Most of us remember the January 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti and killed tens of thousands of people who lived there. I remember exactly where I was when I heard that an earthquake had struck in Haiti. I remember praying that it please NOT be in Port au Prince. Not only is that one of the most densely populated areas of Haiti, but it was the place my friend called home. It wasn’t long before I learned that Port au Prince was less than twenty miles from the epicenter of the quake and been severely impacted, resulting in massive destruction and loss of life.

Sr. Luvia Joseph was my friend. She was a Roman Catholic nun who ran numerous programs in Haiti on behalf of her faith and in an effort to help the people of the country she called home. One of Sr. Luvia’s biggest projects was the operation of St. Alphonse de Liguori Catholic School, but she also operated an orphanage, trained young women for religious life and trained young men who would become Brothers and Priests. These were just the highlights of the valuable work that Sr. Luvia was doing in Haiti.

Sr. Luvia’s work began with the foundation of an orphanage in 1976 using money she had won in a lottery. In 1984 she felt God was calling her to open a school, so she began the operation of St. Alphonse School. Sr. Luvia operated her orphanage and school on faith and in love. She would turn no child away. She would feed them daily. Many of the children came to school only to receive food that they could not get elsewhere, and some came for the safety that the walls of St. Alphonse offered from the poverty and dangers of Port au Prince.

Sr. Luvia knew that the reasons the children came to school were not always to receive an education, but her answer to this was, “My mission is threefold: I hope to feed peoples’ souls, bodies, and minds. It may be necessary to feed their bodies before they’ll accept food for their souls or an education. I hope to help the people to be better equipped to gain food for their souls and bodies, and that once nourished, they will help many others in Haiti.”

At the time of the earthquake, St. Alphonse de Liguori School had approximately 3000 students. It was impossible for me to believe that they had all survived. It was impossible for me to believe that Sr. Luvia had survived. I was certain that she would never have left the students. If they were to perish, so would she.

The television offered vivid pictures of the death and destruction. It was more than I could bear to watch. Like most people, I felt helpless. I contacted Sr. Luvia’s family who lived in the United States. Had they heard from her? Did they know anything?

The first call I remember receiving from them was frantic. Her nephew was crying and through his tears, trying to tell me something. Something I thought I already knew. But when he gained composure, the sad news he shared was not about Sr. Luvia, but about his other aunt, Sr. Esta, who was also a religious in Haiti. She had been killed, along with two other religious sisters and 200 children, when the building they were in collapsed. I listened and I tried to find words to express my sympathy, but I could offer little comfort as my thoughts remained with Sr. Luvia.

The next day I received a phone call that brought both relief and pain. It was Sr. Luvia. She was crying and trying to tell me about the earthquake and the lives lost. I tried to listen, but the language barrier, which already causes difficulty in communications, was further complicated by her hysteria. She told me her sister was dead. She tried to put into words something that no words can describe. I listened and I prayed. I told her we knew. I told her it was all over the news and that help was on the way. My words seemed empty and powerless, but she calmed down and listened. I assured her that the whole world was praying for Haiti. And then we were disconnected...

Later Sr. Luvia told me that she believed it was a miracle that she was able to make that call. The ability to communicate, which was sometimes difficult and sporadic before the earthquake, had ceased completely following the quake. Any other time that she had tried to place a call had been unsuccessful. She was sure that God had
blessed her with the ability to communicate with the outside world and to receive the little assurance that I could offer.

The days, weeks and months that followed were extremely difficult for Sr. Luvia, as well as millions of other Haitians. St. Alphonse School did experience extensive damage and loss of life. More than 150 students were killed, and the building was damaged beyond repair. There was also loss of life at Sr. Luvia’s orphanage, and she was forced to live in the streets with the orphans as well as the hundreds of thousands of others who had survived the earthquake and were now homeless. Together they coexisted in the streets, among the bodies of those who did not survive. When it was possible to do so, Sr. Luvia took the orphans, about forty of them to Miragoane. Miragoane was the location of another school operated by Sr. Luvia, and while it had not escaped the wrath of the earthquake; it was much safer place for the children to be.

In an email from Sr. Luvia on February 5, 2010 she wrote, “What we are doing now is to see how we can install some tents for the children to sleep because we are sleeping in the open air on the ground, no one can sleep inside because the earthquake is not done yet. They are asking to start with the school at Miragoane. We don’t have tents yet. I say tents, because I don’t want to place the children inside of house. The situations are bigger than us.”

The summer following the earthquake, Sr. Luvia came to Michigan to visit the parishes with which she had developed twinning relationships. These parishes had been offering support to Sr. Luvia for many years, but never was it more needed than now.

We met with Sr. Luvia and an interpreter to discover the status in Haiti. There was very little good news, but from that meeting we gained the knowledge of how Sr. Luvia had survived and how God had miraculously saved the life of one of her orphans who had been trapped alive in the rubble.

Sr. Luvia had been attending a meeting of religious on the day of the earthquake. In the moments before the earthquake struck, Sr. Luvia said she heard a voice in her spirit telling her to get out of the building. Sr. Luvia informed the person with whom she was speaking that they needed to get outside of the building, but he did not see the need to follow her direction and therefore she excused herself from the conversation. As she was making her way out and had reached the veranda, an important leader of the meeting asked to speak to her. She informed him that if he wanted to speak to her, he would have to join her outside, and so he did. Sr. Luvia said she felt drawn to an open lot. As she and her companion stepped foot onto that grassy patch, she said it’s as if the earth gave way. She remembers grabbing onto a small tree to keep from being knocked down by the forces of the quake. She watched in horror and confusion as the broken world in which she lived became even more broken.

The days immediately following the quake were consumed with efforts of rescue and survival. As a leader in her community, she had little time to consider herself or properly mourn her sister. There were so many who looked to her for direction. The fear and hysteria of the children resurfaced with each aftershock. There was no escaping the death around them and no sanctuary to be found, and absolutely no end in sight to their suffering.

It must have seemed that the victims of the disaster were the fortunate ones. The living searched through the rubble for loved ones. The hope of rescue was soon replaced by the desire to recover bodies of loved ones lost. Sr. Luvia felt it was a great blessing that the body of her dead sister was recovered. Sr. Esta was the youngest of her siblings, but she was so much more. She and Sr. Luvia shared a special bond, as their life missions connected them. Her body was placed in a morgue, anticipating that their family might come to Haiti to see Sr. Esta one last time and join in giving her a proper burial. This was not to be, though, as the loss of power and absence of generators did not allow for the preservation of the body. On Saturday, January 16th, Sr. Luvia was forced to have her buried. As awful as that must have been, Sr. Luvia realized the blessing. There were countless others with loved ones who had been claimed by the massive piles of concrete and debris. They would never receive a proper burial.
In the rubble of the orphanage, there was death, but there was also life. One of the orphan girls had been trapped beneath fallen concrete during the quake, and she was still alive. Sr. Luvia said they could hear her calling for help, but it seemed that no matter how hard they worked, they could not free her. Sr. Luvia told of how her heart was torn as they dug with their bare hands and listened to the sounds of the child’s cries. After hours of working with other volunteers to free the young girl, Sr. Luvia remembers going away to pray. She prayed that God might take the child’s life and end her suffering, and again the voice inside spoke.

Sr. Luvia said that she felt God answered her prayer, but in an unexpected way. He told her to go back and get the child out. Confused, but obedient, Sr. Luvia returned to the site and summoned others to help her. She said they thought she had lost her mind. They reminded her that every possible effort had been made, and that there was no way to free the child. She told them she was only following God’s direction and that He would provide the way. Using a crowbar and a piece of a broken door, they attempted again to do the very thing that had been tried so many times before; only this time, God and His angels had joined their efforts and within moments the child was free. She had sustained broken bones; but she was alive, delivered from the darkness that had tried to claim her. In June of 2011 members of our group were blessed to see her and listen as she tearfully shared her story.

I remember asking Sr. Luvia how she knew that she should pay attention to the voice that gave her such valuable direction on those days when she was told to leave the building and to save the young girl. “I have learned to listen to that voice,” was her simple reply.

Prior to the earthquake Sr. Luvia had purchased property and begun the construction of a building that she hoped would house St. Alphonse School, as well as several other programs that she was operating in Port au Prince. She had interviewed several contractors until she met one who would agree to her construction requirements. She made several trips to the site, insisting that rebar be placed in the concrete as reinforcement. This wisdom and persistence paid off, as the construction site survived the earthquake without notable damage. When time allowed, construction was continued; and today it is the new site of St. Alphonse School, replacing the previous site which had been extensively damaged by the quake and later demolished. Sr. Luvia continues her work, listening and leading as they attempt to rebuild and to move forward.

Our trip to Haiti in June of 2011 left our group inspired and overwhelmed. It was obvious that the work that Sr. Luvia was doing was needed. It was obvious that what was needed was much bigger than we could accomplish alone. We brainstormed and dreamed of ways to help her on a much larger scale. Maybe if we could get the word out to a larger population of who she was and all she was trying to do. Maybe there would be more help.

Sr. Luvia reminds many of another hero of faith and service, Mother Theresa. Mother Theresa impacted the world by living and teaching that there is value in every human life. She brought hope and displayed God’s love to the poor she served, but she did more than that. She inspired, and brought hope of goodness and faith to those of us who she referred to as “spiritually impoverished”.

We can all be inspired by the heroes of faith who point the way to God and reflect His love. While it is true that Sr. Luvia counts on our support to continue her work, she relies more on God and she trust that He will provide. And ultimately, I believe that we need Sr. Luvia more than she needs us. We are in a position to learn and gain greater blessings from her than she will ever gain from our donations, no matter how important they are.

I believe the world, whether materially or spiritually poor, needs the Mother Theresa’s, the Sr. Luvia’s and the other saintly heroes who make it their life’s mission to answer God’s call in serving those who are oppressed and neglected by our modern society.