

Haitians hold high hopes for resurrection of country at Easter Mass

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti - Joel Samson showed up for Mass early Easter morning at what's left of Our Lady of the Assumption Cathedral in the center of the Haitian capital, just as he has on most Sundays for the last 16 years.

Joining about 250 faithful who gathered for the liturgy under a large white tarp in front of what was perhaps Haiti's best-known landmark to celebrate Christ's resurrection, Samson, 26, looked at the rose-colored walls of the cathedral. It was hardly the church he has always known.

"Before the earthquake, it was nice, really beautiful," Samson said of the cathedral. "But after what happened on January 12, everything has become bad inside. There's not even a seat for people."

The destruction of the cathedral symbolized the suffering of Good Friday to many of the worshippers. For them, suffering was nothing new.

Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Throughout its history, despotic rulers have pillaged government structures and confiscated foreign aid for their own use. Up to 80 percent of people remain unemployed today. On top of it all, the earthquake claimed 230,000 lives and left more than 1 million people homeless.

On Easter, Samson and the others gathered, praying that their country would experience its own resurrection and renewal.

Samson has many friends among the cathedral chorus. At 150 members, the chorus was the cathedral's largest choir. But one-third of them perished in the earthquake.

Loss is pervasive. Choir member Joincent Bon Ami's three children died in the earthquake. He said he still needs much more help to put his life back together.

Yet as the choir marched from the broken church to the white tent for Mass, he smiled broadly in his white robe and red sash.

"I always liked this church because this church makes me complete," he said, "I have the strength and I believe God can (change things here)."

"They have joy. It's the moment when we can hope," observed Father Glandas Marie Erick Toussaint, a priest assigned to the cathedral.

"We must say hello to hope because everything is not finished after Jan. 12. We have joy and life to start over," he added.

During the homily at Mass, it was as if the clergy went to extra lengths to emphasize themes of hope and renewal.

Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Lafontant, apostolic administrator of the Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince, spoke of liberation and the hope that comes after suffering, emphasizing that those who are living must continue on in spite of the challenges posed by the earthquake.

"It was a good message," said Madame Solange Amelise, a lifelong member of the cathedral parish. "Jesus is risen, so of course I have hope."

Hope for herself and for the rebuilding of a new cathedral as well as for a new Haiti.

"This is our mother church, the mother of Port-au-Prince," said Wesley Pierre, his grizzled white hair pressed close on his head.

"We can rebuild it in a little while," he said.

But Father Toussaint said rebuilding a new cathedral will be complicated and largely out of the hands of parishioners.

"The plans to rebuild start first with the government and the church authorities," he said. "Is the government going to reconstruct the city where it is and the cathedral where it is?"

Those are questions too far from the heart and mind of the elderly Pierre, who on

Easter morning shared one simple thought.

“Even though the earthquake crushed the cathedral,” he said, “I will always love it.”