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BLUEPRINT

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The Liberation of Pere Gerard Jean-Juste By Bill Quigley

“Like St. Peter and St. Paul, my body is in jail, but my spirit is free!”
Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste in a Haitian prison, October 2004

Fr. Gerry had been in jail in Haiti for 48 days already. For over a week, he was kept in a small cell with eighteen other prisoners. They took turns sleeping on the bare floor, when the mice would let them. Prisoners ate when someone from home brought them food. The toilet was a single bucket in the corner, open to all.

Pere Jean-Juste was finally going to be released from prison. I was waiting in Port au Prince with Mario Joseph, Fr. Gerry's courageous Haitian lawyer from the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti.

Meeting Jean-Juste

A native Haitian, Fr. Jean-Juste pastors St. Claire's, a sprawling catholic parish of over 80,000 families on the airport edge of Port au Prince, Haiti. The church is on a hill more than a mile from a paved road. Most people in his parish have no running water. Few have paying jobs.

When I first met Fr. Gerry, he was not in jail, he was outside his parish center, singing with hundreds of little children. His parish feeds six to eight hundred hungry children every Wednesday and Sunday on picnic tables under a tin roof outside the parish presbyter. I counted 27 little kids at one table, most under 6 years old.

Fr. Gerry told me later that for most Haitians, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, their whole day is a search for food. For most of these children, this is their only meal for the day.

Before the meal, his booming voice lead hundreds of smaller voices in singing an uplifting song in Creole. Volunteers from the parish prepare the food, which is purchased with donations from generous people in the US through the What If Foundation. Hundreds of tin plates heaped with rice and sauce and a

small knuckle of meat came out of the kitchen, fast and furious. The little kids scraped the metal plates clean as hundreds of older kids waited outside for their turn.

I was in Haiti on a human rights mission sponsored by Pax Christi USA. We went to Haiti because of numerous complaints about human rights violations that have plagued the country since February 29, 2004, when the elected government of the President of Haiti, Jean Bertrand Aristide, was forced out and replaced by unelected authorities.

After we helped him feed the children, we asked Fr. Jean-Juste to tell us about human rights in Haiti. He spoke with us in a concrete room behind the kitchen while a chicken walked around the room. He is a charismatic man, with a big voice, and he laughed frequently.

The supporters of President Aristide were primarily the grass roots people. Since his removal the leaders and supporters of Aristide's political organization have been systematically harassed, had their homes burned, arrested, or killed. Many fled their homes in the countryside and were now in hiding as internal refugees in Port au Prince. The Haitian military, which Aristide disbanded in the 1990s, was reasserting control.

Across the country, hunger is up, he told us, jobs are down, schools and medical clinics are closed, crime has increased.

Hundreds of supporters of Aristide were jailed by the unelected government including: the prime minister, Yvon Neptune; the minister of the Interior, Jocelerme Privert; senators and the former mayor of Port au Prince, Harold Severe. Hundreds had been in jail for months, none had a trial set, none could be released on bond. Brian Concannon of the Institute for Justice and Peace in Haiti estimates there are hundreds of political prisoners in all.

We asked Fr. Gerry, "Are you personally at

risk?" "Of course," he laughed. His life had been threatened many times since the removal of President Aristide. For six years, he had broadcast a two hour radio program every Saturday that talked about religion and human rights. After the coup against Aristide, the radio station was told that they either cancel Fr. Gerry's show or the station would be blown up. They cancelled. He had not been back on the air since. Five men had recently threatened him to his face.

"We have gone too far in being violent to our brothers and sisters," he said. "It is time for all of Haiti to kneel down, ask forgiveness of each other, and start over."

As we parted, I gave Fr. Gerry my card from Loyola Law School. "If you ever get arrested," I promised, "I will come help you out." Little did we know.

The Arrest of Pere Jean-Juste

I got the call late Wednesday night, October 13.

On Wednesday afternoon Fr. Jean-Juste was feeding children when the church presbyter was surrounded by heavily armed men dressed all in black, faces covered with black ski masks. They identified themselves as police and said they had come to arrest Fr. Gerry.

"Did you have a warrant like the Haitian constitution requires?" "No." "What was the charge?" "None of your business." "If you take away our priest, are you going to feed us?" "We are just following orders," one whispered.

The children were petrified. As a large crowd gathered, the people of the parish refused to unlock the gates to give up their pastor. Calls were put in to the bishop.

The masked police smashed out the iron bars that covered one of the windows and

The masked police smashed out the windows of the parish center, handcuffed Fr. Gerry and dragged him out

used their rifle butts to break all the glass in the windows. Then they poured into the church building. Pointing their guns at the women volunteers who were cooking the food, they ordered the feeding to stop.

They grabbed Fr. Gerry, who curled into a ball as they handcuffed him, beat him, threw him up against a wall and dragged him out of the building through the window of broken glass into the back seat of a car.

The police, fearful of the crowd, started firing their automatic weapons. Some fired into the air, some fired into the crowd. There were reports that some children had been shot. The police jeeps sped away.

Petitionville Jail

I arrived in Port au Prince on Saturday and went straight to the jail in Petionville with Mario Joseph and Anne Sosin, courageous human rights advocates with the Institute of Justice and Democracy in Haiti. There were no formal charges against Fr. Gerry. The Ministry of Justice told the press that he was accused of “aiding the uprising.” Others said he was arrested for “disturbing the peace.”

When he first saw me, Fr. Gerry, who was wearing a rosary around his neck, laughed out loud, “You! You are a prophet! You said if I ever needed a lawyer you would come - and who thought it would be so soon!”

We spoke through the bars of the prison door secured by a big brass lock. Other prisoners were visiting family through the same door at the same time. A radio blared from the police desk three feet away. It was very hot, no fan. He had cuts on his arms and leg, his neck and back and leg were swollen, but he was smiling and in great spirits.

Fr. Gerry shared this jail cell with 18 others, including, on the first day I visited him, a sobbing fourteen year old girl who was in jail for “causing trouble.” No beds. No

blankets. No water to bathe. A bucket in the corner in front of everybody for a toilet Mice. No food except what friends or family brought.

His arrest was totally illegal. Haitian law requires a warrant for an arrest unless the person is arrested during the commission of a crime. The police had no warrant and there was no crime unless feeding children violates the law. His continued detention was illegal. Haitian law requires an appearance before a judge within 48 hours of arrest. That time had passed and no appearance was even scheduled. There were not even any official charges. Mario Joseph was preparing to file papers on Monday to see if Fr. Jean-Juste could be released, but was being told that no judge would touch the case because it was “too political.” The legal system, it seems, is nearly totally powerless. Though Haiti has many of the same laws as in the US, they are routinely ignored.

From the jail cell, did he have a message for friends on the outside? Indeed he did. Without hesitation, he told me to pass this on:

“Insist that we return to constitutional order in Haiti. Freedom for all political prisoners. Respect the human rights of everyone. Pledge to respect the vote of the people. Advocate for the return of Aristide so he can finish his democratic mandate as President until February 6, 2006. It is fine for the United Nations to be in Haiti, but work with Aristide instead of the illegal government. Keep praying that God will strengthen my faith, hope and charity. Like St. Peter and St. Paul, my body is in jail but my spirit is free!”

After a week, a judge notes Fr. Jean-Juste has been officially charged with disturbing the peace. In Haiti, this is a crime punishable by a fine of up to 15 gouds, or 40 cents US. The authorities will not allow anyone to pay the fine and there is no bail.

Fr. Gerry was in a jail cell with 18 others. No beds. No blankets. No water. A bucket in front of everybody for a toilet

And how was Fr. Gerry after now a week in jail? “I consider this a blessing. As followers of Jesus we are called to take up the cross of jail, even martyrdom. This experience has given me a chance to learn a whole new world. I work with the prisoners and I have been able to help some get their freedom.” One of the ones he had helped get out was the 14 year old girl.

I went to the US Embassy. Many guards. Many big guns. Metal detectors. Big walls, beautiful grounds. I soak up the air conditioning. The person I met with was very polite, but said the US refused to intervene. The US officially supports the unelected government in Haiti. “Haiti,” she said, “is a sovereign country. We cannot tell them what to do.” That, I thought, would be big news to many. What about the children being shot or the rectory being damaged? They had no official information about the rectory being damaged, because US people are not allowed to travel in that area of the city, it is too dangerous. Children being shot? “Probably a rumor or propaganda - the Haitian rumor mill is incredible. Had anyone actually interviewed the children? I left the embassy grieving for my country and for Haiti.

Fr. Gerry was transferred to the National Penitentiary. Prison guards walk in and out with rifles, pistols and armored vests. The chalkboard in the warden’s office shows over 1000 people are inside, 27 have seen a judge, 991 awaiting trial. When I was here a couple of weeks ago with Pax Christi, there were 868 people here, 21 had seen a judge.

Here at last the father has a bed and his injuries are starting to heal. He was very thankful for all the support but very concerned about the people of his parish and asked supporters to assist them. For him personally?

“For the experience of knowing another world, I forgive my accusers. I love this experience. I did not know this world. I thank God for the grace of this time.”

The word about Fr. Gerry is starting to get out. Newspapers and radio shows are spreading the story. People are phoning and faxing the embassy and the US government. Representative Maxine Walters leads the way in Congress by pressuring Secretary Powell to act.

I Held the Bullet in My Palm

I went back to the parish to try to find the injured children and document what really happened. Local members of Pax Christi tracked the families down and I went to visit. Halfway up a hilly gravel road, through a narrow passageway hung with laundry, I meet a girl I will call Jeanine. She is 14.

When I visit Jeanine, she sits on a wooden bench leaning far to her left. After talking with us, her mother tenderly turns her around and modestly lifts her daughter’s dark blue skirt to reveal a 4 inch jagged blue-stitched suture at the bottom of her right buttock. Jeanine’s older brother holds out a blood-stained gauze packet. Unfolding it, I find the brassy bullet the doctors removed from Jeanine's backside last week.

Jeanine was shot in the backside while running away from the Haitian police during the arrest of Fr. Jean-Juste.

I held the bullet removed from Jeanine in my palm. It is a little less than an inch long, brass colored, pointed, and very hard. Jeanine is still in pain. Her family cannot afford to bring her back to the doctor. They share their documents with us, trust us with the bullet, and we help them get back to the doctor.

We also met two other children, two young boys, also shot by the police during the arrest of Fr. Jean-Juste. One was shot in the head, one in the shoulder. They were also seen by medical authorities. We get their documentation as well.

This 14 year old girl was shot by the Haitian police during the arrest of Fr. Jean-Juste

Fr. Gerry tells me he is organizing prayers and the rosary among the prisoners. The prison is a massive concrete box. People are physically ill and many mentally as well. A message for people on the outside?

“We must insist on respecting the people's vote and the human rights of all in Haiti. Free all the political prisoners. Instead of providing for the basic human needs of people, the illegal government is deploying cruelty in order to stay in power. As for me personally, I am living like an ascetic. I pray a lot and read the bible. In the prison we are all together, catholic and protestant; we all come together to share our prayers. We all have a strong belief that with the advocacy of sisters and brothers and friends, freedom will ring pretty soon. Let freedom ring!”

In mid-October, the US government lifts the thirteen year embargo on shipping arms to Haiti. Just what Haiti needs from the US, more weapons.

In early November, I am back in Haiti. Fr. Gerry has been moved to yet another prison on the other side of Port au Prince in Carrefour, a worrisome development. He has now been in prison over three weeks.

I go to visit and find four sisters in sky blue habits visiting and bringing food, rosaries and toilet paper. He meets us in a big empty room where we sit on two long wooden benches. He greets us enthusiastically, rosary around his neck. He was not told why he was moved. The prison is fine. The guards here are much more relaxed than in the penitentiary.

The government has now publicly accused him of “endangering the security of the state” and even says that it may charge him with murder. He laughs at that.

“I have been an experienced activist in the US and Haiti. I am a follower of Martin Luther King and Gandhi. I am against all kinds of violence - violence from the oppressors and

violence from the oppressed. The people in power in Haiti are trying by any means necessary to grab all the powers and are behind the killings and arbitrary arrests of the supporters of President Aristide.

“The role of the US in Haiti is that of proconsul. They are behind the puppet government installed by the US with the help of France and Canada.

“As for me, freedom is coming - one way or another. I as a Christian and as a priest, I know freedom is coming for me through Jesus. Suffering will end, and freedom is coming. Regardless of who tries to enslave my body, my soul will taste freedom forever.”

Fr. Gerry visits with my companions and laughs. He tells us how he created a mural on the wall of his cell out of gum wrappers that says, Free in Jesus. He outlined all the words with the shiny parts of the gum wrappers so it seems to gleam at night and all the other prisoners want to see it. He is leading the group in night prayers and has passed out hundreds of rosaries. As we leave, we make a small circle in the big visiting room, hold hands and pray. His message to the outside? “Don't give up the good fight. The accusers are feeling the pressure. Pretty soon freedom will ring. My gratitude to all!”

When I went back to where I was staying, some people from the US who were there on a medical mission asked me what I was doing in Haiti. I told them I was representing a person illegally arrested and being held in prison without even a chance to see a judge. They asked me, “Where is your client, Guantanamo?” Later the same evening, a Haitian translator told a group of us from the US:

“Ten years from now people will be saying ‘we didn't know!’ If we had only known what was going on in Haiti, or Iraq, or Palestine, we would have done something. But, the fact is, they could have known.”

“Ten years from now people will be saying ‘we didn't know!’ If we had only known what was going on in Haiti, or Iraq, or Palestine, we would have done something. But, the fact is, they could have known.”

The Liberation of Pere Jean-Juste

While I was back in the US, Mario Joseph was finally able to conduct a hearing with a judge with Fr. Gerry in attendance. The prosecutor did indeed accuse him of murder, endangering the security of the state, and disturbing the peace. Mario challenged him to produce evidence, but he had none. The prosecutor asked Pere Jean-Juste if he ever said the current government was illegal, and he said absolutely yes that he said that and he still says that. The prosecutor asked him who he thought was the President of Haiti, and he responded that Jean Bertrand Aristide was still the President of Haiti and remained so until February 2006. The judge declared that all the evidence before the court showed was that Fr. Jean-Juste fed children. He ordered Fr. Jean-Juste released unless the government produced some other incriminating evidence within 5 days.

The five days stretched into ten with weekends and holidays, but it did look like Fr. Jean-Juste might actually be getting out, though none of the other hundreds of political prisoners in Haiti had actually ever been released.

I returned to Haiti on the Sunday after thanksgiving and went directly to visit Fr. Gerry in Carrefour prison. He was even more upbeat than usual. He was looking forward to another visit from Bishop Tom Gumbleton of Detroit, his second trip to Haiti since Fr. Jean-Juste was arrested.

Finally the order was signed to release him. On Monday night, November 29, we arrived at Omega Prison at Carrefour. Bathed in the spotlight inside the prison walls was Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste, radiant in a white clerical robe. We hugged, picked up a few plastic bags of his belongings, and took off before anyone could change their minds.

Forty eight days after being arrested, Pere Jean-Juste was on his way back to his parish.

At 7:30 the jeep rolled up to the darkened parish church of St. Claire's. Because the electricity was out for miles around in the neighborhood, the stars shone extra bright. As the car drove in two dozen people, mostly children, swarmed around it. As Fr. Gerry got out of the car, they started screaming and cheering and jumping and hugging him. As he went into the church, someone switched on the backup generator and started ringing the church bells. People started filling up the church and Fr. Jean-Juste decided to hold a celebration mass.

At 8:05 he entered the church to a deafening roar from the thousand plus people who packed it. Cheering and screaming, the people starting singing "merci, merci." Much to his amazement, young men hoisted him, in full vestments, onto their shoulders and started carrying him around the altar until he was able to persuade them to put him down. He was received like a cross between the Pope and Elvis. The singing was powerful with arms waving. During his homily he told the church some stories about jail and acted out various roles of prisoner and guard and judge and the congregation howled with laughter.

Fr. Jean-Juste made several points repeatedly. First, he thanked everyone in Haiti and across the world who worked for his freedom. Secondly, he always forgives his accusers and thanks them for giving him the opportunity to be in jail. Finally, he always reminds people that there is nothing special about him other than he is the first out of prison and there are many more political prisoners that still must be liberated.

I stayed with Fr. Gerry and the people of St. Claire's for another week until he flew to Miami. Grown men and women came up to him and fell on their knees and embraced him.

During our time together I came to

Fr. Gerry was received in his parish like a cross between the Pope and Elvis

know a man and his parish who have deep love for each other. He says mass every day, sometimes for a thousand people, sometimes for twenty. He treasures the daily office. Every evening at 7, he leads whoever shows up in a vigorous recitation of the rosary. He loves to sing and to visit with people. He revels in the feeding of the hundreds of children and takes time to help people write letters and prepare for their wedding. He is deeply spiritual.

Fr. Gerry is also deeply liberating. He has clearly chosen to be on the side of the poor. To him, Jesus saying that we are to love our enemies means exactly that. He loves the prophets. The bible is not a metaphorical story for him - it is a concrete daily instruction on how to live lives. We are to care for poor and the widow and orphan. If we have two coats we are to share one with the one who has none. We are called to justice and freedom and equality and respect. And woe to those who pile up riches on earth and woe to those who do not act justly.

One final story illustrates the liberation of Pere Jean-Juste

On the Sunday afternoon following his Monday release from prison, Fr. Gerry said, "I want to go to visit my friends in jail." So off we went across town. He took his hat off when we passed each church and he sang out to each of the five jails he was in. When we got to Carrefour, I had to walk in with him to see the looks on the faces of the guards.

When he walked through the metal gate, the guards were stunned and their mouths slowly opened. Fr. Jean-Juste walked up to them and boomed out "Bon Jour, Bon Jour!" The chief guard, a muscular man with a shaved head, put down his gun and hugged Gerry. The warden allowed us to go back into the prison yard to see his fellow prisoners. When the prisoners saw him, they started yelling and clapping, then chanting "Mon Pere! Mon Pere!"

I have been in jails and prisons hun-

dreds of times. I have never seen both the guards and the prisoners happy at the same time. As we were walking down the hall back to the gate, the burly guard leaned into Fr. Jean-Juste to speak privately to him. As he did, Fr. Gerry grasped his hand and the two men walked out of the jail, jailer and jailed, hand in hand. That is liberation.

Deeply spiritual and deeply radical. You can see what they meant when they charged him with disturbing the peace and endangering the security of the state. He is guilty as hell of both charges. The liberation of Pere Jean-Juste liberates us all.

About the Author:


Bill Quigley teaches at Loyola University New Orleans School of Law. He was one of the lawyers for Pere Jean-Juste. You can reach him at quigley@loyno.edu or 504.861.5590.

You can reach Pere Gerard Jean-Juste njeranjeri@yahoo.com or PO Box 784, Port au Prince, Haiti.

The lawyers in Haiti who helped liberate Pere Jean-Juste need your support to help fight for human rights for rest of the people in Haiti. Check them out online at www.ijdh.org and send them some help.

If you want to help feed the children of St. Claire's, make a donation to the What If foundation. www.whatiffoundation.org or call Margaret Trost at 888-288-8020.

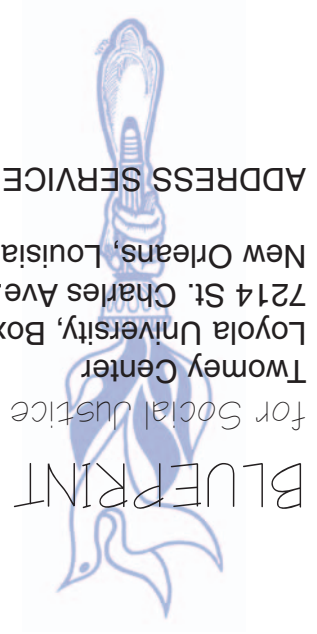
Plenty more about Haiti, including other sources of information can be found in the full report of the Pax Christi human rights visit of Johanna Berrigan, Kathy Boylan, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Bill Quigley and Bob Dela-Valle Rauth, which can be found at http://www.paxchristiusa.org/news_events_more.asp?id=943


The two men walked out of jail, jailer and jailed, hand in hand. That is liberation.

In this Issue

The Liberation of Pere Gerard Jean-Juste by Bill Quigley

Fr. Gerard Jean-Juste is a Haitian priest who was jailed October 13, 2004 while feeding hundreds of the world's poorest children at his parish in Port au Prince. Bill Quigley is one of the lawyers who worked to free him. This is the story of the arrest, imprisonment, and liberation of an extraordinary priest and social justice advocate.



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