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St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church
640 Canal St
New Orleans, LA 70119

Community, the Support to Rebuild

Religious Responses of St. Anthony of Padua Parish to Hurricane Katrina

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Photo courtesy of John DeMajo.

Catholics are community-oriented people, especially American Catholics, focused on relationships within the congregation, and viewing society as a network of relationships. Perhaps this resulted from Catholics' minority status and ethnic alienation in early America. "At the same time that Catholics' minority status led to support for political principles emphasizing autonomy from state control of religion, the demands of group

preservation meant emphasis on internal communalism and collective identity. This minority solidarity in the face of America's assimilationist tendencies reinforced some Protestant fears of Catholicism's communalism" (Williams 1999, 6). Andrew Greeley examines the role of Catholicism in Italian and Irish communities, which are both strong, vibrant cultures that rely on family ties, in his book *The Catholic Imagination*. "To be Catholic is to be guilty, to be 'neighborhood' is to be trapped in obligations, to be 'family' is a torment," yet somehow people maintain their ties to the community; they either cannot or do not want to leave (Greeley 2000, 117). New Orleans' French and Creole Catholic culture has been enriched by numerous Italian and Irish Catholics. This strong sense of Catholic community found through religion and culture provides support and resources for its members, and not only was this true for early immigrants adjusting to a new way of life in America, but it is also true today in post-Katrina New Orleans, where people are struggling to start over and adjust to a new way of life.

DOCTRINES AND PRACTICES OF CATHOLICISM

The history of Catholicism is a long and complicated one, so the focus here will be on the main beliefs and universal tenants of the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church's mission is to bring the message of Christ to all the ends of the Earth, and call all persons to baptism to become children of God. Peter is considered the first leader of the Catholic Church, who established the precedent of the Pope, the visible head of the Roman Catholic Church. The church became structured into an ecclesiastical hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons. Catholics believe in God as a Trinitarian Father, Son and Holy Spirit, with the love of the Father and the Son overflowing to create the Holy Spirit, and a salvation that is justified through the grace of God and good deeds while alive. The origins of the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church lie not only in the Scriptures, but also in the tradition of the church. Catholics are united in the mystical body of Christ expressed through the Eucharist and unified universally under the Pope.

Some of the main theological beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church are that Adam, being the first man was created by God with a soul; humanity is currently in a fallen state because of the first sin, and original sin is a result of Adam and Eve's fall. In this fallen state, personal sin can be either mortal, destroying grace in the soul, or venial, which

while less serious, still weakens and increases temptation. Sanctifying grace is received through baptism, which by purifying the soul, forgives original sin and dedicates the person as a child of God. The sacrament of Reconciliation forgives mortal and venial personal sins and restores grace. All other sacraments, most importantly the Eucharist, increase redeeming grace.

There are seven sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church—Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Holy Matrimony. Through baptism, a person becomes a new in Christ, receiving the gift of sanctifying grace given by Christ’s sacrificial death. The Eucharist is the real presence of Christ’s body, blood, soul and divinity transformed from bread and wine, “uniting the Catholic Church in an intimate relationship with Christ and brings the grace needed to live as a faithful believer” (Miranda [2006]). Confirmation becomes a personal step towards enhancing a relationship with God and reaffirming the Catholic faith, through receiving the Holy Spirit. Reconciliation allows for the forgiveness of sin in confession to a member of the priesthood. Anointing of the Sick provides special grace for the strength and peace of the sick, aging, or dying. Holy Orders bestows upon men the graces needed for the ministerial priesthood. Holy Matrimony brings the spouses together to live a more unified Christian life through their relationship with God.

The core Catholic teachings and beliefs have remained the same since the founding of Catholicism and understanding these is essential in looking at Catholic New Orleanians’ responses to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

HISTORY OF THE CONGREGATION OF ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA

Archbishop Placide Louis Chapelle of New Orleans assigned Father Thomas Lorente, O.P. to a church at the corner of North Rampart and Conti that was dedicated to St. Anthony of Padua and known as the Obituary or Old Mortuary Chapel because victims from the plague were buried at this church. In 1903 there were a small number of Catholics in the Lakeview area, a wilderness at this time, who wanted to have Mass offered in a convenient location for them so on 12 May 1912 Fr. Lorente celebrated the first Mass in Lakeview. From then on this area was known as a mission of St. Anthony’s cared for by the Dominicans from Rampart Street. The small chapel in the Lakeview mission was called Avenue Maria Chapel, which today is known as St. Dominic’s Parish (“St. Dominic Parish” [2006]).

In 1915 Archbishop James Blenk closed the St. Anthony chapel on Rampart Street and began plans for a new St. Anthony of Padua Parish that would stretch from Carrollton Avenue to Lake Ponchartrain. The site for the new buildings was located on the south side of Canal Street between Olympia and St. Patrick Streets where a temporary building was constructed to serve as the church, a school and also a rectory. On 15 August 1915 the new St. Anthony of Padua Parish was blessed and dedicated by the archbishop.

Several years later in 1923, under the direction of Pastor Fr. Malone, the church was built in Spanish Renaissance style with white stucco buildings and red tiled roofs, just as it appears today. A year later the separate rectory and school buildings were completed in the same architectural style (“St. Anthony of Padua Newsletter” 2005, 2).

St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church proudly celebrated 90 years as a congregation only a week before Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans.

HISTORY OF ST. ANTHONY OF PADUA SCHOOL

St. Anthony of Padua School was also established in 1915 under the direction of a Dominican priest, Father William Martin. The first year it was open the school only consisted of grades one through three. The next year four Dominican Sisters ran the school, adding a fourth grade and it only continued to grow from there. St. Anthony’s fostered and continues to foster a unique sense of spirit and community that encourages alumni to visit, eventually work for the school and even enroll their children at St. Anthony’s (St. Anthony of Padua School [2006]).

IMPACT OF HURRICANE KATRINA ON THE CONGREGATION AND ITS MEMBERS

On 29 August 2005 after Hurricane Katrina passed through, St. Anthony of Padua School and Priory suffered damage from the levee break at the 17th Street Canal. The Sanctuary, however, escaped flooding, although narrowly, with the basement full to the top with water.

During the storm, St. Anthony and its fortress-like buildings served as a shelter for people who had stayed in the city after the levees broke and the flooding began. The Dominican Brothers and Sisters took in strangers from the neighborhood on their second and third floors, safe from the rising waters.

The congregation also lost two of its members, Sandra Richard and Amelie Dalier, as victims of Hurricane Katrina.

On 5 October 2005, the recovery efforts at St. Anthony of Padua began. Sr. Ruth Angelette, O.P., principal of St. Anthony of Padua School contacted an acquaintance in Washington with whom she had worked through Hurricane Camille in 1969 to see what kind of help the National Guard could supply. “Sister Ruth has served for 32 years as principal at St. Anthony of Padua, and she was so determined to get the school back up and running that she named herself contractor for the renovations. She also coordinated the volunteer help that cleared the school of debris and refurbished the building” (Brocato 2006). The National Guard spent two weeks clearing debris and removing furnishings from the school buildings. Meanwhile in Greenwood, Indiana the parishioners of Our Lady of Greenwood, Queen of the Rosary, made preparations to deliver materials and

equipment that groups of parishioners would use when they arrived at St. Anthony of Padua on 7 November offering their volunteer efforts. During the following weeks, progress continued with the help of eager hands who helped paint classrooms, replace floor tile, fix electrical issues, clean and prepare the cafeteria, and order new furnishings for the first floor. Others provided carpentry and cleaning services in an effort to restore the classrooms back to their original status, in order to reopen in January (St. Anthony of Padua School [2006]).

Many people have assisted St. Anthony of Padua in several different ways, such as financially, service, and donating materials. Some children even set up a lemonade/ice tea stand to raise money for the school. One young boy asked for money instead of gifts on his birthday so he could send the money to the school. My own home parish of St. Anthony of Padua in The Woodlands, Texas and the school children helped raise money for their “sister school” through a fundraiser called “Coins for a Cause” that was so successful we raised \$6,192.19 and were able to provide 200 new chairs and 22 tables for the auditorium and the cafeteria.

The main focus upon returning to the city was to get the school buildings operational in order to reopen in January for the spring semester of this school year, which would encourage families to return to the area if they knew their children had a place to attend school. However, it is easy to focus on rebuilding with the goal of reaching out to the community and providing for their return and to forget about the damage to other areas of the property, such as the convent and the priory where the Dominicans live in community. When I visited the property on 23 March 2006 repairs to the wooden floors in the priory were not even started. Everything from the first floor was still packed up in boxes, and the buildings were being repainted.

However, the sanctuary and the school building, which are the most important centers for supporting the community, are fully operational. It was, in fact, the opening of the doors of St. Anthony of Padua School and Church that encouraged community members to return to New Orleans, because they knew that at least they had something to come back to. Their homes and personal belongings may have been destroyed, but their spiritual center was still standing strong.

RESPONSES OF THE CONGREGATION TO HURRICANE KATRINA

The congregation and school, whose communities are comprised of different members, are focused on being a beacon of hope to New Orleans through faith in this time of rebuilding. In front of the parish buildings there is a banner erected that reads: “St. Anthony of Padua: A Beacon of Hope for New Orleans.” On the whole, they maintain strong faith despite the destruction, and many members of the congregation said they did not question God after the hurricane. This can be seen through their perseverance in rebuilding their community located in Mid-City, an area greatly affected by the breach in the levees.

The congregation also does not believe that God was punishing New Orleans because they do not believe in a vindictive God. Instead, they focus on the merciful God of the New Testament, who offers his grace and salvation to those who believe. St. Anthony's held an adult education class entitled "Coping after Hurricane Katrina from a Faith Perspective" that examined ways of strengthening faith through hardship as an alternative to feeling lost or turning away from God.

The community itself is in need of service from others and many members have not completed their personal rebuilding, so the congregants are taking time to recover from this disaster. The parish itself is helping to support its own members by offering free clothing, kitchen items, toys, and mattresses to those in need to help restore personal belongings. However, St. Anthony of Padua is still attempting to fulfill the Catholic mission of social justice through activities such as participating in the Walk for the Hungry and Operation Rice Bowl ("St. Anthony of Padua Bulletin" 2006, 2-3).

INTERVIEWS WITH MEMBERS OF THE CONGREGATION

Throughout all three interviews with Pastor Ian Bordenave, Sister Ruth Angelette, and Lisa Stieber-Alden the sense of community that surrounds St. Anthony of Padua parish and school was evident in their memories and commitment and dedication to St. Anthony's.

Lisa Stieber-Alden

Lisa Alden attended St. Anthony of Padua as a child, and now is a teacher at the school and member of St. Anthony of Padua Parish who sends her child to the school, so she obviously has deep ties to St. Anthony of Padua. In her hurricane experience, she had particular difficulty with the area to which she was displaced because she, her husband, and their two children lived with relatives up in Connecticut. The dichotomy between the North and the South is always present, but Lisa truly felt it these past few months with the absence of her own spiritual community. She expressed that it is not that people up North are cold, but rather that they act like they don't know you. This lack of community that she held so dear was what brought her and her family back to New Orleans, despite the loss of their house in Lakeview. When she visited New Orleans during her displacement, she said it was just what she needed to boost her spirits and keep her going. She was asked to lector at the Sunday Mass and she said she remembered an overwhelming feeling of joy standing up at the lectern and looking out on familiar faces and could not keep the smile off her face. When she had no material possessions left, it was the people who brought her back to New Orleans and the feeling of camaraderie of being among people who knew what it felt like to lose so much. Despite many people's well-intentioned attempts to help her and her family after the storm, which she appreciated, they could not even begin to fathom how she was feeling or the enormity of the destruction (Alden 2006).

Father Ian Bordenave

Fr. Ian Bordenave, O.P. remained behind during the storm, sheltering those from the surrounding neighborhood who had also remained in their homes, but fled because of the threat of rising water. Eventually he was rescued by boat from which he traveled to Houston and then to Hammond, Louisiana. Returning to the city on 5 October 2005, as soon as it was opened, Fr. Ian surveyed the damage and began work to reopen the school. However, because the sanctuary had been spared damage he was able to perform Mass that first weekend the city was opened. He felt that this was an important element in bolstering that sense of community and providing people with the spiritual strength they needed to recover. He also said that if there had been an interior damage to the church that they would not have been able to open their doors for Mass, because there is no other space on the property that would have been damage free, and that would have severely changed the morale and the rate of return of congregation members. Why return to a city where in addition to losing all material possessions one's faith community was non-existent as well? As a member of the Dominican community, Fr. Ian's immediate needs are cared for, allowing him to turn outwards to the congregation. His main concern at this time is providing support and spiritual guidance that his parish needs (Bordenave 2006).

Sister Ruth Angelette, O.P.

Sr. Ruth Angelette, O.P., the principal of St. Anthony of Padua School evacuated the Saturday before the storm hit to Lake Charles until Hurricane Rita was heading that way and so she relocated again to Baton Rouge. Immediately after the hurricane hit she was trying to contact everyone from teachers to parents to staff through the Internet and whatever phone numbers she happened to have.

When she returned to New Orleans on 5 October with Fr. Ian, Sr. Ruth began putting her energy into planning the gutting and restoration, raising money for the school, and reaching out to the national Catholic community for support. She knew that what she needed to do was get the school back up and running; she felt that that was God's plan for her life at that time. The responses were great in both volunteer efforts and monetary donations. Sr. Ruth said, "It really gives you a sense of community in our own country that these people and these places that are helping are not so far away that it brings us together in a way and that part is something good that came out of the storm" (Angelette 2006). This determination to re-open the school in January positively influenced families who were still considering whether or not to return to New Orleans. "Parents pushed to come back for January when they found out that we were opening so we feel that we really brought some families back to New Orleans because their children could go back to school" (Angelette 2006). One of the first things parents wanted to get settled was where their children could go to school because it would restore some sense of normalcy in the lives of the children, giving them something everyday to concentrate on, returning a small piece of their life before the storm. "That was one of our main goals in opening

the school as soon as we could was to create a sense of normalcy where the children would come back into an environment that they were used to...even in rebuilding the building we were very careful to try to put things back as much as possible the way things were before the storm” (Angelette 2006).

Teachers agreed to take a 15 percent salary cut in order to allow the school to re-open in January because without this reduction in budget the school would not have been able to function, which speaks to the dedication of the staff of St. Anthony’s and their own feeling of community in standing by the side of the school. That is a large sum of money for anyone, but especially for people who are trying to reestablish themselves. It is mainly due to the community that St. Anthony offers that these teachers were willing to come back despite the decrease in pay.

St. Anthony of Padua has such a rich history as both a school and a parish that it plays a vibrant role in the community. “There’s hardly any place I can go where I won’t find someone who has been here.... There is always a link” (Angelette 2006). St. Anthony’s permeates throughout the community of New Orleans and not just Mid-City. It is a historical landmark, and represents aspects of the past and the future of New Orleans. “We were basically the first people to open and so we felt that we would set the pace and be a beacon of hope for New Orleans” (Angelette 2006). By opening their doors again in October, St. Anthony of Padua touched everyone who is linked in some way to the church because it represents community, love, and support. “St. Anthony is out there in the community everywhere.... It’s a good link and a happy memory.... Will that continue? You bet that’s our purpose to continue to [make] our history” (Angelette 2006).

CONCLUSION

The emphasis for St. Anthony of Padua lies in the sense of community for alumni of the school, members of the congregation, school families, and staff. A strong sense of community found through religion and culture provided support and resources when early Catholic immigrants clustered together in religious, ethnic neighborhoods to adjust to a new way of life in America, but community is also necessary today in post-Katrina New Orleans where people are struggling to start over and adjust to a new way of life. They need something like a spiritual center that they can lean on for resources for things ranging from a new mattress to classes on dealing with this disaster. The focus of all three interviewees was on the community—that is what makes St. Anthony of Padua special, that is what sets it apart. Catholics have always been a community-oriented people, but after such a disaster there is a stronger sense of camaraderie because everyone has lost so much it puts people back on an even playing field.

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