

Aristide: In the Parish of the Poor

Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide is president of Haiti, currently in exile. A leading member of the Ti Legliz (Little Church) movement, he has spent his life ministering to Haiti's poorest communities. Fr. Aristide gained the respect and love of many Haitians by speaking out fearlessly about the injustice in Haitian society. But his message angered those who profit from the system, and there have been several attempts to assassinate him. Here Father Aristide explains why the church should help organize for change.



In Haiti, it is not enough to heal wounds, for every day another wound opens up. It is not enough to give the poor food one day, to buy them antibiotics one day, to teach them to read a few sentences or to write a few words. Hypocrisy. The next day they will be starving again, feverish again, and they will never be able to buy the books that hold the words that might deliver them. Beans and rice are hypocrisy when the pastor gives them only to a chosen few among his own flock, and thousands and thousands of others starve.

What good does it do the peasant when the pastor feeds his children? For a moment, the peasant's anguish is allayed. For one night, he can sleep easier, like the pastor himself. For one night, he is grateful to the pastor, because that night he

does not have to hear the whimpers of his children, starving. But the same free foreign rice the pastor feeds to the peasant's children is being sold on the market for less than the farmer's own produce. The very food that the pastor feeds the peasant's children is keeping the peasant in poverty, unable himself to feed his children. And among those who sell the foreign rice are the big landholders who pay the peasant

fifty cents a day to work on their fields; among those who profit from the food the pastor gives the children are the same men who are keeping the peasant in utter poverty, poverty without hope.

Would it not be better—and I ask the question in all humility, in its fullest simplicity—for the peasant to organize with others in his situation and force the large landholders to increase the peasants' pay? Would it not be wiser—more Christian—for the pastor, while he feeds those children, to help the peasant learn to organize? Isn't this a better way to stop the children's cries of hunger forever? As long as the pastor keeps feeding the peasant's children without helping deliver the peasant from poverty, the peasant will never escape the humiliating fate to which he has been assigned by the corrupt system. When the pastor only feeds the children, he is participating in that corrupt system, allowing it to endure. When the pastor feeds the children *and* helps organize the

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peasants, he is refusing the corrupt system, bringing about its end. Which behavior is more Christian, more evangelical?

I chose the second course, along with many of my colleagues... I chose to help organize youth, I chose to preach deliverance from poverty, I chose to encourage my congregation to hope and believe in their own powers. For me it is quite simple: I chose life over death. I preached life to my congregation, not life as we live it in Haiti, a life of mud, dank cardboard walls, garbage, darkness, hunger, disease, unemployment, and oppression. But life as a decent poor man should live it, in a dry house with a floor and a real roof, at a table with food, free from curable illness, working a meaningful job or tilling the fields to his or her profit, proud.

The only way to preach a decent poor man's life in Haiti is to preach self-defense, defense from the system of violence and corruption that ruins our own and our children's lives. I hope and trust that I have preached self-defense to my people. I would feel myself a hypocrite otherwise. And I would rather die than be a hypocrite, rather die than betray my people, rather die than leave them behind in the parish of the poor.



Open your eyes with me, sisters and brothers. It is morning. The night has been a long one, very long. Now, the dawn seems to be climbing up slowly from beneath the horizon. Wisps of smoke are rising up from the little houses of the village, and you can smell good cornmeal cereal cooking. The sky grows pink. An hour later, the children in their tidy, well-fitting uniforms run off to school, clutching new books in their arms. Women wearing shoes head off to market, some on horseback and donkey, others on motorcycle and bicycle. They all take the new paved road, down which buses take other women and men to market for the day. If you listen closely, you can hear the sound of running water, of faucets being turned on in houses. Then the men emerge, carrying shiny new tools, laughing together, their bodies strong and well fed. They head off for the fields. A new irrigation project has been installed and the crops are growing where before there was almost a desert. Throughout the village, you can hear laugh-

ter and the sound of jokes being told and listened to.

This is the village I call Esperancia. The day is coming when this village will exist, though now it is called Despair and its residents wear rags and never laugh. Yet when we look around this village I call Esperancia, we can see that not very much has changed since it was called Despair. This is what has changed: Everyone now eats a decent poor man's breakfast. There is a new road. The children now have books. The women have shoes. There is water, and running water. There is an irrigation project.

This is not very much to change. Yet just those few changes can turn Despair into Hope, and all it takes to change them is organization. In a year, the village of Esperancia could exist in any of our lands. Esperancia, El Salvador; Esperancia, Honduras; Esperancia, Guatemala. It is an honorable address in the parishes of the poor.

Let us leave our old homes of cardboard and mud floors. Let us make a plan to douse them with gasoline, and burn them to the ground. Let us turn our backs on that great fire and on that way of life, and hand in hand, calmly, intelligently, walk forward into the darkness toward the sunrise of Hope. Let us trust one another, keep faith with one another, and never falter.

Take my hand. If you see me stumble, hold me up. If I feel you weaken, I will support you. You, brother, hold up the lamp of solidarity before us. Sister, you carry the supplies. Yes, the road is long. I fear there are criminals on either side of us, waiting to attack. Do you hear them in the bushes, brothers and sisters? Hush! Yes, I can hear them loading their guns. Let us ignore their threats. Let us be fearless.

Let them come. They do not know it, but though they kill us, though they shoot and cut down every last one of us, there is another battalion about a mile back, coming and coming down this long path toward sunrise. And behind that battalion, another and another and another, God is for the big battalions, and the big battalions are the people. Let us keep the lamp of solidarity lit, and move forward.

Amen.

Excerpt from: Aristide, J-B. (1990). *In the Parish of the Poor: Writings from Haiti*. New York: Orbis Books. Photo: © 1992, Mev Puleo/Impact Visuals.

The Roots of Democracy:

Haiti's Popular Movement

International media about prospects for democracy in Haiti focuses the spotlight on generals, politicians and individual citizens. Meanwhile the country's most significant actors—peasant groups, unions, student associations, religious and community organizations—are often ignored. However these organizations have been the prime movers in Haiti's movement for democracy. Over the past decade their strength has led to the:

- Overthrow of Jean-Claude Duvalier in 1986.
- Election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide
- Inability of the generals to “normalize” the coup

Civil society began its rapid growth with the fall of the Duvalier dictatorship in 1986 and reached its zenith under the Aristide government. Jean-Claude Duvalier's flight to France, just a step ahead of countrywide popular protests, created a profound opening for independent associations which Haitians vigorously seized.

Known broadly as “popular organizations,” the members of these groups came mostly from the country's vast poor majority. They formed farming cooperatives, Creole literacy programs, and rural development projects, often with the support from abroad. Churches — Catholic and Protestant — nurtured this movement, and lay participation in church activities exploded. Some associations took political actions to address issues of land distribution, corruption and human rights abuse. The strength of Haitian civil society lay in its breath and diversity outside the narrow realm of electoral politics.

In urban areas as well, the realms of organized activity broadened rapidly. Politically active trade unions, professional, student and women's organizations, and thousands of neighborhood associations and community groups were born. A vibrant press emerged, primarily in the form of the much-listened-to radio, providing information about other organizational activities and a forum to denounce periodic attacks on this independent movement.

The diversity and depth of civil society, as opposed to any particular political party, led to Jean-Bertrand Aristide's overwhelming victory in Haiti's first free elections in 1990. Most independent organi-

Haitian Popular Organizations

- **Mouvman Peyizan Nasyonal Kongre Papay**
National Peasant Movement of the Papay Congress
- **Federation Nationale des Etudlants Haitlens**
National Federation of Haitian Students
- **Solidarte Fanm Ayisyen**
Solidarity Among Haitian Women
- **Komite Kontak Nasyonal TKL**
National Committee for Ecclesiastical Communities
- **and many more**

Write to NECA for a longer list and descriptions.

zations flourished in the relatively free environment of Aristide's seven-month presidency. Many added members and redoubled their efforts.

Haitians abroad also play a role in the movement for a democratic, civil society in Haiti. They pressure for international attention on Haiti and provide financial support to their families at home. And they consistently mobilize around issues pertaining to the fair treatment of Haitians.

This surge of organized popular activity came to a halt with the September 1991 military coup. Far from a peripheral casualty, these organizations were as much the target of the army's repression as was the elected Aristide government. Violence was directed against the independent media, the Catholic and Protestant churches, particularly the *Ti Legliz* or popular church, pro-Aristide elected officials, rural development and peasant organizations, neighborhood and community associations, trade unions, and literacy, pro-democracy, student's and women's groups. Soldiers and section chiefs have arrested, beaten and killed group leaders and members.

A key issue to watch will be the relationship of foreign aid organizations with these indigenous groups. The organizations listed in the *Resource Guide* can provide current information and analysis.

Excerpts from the Haiti Public Information Campaign press packet (for complete packet write to the Quixote Center) and the report: Americas Watch. (1993). *Silencing a People: The Destruction of Civil Society in Haiti*. New York: Americas Watch.