The role of faith in Paul Farmer’s work

How could a just God permit great misery? The Haitian peasants answered with a proverb: “Bondye konn bay, men li pa konn separe,” in literal translation, “God gives but doesn’t share.” This meant, as Farmer would later explain it, “God gives us humans everything we need to flourish, but he’s not the one who’s supposed to divvy up the loot. That charge was laid upon us.” Liberation theologians had a similar answer: “You want to see where Christ crucified abides today? Go to where the poor are suffering and fighting back, and that’s where He is.” Liberation theology, with its emphasis on the horrors of poverty and on redressing them in the here and now, its emphasis on service and remediation, seemed to fit the circumstances of Haiti. And it suited Farmer temperamentally because, for all his scholarship and interest in theories, his strongest impulses were pragmatic. He only seemed like a nerd. He would tell me years later, with undeniable accuracy, “I’m an action kind of guy.”

Looking back at this first year of living in Haiti, Farmer would speak of the feeling that many things in his mind coalesced into a vision of his life’s proper work. But, he’d insist, this happened in stages, not all at once. “For me, it was a process, not an event. A slow awakening as opposed to an epiphany.” Then he remembered an incident from the time he spent in Léogâne. Repossessing it, he said that perhaps there had been an epiphany after all.

Working as a medical volunteer at the Hôpital St. Croix in Léogâne, he got to know a young American doctor. “He loved the Haitians,” Farmer said. “He was a very thoughtful guy.” The man had worked in Haiti for about a year. Now, in a few days, he was going back to the United States. “I realized, hearing him talk, that something had happened to me already,” Farmer said. “I wasn’t feeling judgmental. Haiti was something he was seeing that he could leave and erase from his mind, and I was thinking, Could I do that? He was leaving Haiti, really leaving in body and mind, and I realized I was going to have trouble with that.”
“Isn’t it going to be hard to leave?” he asked the young doctor.

“Are you kidding? I can’t wait. There’s no electricity here. It’s just brutal here.”

“But aren’t you worried about not being able to forget all this? There’s so much disease here.”

“No,” the doctor said. “I’m an American, and I’m going home.”

“Right. Me, too,” said Farmer.

He thought about that conversation all the rest of the day and into the evening. “What does that mean, ‘I’m an American’? How do people classify themselves?” He understood the doctor’s position, but he didn’t really know his own. The only thing he knew for sure was that he would become a doctor himself.

Later on that night, a young woman arrived at the hospital, pregnant and in the throes of malaria. “She had a very high parasitemia,” Farmer remembered. “Bad malaria. She went into a coma, and you know—I didn’t know the details then, I do now because it’s my specialty—she needed a transfusion, and her sister was there. So there was no blood and the doctor told her sister to go to Port-au-Prince to get her some blood, but he said that she would need money. I had no money. I ran around the hospital, and I rounded up fifteen dollars. I gave her the money and she went away, but then she came back and she didn’t have enough for both a tap-tap and the blood. So meanwhile the patient started having respiratory distress and this pink stuff started coming out of her mouth. The nurses were saying, ‘It’s hopeless,’ and other people were saying, ‘We should do a cesarean delivery.’ I said, ‘There’s got to be some way to get her some blood.’ Her sister was beside herself. She was sobbing and crying. The woman had five kids. The sister said, ‘This is terrible. You can’t even get a blood transfusion if you’re poor.’ And she said, ‘We’re all human beings.’ ”

The words—toute moun se moun—seemed like the answer to the question he’d asked himself earlier that day. Was being an American a sufficient identity unto itself? “She said that again and again,” he remembered. “We’re all human beings.”

The woman and her unborn baby died. Afterward, the sister lavished thanks on Farmer. And of course this made him feel more
acutely his failure at emergency fund-raising. He was obviously upset, and the doctors and nurses seemed to focus their attention on him. The nurses were saying, “Poor Paul. What a sweet young man.” And he knew what the doctors were thinking: “He’s new here, he’s green, he’s naïve.” Remembering this years later, he was still framing his retort: “Yeah, but I got staying power. That’s the thing. I wasn’t naïve, in fact.”

Or perhaps he was, a little. He decided to raise money to buy the hospital its own blood-banking equipment. He wrote to his relatives and the parents of his friends from Duke. He was seeing dreadful things in Haiti, he wrote. He described the project. Many checks arrived. In the end, he collected a few thousand dollars. He was elated. He wrote to Ophelia, “I’m off to Léogâne for a meeting with the director of Hôpital St. Croix to discuss big plans.” But not long afterward, Ophelia received another letter: “My stint down here at the hospital isn’t turning out exactly as I thought it would. It’s not that I’m unhappy working here. The biggest problem is that the hospital is not for the poor. I’m taken aback. I really am. Everything has to be paid for in advance.”

The central imperative of liberation theology—to provide a preferential option for the poor—seemed like a worthy life’s goal to him. Of course, one could pursue it almost anywhere, but clearly the doctrine implied making choices among degrees of poverty. It would make sense to provide medicine in the places that needed it most, and there was no place needier than Haiti, at least in the Western Hemisphere, and he hadn’t seen any place in Haiti needier than Cange. He didn’t stick around in Léogâne to see the blood bank get installed. He’d found out that the hospital would charge patients for its use. He told me he had these thoughts, as he headed back toward the central plateau: “I’m going to build my own fucking hospital. And there’ll be none of that there, thank you.”