

February 28, 2010 – Salesian GHQ – A letter from the Rector Major after his visit to Haiti



(ANS – Rome) – A few days after his visit to Haiti, Fr. Pascual Chavez has written a letter to the Salesians of Don Bosco, members of the Salesian Family, and all those close to Don Bosco.

After describing what was done when the tragic news of the earthquake was received, the Rector Major explains the reasons for his visit between February 12 and 15: "I felt it necessary, important, and significant to go personally to Haiti so that through the person of the Rector Major the closeness, fraternity, and solidarity of the Congregation could be felt. I wanted to share at close hand in the suffering and uncertainty in which the whole population is living."

Visiting Port-au-Prince Fr. Chavez was aware of the total lack of civil leadership and of how life "continues to go ahead, more by dint of inertia and by the struggle for survival than for any social organization which is supporting or stimulating it."

"I tried to hear the voice of God which, like the blood of Abel, cried out with the voices of the thousands of the dead buried in mass graves or still under the rubble," Don Bosco's successor wrote. "I tried to listen to God, who was speaking through the dull sound of the thousands of people struggling to live under the tents.... I tried to open my ears and heart to the cry of God, which could be heard in the anger and feelings of powerlessness...."

The letter is not a simple description of the situation, but contains an exhortation and suggestions for the rebirth of the country, and especially of the Salesian presence. "Therefore the challenge for today cannot be merely to reconstruct the walls of the buildings, the houses, and the churches destroyed, but it is rather to make Haiti rise again, building it on living conditions which really are human, where rights, all rights, are for everyone and not the privilege of some."

The fear, expressed several times, is that with the passing of time and the complicity of the mass media, Haiti will be forgotten, considered old news.

The efforts of the Salesians have been admirable. They opened their houses to welcome the displaced people, e.g., at Carrefour-Thorland, Pétiion-Ville, Delmas, Cité Soleil. Fr. Chavez renews the commitment of Don Bosco's sons "to the rebirth of the country, refounding, step by step together, the Congregation with the presences that are responding to the expectations and needs of Haitian society, the Church, and the young." In this process the state and the local Church need to take part, together with consecrated life, "seeking more and more its identity, fidelity to the Lord Jesus, and his Gospel."

The letter also contains some details of the decisions reached in agreement with the Haitian SDB provincial council for "refounding the works, revision of the pastoral approach in general, and in certain places having always in mind in particular the needs of society, the Church, and the young."

Rebuilding, relocating, rethinking Salesian presences and works in the short and in the long term so as to ensure greater significance and pastoral effectiveness, is, the Rector Major says, the program: "Looking at the present and to the future, what becomes the priority is to keep the schools and youth centers functioning where they are fit for use, and in addition to build or rebuild as soon as possible those works which have become unfit for use. The priority of the care and education of the young is absolute, all the more so since what is at stake is the creation, through a new education, of a new culture, capable of building the new Haiti."

In conclusion, Fr. Chavez thanks the Congregation, the various mission offices, international organizations close to the Salesians, benefactors, and friends of Salesian work; he invites them "to continue with the efforts we are making to respond to the immense demands of this country in so much need."

The full text of the letter follows.



DIREZIONE GENERALE OPERE DON BOSCO
Via della Pisana 1111 - 00163 Roma

Il Rettor Maggiore

*“I have seen. I have heard. I understand. I have come down...
Go, set my people free” (Exodus 3:7-8)*

A letter after the Rector Major’s visit to Haiti

My Dear Confreres, Members of the Salesian Family, Friends of Don Bosco:

I would like to start this account of my visit to Haiti with the dedication which the confreres of that vice province wrote and signed in the book *Haiti, the face of a country*, which they gave me just as I was leaving. I consider it is not a eulogy to me but rather a sincere expression of their experience and their feelings, and at the same time, a mark of recognition of all those who have been a sign of the presence of Providence and made them feel the loving, supportive closeness of God:

*In a few seconds a terrifying earthquake put us on our knees.
Apocalyptic catastrophe. Ruins. Deaths. Cries. Weeping. Dismay.
Desolation. Silence. Rebellion. Darkness. Trauma. Misery. Desperation.
Hands stretched out to each other. Hands stretched out to the Lord.
“I have seen. I have heard. I understand. I have come down...
Go, set my people free” (Exodus 3:7-8)*

Fr. Pascual, like the Lord, you saw and understood. THANK YOU for having understood at once. In the letter to all the Salesians, which with your father’s heart you sent us. Awareness. Response. Solidarity. Fraternity...

Fr. Chavez, before the Lord we say in confidence that the message which pleases us the most is “the open letter of yourself.” What a father’s heart! What sensitivity! Thank you, Father, for not sending us a Moses. Thank you for coming yourself. Thank you for following in the steps of Jesus and the heart of Don Bosco. For sharing with us, from the suffering for our dead and dispersed to the struggle for life taken up again, from our ruins to the refoundation, starting from personal and community conversion.

Fr. Pascual, thank you, thank you!

On February 12-15, 2010, I visited Haiti. From the very first day of the earthquake that on January 12 struck a large part of the country with devastation and death, I kept in touch with the confreres through a daily telephone call to the superior at the time, Fr. Jacques Charles, and to the one who, from the end of January, would take over as the new superior of the vice province, Fr. Sylvain Ducange. I got to work, officially involving the Antilles Province, whose provincial, Fr. Víctor Pichardo, I asked to go at once to Port-au-Prince to set up a link for aid; in addition I sent a letter to the whole Congregation, with information about the dramatic situation of our confreres, requesting the solidarity of all the houses, works, and provinces in response to the emergency situation, and likewise to the future reconstruction; finally I mobilized all the mission offices, with that of New Rochelle leading the way. I have to say that the response I received was extremely positive and exemplary, and for everything that was done I feel the need to give thanks and to bear witness.

Nevertheless, I felt it necessary, important, and significant to go personally to Haiti so that through the person of the Rector Major the closeness, fraternity, and solidarity of the Congregation could be felt. I wanted to share at close hand in the suffering and uncertainty in which the whole population is living. I really wanted to know better the situation of the Salesian houses, completely or partially destroyed, especially those in the area of Port-au-Prince, and, with the superior of the vice province and his council, to reflect together on the decisions to be made in the immediate future.

Even though, as we arrived at Port-au-Prince, the pilot of the helicopter flew over the most devastated area – which gave me the chance to have an immediate overall panoramic view from the air – it was only when driving in the car, seeing the buildings razed to the ground, then walking through the ruins that I was able to have some real idea of the dramatic effects of the quake, which struck this helpless people totally unprepared for such an event.

I was totally dismayed when faced with the extent of the destruction, at the apocalyptic landscape of death, suffering and despair. The National Palace, the symbol of pride and power, has practically fallen in on itself, with the columns sticking up in the air, and similarly the other ministry buildings. Of the cathedral the only things still standing are the facade and the side walls; the roof and the pillars have fallen to the ground. It was as though, in those 28 seconds that the major shock lasted, the city had lost its head and its heart. In fact, that it precisely what happened, since from that moment there has been a total lack of *leadership*, and life, immensely humbled, continues to go ahead, more by dint of inertia and by the struggle for survival than through any social organization supporting or stimulating it.

While I listened to the accounts of those who survived, especially those who managed to escape death after hours or days being trapped between floors, ceilings, and walls, and gradually as I looked at the buildings and homes destroyed, I tried to hear the voice of God which, like the blood of Abel, cried out with the voices of the thousands of the dead buried in mass graves or still under the rubble. I tried to listen to God, who was speaking through the dull sound of the thousands of people struggling to live under the tents, those distributed by the international organizations or those made of rags somehow put together. I tried to open my ears and heart to the cry of God, which could be heard in the anger and feelings of powerlessness of those who see everything that they had built up – either great or small – gone up in smoke, into nothing. It is estimated that the number without a roof over their heads is between 300,000 and 500,000.

It is true that an earthquake of 7.5 degrees on the Richter scale produces a shock with a devastating, incalculable force, but it is also true that in this case the destruction and the deaths are even more enormous on account of poverty in every sense of the word. In this situation one cannot rebuild a life worthy of the name, nor even houses which are safer and more resistant in the face of this kind of violent eruption of nature. Therefore the challenge for today cannot be merely to reconstruct the walls of the buildings, the houses, and the churches destroyed, but it is rather to make Haiti rise again, building it on living conditions which really are human, where rights, all rights, are for everyone and not the privilege of some.

The almost total absence of any government leaves the people stunned by the suffering, submerged in anguish and overwhelmed by despair, wandering around the streets without goal or purpose. This constant walking of the people on a pilgrimage in the struggle for life makes quite an impression. But also at church level, the death of the archbishop, the vicar general, the chancellor, 18 seminarians, and 46 religious men and women, with the collapse of houses, schools, and help centers meant a tragic loss of pastors, so extremely necessary for this people.

Unfortunately, the time has almost passed for it to be news, when Haiti was center stage of history, like a victim fallen to the ground, on which was focused the attention of the great television networks, of journalists always on the watch for events that increase sales. Today the city is in a state more chaotic than before. Certainly to be admired is the religious sentiment that leads the Haitian people to gather together in prayer, a sentiment which is now being greatly exploited by the evangelical sects; and in a similar way, one is amazed at the efforts to return to normality when basically everything has changed.

Even though the state of emergency could last for at least two months, according to what is said by those responsible for this phase, the hour has struck to roll our sleeves up and begin the rebuilding of this country, or rather, its rising from the ashes. Here, then, is the great opportunity being offered to this poor country, the former "Pearl of the Antilles."

To make this dream come true, it is not a matter of starting from scratch, but a starting again, in the first place, by the Haitians themselves, who more than ever are being called to take the lead in this new phase of their history. They are not alone. On the contrary, it is very comforting to see so many organizations (a total of 80) seriously committed to this challenging task, together with the very many people of good will who want to sow seeds of hope and build a future for the Haitian people.

The protagonism on the part of the Haitians themselves is absolutely indispensable, in order to overcome not only a tendency to resignation which is something of a cultural feature, but to overcome also a total dependence on outside help, which could lead to the temptation of a power struggle and deprive Haiti of its sovereignty.

Therefore opening up our houses, even though seriously damaged – I'm speaking about those of the Salesians – to take in those displaced, with the effort to make them feel better, even in the midst of their tragedy, and likewise the civilian organization of these camps for refugees and the decision to live in tents like them, caused me great joy and also to feel very proud of my Salesian brothers.

May the Lord change this tragedy which has filled all the families of Haiti with mourning into hymns and dances of joy. It would not be right nor responsible to allow the death of hundreds of thousands of victims, nor the loss of everything by those who now find themselves on the streets with nothing to fall into nothingness, into the void, into sterility.

On our part we feel the need to renew our commitment to the rebirth of the country, refounding, step by step together, the Congregation with the presences which are responding to the expectations and the needs of Haitian society, the Church, and the young.

I said before that rather than simply rebuilding the walls, it is a matter of a change in the way of thinking.

The State has to change in such a way that it ensures a worthy life for all its citizens, guaranteeing all their rights and fighting against injustice, corruption, poverty, without ideologies and with expressions of genuine democracy.

But the Church, too, as part of it consecrated life, has to change, seeking more and more its identity, fidelity to the Lord Jesus, and his Gospel, properly bringing together evangelization, human development, and the transformation of culture and society.

From this point of view, I am pleased with the way the superior of the vice province and his council are managing this situation. They have organized assistance (providing tents, food, water, psychological and spiritual help) for all the thousands of refugees, the homeless who came to find shelter at Thorland, Pétion-Ville, Delmas, Cité Soleil. They have busied themselves in giving help to those employed in our communities and works. They have found places for the confreres from our no longer habitable houses: ENAM, Fleuriot, the provincial house, Gressier.

A immediate plan has also been set in motion which involves the reorganization of the vice province at all levels, including that of refounding the works, revision of the pastoral approach in general, and in certain places, having always in mind in particular the needs of society, the Church, and the young.

After my “on the spot” visit, and with the information available regarding our works, it seems above all necessary to carry out an assessment of the fitness for use or not of those houses which have remained standing, and afterwards:

-- to make secure all the works, some of which have already been looted, rebuilding the security walls that collapsed;

-- to re-build the whole complex of the OPEPB, those next to ENAM and those located in Cité Soleil, which implies drawing up an overall plan for the Lakay School and a youth center;

-- to re-locate ENAM in such a way as to build a vocational training center of the highest quality, also opening a fresh page of the history of this work: however, the best place has to be chosen;

--to rebuild the Young Peoples' Center in Thorland and the multipurpose hall;

- to rebuild the parish in Cité Soleil and the youth center;
- to rebuild the dormitory and classrooms of the school at Gressier;
- to rebuild a part of the primary school at Pétiion-Ville;
- to re-think the whole of the work at Fleuriot, taking into account the needs of the house for the postnovices and the center of studies;
- to relocate the provincial house, leaving the present house for the community of Cité Soleil;
- to simplify the complex of works at Fort-Liberté, giving priority to the Vocational Training Center, the training school for teachers, which is of strategic importance and absolutely necessary for the training of the new kind of educators whom Haiti needs, and the school for nurses, the only one left in the country;
- to carry out a process of discernment about the future of the Vincent Foundation Agricultural School in Cap-Haitien, situated on a property which is not ours, and consider relocating it at Tosià or at Gressier, where we have quite a large tract of land belonging to us. For the moment it should continue to function with the various educational services it offers;
- to make a decision about Baudin (the novitiate house, which in fact has been functioning for only three years): either giving it to the Haitian Bishops' Conference for its formation center, or selling it.

This does not mean that everything has to be done at the same time. An order of priorities for what has to be done has still to be made. We will be able to count on the readiness, already in operation, of the Italian Civil Defense service, which has expressed its intention and willingness to work closely with us, and on the donations that have already arrived from the mission offices, international organizations, the provinces, or individual houses, from bishops' conferences and benefactors.

Looking at the present and to the future, what becomes the priority is to keep the schools and youth centers functioning where they are fit for use, and in addition to build or rebuild as soon as possible those works which have become unfit for use. The priority of the care and education of the young is absolute, all the more so since what is at stake is the creation, through a new education, of a new culture, capable of building the new Haiti.

All of this urgently requires personnel capable of coordinating the work. This would also be a good opportunity to get the Bureau de Planification et de Développement of the vice province functioning well. The one directly responsible for all the "Haiti emergency re-construction operation," however, is – as it ought to be – the superior of the vice province, Fr. Sylvain Ducange. Fr. Mark Hyde, director of the New Rochelle Missions Office, to which the work of coordination has been entrusted, and the organizations involved in this reconstruction operation, will refer to him.

Next year the Blessed Philip Rinaldi Vice Province of Haiti will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of our presence in this country. For the Haitian confreres it will be a real jubilee, and

I hope and pray that by then we may see the refoundation of the charism as a renewed gift from God for young Haitians.

A jubilee is also a time for conversion: this means acknowledging our sins, personal, community, and institutional, for not having succeeded in living to the full our identity as consecrated apostles, making of the spiritual and apostolic project of Don Bosco, codified in the Constitutions, a genuine plan of evangelical life.

While I thank the Congregation, our mission offices, the international organizations close to us, the benefactors and friends of Salesian work, for the generosity and enterprise with which they have responded to my previous letter, I invite everyone to continue with the efforts we are making to respond to the immense demands of this country in so much need.

I entrust to Mary this new phase of history. May she guide us in rising to the challenge. May she bless you all.

With affection and best wishes, in Don Bosco,

Fr. Pascual Chavez V., SDB

Rector Major

Rome, February 25, 2010