

Haitian priest thanks Toronto parish for quake donations

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Fr. Joseph Philippe was in town the other day. He is a village priest from Fondwa, in the Haitian countryside. A village priest? He is also an organizer, a businessman, a worker, a leader, a planter of trees, a teacher, and a community developer. He has, over the past 22 years, built a clinic in Fondwa, and an orphanage, a bakery, a radio station, a community centre, a school for 700 children, and a university specializing in agronomy, business management and veterinary medicine.

And then the earthquake hit.

Much of Fondwa, including these institutions, was destroyed or seriously damaged. The orphans now sleep under tarps. Classes take place outdoors. Fr. Philippe came here to say thanks. Thanks?

The people of the parish of San Lorenzo, on Dufferin south of Lawrence, raised \$30,500 and sent it to Fondwa, to help rebuild what was destroyed. The poor, helping the poor.

In the office of the parish of San Lorenzo, I asked Fr. Philippe how it felt to have his feet on solid ground. He wasn't sure what I meant. He speaks English, French and Creole but he does not banter easily.

He chose, instead, to give me an education. "You know Haiti is the poorest country. We have 570 villages. Half the people are under the age of 20. Most of them abandon the country to go to the city, and . . ." I stopped him there.

I asked where he was when the earthquake struck. He said he was in Port-au-Prince, where much of his work these days involves persuading young people, at loose ends in the city, to return to the countryside. He went back to Fondwa the day after the quake. It was a difficult journey; at every step of the way, he saw devastation.

"I was in pain when I heard the cries of others. One man said it took him 10 years to build his house, and now it was gone. I talked to men who lost their children, and to women who lost their husbands or their best friends. In Fondwa I found my people lying on the ground, no tents — it took a month for international aid to reach us."

His reaction to the damage? "We are better off than when we started." I asked him what he could possibly mean. He said, "Twenty-two years ago, we had no organization. Now, we do, and we have a network of friends, and the experience of knowing what to do." Keep a happy thought?

"It's still a headache."

How is he using the money that was sent from San Lorenzo? "We have a program called 'Cash for Jobs'. We hire 150 people a week to clear the rubble; we give them a meal. We bought sledgehammers and shovels. We also bought 5,000 lbs. of seed — red beans, black beans — because now we are in the planting season. This is therapy. It gives us confidence.

"Our school is open again, under tarps. The university is open, under tarps. Now we are looking for six teachers — two veterinary teachers, two business teachers, two agronomists who specialize in environmental sciences and agribusiness. "And we need a university administrator, perhaps a retired college president; do you know anyone?"

Do you?

"For us this is the Big Bang. It is also the creation of a new world, the basis of which is love, compassion, solidarity, forgiveness, respect for human dignity . . . these are values you cannot buy in the supermarket."

Speaking of markets, I have since learned that the parish needs 10 empty sea containers to send aid; contact Fr. Hernan Astudillo at 416-782-2953 for more information. Or email Fr. Philippe at APF222@aol.com if you wish to learn more about how to help.