

The Fermenting of Wines and Revolutions, Fr. Rick Addresses the Political Situation in Haiti

February 15, 2019/ Mallory Martin



Dear family and friends,

Social and political tensions in Haiti have reached their flash points over the past number of months, and we have been living, with more intensity these days, what seems like the dangerous and cynical unraveling of a nation.

The spiral of violence and destruction is both tragic and maddening.

The simply stated reason for all of this is that the cost of living has become impossible,
in a country where it was already hard enough to stay alive.

As usual, far from sheltering in place, we are seeking out the wounded and bringing them to our hospitals, doing our best to be present and helpful to the people, picking up some of the dead on the streets, and delivering water by the truckloads to the poor all around the city (one of whom I heard say today , "I thought hunger was bad. I would much rather be hungry for food than for water.")

Hard to understand, I know, unless you have stood in those parched shoes.

We use our ambulances to change shifts at our hospitals.

They usually are allowed through burning barricades.

There is not always a guarantee, and we have had some casualties (wounded staff).

Sounds officious, "wounded staff."

Most are ten and twenty years veterans with us, like Ketly our hospital cook.

She was hit with both fists and stones.

You can imagine that we also feel each of her bruises, and find that her initial despondency also pulls us all down, very low.

Ketly's injuries happened this way:

The first set of her blows happened when she was walking to the hospital at 4am to be on time to make breakfast for the children.

For many of our workers, travel on foot is the only option. (Raphael and Domo come every day on foot from Croix des Bouquets.)

While Ketly crossed many barricades without too much problem, it was not true of the last one.

Later in the day, when she was pelted with stones, she was a victim of circumstance.

The ambulance she was in, doing the change of shift, came to a barricade where a rock thrower was just shot and killed by the police.

The angry crowd wanted our ambulance to take the body, but the driver could not since it was full of workers.

Also, because if he really was killed by the police, it is a forensic case and needed legal investigations.

An angry scene developed. The ambulance was held hostage, and then released when some others in the crowd defended our hospital.

But as the ambulance pulled away, it was pelted with rocks, smashing first a window and then Ketly.

Sticks and stones do break your bones.

We also use the ambulances, and my truck, to get our water trucks through the barricades, to bring water to other hospitals and orphanages who have run out of water and cannot function without it. Also to desperate neighborhoods.

Since most stores, banks, and businesses remain closed, we are hoarding cash where we can, and we are obliged to pay black market prices for necessities.

The motorcycle, and your two feet, have become the best way to get around town.

This works alright if you are not delivery 3,000 gallons of water, or bringing home the wounded, or a corpse.

But even motorcycles have become expensive and dangerous.

One of the mothers at our hospital needed to go to the Red Cross to try to get blood for her son with cancer.

The motorcycle asked for 1000 Gourdes, which would be equivalent 10% of what would be considered a minimum monthly wage in Haiti.

This amount at the current exchange rate would be US \$12 for this blood ride, which is a fortune for the poor people of Haiti.

Calculate this out to the \$120 per month minimum wage (for 40 hour work week).

Pathetic by all humane standards.

The driver asks for this much because he has to pay dearly for gas, and because of the bribes he has to give at barricades, with no guarantee that he or the mom will get through unscathed.

I was met by a nurse this morning, the very second I came out of my room at 530am to face the day, who told me that both the driver and the mother were robbed, and left in the street, and the motorcycle itself was stolen.

This small story is the kind of thing the people are living, in every direction, for as far as you can see.

As a distraction to the unraveling of the nation, and to the ongoing challenges to solve impossible problems, I have started the hobby of making mead at night, with honey from our own bees.

As a further distraction, I am also enjoying drinking it.

Mead is the oldest fermented alcohol in human history.

I sometimes wonder if Adam and Eve made mead, and then also made poor choices after it's use.

If you know anything about bees, they are phenomenally social. They give their lives to the queen and the community, working in spectacular harmonious patterns. They communicate through dance, and know how to give each other directions by describing the position of the sun, and they make the splendid golden nectar we call honey.

But when bees go berserk, their whole focus is on killing, and they give their own lives by inflicting the sting. A honey bee cannot survive inflicting its venom.

A society patterned on order, purpose, and shared wellbeing is a wonder.

But this can tilt, wobble and fall to destruction, when any part of it becomes singularly self serving.

During this whole tragedy, over riding voices are absent.

Yes for sure the talking heads never stop commenting on what is about to happen and what just happened, but I am talking about voices that would address the people with reason and higher vision.

"You must organize for a better life, but you CANNOT kill to do so. You must speak out for your rights, for needed change, but you CANNOT speak hatred and lies. You must build a better tomorrow for yourselves, your family, your country, but you CANNOT do it by destroying the property of others."

There is plenty to say.

The ten commandments,

and the eight beatitudes

would be a great starting point.

And you don't even need to mention your political opinion.

When I was a young priest, I lived through the kind of violence we see now, and I was still convinced that we could, and would, change things. This conviction is life saving for the young.

Now in more senior years, as I live through the same kinds of violence again and again, I am still convinced that we can, and will, change things. This conviction is life saving for the older generations.

It's understandable- the fear, the frustration, the feelings of futility.

In the Gospel reading at Mass this morning, Jesus tries to get away from it all, and didn't want anyone even to know where he was. Then, when his much needed peace was disturbed by a woman in need, a very unkind dialogue followed.

But her need was great, her faith was greater, and his fatigue paled in the light of these. His help was immediate, and final.

The lesson is, we do the right thing, in season and out of season, without caving in to frustration, futility and despair.

On another note, I will tell you how I would solve these current riots. I would lower the prices of everything by half.

But then again, what do I know.

I better get back to my next batch of mead.

Morning will come soon enough.

Let's not give up on humanity.

Let's not forget our prayers.

Fr Rick Frechette CP, St Valentine's Day 2019, Port au Prince