The following is a translation of the eulogy delivered by Paul Farmer during the funeral mass for Jean Gabriel, "Ti Jean," in Cange, Haiti, on June 10.

Over a thousand family and friends gathered in L’Eglise Bon Sauveur to remember a valiant worker, a die-hard progressive, and a wonderful and loving friend.

Before I speak of Ti Jean as a friend, I’d like to pay tribute to his work and his example. I proceed in this manner because it’s easier to start by reflecting on what will continue, rather than what will not.

Ti Jean was, as all of you know, the director of an ambitious effort to extend our “pragmatic solidarity” to the poor by helping to build decent housing, augment school enrollment, purify water, and improve, in general, our ability to respond to the needs of those around us. “Poverty is a disease,” Jean would say theatrically and sincerely, meaning to goad his doctor friends into more action on behalf of the destitute.

All of you already know how personal this was for Jean. Born into poverty not far from here, Jean attended school only briefly and intermittently. By the time he was 20—I knew him even then, because I worked with his mother Olive, who is here today—Jean had been, at turns, a peasant farmer, a fisherman, and a charcoal maker. He spent much of his early years on the far side of the Péligre reservoir, the dam project which cost his family its land. As there was no high school there, Jean never went to high school, but all of us know that it was not for lack of ambition or talent. Jean was blessed with a subtle, fiery intellect and limitless passion for setting things right. Along with his mother and at least two of his brothers, Jean came to work with Zanmi Lasante, first as a manual laborer—remember his Friday trips to the market in Domond, so that all of us, patients and doctors and nurses, could eat?—and more recently as the founding director of POSER, the Program on Social and Economic Rights.

POSER is an important endeavor, as all of those gathered here today know. Through this project, and with his leadership, we were able to ask not whether or not the poor deserved a right to health care or clean water or a house that didn’t leak half the year. Through POSER, we were able to ask what we might do to show that we believed in these rights. We have sought to echo and amplify this work, and Jean’s example, in Peru, Boston, and Rwanda.

Ulrick has already offered us a reflection on Jean’s life and times, which were lived out here in central Haiti, even though Jean traveled widely in recent years. I’d like to add a few words about his core beliefs. Jean was a die-hard progressive. Regarding poverty as a disease, he was intolerant of inequality and racism; he was deeply knowledgeable about mean-spirited policies and opposed them with all his heart. He was an ardent supporter of the Haitian popular movement from the time he was a very young man and active in progressive Haitian politics. Jean moved easily between worlds, traveling to the United States to talk about popular democracy under fire and speaking with admirable forthrightness, both in the halls of power and among more
sympathetic audiences, about official U.S. and French complicity in the undermining of Haitian democracy. Jean believed not only in the need to move his people from misery to poverty with dignity: he believed in himself and in his talents, which is why he asked Ophelia to name him to the board of advisors of Partners In Health (PIH); he also served as a member of ZL’s executive committee.

But no c.v. will capture accurately Jean’s contributions, and so I add a few personal words about the man himself. One of his peers from Cange just referred to Jean as “docile,” which may be true in some senses but not in others. Jean was generous and always alive to the suffering of others. He was often courteous and kind, but he was a fiery man, too, and full of indignation about injustice. He was insistent and tough and garrulous. Some would see these traits as incompatible. Jean was complex, certainly, and impulsive. But he always had his bearings. In his house you will see four portraits: one of Nelson Mandela, for whom he named his youngest son; one of Martin Luther King; and another of Malcolm X. The fourth portrait is of Jesus, whose image is seen throughout Haiti, but in Jean’s house Christ is black and the focus is on the Stations of the Cross: the suffering of Christ at the hands of empire, power, privilege, and racist scorn. I can’t help noting that of these four heroes, all but one died young; the fourth sacrificed his youth and middle age to the cause of social justice.

The portraits remind us that Jean tended to think big. He may never have gone to high school but that, as he so often reminded us, was solely a consequence of his being born to poverty. He knew himself to be the equal or superior of anyone who, through chance, enjoys power and privilege. In argument, or even in light-hearted discussion, Jean often told me that had he been born in the United States he would have become, “at the very least, a Harvard professor.” He was less sure that I’d have done well as a kid in rural Haiti.

I can’t close my comments without adding that it’s hard for me to celebrate Jean’s life. It’s hard for me to celebrate anything at all today, as we bury him. But I hope that we will find, in reflecting on his life and his contributions, some shred of consolation. If not today, perhaps later—consolation to his children gathered here, to his mother, to his brothers and sisters, and to his friends. That would be all of us. Ti Jean had many “dependents,” to use a freighted word; I know I was one. I depended on Ti Jean for so many things: for making sure that things got done (a difficult enterprise here); for advice; for analysis of complexity. One of the amazing things that
strikes me in reflecting on his short life was just how many of us depended on Jean. It’s hard to imagine life here without him. It’s painful.

But continue we must. Today you’ve heard from Jean’s friends and co-workers. Loune has struck an important note in underlining the truest challenge to all of us: to honor his memory by continuing his work. When someone dies young, there is so often strife and confusion; anger and resentment; even the desire for revenge. But none of those sentiments will help us honor Jean; still less will they bring him back. Instead, we will strive to continue his efforts. Ophelia will establish, upon our return to Boston, a fund in his name. Jean’s closest friends hereby publicly commit to seeing that his many children are able to attend school; that’s the least we could do. We will also commit ourselves to renewed engagement in the struggle for the basic rights for which Jean fought, and about which he spoke so eloquently. Poverty and inequality are indeed a disease, and we will pursue the struggle against them as best we can without him.

The Jean Gabriel Fund will be launched by gifts from his friends from PIH, and by PIH supporters. Please send donations made out to Partners In Health, 641 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115. If you donate by check, designate in the memo line that your contribution is intended for the Jean Gabriel Fund. Donations can also be made online using a credit card at www.pih.org. Donations will be tax deductible.