

Seminarian from Haiti works with local Haitians

By Christine Bordelon
Clarion Herald

Oblates of Mary Immaculate Brother Weibert Merilan has only been in New Orleans five months, but already he has endeared himself to parishioners and those served by Our Lady of Guadalupe Church and the local Haitian community.

When the 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit Haiti Jan. 12, Brother Merilan, a native of Port-Au-Piment, Haiti, shared his despair with other local Haitians, not knowing what happened to friends and relatives.

"I wasn't able to eat or sleep," he said, thinking of his parents, sisters and brother, Oblate Father Laody Merilan, who lived five hours south of Port-Au-Prince. "The only thing I could do was pray."

He eventually learned that one sister broke her leg, another had a building block hit her head and his mother's cousin had died, but everyone else was okay.

Speaks Creole

A regular Gospel reader and homilist in Creole at the weekly Catholic Mass for Haitians at St. Katharine Drexel Church in New Orleans, Brother Merilan found local Haitians quickly turning to him, their native son, for emotional support after the earthquake. The majority of Haitians are Catholic.

Many, whose loved ones had died, were so distraught that they could not eat, sleep or even leave their homes. Brother Merilan provided food and faith.

"Some Haitians who live here (in New Orleans) have lost parents and are emotionally drained," he said. "It is a painful situation. They cannot drive or go to work. I try to do as much as I can for them. Spiritually, I am supporting them. ... What they need right now is psychological and spiritual help."

Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans has stepped in to offer help to local Haitians in the areas

of pastoral care, referrals to community partners, assistance with temporary protected status and gift cards, when available through donations.

Brother Merilan thinks more help is needed in all areas for Haitians living in New Orleans and back home. In Haiti, people need the basic resources such as food and water and money to conduct funerals and bury their dead.

"We have to find a way to show them love," he said. "That's the way we can heal them. We don't need paperwork and having people stand in lines for food. We need to get the food in the hands of those who distribute it properly."

He is hoping to secure additional provisions for future Haitians who are expected to settle here in the future.

"If you are grieving and don't have food or money or water (it's tough)," he said.



BR. MERILAN

Brother Merilan said his eight years of training for the priesthood, thus far, including philosophy, theology and formation in Mexico, have served him well during his one-year internship in New Orleans. He is scheduled for ordination as a priest in San Antonio in May 2011.

His experience has enlightened him and enabled him to keep level-headed when individuals turn to him for consultation and healing.

New Orleans wasn't on his list of locales he thought as ideal for his internship. He had Tijuana, Mexico, Miami, Fla., and Brazil down as sites where he could hone his Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking skills.

The Oblates chose to send him to New Orleans instead. Now, he understands why.

"They know that I love the poor, and every choice (of where to do an internship) I made was to help the poor,

too, but they sent me here," he said. "It was a blessing from God. It's not an easy place, but I enjoy it very much. I deal with the poor every day."

He had no idea that he would be working with a Haitian community when he arrived but knows that it was fortuitous, considering the earthquake and its aftermath.

"The Haitians feel like God sent me to help," he said since there was no other Catholic priest in town who could speak Creole.

Haitians throughout New Orleans – estimated to be approximately 5,000 strong – flocked to Brother Merilan, introducing themselves and cooking food for him before the earthquake. He, in turn, would direct them to needed services such as obtaining an identification card and help with furnishings.

Making a difference

"You can make a difference in a life," he said. "But, while I think I'm coming here to evangelize people, people evangelize me, both the poor and rich. It's really touched me."

He advises individuals who want to help earthquake victims to look to the lead of the Catholic Church to help Haitians. Catholic Relief Services has been selected by the Vatican as the lead disaster relief organization in Haiti. Food, shelter and hygiene products are short-term solutions, while permanent housing and economic development are long-term goals.

Brother Merilan also recommends funneling resources to Catholic religious working in the trenches in Haiti. Brother Merilan experienced the tremendous work by Catholic parishes and religious orders as a child in Haiti.

"If the money goes directly to parishes, they can help more," he said, giving an example of his order. "The Oblates know what to do, know what is needed."

Brother Merilan said his strong Catholic upbringing



Photos by Christine Bordelon | CLARION HERALD

Brother Weibert Merilan, completing a one-year internship at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in New Orleans, helped with Creole translations Feb. 6 for Haitians applying for Temporary Protected Status through Catholic

has led him to work with the poor and displaced. He says he has felt fortunate in life and wanted to give back to the poor.

"Every day being here (in New Orleans) makes me believe that God really wants me here," Brother Merilan said. "I never feel tired helping the Haitians because they don't have anyone speaking their language."

He said he's been learning

more compassion and how to treat everyone with dignity and respect as a brother.

"I have been blessed by meeting different people with needs," Brother Merilan said. "My goal is to serve them with all my heart and my life. ... I give my life to the church. I know I cannot save the world, but I can help."

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Catholic Relief Services in Haiti

Many of the ongoing CRS programs in Haiti focus on the country's most vulnerable groups, including orphans and people living with HIV.

BEFORE THE EARTHQUAKE

1954 First year of CRS work in Haiti

315 CRS staff in Haiti on a regular basis

\$28 million Invested into Haiti's programs in the most recent fiscal year

AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

\$30-\$40 million To be spent by Dec. 31, 2010

\$100 million Estimated to be spent by CRS for earthquake disaster

34 Additional temporary staff sent to Haiti
There are 12 additional workers in the Dominican Republic.

