

Human Rights in Haiti: Remembering Father Gerry

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The Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti's (IJDH) Brian Concannon knew him well, and posted this on IJDH's web site on his passing:

"Reverend Gerard Jean-Juste (1947 - 2009), a tireless advocate for justice for Haitians in Haiti and the US, passed away today, May 27, 2009. Fr. Gerry's passing is a great loss to all of us at IJDH and BAI (Bureau des Avocats Internationaux in Haiti)."

In an on-air interview, Concannon added:

"So every time there's been a dictatorship in Haiti in the last 20 years he was one of the top people out there resisting it. He was also a leader in the United States where we've got a problem of treating Haitian immigrants discriminatorily. He not only achieved results including ending all three of those dictatorships, but what's probably (most) important was how he achieved (them) - because he was a steadfast proponent of nonviolent tactics including sit-ins, demonstrations, popular education, those kinds of things. He was very effectively able to channel the Haitian people's desire for justice into concrete activities."

Friends, associates, bloggers, and many others paid tribute to this champion of the poor and oppressed, a Liberation Theologian, and ardent Fanmi Lavalas supporter - the party President Jean-Bertrand Aristide headed until US Marines ousted him to exile on February 29, 2004.

William Grimes in The New York Times headlined: "The Rev. Gerard Jean-Juste, Champion of Haitian Rights in US, Dies at 62."

In a glowing, moving tribute, Directeur du Centre Haitien's Professor Bell Angelot wrote:

"Like Jeremiah the prophet, he knew the inside of a prison. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. he preached love. Like Mahatma Gandhi he lived non-violence and overcame violence. Just as Moses never reached the Promised Land, he too, did not see the day of the complete liberation of the Haitian people."

"Father Jean-Juste was always coupled to what's just and morally right. A powerful spirit has left this earth, and our mourning darkens the whole city....But though the prophet is gone, his light remains. (He) was one of the pioneers of Liberation Theology alongside Jean- Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, Leonardo Boff of Nicaragua and Oscar Romero of Salvador....."

“He is not dead/He lives on! His body succumbed to the vicissitudes: to pains that even defied science, to evil his heart and brain could no longer bring order to, to political shocks that his conviction and his morale could no longer endure. In the name of the larger Lavalas Movement, we bid farewell to (this blessed man) and wish him a good journey....Thank you very much brother/compatriot, we shall continue to be the Sentinels.”

Reverend Jesse Jackson knew Jean-Juste since the 1980s and once traveled with him to see the Pope in Rome. Expressing sorrow, he said: “The burden he puts upon those who remain is to continue his unfinished business. He lived in the eye of the gun, but without fear....he is a martyr whose legacy will live a long time.”

In a recorded statement from exile in South Africa, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide said Father Gerry “will always live in the thoughts of those who love him. It is there you triumph over death” and the evil he resisted to the end.

Others said “I’ve lost a brother....My father! My friend! A role model for the rights of the less fortunate.”

Bill Quigley called him a “Jesus-like revolutionary. In jail and out, he preached liberation of the poor, release of prisoners, human rights for all, and a fair distribution of wealth....(He) was a scourge to the unelected coup governments of Haiti, who served at the pleasure, and usually the direction, of the US government. (In America) he fought against government actions (to deport) black Haitians while welcoming Cubans and Nicaraguans and others....Mon pere, our brother, your spirit....lives on.”

Fr. Gerry worked tirelessly for the less fortunate, was the first Haitian ordained a priest by the US Catholic Church, and according to attorney Ira Kurzban who represented his Miami-based Haitian Refugee Center:

“He was a person who spent his whole life committed to justice for the poor” despite being harassed, intimidated, falsely charged with murder, illegally possessing weapons and conspiracy, and jailed twice by the US-installed Latortue government. Then in December 2005, he was diagnosed with leukemia in prison.

Medical anthropologist, healer, humanitarian, co-founder of Partners in Health to treat the poor, and board member of the Institute for Justice & Democracy in Haiti Dr. Paul Farmer broke the news at the time saying:

“I visited Father Gerry just before Christmas because I had heard reports that his health was deteriorating...I examined him, obtained the necessary specimens and brought them to the laboratory. When his neck first began to swell some months ago, he thought it was due to a beating he’d received in jail. But the swelling on both sides of his neck increased, followed by fatigue and swollen lymph nodes elsewhere.”

“A definitive diagnosis is in: Father Gerry has (what later was confirmed as chronic lymphocytic leukemia). So he is not only a prisoner of conscience, one of hundreds in Haiti, but a sick prisoner who needs more than prayers and letters of support. He needs proper medical care and, probably chemotherapy,” hard to get anywhere in Haiti and impossible “in a Haitian prison.” Farmer said his symptoms were progressing rapidly, could damage his

immune system, would make him susceptible to common prison infections and diseases, and might end up killing him.

On October 13, 2004, Haitian police arrested him while feeding hungry children in his parish on charges of being “a threat to public order,” or in other words no charges, so they made one up. After several weeks, he was released following outcries from supporters, but it was only the beginning of his ordeal.

In July 2005, he was arrested again on charges of murdering journalist Jacques Roche even though he was out of the country at the time of the killing. On July 28, Amnesty International named him a prisoner of conscience, its highest honor. On January 26, 2006, the murder charges were dropped, but he was indicted on illegal weapons possession and conspiracy.

Then on January 29, he was provisionally released on humanitarian grounds to receive proper medical care in Miami.

On September 11, 2006, the University of San Francisco awarded him an honorary doctorate in recognition of his human rights and social justice work. On November 26, 2007, the Port-au-Prince Court of Appeals heard challenges to his illegal weapons and conspiracy charges but declined to dismiss them, even though the prosecutor said no evidence existed.

Finally, in June 2008, the remaining charges were dropped. All were bogus and intended only to intimidate and harass, disrupt his social justice work, and remove a persistent thorn – a beloved humanitarian and champion of the poor from continuing his work and speaking forcefully against what former Prime Minister Yvon Neptune called Haiti’s “political machine of injustice” and all forms of violence.

In September 2005, Port-au-Prince’s archbishop Joseph Serge Miot suspended Fr. Gerry from his parish duties at the city’s St. Claire Catholic Church on grounds he might run for president, something the Vatican prohibits. Jean-Juste was in prison at the time, couldn’t register if he considered running, and immediately appealed. The Vatican, however, supported Miot. The suspension remained, and likely it was less about politics than the Liberation Theology Fr. Gerry practiced.

Rome has long supported some of the most repressive dictators globally. In Haiti also even though it excommunicated Francois (Papa Doc) Duvalier in 1959 for expelling clergy critical of his rule. However, in 1966, Pope Paul IV capitulated, reversed the excommunication, and gave Duvalier veto power over Haitian clerical appointments.

The Vatican hardly notices what Haitians now endure, their deep poverty and deprivation, and how oppressively Washington-backed governments treat them. Only humanitarian opposition engenders its ire, the kind no one practiced better than Fr. Gerry.

He was born in Cavaillon, Haiti in 1947, grew up in Les Cayes in the Southeast, studied for the priesthood in Canada, was ordained in 1971, then returned to Haiti to minister to the poor. After refusing to sign a loyalty oath to the Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier government later in 1971, he came to America, worked at the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in Boston, and earned two degrees from Northeastern University – in engineering technology in 1974 and civil engineering in 1977.

In 1979, he co-founded the Miami Haitian Refugee Center to help thousands of Haiti’s poor find asylum in America from repression and deep poverty at home. International law

protects them, but it hardly mattered then or now.

Being poor and black, Haitians aren't wanted so they're denied the same rights afforded more favored immigrants like Europeans and Cubans. They're rounded up on arrival, denied refuge, placed in detention under deplorable conditions, and treated like criminals before most often being deported back home. Fr. Gerry worked tirelessly on their behalf and against America's discriminatory immigration policies. In 1980, he told the Miami Herald:

"Haitian people had no rights in Haiti, and they have no rights here. They are starving, they are being separated from their families, they cannot work."

Haitian Women of America's executive director, Marleine Bastien, told the AP:

"We were out in the streets, demonstrating nearly every day on behalf of other Haitian immigrants. I can still in my mind's eye see (Fr. Gerry) lying on the ground when buses were taking refugees without process - lying there in the path of the buses."

In 1980, a US District Court ruled for the Center against the Immigration and Naturalization Service's "wholesale violations of due process" and racial bias for its mass deportation policy. It ordered a new hearing for thousands of Haitians - represented by the Center and other organizations in a class-action suit.

After Jean-Bertrand Aristide's February 1991 election, Fr. Gerry returned to Haiti to help his country's poor and represent the Haitian diaspora abroad. However, after the September military coup, he went into hiding, only resuming his work publicly after Aristide's 1994 return.

After the February 2004 coup, the Washington-installed Latortue government began the above-described ordeal that led to his illness and death. Tears and tributes now honor him. The best way for us all is to support others who continue his work - with far more than just lip service.

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