

Amid the ruins

Tom Roberts | Feb. 4, 2010



A Haitian woman attends the funeral of Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot and Msgr. Charles Benoit beside the ruins of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 23. (CNS/Reuters/Tomas Bravo)

If Haiti before the earthquake of Jan. 12 had become a near universal symbol of a dysfunctional civil society, the Catholic church, at least, stood as a somewhat redeeming example there of institutional stability.

Its churches and schools were crowded, its ministries functioned despite the chaos endemic to the poorest country in the hemisphere. The church's connections through parishes, agencies and religious orders reached across international boundaries and were responsible for untold millions in formal and informal aid each year.

No longer.

While it retains its international connections, the church in the aftermath of the vicious earthquake is in tatters: Its archbishop and other top officials are dead; scores of seminarians perished in the quake; its most prominent symbol, the national cathedral in downtown Port-au-Prince, lies in ruins, as does the national seminary and dozens of churches.

No one yet has an accurate account of the total loss, but it is extensive, as is the loss everywhere in the capital city.

According to Archbishop Barnardito Auza, apostolic nuncio to Haiti, who answered questions posed by e-mail, the major church structures destroyed by the quake were the Cathedral of Port-au-Prince, the archbishop's residence, and the archdiocesan pastoral building, which housed the radio and TV station, among other agencies.

A number of the most important parish churches and places of worship have been completely destroyed, wrote the archbishop, listing seven churches in Port-au-Prince as well as the Cathedral of Jacmel, a town on the southern coast.

The National Major Seminary of Notre Dame of Haiti, the only major seminary in the country, was destroyed, and the philosophy department lost eight of its 97 seminarians when a building collapsed.

While the four-story main building is still standing, said the nuncio, it has been condemned, "with parts of floors almost touching each other."

"The theology department lost more seminarians," he wrote. The number keeps fluctuating so that an absolute figure had not been established by press time, but "there could be around 20 seminarians still under the rubble," the nuncio said.

The Institute of Theology for members of religious congregations collapsed and about 15 people, presumably students, were buried in the remains.

"As of now," the nuncio wrote, "we cannot provide precise numbers of how many priests, religious men and women, and seminarians lost their lives" because of continuing problems with communication and travel. He has asked the Conference of Religious Men and Women of Haiti to come up with a complete list, but that will take time because the offices of the conference are under rubble. Auza believes the number of religious women lost will be less than originally feared, a prospect he calls "a small miracle" because so many religious houses collapsed.

"Many Catholic schools collapsed or are totally condemned with damages beyond repair," he wrote. "Some of those schools were among the best ones in the country."

Indicative, perhaps, of the situation of religious orders in Haiti was the experience of the Sisters of St. Anne, an order headquartered in Montreal. Sr. Rita Larivee, former publisher of NCR, is now general superior of the order and eventually learned that of about 50 sisters in the country, most Haitians, only one died in the quake, Sr. Odeline Morcy. Another sustained injuries, but not life-threatening. However, the order lost all five of its schools -- a variety of educational facilities that covered all grades and post-high school, serving thousands of Haitian youngsters; three of its residences; and a major health clinic.

As well, the order's motherhouse was damaged beyond repair, and many of the sisters and novices, two weeks after the quake, were sleeping in makeshift tents on the grounds outside the motherhouse and outside another collapsed residence.

What the future holds isn't clear because the order's major ministries -- its means of support as well -- have been destroyed. The obstacles to rebuilding what once existed are enormous. Larivee reported that even its schools in the south are closed because money to run them comes from the government in Port-au-Prince, where most of the ministry buildings were destroyed.

At the end of two weeks, she was reporting that communication within Haiti was improving and that sisters in different parts of the country were able to speak with one another again. Some from Port-au-Prince had traveled to the order's facilities in the south and in the Cap Haitien area in the north. The food situation had also improved.

Regarding the future of a church that has suffered so much loss of personnel and property, Auza said: "There are always creative ways to overcome adversities. For instance, Masses are celebrated outside, in courtyards, in halls and open fields." Mass at the nunciature, he said, is now celebrated in the backyard.

"At the same time, it is evident that there are so many serious concerns for which we don't have any solution yet. For one, where are we going to house the 256 major seminarians who have lost everything? How fast can we rebuild the seminaries? Where would the new leadership of the archdiocese of Port-au-Prince have its offices?"

Asked if the earthquake, horrible as it is, might provide a new beginning for the church as well as the country, he responded: "Surely we would not have needed such a devastating catastrophe to renew ourselves. But, yes, I do believe that the brightest silver lining of this huge disaster should be renewal and a commitment to do things better, be it in governance, in civil society and in the church." He said for Haitians, this is a "never-to-be-missed occasion to show transparency and accountability, in order to restore the trust and confidence of the international community, which is absolutely necessary for the gargantuan efforts for reconstruction."

The church has to think about rebuilding "fairly quickly," New York Archbishop Timothy Dolan said in a Jan. 25 phone interview with NCR. Dolan, representing the U.S. bishops, had attended the Jan. 23 funeral for Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot and had also viewed some of the devastation in the city with Ken Hackett, president of Catholic Relief Services, a major coordinator of relief efforts in some areas of Port-au-Prince.

Significant questions, however, face any rebuilding effort, said Dolan. "Who's going to do what? Will decisions go through the bishops' conference, or will it just be the bishops of the two dioceses that were hardest hit? What role will the Holy See play? What role will the Americans, the Germans, the Latin Americans, etc. play? I don't think we have answers. The good news is that people are beginning to raise the questions, sanely and prudently. The bad news is that the answers are going to be complex -- there's no one simple solution."

Also looming are the difficult-to-navigate sensibilities that will come to play between those from what Pope John Paul II, for instance, termed the "rich North" and the "poor South."

"Think of the number of dioceses and parishes in the States that have sister parishes in Haiti. Thank God, but it poses some obvious questions," said Dolan. "Should they deal directly with those parishes [in terms of rebuilding]? Should they go through the USCCB [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops], or CRS [Catholic Relief Services], or somebody else? That has to be sorted out."

The U.S. church "can't be patronizing about it," he said. "We have to be sensitive to the local leaders, but the decisions have to be made."

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