

# Deacon Mortel describes need in Haiti

At mid-day Feb. 4, while most in the Mid-Atlantic concerned themselves with the arrival of a record-setting blizzard, Deacon Rodrigue Mortel sat in his office at the Catholic Center and considered a crisis that requires more than stocking up on bread and milk.

Deacon Mortel is the director of the Office of Missions for the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the Baltimore Haiti Project. He is a retired doctor, native of Haiti and benefactor of his homeland, where his latest visit was part mission of mercy, part fact-finding trip.

Deacon Mortel was in Haiti from Jan. 20 to Feb. 1. Weekdays, he volunteered his services at an open-air post-op clinic outside St. Vincent de Paul Hospital in Port-au-Prince, near the epicenter of the Jan. 12 earthquake that killed an estimated 200,000 in the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere.

On his first weekend, he stole away to St. Marc, his hometown and the location of The Good Samaritans School, which he founded. On the second weekend, he ventured farther north, to the city of Gonaives, where he founded The Cardinal Keeler School.

Both are in the Diocese of Gonaives, where 18 parishes in the archdiocese have adopted sister parishes. The need there is compounding by the day, as refugees flee the havoc in Port-au-Prince, to the south.

“By the time I left, there were an additional 140,000 people in the Diocese of Gonaives,” Deacon Mortel said. “In St. Marc alone, there were 40,000. It’s going to get worse.”

It’s not as if Haitians leave their fears behind in Port-au-Prince. The combination of poor building standards and concerns over aftershocks led a United Nations agency to recommend that no one sleep indoors at least through the end of February.

"I never slept inside, I slept on cement for two weeks," said Deacon Mortel, who is in his early 70s. "The fear is justified. Thursday (Jan. 29) night, I went into a building to take a shower. I was getting ready to shave when I heard a rumble. I run outside, a water truck was starting its engine.

"This is how afraid people are. I don't have post-traumatic stress syndrome, but a lot of people do."

Every year, Deacon Mortel welcomes into the faith dozens of Haitian children, but plans for one such trip next month are on hold.

"My March trip included the baptism of 40 children from Good Samaritans School," Deacon Mortel said. "It takes two years to prepare them for baptism and first Communion. Baptism occurs in the school building, where we celebrate Mass periodically.

"People keep finding cracks in the school. It has to be evaluated, to see if the building is safe. School is going to be out so long, students are not going to be ready (for baptism). We'll postpone until they're ready, but ... people are so traumatized, not sure whether they want to return to Good Samaritans."

Deacon Mortel showed photos he had taken of a construction site in Gonaives, where the foundation had been poured for a high school.

"I have three schools down there, and I'm building another one," he said. "Now, I need another two or three high schools. There are no good schools left in Port-au-Prince, they all collapsed. Everyone is concerned about Port-au-Prince, but they forget what is happening up north.

"Somebody has got to care for the people who are migrating from the capital."

Much of his hope lies in the archdiocese, where parishes such as St. John the Evangelist in Hydes and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton in Crofton have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to feed and educate the children of sister parishes in the Diocese of Gonaives.

"I would hope that the need is so clear now," Deacon Mortel said, "that more

parishes will come forward and support the Baltimore Haiti Project.”

*More information about the Baltimore Haiti Project can be found at <https://www.archbalt.org/ministries-offices/missions-office/outreach/index.cfm>.*