

Homily at Mass for the Victims of the Haitian Earthquake

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Gospel: Mk. 4:35-41

The Storm on the Sea

Thank you everyone for being here tonight to pray in solidarity with the people of Haiti.

I would first like to explain why it is I who am giving this homily about our Haitian brothers and sisters in distress. Since the early '80s, with exceptions here and there for dictatorships, embargos, and political unrest, groups of Boston College students have been traveling to Haiti during spring and summer to serve there, or, more accurately, to receive the gift of knowing the Haitian people, and I have accompanied our students. They have worked in Port-au-Prince and in the countryside; at a hospital, a home for the dying, an orphanage, and a home for starving children.

You are probably very familiar with the statistics one often sees about the mountainous little country of Haiti. The basic facts were well-known, even before the earthquake: "Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere; 7 million of its 9 million people live on less than 2 dollars a day. Haiti, where unemployment is 70% to 80%; where half of the population are children and the average life expectancy is 44 yrs. of age; Haiti, ranking 149th out of 189 countries on the UN Human Development list.

You are also familiar with the unimaginable statistics of damage from the recent earthquake: 150,000 or more dead; most of the schools, government buildings, churches, hospitals, homes destroyed in and around Port au Prince and other large towns.

But there is little point in rehearsing such sad truths and letting them paralyze us. I would like to talk about the people of Haiti, about their character, their strength, their hope, and their faith in the midst of these immense and unrelenting hardships.

To do so, I will seek the powerful support of our own Boston College students, who have been to Haiti over the decades. Each year, our students keep a journal of their trip. Each one records for all the others what is happening interiorly to them while in Haiti. These many students tell us who

the Haitian people are and what a profound gift our students receive every time they go to that suffering but beautiful land.

"I keep trying to find the words [writes Meghan] to tie down all that I've been seeing and all that I've been thinking. I keep hoping that somehow the word beautiful, or meaningful, will open up and expand to encompass all that I see in the Haitian people and experience...I think that sometimes when you are overwhelmed by something, when it's so intense that you can't make out its contours, during that moment you should try to see one speck of what makes it all glow. Today my speck is a little girl with an egg" [That 17 year-old girl, to whom she is referring, out of the girl's poverty, had given Megan an egg, which was one of the very few things the girl possessed.]

"What can I say about this place that can do it justice? [records Rich]All of you [the other students] have seen and felt the spirit of these people and must know that it is impossible to convey its power in words. I am left asking myself, "Where is this spirit in the States?" Is this a spirit that can only be born from abject poverty? Is it possible for us in our pampered lives back home to maintain a similar spirit? I hope so. These people will certainly serve as a reminder to me in my effort. There have been so many gestures of pure kindness--the donated egg, the shared coconuts...It is humbling to know that there is so much beauty around you, you can't even describe it fully...I pray that God will allow me to see and interact with the world in the same spirit as these people."

"I feel that I need to be sitting down when I talk about that country. [says Kat] I don't comprehend most of what occurred during the trip. I do know that there is a reason I went to such a beautiful yet desperate place. I hate to think of all the pain and agony we saw. To ignore it, would be to forget why I even went in the first place. That little piece of an island means so much to me because of what it gave me."

"Isn't it strange [writes Stephanie] how we could form such tight bonds with people...and that villagers were so willing to let us into their tiny homes even though we were complete strangers, but [at home in the States] we can walk by each other everyday and never say a word, even though we speak the same language!?"

[Patrick] " I hope the images of Haiti stay imprinted in my mind for the rest of my life."

The mystery of the Haiti, its beauty and its suffering, is compounded by its present tragedy. What are we to make of it in the eyes of faith, as we pray here tonight?

"I went to this country[reports Mary] and was healed and broken at the same time...It caused a hurt in me so deep I still can't find the tears to express it all...Haiti was the vehicle through which I learned about God and in turn about myself. While I am no longer present in that country, it is present in me. Each hand I touched, person I blessed, baby I held, smile I made and eyes I met, lives in me... in the form of a fire in my heart."

Were you asleep, Lord? "Do you not care that we are perishing?" Should we lose our faith, we may ask?

The Haitian people have a deep and long acquaintance with grief. Their answer is no.

"I think the memory I will keep as the essence of this trip [says Mary] was praying with the group at Don Bosco Church [a church near the slums which was burned down and whose members had been attacked and murdered with machetes by one of the dictators during Mass. It stood in ruins now as we prayed the rosary with Haitian women amid the rubble]. I remember feeling at that moment how deeply we were connected with the prayer group, through both our faith in a living, merciful God and in a shared hope for Haiti. I knew then that I would always be connected to the Haitian people."

"This whole trip has made me step back from everything [writes Steph] and think about how life works. Isn't it also strange how we Americans or BC students are so wealthy, but not necessarily happy or spiritually fulfilled, yet so many people crowded onto this tiny island of Haiti can have so little money, yet have so much fulfillment spiritually, mentally and have such strong community ties? I am just overwhelmed by it all...the generosity of the poor..."

If suffering could separate Haitians from the love of Christ, they would have lost their faith a long time ago in the centuries of slavery, injustice, and painful poverty, that runs right up to today. This month, Port au Prince has been destroyed; but even in its rubble--even in the shards of its cathedral where its archbishop was crushed, the people stand at Mass today and sing about a different kind of destruction. With amazing faith, they proclaim to Christ, as we do tonight:

"Dying, you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory."

[David writes]"I am excited for Mass with the people of Haiti. There is so much life."

If the people in their aching loss have the strength to proclaim the death and resurrection of Christ, are they not also giving us the gift of doing so? Their courage empowers us, just when we were thinking it is our strength that supports them. As we proclaim with them the same words of faith tonight, let us feel the bond we have with the Haitian people who suffer with Christ. If need be, let us lean on their faith.

St. Paul says that the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives.

"How are you?" [Matt recalls asking a dying man in one of Mother Theresa's homes]. "I am suffering with Christ," the man replied.

Yes, the Haitian people are suffering with Christ. And yet, they look to a resurrection for those countless mothers, fathers, and children, who are lost. And they look for the resurrection of the Haiti that still gasps for life after the storm.

"I wish that I was incredibly articulate or poetic [says Kathy]and I could adequately describe what I saw and what I felt in Haiti. A rush of images and feelings come to my mind and heart each time that I think of our trip. Haiti was pain and joy, death and resurrection, heaven and hell--all intricately twisted together in this astounding place...The Haitian people blew my mind with their spirit and their passion and their faith. I don't wish to romanticize this. I can't forget that people bathe in the sewers and stay up at night to keep rats out [of their shanties in the slum of Cité Soleil]...I wanted to remain [in Haiti]. I have never felt so alive and right in my whole life."

So, let us be the Body of Christ to these brothers and sisters of ours. Let us be Christ, who does not fail to help in the storm. St. Paul says: "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."

"I was part of an experience [recalls Pat]that was greater than my very own breath. While I was there I was almost in a constant daze. My eyes struggling to comprehend a reality that clashed with my core understanding of life... I could not begin to process Haiti...I looked into someone's eyes or laid my hands on another human being. In such acts, I could see the spirit that runs through us all. Despite the poverty and disease, I saw that spirit smiling back at me and holding my hand...They communicated their beauty

with us in many forms and seemed to know the exact way to empower our hearts and souls. They understood what it meant to be human. They understood the power of compassion and how we fit into the grand puzzle...Not a day goes by that I do not see a lesson that Haiti gave to me...It is there that I can see hope and a sense of spirit."

We cannot explain the mystery of suffering, but we do know that one of its effects is the growth and flowering of human compassion. We see that truth demonstrated now in the wonderful outpouring of support from all across the world. Haiti, among the most forgotten of places, creates in its tragedy a community of compassion. May we all be part of it and make it permanent, never letting our brothers and sisters slide back into the misery of the past. Let us pray with them the well-known Haitian prayer: "O lesprit san desann sou nou; nou gen yon misyon pou Haiti." "O Holy Spirit, descend upon us; we have a mission for Haiti."

Amen.