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Haiti: Grace in the rubble

Gerry Straub | Sep. 24, 2010

In Port-au-Prince, women sell vegetables and goods in an open market located next to a mound of flea-infested, rotting garbage. (Photos by Gerard Thomas Straub)

FIRST PERSON

PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI -- After five full days of living in a slum here, I was ready to give up. Life was just too harsh. I didn?t think I could survive another day.

I am a documentary filmmaker and I?ve filmed in slums like this all over the world -- this was my fourth trip to Haiti in the last eight months -- but to live in one is another story, a horror story laced with rodents, roaches, ants and mosquitoes. Life without running water and electricity is exhausting. The stench of human waste and rotting garbage is inescapable. Violence and corruption are commonplace. The slum where I stayed for two full weeks is in an area known as Girardo-ville. Access to the heart of the slum is limited to one unpaved road that is almost impassable. The difficult physical journey out of the slum is symbolic of the even more difficult journey out of hopelessness in a city where death and disease linger everywhere in the toxic air.

During the night of my sixth day in the slum, I became very sick. I awoke in the middle of the night shivering from the cold even though the night air was still very warm. I was running a fever and was wet from perspiration. I could not stop coughing. I became anxious when I realized there was no way out of Girardo-ville at night, and I had no access to help. The thought occurred to me that when people get sick here, especially at night, they die. It is that simple. Residents of this slum have nowhere to go for help; even if they did, they have no money to pay for medical treatment. Curable illnesses, such as malaria and pneumonia, quickly turn into death sentences.

In this place of overwhelming need, I faced my own emptiness and limitations. I faced my own dark side, my own deep poverty and loneliness, my own weaknesses and doubts. At the same time, in this dysfunctional city where extreme chaos and suffering are the foundation of every day, I found beauty, grace and a new way to look at life. This slum became a place of personal transfiguration. Haiti can change a person.

From my perspective, the situation in Haiti seems to be getting worse. There are still a million homeless people in Port-au-Prince. Tents are everywhere. They line the streets, they fill the fields and are jammed into every

open space. After six months, many tents are becoming frayed from the intensity of the sun and the nightly rain storms. Infectious diseases are spreading like wildfire. Violence against women is rising steadily. People are bathing in the streets. The rubble from the collapsed buildings is everywhere.

Fr. Hagan

Nearly 20 years ago, a man walked into a lawless nightmare under the sun, a gentle, humble, funny man from Philadelphia. A former chaplain at Princeton University in New Jersey, he seemed ill-suited by temperament and training to be a beacon of hope in such a hopeless and violent place. His name is Fr. Tom Hagan. A member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, Hagan is the embodiment of the luminous force of intentional kindness and compassion.

Hagan lives, not for himself, but for the forgotten and anguished people of Cité Soleil, a massive slum located on the margins of Port-au-Prince. He does so at great risk to his own life. Hagan, with his dog, Julia, at his side, daily confronts the countless trials of slum life as he tries to comfort, encourage, educate, feed and care for the victims of oppression living in the shadow of death known as Cité Soleil. The first time we walked together through Cité Soleil, just weeks before the devastating earthquake in January, he turned to me and said, ?In this neighborhood just because you are with me doesn?t make it safe. Someone put a gun to my head here just a few weeks ago.? Daily life in Cité Soleil is dominated by duplicity, fear, ambition, jealousy, rivalry, rumor, false perceptions, and slander. A current of violence flows just beneath the surface of it all. Hagan has paid a huge price for trying to bring relief to desperate people of Cité Soleil. In his 16 years in the slum, more than 20 of his staff and volunteers have been murdered.

Half the newborn children in the slum will die before they reach the age of 5. At night, some kids are forced to stay up all night and beat the rats away with sticks. In Haiti, corruption and violence abound. The government is dysfunctional and out of money. Garbage is piled up in the streets and alleys. There is virtually no electrical power; people without a generator spend the night in the dark. Hunger and starvation are rampant. People live in unimaginable squalor and eat mud cakes made from clay, dirt, spices and sugar -- and contaminated sewage water. All of these shocking conditions existed before the earthquake. The grim, deadly and dangerous environment was made monstrously worse afterward.

Throughout his years in Haiti, Hagan has been vigilant in protecting his morning time of solitude with God. Before the earthquake he used to get up every morning at 4:15. He would head straight for the kitchen to make some coffee in a small percolator. Then he would take the pot and a cup to the little chapel on the second floor. The walls were decorated with folk-art paintings of saints and people who had been murdered in Cité Soleil while serving with him. This was the most important part of his day, he said, and he jealously guarded this time of stillness and silence. He placed the coffeepot and cup on a small table next to his large, wicker rocking chair. A candle burned next to the coffee. He read his Jerusalem Bible by the light of a lantern flame, as electricity was only an occasional visitor, dropping in and out without notice. He would read a passage and then meditate on the words.

He said he often asked, ?Lord, why am I here?? He told me there were days when he couldn?t stand Haiti. Actually, a lot of days. He admitted that working with the poor is hard. ?They are always pulling at me, always needing something. Some days it?s hard to get out, because so many are waiting outside the gate to ask me for something.? He said he would not survive without his early morning prayer time. ?Some days I tell God I can?t get through another day.? At night, he returned to the chapel before going to bed -- and thanked God for getting him through another day.

He still says Mass every morning at 6:30 in the nearby convent of the Mother Teresa?s Sisters of Charity. ?It?s like having a strong cup of coffee,? he said, which helps him get through the day. There would be many more tough days, as the earthquake destroyed his house, injuring Hagan and killing two seminarians.

Confidence in God

Cité Soleil, he said, has taught him there is no individual survival. ?But the culture says we should know what we are doing all the time, you should be in control -- self-sufficient. Well, that?s the advice of a fool.

?We are three-dimensional -- we need to love ourselves, others and God all at the same time, which creates a synergism of love. Without any of those three dimensions, we become less human, less alive. All the evils of the world, I think, have been caused by one-dimensional people, people just focused on themselves. The culture is forcing us to be one-dimensional people.?

I asked Hagan about Salesian spirituality. He said that according to St. Francis de Sales, everyone needed to have confidence in God. But if you don?t have confidence, tell God you don?t have confidence because it is really God?s problem. The priest added, almost with a chuckle, ?Sometimes I am ready to say to the Lord, ?I?m losing confidence in you, too -- where the heck have you been?? ? But Francis de Sales? point was more profound. Hagan said, ?You just know that the same loving God who took care of you yesterday will take care of you today and will take care of you tomorrow. So what you really have is what I call a positive arrogance. You wake up and know nothing will bother you. The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales is really about taking every moment as they come.?

In the aftermath of the earthquake, Hagan uses a tiny temporary office, just barely large enough to fit a desk for his computer, a chair and a few cabinets. On one wall hangs a crucifix that seems to contain the story of the earthquake in all its agony. The crucifix once hung in the bedroom of the

priest?s parents. It was fairly large, perhaps about 2 feet tall. After the death of his parents, Hagan has always had the crucifix with him, no matter his assignment. In Haiti, it hung in the chapel inside his home.

When the quake destroyed his home along with most of the schools and other facilities that he had built over the years, the crucifix was hidden in the rubble. When it was pulled out, the Christ figure was missing its arms and legs. All that remained were thin strands of metal that formed the figure?s extremities. In a country where so many people lost arms and legs, the figure was a disturbingly fitting symbol. For me, the wounded crucifix perfectly represented the tragedy that had befallen the nation of Haiti. And Christ was there, hidden in the suffering, hidden in the death.

Ray of light

In a world of shadows and despair, Hagan is a gentle ray of light and hope.

On this last trip to Haiti, I was delighted to see that he was in better spirits and seemed to have made great progress in his personal recovery from the nightmare of the earthquake.

He said, ?Coming out of a collapsing building, hearing the cries and screams of those still trapped, has changed the way I look at things. Life has become more simplified. I can?t think of all the things I?ve lost or I?d be sad about it. The earthquake has made me become more detached from things I thought were important. ... I trust in God?s love. God does not want to hear about my aches and pains.?

He lamented that so much of the relief effort has excluded the Haitian people in the planning. ?We are not going to make anyone?s life any better. We impose so much without asking actual Haitians what they need. But the longer I am here, the less I know. ... I feel strongly that we can do a great deal of harm with the best intentions when we begin to be the benefactor. Even with all this aid coming in, we must go slowly, and every step of the way we must include the Haitians in the decision-making.?

In the end, it seems, poverty is more than a lack of food and work. Poverty is a force that destroys the unity of the human family by dividing us into camps of those who have and those who don?t have. And between the rich and the poor, there is an impenetrable wall that separates us. That scandalous wall must come down. Hagan is knocking down a section of that wall in Cité Soleil, and in the process he is building up the body of Christ.

[Gerald Thomas Straub is a documentary filmmaker and author of The Sun & Moon Over Assisi (St. Anthony Messenger Press) and Thoughts of a Blind Beggar (Orbis Books). His latest book, Hidden in the Rubble: A Haitian Pilgrimage to Compassion and Resurrection, recently published by Orbis, is based on his experience in Haiti this year.]

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