

Psychologist from Busto Arsizio to help earthquake victims

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Sister Marcella Catozza **is not the only inhabitant of Busto Arsizio** to have worked in Haiti in the last few months. A few kilometres away, a 40-year-old psychologist from Busto Arsizio, **Claudio Moroni** was working, unaware of her, except for vague information about the presence of nuns working in Waf Jeremie. Claudio is an old friend of VareseNews. Four years ago, he spoke of his short, but dramatic experience of kidnapping in Palestine, where he was a volunteer with the Red Cross in the occupied territories in the West Bank, to friends of the association “Delfini Birichini” and other people who had come to listen to him. This year, two weeks after the earthquake in Haiti, in February, he **went to Port-au-Prince** where he worked with Doctors Without Borders until the end of October, giving his psychology experience to support the people involved in the natural disaster. It was still an emergency, but the intervention no longer had to be immediate; although the period of immediate shock had passed, **there was an immense amount of pain for doctors of every kind to alleviate**. Claudio joined local doctors and personnel recruited from the area; his job was often to help and console people before and after surgical operations, maybe amputees (he also worked in an *orthopaedic clinic*), *people who had lost relatives, friends and their houses, people struck hard by the great tragedy, a real apocalypse that had fallen on one of the most forsaken countries in the world. Claudio left the country only at the end of October when, he says, the first rumours of the epidemic that would break out this month were heard. And the word “cholera” had not yet been mentioned.*

“Technically, my job was that of Mental Health Officer. Local personnel were employed, trained and assigned as assistants. I was in the city of Port-au-Prince, I mainly operated in the Carrefour area, and later near the city centre, in the Petionville Golf Club area, which became a tent city, like most of the parks and empty spaces. Even those who still had a house for a long time didn’t feel safe enough to go home, and so spent the nights in emergency shelters.” It was as though an atomic bomb has been dropped. Fortunately, the winter climate at that subtropical latitude is quite mild. “Wherever there was a clinic or a hospital, there was a psychology service that we assisted. At first, we came across situations of stress and anxiety, which often caused migraines and gastrointestinal disorders,” the unconscious symptoms of people’s internal stress.

“Of course, it was difficult for many people **to come to terms with a bereavement.**” According to the local authorities, the earthquake killed 230,000 people; more conservative estimates speak of 92,000 dead. Either way, it was a terrible catastrophe, which drew thousands of volunteers from a great number of NGOs from all over the

World.

“I admit that my view of things was limited,” Moroni says, “in the sense that I didn’t travel around much; apart from a few who went “exploring”, **we didn’t make any unnecessary journeys.**” And so, he only had limited information about Waf Jeremie, for example, which had been so badly damaged that it was off limits, even for the UN. Some districts in the capital cannot exactly be recommended, even for the foreigners; nevertheless, the forces of law and order were present, the psychologist remembers. Once in a while, victims of violence came to the hospital, but not in alarming numbers.

As time passed, those who could, went back to their houses, as they were restored as well as possible, or while they were being rebuilt. “Vast fields of evacuees remain, and the situation is still precarious.” We need only think of “our” earthquake in L’Aquila, where problems still persist, and multiply the devastation and the suffering by about a thousand. And yet, even in the face of so much desolation, “I found among these people a striking **resilience.** The ability to face the disaster, the tendency to resist. **They’re not ‘hard’ people,** but when you get to know them and see them day by day, you realize how precarious the life they led before was, with problems like gathering enough food for lunch and dinner, for many of them, and the passing cyclone that swept everything away. And despite everything, the Haitians **manage not to lose heart;** of course, there are some who suffer particularly, but that’s true everywhere,” says Moroni.

The patients were Haitian, but so were many of the physicians. And the psychologists. “They were rather young; I found their training to be **really excellent,** similar to ours, maybe more French-school.” This is to be expected, given the official language of the Country (at the beginning, the language that is commonly spoken, *kreyòl*, was “almost incomprehensible”). The **cultural aspects** were essential for relating with the patients. “They’re very important in my job, and it took me some time to understand how important in the local context.” It is often said that Haiti is a piece of Africa transported to the Caribbean. “I don’t know Africa very well, because I’ve only spent a short time there (in Sudan), so I don’t think I can make comparisons. But I’ve noticed that among the people there are beliefs and a way of thinking that are almost **magical.** They’re certainly characteristic. I also had to take this into consideration.” When in Rome, do as the Romans do. And what about tomorrow? “For the moment, I’m having a rest after this experience, but I think I’ll be available for another period of working abroad,” he says.

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