would be able to visit us yet this spring. But he says that he is behind on church work with all the disaster relief and cannot come till summer at least.

Again and again aid workers reported their personal reaction to the needs in Haiti and their desire to return and help. If anything our experience in Haiti teaches that we are not alone in our efforts there.

Respectfully submitted,

Saint Robert's Haiti Committee

