

The Blessed by Dan Jacoby

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.”

– Matthew, 5:3

An enormous earthquake, followed by a long string of very powerful aftershocks, hit Haiti yesterday. Reports are still just beginning to come out of that bleak country, but it appears that the number of dead will be in the tens, or possibly hundreds, of thousands. In addition, as many as three million people are left without homes, without belongings, and possibly without hope.

Despite the enormous suffering and the hideous, horrifying situation the Haitians are facing, Pat Robertson – televangelist, hypocrite and pathetic excuse for a human being – said that this was the result of a “pact with the devil” made by Haitian slaves who overthrew their French overlords over 200 years ago. I’m not a physically violent person, and I have never truly wished to see someone die slowly and agonizingly, but for Pat Robertson I may be willing to make an exception.

Haiti is the poorest nation in the western hemisphere, and has been for two centuries. Even before the earthquake, the country had little hope of ever advancing beyond its pitiable condition. It didn’t have to be – when Christopher Columbus landed on the island now known as Hispaniola, it was a lush, beautiful place. How, then, did the eastern two-thirds, now called the Dominican Republic, become merely poor, while the western third, called Haiti, become so impoverished?

When Columbus first landed in 1492, the island was well populated with five different native tribes. Within 30 years, however, virtually all of the natives were dead, some as the result of enslavement by the Spanish conquerors, but most as a result of European diseases to which they had no immunity.

Soon after that point, the Spaniards who now controlled the island discovered that they could grow a lot of sugar, and sugar was widely demanded in Europe. The problem was that in order to be truly profitable, sugar had to be grown and harvested by extremely low-cost labor – in other words, slaves, imported from western Africa. The problem with that arrangement was that the island didn’t have a lot of mineral wealth, while the mainland did. In addition, there were plenty of natives on the mainland who could be enslaved without all the trouble of transporting them thousands of miles. As a result, the sugar trade stalled.

Meanwhile, other countries, particularly France, developed an interest in the island, especially the western part, and began importing their own slaves to grow sugar. Through the 18th century, France’s influence and control over the island grew, while Spain’s dwindled. In 1795, Spain ceded the eastern part of the island to France, who now controlled the entire island.

By that time, the western part was more developed and far richer. That wealth, however, provided the seeds of destruction, quite literally, as the native forests had been stripped away to make room for more sugar. The result can also be seen in South America, where huge tracts of tropical rain forests have been destroyed to create farms that cannot support crops because the soil isn’t good enough. Haiti’s forest was destroyed, and the soil could not, and can not, support a robust agriculture suitable for major exports over time.

Meanwhile, the French slaves decided that they had had enough, and they revolted, first in 1791 and lasting over a decade. In 1804 France gave up and left, and the newly free people renamed their country Haiti, the original Taino name for the island. (Note: These are the people Pat Robertson accused of making a pact with the devil.) (Second note: When France left Haiti, they also decided to rid themselves of a lot more of their “possessions” in the New World, and sold a lot of land to the United States; that sale is known here as the Louisiana Purchase.)

Unfortunately, the people who overthrew the French government had never been a part of any government, and didn't know how to govern themselves. They also killed or drove away everyone who was “too European,” leaving nobody who could manage the land, even badly. Flush with their relative wealth, however, the Haitians invaded the eastern part of the island several times over the 19th century.

Haitian wealth, and the political situation, declined rapidly in the second half of the 19th century and into the early 20th. Between 1843 and 1915, Haiti had 22 presidents, 21 of whom were assassinated or driven out of office.

In 1915, the United States invaded Haiti (the so-called “pacifist president,” Woodrow Wilson, was actually an invader – he also invaded the Dominican Republic in 1916, and several other countries, including the new Soviet Union in 1918). The invasion of Haiti was prompted by Wall Street bankers, especially First National Bank of New York, who were afraid that impending inflation in Haiti would hurt their investments.

Twenty years of U.S. rule were followed by twenty more years of instability, and then the reign of the Duvaliers, “Papa Doc” and “Baby Doc,” began in 1957. They were ruthless and either unable or unwilling to develop a Haitian economy; Haiti has never recovered.

Haiti's overdevelopment, based on sugar and slaves, began a cycle of devastation three hundred years ago. The western part of Hispaniola has never been particularly fertile, not does it have the terrain or the weather that makes agriculture profitable in the long run. Haiti also lacks mineral reserves. Finally, the country has been mismanaged all the way through its post-Columbian history.

While Haiti lacks natural resources, it does have a large supply of cheap labor. That being the case, it might be possible that goods manufactured in Haiti could be imported at even lower cost than goods from China. Unfortunately, that labor supply is so deficient in basic education and skills that it would take an enormous investment to begin any sort of manufacturing there. Furthermore, being devoid of mineral resources, all the raw materials would have to be imported. Finally, the constant threat of hurricanes is certain to disrupt commerce; four tropical storms hit Haiti in 2008 alone.

On the other hand, between the climate, the horrifying misery, and the recent natural disasters, investing in Haiti, though it would be a long-term project, would also probably be phenomenally inexpensive, and anyone willing to spend the time it would take to create a productive labor force and develop a manufacturing base would stand to reap tremendous profits in the long run.

You may have realized that the title of this column is intended to be ironic. It would be doubly ironic, however, if the devastating earthquake of 2010 resulted in a renewal in Haiti, finally bringing the people of that starved country out of impoverishment.