

**News and Current Events :: Suffering, Haitians Turn to Charismatic Prayer****Suffering, Haitians Turn to Charismatic Prayer, on: 2010/11/25 10:20**

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Suffering, Haitians Turn to Charismatic Prayer

By ANNE BARNARD

The pastor likes to sing in tongues on his daily walk around the park. Certain women in his parish say so many Hail Marys on their own that he no longer assigns them the prayers as penance for sins; instead, he may prescribe a pedicure. On a Saturday night in the basement of his mostly Haitian church in Queens, in a bare white room vibrating with hymns and exclamations, a young woman may find herself channeling the Holy Spirit to reveal news from Haiti.

The earthquake that killed an estimated quarter-million Haitians 10 months ago has made the noisy devotion of the parish, SS. Joachim and Anne, even more exuberant. On Jan. 12, barely two hours after the quake visited devastation on their homeland, Haitian immigrants flooded the church, dancing, singing, waving their arms above their heads — and praising God. Amid the lamentations and the laying on of hands and the surprising deluge of thanksgiving from people who did not yet know if their relatives were alive or dead, they ran out of tissues.

Olivia Benoit, one the parish's most energetic worshipers, recalls, "The water was pouring down from our eyes."

The pain continued into the spring. The church overflowed as more and more survivors turned for solace to charismatic prayer, the growing, fervent brand of worship that is reinvigorating the parish and infuses much of Haitian Catholicism. The young Haitian-born vicar, the Rev. Jean-Moise Delva, led a dozen memorial Masses for the earthquake dead, spent August in Haiti ministering to a sweltering tent city and still wrestles with feelings of helplessness and despair. In October, people packed into SS. Joachim and Anne, chanting and dancing and holding sick relatives' pictures heavenward for healing as a revered nun visiting from Haiti invoked the Holy Spirit.

Father Delva turned to the pastor, the Rev. Robert Robinson, and said, "Looks like they have more faith than we do."

The disaster shattered families, homes and finances and laid new burdens on Haitian immigrants supporting relatives back home. In Haiti, it set off a period of upheaval and uncertainty — the latest and perhaps worst in the country's chain of natural and political disasters — that almost a year later is nowhere near an end.

The quake, too, is reshaping Haitian religion. It has demanded new resilience — not only from Haitians and Haitian-Americans, who often lay claim to a legendary, divinely inspired endurance, but also from faith itself, suddenly more vulnerable to doubt, disillusion and competition. And it has pumped new life into Haitians' version of charismatic Catholicism, which seeks direct contact with the Holy Spirit through uninhibited, even raucous prayer. This year, for many Haitians, the movement's embrace of raw emotion has seemed the only sensible response.

Catholicism suffuses Haitian history and identity. French colonists converted African slaves, who mixed Catholic and African rituals into Haitian voodoo, the religion revering spirits and ancestors that many Haitians still practice alongside Catholicism. Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led Haiti in the world's only victorious slave rebellion, was Catholic. The country's elite schools are Catholic. Even its lottery stands have names like Angel of God. And in America, Haitian immigrants turn to the church to ease their arrival and educate their children, rejuvenating parishes from Miami to New York and Boston.

But the earthquake struck as Catholicism's dominance was eroding. Pentecostals and other Protestants — promising a more direct, less hierarchical connection to God — have made inroads here and in Haiti. The United States government lists Haiti as 80 percent Catholic, but a United Nations survey found that by 2003, that number had dropped to 55 percent and that 29 percent of Haitians identified as Protestant.

The quake destroyed many of the symbols that made the church imposing and services that made it indispensable. It fell the national cathedral and most of the capital's Catholic churches, killed the archbishop and many nuns and priests, and wrecked Catholic schools and clinics. Competing proselytizers pounced on those wounds with harsher claims: Maybe God punished Haiti because its dominant faith was on the wrong track, some Pentecostals preached; maybe the Catholic Church, by tolerating voodoo among some faithful, courted evil.

In answer, churches like SS. Joachim and Anne can point to their response to this dark year: a redoubled commitment to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, a 43-year-old movement, growing fastest in Latin America and among immigrants in the United States, that makes Haitian Catholicism distinctly vibrant even as some American Catholics complain of a church gone lukewarm.

Charismatics, both Catholic and Protestant, seek an ecstatic state open to unmediated communion with God. They dance, sing, speak in tongues, issue prophecies and even, they believe, heal the sick. They call these spontaneous acts gifts—charismata in Greek—from the Holy Spirit. Catholic charismatics holler and weep beneath their stained glass like Pentecostals in their storefronts, but they begin and end with rosaries and Hail Marys.

Haitians have long embraced charismatic worship. But never have they needed so much to warm themselves in its heat. To watch it carry a community through an unthinkable calamity, swaying and clapping and sending noisy thank-yous to God, is to see faith working to heal the hurts of the year, and to save itself.

### The Spread of a Movement

The Catholic charismatic movement was born during an upheaval in the faith. In 1967, two years after the Second Vatican Council de-emphasized ritual and mystery, a group of Catholic students reported being inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak in unknown languages—like the Pentecostals already chasing the mysticism of first-century Christianity.

The movement spread, mixing old-fashioned fervor with more-progressive direct participation for laypeople, especially women. Some parish priests objected, but church leaders saw recruiting potential, and Pope Paul VI embraced it by 1975.

That year, the man who would eventually make SS. Joachim and Anne in Queens a hub for charismatics, the Rev. Joseph Malagrecia, was a freshly ordained Italian-American priest inflamed with his own “baptism in the Holy Spirit.” He returned to his native Brooklyn to minister in Spanish and Creole to immigrants culturally primed to mix worship with emotion, music and dance.

Born that same year in Haiti’s capital, Port-au-Prince, was Father Delva, who grew up drawing no boundary between the charismatic prayers he attended with his aunts and the formal rituals he learned as an altar boy.

Marie Andr e Mars, 63, then in Haiti and now one of Father Delva’s parishioners, remembers most Haitians’ gut reaction to the movement: “This is mine.”

Its tambourines and stamping feet, reminiscent of voodoo, offended her mother, she recalled (“Where is the silence, the reverence?”), and some pastors (“You’re not going to do no Haitian stuff in my church!”).

Mrs. Mars joined for those very reasons. The ultimate respectable church lady, she wears black-brimmed hats and leads a rosary group each morning after working nights at the post office. She says, “I love to dance and shout.”

These charismatics converged at SS. Joachim and Anne, a squarish modern church on New York City’s eastern edge, among neat cookie-cutter houses and boulevards lined with fast-food and Caribbean restaurants.

Father Malagrecia, by then a prominent charismatic leader, became pastor in 1991. His Creole Masses rebuilt the congregation, today 80 percent Haitian. (Now a monsignor, he oversees 120 Spanish and 21 Creole charismatic prayer groups in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn, which includes Queens and also has 100 English groups; worldwide, the movement claims to have attracted 150 million Catholics over the years.)

It was a ripe moment to build on charismatic leanings that some congregants had brought from Haiti. Charismatic prayers offered neutral ground during a crisis that divided Haitians at home and abroad and politicized Haiti’s church, when populist parish priests of Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s Ti Legliz, or Little Church movement, challenged the elite. Charismatics helped the parish compete with Pentecostal storefronts blocks away, and with voodoo, which offers its own version of direct contact with the supernatural—possession by ancestors or gods.

Ms. Benoit became interested when she saw a woman at another Queens church testify that the Holy Spirit had drawn her away from voodoo. She got hooked because she could express ecstasy in church, without shame, instead of being p

assive and prim. Some critics say charismatics' focus on spiritual experience distracts from tackling social problems. But Ms. Benoit, 57, who when not mentoring youths or visiting the bereaved might be addressing envelopes for an autism charity, said it made her feel more empowered, more responsible.

"God wants us all to participate, to talk about our frustrations," she said. "He wants me to be in your business."

By 2007, when Father Robinson became pastor, the church's lay leaders were mostly charismatics.

The night of the quake, their Tuesday prayer meeting skipped its usual slow ramping-up; people simply burst through the doors wailing. One was Ms. Benoit, her niece missing in Haiti. Intellectually, her faith accepted that "suffering is part of life." But she needed charismatics' touches and voices to "tell me I'll be O.K."

Father Delva feared for his missing father, and the comfort he could offer others — "God is with us in our suffering" — seemed to him pallid and lame. "He was sitting there like a piece of salt," Ms. Benoit recalled. "He could barely open his mouth."

Others filled the vacuum, crying and shouting. Ms. Benoit remembers extra-intense adoration of God; Father Delva recalls "more praying for Haiti than praising." Either way, the priest says, what charismatic prayer gives worshipers was newly clear: "a way for God to hear their cries."

The parish grieved for hundreds dead and injured. Almost as shocking was the spectacle of Haiti's church in disarray. People saw their ruined childhood parishes on the news. At Father Delva's, Sacré-Coeur, only a cross and part of a wall still stood.

There were ugly reactions. In Haiti, Mrs. Mars recalled hearing from people there, Protestants said, "That's God getting rid of the garbage." Some Haitian Pentecostal pastors in Queens preach the same. The American evangelist Robertson, referring to an 18th-century voodoo ceremony by Haitian revolutionaries, called the quake God's punishment for "a pact with the devil." (Father Robinson had to fend off an irate congregant who, mishearing "Robertson," thought he had said it.)

Simpler doubts were heard among the devout. As Mrs. Mars's rosary group praised God's goodness, one woman balked, saying there was "nothing good" about the quake. Mrs. Mars countered, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God — not earthquakes, not anything."

For months, people packed Masses, sometimes calling out, "Jesus, Haiti is in your hands!" The priests came to feel the congregation was ministering to them, not vice versa. Father Robinson, 66, who is not Haitian, was jolted when people would declare that if God had not watched over the disaster, "maybe it would have been worse."

"Are these people for real?" the priest would wonder.

'People Are Thirsty for Faith'

In April, Haiti's three-day outdoor National Charismatic Renewal Congress, one of the country's largest annual gatherings, drew more than 80,000 people, up from about 60,000 last year. An organizer, Antony Jean-Baptiste, said, "People are thirsty for faith."

By then, Haitian-Americans realized that mourning was only the beginning. With Haiti's reconstruction stalled, the earthquake and the new obligations it brought them were not going away. Relatives made homeless were staying homeless. People wrote their names on paper scraps and piled them in baskets, to pray for, at Monsignor Malagreca's Haitian-American charismatic conference in June.

Haitians, he said, needed the movement more than ever. "They are in need of intimacy and a lot of resilience," the Monsignor said. "They are thinking: 'Another suffering is upon us. How are we going to do it? We thought we had it bad before.'"

In August, the Brooklyn Diocese sent Father Delva, 35, and others to minister to a tent city in Port-au-Prince. He witnessed the limits of the church's power to help — a serious blow in a country that jokes about a bureaucrat who drives into a pothole and complains, "Isn't there a priest around here?"

Parish life continued; people worshiped near churches' rubble at dawn, to avoid the heat. But the tent city, Solino, had no church. Father Delva heard confessions and said Masses under stifling tarps, but was forbidden to perform weddings and baptisms because there was no parish to register them.

People were frustrated, Father Delva said. "They don't just want to hear about God, God, God, God," he said. They wanted help.

But priests were at a loss. Father Delva visited one who slept in a leaky tent in his churchyard, near relatives' fresh graves. Some priests, Father Delva said, avoid the faithful, who see their collars and ask for money. "They were keeping a way because they could not help them," he said.

In Queens as the anniversary nears, charismatic prayers, always love poems to God, have never sounded so poignant.

"Thank you, Savior," elderly women sang one Tuesday, swaying to a pulsing Caribbean synthesizer beat. "You give me back the taste of love."

Hands on heads, they pushed skyward, miming handing burdens to Jesus.

In the basement one Saturday, people prayed and sang at different paces, weaving a background murmur as a young scientist channeled revelations about events in Haiti—a quarrel in a worshiper's family; a spiritual brawl between Jesus and the gods of voodoo. Others prayed in Creole and French.

"Thank you for saving our lives."

"Lord, I need you. I need you so much."

"Come and change our lives."

The question nags outsiders: How can people draw joy and faith from the earthquake?

"The Haitian community here really feels they are blessed to be alive," Ms. Benoit explains. Had they been in Haiti, they might have been "called to Jesus"; relieved, "they're trying to get ready right now."

Father Delva plans to return to Haiti to deliver a modicum of aid: small diocesan grants to start businesses like motorcycle taxis. Or fried-food stands, like one his cousin lost and needs \$200 to rebuild.

Three weeks ago, he stood wreathed in incense at the church's monthly overnight prayer vigil. People swayed in the aisles in a kind of line dance, to music not unbecoming a Haitian nightclub. Some prayed until dawn, breaking only for lentil soup. They sang in tongues, unfamiliar syllables flowing rhythmically like Dada poetry.

It was one of the largest vigils ever, and Father Delva thought he knew why. A new round of earthquake drama hit Haiti that night: Hurricane Tomas. People feared it would drown tent cities, or spread cholera that had surfaced for the first time in a century.

Before daybreak, people picked up their rosaries and said a prayer in Creole. They repeated it 50 times. "Debloke Ayiti," they implored God. "Unblock Haiti, unchain Haiti, deliver Haiti, liberate Haiti, heal Haiti.

"Save Haiti."

Ozier Muhammad contributed reporting.