

National Collection for  
Catholic Home Missions  
April 29-30, 2006



# neighbors

WINTER/SPRING 2006 A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA



## MISSION RECOVERY



St. Joseph Church (Bay St. Louis, Mississippi) before and after Hurricane Katrina.

“Katrina was the worst natural disaster in the history of our country,” said Bishop Thomas Rodi of Biloxi, surveying the devastation in south Mississippi with a visitor.

“Overnight, we lost ten parish churches and six schools. Ten other churches and four more schools sustained major damage.”

Up until now, he added, Hurricane Camille in 1969 was the benchmark—

a storm with 200-mile/hour winds. “But Camille was relatively compact. We never could have imagined a storm with a flood surge as high as 30 feet along the coast, from Lakeshore and Waveland in the west to Pascagoula in the east.”

We all know the tragedy from TV: the sunken homes, the debris-choked neighborhoods, people sobbing at the wreckage of their hopes. The fury of Hurricane Katrina, followed quickly by Rita, blew

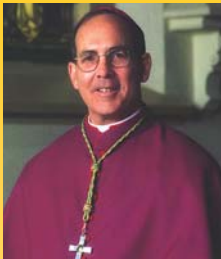
apart and washed away homes, businesses, churches, and schools. An estimated 1,300 people died in Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and east Texas. Afterwards, observers with long memories compared the sodden Gulf Coast to the bombed-out remains of Berlin in the waning days of World War II.

The analogy is apt. War can transform your world in an instant, and so did Katrina. Nature, usually benign along the

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# FROM THE CHAIRMAN

WINTER/SPRING 2006



## DEAR FRIENDS,

The Home Missions Committee would like to share with you this special issue on the terrible devastation Hurricanes Katrina and Rita visited upon the mission Churches of the Gulf Coast. We focus especially on the Diocese of Biloxi, Mississippi, headed by Bishop Thomas Rodi, who is a member of our Committee.

As you will read, Biloxi suffered the greatest damage from the storms after New Orleans. It will take years for Bishop Rodi and the Catholics of southern Mississippi to rebuild, repair, and get back on their feet. At this writing, some parish congregations are meeting for Mass in tents or in friendly Protestant churches, because Katrina destroyed their own buildings or rendered them unusable.

As a matter of policy, the Committee on the Home Missions does not fund capital projects such as repairing churches and parish halls. We usually give grants for pastoral work—preaching God’s Word, helping poor parishes keep their doors open, offering religious education, training ministers—that mission dioceses could not afford to offer without outside assistance.

However, the two hurricanes’ assault was unprecedented, the worst natural disaster in U.S. history. We had to respond. The Committee maintains a modest reserve, enough to cover the next year’s grant commitments. As reported elsewhere in this issue, we decided to give \$3 million from this reserve to the five Gulf Coast dioceses most affected by the storms. We sent \$900,000 to Bishop Rodi to help him deal with the tragedies described in our feature article. An even larger share went to New Orleans, and lesser shares to other dioceses in Louisiana and Texas.

As it is every year, the Catholic Home Missions Appeal will be taken up at the end of April. The Committee believes that American Catholics will respond generously. Katrina and Rita made us aware in a most frightening way that sometimes helping Catholic communities operate is not enough. Sometimes it is necessary to help them survive. With your help, we hope to be ready.

† Most Rev. J. Peter Sartain  
Bishop of Little Rock  
Chairman, Committee on the Home Missions

**Remember the Missions! Donations are very much appreciated. Checks may be made to Committee on the Home Missions.**

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## DID YOU KNOW?



### HURRICANES KATRINA & RITA

A Category-Four hurricane with sustained winds of up to 145 miles per hour, Hurricane Katrina was by far the single greatest natural disaster in 229 years of U.S. history. On the morning of Monday, August 29, 2005, Katrina hit the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi. Ultimately, the cost was **1,300 lives** and counting, and the property destruction is estimated at **\$75 billion or more**.

Katrina delivered a crippling blow to New Orleans, where the levees failed in several places, and slimy mud and dirty water flooded most of the city. More than 100,000 residents, mostly poor and without adequate transportation, were trapped in their homes without food, water, or electricity.

Katrina smashed into the Gulf Coast with a storm surge as high as 30 feet; in some places, the water rolled seven miles inward. It devastated 70 miles of Mississippi’s coastline and swept away or harmed over 65,000 homes. **The damage extended over an area the size of Great Britain.**

Three weeks after Katrina, Hurricane Rita hit farther to the west, causing close to \$9 billion in damage to homes, schools, and local businesses in Louisiana and Texas. Storm surges of 15 to 20 feet were again reported along coastal areas. In the hurricane’s aftermath, roads were piled high with furniture, carpets, mattresses, and household goods.

An estimated **1.5 million people were displaced** by Katrina and Rita, a humanitarian crisis on a scale unseen in the United States since the Great Depression. How many uprooted families will return to the devastated areas is unknown.



*continued from page 1*

southern shore, turned monstrosly violent, destroying the familiar and comfortable, leaving people dazed, disoriented, and comfortless. Bishop Rodi explained, “Right now, our entire community has suffered the loss of so much of our past. People have lost family members and friends; they have lost not only their own homes but their whole neighborhoods. It’s like a death of someone close to us. But instead of being personal, it’s everyone, the whole community.”

Katrina was an unimaginable catastrophe that will echo in the nation’s imagination for decades. The Gulf Coast, with its wonderful racial and ethnic mix, its colorful culture, its bayou geography, its aquatic cuisine, has been changed, probably forever. Some wards of New Orleans will never recover. The quaint towns along the Mississippi beaches will be rebuilt; but, bereft of their history, they will neither look nor feel the same.

Six months later a great deal of suffering remains, because people have lost not only houses but jobs. In the town of Pass Christian, only 200 houses remain

standing, and the local economy is at a standstill. Hundreds of thousands of people, many poor or near-poor, have been displaced from homes that had been in their families for generations. Those who had little before Katrina have even less now.

The Diocese of Biloxi, poor to begin with, suffered the common fate. The parishes alone sustained property damage upwards of \$70 million. It will take years to rebuild or replace the drowned churches and schools. Some may not be replaced at all. St. Joseph’s in Bay St. Louis was a white clapboard structure, a classic small-town mission church. A sad photo now shows the front steps of St. Joseph’s—leading nowhere. The building is not just damaged: it’s gone, taken by wind and water.

The storm surge rushed seven miles up rivers and streams in some places. “We basically lost everything,” said Deacon Bob and Miriam Jones. “The water was over our rooftop. But thank God we are okay.” Deacon Ben and Mary Wimberly had about four feet of water in their home. “We lost our cars, most of our

furniture and appliances. During the hurricane, we stayed two hours in the attic with my 90-year-old mother-in-law, our son, and two dogs,” said Deacon Ben.

Bishop Rodi insists that faith and perseverance will win out despite the devastation. The shape and direction of peoples’ lives may have been altered, but not their will. Situated just blocks from the Gulf of Mexico, shell-shaped St. Michael’s Parish was once a lovely place of worship. The walls held through the storms, but little survived inside the church when Katrina crashed ashore. The pews have vanished, and the bottom half of the tall stained glass windows are shattered remnants. Katrina even pushed aside the massive two-ton marble altar like a child’s plaything.

Yet a crucifix still hangs in the shadows, presiding calmly over a tangle of exposed wiring, broken glass, and scattered mounds of muddy debris. **“Jesus is still with us,”** whispers Bishop Rodi. **“Mississippi will rise again.”**

*Special thanks to Shirley Henderson of the Gulf Pine Catholic newspaper for her help with our staff visit and this article.*

# SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS ADD UP TO *Hope*

## STUDENTS LEAVE SHOES AT ALTAR

When the campus minister of the Newman Center at Alabama's Auburn University told his Catholic students after Mass about the great need hurricane victims had for shoes, about **200 students came up, left their shoes at the altar, and went home barefoot.**

## WEDDING RING

At St. Lawrence, a poor inner-city parish in the Watts section of Los Angeles, a Hispanic woman slipped her gold wedding ring into the donation envelope for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. There was a note: **"For the victims of the hurricane. I have little money. But this ring should be of some value. It is given with all of my heart."**

## SISTER DIOCESE IN SALTILLO, MEXICO

For more than 30 years, the Diocese of Biloxi has sent gifts of money to support a poor parish in the Diocese of Saltillo, Mexico—one mission assisting another. After Katrina hit, all the Saltillo parishes took up a special collection for their brothers and sisters in Mississippi, USA. **"The love which we have brought to them is now returning to us in this gesture of solidarity in our hour of need,"** said Biloxi's Bishop Thomas Rodi.



St. Clare's Parish (Waveland, Mississippi)

DAVID SUILEY

## IOWA PARISH CLUSTER SPONSORS DEVASTATED BILOXI CHURCH

Sacred Heart and St. Mary's parishes in eastern Iowa form a parish cluster serving 550 families in several towns. The cluster not only donated \$20,000 from two fall festivals to St. Peter the Apostle Parish and School in Pascagoula, Mississippi, they also decided to adopt the church. The pastor of St. Peter's in Pascagoula, Fr. William Norvel, welcomed an initial team of seven after their 17-hour drive from Walker, Iowa. About 30 parishioners, singing hymns, formed a human chain to unload construction supplies, clothing, food, and gifts from an RV, a station wagon, and a pickup truck.

Katrina had totally destroyed St. Peter's Church, and Mass could no longer be held in the building. "A top priority was to complete the chapel in the convent and fix the roof of the rectory so week-day Mass could be celebrated there," said Fr. Norvel. During a busy week at St. Peter's, the Iowans cleaned the mud from the rectory and convent floors, sanded and painted drywall, hung cupboards, installed light fixtures, and laid floor tile.

The seven visitors felt a divine call to join in this mission. **"Each of us has his or her unique purpose. After sharing Jesus' message of love and doing physical labor, we all came back to our homes in Iowa with grateful hearts. For we had truly received more than what we gave. Isn't this what being Catholic really means?"** said Iowa parishioner Bud Miller.

The people of St. Peter's responded with heartfelt gratitude. "We deeply appreciated everything these seven parishioners did with us to rebuild our parish. They themselves were a most generous gift to us in our needs. They were—and still are—our angels from the North," said Beverly Duffy, a member of the parish council.

## Committee on Home Missions Gives \$3 Million to Hurricane-Stricken Dioceses

The Committee on the Home Missions awarded \$3 million in special grant funds to the five U.S. mission dioceses most affected by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. These special grants were allocated as follows:

- \$1.2 million to the Archdiocese of New Orleans,
- \$900,000 to the Diocese of Biloxi (Mississippi), and
- \$300,000 each to the Dioceses of Houma-Thibodaux (Louisiana), Lake Charles (Louisiana), and Beaumont (Texas).

"The Catholic Home Mission Appeal is a concrete expression of the spirit of *communio* that binds together all the bishops of the United States," said Bishop J. Peter Sartain, chairman of the Committee, in a letter to the mission bishops of the affected dioceses. "Please accept this special award with their prayers and ours for a hopeful future."

# KATRINA LEFT CATHOLIC STUDENTS WITH “no nothing”

The school year began without a hitch in the Diocese of Biloxi, Mississippi. But several days into the semester, Katrina slammed into the coast. The hurricane totally destroyed five diocesan schools and caused major to severe damage to seven others.

Six feet of water crashed into the adjoining Our Lady Academy and St. Stanislaus Catholic High School in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Just about everything was swept back into the Gulf. All student records were lost. All computers were destroyed. All books were water-logged. **“Half of the school has to be demolished.** We have no desks, no science equipment, no art supplies, no cafeteria, no nothing,” said Sr. Jackie Howard, principal of Our Lady Academy, immediately after the hurricane.

With the help of teachers, students, and parent volunteers, both Our Lady Academy and St. Stanislaus reopened, amazingly, within two months, using sections of both campuses. “Everyone in the Bay area saw this reopening as a sign of great hope and an attempt to return this devastated area to some semblance of normalcy,” said St. Stanislaus’s principal, Sacred Heart Brother Ronald Hingle.

Even so, these young high school students will remember Katrina for a long time. The hurricane severely impacted their homes, their families and friends, their local community, their emotional well-being, and even their faith. “It was like God just packed up his bags and left us,” said one student. Another student said, “I experienced a great sense of loss, and things will never be the same again, for us and the next generation.” Another young person commented, **“It made me realize what’s really important in life and to be thankful for what was left.”**

*Special thanks to the following Our Lady Academy–St. Stanislaus High School students for this article: Don Haller, Erin Kergosien, Eric Lichtenstein, Buddy Schulz, Alyse Prieur, and Chelsi Potee. These wonderful young people give us hope for the future.*

St. Clare Elementary School (Waveland, Mississippi). School began in 19 tents donated by a benefactor from Alaska.

## Support the Mission Church Here in America

CATHOLIC HOME MISSIONS APPEAL  
APRIL 29-30, 2006

The Committee on the Home Missions distributes money that Catholics contribute to the annual **Catholic Home Missions Appeal** (CHMA). When Katrina and Rita struck, the Committee immediately donated \$3 million in special grants for hurricane relief to the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the Dioceses of Biloxi (Mississippi), Houma-Thibodaux (Louisiana), Lake Charles (Louisiana), and Beaumont (Texas).

This year, the CHMA will be taken up in parishes across the country on the **weekend of April 29-30**. As always, the proceeds will support pastoral services like religious education and training for ministry both along the Gulf Coast and in other parts of the United States where the Catholic Church struggles. The Appeal is a wonderful opportunity for American Catholics to be brothers and sisters to one another, to extend one another a helping hand.

Catholics in the mission dioceses—Alaska, Appalachia, the Deep South, the Southwest, the Mountain West, and the young dioceses of the Caribbean and the Pacific—face serious challenges in living their faith. In the U.S. missions, priests and sisters are few, Catholic schools rare, distances between parishes great, poverty widespread, and financial resources scarce. Ninety U.S. dioceses, including Eastern Catholic Churches, are unable to provide the most basic services for their people without support from the Catholic Home Mission Appeal.



DAVID SUIEY

*“ Our lives can be buffeted by winds of sorrow, strife, and struggle. We trust in the Lord’s powerful love to see us through these storms, never doubting his faithfulness.”*

—BISHOP RODI



CLARION-HERALD

Our Lady of Lourdes (Slidell, Louisiana)



DAVID SUIEY

Pass Christian, Mississippi

*“Over 65,000 homes have been destroyed. I’m not a contractor, but I think it would be impossible to build 65,000 homes in any community in a limited time period. I simply don’t know how long people will be living in trailers.”*

—BISHOP RODI

*"In the midst of tragedy, loss, and anguish, God is indeed present. He is enlightening and strengthening us to engage in the challenging work of recovery, restoration, and rebuilding"*

—Archbishop Hughes



DAVID SUIEY

St. John’s Church (Lakeshore, Mississippi)



CLARION-HERALD

St. Anne Mission (Empire, Mississippi)

This wooden church was lifted and moved 75 feet from its cinder block foundations.

# the damage done . . .

# Katrina & Rita's Wrath



**Diocese of Bioloxi**  
 10 parish churches destroyed  
 10 parish churches damaged  
 6 Catholic schools destroyed  
 4 Catholic schools damaged  
 Diocesan pastoral center damaged  
**Damage: \$70 million**

**Archdiocese of New Orleans**  
 The scale of damage was so great that no complete report is available yet. Preliminary figures show that of the 1,244 archdiocesan parish and church buildings, 387 were flooded, and 864 suffered wind damage, with many buildings receiving both. These numbers include elementary schools and high schools. Seven severely damaged parishes will be permanently closed. The archdiocesan pastoral center severely damaged.  
**Damage: \$74 million**

**Diocese of Beaumont**  
 6 Catholic elementary schools damaged  
 1 Catholic high school damaged  
 No parish churches destroyed  
 Several parish churches damaged  
**Damage: Pending final reports**

**Diocese of Lake Charles**  
 3 parish churches destroyed  
 3 mission chapels destroyed  
 3 religious education buildings destroyed  
 4 parish churches damaged  
 6 Catholic schools damaged  
 Diocesan pastoral center damaged  
**Damage: \$15 million**

**Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux**  
 2 Catholic high schools damaged  
 5 Catholic elementary schools damaged  
 9 parish churches/buildings damaged  
 1 parish religious education building destroyed  
 1 parish administration building destroyed  
 Diocesan pastoral center damaged  
**Damage: \$4.1 million**

*“We had a small wooden church in Bay St. Louis. Immediately after the hurricane, I wasn’t able to enter that area to check on this church. When I asked one of my priests what had happened to the little wooden church, he told me it was just a sea of debris. He couldn’t find the exact place where it used to be. He couldn’t find enough identifiable debris to indicate where it had stood for so many years.”*

—BISHOP RODI



# neighbors

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## • COMMITTEE ON THE HOME MISSIONS • **Who Are We?**

**T**he bishops' Committee on the Home Missions was founded as the American Board of Catholic Missions in 1924. In cooperation with the Black and Indian Missions Board (1885) and the Catholic Church Extension Society (1905), the Committee provides financial support for missionary activities that strengthen and extend the presence of the Church in the United States and its island territories in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The principal beneficiaries of the annual Catholic Home Missions Appeal are approximately 90 home mission dioceses, which include the Eastern Catholic Church eparchies.

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## WANT TO SEE MORE?

We invite you to take an Internet journey to a few of our home missions and learn what's happening in their parts of the country. Just log on to [www.usccb.org/hm](http://www.usccb.org/hm) and click on **Stories and Pictures from the Field.**