

Haiti pastor says food is critical need

Father Murat Dorcent's impoverished parish in Verrettes, Haiti, is more than two hours away from Port-au-Prince, but the devastation of January's massive earthquake has caused thousands of refugees to flood the area in search of food, shelter and spiritual support.

"In one week after the earthquake, I did 150 funerals in my church," said Father Dorcent, speaking to a crowd of about 40 archdiocesan employees who gathered Jan. 29 at the Catholic Center in Baltimore to hear his firsthand account of conditions in Haiti.

"So many people came with their dead to be buried," said Father Dorcent, noting that all but one of the more than 20 Catholic churches in Port-au-Prince were destroyed in the earthquake. "The smell was overwhelming."

Father Dorcent is pastor of Our Lady of the Nativity, located within Baltimore's sister Diocese of Gonaives.

He visited Baltimore Jan. 28-31 to speak at the weekend Masses at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, Ilchester, his sister parish since 2002. The pastor also celebrated Mass at Our Lady of Perpetual Help School Jan. 28, visiting students of each class afterward.

The priest told Catholic Center employees that his parishioners have taken in hundreds of refugees. Yet, he lamented that there are many more who cannot be accommodated.

"We have to give food, but food is really expensive," said Father Dorcent, who is personally accommodating more than 20 refugees at his home. "It's really difficult. People are dying of hunger and distribution is really hard. People are fighting over who gets what."

The emotional stresses on those who have lost everything can be overwhelming, he

said.

“Imagine losing your mother, your father, your family and everything you have in just 25 seconds,” he said. “How do you think of continuing? It’s really difficult.”

Our Lady of Perpetual Help is stepping up to help its sister community. Parishioners donated \$14,000 over the weekend to help meet emergency, short-term needs. The parish also donated \$10,000 from a special account reserved to aid Haiti. The parish school raised more than \$2,500, designating the money for Haitian relief through Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services. School children are also planning a Lenten fundraising project to raise money for Father Dorcent’s parish and other outreach efforts.

“It speaks to the generosity of our people here,” said Father Erik Arnold, Our Lady of Perpetual Help’s pastor. “So many had already given to the archbishop’s emergency appeal benefitting Catholic Relief Services, yet they gave more. They have a real concern for the people of Haiti.”

Our Lady of Perpetual Help parishioners have raised more than \$300,000 for their sister parish since 2002 – the second-most generous financial offering of any parish in the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

The money is used to underwrite teacher salaries and support a food program at one of Father Dorcent’s six parish schools – an educational institution located in a poor mountain community where only about 10 percent of the parents are able to pay the \$10 annual tuition.

Father Dorcent told The Catholic Review his schools are already at capacity, serving 1,300 children. In the wake of the destruction of many Port-au-Prince schools, Father Dorcent expects an influx of students and is unsure how he will accommodate them.

Nancy Malloy, principal of Our Lady of Perpetual Help School, said her students have great concern for the people of Haiti and connected with Father Dorcent on an emotional level.

“They’ve seen the images on the TV and he made it real for them,” she said. “The

teachers tell me the children were intently focused on what he had to say.”

Throughout his visit, Father Dorcent reiterated how much he appreciates the generosity of the American people, who are making a real difference in Haiti.

“The problems of one person are the problems of everyone,” he said. “We are one world, one race, one humanity.”