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## **Fr. Roustaveg: “Faith can be a powerful source of hope”**

Fr. Roustaveg is a Haitian priest who studied in Rome at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. In this interview, he talks about his vocation and the formation of young people in his country.

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**Can you tell us about your vocation and your journey to the priesthood?**

I was born in Mirebalais, a town in central Haiti, in 1991. I am the oldest of four siblings, and my parents are very devout. After completing my secondary education, I decided to become a priest thanks to some seminars on vocational discernment. During one of those events, I heard a testimony from a priest, and it stirred something in my heart. From that moment on, I felt the desire to embrace the priestly life.

The event that solidified this decision was the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince, which claimed around 200,000 lives. I witnessed the sacrifice and dedication of the priests who worked tirelessly to help and support the suffering people. Their example inspired me to want to follow their way of life. I began my formation in Haiti and was then sent to Rome to continue my studies. I was ordained a priest on 6 July 2019.

## **What are your responsibilities in your diocese?**

I have several pastoral roles. I live in the minor seminary of the diocese, where I work in formation, guiding young men who feel called to the priesthood through the initial stages of their formation. I am also the coordinator of formation in the diocesan Catholic school, where I help teachers develop an educational framework for their students.

I am also responsible for our online communication strategy. I'm the director of the diocesan radio, Radio Immaculate Conception. Finally, I serve as the general secretary of the diocesan pastoral office, where we are now preparing for the 2025-26 pastoral year for youth.

## **What is the security situation in Haiti, especially for those who profess the Christian faith?**

Publicly professing one's faith is not dangerous in itself in Haiti. Ours is a predominantly Christian country, which allows us to practice our faith freely. However, general security is a major concern due to the presence of armed groups. These groups make it dangerous to move from one neighborhood to another within cities, and violence is a constant threat to everyone, not just Christians.

### **How does the violence from armed groups affect education for young people in Haiti?**

Violence has a devastating impact on youth education. Due to ongoing threats, many schools and churches in some areas remain closed for an entire year. People may be afraid to leave their homes and often go out only for urgent needs. Fortunately, in the city where I carry out my pastoral work, Hinche, schools are

still operational. However, the situation has triggered an unprecedented internal migration crisis, with many people relocating in search of safety. At our school, we have taken in displaced students and sought support from international organizations to provide them with education and psychological support to cope with the trauma they've endured.

### **The armed gangs are mainly composed of young people. Why does this happen?**

Sadly, many young people end up joining armed gangs because they are left to fend for themselves by parents who cannot care for them or send them to school. Without alternatives, when they encounter corrupt politicians who pay them to commit crimes, they cannot refuse. They are driven to take up arms to help these individuals achieve their

goals. The gangs are funded by wealthy men who seek power, and young people are merely pawns in their hands. Without realizing it, they are destroying their own country.

### **What role does faith play in these young people's lives?**

Faith can be a powerful source of hope and transformation. Through the teachings of the Gospel, we try to guide young people toward a more just and peaceful life. However, many people have a complex relationship with faith, due to natural disasters and the suffering they witness and endure. Some see catastrophes as divine punishment, while others turn to faith temporarily during times of crisis.

### **What are the main challenges you face in your daily educational work?**

The main challenges involve helping young people with economic and family difficulties to attend school, especially secondary school. We also need to support young people who have fled violence and carry deep trauma. A young person raised in an environment of violence risks becoming violent themselves. My role as a person who gives formation is to help them understand that they can be agents of positive change, leaving behind vengeance and embracing a more tolerant and fraternal mindset, inspired by the Gospel.

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