


Issue No. 337

Nov. 2009 – Jan. 2010

Haiti

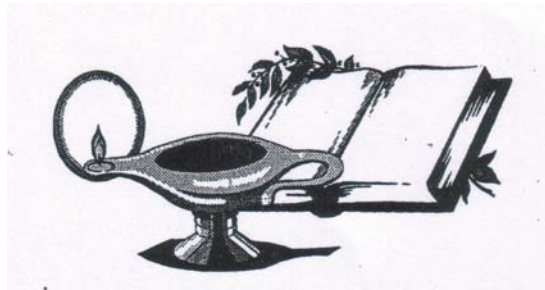
Editor: Harold F. Gross

ECUMENICAL 
 *DIGEST*
From The Church of Christ in Thailand

Editor's Desk:

The previous issue of "Ecumenical Digest" was the one dated October, 2009. Readers, I believe, are aware of the reason why the next issue has not appeared until now. We trust that we will be able to compile further issues in the coming year, although whether this can be done on a monthly basis remains to be seen. In the meantime your Editor thanks you all for your forbearance, and for the prayers and good wishes that have surrounded me during the operation and my recuperation thus far. H.F.G.

%%%%%%%%%



Over Christmas someone sent your Editor a bookmark, on which were written the words below. They are said to have come from Old St. Paul's Church, in Boston, Massachusetts and date from the year 1692. In spite of the antiquated language there is a lot of wisdom in these words. Think on these things, and adopt some of them as lamps to show the way along the road you travel in the year of grace 2010.

Go placidly amid the noise and the haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit. If you compare yourselves with others, you may become vain or bitter, for always there will be greater or lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your career; however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery. But let not this blind you to the virtue there is; many persons strive for high ideals and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is as perennial as the grass. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gratefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline be gentle to yourself.

You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars, and you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be, and whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life. Keep peace with your soul; with all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

BRICKS AND MORTAR

and

PEOPLE

Of course, no one questions the assertion which says that people, and the suffering they endure, have a paramount priority when it comes to relief, rehabilitation and recovery.

What struck your Editor about the article “ Why Helping Haiti Means Helping Ourselves ” (Nash Siamwalla, “Bangkok Post” 22.1.2010) was the way it expressed the unanimity and universality of the response evoked by the earthquake and its aftermath.

Written by a Buddhist, the article expresses a stance and a sentiment that could just as well have been written by a Christian commentator, with only minor emendations. It also calls to witness the representatives of two other world faiths, Father Thomas Merton, a Christian, and Mahatma Gandhi, a Hindu, in a response which embraces the whole human family.



Why helping Haiti means helping ourselves

Disasters do happen. In fact, if we look back in history, not one single corner of this world has been disaster-free.

The point, then, is not so much about how we can avoid disaster but how we can learn and grow from each experience. Provided that we survive, of course.

The magnitude of the recent earthquake in Haiti as well as its aftermath reminds the author of the 2004 Asian Tsunami. At that time, the whole country, and the world, came together as one to provide ongoing help of every nature. You could feel the continuing outpouring of care

and compassion through the air even though we were hundreds of miles away from the disaster scenes.

In Thong Lo, for example, different organisations set up make-shift donation centres to collect everything and anything from Sukhumvit dwellers. Local artists joined in and stood on Thong Lo's street side to pick up boxes of clothes and other daily necessities that were being dropped off by an endless line of cars.

The author remembered having this wish, “If only we Thais could come together to do good things like this all the time!”

Indeed, has it ever occurred to you why

we need a disaster of such magnitude to bring us to our senses?

Mr Obama seems to be able to explain quite nicely why. In his article in the recent issue of Newsweek, Mr Obama said, “... in these moments, when we are brought face to face with our own fragility, we rediscover our common humanity. We look into the eyes of another and see ourselves...”

There is an essence of Dhamma, in other words, Truth, in Mr Obama's musings. Disasters of such scale brings us face to face with the first of The Four Noble Truths, suffering. Suffering in The Four Noble Truths means much more than just your

(continued on pg. 3)

Why helping Haiti means helping ourselves (continued from pg.2)

average, everyday nuisances. It is the ultimate, unavoidable suffering that comes with existence: physical suffering, death and losing loved ones and cherished possessions.

In Buddhism, suffering can bring wisdom if one ingredient is present — mindfulness. When you mindfully absorb what is going on as it is, without judgment, wisdom will arise.

One of the wisdoms that would arise early on is the realisation that we are but one big family on this earth, and that no-one can escape from suffering. This realisation creates the feeling of oneness, of brotherhood and sisterhood, which in turn expedites the outpouring of compassion and the desire to help.

In Christianity, love is an important virtue. This also holds true in Buddhism although it is known more by its “technical term” as loving-kindness. The late D.T. Suzuki, the leading Zen master of the modern era who was credited with bringing Zen to the Western world ditched the technical term altogether when he addressed his Western audience. One Christian priest, Father Merton, remembered how Suzuki always said, “... The most important thing is

Love!” before saying the usual good-byes.

In one of his famous essays, Suzuki explained the interconnectedness of mankind in a quite interesting way, “... we must remember that the individual is non-existent when he is isolated from other individuals and cut off from the group to which he belongs, whether the group be biological, political or cosmological...”

“Mathematically stated, the number one can never be itself, unless it is related to other numbers which are infinite.

The existence of a single number by itself is unthinkable. Morally or spiritually, this means that the existence of each individual, whether or not he is conscious of the fact, owes something to an infinitely expanding and all- enwrapping net of loving relationship, which takes up not only every one of us but everything that exists. The world is a great family and we, each one of us, are its members...”

With this in mind, it is time we ask ourselves what we can do for our brothers and sisters in Haiti. Find out from the Red Cross or any other organisations near you what you can

do. Lord Buddha said there is no act of giving that is considered too small if done wisely. The important part is your good intention.

When we are able to mindfully see something as it really is, said Suzuki, love would flow out. It is also this love, Suzuki emphasised, that makes us feel that we are responsible for whatever things, good or evil, go on in our human community.

“Be the change you want to see in this world,” said Gandhi. You, too, can be the change you want to see. Set aside some quiet time to contemplate what happened to our fellow humans in Haiti. Your wisdom that arises from that quiet contemplation will guide you. You would be surprised to learn that your capacity to help exceeds what you previously thought.

By helping our friends in Haiti, we are helping ourselves grow in the understanding of life and the recognition of our duty. For it is only when we engage in some kind of sacrifice and immerse fully in a cause bigger than ourselves that we would reach our highest human potential.

See you in two weeks’ time. Until then, let us stay mindful and giving.

But, while people have an undisputed priority in the Haitian disaster, or in one that occurs anywhere in the world, such events, inevitably also disrupt the lives and prospects of people by destroying opportunities for their development in the future. Bricks and mortar - buildings - do not merely represent opportunity and community. They also make them possible. People come together - to learn or to worship – or for whatever purpose – and universities and churches facilitate the achievement of those objectives. Long-term, their replacement is essential also, and costly. People’s lives, and the bricks and mortar which symbolize a community’s values and aspirations all cry out for rejuvenation and restoration.

We can but hope and pray that the world will look with compassion on the nation of Haiti, and speedily do all it can to give back life to its people and institutions.

Thousands of dwellings must be re-built to restore some normality to the lives of the people. The two articles (“Bangkok Post” 19.1.2010) on the next page are indicative of the kind of restoration at the institutional level the people of Haiti will also have to cope with.

MANY PRAY OUTSIDE SHATTERED CHURCHES

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Survivors of Haiti's devastating earthquake gave thanks to God on Sunday, in churches if they were still standing, or on the street, out of fear of dangerous aftershocks.

"It has been a week for thanking God for protecting us. We are suffering a lot. Praying helps us," said evangelical worshipper Anne Pierre, 64, who lost her home but whose family is safe "thanks to God".

So many churches were damaged in Tuesday's quake which wrecked Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, that religious Haitians sheltering in tent cities were asking Catholic priests to hold Masses at their makeshift camps.

The city's once-majestic Notre Dame cathedral lay in ruins, but some people went to pray near its rubble for the Roman Catholic priests and parishioners killed when it toppled.

They also grieved the loss of the beloved leader of Haiti's Catholic Church, Archbishop of Port-au-Prince Monsignor Joseph Serge Miot, who died when his residence collapsed and he fell to the ground outside, smashing his head.

"I was totally numb when I saw his house crumbled," Vatican envoy Bernadito Auza said at his hilltop home, which was not damaged.

"The loss is unimaginable," he said of the loss of Catholic churches, convents and seminaries. "It will take us decades to replace what we have lost."

Among those who died were dozens of children being handed food donations at a church in the nearby town of Legane. Hundreds of thousands of Haitians have slept out in the streets, singing hymns for comfort and praying in the darkness.

About 80% of Haitians are Catholic and 16% Protestant, though more than half the population are believed to practice voodoo, a religion with roots in Africa.

Many Haitians have turned to God for an explanation of their impoverished country's worst catastrophe in living memory. **REUTERS**

MINISTER SAYS EDUCATION HAS COLLAPSED

PORT-AU-PRINCE: Half of Haiti's schools and its three main universities were destroyed or badly damaged in the earthquake, but classes must resume even in tents to help children overcome trauma, the education minister said.

"What we have seen is the total collapse of the Haitian education system," Joel Jean-Pierre said at the government's temporary headquarters in a police station. About half the nation's 15,000 primary schools and 1,500 secondary schools were hit in the quake, he said, creating an enormous challenge for the western hemisphere's poorest nation.

The three main universities in Port-au-Prince were also "almost totally destroyed", Mr. Jean-Pierre said.

Already desperately short of resources and struggling with poor infrastructure, Haiti now has to cope with its pulverisation from one of the world's worst earthquakes. The government says most of Port-au-Prince will have to be rebuilt, and between 100,000 and 200,000 people died in Tuesday's disaster.

"At the time of the disaster, just before 5pm, there were many schools still working because this was the second session of the day. And the universities were all still working. So many, many people died inside," the minister said.

The priority now was to somehow get classes going again, he said.

"I don't know how, perhaps in tents or the open-air. But even in wartime, schools must function."

Classes could be a focus for post-traumatic stress help and for feeding, the minister said.

"For the mental health of the population, the children and students need to go back to normal life, he said.

Mr. Jean-Pierre said his own ministry collapsed, with 25 rescued alive so far from 100 people inside at the time.

"The destruction of the university in Port-au-Prince and of numerous secondary and primary schools in Tuesday's earthquake, and the human loss of teachers and students, is a catastrophic setback for a country already hit by other disasters," the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation said in a statement. **REUTERS**