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Haití: A Drop of Solidarity in a Land of Thirst

Some students from North Hall, a university center in Trinidad & Tobago, spent the first week of August in Port-au-Prince on a social outreach program. They will never forget what they saw there.

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In mid January, as we got the news of the earthquake in Haiti, we asked ourselves what we could do to help.

The first need seemed to be the collection of food. We contacted several institutions and devised our action plan. For several weeks students who attend activities in North Hall, a university center of Opus Dei, went to nearby supermarkets to encourage customers to donate some items, and we were surprised at everyone's generosity.

Meanwhile Egwin, who makes frequent trips to Haiti because of his work, gave us a first hand account of the situation in Port-au-Prince. He brought back very moving stories of the widespread destruction and loss of life. He suggested that we focus our annual summer social outreach program on Haiti's needs, and put us in contact with two Haitian friends of his, Arneaud and Giscard.

We had to overcome many obstacles to identify a feasible project,

organize accommodations and raise money for the trip. We first went to Red Cross International and Habitat International for advice, Eventually we contacted the St. Joseph of Cluny nuns in Port-au-Prince, who run many undertakings there including two schools and an orphanage. Some of their buildings survived the earthquake but others totally collapsed. They were happy to receive our offer of help and told us we could camp on their grounds. Our plan was becoming a reality.

Preparations included collecting medical supplies and food, and finding several tents. Our group left heavy laden on the 31st July to fly via Panama to the devastated country .

While approaching the capital of Haiti by plane we were moved by the scenes of destruction and rubble, even though almost half a year had gone by since the earthquake. What

the first days must have been like was unimaginable.

On the first night it rained heavily and our tents were flooded. But first let me introduce our group here. The students' ages ranged from 20 to 26. Kwesi has a degree in Chemical Engineering from the University of the West Indies. Mikhail is finishing Agribusiness. Niko finished the same degree two years ago and is now doing his masters as well as tutoring at UWI. And finally there is Jerome, who is studying Civil Engineering. Oh, and myself, an art lecturer at another institution.

Every morning we did some prayer before Mass. After a quick breakfast, we headed off to work. Our first task was to dismantle the “UNICEF tents” that were no longer needed, which was a demanding job in the hot sun and humidity. We also measured the grounds of the orphanage with a GPS

that Jerome had brought with him. Jerome took some samples of failed materials as well as pictures to analyze them when we got back to Trinidad, where we hope to prepare plans for a new orphanage that can withstand a serious earthquake in the future. Finally we tackled the painting of several recently repaired rooms in the school.

I became good friends with a dedicated Haitian art teacher at one of the schools. With his help we organized an art workshop with students and have brought 100 paintings back to Trinidad with us. Our plan is to hold an exhibition in an art gallery and sell each painting for a very good price and send the proceeds to the orphanage.

Between the work sessions we had time to do some spiritual reading and each evening said the Rosary. We

prayed especially for the people of Haiti and their immense needs.

We Trinidadians resemble Haitians in many ways. Often when we walked around the city people would speak to us in Creole. One of the students who took part recalled: “The strength of the Haitian people is amazing. After the earthquake, they could still smile despite all the destruction. But it was hard walking down the streets of Port au Prince and seeing building after building destroyed. I remember seeing a woman with no legs making her way down the street with only her hands on the blazing hot pitch. In Haiti there is a distinct line between the wealthy and the poor. The wealth is only concentrated within 1% of the population and the lives of most Haitian people is a constant struggle.”

We returned home tired but happy, although we realized very well that our help had been only a "drop of water in a land of thirst." Throughout our project we were inspired by some words of St. Josemaria: “I myself measure the sincerity of concern for others in terms of works of service, and I know of thousands of cases of students in many countries who have refused to build their own little private worlds. They are giving themselves to others through their professional work, which they try to carry out with human perfection, through educational endeavors, through social and welfare activities, with a youthful and cheerful spirit.”

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