

Religious Responses to Disaster  
April 24, 2007

Hispanic Apostolate of New Orleans  
4309 Williams Blvd.  
Kenner, LA 70065

## **An Expanding Mission for an Expanding Community**

Hispanic Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Orleans  
and Katrina

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English as a Second Language Class organized and directed post-Katrina by the Hispanic Apostolate, December 12, 2006. Photo courtesy of Megan Harvell.

Before the Katrina disaster in August-September 2005, the Hispanic Apostolate was a small branch of the Archdiocese of New Orleans. With only eleven employees, it was in charge of the ministries to the Hispanic community in the New Orleans area (Lovera 2007). As the Hispanic Apostolate of New Orleans committed itself to answering the needs of the new growing Latino population, its services came to include employment and educational programs, emergency assistance, and immigration and pastoral services (Stone Center 2003). After Katrina, these services became part of the umbrella organization of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, which supported the Hispanic Apostolate's work. After the destruction and havoc created by Hurricane Katrina, the direction of the Hispanic Apostolate is still intact, but its mission has expanded beyond the pre-Katrina services. It has been estimated that over 100,000 Hispanics have come to the Gulf Coast Hurricane Katrina strike zone seeking employment with 4,000 settling in Orleans Parish consisting of a 6 percent increase, and 6,000 in Jefferson Parish, consisting of a 2 percent increase (Waller 2007). Due to these high numbers of Hispanics coming to New Orleans either on Worker 1B Visas or to work illegally in the rebuilding of the city, a new outreach mission has inspired new services such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, renewed vigor towards addressing unfair business treatment of Hispanic workers, as well as Latino Health Outreach. In health for example, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* highlighted the overwhelming issue of pre- and post-natal care for Hispanic women (Waller 2007). Under this religious organization, these new challenges are being confronted based in a Catholic tradition of charity.

### **CATHOLICISM, URSULINES, AND CHARITY**

Taken from the Greek adjective meaning *universal*, Catholicism places its center of worship around the self-affirmation of the universal unity of the Roman Catholic Church under one God. The term Roman Catholic Church would come to represent the separation between "true" Christians and the "heretics," who denied that the Eucharist was divine, truly God's flesh and blood. Following the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church would come to designate those Christians who still recognized the Pope and traditional teaching from the other Protestant Christian denominations (Wikipedia Contributors 2007a). With nearly twenty centuries of history and having gone through many different political and economic systems, the gospel of Jesus as expressed in the Catholic tradition has lived and flourished in many different times and places under many circumstances (O'Grady 2001, 10).

With nearly 1.1 billion followers today, Catholicism is the world's largest religious body (Wikipedia Contributors 2007a). The Church is led by the Pope in Rome as well as by bishops, priests, and deacons. Written scripture and unwritten tradition keep the Roman Catholic Church in unity to the present day. This tradition is reflected in the beliefs and ritual practices of Catholics today, many of which can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. They believe in the Trinity, God as three persons, the Eucharist as the Real Presence of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, the use of sacred images, candles, vestments and music, incense and water in worship, and the veneration of Mary, the Mother of God, who was preserved free from all stain of original sin and was taken up body and soul to heaven in the Assumption (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1994, 966). They also encourage receiving the Seven Sacraments that are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in the Holy Spirit's body, the Church. These sacraments of grace instituted by Christ and entrusted in the Church include Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Reconciliation, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders, and Anointing of the Sick (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1994, 1113, 1131).

Since the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), the Roman Catholic Church has also produced many teachings on major social issues such as social justice, economic

justice, political justice, discrimination, war and peace, and capital punishment throughout the world (Darring 1987, iv). These teachings have inspired the presence of the Church in the social world. The philosophy in which these teachings are based states that the “human person is the clearest reflection of God’s presence in the world; all of the Church’s work in pursuit of both justice and peace is designed to protect and promote the dignity of every person” (Darring 1987, 4).

Along with lay people, an important sector of the Church involved with many of these social issues is that of Religious Brothers and Sisters who respond to the call to live out their faith. One of these communities is the Ursuline nuns founded by St. Ursula and recognized as a religious order by Pope Paul III in 1544. They are committed to the service of poor people and specialize in providing educational opportunities (Wikipedia Contributors 2007b). They also are involved in education, including two operating universities and many secondary schools across the United States. One such secondary school can be found right here in New Orleans, namely, Ursuline Academy (Wikipedia Contributors 2007c). Founded in 1727 by the Sisters of the Order of Saint Ursula, Ursuline Academy, New Orleans, “enjoys the distinction of being both the oldest, continuously-operating school for girls and the oldest Catholic school in the United States” (Ursuline Academy 2005).

The Ursuline nuns settled in present-day Lower Ninth Ward in 1727 to help the people of Louisiana. Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, incorporated in 1938, continues the Ursulines’ mission of charity, advocating for the voiceless, and empowering the vulnerable in search of a more just society (Archdiocese of New Orleans [2007]). With over 30 programs addressing issues such as hunger, unemployment, and domestic violence, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans served the pre-Katrina New Orleans area and now continues to serve after Katrina. The ever-growing Hispanic community is one of these communities that Catholic Charities and the Hispanic Apostolate are trying to help assist.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HISPANIC APOSTOLATE**

Following in line with the consultative processes inspired by the Second Vatican Council of 1965, the Archdiocese of New Orleans elected an archdiocesan school board, several advisory boards, and created the Office of Black Ministries and the Latin American Apostolate (Archdiocese of New Orleans 2005). The Hispanic Apostolate would answer the needs of newly arrived Hispanic immigrants by helping them integrate into American society (Stone Center 2003). Before Hurricane Katrina, the Hispanic Apostolate offered a number of small assistance programs, including job services, immigration, health, emergency assistance referrals, education, and pastoral/parish support, to more than 80,000 Hispanics primarily living in Jefferson Parish (Brown 2006). Before Katrina, there were eleven people working with these different programs and they felt like they were family (Lovera 2007).

## **IMPACT OF KATRINA**

Following Katrina, the Hispanic Apostolate lost some people and no one knew exactly what they were doing because “no one was trained to respond to a tragedy of this magnitude...[they were] trying to do the best with whatever resources [they] had” (Lovera 2007). With all of the expanding programs, the Hispanic Apostolate soon merged with Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans and many of its offices moved to the Howard Avenue Catholic Charities offices. Luckily, the Hispanic Apostolate received manageable damage at its site on Williams Boulevard in Kenner, Louisiana. The Hispanic Apostolate deacon, Luis Camposano, was able to get back early after the flooding to tear up the carpet and do other repair work. This enabled the Hispanic Apostolate to keep some of its offices there as well (Lovera 2007).

## **RESPONSES OF THE HISPANIC APOSTOLATE TO THE KATRINA DISASTER**

Following Hurricane Katrina, the Hispanic Apostolate has remained true to the mission of Catholic Charities, which calls for action guided by the “love and teaching of Jesus Christ [to] offer life-giving programs, advocate for the voiceless, and empower the poor and vulnerable to foster a more just society” (Archdiocese of New Orleans 2007). With renewed commitment specifically in response to the Hispanic community, just action rooted in this tradition has been a main concern. One such issue now calling for action has been the question of how to serve the day laborers who have traveled to New Orleans to remove debris, demolish, and rebuild. These workers spend each morning on street corners or at Lowe’s stores hoping to get picked up for work. Most of these laborers are undocumented Hispanics often living in deplorable conditions with little access to showers, food services, and health care (Brown 2006). The Hispanic Apostolate is responding to this new social issue. Martin Gutierrez, director of the Hispanic Apostolate, would like to address a short-term need by giving these workers a site where they could shower, eat, and receive vital information. A long-term need Gutierrez envisions addressing is a union of Hispanic, African American, and Vietnamese leadership to address the increasing levels of violence, bias and competition between these three communities (Brown 2006).

The Hispanic Apostolate has also responded to Katrina by becoming involved in other non-profit sectors. One example is the cooperation of AmeriCorps Vista volunteers in the ESL programs. The AmeriCorps Vista program, an acronym for Volunteers in Service to America, “provides full-time members to nonprofit, faith-based and other community organizations, and public agencies to create and expand programs that ultimately bring low-income individuals and communities out of poverty” (Americorps VISTA 2007). Two such Vista volunteers include Carly Benkov and Christina Indovina who have become the coordinators and directors, along with Karla Sikaffy, of the Hispanic Apostolate ESL site at Loyola University (Harvell 2007). They have also reached out to certain churches in order to better assist the day laborers. For example, the Hispanic Apostolate worked with El Buen Pastor Church. After the hurricane, many Hispanics were getting arrested constantly because they did not have proper identification so El Buen Pastor Church decided to provide everyone that wanted one with an identification card saying, “I am here working.” That Sunday alone, 400 people came (Sikaffy 2007). For the Hispanic Apostolate clients or participants, any Hispanic faith-based organization like El Buen Pastor has probably tripled in its clientele. They all collaborate. Churches have taken major steps in helping the Hispanic Apostolate in providing social services.

### **INTERVIEWS**

#### **Karla Sikaffy**

Karla Sikaffy is the director of the Hispanic Business Research Technology Center as well as ESL coordinator. Before the storm, however, she had been an employee of University of New Orleans. On August 24, five days before the storm, her mother received a kidney transplant at Tulane University hospital. Therefore, when Katrina hit on August 29, she had no other choice but to stay. Her mother was airlifted on the Wednesday after the hurricane, but Karla had to stay. She saw bodies floating as the water was rising and in her own words she was an absolute “basket case” (Sikaffy 2007). By Thursday she was taken by canoe to the corner of Poydras and Loyola Avenues in the Central Warehouse District and there she was told to walk. She walked to the

Convention Center and was in shock wondering what was going on. She remembers thinking that this is what was supposed to happen in Third World countries. However, she also remarked that she was not afraid because she “truly felt God’s presence” (Sikaffy 2007). She also recalls a group of women praying with her outside the Convention Center. She said she had never seen so much open spirituality in the city. She was picked up that very same evening by friends and taken out to their house in Metairie, Louisiana where she spent the next week following Hurricane Katrina. She lost her apartment in Mid-City to flooding, but has come back to New Orleans. Some days, she said, she would like to just pack up her bags and leave, but she cannot because she loves this city (Sikaffy 2007).

Karla came back to the city, primarily, because she knew that an influx of Hispanics was here and she knew that English as a Second Language was going to be an issue and that she had to come back and make a difference. She immediately got involved with the Hispanic Apostolate. Through its members she received a lot of spiritual guidance, keeping her “sane,” she said. It also allowed her to work more closely with the Hispanic Apostolate and its mission. She realized that it was her mission as well. She wanted to go out and spread the word and be able to help those who were in need. She decided to jump on board with Catholic Charities and be part of that organization because she truly believed in its mission of charity. She said, “Going out there and just relating the message of where these individuals can find resources and where to guide them is a mission of charity” (Sikaffy 2007). She has truly discovered her mission. She wants to make sure that the leaders in New Orleans hear Hispanic voices so that the city will not return to the previous condition of high unemployment, crime, and a lack of a solid education.

She also experienced a new mission in her personal life. She said, before Katrina “I was a workaholic and I still am, but I place family first. I realize the importance of me being able to take time out and I think that spiritually, that’s important for all of us here in the city now, because everyone is so busy working and rebuilding that we forget to take care of ourselves and we forget to look at the spiritual side—I am very blessed, oh my God, I am so blessed (Sikaffy 2007).

### **Shaula Lovera**

Shaula Lovera, a native of Bogotá, Colombia left New Orleans before the storm hit. She ended up with family in Washington, D.C. She said she felt like a “show-and-tell.” Her aunt’s church was inviting her for dinner and her cousin’s church was asking to donate things to her and her friends. She said she felt bad because her apartment in Harahan in Jefferson Parish received no damage and she was able to come back within a month. While away, Martin, the director of the Hispanic Apostolate, communicated with everyone to figure out who would be coming back to work. Lovera had no hesitation and was back to work very soon (Lovera 2007).

Before Hurricane Katrina, Lovera had become the director of the Latino Health Access Network incorporated in 2002. This was a concept that was developed to involve “physicians and volunteers to provide health services for the Hispanic community” (Lovera 2007). Right before the storm, they had received a grant to create a Church Health Program. The idea was to train lay people who were leaders from each congregation to be able to replicate within their religious community what she was doing at the Hispanic Apostolate. They thought that this type of program would trickle down to other families belonging to other denominations and faiths. After the storm, they had to “rewrite the grant and they lost the church component because those churches had been destroyed or they were not back and running” (Lovera 2007). Moreover, they did not know where the original Hispanic population they had served was located so they had to change it to a typical health promoter’s role by training community promoters to do community

outreach and assessment.

Following Katrina, there was still much work to be done. The need for Hispanic health care was greater than ever and they had to work with a smaller budget and fewer resources. Many of their cases come from churches of all denominations that have undertaken many social services for the newly arrived Hispanics. They make sure that the voices of Hispanics are heard. Lovera also realizes that with Katrina comes opportunity for the city and the Hispanic Apostolate. She commented, “Katrina has brought to light some of the problems” and as a result the Hispanic Apostolate has “become much better at administrating [its] programs and really looking at the community’s needs” (Lovera 2007).

### **Martin Gutierrez**

Martin Gutierrez is the Director of the Hispanic Apostolate Archdiocese of New Orleans. Since joining up with Catholic Charities after Katrina, he now also works with them in handling the services available for the immigrant community. His family came here from Nicaragua in 1979 and they settled in Chalmette in St. Bernard Parish. Presently, he lives in the same house he did before the storm in his Metairie neighborhood. His house received around nine inches of water, but he was able to renovate and come back home (Gutierrez 2007).

He arranged, in advance, for a hotel for his immediate family, parents, and in-laws to stay in during the evacuation. They were already on the road to Houston when they heard of the mandatory evacuation. The most unsettling part of the experience for him and his family was the uncertainty. They did not know if they had a house or even a city to return to in which they could continue their lives. The archdiocese “set up shop” in Baton Rouge, but they resided until September 21 in a hotel in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Martin became the bridge of communication for the Archdiocese of New Orleans between Baton Rouge, Kenner/Metairie, and Vicksburg. Throughout his hurricane experience, he did not question his faith in God, rather like Rothstein’s attributive theodicy that finds human fingerprints on suffering (Rothstein 2005), Martin questioned the response that “human beings had towards the disaster” (Gutierrez 2007). He added that even though it’s hard to see it right now the way it is, in the future “most of us will be better people for having gone through the hurricane” and it will serve as a “reminder that the material things are not important” (Gutierrez 2007).

Before the hurricane, Catholic Charities had no plan to evacuate its employees or members of the community it serves. Since Katrina, Catholic Charities has taken the initiative to learn from its mistake and is now strategizing and planning in the event of another hurricane or emergency. Katrina has also prompted Catholic Charities to expand its services to the Hispanic community to help to integrate them into the community. Martin feels these services are crucial if one wants to “follow the teachings of Jesus Christ” (Gutierrez 2007). The Hispanic Apostolate has grown in this mission from nine employees to close to forty after Katrina. The original five services still remain, but the Hispanic Apostolate has increased in its capacity to meet the new demand. In addition to these services, it has also developed two new programs, the workers’ rights initiative and a counseling program. Now, its programs deal with issues of “health, immigration, ESL, counseling, emergency assistance, workers rights, and income tax” (Gutierrez 2007). The Roman Catholic Church in New Orleans has helped in maintaining and supporting these services. “The collaboration between the different offices and ministries within the Catholic Church here in New Orleans has been tremendous after the hurricane” (Gutierrez 2007). For example, the Pastoral Office’s mission is to assist the thirteen parishes that have Hispanic ministry in the archdiocese (Gutierrez 2007). There is a commitment in these different ministries to help serve all fellow

brothers and sisters.

Martin, by continuing the Hispanic Apostolate's mission, has hope for the future. He believes that Katrina exposed a lot of issues, such as crime, racism, education, and he hopes that people will take advantage of the opportunity to rebuild a better city. His fear is that people won't work together towards that goal. Personally, he has felt a new renewal towards his mission as director of the Hispanic Apostolate. He does not like to call it his job; it is his mission. He gets paid to do what he is "supposed to do as a Christian" (Gutierrez 2007). This call asks him to deal with the recovery and issues such as racism, job opportunity, economic development, and housing. He senses that "God is calling [him] to do this" and he answers this call because of his faith (Gutierrez 2007). This call has grown after Katrina and he remains committed to answering that call through the mission of the Church and the Hispanic Apostolate. He believes in the hope that the Hispanics who have come will stay and help the growth of the city and can integrate themselves. He hopes to "teach people how to fish, not give them the fish" (Gutierrez 2007).

### **CONCLUSION**

The Hispanic Apostolate has always had a mission of charity towards the Hispanic population of New Orleans. Katrina highlighted the importance of these services and created the need for new services. The Hispanic Apostolate, with help from Catholic Charities, is responding to these new challenges by making sure that as the city begins to rebuild, Latino voices are heard and their needs are not forgotten.

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