



Marie Constantin

Ministry Collaboration in New Orleans

Along with Devastation, the 2005 Hurricanes Brought New Opportunities and a Newfound Faith in God's Love

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita of the summer of 2005 will forever be recognized as great natural disasters. However, in this article, I will focus not on the events of Katrina and Rita but, rather, on what these cataclysmic storms have called forth from us as a community of faith. What is our understanding of our call? And what is our potential, as both communities and individuals, to respond to that call?

If we are to find opportunity in the wake of such monumental destruction, then our response is about people, communities, church, and hope. What have we learned from the experience? What's next? How will we benefit from it?

CHA describes the elements of our Catholic identity as:

- Promoting and defending human dignity
- Attending to the whole person
- Caring for poor and vulnerable persons
- Promoting the common good
- Acting on behalf of justice
- Acting in communion with the church¹

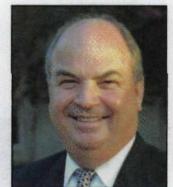
Certainly those definitions are applicable when one reflects on the last 18 months on the Gulf Coast. Just as importantly, they provide a guide for how we must continue to persevere in the

coming months and years. News reports tell stories of rebuilding. But headlines and photo captions alone can't possibly articulate the layers of thought and stewardship that continue to be needed. The unreported effects of the storms are perhaps an even more compelling story. They provide an opportunity for finding Christ in others, understanding Christ in serving others as ministers, and bringing him to them through service.

Through our Catholic identity, we believe that the enduring sign of health care is rooted in the belief that every person is a treasure; every life is a sacred gift; and that we care for the unity of body, mind, and spirit. Through our stewardship of the healing ministry of Jesus, we bring alive the Gospel vision of justice and peace. Catholic health care is about Jesus' mission of love and healing. And nowhere is that mission needed more today than on the Gulf Coast. By our service we strive to transform hurt into hope.

GREAT CHALLENGES AND GREAT HOPE

Great challenges bring out the best in people. The innate human goodness of the person manifests itself through our desire to give time, talent, and treasure. The grace of faith and hope draws us together—our church, our communities, and our health care providers. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* describes hope as "the desire of something together with the expectation of obtaining it. . . . [It is] a movement of the



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appetite towards a future good, which though hard to attain is possible of attainment. . . . [It is] a Divine virtue by which we confidently expect, with God's help . . . to have at our disposal the means of securing it. . . . It is directly implanted in the soul by Almighty God . . . to elevate and strengthen our wills."² Today, hope abounds in the Gulf Coast communities.

Katrina and Rita and their aftermath saw the emergence of countless heroes. But there are actually many more heroes today—individuals whose heroics are measured not in moments of sweeping action but, rather, in the quiet resolve of daily courage and commitment. We can be most excited about, and inspired by:

- The courageous parents who live in a FEMA trailer while rebuilding their home, returning to work, caring for neighbors and family, and working through frustrating bureaucracies of insurance and government assistance programs.

- The small-business owner who assumes the risk of investing and reopening in a devastated neighborhood as his contribution to restoring a sense of normalcy, simultaneously seeking the same for himself.

- Civil servants and those individuals in critical jobs who return to work while, in their own personal lives, they face the same incredible chal-

lenges as the people they seek to serve.

- Families rebuilding houses and communities—individuals seeing need and responding with the opening of schools, restaurants, businesses, and civic organizations.

- Neighbors engaging in discussions to plan their collective future.

- Volunteers committing precious time away from careers already disrupted, giving of themselves to participate in leadership of quasi-governmental programs to help oversee the receipt and distribution of resources—volunteers, who, ironically, are often the target of criticism for issues beyond their control.

We should (and do) express our great joy for leaders who lead effectively. We have compassion for those who can't. And we are justifiably frustrated and disappointed by those who won't. Like our "day-to-day" heroes, our most effective leaders are often unidentified, reflecting their true humility.

SIGNS OF REBUILDING

Signs of rebuilding are beginning to show in hundreds of ways, many of them being the result of partnerships and a palpable spirit of collaboration and cooperation. Among these signs are:

- The Second Harvest Food Bank of Greater New Orleans and Acadiana, which continues to experience an 80 percent increase in need in the 23 parishes it serves. The Greater Baton Rouge Food Bank is experiencing a 65 percent increase in need.

- PACE (Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly) Greater New Orleans, organized by the Archdiocese of New Orleans, with support from Ascension Health, CHRISTUS Health, and Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady (FMOL) Health System, was scheduled to open in November 2005. The opening is now scheduled for this September.

- St. Bernard Health Center, sponsored by Ascension Health and FMOL Health System, is the principal provider of health care services in St. Bernard Parish, where 26,000 homes were flooded.

- Project Fleur-de-lis is a cooperative effort among Catholic schools, Catholic Charities, Ascension Health, and Sisters of Mercy Health System to provide school-based mental health services.

- With the support of Catholic Charities USA and many donors, area Catholic schools were, in the immediate post storm environment, opened at no charge to the children of police and firefighters who had no school to attend. Families of Catholic school students who were in need also received tuition support from the archdiocese.



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■ The Louisiana Recovery Authority (LRA) provided leadership and oversight for statewide comprehensive redevelopment planning—economic and workforce development, infrastructure and transportation, housing, public health and health care, human services, education, and coastal protection—all in collaboration with representatives of the communities involved.

■ Under LRA auspices, a regional plan called Louisiana Speaks offers a vision for redevelopment of several critical regions. The plan was developed on the basis of a survey of more than 23,000 participants, 40 percent of whom now are living in a zip code different from their pre-storm addresses.

■ More than \$1 billion has been spent on levee system repairs, with another \$4.5 billion allocated for projects in 2007-2010.

■ Large employers are experiencing employment growth, and there are several billion dollars in construction projects planned. Construction is a new major industrial sector in south Louisiana.

■ The Port of New Orleans has been restored to pre-storm tonnage and cruise lines are returning to it with both U.S. and international tourists.

We know that residents who have chosen to establish a new life in other communities have been welcomed and supported. We are grateful for the hospitality they have been shown. While we miss our friends and co-workers, we wish them well, and will welcome them home as they choose to return. And we certainly continue to celebrate our unique Gulf Coast culture—families and friends joining together on almost any occasion, jazz festivals, Mardi Gras, the NFL Saints, music and dance, wonderful food, fishing, wildlife, and the incredible natural beauty of the land. All these are all signs of our identity as a community that can never be washed away.

As we envision a future for the Gulf Coast region, we live in the anticipation of realizing all our hopes and dreams. We strive to be a community that has risen to its challenges. We will work to create a place that is protected from natural disasters through improvements such as remediation of our coastal erosion and the construction of reliable levee systems. We will be a community in which

individuals have the opportunity to reach their highest potential in contributing to the common good. This will only be accomplished through education, health care, social services, and public safety programs that are both highly effective and efficient. We will be a community where diverse cultures and interests can collaborate for the benefit of all. And we will be a community in which each human life is respected and cherished.

A BETTER COMMUNITY

Hurricanes Katrina and Rita have left indelible scars on the lives and memories of victims and their families and friends. But we are hopeful. Disruption forces change. Few communities have the Gulf Coast's opportunity to rebuild so much at one time. And, although that rebuilding is often uncomfortable, it is absolutely necessary and beneficial. We will all get to know one another and ourselves better. And we will be a better community because of it.

Although the hurricanes were a huge disaster that called us to our healing ministry, smaller opportunities to do so occur each and every day. We don't need a disaster.

Our church has been a beacon of hope in reminding us of God's ever-present love, of the joy of difficulties as an expression of special grace. And it has also been a conduit for the love and goodness of the world, and a cheerleader for our belief in a brighter future. Our faith teaches us to believe that each life is important and has a purpose in God's plan. We see God in all of creation, even in weather. That same faith allows us to accept a plan we may not understand, to find joy in the privilege we each receive in participating in it. We are answering God's call. ■

NOTE

1. Catholic Health Association, *A Shared Identity Statement for the Catholic Health Ministry*, St. Louis, 2001.
2. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Appleton, New York City, 1910, vol. 7, p. 465 (www.newadvent.org/cathen/07465b.htm).

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