

A parish rich in spirit helps struggling Haiti

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The padre sat hunched at his desk on a recent afternoon. He was making notes. He was planning a trip. He's off to Haiti on Thursday.

Fr. Hernan Astudillo is the pastor of the Anglican parish of San Lorenzo, on Dufferin just south of Lawrence. You remember the padre.

For the past 10 years he has led a caravan of school buses and ambulances to El Salvador and other Latin American countries.

He buys the buses second-hand from the school board, and the ambulances, also second-hand, from the city. He fills these with food, tools and supplies. On arrival, he distributes the supplies to the poor and leaves the vehicles behind. He does this using money raised by his parish, a small one, perhaps 350 families, most of them Latino; they are not rich in anything but spirit.

He said, "When the earthquake in Haiti happened, I was listening to the CBC. Then I went on our radio."

The parish has a community radio station; they raised the money and built it a couple of years ago. The padre said, "On the radio, I asked the parish community to share with one of the poorest countries in the world. We have a donation box. I opened the doors of the church. At mass on Sunday, I read the beatitudes."

Even I know those:

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

"I said we need to pray, but a faith without acts is a dead faith; sharing with others is a way to enrich our human dignity. The people know what I'm saying."

They ought to know by now.

In the past 10 years they have raised roughly \$3 million worth of aid money for El Salvador and other countries. How do they raise so much money?

"We have parties. The people bring onions, potatoes, tomatoes, flour, cheese; some bring a leg of pig, or rice. All of those ingredients we convert into food."

Pupusas aplenty.

"Last year, after the floods in El Salvador, we raised \$9,000. Two years ago, when there was an earthquake in Peru, on the coast, we raised \$40,000."

And so on.

For Haiti, they raised \$30,500.

How will he distribute the money when he gets there? "I did some research. There is a priest in a small town. He has been there 20 years. He has an orphanage. He has a bakery preparing bread for 2,500 people. He also has a community radio station. And he has a credit union where 2,000 people put their money."

The padre smiled. "We don't have a credit union yet."

He prefers to give aid money directly, rather than make donations to any of the political, or non-governmental organizations; it is a way of making a link between the poor in other countries and the people in his parish.

He said, by way of illustration, "In El Salvador, there is a village called San Lorenzo de Toronto."

The best way to evaluate any aid group, even one as small as this parish, is by how much money they spend on overhead. What will it cost for the padre to travel to Haiti? Nada.

"A woman from the Dominican Republic, she works at a travel agency. She said she would find a ticket for me. She said that would be her donation."

Okay, but who will say Sunday mass at the Church of San Lorenzo while the padre is away? "There is a priest in Beaverton and there are 200 Mexican workers in his parish. Some time ago, I wrote a small liturgy for him in Spanish and I helped him to pronounce the words. Now, when I go away, he comes here."

They shall be comforted.