

FATHER RICK: HAITIAN HERO

Mother Teresa never sought fame—she was content to simply care for the sick and indigent without notice or fanfare. While she was unique in many ways, she was not the first, or the last, of great Catholic heroes who are blessed with incredible humility. Father Richard Frechette is cut from the same cloth: he services the dead and dying without a trace of hubris. His venue is Haiti, one of the most tragic places on earth. And that was before the earthquake.

I never heard of Father Frechette before Irving Louis Horowitz told me about him in February (Irv is the publisher who jump-started my career at Transaction books). Father Rick, as he is called, is a Passionist who doubles as a doctor, and Irv is responsible for bringing out his new book, *Haiti: The God of Tough Places, the Lord of Burnt Men*. It is a riveting volume that requires a strong stomach. But the rewards, especially for Catholics, make the struggle worthwhile.

Father Rick has lived in Haiti for 22 years (he hails from Connecticut) and is the founder and director of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (“Our Little Brothers and Sisters”). He also runs Haiti’s only free pediatric hospital, St. Damien’s. When Matt Labash, a senior writer for *The Weekly Standard* sought to do an article on Father Rick well over a year ago, the priest-physician balked. Just like Mother Teresa, he wanted no publicity. But just like the saintly nun, it is our good fortune that he (like her) was overruled.

On Thursdays, he likes to avail himself of Marlboro’s and rum. Father Rick’s intake is not driven by vice; rather, it is occasioned by the need to cope with the stench of burnt bodies. To be specific, Thursdays mark his weekly morgue run, the day he blesses the bodies and comforts the family and friends of the deceased. Without the smokes, and a little libation, the smell of the corpses would simply overwhelm him.

But just as he never misses saying daily Mass at 7:00 a.m., he never misses his weekly obligation.

Haiti is a nation long riddled with massive exploitation, abject poverty, kidnapping, gangs and unrelenting violence. So what's in it for Father Rick? The same prize that drove Mother Teresa.

The Albanian nun was once asked how she could live and work among lepers. Her answer was telling. "I try to give to the poor people for love what the rich could get for money. No, I wouldn't touch a leper for a thousand pounds; yet, I willingly cure him for the love of God." That's what motivates Father Rick as well—God's love.

What also energizes him is the Haitian people—they never give up. Surrounded by horror stories, many of which are their own, they possess a will to live that would astound most of us in the developed nations.

"The idea of assisted suicide, or of determining who should be helped to live and who should be left to die, are hot and controversial topics in our world today," he writes. Then he lowers the boom. "It is just that I have not yet come across someone who said to me, 'Thanks for offering help, but I really would just rather die.'" His closer finishes the conversation. "I am waiting for such a moment, and its accompanying wisdom."

It is fascinating to ponder. Why are so many self-identified champions of compassion in North America and Europe obsessed with promoting doctor-assisted suicide, while the indigents from Haiti just want to live one more day? The idea that life is valued more highly by the wretched than the wealthy, and by the ignorant than the intellectual, seems counterintuitive by most standards. But then again the "deep thinkers" have often seen the poor as constituting nothing more than the miserable masses, not realizing how the least among us still find room

for joy and a reason for living.

Surely the assisted-suicide enthusiasts could not make heads or tails of those who rallied around Joseph. Father Rick never met him, but he did risk his life trying to find his dead body. Joseph was an American college graduate who worked at a mission hospital trying to eradicate a terrible mosquito-borne disease. He was murdered in the most murderous section of Port-au-Prince, his body left to die rotting in a car. No one from the police or United Nations would agree to his wife's wishes to go into the area to find him. Father Rick tried, but failed.

Why would Cathy, married to Joseph for only a year, want his rat-eaten body? Because she wanted a Christian burial. Those who joined the search for his body were men and women plagued with tuberculosis and AIDS. That none of them knew Joseph made their heroism all the more remarkable.

Father Rick reflected on what happened. "In the face of the arrogant and horrible display of hell, there appears a powerful force of good capable of defying it, and often this goodness is in a seemingly very feeble form. That force of goodness has made its home in you and I." Spoken like a true priest.

I will write more about this inspiring story in the next issue of *Catalyst*. How Father Rick ties his experiences to Catholic teachings is compelling.