NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

On earthquake anniversary, a papal full-court press for Haiti

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 12, 2011 NCR Today

On the one-year anniversary of an earthquake that left an estimated 300,000 people in overwhelmingly Catholic Haiti dead, with another 300,000 injured and more than one million homeless, Pope Benedict XVI is offering what amounts to a full-court press of financial, ecclesiastical and spiritual support.

One year to the day after the quake claimed the life of Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot of Port-au-Prince, the pope moved to fill the vacuum atop the Haitian hierarchy by naming a successor: 69-year-old Archbishop Guire Poulard, who spent most of his priestly career in pastoral assignments in Port-au-Prince before serving as the bishop of two smaller Haitian dioceses.

Speaking on background, church observers said Poulard is in some ways a bold choice. He was among the most outspoken Catholic critics of human rights abuses under former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, especially his second term from 2001 to 2004. At the time, the Haitian bishops? conference sometimes attempted to position itself as a mediator ? a choice that did not go down well with Poulard, then the bishop of Jacmel in southern Haiti.

?If the church had taken a strong position from the very beginning, this catastrophe would have been avoided,? Poulard said in a 2004 interview.
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Also today in Rome, the Vatican?s Secretary of State, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, celebrated a Mass at the Basilica of St. Mary Major commemorating the death of Miot and the other victims of the earthquake, in the presence of the Haitian ambassador to the Holy See and several high-ranking diplomats and Vatican officials.

tBertone used the occasion to deliver a call from Benedict XVI to the international community ?to promote and carry forward every useful initiative in order to contribute, in a shared and fraternal way, to the full rebirth? of the ?dear population? of Haiti.

tIn a message to the Haitian people, the pope said that material rebuilding should be matched by efforts to foster ?civil, social and religious coexistence,? and insisted that ?the Haitians themselves must be the main actors in their own present and future,? though with long-term international support.

Meanwhile in Haiti itself, Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah, recently appointed by Benedict XVI as President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council ?Cor Unum,? responsible for overseeing Catholic charitable efforts, is touring the country to offer support for relief efforts.

Among other expressions of that support, Sarah has presented $800,000 in the name of the pope for the reconstruction of Haitian schools and $400,000 for the reconstruction of churches. According to the Vatican, the funds come from offerings received to support earthquake relief.

On Monday, Sarah visited several religious communities in the city of Léogane, which operate hospitals and centers for youth and for senior citizens. Yesterday, Sarah and an aide met with Haitian President René Préval

and celebrated a Mass in the Parc Acra camp for displaced persons.

Today, Sarah celebrated another Mass commemorating the one-year anniversary of the earthquake, reading out a message from Benedict XVI to Haiti. Sarah also was to meet with bishops and seminarians, as well as officials of both Catholic and secular relief agencies.

Before returning to Rome tomorrow, Sarah is scheduled to celebrate a Mass in a convent of the ?Paridean? Daughters of Mary, a religious order that lost fifteen sisters in the quake, with another twelve gravely injured.

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The following is the text of Pope Benedict XVI's Message to Haiti, presented today by Cardinal Robert Sarah.

"In order to mark the first anniversary of the terrible earthquake which struck your country, I join you all, dear Haitians, to assure you of my prayers, particularly for the dead", the pope writes.

"I also wish to pronounce a word of hope in the current particularly difficult circumstances. The time has come to rebuild, not only material structures but, and above all, civil, social and religious coexistence. I hope that the Haitian people will become the main actors in their own present and future, also with the support of international aid which has already demonstrated great generosity with economic support and volunteers coming from all parts of the world.

"I am present among you through Cardinal Robert Sarah, president of the Pontifical Council 'Cor Unum'. With his presence and his voice, he brings you my encouragement and affection,. I entrust you to the intercession of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, patroness of Haiti who, I am sure, in heaven, is not indifferent to your prayers. May God bless all Haitians!"

Source URL (retrieved on *08/01/2014 - 21:11*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/earthquake-anniversary-papal-full-court-press-haiti