

WHERE IS GOD? LOOK AROUND

In mid-January, as we were putting finishing touches on our special section on health care design — and sending grateful thoughts to Dougal Hewitt of Bon Secours Richmond Health System for pulling it all together — when an earthquake struck Haiti and a cry went up. Where was God? People asked it privately and publicly. It resounded through the media. If Jesus taught a preferential option for the poor, how could this happen — especially to a nation where so many people have a deep faith in God? How much more suffering could our impoverished neighbor to the south endure?



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Musings on this vexing, age-old theological question — how do we square God’s goodness and love with intolerable suffering? — bear the fancy name of theodicy. The question fills an entire book in the Hebrew Scriptures: the Book of Job, the righteous, God-fearing man whose sequential losses were compounded by the posturing of false friends who suggested Job had brought his sufferings on himself. The question tormented 18th-century Portugal when an earthquake destroyed much of Lisbon, killing some 100,000 citizens. Sinners were blamed; heretics hunted down and hanged, prompting Voltaire to question blind faith in his “Poem on the Disaster in Lisbon” and in his novel *Candide*.

In a similar vein, one prominent commentator suggested Haitians deserved what they got, having gained independence from France by swearing “a pact to the Devil.” The earthquake was a blessing in disguise, he said. Rebuilding would follow; the suffering would bring good. Tell that to Haitians who have lost everything from loved ones to limbs.

As we noted in a book review in the last issue of *Health Progress* (*Hope in the Age of Terror* by Paul J. DaPonte, Orbis Books, 2009), questions about God’s whereabouts in the face of intolerable suffering have been asked with escalating urgency since the Holocaust. Events of 9/11 brought them to the forefront again. And now, as Haiti’s horrors play out on newspaper pages and television screens, theodicy feeds the blogs. Fortunately, good theology, including Catholic theology, offers us, if not clear answers

to the mystery of evil, at least some alternative ways of shaping a compassionate response.

As author DaPonte points out, our task in the midst of suffering is rooted in our human interconnectedness. Through the window of the Gospels, we see Jesus feeding the hungry and healing the sick. Jesus does not promise an end to suffering — he embraces it for himself — but he does require his followers to do as he did: to reach out with compassion and love.

Paradoxically, as our articles on design invite readers to reflect on the importance of beauty in our lives, we urge all who haven’t already done so to respond to what is surely among the ugliest events in recent memory. We know that Catholic health care was quick to mobilize on Haiti’s behalf — providing funds, medical supplies and healers, doctors and nurses sent or released to the scene.

As for organized efforts, we know of several and would like to celebrate them all. For instance, Providence Health & Services in Renton, Wash., regularly sends medical supplies to Haiti. Global Health Ministry in Newton, Pa., an affiliate of Catholic Health East, provides ongoing medical care in Haiti and other impoverished countries to our south, and is supporting reconstruction of St. Francis de Sales Hospital in Port-au-Prince. But in the interest of pressing deadlines, we have chosen to highlight Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach, featured on page 67, whose gargantuan recent effort to get medical supplies to a nation desperately in need is simply turning up the juice on a program in place for several years.

Yes, we need beauty in our lives. This, too, honors God. But today Haiti needs God’s help, and God has no hands but ours.

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