

HAVING LESS THAN NOTHING: Haiti in the Aftermath of Matthew

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Port Au Prince, Haiti—I never realized it was possible to have less than nothing until Hurricane Matthew ripped through Haiti on October 3rd.

In its wake, the category 4 storm left the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere even poorer. It destroyed homes, crops, farm animals, lives, and entire communities.

It left everyone bracing for the aftermath—conditions feared more than the storm itself: shortages of food and water, escalating costs for housing material, and outbreaks of life threatening diseases like malaria and cholera.

What could Matthew leave behind besides devastation—further social, political and economic instability in an already unstable and fragile country?

I am a volunteer living and working in Haiti with a ministry supported by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth (based in Convent Station, NJ). In the days following the hurricane, I was able to visit some of the hardest hit areas; not ones seen on the news along the coast, but ones more isolated up in the mountains close to where I live.

Having visited Haiti on six different occasions, and now calling it home, I thought I had seen the worst of the slums, walked in the poorest of neighborhoods, and seen the gravest depths of despair that only exists on the faces of the most destitute. I thought it impossible that a people who had nothing, could possibly ever have even less. But I was wrong.

I didn't think anyone who just had a chair to sit on could have less but they do when that one chair is splintered into a thousand pieces. I didn't think that you could have anything less if all you had was a stained mattress to sleep on but you can when that mattress is under six inches of mud. I didn't think you could have anything less when you only had enough food to give your child a meal every other day but you can when what little you had is now moldy.

I didn't think you could have anything less than a grass hut to call home but you can if it is missing its walls. And, I didn't think you could have anything less than a dirt floor to stand on but you can when you are now standing in a foot of mud in what used to be a single room home that housed your entire family.

I, like you, have heard the stories about how little of the billions of dollars donated to Haiti after the earthquake ever got into the hands of its victims but instead lined the pockets of Haitian governmental officials or was wasted by large foundations and NGOs. But I, maybe unlike you, have seen first-hand how, in some instances, that it is actually true.

There are what we call "monopoly houses" in Haiti, some 20 miles outside of Port au Prince, which cost millions of dollars to build and was to be the home of 3,000 families displaced by the earthquake. Six years later you can drive by and see a few squatters but no community; it's a ghost town. And, I can assure you, the village in which I have my ministry has never seen a dime of that money.

Many are skeptical about sending any more money to Haiti; I get it, I really do. But, please do not further punish the Haitian people for the failures of their government or the misguided, even though well intended, efforts of individuals or organizations that have tried to help in the past. Please don't turn your back on a people who have been the victims of unimaginable hardships and disasters because you may be their ONLY hope!!

There is a saying in my part of the world: "If you want your money to go into the hands it is intended to help, give it to a Catholic nun." I currently live in Haiti with Catholic missionaries and can vouch that this is true. I have also been fortunate to live in several religious communities and can attest that these women only care about two things: social justice and serving the poor.

I have been blessed to work side-by-side with Sister Dianne Moore, Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, for some time now. Sister Dianne has her hand in so many things: medical clinic, goat project, English classes, women's groups, water project, hurricane relief...but her greatest contribution and gift to people is her love and compassion. It is her gentle touch or hug to a sick patient, a balloon to a crying child, or her encouraging words to a person who is down or discouraged, that has the greatest impact. Sister Dianne has learned how truly to be present to someone and that is her true ministry - a Ministry of Presence which is the greatest salve to heal whatever is broke or wounded.

If you are compelled by your compassion and generosity to help the hurricane victims in Haiti and want to make sure your donation gets into the right hands. The Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth have set up a GoFundMe page at <https://www.gofundme.com/HaitiSOC> or if you choose, you can send your check to: *Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth, Haiti Hurricane Fund, P.O. Box 476, Convent Station, NJ 07961. Make checks payable to Sisters of Charity/Haiti Hurricane Fund.*

(Dawn Colapietro currently lives in Haiti as a volunteer with the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth. She is a social worker, a chaplain and a graduate of VCU who worked for 25 years in Richmond serving her community in the non-profit sector. She can be reached at: d.colapietro@yahoo.com.)