



DESTRUCTION—MOURNING—REBUILDING—NEW HOPE

Journeying within the Haitian Culture

A Reflection by Thomas Faiola, O.F.M. Cap

The day that the earthquake destroyed Port-au-Prince, Haiti in January our Haitian Capuchin brother, Armand Blanc, happened to be staying at our friary of Our Lady of Sorrows in Manhattan while visiting family in Brooklyn. Although he did not ask for anything in the aftermath of the earthquake, his presence motivated our parishioners to take a collection for the work of our Capuchin friars in Haiti. At the weekend Masses the parishioners raised \$5,000. We sent the money to Haiti with Armand. As a result, he has kept in touch with us, sometimes sending photos of the work being done by the friars.

As a result of our continued contact we decided that we would use the money we usually collect during Lent on the quarter-a-day Lenten prayer card to further assist the work of the friars. When I communicated with Armand about the money we raised he invited me to come to Haiti to see firsthand the situation of Haiti and the friars. Through the not-quite-miracle of frequent flier miles I then made arrangements to fly to Haiti at the end of June. The following narrative highlights some of the experience of the trip.

I arrived in Haiti on Tuesday morning. Frere Armand and Cardelin picked me up at the airport and we immediately began the journey to Beraud. We passed through the streets of Port-au-Prince, at least the ones that were not so filled with building debris, garbage, or the new tent homes of hundreds of thousands of people that a car could not pass.

The trip to the relatively new, three year old community of friars at Beraud took about 5 hours that day. There were constant slow-downs because of markets that spilled onto the highway at each town large enough to have one. Traffic accommodated the baskets of mangoes and plantains, the chickens and pigs, the people who forgot that they were standing at the edge of the road and absentmindedly just walked out into traffic. The only noticeable difference between this trip and innumerable similar runs from the airport in Central America over the years was that there were almost no signs of any commercial activity beyond the markets – no Coca Cola billboards, no hardware stores or glass-doored markets – nothing to indicate that a world of commercialism and consumerism exists except for the 'Digicell' signs for cell phones plans.

The fraternity of Sainte Francois d'Assise in Beraud consists of five friars, two from France, two Haitians, and one Brazilian friar. They care for the parish and are also constantly busy with the construction projects of their own compound. The two-story house the friars have built for themselves is within a cinderblock-walled compound about the size of a football field. The house is most impressive because it has large windows, something none of the local houses have and because it is large and newly painted. But it is still relentlessly hot, unshaded and fills with mosquitoes as soon as the sun goes down in spite of the screens.

Most of the small Haitian houses have only openings in the walls or wooden shutters. Glass windows tend to appear only when a family has someone living in the United States, Canada, or perhaps France who is sending money home. The friars are also building a smaller building within the compound for Haitian postulants who will join them early next year.

The friars are very much involved in the construction projects, beginning work early in the morning and continuing until the sun sets at about 7:00 p.m. They also attend to the many people, adults and children who stop by each day. Many are looking for material assistance to help build or rebuild houses. Many times, walking along the roads a person would begin a conversation with me. After explaining in bad French that I don't speak Creole, they would continue to talk. Quite often they would ask for money or, in the case of a child, a toy or candy. I never made any exchange of dollars for *Gourdes* so never carried any money, a perplexing disappointment to my new friends on the road.

On Thursday, Frere Armand and I went to the other Capuchin community at Abacou. The trip took an hour and a half, first on highway, then on dirt road, and then on a path along the Caribbean. Maybe a good developer could convince the world that this is a tropical paradise and build an all-inclusive resort so the hunger and misery would be invisible.

Abacou is a small settlement on the sea with about ten houses. There is a chapel built before Abacou became a parish. Since the friars moved there a short while ago they have been constructing a house for themselves and are planning to build a church. The friars are incredibly young. Two Brazilians whom I met two years ago when they were still in initial formation in Canoas, outside of Porto Alegre, Brazil, one Dominican friar who is not yet in final vows, and a newly ordained Haitian friar. Compounding their isolation is the fact that they do not have a four-wheeled vehicle to drive to the nearest city with stores, a doctor or other facilities.

Like the friars in Beraud, their house is large and somewhat majestic looking. Set back from the Caribbean and blocked by the terrain and the trees, the house gets almost none of the breezes that make the houses closer to the water more tolerable, even if they are flooded by storm tides fairly regularly. Here, the pace of life seems slower than that of Beraud.

After lunch we walked down to the settlement. About 15 people were sitting in the shade of a few almond trees, talking and some men playing a game of dominoes. We talked with them for a while and one of the young Haitian women showed me how to eat the green, fibrous husk around the almond nut. It was hard to decide whether it was more bitter or sweet but I knew it wouldn't be part of my diet in the future.

On Saturday, Frere Lori, the energetically enthusiastic Brazilian pastor of the parish at Beraud, invited me to go with him to the funeral of a 23 year old man who died in a car accident in Port-au-Prince and was being buried in the family tomb in Beraud. The custom in this part of Haiti is to build a tomb in the front yard of the family home where family members can be interred.

The site of the service, which turned out not to be a Mass, was an outdoor chapel with palm fronds to partially block the afternoon sun. I learned when we arrived at the funeral site that there were actually 22 people who died in the accident. Robinson, the young man, was the oldest of nine children. He had moved to Port-au-Prince to work so he could send some money home to his mother and siblings.



Top: typical home of a resident of Beraud; a new home in mid-construction; friars constructing new housing for Capuchin postulants; new friary built by the friars



Top: children in the neighborhood of the friars; Frere Andres and Armand; market day on the highway; a typical street in Port-au-Prince

When Frere Lori and I got to the place of the funeral his mother and some of the other close female relatives were sitting on chairs in front of her house. She was barefoot and disheveled, sitting, rocking in rhythm to her loud moans and occasional wailing. Some of the other women followed her example while others took on roles of hospitality, leading music, showing other people where to sit. Many of the men and children stood in back, looking as though they didn't know how far they could safely enter into the pre-service rituals.

The funeral car with a broken front windshield drove up and four men took the coffin out of the car and put it on the carpet that had been laid on the ground to give more solemnity to the moment. The minute they removed the coffin a great shriek came from where Robinson's mother was seated. A woman tried to comfort her but she very violently pushed the woman onto the ground.

Frere Lori began the funeral rite with mourning songs, an opening prayer, the Gospel and a brief sermon. At that point a huge commotion began at the front of the yard. Robinson's mother began to thrash and scream, violently throwing herself on the ground, slamming her limbs and her head, seemingly out of control of her body. At this point five mourners rushed over to restrain her. They had to lift her into the air prone, face down, arms pinned behind her back so that she could not punch or kick them. For all the overwhelming emotion of the moment, it was clear that there was choreography to the whole process.

As soon as she was restrained two other women went to the ground in the same way, only without the conviction of a mother who doesn't know where her life-giving force has gone and which God to blame, the Christian God or Bondye, the vodou god. While the women were being restrained, the Catholic and Protestant choir members continued to sing hymns to finish the service. At this point I thought we were finished but Frere Lori informed me that we would accompany the community to the tomb to pray the final part of the funeral ritual.

We walked, just behind the five people who were restraining Robinson's mother and just in front of the brass band playing 'Auld Lang Syne', the hearse and the rest of the mourners. We walked about a half mile when we reached a river. It was shallow enough to wade across but that meant that everyone had to get wet. People started taking off their shoes and rolling up their dresses or the pants of their homemade suits. Judging that the only way to keep my pants dry was to take them off I decided to walk across as I was with my synthetic walking shoes on. The smiles and raised eyebrows indicated that I had committed some sort of faux pas but given the context I was comfortable with a social gaffe.

Across the river and up a rise we came to the family tomb. Frere Lori spoke in a passionate manner while the cement plate that was the door of the tomb was removed and the coffin placed to be slid on top of the coffins that were already in the monument. Once again Madam, the only term of address I learned for Robinson's mother flew to the ground and had to be restrained. With the prayers over, we all left to cross the river again and go home.

Maybe Madam *is* Haiti, a mother who has witnessed the cancelation of the life she was instrumental in creating, a mother who still wants to have some power but can seem only to smash herself on the ground with the result of broken bones rather than new life. It was all there, the cultures, the syncretism of religions, the poverty, the attempts to help, and the feeling that death is very powerful in a world of lives truncated by misery and disasters, both natural and human-made.

In the midst of this reality that is the situation in Haiti and much of the world there, is always the need for a Franciscan response; that is, the love that comes from a spirituality of minority, of being a lesser brother and sister to people who suffer. As anyone reading the newspapers and watching the news knows, even the attempts to provide aid for survival and reconstruction often seem to be obstructed by the lack of resources, structures, and moral integrity. I try to think how Saint Francis would live through a situation like the earthquake in Haiti. How tangible would the love of God be if we could respond with the simplicity and sagacity of a Francis to the unimaginable?