

The Florida Catholic

Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition front page story

Biloxi still on long road to recovery

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Biloxi

In the two months since Hurricane Katrina wiped out much of the Mississippi Gulf Coast, little has changed and everything has changed.

Mountains of debris still fill lots where homes and businesses once stood. Shreds of clothing and people's lives hang like so many Halloween ghosts in the trees and fences. Casino barges still sit where the storm tossed them, hundreds of yards from their previous moorings. Mansions and historic homes along Highway 90 are gone, the ground where they stood swept clear.



The bell from St. Michael Church, located on Beach Boulevard in Biloxi, wasn't recovered from amid the storm debris until late October. It had been feared lost. The wrecked buildings in the background are the parish hall and the rectory.

TFC PHOTO BY PEGGY DEKEYSER

Yet amid the destruction, people are starting to rebuild, to hope again. The people of Our Mother of Sorrows Church have a stake in the future of their parish. The church of the historic African-American parish was built in 1914, largely by hand by the current members' parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.

Father Steve Wilson, CSSR, came to be pastor of the parish just after Hurricane Katrina hit. "Two weeks before the storm, we were sitting in Mary Mahoney's restaurant to sign the contract between our order and the diocese. I was thinking to myself, dining in the warm tropical evening air and eating seafood, that this was going to be a very nice mission for us. We were to have started on Oct. 1. When the storm hit Aug. 29, we came down immediately, to be here with the people. We just had to come." The Redemptorists relocated to Biloxi from Chicago.

Father Wilson and two other priests and one brother from the order have been sleeping on couches since arriving, sharing whatever quarters they can find, because the rectory that was to have housed them was also heavily damaged by the storm.

Our Mother of Sorrows Church sustained water damage from the storm, but ironically, the water appears to have risen slowly in the building, unlike so many that were pounded by the storm's surge. "All the pews were moved around, and the altar had floated to the back of the church," Father Wilson said. "Strangely though, the candlesticks were still right where they had been left on the altar. Contrary to some rumors, the candles were not still burning, though."

The church's plaster walls were waterlogged, requiring stripping down to the lath. "I really regret that we had to tear out the old tongue-and-groove paneling, but it will just be too expensive to replace, I'm afraid," Father Wilson said. The several layers of vinyl flooring were ripped up, exposing the original hardwood floor. It is uncertain whether the church will be able to restore it, though.

"This church was literally built by the families of many of the current members, and has been a vital part of this community for years," Father Wilson said. "For many years there was a school that graduated some of the most talented students anywhere. It is a very stable community, and people are willing to work hard to get back into the church. We've been saying Mass outside at St. John's, but had our first outside Mass here this week, and hope to be back in the sanctuary by Christmas." St. John Church also sustained heavy storm damage.

Helping with recovery and repair operations is a group of tradesmen from a parish in Holland, Mich., which has agreed to come to restore the small church. "They're coming for a week at Thanksgiving, and they're professionals, so I have great hopes for what they can accomplish," Father Wilson concluded.

At St. Michael Church on Beach Boulevard, the task of digging out the debris is moving slowly. The church bell,

Volunteers needed in Mississippi

More volunteers are urgently needed in the areas of Mississippi heavily damaged by Hurricane Katrina, according to volunteer coordinator Caroline Bush of Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida.

"Even though the storm hit two months ago, we still need volunteers. The distribution center at St. Louis Parish in Biloxi has been closed and now the emphasis has shifted from distributing relief supplies to helping with debris removal. We need volunteers who can work on gutting homes, too," Bush said.

With the onset of cooler weather, the need for homes to be gutted for mold abatement becomes more critical as people move back inside whenever possible.

The bishops of the province of Miami, of which the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee is a part, adopted the Diocese of Biloxi shortly after the storm, offering long-term assistance and resources to the hard-hit communities on the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

Volunteers are advised that they should wear heavy work boots and have up-to-date tetanus shots to serve in the Biloxi Diocese. Accommodations are still scarce, and for that reason, volunteers are encouraged to plan on making day trips from northwest Florida into the area. Also, volunteers are asked to coordinate their activities through Bush to avoid duplication of or gaps in services. To volunteer, contact Bush at 850-436-6410.

feared lost in the storm, was finally uncovered nearby in late October. "I had looked for the bell, because the family who donated it called me to ask if I knew what had become of it," said Shirley Henderson, diocesan director of communications. "Last week, this space was buried deep in debris. Apparently the bell was under it all the time."

The stained-glass windows of the church were shattered by storm surge from floor level up to 10 to 15 feet high. Bits of smashed stained glass have been picked up for souvenirs, Henderson said, but the parish would like to have them back in order to match the 40-year-old glass to rebuild the windows.

As Bishop Thomas J. Rodi of Biloxi observed, "We've lost so much of our past. It's like a death of someone close to us, but instead of being personal, it's everyone, the whole community."

Back to Top

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