

2d SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (January 17, 2010)

Fr. Jerry Kopacek

As I mentioned last week, we are now in Ordinary Time...but we are still in the immediate aftermath of a most extra-ordinary and truly catastrophic event. I speak, of course, of the massive earthquake in Haiti this last Tuesday. Any time a natural disaster of this magnitude strikes somewhere in the world, we as individuals and as Church extend our spiritual and material support. But this time it hits much closer to home—not just because Haiti is so close to the U.S., but even more so because of our own parish's connection to Haiti through our twin parish in Grison-Garde. We have been getting many questions about what has happened there and what we can do to help; I want to spend a few moments sharing what we know at this time which, frankly, is not much more than what you have already heard.

First of all, a brief geography reminder: the earthquake was centered just a few miles from Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti and located in the southern part of that country. That, of course, is where the worst damage and destruction has taken place. Our twin parish in Grison-Garde, on the other hand, is in northern Haiti, near the north coast city of Cap-Haitien. From what our Haiti twin committee has heard thus far, there was not much earthquake damage in that area—we were grateful for at least that bit of good news. They are, however, being hit with torrential rains at this time which is all too typical. In addition, Grison-Garde is still afflicted by severe poverty, of course, as is the rest of the country; the earthquake in the south will only make the whole country's situation even more dire and extreme.

The damage in the south in Port-au-Prince, on the other hand, is nothing less than catastrophic. You have all seen pictures or video; it will probably take a long time to get an accurate count of how many people died or were injured. Some project the death toll to be in the hundreds of thousands; there is simply no way to know at this time. The Vatican's representative in Haiti reported to Rome very simply and starkly: "We are in great distress. We have no water reserves and gas stations are closed. There is no electricity...We are in need of everything." What can one say? It's simply heartbreaking. We think we are greatly inconvenienced if the electricity goes off for a short time because of ice storms in the winter or lightning in the summer; we have no idea—not a clue—as to what they are having to endure down there. You may remember Monique Blanchard; she is the woman who has been here at St. Ed's to translate for the pastor of our twin parish. One of our committee members got an email from her; she mentioned a niece who was in Port-au-Prince at her grandmother's house. The tremors began, the house started to crack...the niece carried her grandmother outside and then the house simply collapsed. "Since then they are on the grass outside."

The impact on the Catholic Church in Haiti has been devastating as well. Haiti's population is almost nine million, about 80% of whom are Catholic. The Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince is in ruins; according to that same Vatican representative:

--the archbishop of Port-au-Prince was killed in the earthquake, as was his vicar general and chancellor and untold numbers of priests and seminarians;

--the cathedral church and almost all the other parish churches in the city were destroyed as were all the major seminaries and many other church structures and institutions. The priest who is currently at our twin parish in Grison-Garde has told us that the surviving seminarians for the Archdiocese of Cap-Haitien (which includes Grison-Garde) are now back in the north. But, he says, they now have nothing since they lost their clothes, shoes, socks, books, computers, money in the earthquake—it's all gone; it's all destroyed.

So what do we do? What can we do? Haiti has long been the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and one of the poorest countries in the world; this disaster has made this already-bad situation unimaginably worse. It can be tempting to think despairingly: 'it's no use; the needs are too great.' But

that is not an option for those whose Christian faith is genuine. One thing everyone can, should and must do: pray. Pray for the victims—the dead, the injured, those who mourn, and for the whole country. We are also called and challenged to help with our financial contributions; Pope Benedict and Archbishop Hanus are encouraging us to do what we can along these lines.

I would like to suggest one of the following options:

--our Haiti twin committee is continuing to gather information about the impact of this earthquake on our parish in Grison-Garde. Again, the buildings there were not directly affected, but the impact is there in other ways as it is throughout the country. As we learn more about that impact, our committee will be developing a plan of response. If you would like to contribute to those efforts, you are invited to make your check out to “Haiti Twinning Committee” and indicate ‘earthquake relief’ in the memo. Those funds will then be distributed to meet those particular needs that the committee is able to identify.

--in next week’s bulletin there will be information on other ways you can make your contributions (this information is not in today’s bulletin since the earthquake happened after it was printed). In particular, there will be information on how you can make your donations through Catholic Relief Services, the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church in the United States.

I understand that some have wondered about the possibility of donating clothing or other such items. That is not recommended, at least not at this time. Besides the logistical problems of transporting such things down there in the growing chaos, the biggest need is financial. Our monetary contributions can be easily directed to the most immediate and pressing needs by those who are there.

In the gospel today, we heard that familiar story of the wedding at Cana where the Blessed Mother told Jesus of the need, and then directed the servers: “Do whatever he tells you.” Those words are also directed to us in our lives of Christian discipleship, and especially in response to this horrific tragedy. One of the things that Jesus tells us: “Whatever you do for the least of my brothers or sisters, you do for me.” We are presented with the challenge of responding to our suffering brothers and sisters in Haiti and to their needs. We can’t fix it all, but we are called to do what we can. You good and generous people of St. Edward’s always step up to the plate when such needs present themselves, and I mean always. That is one of the many things that makes it such a privilege for me to serve as your pastor; you always make me so proud of you. Again, as we learn more about the situation and the needs in Grison-Garde, we will keep you informed. I thank you for the concern you have already expressed; I thank you in advance for your generous prayerful and material response.