

Long Lent in Haiti

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Haiti and her people are just beginning to grieve. The relief work will continue for some months. The rebuilding will require years, and it will need the efforts of the world. The world will do well to learn more about the historic injustices in Haiti and her people's long suffering endurance.

Together we must ponder and strategize how best to assist Haiti in rebuilding the nation, under direction from the people of Haiti. The goal must be a free and more self-sufficient nation, which will not come from first-world direction of the rebuilding efforts. Resisting our own desires to rush in and fix, rather than act as servants and partners, will be the biggest challenge.

I visited Port-au-Prince recently, to offer pastoral support to the Episcopal Diocese of Haiti and to its bishop, the Rt. Rev. Jean Zaché Duracin. Haiti is the largest diocese of The Episcopal Church, and one of ten dioceses beyond the bounds of the United States.

The destruction is as many have seen in pictures and videos - mounds of rubble, desperately cracked and tilted buildings, and throngs of human beings looking for help. The trip through Toussaint Louverture airport offered a view of many large jets filled with pallets of food, water, and medical supplies; others disgorging troops from several nations; one with a large crew of fire fighters and rescue teams. Some small planes departed with children bound for the United States, Medevac patients, and a handful of apparent diplomats. The airport terminal is badly damaged, and passengers await their flights in rows of seats on the tarmac, with no amenities beyond a few remarkably clean port-a-pots. There is as yet no regular commercial service, and visitors are strongly discouraged unless they are first responders or accredited relief workers.

In the city, some semblance of normality is emerging. Hawkers attempt to sell everything from food to car mats. The streets are swept cleaner than in most U.S. cities. The mounds of rubble impinging on sidewalks are carefully verged with larger rocks to keep more from filtering into the street. The most disheveled folk we saw were relief workers; others are well groomed, their clothing and uniforms clean, even in the midst of the large tent camps.

We visited one of those camps sheltered on a soccer field of an Episcopal high school. About 2,000 people have clustered there, in camping tents and other shelters constructed of linens and plastic sheeting. The camp is a site for food and water distribution. A woman associated with one of the diocesan schools is providing a program for nearly 150 children, offering them some degree of predictability and nurture. Children were playing basketball outside a collapsed building while their parents washed clothes and tended the injured.

The Episcopal university experienced great losses - some classrooms held nearly 100 students at the time of the earthquake, and bodies are being reverently pursued in the rubble, with teams picking apart the piles with mauls and by hand. Those they find are laid in a common grave.

Just outside the university, the local police station had a table set up on the sidewalk to process replacement requests for lost passports - at least 100 people in line. Across the driveway was a makeshift jail, ringed with iron fencing and holding a couple of dozen young men. The destruction of government capacity is immense, yet the police we saw were working well with tired and frustrated citizens.

Bishop Duracin and I talked about foregoing Lent this year, for Haiti has already experienced Good Friday. Their task is to practice resurrection, find hope, and dream together of a restored world. That is our own task as well. The nations of the world, under Haiti's direction, can help to rebuild a stronger and freer nation, where all people have hope of a more abundant life.

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