



Photo by Robyn Fieser/CRS



TWINNING IN THE BEST INTEREST OF CHILDREN:

promoting family life, not orphanages

AS MANY AS 500 CATHOLIC parishes in the United States are linked, or “twinned,” with parishes in Haiti, a country still recovering from the devastating 2010 earthquake. Parish twinning projects provide money, resources and/or volunteers that support Church-based social or spiritual welfare projects in their twin parishes overseas. Significant Church-based support from the United States is currently being directed toward children in orphanages.

However, about 80 percent of children in Haitian orphanages are not, in fact, orphans. Although no one knows the exact number of residential care facilities, or the number of children who live in them, most orphanages house children whose parent(s) are extremely poor, or those who have been abandoned, neglected or abused by family guardians. Poverty has increased since the earthquake, and the number of vulnerable children in Haitian orphanages has skyrocketed. Living conditions for these children have, for the most part, deteriorated.

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Catholic ministry is rooted in a commitment to promote and defend human dignity. This is the foundation of the Church’s effort to respect the sacredness of every human life:

- **The right to life** includes the right of every human being to the means for the proper development of life, such as adequate health care and support.
 - **The family is the central social institution**, and it must be supported and strengthened.
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Young children in Haiti’s orphanages are more likely than their peers to suffer from poor health, developmental delays and problems with emotional attachment. In addition, older children face high risks of behavioral disorders and abuse—many former residents report great difficulty integrating into society. Most egregiously, orphanages in Haiti have become sources for child traffickers. More information about these concerns, including empirical research, has been gathered by the Better Care Network at bettercarenetwork.org and by the Faith to Action Initiative at faithtoaction.org.

Most children who live in Haitian orphanages were placed there not because their families didn’t want them, but because they were too poor to care for them. While children who currently live in institutions continue to need assistance until they can be reunited with their families, we believe new twinning projects should support keeping vulnerable families intact.

It is recommended that churches interested in helping vulnerable children consider the following:

1) BEFORE DECIDING ON A PROJECT

Instead of funding an orphanage, **churches should consider supporting a faith-based or nongovernmental project that helps families provide for their children.** Many poor families say that their biggest need is for school fees. In fact, many parents put their children in orphanages because they think it will guarantee them an education. They learn—too late—that it often doesn’t work that way. And their children end up suffering the consequences.

Parishes in the United States can obtain more information on community-based projects from the local offices of the Haitian Ministry of Social Affairs, government-recognized community protection committees and local churches in Haiti. As a first step, churches can speak with the pastor of their twin parish in Haiti about alternatives to supporting orphanages.

2) IF YOUR CHURCH IS ALREADY FUNDING AN ORPHANAGE

Ensure that the orphanage meets national standards for residential care. According to Haiti’s L’Institut Bien Etre Social et de Recherches, or **IBESR**, the orphanage should be rated as Good Quality (“green”). IBESR’s most recent residential care assessment, “L’Annuaire des Maisons d’Enfants,” was published in June 2013 with the Ministère des Affaires Sociales et du Travail. To obtain an electronic copy of IBESR’s assessment, email haitipartnership@crs.org.

Churches are encouraged to only support orphanages that are working to achieve national standards. Churches need to monitor their efforts through regular written reports by the orphanage, careful reviews of the institution’s fiscal accounts and during mission visits. It is unwise and risky to support orphanages that do not meet national standards of care, unless they are actively working to achieve these standards.

PROTECTION: The responsibility and measures taken to prevent and respond to abuse and exploitation of a child or vulnerable adult. This includes building awareness, promoting training, identifying and responding to all complaints, monitoring and evaluating protection structures, and taking personal responsibility.

Families and communities are central to the care and protection that children need. Wherever opportunities allow, churches should understand, support and build upon sources of support and protection that already exist in the community.



Photo by David Rochkind for CRS

Orphanages should be encouraged to facilitate family reintegration efforts, either with the child's family of origin or, in the case of known abuse or neglect, with distant relatives or a preapproved foster family. Finding the most appropriate solution for each child takes time and careful planning, and implementation requires the active participation of all family members, including the child, as well as the local child welfare office. Churches can demand that [proper procedures are followed](#) and that no child who can return home is left behind. If the orphanage is still accepting children, ensure that proper intake procedures are followed so that children who have families are not institutionalized.

3) PROTECT YOURSELF AND THE CHILDREN YOU SERVE

All vulnerable children need to be protected from abuse, neglect and deprivation. While there is evidence that children are more likely to be abused or neglected in institutional care, it is important to support the well-being and protection of children in all settings. As churches and individuals, we should set a good example. If your church does not have its own child protection policy, consider developing one with the guidance of your diocesan child protection office. Everyone who has contact with children—including visitors—should be well-versed in your child protection policy. And they should sign the code of conduct and carefully follow its provisions.

Parish twinning has the potential to improve the lives of vulnerable populations overseas and to enhance cross-cultural understanding. Twinning can be transformational for everyone involved. CRS seeks to help U.S. parishes protect and support vulnerable children in Haiti and beyond.

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"Children, Orphanages and Families: A Summary of Research to Help Guide Faith-Based Action" is an excellent resource for Christian groups, churches and individuals seeking to respond to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in Haiti, and elsewhere. For a copy of this document, please visit faithtoaction.org and bettercarenetwork.org.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION FROM CRS, CONTACT
healthcrs@crs.org OR haitipartnership@crs.org



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*“Protecting
children ... is a
Gospel priority.”*

MONSIGNOR ROBERT OLIVER
Secretary of the Pontifical
Commission for the
Protection of Minors

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