

Earthquake draws attention to Haiti's strong Catholic presence

By Carol Zimmermann - Catholic News Service

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One image that has emerged from the devastating rubble of Haiti's Jan. 12 earthquake is the resilient faith of the Haitian people.

The magnitude 7 quake that reduced homes and buildings to rubble also crumbled churches, seminaries, schools and retreat centers. In Port-au-Prince, Sacred Heart Church is in ruins but a stone cross on the church property remains standing and the steeple clock at St. Pierre remains stopped at 4:53, the exact minute the quake hit.

Despite the devastating loss of lives, homes and places of worship, reports from the region have continually highlighted the ongoing prayers and singing taking place at makeshift camps for the displaced.

On Jan. 17, many Haitians attended Sunday Masses next to the ruins of their collapsed churches. The outdoor congregations, which included wounded members in wheelbarrows, said prayers of thanksgiving -- for what little they had left -- and in petition for help they desperately needed.

Local Catholics also mourned the loss of their leader, Haitian Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot, who died in the quake when his residence collapsed and he was thrown to ground.

Reports on Haiti often cite that the Caribbean nation is 80 percent Catholic.

And certainly Haiti, with its nine dioceses, has a strong Catholic presence, as shown by the extensive number of Catholic churches, schools and religious centers. But the country's relationship with the Catholic Church also is a complicated one, and some say the number of Catholics is starting to decrease as Protestant denominations gain more members.

Haiti -- founded in 1804 after a slave revolt against French rule -- did not begin with a Vatican blessing.

Although Catholicism was established as the country's religion in its 1800 constitution, the Vatican did not officially recognize Haiti until 1860 when it signed a concordat, or agreement, with Haitian leaders and sent a papal delegate and priests to the region.

Fast forward 100 years and the church-state relationship is even more at odds. Haiti's president, Francois Duvalier, the notorious dictator known as "Papa Doc," expelled the archbishop of Port-au-Prince in 1960 and four years later he expelled the Jesuits. During Duvalier's regime, the Tonton Macoutes, his secret police, also attacked, arrested and expelled dozens of priests.

The Vatican responded to Duvalier's actions by excommunicating him. They restored relations in 1966 by calling for an end to repression of the church and allowing the president to nominate local priests as bishops.

Twenty years later, Catholic bishops, clergy and lay workers in Haiti primarily focused on the country's poor and denounced human rights violations.

Pope John Paul II visited Port-au-Prince in 1983 and addressed 100,000 people at a Mass where he was strongly critical of conditions in Haiti and insisted that change must take place "without violence, without murder and without internal struggles."

The pope criticized "divisions, injustices, excessive inequality, the degradation of the quality of life, misery, hunger (and) the fear of many people."

In July 1987, Haitian priests were accused of inciting violence and being communists after peasants pressing for land reform clashed with landowners in a machete battle.

Into this heated environment stepped Salesian Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who served as Haiti's first democratically elected president in 1991 but was ousted later that year in a military coup. He was president again from 1994 to 1996 and from 2001 to 2004 before being ousted again in 2004.

Aristide was expelled from his order for his political involvement, laicized by the Vatican in the 1990s and later married. He is currently in exile in South Africa.

Haiti's Catholicism not only has a complicated track record with state politics but also has the added mix of prevalent voodoo practices. Voodoo, derived from a combination of West African traditions, has its own rituals and ceremonies that primarily involves calling on family spirits, or "loas," for help and protection. Many practitioners do not find these customs to be at odds with Catholic beliefs and often combine the two.

In the early part of the 20th century, Catholic priests led major campaigns against voodoo, but in recent years they have not expressed as much disdain of voodoo practices. A 1971 story by Catholic News Service quoted a Haitian archbishop who said one of his main tasks was to spread Catholicism without destroying the cultural richness of voodoo.

Protestant churches, which have recently gained momentum in Haiti, have not embraced any elements of voodoo and have likened the practice to devil worship. Those who are taking up the Protestant faith are giving up voodoo as part of their conversion experience.

Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado, an assistant professor at the University of Miami's department of religious studies, told CNS Jan. 20 that the trend of Haitian Catholics turning to Protestant denominations has gone largely unreported. She said scholars put Haiti's Catholicism rate closer to 70 percent and said the number of Catholics is likely even lower -- 60 percent to 65 percent -- in Port-au-Prince.

Although Maldonado stressed that the country's "ethos is still Catholic" she noted that the growing number of Protestant churches reflects people's desire to express their faith on a more personal level. She said the Protestant emphasis on "testimonies and personal witness" are selling points with many Haitians who want religion to address challenges of everyday life.

But no matter where the numbers stand, Catholics still make up a large percentage of Haiti's population. According to the 2009 edition of the Vatican yearbook, known as the *Annuario Pontificio*, there are 2.85 million Catholics just in the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince.

One Haitian Catholic getting renewed publicity is sainthood candidate Pierre Toussaint, born a slave in 1766 in what is now Haiti. Toussaint's owner moved him to New York and allowed him to apprentice as a hairdresser.

In 1807, Toussaint bought his freedom and donated money to orphanages, schools and priests. He nursed the sick and took in homeless black youths.

New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan wrote about Toussaint, who was declared venerable in 1997, in a Jan. 13 blog entry asking people to say a special prayer to him for his intercession for the "safety, support, and comfort of the people of Haiti at this time."

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