

Priest's Timely Rescue of Haitian Orphans "Wouldn't Have Been Possible" Without Help From U.S. Catholics

The men standing in Fr. Marc Boisvert's doorway had terrible news. A nearby orphanage had just collapsed under financial pressure, and sixty-four boys were in urgent need of help. Many of the children had already gone hungry for days, and some were sick and needed medical attention.

No one else was capable of dealing with the problem — could he help?

Having worked with orphans for several years, Fr. Marc could easily imagine what the children were going through as they awaited word of their fate. First there would be shock. Then loss and emptiness, followed by fear.

Ultimately, these children would relive the full, crippling sense of abandonment that overwhelms all orphans.

"When I heard about these kids, my mind raced, and I wondered if I could do anything about it. My own orphanage already housed hundreds of children and we were financially strapped ourselves," Fr. Marc recalled. "I knew I had the heart for the job, but there were so many practical and financial hurdles to overcome. Could I afford to take those children in? And on the other hand — could I afford not to? This is Haiti, I thought. What are their chances if I turn my back on them? They might not survive."

Knowing that some kind of outside help would be necessary to properly feed, shelter and educate the new children, Fr. Marc quickly contacted several large international charities seeking their support. All of them turned him down... except one.

Navy Chaplain Leaves Success, Opportunities to Accept Christ's Call for "A Few Good Men"

While serving in the U.S. Navy, Chaplain Marc Boisvert, a veteran of "Desert Shield/Desert Storm," made a trip to Haiti. He went, in part, to confirm stories he had been told about the plight of the poor living there.

What he saw changed his life forever — not simply because it altered his perspective on poverty or changed his political views, but because it moved him to act.

"What I saw — particularly the condition of the children — demanded my immediate action. I saw life or death situations, and I knew I could help... but only if I got deeply involved," Fr. Marc recalled.

After resigning his commission in the US Navy Chaplain Corps, Fr. Marc was honorably discharged as a Lieutenant Commander.

"I sold most of my worldly possessions — all 17 of them — and moved lock, stock and barrel to Haiti. That was on January 1st, 1998," He recalls. Today, Fr. Marc directs of one of Haiti's finest Christian orphanages, serving hundreds of children (see story above).

"You don't have to be a brain surgeon to see how devastating poverty is for children here. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western hemisphere and that is almost a death sentence to the kids here. Poor sanitation, polluted water, no access to decent medical care, no money for school and often no money for food."

Within hours of hearing from Fr. Marc about the plight of the orphans and his desire to help, Cross International Catholic Outreach made a firm pledge of support and wired all of the funds needed to get the rescue underway. Every one of those children was saved.

"What are their chances if I turn my back on them? They might not survive."

Fr. Marc Boisvert, Project Espwa

"The first week involved some adjustments," Fr. Marc explained. "They came in with nothing but the clothes on their backs, no shoes and many were clearly malnourished. They ate ravenously that first night. The next morning at breakfast, one of the kids seemed surprised and wondered if the food he was being served would be his only meal for the day. He wasn't used to eating every day — and certainly never more than once a day."

Over the next few weeks, Fr. Marc turned these new "visitors" into family. Meanwhile, Cross International has had to mobilize its programs to get the financial support that was needed.

"It's been a big undertaking," explained Jim Cavnar, president of Cross International Catholic Outreach. "Fr. Marc had to have beds, sheets and towels, clothing, shoes and school



supplies, among other things. Funds were also needed to bring in a doctor to examine and treat children that were ill or suffering from malnutrition. Now we are working on supplying food and other day-to-day needs."

For Fr. Marc, it has been a tremendous relief to have so willing a partner help handle the emergency.

"Here in Haiti, a Catholic priest is constantly in the midst of life-or-death situations — people come to him because they're desperate for food or have dying children in need of medicines or face some other urgent needs," he explained. "When they come to us for help, we want to respond, but we can't unless we have outside resources — food for the hungry, medicines to treat the sick or the other materials needed to get the job done. It's a real blessing to have Cross as a partner in times like those. In fact, without their support, taking in these additional orphans wouldn't have been possible... and these children wouldn't have the peace and hope they enjoy today."

Although the story of the rescued orphans is still unfolding, Cross is committed to providing Fr. Marc with the tools he needs to care for them... and give them new hope. To accomplish this, the ministry hopes to secure support from Catholics in the U.S.

"I'm confident that when Catholics in America hear about this urgent need and about Fr. Marc's goal of rescuing these children, they will want to help. We Catholics value life as a

gift from God, and we have always supported our missionaries overseas," explained Jim Cavnar, president of Cross International Catholic Outreach. "This situation gives us an opportunity to put our beliefs into action. Our involvement is meaningful and it will have a tangible impact — these children will have hope and a better life because we chose to become involved."

In addition to seeking help from U.S. Catholics for these rescued orphans, Cross is also hoping to gain support for Fr. Marc Boisvert's larger goal — the development of "Project Espwa," a major housing and self-help program for Haiti's neediest orphans. It's goal is to take children off the dangerous streets in Haiti and place them in a safe, rural setting where they can recapture their childhood and take part in educational programs that will help shape a new future.

"Espwa means *hope*, and that is what this project is all about. It includes safe housing and food — the basic necessities of life — but its staff is ultimately working toward self-sufficiency for the children who will grow up there," Cavnar said. "Their goal to educate the children and teach them skills on the farm is a wonderful plan we should get behind and support. This approach does more than meet the immediate needs of these children. It gives them the gift of a brighter future. It literally gives them espwa — *hope*."



Fr. Marc, while serving in the U.S. Navy

"Still, some ask why I do this. In part, it is a response to Christ's words in Matthew 25. Jesus explains that in serving Him, we serve the poor. As a Christian, you can't read that and not take it seriously. You have to do something. You have to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and respond to the needs of the poor."

How to Help:

Your help is needed for Cross International Catholic Outreach to bring Christ's mercy to the poorest of the poor. Use the enclosed postage-paid brochure to mail your gift or send it to Cross International Catholic Outreach, Dept. AC00397, 490 White Pond Drive, PO Box 63, Akron, OH 44309-0063.

