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Diocese of Biloxi slowly recovering from Hurricane Katrina

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Waveland, Miss.



TFC PHOTO BY PEGGY DEKEYSER

The sign posted directly across the two-lane road from Mississippi Sound tells of the spirit of the parishioners of St. Clare Parish in Waveland, Miss.

At St. Clare Catholic Church in Waveland, Father Cuddy O'Connell serves as pastor. Not sure of what the future holds for his parishioners, he's taking the practical approach. He celebrates Mass in a corrugated steel building erected on the slab of what once was the brick church. Stations of the Cross are coloring-book pages taped to the support beams of the structure. If Father O'Connell could rally any donations for his parishioners, it would be

The remains left by Hurricane Katrina along the Mississippi coast, with vacant foundations swept clear by the storm surge and tatters of clothing still hanging in what is left of the dying trees, contrast starkly with the riot of color bursting forth from azaleas that somehow survived the saline inundation.

The killer storm that struck Aug. 29, 2005, cannot be forgotten here, even if the tragedies in other places have gotten more continued media attention.

The storm crashed into the border between Mississippi and Louisiana, putting Waveland on the deadly eastern side. Flooding from the storm surge advanced as far north as I-10, a distance of more than five miles from Mississippi Sound, destroying lavish coastal estates along with simple frame cottages in its path.

in the form of building materials.

"Sheet rock — purchased elsewhere where the prices might be a bit more reasonable and delivered here — and any other building supplies would be a godsend. Or Home Depot and Lowe's gift cards. We could really use those. The stores (in nearby Gulfport) are open," the Irish-born priest said. He also seeks help for the parish and the diocese from the Irish government.

One thing on which all agree: The help from outside sources has been lifesaving. At the Catholic Social Services Long-Term Recovery (LTR) Center in Gulfport, director Sheri Cox Bowling praised the contributions made by volunteers and donors from Florida.

"The people of the Province of Miami are the most amazing people in the world. We have had so many volunteers, from the days immediately after the storm right up to the present, passing out food and water, gutting houses, helping to rebuild," she said.

The province provided immediate technical assistance after the storm and Bowling praised the efforts of the teams from Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida (Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee), Catholic Charities of Venice and Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami, along with Deacon Marcus Hepburn, emergency management specialist from the Florida Catholic Conference.

The need has shifted in the aftermath, however, and the LTR now sees more requests for help with the emotional devastation that follows a disaster.

"Our DUI rate has risen 200 percent. That's one measurement of how the storm is taking its toll on the emotional health of the community," Bowling said.

Mary Wemberly, assistant director, sees people trying to cope. Having her own home in Biloxi flooded, she can relate to the struggles of people who "thought they could manage and just now are willing to admit they need help. They've exhausted their resources and still haven't recovered," she said.

The agency gets an average of 30 new cases a day, mostly to gut and disinfect homes and help with rebuilding. A critical shortage of skilled labor is delaying the process. The area is also desperate for service workers to staff the lifeblood industries — casinos and tourism.

"Affordable housing will make or break Mississippi's recovery from Katrina," Wemberly said. "The issue is not being taken seriously enough. Some leaders just can't hear the social justice concerns and only focus on the bottom line. Without the workforce and without safe, sanitary housing for the workforce, recovery will be nearly impossible."

Another fear clouding the horizon is the coming hurricane season. In a region where thousands still live in FEMA travel trailers and in tents on concrete slabs where their homes once stood, predictions of another bad year for storms raises very practical concerns.

There are few suitable buildings left that can serve as shelters, according to Wemberly. The bridges that connect across the bayous are still out, limiting access to evacuation routes and further clogging them. Many have exhausted all their financial resources and can't afford to evacuate. Wemberly fears for her family, her friends and her neighbors.

"With Katrina, the water came up so fast — where it had never come before," Wemberly said. "Thousands were without flood insurance. Families are moving their children away to safety. Renters were just out of luck. I never thought I'd be eating MREs (meals ready-to-eat) and applying for money from FEMA. We followed the conventional wisdom. We got our educations. We worked hard; I in nonprofits and my husband as a teacher. We bought our insurance, including hurricane insurance.

"Now everything is just crazy. We've all lost so much, but I'm also thankful for so much — things I never fully realized," she said. "The Lord gave us a sense of humor, so we might as well use it. But I told my husband that I'll only rebuild this house one time."

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