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Haiti

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One **step** at a time

Interview with Joseph Phillippe CSSp

The night of the earthquake I thought I was going to die. I prayed what I thought would be my final prayer, "God, my life is in your hands."

I smelt the smoke, and heard the cries from all around, "Jesus, save us!"

It was the end of the world. Many people were on the streets: it was like one huge wake — singing, praying, wailing. Nobody knew what was happening.

Then the aftershocks — renewed panic and calling out to Jesus.

Where were the people I was with? Were they still alive or were they dead? People looking for their children, their friends — nobody quite sure what was going on. Panic — yes, panic.

No way to communicate with anyone — the whole communications system was down. You just stayed where you were, unable to move, unable to go to the help of others.



"It's a little bit tough"

An interviewer's eyes widen. "A little bit tough" sounds like the understatement of the year. Is this priest totally unflappable?

He goes on: "I look at the earthquake like the creation of a new humanity in the world starting with Haiti. Why does this happen to a poor country like Haiti? It might be a way to rebuild the whole country and include everybody."

"You can do it again"

His thoughts turn to his beloved Fondwa. "It's very difficult to look at what has happened. Twenty-two years ago I started to give them hope, to encourage them to move forward. It worked. Now it's hard to go back to them and say, "You can do it again."

"It took us so long to build what we have built: the school, the orphanage, the sisters' convent and the international centre. I estimate it will take us three to five years to rebuild. How and where we are going to get the resources is another thing."

But he remains hopeful: "In Fondwa our people are still alive, our networks of friends are still around — in fact we have more friends than ever before."

He is aware that the mood of the people has changed. In general they are caught between giving up and beginning again, not as motivated as they used to be. They have had to welcome a lot of refugees in their homes — a house built for

five might have twenty living under a tent in the same space. Many people who moved from the cities to the countryside have returned because they received no help where they went.

"It's very challenging"

"We ask ourselves how long will people be in this situation? After a year things have not changed that much.

"We have the cholera issue, then the political situation where we don't know what's going to happen.

"I've lost all I've worked for in the past twenty-two years."

"With outside help we have created jobs for people, helped them to get their confidence back, move forward and do something for themselves.

"But it has not been easy. For instance in College St. Martial, we've had to pay \$200,000 to have the rubble removed. Fortunately there was some government help to do this.

"In Fondwa we rely on the people to remove the rubble, fill in the holes on the roads, plant trees — all with their hands. This is slow and painstaking — Fondwa was at the epicentre of the earthquake — but it does give employment."

“We need less talk; we need action”

If Haiti gets 20% of the money raised “For Haiti”, Joseph sees that as a very good percentage. “We don’t have large international NGOs like Oxfam. After the earthquake the Canadian military were the first ones to arrive in Fondwa. They helped us rebuild our small houses. But the people in need are not as easy to help as they should be.

“The government is non-existent. Many government buildings are gone, along with many churches. On the other hand we now have a lot of international NGOs in the country with a lot of resources. There are three main actors in the country — the government, the NGOs and the local grassroots organizations. We need to find a way for all three to work together. We have been in touch with groups in Toronto, New York and Philadelphia.”

Religious divisions disappearing

One good thing that has happened is that religious divisions have broken down. The Spiritans shelter about 300 people in their house in Port-au-Prince. Each one shares food with their neighbour — there is a renewed sense of solidarity among the Haitians themselves.

“Nobody died inside our Spiritan house,” says Joseph, “but they brought a lot of dead bodies to us and left them on the floor.

“The whole experience was a real test about how much we believed in God. If you didn’t have faith what else had you? In Fondwa when I found I had lost everything I also found myself saying, ‘God has given, God has taken, God will provide.’ I didn’t know how I was going to make it. But we have to continue to move forward. God will never abandon us.”



We need:

- Volunteers to build houses, able to come for 6-12 months.
- Administrators, CPA accountants.
- People to sponsor a student at Fondwa University at \$45,000; to sponsor three students a year specializing in agronomics, veterinary medicine, management.
- Someone to put us in touch with a university in Canada to sponsor someone from Haiti.
- We welcome people to come and assess our needs to see how best they can assist us. We thank all those who have supported us. Moving forward in solidarity encourages us to keep going.

One step at a time

Discouragement is an ever-present adversary. “My office in Port-au-Prince has been destroyed and it has been very difficult to find another. We cannot pay the teachers and other staff at Fondwa. We’ll keep our commitments to pay them whenever we have the money. They turn up because it’s a commitment for them too. \$100,000 would fix most of our problems ... but none of our friends have this kind of money.”

“How long can we continue like this? ... One step at a time ... God will never abandon us. Yet — it’s difficult.”

Political stability

Joseph is convinced that the main problem now is to have political stability in Haiti. “If we could get the international NGOs, the local grassroots groups and the government working together we could rebuild the country.”

He speaks of a plan to create wealth in rural Haiti through Fondwa. “We know what to do. We need to look at the resources that can create working and business opportunities for the people. Then we need to provide access to water, to communication, to health care.”

One wonders if political stability will ever come to this tortured island. The presidential election and the ensuing chaos over voting, the return of Little Doc Duvalier, the almost total inertia of the present government, bureaucratic red tape at the seaport and airport, talk of grandiose solutions to on-the-ground problems, maybe too many competing NGOs, a very young population ...

But then again there are the Joseph Philippes who, day by day, renew their faith in God and are willing to reconstruct one step at a time. ■

Glimmers of hope in the embers of despair

Noel O'Meara CSSp



The soldier looks at our stamped documents. The barrier is lifted. We cross from the Dominican Republic into Haiti.

There is no more tarmac, only stony roads, rocks and holes to be avoided. There is a large UNICEF tent. Donkeys replace motorbikes. Most people walk. After half-an-hour negotiating these roads we come to a huge archway with Douane emblazoned upon it. Under its shadow a policeman looms. He finds out we are priests — Werby, Don and I. He bows, takes my hand in a warm handshake and waves us on. How totally different from the officious bureaucracy on the other side of the border.

There are Chilean UN soldiers with guns and Toyota land cruisers just beyond the customs.

Inside Haiti

The scenery is rugged. We are in high mountains. Some of the road clings to the mountainside. The car, a small truck really, jerks and bucks, the average speed about 10-15 kms per hour. I wonder how trucks manage. They must be even slower.

Convoys with food aid make their way from the San Juan diocese with the confidence of experience. An armed escort accompanies them when they get into Haiti.

We pass a huge hydro dam somewhere in the mountains. Then climb high above the dam. A spectacular sight. Homes cling to the side of the mountain that contains the man-made

lake. How do they live? Their farms are now under water. No more maize. No more bananas.

The home of one of the major workers providing anti-retroviral drugs to the poor, Harvard doctor Paul Farmer, is here. He has written passionately about the poor and how they are discriminated against, especially when it comes to sickness and disease. He has dedicated his life to them and has built a hospital in this exact place. There is a market outside its gates. People all over the place. I am reminded of the pool at Bethsaida.

Further on we hit the main Hinche-Port-au-Prince road. We make good time, arriving at Hinche six hours after leaving San Juan.

Werby and I communicate in French. Don and Werby in Spanish, and Don and I in English. Quite a Babel in the cabin of the truck — but we all sing the same song.

Hinche

The Caritas HQ in Hinche has been the centre of all our work. Its director is Haitian priest, Père Jacques, a thin gracious man.

He looks after children who had to leave Port-au-Prince in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake for a variety of reasons: death of immediate family; parents' need to place their children away from the city, away from danger, near food and helping hands; family members taking in their relatives; church people recommending children for help with education. There are 3,200 children in the programme: accepted

One cholera patient told me she gets drinking water from a river. If she were to seek water from a safer source, she would have to spend three or four hours a day fetching water for her family — and then would have less time to work and earn money. Those are the trade-offs that Haitians face.

Nicholas Kristof, *New York Times*

Rubble left by the earthquake in the capital would fill enough dump trucks parked bumper to bumper to reach more than halfway around the globe.

Globe and Mail

Aid is not the answer ... Let Haitians assume full control of their own affairs and start rebuilding a life of their own.

Kieran Green, *CARE Canada*

“Haitians have grown weary of solution-wielding foreigners who never deliver.”

The country's future will take at least two decades to change ... in the last two decades Haiti has become some kind of huge laboratory for all kinds of projects. Everybody needs to rethink their way of doing things. Haiti cannot continue being the Republic of Port-au-Prince. It has to be about the Republic of Haiti.

Nearly half-a-million households are headed by women. Many have lost small retail or food businesses, street stalls. The loss of this income, which supports several family members, makes them more vulnerable to sexual exploitation or dependent on food aid.

Michaëlle Jean, former *Governor-General of Canada*

Spiritans got to work the day after the catastrophe to get back on our own two feet and to bring hope to its victims ... The post-earthquake situation in Haiti has pushed us to become much more involved with the displaced and the homeless.

We are very grateful for the generosity and solidarity of other Spiritans. We have received a half-million dollars from different Spiritan groups, \$200,000 of which we have already spent. We are slowly recovering.

Paulin Innocent *CSSp*

“How is it we are here when so many others aren't?”

Guilt-ridden survivors

“There is enough money in the country already. The problem is that ten families own it all.”

Jessica Leeder, *Globe and Mail*

Concern Worldwide — the Irish aid group that built and manages the \$2 million Tabarre-Issa camp, landed on a winning formula.

First they transplanted a community in its entirety, keeping their roots intact. Second, they offered a job. Third, they defused potential tension by sharing their resources with the existing neighbourhood.

Partner agencies are rebuilding five of six local elementary schools that collapsed in the quake. Concern has begun offering microcredit loans to residents.

Catherine Porter, *Toronto Star*

One island, two countries

Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic — nearly 20 million people distributed equally between the two countries. That is as far as the equality goes.

Haiti has only one third of the landmass, a lot of it mountainous. The Dominicans enjoy the rest. There is a lot of history, most of it sad. France and Spain do not come well out of the telling of it.

Over 200,000 died in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, on that fateful day, January 11, 2010. Many more were wounded for life. Families are broken. The future is bleak.

The world and its cameras came those first few days. Our hearts were touched and a most generous response was forthcoming.

Time has passed. Haiti has slipped back in the consciousness of the media. But the repair of the world, that part of it anyway, goes on.

into the Hinche Catholic schools, taken in by various families, given food, clothing and housing.

The schools, already over-crowded, swell with these newcomers. Extra teachers have to be hired. Doors of family homes, most of them poor shacks, open to receive the children.

I come across one family living in a small shack with 32 members — I cannot imagine how they live. All I see is one bed. Caritas delivers one box for every five members to each family every two weeks. This particular family receives 35 boxes, each box containing rice, beans, cooking oil, salt, sugar, and maize. It is spartan, but wonderful.

Refugees from Port-au-Prince

I meet some of the refugee children. It is obvious how homesick many of them are. One 12-year-old girl writes a letter of thanks for what we have done to help. Her sadness particularly strikes me: at her age, the knowledge of what has happened to her home, her family, to the whole way of life she had become accustomed to — how soul destroying.

There are some 1.6 million people living in camps, and another 400,000 are living with extended family or friends. More than 1,300 schools and 50 health care facilities have been destroyed, and more are significantly damaged. The level of destruction is extraordinary.

The debris alone would fill 8,000 Olympic swimming pools. It is estimated that the earthquake has had the largest proportional impact any country has ever experienced.

Port-au-Prince

After six hours we arrive in Port-au-Prince, the epicentre of the earthquake. Traffic is horrendous. Tents occupy any open space — tents of all shapes and sizes fill corners, gardens, every patch possible. The airport has tents all around it.

We pull into the central Spiritan house. It looks to be a fine structure, but close up you can see the cracks. Again — tents

everywhere. The Spiritans live in tents. They have opened their garden to their neighbours.

I get busy with the camera. A poignant photo is one of the Spiritan Provincial, Paulin Innocent, with some of his Council outside a Chinese tent, plus a wooden table and chairs. This is the centre of administration of the Spiritan effort in Haiti. A tent, a table, and a few chairs.

Old Spiritan Seminary

Spiritans Patrick Eugene takes me to see his ministry based in the old Spiritan seminary — now empty and unusable. On the patio are two large tents housing a clinic manned by the Belgian Médecins du Monde.

The house is eerie. You know it is unsafe, the least after-tremor and that will be that! The rooms are closed and a permanent guard keeps watch. Dust and cobwebs are the sole inhabitants. It is a ghost house with mementos of Spiritan presence.

I see a room with the name Antoine Adrien. He was one of the great Haitian Spiritans who stood against the dictator Papa Doc Duvalier and suffered exile for so doing.

There must be over 1000 families encamped on the football field. What will it be like when the rainy season starts?

A large water truck blocks the entrance. Some people are already at the truck's tail holding their buckets under the leaking taps. Water comes by truck at certain times. Brightly coloured plastic canisters and buckets and pots are there in plenty. The water is for drinking, cooking, washing both bodies and clothes.

Living perpetually under canvas in a football field in the middle of a broken city — what a hell of a life.

I note the number of children and the fact that most of the tents are taken up by makeshift beds. Sometimes there is a person lying on that bed. Always there are the children.

There are small passageways between the tents, wide enough for a person to pass. On each side the tents are canvas to canvas. So little room. People are cooking on small stoves. Just one small blaze and there will be another tragedy. Where are the toilets?

A man who wants the best for his people

This is Patrick Eugene's parish or at least what is left of it in the material sense. Patrick greets everyone — one hand perpetually holding a cell phone to his ear, the other gesticulating at somebody or other — a man who wants the best for his people.

He tells me of his plans for a technical, professional school. He will use the old Spiritan buildings. He feels they can be fortified, recuperated. He points out that, as things stand, the kids have nothing in their future. There is no other technical school in this whole section of Port-au-Prince. He wants to do something about that. He has plans. ■

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