

Catholic Church Walks With the Haitian People

MONSIGNOR PATRICK ARIS

The mission of the Catholic Church in Haiti is, first of all, to spread the Good News. The local church walks alongside the Haitian people and gives the Gospel a voice in their daily lives and in the lives of those whom society leaves behind.

“We have created a ‘throwaway’ culture which is now spreading,” Pope Francis writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*. “It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live ... The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers.’”¹

Haiti was born as a nation in 1804 after a rebellion ended slavery and French colonial rule on the island. In its turbulent and challenging history, Haiti has had a king, two emperors, presidents, dictators, military rule and 23 constitutions. But from government to government, the Haitian people have lacked the successful nation-building, freedom and power that could create and maintain their country as the pearl of the Caribbean.

Throughout its history, Haiti’s setbacks have been more spectacular than its advances. Although the country has experienced times of generous and bright awakening, the fruits of such flowering never have managed to ripen. Haiti has suffered disasters caused by nature and injustices created by man, especially by some whose pursuit of political power prevented establishment of a social contract for all. Haiti does not yet have a history and tradition of permanent, inalienable rights and values like respect for life and the common good, constitutional protections for people and for the environment, and a legal shield preserving such fundamental rights as health, work,

security and respect for the law.

The result: Haiti’s achievements as the first Caribbean island to throw off colonialism and the first nation in the Western hemisphere to completely abolish slavery remain in the past. Our future has no face.

MANY TYPES OF SUFFERING

The English verb “to suffer” is closest in meaning to the French *souffrir*. Although both words can refer to pain or distress, *souffrir* carries additional shadings: to experience, to endure, to go through. Those nuances apply when I speak of the Haitians, a proud people who have known many types of suffering, including state oppression, corruption, ignominy, epidemic illness and natural disasters.

In our history as a people, it only takes us about 48 hours to foment a rebellion to overthrow the old — but, until now, we forget about then creating something new and good for posterity. Instead, we have allowed corruption to take hold, with its dirty and shameful money. Those in power want everything for themselves, and they want it right now. As a result, our hardworking people are treated unjustly, and the social goal of building a strong and financially sound country for the good of all has become obsolete.

These are ugly observations, and they describe how suffering became our history and almost has destroyed our dignity. Today, Haiti is known as the poorest country in the Americas. The inter-



national press show our country as a place of jumbled and trash-strewn streets, starving children and looters on the prowl. They present this spectacle as typical daily life for the 11.5 million Haitians, ignoring the country's natural wonders, beaches, historical sites and the heroes who left their mark on history. Failing to show Haiti and its people evenhandedly perpetuates suffering. The country's weaknesses should not obliterate

when it is also determined by a public conception of justice.”² In Haiti, corruption has caused so much suffering that people have lost the concepts of justice and the common good. The people — the citizens — need to be educated about these things. It is as if they need an intensive class of social and civic generosity.

One wonders, are our politicians even concerned about their citizens? Experience indicates



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The blue roof of Saint François de Sales Hospital and clinic stands out against the dense urban landscape in Haiti's capital city, Port-au-Prince.

its strengths and its opportunities. It is distressing and ultimately overwhelming for a people who fought for their independence — and won it — from Napoleon Bonaparte to be shown as nothing but poverty-stricken victims.

Corruption is the real cause of administrative inefficiency and underdevelopment in Haiti, and the plague of corruption on the island creates much suffering. It takes the form of unjust lawsuits, legal banditry and the squandering of public funds with impunity. When government work depends on cronyism and the power of money, the state becomes a place for some to enrich themselves at the expense of the common good. Under those conditions, the promises our Constitution makes to its citizens never will be kept.

The American philosopher John Rawls wrote, “A society is well-ordered when it is not only designed to promote the good of its members, but

that promises of “serving the people” have been voiced simply as steps to power, money and prestige. The political “charism” is not at the service of the community, and this is so bad for Haiti. The Haitian state has miles to go in terms of actually looking after the common good and the people's interests, teaching the value of good citizenship and respecting the contract that binds the government to its citizens.

THE CHURCH ALONGSIDE THE HAITIAN PEOPLE

The Catholic Church in Haiti's leadership role has developed gradually. In October 1966, the Holy See instituted a Haitian episcopate, and in February 2014, Pope Francis created Bishop Chibly Langois the first Haitian Cardinal.

La Conférence Épiscopale d'Haiti (the Haitian bishops' conference) got its start after Vatican II when Pope Paul VI appointed five Haitian priests

as bishops. In 1972, the Haitian bishops' conference released its first pastoral letter, "The Church in the City," the starting point of inculturated evangelization. In 1982, the bishops' conference organized the first national symposium to mold the first theological formulations of the church's mission in Haiti.

The following year marked Haiti's first papal visit, when Pope John Paul II stopped at the airport in the capital, Port-au-Prince, during his visit to several Central American and Caribbean countries. He made a memorable and remarkable speech.

"Something must change here," the pope declared during his "blistering condemnation of poverty and human suffering in [the] Caribbean nation," according to a United Press International wire service report.³ Haiti's President-for-Life Jean-Claude Duvalier — the dictator known as "Baby Doc" and son of the notorious François "Papa Doc" Duvalier, who ruled Haiti from 1957 until his death in 1971 — was in the audience when John Paul II said Haiti was afflicted by "injustice, excessive inequality, the degradation of the quality of life, misery, hunger, fear ..."

"I have come to encourage a reawakening, a step forward by the church for the good of the country," the pope said.

After the pope's speech, the Haitian bishops' conference published several documents, notably "*La Charte de l'Église d'Haïti pour la promotion humaine*," establishing a leadership position in Haitian life: that fidelity to the Gospel requires the church to intervene in social and political matters;⁴ that the church must "engage in dialogue with the human society in which it lives"⁵; and that the degrading misery in Haiti forces the poor to concentrate on seeking food, so the church must help them in a state that doesn't protect their rights. The bishops' conference denounced government attacks on the dignity of the human person, illegal dispossession, employees' exploitation, usury and enrichment, violation of justice, torture and oppression⁶ — a courageous stand in 1983 during the brutally repressive Duvalier regime. But the church commitment went well beyond.

A BETTER WORLD IS POSSIBLE

The Catholic Church in Haiti collaborates with all

those "who promote what is true, just, holy, worthy to be loved" (Philippians 4:8). It dialogues with them, with intelligence and delicacy, to seek ways to improve social and public institutions according to the Gospel. In the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince, this vision is realized, among other things, through the ministry of Centre Hospitalo-Universitaire Saint François de Sales.

That hospital, founded in 1881 in Port-au-Prince, was almost completely destroyed in 2010 during a massive earthquake. With a reconstruction cost of \$21.5 million, (thanks to the Catholic Health Association, Catholic Relief Services and Sur Futuro), Saint François de Sales is now Centre Hospitalo-Universitaire Saint François de Sales, both a hospital and university health center with the same mission and vocation: to seek out and address human suffering by means of quality health care for all — especially for those who are poor. This

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— POPE PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*

facility has 204 beds: 100 in wards, 50 in semi-private and 54 in private rooms.

As Pope Paul VI wrote, "Since the world cannot be saved from the outside, we must first of all identify ourselves with those to whom we would bring the Christian message — like the Word of God who Himself became a man. Next we must forgo all privilege and the use of unintelligible language, and adopt the way of life of ordinary people in all that is human and honorable. Indeed, we must adopt the way of life of the most humble people, if we wish to be listened to and understood."⁷

Through its pastoral facilities including the hospital, the church says to all humanity and to the world, "I have what you are looking for, what you are missing," the church says, speaking to all. She doesn't promise happiness on earth, but she offers something — light, grace — to reach it as best as possible.⁸

Taking these concepts into consideration, the mission of Centre Hospitalo-Universitaire Saint François de Sales is to offer relief for people's suffering and bring faith to ignite their hope. To do



so, plans include:

- Establishing a strong, functional hospital board
- Establishing the Association Saint François to support the hospital's mission
- Collaboration with a large national network of Christian hospitals
- Expanding the medical center's partnership with the University of Notre Dame of Haiti
- Creating innovative services to better accommodate patients
- Providing an international standard of health care
- Serving Haiti's poor and vulnerable and attracting patients who otherwise have the means to seek medical care in another country
- Becoming the leading Catholic hospital in Haiti

To nurture this vast and ambitious program, we rely on very competent people — more than 300 employees, including five directors of departments, 20 heads of services, 60 doctors (salaried and non-salaried), 100 nurses and nurse's aides, 25 laboratory technicians; 40 security guards, two pharmacists and a group of medical imaging engineers. We offer the following services: maternity, surgery, pediatrics, internal medicine, external clinic, medical imaging, physiotherapy, blood bank, emergency, pharmacy and laboratory. The hospital has several jumps ahead in order to expand and offer more services.

The hospital is owned and administered by the archdiocese of Port-au-Prince. Knowing the earthly city is indispensable to the heavenly one, Archbishop Max Leroy Mésidor — following the wisdom, leadership and commitment of the recently retired Archbishop Guire Poulard — has promised to guide Centre Hospitalo-Universitaire Saint François de Sales in its vision and mission.

The magnitude of the Catholic Church in Haiti's social leadership responsibility is immense. We count on our solid partnerships with Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Health Association, Ascension, Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, University of Notre Dame in Haiti, Multimed, Haitian Society of Urology and the Haitian Society of Physiotherapy. Their dedication and experience already are part of the hospital's heritage, and they dream with us of a local Catholic Church

guiding a world-class health care facility for the Haitian people.

To succeed, we must be inventive, methodical and efficient — and we cannot wait. In the next five years, we need a hospital with one of the best-performing laboratories in Haiti, a medical imaging center doing technological miracles, a 24-hour dialysis center and an innovative trauma center. Looking ahead, we aspire to a residency program for specialties such as urology, radiology, surgery. The future will require leadership, drive, and effective management that displays the church's skill and insight in managing Centre Hospitalo-Universitaire Saint François de Sales' finances with insight.

The medical center is a great instrument for increasing the local church in Haiti's pastoral capacities. By making a difference in Haiti's health care, the church already is providing a significant contribution to change our country and its image of suffering. By making smart choices now, tomorrow will be ours, bright as the light of the midday sun. Our future may be even more beautiful than the dream, brighter than crystal.

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NOTES

1. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, par. 53.
2. John Rawls, *Théorie de la justice*, traduit de l'Anglais par Catherine Audard, Collection Points Essais (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1987 et 1997) 31.
3. Philip Pullella, "Ending His Eight-Nation Tour Thursday, Pope John Paul II" *United Press International*, March 10, 1983. www.upi.com/Archives/1983/03/10/Ending-his-eight-nation-tour-Thursday-Pope-John-Paul-II/7413416120400/.
4. La Conférence Épiscopale de Haïti, *Présence de l'Église en Haïti: Messages et documents de l'épiscopat 1980-1988* (Paris: Éditions S.O.S.) 60.
5. Paul VI, *Christus Dominus*, par. 13.
6. La Conférence Épiscopale de Haïti, *Présence de l'Église en Haïti*, 63-64.
7. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, par. 87.
8. Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, par. 95.

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