

The Florida Catholic

[Close](#)

Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition front page story

Diocese responds to victims of Hurricane Katrina

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Pensacola

A time of intense anxiety gave way to profound sorrow as the faithful in the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee watched Hurricane Katrina's storm track slowly slide across the diocese in the days before the killer storm made landfall in Louisiana and raked through Mississippi and Alabama.

Even though they endured two major hurricanes in less than 12 months, residents of northwest Florida were saddened and spurred to action as the catastrophe unfolded along the Gulf Coast.

"The people of the Gulf Coast are not only our neighbors," said Carlisle Semmes, diocesan archivist, "they are our ancestors in faith. Our diocese was once part of what was known as the Archdiocese of New Orleans and later part of the Diocese (now Archdiocese) of Mobile."

People and parishes are responding to the tragedy with an outpouring of prayers and help for the victims.

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, called for a day of prayer for hurricane victims Sept. 4 and authorized all 59 parishes and missions of the diocese to take up a special collection at Masses on the weekend of Sept. 10-11. All proceeds will go for hurricane relief. This



COURTESY PHOTO

Students at St. Mary Catholic School in Fort Walton Beach help load a truck headed for Houston after packing hurricane relief supplies into packets in the parish's "Christ Smiles on You" initiative.

coincides with a collection requested in all Catholic parishes across the country by Bishop William S. Skylstad, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In his Sept. 1 letter to the faithful, Bishop Ricard wrote, "We can readily relate to the feelings of vulnerability, desperation and helplessness that a powerful storm can raise in the minds of those affected. Our hearts and our prayers go out to the people of Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. We trust in the mercy of God that relief will come to them soon."

Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida Inc. is partnering with the Catholic Charities agencies in the other six dioceses in Florida and with Catholic Charities USA to respond to victims' needs. Each regional office (Pensacola, Fort Walton Beach, Panama City and Tallahassee) is accepting donations of nonperishable food to be distributed to evacuees from the storm. The Family Outreach Center at St. Anthony Catholic Church is providing emergency supplies and arranging additional assistance for individuals and families. All offices are providing case management to assist victims in obtaining needed help.

In partnership with other Catholic Charities agencies, Catholic Charities of Northwest Florida is working to set up a distribution center for relief supplies to be shipped to the Diocese of Biloxi.

Bishop Ricard traveled to the Diocese of Biloxi on two occasions to offer the assistance to Biloxi Bishop Thomas J. Rodi. Father Joe Fowler also delivered water and baby supplies there.

On an assessment trip, Florida's Catholic Charities directors, including Mark Dufva, and Deacon Marcus Hepburn of the Florida Catholic Conference, flew over the Mississippi coast in a Navy helicopter to look for a site from which to distribute relief supplies. They found a slightly damaged but usable warehouse, which has been secured for that purpose.

Catholic schools from Pensacola to Tallahassee have enrolled more than 200 new students from Catholic schools in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama, with many more expected. Catholic schools, locally and throughout Florida, are gathering supplies, uniforms and other resources for these students.

"We have asked if they are able to pay. Some are and do, some aren't. Those who can't pay, we will accept tuition-free," said Susan Mueller, diocesan superintendent of schools. "We are accepting donations to 'Katrina's Kids' to help cover the costs of tuition, uniforms, books and fees. All storm-displaced children are eligible for free and reduced lunch, so we sign them up immediately."

Several parishes within the diocese are working to establish refugee centers in unused or underused parish facilities. Meanwhile, others are steadily collecting nonperishable food, baby supplies and personal care items and working to ship them to the affected areas. Some are bringing hot meals to victims. Pastors are asking their parishioners to consider opening available space in their homes to those displaced by the storm. Catholic Charities will handle the processing of families needing refuge. Many individuals have donated blood.

St. Mary School in Fort Walton Beach worked along with the parish to collect personal-care items in an effort it

called, "Christ Smiles on You." The packets, assembled by the children, were delivered to shelters in Houston.

St. Rose of Lima Parish in Milton used a multiple approach to send relief. The youth group drove to Bayou La Batre with hot meals for a Vietnamese shrimping community that suffered a storm surge to their homes and the loss of all their fishing boats. Life Teen and Edge youths filled trucks with water, food, clothes, first-aid supplies and many other basic living items, and then adults took the supplies to families in Waveland, Miss., who are now living in a hurricane-damaged hotel.

St. Ann Church in Gulf Breeze helped fill an 18-wheel truck with supplies and drove it to Bay St. Louis and Waveland, Miss. Their response, part of an initiative of the Interfaith Disaster Resource, came in part as a way to return the assistance that they received after hurricanes Ivan and Dennis struck the parish and its mission, Our Lady of the Assumption on Pensacola Beach. The supplies went to a very poor area, largely ignored by other relief agencies. They plan to return to the area as soon as possible with more supplies. "We can't not do this," said Trish Bond, stewardship development director. "This deep-down compassion and sympathy is innate and crosses all boundaries of faith, ethnicity and geography."

The Gulf Breeze church is also feeding breakfast and lunch seven days a week to an average of 250 displaced persons and is providing assistance with housing and hotel vouchers for evacuees.

Holy Spirit Parish, across Gulf Beach Highway from the Grande Lagoon subdivision where five residents drowned in Ivan's storm surge, also understands being on the receiving end of hurricane relief. The parishioners, visited by Our Lady of the Lake and Our Lady of Lourdes parishes of Mandeville, La., after last September's storm, are preparing to return the kindnesses shown them. Meanwhile, they are converting their education building into the Seton Center, a home away from home for displaced storm victims.

"We hope to be able to house up to 36 people," said pastor Msgr. James Flaherty. "First we're quickly installing bathrooms and showers. We're taking a multi-pronged approach to helping take care of our neighbors, with supplies sent to the devastated areas and reaching out to those who have come into our midst as refugees from the storm."



Youths from the youth group at St. Ann Parish in Gulf Breeze help fill a truck bound for the Bay St. Louis and Waveland, Miss., areas devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

COURTESY PHOTO

In his letter, Bishop Ricard also included a prayer borrowed from the Archdiocese of Miami: "Lord, we pray for all who have been harmed by Hurricane Katrina and ask that you hear your people who cry out to you in need. Be for us a beacon of light in the midst of shadows and help us never to be afraid. Bring courage to the homeless. Bring comfort to the lost. Bring hope to the needy. Bring rest to the weary. Gather in your arms the souls of all who have departed this life due to Hurricane Katrina, and through the hardships and dangers that must be endured, lead us home to the shores of peace."

[Back to Top](#)

Copyright © 1996-2005 *The Florida Catholic* Newspaper - All Rights Reserved
498 S. Lake Destiny Road, Orlando, FL 32810
Phone: (407) 660-9141 • Fax: (407) 660-2977 • Toll-Free: 1-888-275-9953