

Memories of grief, hope for future: Haitians pray, one year after quake

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti – In front of a national cathedral that lay in rubble, Catholic leaders marked the anniversary of Haiti's deadly earthquake by praying for its victims and calling for reconstruction of this tattered Caribbean country.

"This tragedy took everything. ... and sickness and death is still hitting" Haitians, said Cardinal Robert Sarah, the papal envoy, president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unum and the main celebrant at the Mass. "We call on the international community ... to develop the country, to develop Haiti."

Throughout the earthquake-torn capital, Haitians flocked to churches for prayer services Jan. 12, the anniversary of the earthquake. Schools and many businesses closed for the day, which was declared a national holiday and a day of prayer.

Thousands attended the morning service outside the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption. Haiti's prime minister, presidential candidates and musicians sat in tents flanked by choirs and scores of residents.

Many stood under a cloudless sky in the blaring Haitian sun, singing and praying. Others sat barefoot on blankets, lost in the bitter memories of a year of grief.

"This is a day for us to remember the people we lost, but also it's a day to be thankful that we made it through this year," said Pierre Jean as she sat on a blanket in front of a UNICEF tent. She paused a moment, holding back tears. "It was a horrible year."

Jean's brother and mother died when their home collapsed in the magnitude 7 quake that killed at least 230,000 and left more than 1 million homeless when it struck at 4:53 p.m.

Among the dead was Port-au-Prince Archbishop Joseph Serge Miot, who was remembered at the mass as a man who loved life and suffered alongside poor Haitians. The appointment of his successor, Bishop Guire Poulard of Les Cayes, 69,

was announced at the Mass as well as at the Vatican.

The earthquake began a year of suffering that ended with more than 3,600 dead from a cholera epidemic, 810,000 earthquake victims still living in makeshift camps and rubble from collapsed buildings sitting at nearly every turn in the capital, Port-au-Prince.

Bishops from around the world urged Haitians to continue to be faithful and optimistic, despite the trying circumstances.

Cardinal Sarah read a telegram from Pope Benedict XVI, who told Haitians he hoped international financial aid and volunteer assistance would continue, but also that “the Haitian people will be the chief protagonists of their present and their future.”

New Orleans Archbishop Gregory M. Aymond, who was in Haiti representing the U.S. bishops’ conference at the Mass, read a letter from New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, conference president.

“As we all gather to prayerfully remember the dead, as well as those still grieving and suffering, we call on the Lord’s unfailing presence to strengthen us all,” said Archbishop Dolan’s letter.

In his own remarks, Archbishop Aymond pledged the bishops’ “support for the rebuilding program the archbishops of Haiti have begun.”

International support will be key as the nation enters a critical post-earthquake phase, Archbishop Bernardito Auza, apostolic nuncio to Haiti, told Catholic News Service after the Mass.

“It’s a day of remembrance and looking back, but it should also mark the beginning of a time when the reconstruction process can begin in earnest,” he said.

Archbishop Auza said the Haitian church has dozens of planned projects, including the construction of new churches.

“I’m looking forward to those projects starting this year. It’s incredibly important,” he said.

The pace of reconstruction has disappointed Haitians and drawn criticism that the international community has not moved fast enough with the billions of dollars pledged by foreign governments and citizens.

That frustration was apparent at the Mass as comments that the international aid agencies should move more quickly and work more closely together drew applause.

At the end of the Mass, thousands of attendees poured into the streets, singing in Creole and praying in front of the large cross that remains intact in front of the once-majestic cathedral that the earthquake reduced to rubble, accented by rusting iron rebar.

As Jean said, the horrible year has ended and “Haiti still has its future.”