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*The things which you have heard in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. 2 Tim. 2:2*



Special Edition, April 2009

## MY WEEK IN L'AQUILA

### A War Zone...

I have never experienced living in a war zone. What thoughts or images I may have of such a time or place only come from the movies. Throughout the week of the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> of April those thoughts and images seemed to come true. My time spent ministering in the city of L'Aquila following the major earthquake that struck the central Italian region of Abruzzo, during the early morning hours of Monday the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, felt as though I was living in a war zone. Upon entering L'Aquila, which was at the center of the quake, a week after the disaster, one could instantly sense the somber mood in the air. L'Aquila appeared abandoned and desolate with the exception of a few people on the streets and emergency vehicles rushing back and forth. Buildings stood with huge craters in them as though they had been bombed. Some homes were but rubble while most had large fractures running up and down their structures. It was interesting to see how the destruction was somewhat random. There could be three large apartment buildings looking exactly alike lined up side by side on a certain street and the first and third had severe damages while the second had only minor ruptures. In another instance

two homes were joined together and one disintegrated while the other still stood almost intact. A military road block was stationed at a crossroads that seemed to lead to the historic part of the city. This is also the quarter of the city most destroyed by the quake. The student housing complex that crumbled killing numerous young college students was situated in this historic city center.

I led a group of about ten other members from our home church in Rome. We drove in to L'Aquila early Monday morning with four cars loaded with supplies and evangelistic literature for the believers in that city. Our church has a missionary family, the De Angelis family, serving in L'Aquila and a sister church which our missionary, Giorgio De Angelis, pastors. We came to help, encourage, serve, console and most of all reach the many lost and hurting Italian souls with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The key item of evangelistic literature that was distributed was "Coi Terremoti Che Centra Dio?" ("What does God have to do with Earthquakes?") This booklet was written by William Standridge, long-time missionary to Italy and also my pastor, who shepherds our church in Rome.



### Once in the Camp...

Following the earthquake the Italian government set up provisional camps called "Tendopoli" (Tent Cities) throughout L'Aquila and the surrounding towns to house and shelter the population in the midst of the emergency. I spent the week in one of these camps living like the general population and immersing myself among them as much as possible. Life in the camp was tough. The temperature was freezing in the evenings just before going to bed and early in the morning just as one awoke. There were only a few portable restrooms for several hundred people to use and no showers. Many in the camp had not bathed since the earthquake.

I myself went the entire week without a shower. Aftershocks continued throughout the week heightening the peoples' fears about returning to their homes and life in



general. The mood was one of desperation and frustration. There was much complaining in the camps and even arguing between the people as tensions were high. In one instance Giorgio had to break up a fight between two grown men in the camp who were about to go to blows with their respective families and others watching. Many lost family members and friends in the quake. It appeared as though the only thing people talked about was where they were or how they managed to escape death at the time of the quake and who did not make it. Sadly most gave credit to their own cleverness in surviving. Others credited “*la forza interiore*”, an “inner force” and still others a local Catholic saint, if not the virgin Mary herself. Several blamed God for the earthquake, asking how God could have killed young infants and entire families. Still others believed that they had been punished by God because they were a bad society.

An assembly of churches in southern Italy helped Giorgio establish a central tent in the camp. The tent was called “The Good News” Tent and all of the meals (lunch and dinner) were served there. Several churches throughout Italy sent their own members to assist with the work related to the tent. Through these efforts we had the wonderful opportunity to evangelize most of the population in the camp. During the meals there was a prayer and testimony time. Literature was also distributed in the tent. There were two book stands carrying Bibles and other evangelistic material at either ends of the tent. Throughout the week Giorgio and I also traveled to other camps to distribute New Testaments and simply talk with many from the local population. Despair and fear was the common theme everywhere.

Toward mid-week the situation in the camp took a very negative turn for the believers and the “Good News” Tent. A Catholic priest, perhaps a cardinal, apparently from Rome arrived to “inspect” matters in our camp. He accused our tent of proselytism and informed the civil authorities of such. The following day the civil head responsible for running the camp told Giorgio that the “Good News” Tent had to come down and the believers associated with it had to leave. By week's end about five more priests appeared on the scene. I was quickly reminded of the even more tragic Italian reality. The Roman Catholic Church behaves in both a ubiquitous and tyrannical manner. In fact, as I traveled throughout the other camps and surrounding towns, priests were present on more than one occasion visiting with the people as well.

According to the latest update the situation has settled in the camp. There has been an apparent truce between the “Good News” Tent and the civil authorities. The tent and believers will be permitted to remain as long as no prayers or testimonies are done inside of the tent. Rather, the believers have been assigned an indoor soccer field nearby where Giorgio can have church services and those interested from the camp can attend.

### Some Final Thoughts...

L'Aquila was a tremendous ministry experience for me despite the tragedy. At week's end I was sad to leave. A passage struck my mind as I experienced sharing the Gospel among the “*terremotati*” (literally the “earthquakers”) throughout my week in L'Aquila. At the conclusion of Paul's sermon on Mars Hill in Acts 17:32-34 Luke writes that *some began to sneer, but others said, “We shall hear you again concerning this.”* But *some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.* Looking back at my time in L'Aquila and the significant testimony that was shared among the people, borrowing from Luke, I'd like to think that *some sneered and others said they would hear us again on these things* BUT some believed.



### Items For Prayer and a Word of Thanks...

Please continue to pray for Giorgio De Angelis, his wife Beate, and their teenage children, Sarah and Marco. They are a great example to many but still have much work to do. Pray for the church in L'Aquila. Giorgio shared with me a significant burden of his at this moment. After 15 years of ministry in L'Aquila the earthquake has caused his church to disperse. Many of the believers in the church have left L'Aquila to seek shelter elsewhere among family, friends, or other accommodations in more distant places. It is as though he must begin anew.

Please continue to pray for the spread of the Gospel among the camps in L'Aquila and the surrounding parts. Many have been witnessed to and received Bibles and literature.

I, finally, desire to personally express my heartfelt thanks and sincere gratitude to all of you who have supported me and the church in L'Aquila with your prayers and the several who also sent monetary gifts to sustain the ministry there.

With much love in Christ,

*Johnny Gravino*

(2 Cor 5:9)