

ACN Testimonies, 31.01.2023 / Nuit de Témoins / Haiti / Sœur Marjorie Boursiquot
CONTACT: press@acn-intl.org

Sister Marjorie Boursiquot FMA

Good evening. I'm happy to be with you this evening and I thank Aid to the Church in Need for having decided to give a voice to Haiti on such a special occasion. To speak about my country in a few minutes is a difficult task, because we live in a situation which is as complex as it is dramatic.

You will remember that in 2010 Haiti suffered one of the deadliest natural disasters of its history, an earthquake bringing about the deaths of more than 300,000 people, with thousands wounded and a country to reconstruct. Unfortunately, soon afterwards, it was a political earthquake which struck our country. The year 2021 represented "a dark series" with a succession of crises. There were confrontations between gangs on a level never seen before; the assassination of President Jovenal Moïse; the malfunction of parliament, a new earthquake causing at least 2,500 deaths; a health system "on the edge of collapse" and dramatic food insecurity.

This accumulation took place in a context where things had already greatly deteriorated, contributing to the proliferation of armed gangs. According to the report of the National Strategy for Disarmament, there were approximately 200 armed groups comprising more than 3,000 members, including teenagers and children...Today the violence in Haiti is reaching its paroxysm. Not a day passes without acts of murder, kidnapping, rape...The victims come from all social categories: journalists, politicians, children, doctors...

In 2022, roughly 1,400 people were killed, and more than 1,000 others kidnapped by these gangs. Thousands of families have had to flee Port-au-Prince into makeshift camps. Along National Route Number 2, which connects five areas of the capital, the bandits, having chased away the police, kill at will, kidnap and demand ransom. Today, the North and South are separated from the capital. Last summer, when I returned to the country, I was scared to see just how much life had changed in Port-au-Prince and its surroundings.

To go and visit my family, I had to take great risks. In many areas, there are roadblocks, burning tyres and heavily armed men. It's sad and revolting.

The Church in Haiti has also been a victim of this violence. Some parishes situated in no-go areas have been forced to close their doors because of the threats of the bandits. On 25 June 2022, in Port-au-Prince, we experienced the cowardly murder of Sister Luisa Dell'Orto, an Italian nun of the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld. For 20 years she had dedicated herself to the street children, giving them a place of welcome, a future and a

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hope. This death has shocked us all, especially the Conference of Religious which made its voice of protest heard.

The Church is also the victim of kidnappings. You will no doubt remember those ten Catholics – five priests and two religious, of whom two were French – who were kidnapped at the beginning of April 2022 and were released one month later. On 27 July 2022, the interim cathedral of Port-au-Prince was set on fire. In other religious institutions, the gangs return without any concerns to kill and kidnap. Many children are kidnapped after school, and some have been murdered because their parents were unable to pay the ransom.

Recently, some religious institutions and NGOs have become victims of acts of vandalism, of pillage and arson, including our brother Salesians. Some of them have told me of their anxieties before and after the violence because they were told that they were going to be attacked. But despite everything, they decided to continue their mission. In general, right across the country during these last months, the religious of Haiti have felt more and more threatened and sometimes attacked.

We ourselves, the Salesian sisters, arrived in 1935 in one of the very poor suburbs of the capital, La Saline. Today we have 17 communities with schools at all levels, professional centres, patronages, boarding schools. Our charism is education, and therefore our mission is with young people, especially the most disadvantaged, and women. These last years, the situation has really deteriorated. The return to school in 2022 was delayed several times.

We had to wait until the end of November until certain schools could discreetly welcome the children, sometimes without uniform so as not to draw attention to the Catholic Church. I still remember all the acts of violence and the terrifying scenes which we endured in 2018 – 2019 in the town of Jacmel in the south-east of the country. Our school was the target of anti-government demonstrators who prevented us from working and forced our students to take part in their demonstrations.

We lived through a Calvary. We constantly tried to protect our 2,000 students, especially the smallest ones, but some fainted under the effect of the tear gas or the fear. Just as in La Saline, we had a very flourishing work with lots of activities, but everything changed in the space of two years. In 2020, the number of students at our school dropped from 1,600 to 450 because of the insecurity of the area. One sister and two teachers miraculously escaped an attack on our car. It is in this climate of fear and insecurity that our sisters are called to carry out their mission, in welcoming each new day as a gift from God.



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However, what touches me most in this everyday reality which is so violent is the resilience of our people, the courage to keep going despite everything, to always start again, to laugh, to nourish their hope and above all their faith in God which is not shaken by dramas nor in the face of catastrophes. We are confident that beyond all suffering an endless joy is awaiting us, and that one day, God will bring our country out of this situation.

I hope with all my heart that in the course of this year, the political actors will find common ground to relieve the misery of our people. For that, we are counting on your support, your prayers and your generous contributions. Because in helping Aid to the Church in Need, you are showing solidarity and working together to improve the situation of Christians across the world. These are certainly serious times in our country, where for several years already it has proved almost impossible to organise elections.

I invite you to pray intensely for Haiti, so that the leaders can let themselves be guided by the power of the Holy Spirit. I remain convinced that these children and these young people who are involved with the gangs didn't dream of such a fate, but the extreme misery in our suburbs, added to exploitation by irresponsible and corrupt adults, pushed them to take up arms to survive.

Let's also pray for the children and the young people of the suburbs who are left to themselves, so that God in His mercy can send them people to help them, because it's only in paying more attention to the vulnerable classes that we can hope for a change in our country. For all these intentions I will pray a Hail Mary in my maternal language, in Créole. I thank you so much for your attention.

