

**(ANS – Port-au-Prince)** – “Poor Haiti, poor Haiti”. Stretched out in a hospital bed in Santo Domingo, Fr Attilio gave a moving account to Alessandra d’Asaro, a journalist from the International Volunteer Movement for Development (VIS), of his very clear memories of that minute on 12 January which put Haiti on its knees.

In spite of the constraints of the situation in which he finds himself, the Salesian shows great fortitude typical of the frontier priests accustomed to being face to face with poverty, violence and social injustice. His thoughts quickly turn to the 300 or so street children in the Salesian school, in the Salina district of Port au Prince, in Haiti.

The number is unclear because as we know, on the streets you don’t count the numbers in the group, and the earthquake was no exception. Here the youngsters had somewhere to go, and the possibility of hoping for a better future: getting away from the dangers of the streets, studying and learning a trade, as happens in Salesian schools spread around the world.

In the Little Schools of Father Bohnen, run by the Salesians, the silence is deafening. The youngsters and Bro Sanon who lost his life with them have been buried in a common grave near the school. Among the ruins, pages from exercise books drift in the warm breeze, chairs, coloured pencils, school reports have been scattered among the dusts and the rubble by the earthquake.

Piles of debris heaped up, confusion among the upended floors. Through the gaps in the collapsed perimeter walls people come and go taking everything – piles of paper cups, broken chairs, abandoned shoes, and those sheets of paper. In the tumult one comes across what seem to be pools of stagnant water. “It’s what was left by the corpses,” explains Fr Pierre Lephène a Salesian from the Enam community. “We just need to rebuild the wall to avoid so much mess, and to increase security, which in these circumstances is always too little.”

The Haiti government has been mortally wounded, with many ministers among those killed in the earthquake, and the Presidential Palace has completely collapsed. The President of the United States, Barak Obama, has entrusted the first responses to the neighbouring Dominican Republic, but in the meantime the priority must be to provide food and medical first aid.

“In this tragedy,” continues Fr Lephène, “what is very moving is the solidarity being shown by the whole world.” At the school a powerful team of civil defence workers coming from all over Latin America is working day and night still hoping to find someone alive or dead among the ruins.

Hands up-raised to catch the water-ration from the trucks on the crowded roads of the city and the loud noise over-head of planes and helicopters. Makeshift tents at the side of the roads while in spite of everything the Salesians continue their work never forgetting how to smile even in the face of tragedies such as these.

*Published 20/01/2010 - ANS*