

Haiti: Dispatch from the disaster zone

By the Rev. Jean Ronald Joseph
Special to *The Islander*

On Jan. 12, at around 4:45 in the afternoon, as I was getting ready to cook, with matches in my hands to start the range, a huge black cloud came toward me.

I heard some of the dishes and glasses rattle. All of our cabinets started shaking, the hot grease from the pan splashed all over my T-shirt.

I felt like the house — the House of Presence — was in the middle of the ocean with the huge waves lifting the house from one room to the next. I ran through the chapel, where the tabernacle was already on the ground, the chairs and all were tossed. It was chaotic. I heard more glasses breaking. I ran outside and saw the house was wavering.

We lost half of our surrounding wall. The house next door was flattened to the ground. The main road was filled with people praising God.

I realized something huge had just happened. I was told it was an earthquake. It would be defined as a magnitude 7.0 quake.

We all left the compound for fear of the house falling. I met a woman outside the wall, who told me her son was under the concrete and, sure enough, he was dead.

It was a nightmare. Everyone was on the streets. We eventually were told to stay away from concrete buildings. We stayed up all night wondering.

The next morning, news came to us that the downtown area of Port-au-Prince, about 15 minutes drive from the House of Presence, had been destroyed. The cathedral, the white house, were no more.

The entire team from the House of Presence and Sabon Enterprise — Junior, Stephanie, Ricardo, Charlemagne, my brother Pierre (who only flew to Haiti the day before the earthquake) and myself — began to mobilize some aid.

We went to the Peace Hospital in Delmas with a 50-quart pot of soup ready to serve. We gathered whatever we could find, white sheets, donated by Key Cleaners months ago, soap, toothbrush, toothpaste and more for the hospital.

Driving through Haiti, especially



The children of Our Lady of the Apostles orphanage in Leogane, located two hours from Port-au-Prince between the city and the earthquake epicenter, now live under makeshift tents of pink plastic tablecloths and sheets in a field adjacent to the collapsed buildings. Islander Photos: Ron Joseph

Delmas, was like driving to a war zone. Many multi-story buildings flattened to the ground. Debris everywhere. All I could feel was tears, and sadness covered me.

Since that day I have not had a minute of rest, between volunteering as the bad news bearer in the hospital, to just feeding or offering water to injured people.

I have been witness to so many communal graveside services, so many dead bodies all over the city. I have no choice but to question why now? Why Haiti?

I need answers, and I am sure I will have to think and pray harder.

I met a woman named Nadine, one of the staff members at the hospital, who was trapped under her concrete house for more than 26 hours. She lost her son, only 2-years-old and not strong enough to resist. While she was talking to me about being grateful to be alive, I learned she also lost her husband and her mother, who lived with her.

Thank God she had a strong faith, but I am not too sure for how long, because soon the doctor told me to let her know she would lose both legs.

The next day, Jan. 14, I was supposed to fly back to the United States.

But I had finally heard news of the children at the orphanage in Leogane, Our Lady Queen of the Apostles — about two hours south and east of Port-au-Prince. I did not lose a minute to join them. A short trip of about an hour on an ordinary day was the longest on this day — four hours.

When I arrived to the orphanage, I could not believe my eyes. The four-story building, which housed the girls, was flattened.

Thank God, it was prayer time at 4:30 p.m. and most of the children were outside praying when the earthquake hit. Unfortunately, we lost two girls at the orphanage and two others at school. Only two bodies were found.

The 90 children remaining are now sleeping under plastic tablecloths, praying that it does not rain.

I am so grateful for packing so many things — including the garish pink tablecloths — from the House of Presence for the trip.

Still, I felt hopeless and desperate. Do I need help? I am sure I need lots of help to help the children of Haiti.

The house needs work. The structure is safe, but cracks in the walls will need repairs.

The children's need should be the

top priority right now, and I am so afraid a good rain will wash away what little was salvaged.

As I write this I am in the Dominican Republic trying to make it to the United States to collect medicine and supplies and gather my strength.

The children at the Leogane orphanage were just hanging by a thread. They hope I will return to feed them.

Help if you can, with money to ship supplies, or supplies for the orphanage.

We will fill a truck with your help and ship the truck and its contents as soon as it is filled.

And know that I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Haiti needs:

Haiti needs everything, but *The Islander* newspaper is helping the Rev. Ron Joseph and the Ministry of Presence meet the immediate and long-term needs of 86 orphans, living in a field outside their demolished Our Lady Queen of the Apostles orphanage in Leogane since the Jan. 12 earthquake.

Deliver donations to *The Islander*, 5404 Marina Drive, Holmes Beach FL 34217. Checks should be payable to Ministry of Presence Inc.

To view more of Joseph's photos of the orphanage, Port-au-Prince and other areas after the disaster, go to www.ministryofpresence.org.



The orphanage in Leogane, which has had support from the Rev. Ron Joseph and Ministry of Presence for many years, is collapsed by the Jan. 12 earthquake. Above, the four-story building that housed the kitchen and dining hall, classrooms and girls dormitory, has collapsed on the first floor. The boys dormitory, a smaller building, also was damaged and can't be used.



The Rev. Ron Joseph looks into the collapsed building that was the four-story orphanage before the earthquake struck Leogane, Haiti, Jan. 12.