

Rich where it counts, parish digs deep for quake victims

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The padre is home from Haiti and his eyes are red-rimmed from fatigue, or maybe they are sore from what he saw.

The padre, Father Hernan Astudillo, is the pastor of the Church of San Lorenzo, off Dufferin south of Lawrence. The people of his small parish are predominantly Latino. They are not wealthy in anything but spirit. Over the past few years, they have built a community centre and a radio station, and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in aid for El Salvador and other Latin American countries.

When the earthquake struck Haiti, they quickly raised another \$30,500 in donations and from the sale of pupusas and empanadas. The padre went to Haiti to deliver the money to a priest whose parish was hit particularly hard.

"I went straight from the airport to the house of Father Joseph in Fondwa. He welcomed me and asked what I wanted to drink – coffee, water or cerveza. I said cerveza. He took a bottle from a box. It was covered with dust. He said they had no fridge. He wiped the bottle clean. It was hot beer."

He was laughing as he said this.

"In a disaster, the gentle priest was keeping up his spirits. He introduced me to Father William, a priest in his 80s, very tiny, like a puff of wind would blow him down. I don't speak Creole, but Father William spoke Spanish."

Father Hernan made a phone call to the community radio station back home; within minutes, Father William was speaking to listeners in Toronto.

And then Father Hernan had a close look at the damage to the island. "The people are sleeping in parks, they are fighting for minimal things, the children are walking and crying, there are dogs and pigs running loose, everything is a mess.

"Some people have tents; those who have no tents make a house of plastic sheets; those who have no plastic make a house of bed sheets; they are painting on the sheets the word 'mansion.'"

He delivered the money raised in his parish by way of a bank in New York. It will be used to clean up the rubble and rebuild, and it will provide work for 150 people.

Father Hernan said, "They asked if they could give me a gift. I said I wanted to say a prayer where the people were buried. They showed me one place, a flat piece of land at the foot of some mountains, by the sea, not far from Port-au-Prince, perhaps one hectare of land; 70,000 people are buried there.

"When it grew dark a truck arrived, and also a backhoe. They started digging, and the truck backed up. I have an image of the faces, the arms and legs of 25 or 30 people, their bodies sliding from the truck into the hole. A man asked if I would give a blessing to the dead.

"The driver told me these were not people who died in the quake, they were people who survived, but who died afterwards."

It is as bad as you have seen on TV, and worse than you can imagine. And then he said, "A good thing: the people have hope. You see it in their faces, their movements, their music."

He came home exhausted.

And then there was the earthquake in Chile, and yet another reason to raise money. Father Hernan said, "Again I have asked the people for flour, for onions, for rice, for a leg of pig; we are having a barbecue, and making empanadas Chilenas and *frijoles con rienda*." You can buy them Saturday from 4 p.m. onward, and on Sunday, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., at the Church of San Lorenzo, 2981 Dufferin Ave.