

Homily (Third Sunday Ordinary Time)

Second Sunday after the Earthquake

My dear brothers and sisters

I usually don't type out my homily, but today I knew that I needed to proceed differently. I am a little afraid that I will come to a point where my emotions take over and I won't be able to continue. I hope that in this case a written text and a good measure of self discipline should help me to continue. Keep me in your prayers.

As you know God called me many years ago to become a priest. I was and I still am very happy and grateful for this most beautiful vocation I have received. Part of my story as a priest now is the experience of being sent with Brother Santos to go and help our poorest and most suffering brothers and sisters in Port au Prince / Haiti.

Just a couple of minutes after the quake, I received a phone call from Lucrezia, an Italian lay missionary and a spiritual daughter of mine, who was sent to Haiti last year to help at the orphanage of our Little brothers and sisters. After the call, as hours ran by, more and more information became available through the Internet about the devastation that the earthquake had left behind.

After discerning with Fr. Juan Jose, my local superior and then with Fr. Jose Ortega, my provincial superior, we understood that God wanted us to give an immediate answer. In the

name of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit and of our St. Matthew's Parish here in Hillsboro, Br Santos and Myself were sent to help. We took the first flight we could get and arrived the next day at Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic. We stayed overnight waiting for a team of Italian Doctors who were coming in later that evening. The next morning at 4.00 am with a totally overloaded shuttle bus we headed out to Port au Prince to the Children Hospital of St. Damien. Along the way we emptied our wallets and a big pharmacy getting all the medical supplies we understood were needed. After a 7 hour drive we finally arrived at our destiny. As we were coming in from the mountains we did not see too much of the destruction that had leveled the historical center, Petionville, Cite Soleil, Wharf Jeremy, Del Mar and other parts of the capital. But once we were at the hospital we saw the effects of the earthquake in the excruciating suffering and pain of the people. Our hospital usually can take in about 140 children. By the time we arrived, there must have been close to a thousand. Most of them were severely injured and yet waiting patiently for their turn. Fife minutes later our doctors were already in surgery. They would spend up to 20 hours there on each of the following days. At the hospital the hallways, the inner courts, the entrance parlor, wherever you looked ... the floors were crowded with children, women and men, old and young, most of them very poor, all with terrible injuries waiting for someone to help, to assist, to heal, to comfort. The immediate needs were so overwhelming that we didn't even know where to start. The Shuttle Bus was emptied and an emergency pharmacy was set up. On my way into the hospital I stoped shortly in the partially destroyed chapel. Our Lord himself had lost his house, the tabernacle had broken out of the wall and the most Blessed Sacrament was under rubble. I dug him out and brought him with us into our improvised pharmacy.

Fortunately the little glass monstrance was not broken and so Fr. Rick Frechette, the passionist priest-doctor who runs the hospital, and I decided to keep Our Lord in the Emergency Pharmacy at the entrance of the hospital. Everybody who came in was able to see him and to pray a little. People were not able to go the Adoration Chapel, so the Chapel came to them. The sisters of Mother Theresa who came from the Dominican Republic constantly invited the people who were coming in or who were lying on the floor of the entrance parlor to look towards our Lord and pray for strength, patience and consolation.

We were lacking a lot of specialized staff, many of the regular personal of the hospital had lost their lives, so everyone had to help out wherever there was a need. Norma, a nice Hispanic young lady who had come a few months earlier to work as a physiotherapist was assigned to radiology, Josh a marine from the East Coast became an assistant to prepare those who were getting ready for surgery. Lucrezia, the Italian volunteer who came to Haiti to work with the orphans, became the psychologist and spiritual guide to take care of the ones who came out of amputations or who were transferred to the hospice room. Br Santos took over the food distribution to the patients and our staff, he assisted the doctors and took care of constantly cleaning the blood covered hallways. I myself worked the following days as an emergency pharmacist, ... something I had to learn in 5 minutes. I never was so grateful for the many languages I understand which helped me to find the right medication that came in from all over the world.

As I was sitting in our pharmacy - chapel I frequently turned around to look at to Our Lord and asked for help, strength and wisdom to do the right things.

Today our first reading from the book of Nehemiah(8:10) ends with these words... *Do not be saddened this day, for rejoicing in the Lord must be your strength.* These words became a reality for me, as I was called to serve, not just as an overwhelmed pharmacist, but even more as a priest.

I told you at the beginning that I am very happy to be called to be a priest. And I have to confess that this time I came very close to the limits of my physical and psychological strength. I felt that it was only my faith and the love that God had put into my heart that made me go forward. Every time - and there were many - when doctors, nurses or volunteers noticed that there was nothing else they could do to save a life, they would call the priest. I was grateful that I had the beautiful gift of prayer and that it was my job to get my brothers and sisters who were dying ready for heaven by forgiving their sins and strengthening them in their sufferings.

I know that we don't call the Anointing of the Sick "Last Rites" anymore, but for many of our patients that's what they became. A few persons received an emergency baptism. I prayed for hundreds of them by laying on the hands and I knew that my own poor prayers were weak, but they received an incredible strength through the many prayers you all here back home have sent us there. I am convinced that I would have not been able to face this huge amount of pain and suffering without the spiritual help I received myself.

The second reading today from the first Letter to the Corinthians (12,26) says that when *on part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it.* I was there next to them suffering with them and knowing that I only was able to be of comfort to our patients and own staff through the powerful support of your love and prayers. We all suffered, but we were able to sustain each other by sharing the love we have received. Thank you all for that.

In today's gospel of Luke it says in the fourth chapter: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor.*

Well, I guess that those of us who had the privilege to go and serve our Haitian Sisters and brothers became a living form of good news to them who were so terribly suffering.

The image that comes to my mind is that of a sponge. As a priest I am called to touch the infected wounds of my people and wash them clean by taking away what hurts and destroys.

We literally touched their wounds and tried to heal their sores and God was with us as we descended into the darkness.

I asked myself how much darker can darkness be than that of the indescribable suffering we witnessed. I understand that we are called to be light to those who are in darkness and who are struck by great suffering. So often I was asked by our faithful staff: Why Father? Why did God permit this? Why all this suffering? Why are we so painfully limited in helping? And I have to confess that I don't have an answer to that. These people were not more sinful than anyone else of us. But I know now that we all were called to become the answer. Here we are Lord we came to do your will.

I am grateful that God made me his instrument to support the Haitian people and the volunteers and the staff of the hospital, by sharing and offering everything through Christ to our Heavenly Father.

In all this darkness there were nevertheless many signs of hope and light. A team of British reporters interviewed Marie Doval an eleven year old girl who had lost her right leg. They asked her if she was sad that she had lost her leg, but she smiled and said NO, she was grateful that

she was alive. They were deeply moved by her answer and asked her what she expected of life and she answered that she wanted to become a doctor so she could help other people.

The second day after we arrived, two babies were born. Twins, ... life continues!

As I was heading out of the hospital to come back to the US a lady stopped me on the hallway.

She said that she wanted to thank me, because I had prayed for her the day she came in. She was in very severe conditions, but now she was fine and about to be dismissed from the hospital. She could go home, wherever this might be.

There is a song we all know that goes:

The Lord hears the cry of the poor, and I can say finally we all have heard this cry.

May our good God bless us all with his peace and strength.