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University Ministry
Loyola University New Orleans
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University Ministry's Religious Response to Katrina

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Loyola University New Orleans' University Ministry has been in a unique position to help its student congregants, both during and after Hurricane Katrina. The resident chaplains helped evacuate students, and University Ministry staff members contacted students during their displaced semester. With Loyola back in session, students are once again turning to University Ministry, which is continuing most of its old programs and offering new programs to help address some of the Katrina-specific needs. Loyola being a Jesuit school, its University Ministry staff is trained in Catholic theology, but they offer services to people of all faiths (Bindewald 2006; Gallien 2006).

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND

“Jesuit” is a term denoting an affiliation with the Society of Jesus, a Catholic religious order founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540. The Jesuits have set up a strong educational network. Loyola is one of 28 United States Jesuit colleges and universities. According to Loyola's website, “Jesuit education is a call to human excellence, to the fullest possible development of all human qualities. This implies a rigor and academic excellence that challenges the student to develop all of his or her talents to the fullest. It is a call to critical thinking and disciplined studies, a call to develop the whole person, head and heart, intellect and feelings” (“What is the Jesuit vision of education?” 2005).

University Ministry offers daily Catholic worship services. Catholicism is the largest denomination of Christianity, which itself has more followers than any other world religion. Catholicism is monotheistic, with its major beliefs focused around the Bible, baptism, the Ten Commandments, and the Holy Trinity. Catholics believe that humans are naturally flawed because of original sin, but sin can be forgiven through divine grace, especially from the seven sacraments: Baptism, Penance, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Matrimony, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick. These are “outward signs that Christ instituted to give grace” (Trigilio and Brighenti 2003, 10). General obligations of Catholicism include attending Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation; penance, or confession, at least annually; receiving Holy Communion on Easter, but weekly or daily communion is encouraged; observing certain fasting laws; respecting the sanctity of marriage; and contributing to the church's finances and community. Catholicism has a hierarchical order, led by the pope in the Vatican. During the approximately 2,000 years of Catholic history, there have been 266 popes, with the most recent pope, Benedict XVI, having been elected April 19, 2005 (Wikipedia contributors 2006).

CONGREGATIONAL BACKGROUND

University Ministry is not an official Catholic parish, or local place of worship. The official Catholic parish for the area is Holy Name of Jesus Church, which the Jesuits opened in 1892. Loyola owns the property of Holy Name of Jesus Church, which sits at the front of campus. Even though Holy Name offers liturgy and worship only a few yards away, University Ministry still offers these services, just on a smaller scale. The primary spiritual center for University Ministry is Ignatius Chapel, which is located on the first floor of Bobet Hall, also home to University Ministry's offices ("A Concise History" [2006]; Cerda 2006).

According to University Ministry's Mission Statement, "The ideals and values of [University Ministry's] Christian, Catholic and Jesuit traditions commission us to offer a welcoming environment and supportive services to all members of the University community" ("University Ministry" 2006). Therefore, not only do they minister to Catholics, who make up between 50 to 60 percent of the student body, but they also offer services to students with a diversity of backgrounds. Their focus is Catholic, but through a director of ecumenical and interfaith ministries, congregants can participate in a variety of traditions. Interfaith programming includes an annual Muslim Ramadan dinner and a Jewish Seder meal, various Christian worship options including the popular Hour of Power, and several nondenominational retreats. University Ministry is a department of the university, not the Vatican, so they are free to be as diverse as the student body, their primary congregation ("University Ministry" 2006; Gallien 2006).

Students are not the only ones who attend Mass at Ignatius Chapel, though. A group of area residents meet regularly every Sunday at 10:30 A.M. to celebrate Mass. This has caused some tension between University Ministry and Holy Name of Jesus Church because Holy Name offers Mass at the same time, but University Ministry contends that since their 10:30 A.M. community is much smaller, it gives the 100 to 150 congregants a more tight-knit sense of family, allowing them to get to know each other better (Bindewald 2006).

IMPACT OF KATRINA ON UNIVERSITY MINISTRY

While Hurricane Katrina did not damage any on-campus University Ministry facilities, it still had a profound impact. After Loyola University New Orleans canceled the fall 2005 semester, its students spent their next months at about 500 different colleges and universities across the country and world. Scattered, they were separated from their Loyola home and family until the university reopened in January.

The non-student congregation, who primarily attend the 10:30 A.M. Sunday morning service, were also affected. Kurt Bindewald, dean of University Ministry, said the first 10:30 A.M. Mass after Hurricane Katrina was "a really big event." "It was the first time a lot of people had been able to come back and see who else was around and who was back in their neighborhoods" (Bindewald 2006).

UNIVERSITY MINISTRY'S RESPONSES

University Ministry's overall response to Hurricane Katrina has embodied the Jesuit ideals of social justice and reflection. The Loyola University Community Action Program (LUCAP), a historically renowned community service organization, has been engaging actively in the social

justice aspect. Sr. Leyla Cerda, a University Ministry staff member, is the LUCAP advisor. Her salary and the LUCAP budget are both funded by University Ministry (Cerda 2006).

LUCAP has been circulating weekly flyers with community service activities and also updating them on their website. Some of these include house gutting, house building with Habitat for Humanity, hunger relief, and tutoring. LUCAP has also been working on advocacy issues. “We’re having LUCAP leaders go to meetings in Orleans, St. Bernard Parish, Jefferson Parish, so they can be part of the conversation of rebuilding New Orleans,” Cerda said. “To put it simple, it’s not enough just to pray or just to think. We need to put our words into action” (Cerda 2006; see “Loyola University Community Action Program” 2006).

Dean of University Ministry Kurt Bindewald returned to campus in early October to begin planning ways of dealing with student responses to Hurricane Katrina, “whether it was the weekends to come in and get their stuff out of the dorms, if they needed to get their stuff, or whether it was to coordinate the activities of the Night of Reflection we did for Katrina, setting up groups that students—if they were having troubles as far as dealing emotionally with the storm or spiritually—sort of support groups for that.” Another reflective outlet University Ministry has programmed after Hurricane Katrina is Tuesday morning quiet prayer, from 8:20 A.M. to 9:20 A.M. Bindewald added, “Of course the chapel is open throughout the day for people to stop by to do individual prayer” (Bindewald 2006).

Bindewald also helped construct reflection boards, which were set up around campus. These boards gave students a medium “to talk about their blessings, their stories, and their prayers.” Students could do this “individually by just writing on a card and dropping it off,” or there were small group sessions around the boards “to spark conversation and sharing” (Bindewald 2006).

INTERVIEWS

Sr. Leyla Cerda

Everyone in the University Ministry community was affected in some way by Hurricane Katrina. One staff member, Sr. Leyla Cerda, had to balance her duties to University Ministry, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and her family. Cerda explained that her family lived “in Chalmette, St. Bernard Parish. Now they are in Baton Rouge because their house was destroyed. The [Sisters of St. Joseph] convent was destroyed, too” (Cerda 2006).

Cerda evacuated to Baton Rouge with her 47 Sisters and her family. “I had my whole family at a hotel in Baton Rouge, and they only had reservations for three days, and I have a father who is on oxygen 24 hours and my mother who’s diabetic, so it was a very stressful time because it wasn’t just the community and 47 people displaced but my whole family, the children, and one of the Sisters had to stay at the hospital, and she was not able to leave New Orleans until the following Saturday” (Cerda 2006).

Cerda’s family was not new to evacuations. “This was our third time evacuating in our life. We first had to leave the earthquake in Nicaragua when I was twelve years old, but we were able to return. Then we had to leave for the Sandinista revolution in ’79, and we were unable to return, and then this third time we had to leave New Orleans, and our homes were destroyed, so for family it was our third time displaced and the second time of destruction” (Cerda 2006).

Cerda said that this evacuation was “a lot, lot worse” than the others because she had so much to worry about. She and her family also did not know what to expect the effect of the hurricane

would be. “If you had asked us about earthquakes, we could tell you what to expect, but not about hurricanes” (Cerda 2006).

Challenged by the experience, Cerda still remembered God was there “even in the midst of destruction.” While displaced, she searched for strength by volunteering to check up on Catholic Charities employees over the phone. “That was extremely meaningful, just to hear so many stories over the phone and the challenges facing people being displaced all over the United States” (Cerda 2006).

Cerda originally came to Loyola University as an international student from Nicaragua about 27 years ago. She joined religious life with the Sisters of St. Joseph sixteen years ago. Her fellow Sisters are all now living in different locations. Cerda herself is renting from the Dominican nuns (Cerda 2006).

Kurt Bindewald

University Ministry is undergoing cutbacks in the financial aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Two staff members, director of pastoral and sacramental ministries Jim Caime and director of spiritual formation Roma Gibson-King, are leaving after this semester, and their positions will not be replaced. Former dean Eddie Gros has taken another job as administrator of Holy Name of Jesus parish. University Ministry will not hire anyone else to replace Gros, but they did promote director of Christian life communities and faith formation Kurt Bindewald to the position of dean. So during a period of cutbacks, Bindewald actually benefited. Even with the promotion, though, Bindewald would have obviously preferred that the storm had never happened (Bindewald 2006).

Bindewald also lives as a resident chaplain in Biever Hall, which is the primary freshman male residence. Pre-Katrina, Bindewald and other staff members were preparing for the largest incoming class ever, which was going to force freshmen to triple up in Biever rooms. He also mentioned big construction projects next door on Tulane’s campus were going to make the surrounding area seem even busier. When he returned after the storm, he noticed the complete opposite level of activity. “Occasionally I’d see a few people out gutting their houses, but it was very dirty, it was depressing, it was sort of a ghost town, except for the National Guard and everything that was around.” Some National Guardsmen were using Loyola’s campus as a base of operations (Bindewald 2006).

Both Cerda and Bindewald had a busy weekend planned while Hurricane Katrina was churning in the Gulf of Mexico. That Saturday morning, Cerda was taking a group of freshmen to the farmers’ market, to kick off a day of community service. Bindewald was also leaving early to prepare to lead an Alumni Board retreat. They soon realized these events would have to be canceled (Cerda 2006; Bindewald 2006).

Bindewald turned his attention to reassuring students and their parents. His advice was “if they had the means to leave, then by all means they should go, but if not, then we certainly have things in place as far as how students would be taken care of on campus.” Bindewald said, “I was actually telling people that my entire time here at Loyola we had never actually had to evacuate, so I told them I didn’t really think that that would happen, but that students would be safe, and if it got really bad, we would put people in the middle of the halls so that there wouldn’t be flying glass or that we might all gather in the Rec Plex” (Bindewald 2006).

Later that evening and the next morning, it became clear that students would not be safe on campus and that everyone would have to evacuate. Bindewald, as a resident chaplain, became

involved as a driver of one of the vans. Before leaving for the evacuation center at Istrouma Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, Bindewald helped Gros make sure the flood-prone University Ministry office was secure. Fortunately, Bindewald said, “Nothing in our main offices were affected, even the offices we have in the basement of the Danna Center [the student center]. Although the Danna Center got some water—to some of the carpet in the public areas—University Ministry as a department didn’t lose anything” (Bindewald 2006).

After a hellish drive to Baton Rouge, Bindewald, like Cerda, had to balance family responsibilities with commitments to University Ministry. Bindewald had to live at his sister’s house, where he helped care for his father, who is on dialysis. He would occasionally check up on the students in the shelter, but fortunately most made travel arrangements back home within a few days (Bindewald 2006).

After three weeks of living at his sister’s full house, Bindewald helped move his parents back to their Lacombe, Louisiana home. “Miraculously, their house wasn’t touched at all,” Bindewald said, “but we live on six acres of pine trees, and more than half of the pine trees fell over, and with my dad being sick, he couldn’t do a lot of the work himself. I actually spent a full month there, just cleaning up the yard.” During that month, Bindewald was in contact with University Ministry. He was also able to attend meetings for Loyola students attending Louisiana State University and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (Bindewald 2006).

In addition to helping coordinate the evacuation and keeping up with students, University Ministry’s religious response involved a Mass on the Sunday night of the day of the evacuation. “Even though we were in a Baptist church that evening, we provided Mass for people, one, because of the Sunday obligation, but two, also as a way for us to gather as a religious community and to pray for safety, pray for thanksgiving that we made it there safely.” Bindewald said prayer is the most important thing he can contribute to the religious community (Bindewald 2006).

Laura and George Gallien

The storm experience of Laura and George Gallien, both University Ministry staff members, was a little different, because they are married with two young children. They, too, live in Biever Hall as resident chaplains, but they chose not to accompany the students who evacuated because, according to Laura, “we just didn’t feel like it was appropriate for us to bring our young babies to a shelter, because that puts extra responsibilities on the shelter staff” (Gallien 2006).

Instead, the Galliens found another way of reaching out to students. After staying with Laura’s parents in North Carolina for seven weeks, they decided to leave North Carolina to check in on Loyola’s scattered students. “Since we both work for the university and our kids are not in school anywhere, we had some mobility that other families probably didn’t have, so we offered to go visit students in schools around the country,” Laura said (Gallien 2006). “So between October 10th and November 18th—that’s about six weeks—we traveled to about 28 schools around the country. We went up the Eastern coast and then went through the northern Midwest and down in the Heartland area—mostly Mid-Atlantic and Midwest areas,” Laura continued. With a list of names from Student Affairs, the Galliens planned trips to clusters of students who were not going to be targeted by university president Fr. Kevin Wildes, S.J., and members of Alumni Affairs, who were also traveling around the country. “So we went to Scranton and Buffalo—you know your big metropolises—Omaha” (Gallien 2006).

Whereas Fr. Wildes' trip's purpose was mainly to connect large groups of students with alumni and also raise funds, the Galliens' trip had a more pastoral focus. George was able to show students video footage he had taken of the Loyola area after the storm, showing that it was largely unaffected. They were also able to answer questions and give students a chance to share their frustrations. Laura was encouraged by the turnout. "It was largely first-year students that we saw, so they had no idea who we are, and so I think some of it was a curiosity of what was really going on" (Gallien 2006).

CONCLUSION

Loyola University New Orleans' University Ministry was there to help when the Loyola community needed it most, in the disruption caused by Hurricane Katrina. With a Jesuit Catholic focus but a commitment to all faiths, University Ministry became spiritual healers for Loyola as a whole. From helping with the evacuation and praying during the storm to visiting students across the country and programming reflection and service afterward, University Ministry's response has been comprehensive. While much of the staff was working to address the needs of their religious community, they were simultaneously dealing with friends and family members who were also in need. Their ability to balance unselfishly these responsibilities and continue to provide for their congregants has helped the Loyola community return strong.

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