

# Don't forget about Haiti, missionary pleads

Haitians are still in dire need of food, water and medical supplies, according to the Missionaries of Our Lady of Divine Mercy.

**GRETCHEN R. CROWE | CATHOLIC HERALD**

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Kellie Ross thought her days as a bedside nurse were over.

During her missionary trip to Haiti following the country's devastating Jan. 12 earthquake, however, she was unable to ignore the blatant medical need in front of her.

Gashes in foreheads, amputees lying side-by-side in tents, infants suffering from starvation: for Ross, co-founder and executive director of the Manassas-based Missionaries of Our Lady of Divine Mercy, these were not images on the news, but the real sufferings of real people.

Walking through the maze of tents in Port-au-Prince, she put herself back in nursing mode, trying to prepare herself for what she was about to encounter.

She couldn't.

Tent cities, made up of bed sheets draped over sticks, were "as common as mosquitoes." The air was stifling as insects and the stench of urine were everywhere. The Haitians had no access to showers or bathrooms. The local hospitals, Ross realized, were far from equipped to deal with the scope of the earthquake's disaster.

"The hospital looked more like a Boy Scout jamboree as I looked at the sea of tents with patients inside," Ross said. "I looked down to see patients lying on make-shift beds, each one missing a limb. I had never seen so many amputations in one place."

She witnessed one 26-year-old lose her right leg. The girl had no wheelchair to take with her when discharged — and, even worse, no home to return to.

Her story was one of thousands.

Ross said she learned that day that, though she had officially given up her nursing career in 2004 to work full time as a Catholic missionary, she was still, and would always be, a medical professional at heart.

"I realized that God uses all of our experiences in life to prepare us in times of trial," she said.

Along with a desperate need for medical help, Ross realized that the 6,000 pounds of food and medical supplies that she brought with her were "a mere drop in the ocean of need."

On the way to distribute food, "we drove for about an hour into the suburbs of Port-au-Prince," she said. "Along the way I passed long lines of people standing in line for food or water. Some carried buckets, while others had just small pails; each one hoping that the food or water wouldn't run out before they got their turn."

As she proceeded through the city, Ross witnessed "a survival of the fittest" attitude being adopted among Haitians during food distributions.

"Almost immediately people began shouting for food," she said. "As I looked at the truck I knew we didn't have enough food for everyone. How can I describe what 'enough' is when there are hundreds of people pushing and shoving just to have a cup of applesauce?"

She held a 4-week-old baby who was starving to death while food sat stockpiled at a nearby airport.

"I have traveled all over the world and I have seen hunger firsthand," Ross said. "I have watched as children pleaded for food but always felt there was food near enough to me that I could buy and donate to the child. I assumed, wrongly of course, that this situation would be the same."

While Ross' co-worker drove to the airport to collect food, Ross sat, baby in arms, with the Haitians and waited.

"While holding the struggling infant in my arms I took a bottle of water from my car," she said. "Using the cap of the bottle to feed the baby, I gently gave it sips of water. Almost immediately the baby began to root as it anxiously tried to suck the water from the cap. Even the Haitians who stood by me became emotional as they saw this tiny infant fighting for survival."

Now, Ross said to the Haitians, was the time for prayer.

They prayed the rosary, at first quietly, then with gaining strength as more people participated.

“The echoes of the Hail Mary and the Our Father prayers billowed through the streets as more and more people joined in supplication,” she said. “Tears streamed down my face as I saw the faith of these people.”

When Ross’ co-worker came back with rice, meat and water, each person thanked God for their food. And the hungry baby drank milk.

“God did not forget the least of His creatures,” Ross said.

When the food ran out, she made the sign of the cross on the foreheads of children and passed out holy cards.

“The kids clamored over them almost as much as the food,” she said. “I couldn’t believe their appreciation of faith. It inspired me to go further.”

In her quest to do more, Ross will return to Haiti next month. Relying on lessons learned from her January trip, she will modify the relief she brings with her. In order to be more equitable, food will be delivered in prepackaged, healthy meals. Clean drinking water will be made a priority, as well as tents to protect Haitians from the elements, especially during the upcoming rainy season.

Throughout the next few weeks the missionaries will collect money and donations for hospitals, food and water. They also will accept donations of medical supplies and equipment.

Above all, Ross said, the Haitians must continue to be remembered.

“People are hungry and it’s not something that’s going to go away tomorrow,” she said. “The plight of these people is so dire. I worry that these people are going to be forgotten. Their voices need to be heard.”

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