

# WHAT INSPIRES FATHER RICK

In last month's edition of *Catalyst*, I discussed the heroics of Father Richard Frechette, the priest/physician who has labored among the dispossessed in Haiti for over two decades. Now I want to explain what inspires this extraordinary priest (my comments are gleaned from his book, *Haiti: The God of Tough Places, the Lord of Burnt Men*, published by Transaction). It comes at the right time: like so many Catholics, I am fed up with the media obsession on the Catholic Church's shortcomings, both real and contrived.

Father Rick does what he does for the sake of Christ. There is no other reason. He is, at heart, an optimist, but there is nothing Pollyannaish about him. He knows what suffering is, having experienced it himself and having serviced those who make our own sufferings seem so trivial. But he never gives up. Here is how he puts it. "We are encouraged to offer our works, our trials, our sufferings to God in union with those of Christ so that they might be redemptive."

It is clear that Father Rick's efforts have touched many. How else can we account for the blessed determination of those who risk their lives, tragic as they are, for others? Surely self-interest would not propel a desperate people to go into gang-infested villages looking for the body of a loved one. "In the face of the arrogant and horrible display of hell," he writes, "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."

As the apostles demonstrated, it is not just us plain folk who are weak without Christ. Father Rick hits home when he says that the apostles were stronger after Christ died. "These timid, ordinary men," he instructs, "who were afraid of their own skins, suddenly were guided by a force that carried them valiantly into the future and into the world. They became

fully servants of the gospel of life: articulate, fearless, leading by example, traveling far and wide to spread the Word, even at great danger to themselves.”

There can be no doubting that Father Rick’s apostolate gives further evidence of the Spirit of Christ. “The vast slums of Port-au-Prince are pretty rough places,” he observes. “Yet they are home to hundreds of thousands of people. Most of these are children. If people are there, God is fully there too.” It strains credulity to see how any atheist could make sense of this truism. It is a pity that they are denied the capacity to appreciate such a statement, though it is they who have elected to trim their own horizons.

But if God is good, how do believers make sense of evil? God, Father Rick informs, is all about setting boundaries. “Boundaries between light and darkness, between land and water, between good and evil. Unbelievable horrors, like tsunami and Shoah, show us what is at stake when boundaries disappear. Hell is in the business of trying to destroy all boundaries. And resisting hell is about fighting to restore them.”

At bottom, there is hope for the human condition. “Most sin is the perversion of something good,” the Haitian hero says. For example, “Hatred is a perversion of sin.” Here’s the optimism: “That is why there is hope for us sinners. The basic stuff for something very right is still there and can be reworked with God’s grace.”

Father Rick does not brag about himself, but he does not hold back in giving due praise to the nuns who service the Haitian poor. He quotes the advice of a Canadian Sister of St. Joseph. “If it’s old and ugly, paint it a bright color. If it’s barren, plant a flower.” Most important, “If they are sick, sit with them on the bed. If they are hungry, make soup.”

Mother Teresa opened a mission in Haiti some three decades

ago. Father Rick tells the tale of Sister Abha, one of the sisters who opened the first mission with Mother Teresa, and how she endured. One night she was shot. Worse, it was one of the men whom she had taken off the streets, and raised from the time he was a child, who ordered and paid for the hit. She survived because she was able to push the hand of the man away, deflecting the shot. How she interpreted what happened is Catholicism at its best. "We will all die one day anyway," she said. "It does not matter how or when or where we die. It only matters how we have lived."

No one can improve on how Father Rick ends his book: "We are destined for greatness. We have a triple dignity: God made us, redeemed us and prepares us for life eternally...Though we suffer humiliations and indignities through desperate situations, or through violence, Christianity proposes that we are made in the Divine image, held by God's hand, considered the apple of God's eye, with every hair of our head counted, and our names engraved in God's heart. These propositions can be hard to hold onto in the crucible, but Christianity has persistently and bravely held them up as banners and standards of truth throughout the ages."

Now you know why Father Rick is able to do what he does.