

Honors World Religions  
30 March 2006

Catholic Charities  
Archdiocese of New Orleans  
1000 Howard Ave  
New Orleans, LA 70113

## Being the Hand of God

Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina

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*[Hurricane Katrina] brought out a deeper sense of responsibility for your fellow man, a deeper sense that God is in control and we are not, and developing trust. You know, to trust that whatever was going to happen to our homes— anything that people hold on to— we can survive by this and grow by this.... This is part of our journey.*

Sr. Judith Bright, 2006

On a sunny February afternoon in 2006, Sister Judith Bright sits in the cafeteria of the St. John the Baptist Community Center in downtown New Orleans. Bright is a clinical social worker for Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, a Catholic Sister, and a survivor of Hurricane Katrina. Softly and sensitively she recounts her Katrina experience over the hubbub of children's voices from the daycare center in the next room. Bright, like so many in New Orleans, was displaced by Katrina for an unexpected and extended period of time. A resident of the Mid-City area, her home that she shared with several other Sisters was overtaken by floodwaters in the events following the storm. Despite personal woes and stress brought by this tragic event, Bright says she maintained her sanity by assisting others with their own stress and woes. "It helped to be able to be helping others," Bright said. "To be able to make life a little easier, to bring some peace to others—that it's going to work out; it's going to be okay" (Bright 2006).

This attitude of giving and reaching out to others in need personifies the mission of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans. Through numerous affiliated organizations, community programs, and individuals, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans has played an active role in the social welfare of Louisiana both before and after Hurricane Katrina. With loving care and attention, the employees and volunteers of Catholic Charities have been actively serving

those affected by the storm. Through its works, this organization strives not to convert, but to serve. In this way, Catholic Charities shows that God can be and is a personal and present force in the lives of all those in need. Amidst the tragedy and devastation wrought upon so many lives by Hurricane Katrina, many people begin to question the presence and goodness of God. This organization attempts to reveal God's loving presence among the people through the unselfish, charitable works taking place today. In the words of Sister Bright, "We have a responsibility to those people [affected by Katrina] to help them in any way we can. So that really the hand of God is us. We're going to be the hand of God that they're going to see if everyone takes the responsibility to reach out to the people" (Bright 2006). In this spirit, Catholic Charities continues its mission to serve and minister to the Katrina-affected community.

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF CATHOLICISM**

The goal of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans is to serve any and all members of the Louisiana community. Although its objectives do not include conversion to the Catholic faith, Catholic Charities is founded upon the beliefs and principles held by the Roman Catholic Church. It actively promotes charity and humility through all social works, while adhering to the example of Jesus Christ and Catholic teachings on all social issues.

Roman Catholicism is a branch of Christianity. Christianity arose from Judaism; therefore, the Christian God is also the God of Abraham, patriarch of the Jewish faith. Catholicism is founded upon the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish preacher and healer. Catholics believe Jesus is the messiah, "the Anointed One," chosen by God to be ruler. He is the "Son of God" and God incarnate in his life on Earth and afterward. After being crucified by Roman authorities, Catholics believe Jesus resurrected from death after three days, and later ascended into heaven to become Lord of all Creation (Breuilly, O'Brien, and Palmer 1997, 43-44).

The leadership of the Roman Catholic Church is traced to Saint Peter, one of Jesus' twelve apostles. The Pope is the successor to Saint Peter, the Bishop of Rome, and the head of the Roman Catholic Church throughout the world. Catholics believe that the Pope is infallible when speaking on issues of faith "*ex cathedra*," from "Peter's Chair" in Rome, signifying authoritative teachings that address issues of Catholic morals and faith (Pace 2003). Under the Pope, there is a network of church authority in descending rank from cardinals to archbishops, to bishops to priests. Because of this system of authority, the Roman Catholic Church is often referred to as the "Hierarchal Church" (Gillis 2003, 11). Today, the head of the church is Pope Benedict XVI.

The scriptural authority of the Roman Catholic Church is the Christian Bible, a collection of traditional writings by various sources. It is divided into the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible. Catholics interpret the events and prophecies of the Hebrew Bible as foretelling the coming of Jesus as messiah. The New Testament consists of Gospels, books of "good news," and letters written about the life of Jesus. The Christian Bible was finalized around 380 C.E. (Breuilly, O'Brien, and Palmer 1997, 46). The Bible and the apostolic tradition of succession and teaching found in the hierarchy of the church are the two sources of revelation for Roman Catholics. Roman Catholicism requires both sources for proper understanding of its faith.

Catholics are to live by commandments, or laws, given by God through the scripture and interpreted by the Magisterium, the teaching authority of the Pope and a council of bishops. These laws include the Ten Commandments given by Moses in the Old Testament as well as the Two Great Commandments that contain the message of all God's laws. The Two Great

Commandments state: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole mind, and with your whole strength” (Mark 12:30), and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31) (quoted in Catholic Online [2006]). In order to fulfill this love of God, love of others, and love of oneself, a Catholic must engage in spiritual and corporeal works of mercy. Catholics must also adhere to the chief laws/commandments of the church. These laws describe the Catholic duties to the Roman Catholic Church itself. They are:

- I. To assist at Mass on all Sundays and holy days of obligation.
- II. To fast and abstain on the days appointed.
- III. To confess our sins at least once a year.
- IV. To receive Holy Communion during the Easter time.
- V. To contribute to the support of the Church.
- VI. To observe the laws of the Church concerning marriage (Catholic Online [2006]).

Thus, the Roman Catholic Church specifies the guidelines by which the Catholic carries out true faith and practice.

Major beliefs of the Roman Catholic faith are stated in the Nicene Creed. These tenets of faith include the belief that God exists as one in the Holy Trinity (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). It states belief in Jesus as being the Son of God conceived by the Virgin Mary; the resurrection and ascension of Jesus; and his impending judgment of the world on the last day. The Nicene Creed is the standard Roman Catholic Creed recited during weekly services. It concludes with the belief in “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church,” the acknowledgment of “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins,” and anticipation of “the resurrection of the dead and life of the world to come” (Gillis 2003, 10). Catholics believe in an eternal soul that will rest with God in heaven according to His judgment of one’s life upon death.

Communal worship and the sacraments play important roles in the Catholic life. The sacraments attempt to bring the Catholic closer to God through an endowment of God’s grace, or “a share in God’s life” (Gillis 2003, 12). The seven sacraments echo the major life stages of humans from birth with baptism; to adolescence with confirmation; and from marriage or holy orders in adulthood; to anointing of the sick at death. A sacrament unique to Catholicism is reconciliation, which is a confession and absolution of one’s sins by God acting through a priest (Gillis 2003, 12-15). The sacrament of eucharist is performed at every Catholic service, or Mass. Although Mass is celebrated daily, Catholics are required to attend Mass only on Sundays or Holy Days of Obligation. During the Mass, the priest “celebrates the death and resurrection of Jesus by sharing of bread and wine and retelling the story of Jesus’ Last Supper before his death (Breuilly, O’Brien, and Palmer 1997, 54). Through these rituals, the Catholic actively lives the way of Christ and gains a share in Christ’s grace.

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES ARCHDIOCES OF NEW ORLEANS**

Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans has a legacy spanning almost 300 years. The history of all Catholic Charities throughout the United States can be traced back to the beginning of Catholic Charities in New Orleans. In 1727 the Ursuline nuns traveled from France to the United States. They landed in New Orleans in the area known today as the Ninth Ward. There, they established the first Catholic school and Catholic hospital in the country (Finney 2003). “People don’t realize the gift New Orleans is to the nation,” says Gordon Wadge, current

president of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans. “One of those gifts was that Catholic healthcare, Catholic charities and Catholic schools all trace their roots to New Orleans.... It’s our gift to the nation” (Wadge 2006). The works begun by the Ursulines continue today in New Orleans and beyond through the tradition of Catholic Charities and institutions they established.

Catholic Charities of New Orleans was incorporated in 1938. Since then, it has expanded to include over thirty programs of social service. These programs include the Second Harvesters Food Bank, child and adoption services, educational services, unemployment and poverty assistance, and care of the elderly and mentally ill. Beth Millbank, director of communications for Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, describes the nature of these services as care and support “from womb to tomb,” meaning programs from prenatal services to death counseling and all stages of life between (Millbank 2006). It is this commitment to lifelong care that makes Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans unique and one of the largest community outreach organizations in the southern United States. It serves 150,000 people throughout Louisiana annually and employs 1,000 people throughout the New Orleans area. Catholic Charities Archdiocese New Orleans operates numerous programs on an annual budget of 39 million dollars. These funds come from state and federal governments, grants, fundraising and individual donations (Millbank 2006). According to the Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans website, 92 cents of every dollar received goes to direct services (Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans [2006]).

The mission statement of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans reflects the principles of social justice, activism, and Christianity on which this organization is founded. It states:

Respecting the dignity and potential of each human person, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans collaborates with the wider community to serve those in need. Impelled by the love and teaching of Jesus Christ, we offer life-giving programs, advocate for the voiceless, and empower the poor and vulnerable to foster a more just society (Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans business card).

Through Jesus Christ’s example of humility, service, leadership, and love, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans reaches out to the greater community of Louisiana.

## **THE IMPACT OF HURRICANE KATRINA ON CATHOLIC CHARITIES ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW ORLEANS**

The headquarters of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans is located on the corner of Howard Avenue and Loyola Avenue in the Central Business District (CBD), approximately one mile away from the Superdome. With the impact of Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent levee breaches, the organization’s offices were greatly damaged. Windows were blown in by the force of the storm winds and the first floor was flooded by the breaking of the 17th Street Canal levee. “There were about 25 [offices] in the whole building that had windows blown out,” Wadge said. “The force of the wind was so great that, in some cases, it tore the entire interior door and frame out of the wall. So you would see the whole door frame blown out across the hallway.” Despite the damage, Catholic Charities continues to function in makeshift offices that include cars and Starbucks. With luck, they expect the repairs on their offices to be finished by March 2006 (Wadge 2006).

Before Katrina, Catholic Charities provided over 200,000 residents of Louisiana with food, healthcare, and social services (Finney 2003). After Hurricane Katrina, the pool of needy people has increased dramatically. The poor and the middle-class alike are turning to this organization for physical and mental comfort (Wadge 2006). As the cries for help increase, Catholic Charities is attempting to continue its traditional services as well as begin new programs to address specific issues caused by Katrina. In light of this, the infrastructure of this organization is being put to the test.

Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans employed 1,000 people pre-Katrina. Immediately after Katrina, 350 employees remained, many of which lost their homes and were displaced. Despite this initial loss, this organization quickly rebounded and now employs 750 people and is still hiring. Millbank remarked on the efficiency and elasticity of the organization saying, "It's amazing to me that Catholic Charities [could] weather this storm and still continue to provide not only for their employees but also for their clients, who are now both employees and clients" (Millbank 2006). Despite the personal losses and trials of Catholic Charities' employees, their spirits and their mission of service have not been thwarted.

### **THE CATHOLIC CHARITIES ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW ORLEANS' RESPONSE TO HURRICANE KATRINA**

Catholic Charities' response to Hurricane Katrina has been manifold and far reaching. It continues its commitment to preserving the dignity of those in need while providing direct and indirect care to everyone regardless of religious affiliation. Through its various Katrina relief efforts, the organization continues Jesus Christ's works of mercy. Even before Katrina made landfall, Catholic Charities began relief efforts with evacuations of people in residential programs. Residents of Catholic Charities' battered women's shelters, homeless shelters, homes for the mentally and chronically ill, center for abused and neglected children, and pediatric program for chronically disabled children were taken by bus to centers and homes in other parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas the Saturday before the storm (Wadge 2006). In addition, Catholic Charities assisted 354 medically fragile people in evacuating from the Louis Armstrong Airport (Millbank 2006).

During the storm, this organization continued its operations. It staffed medical units and ministered to people seeking refuge in the Superdome. Headquarters of Catholic Charities temporarily moved to Baton Rouge where employees immediately began working with Baton Rouge Catholic community services to provide shelter and food for evacuees throughout Louisiana. Since Hurricane Katrina, Catholic Charities in association with the Second Harvester's food bank has distributed 42 million pounds of food to the people of Louisiana (annually it distributed 12-14 million pounds of food) (Millbank 2006).

In the aftermath of the storm, Catholic Charities' plan for assisting those affected by Katrina is a three-phase plan called "Response, Recovery, Rebuild." Within this plan, several new programs have developed to care for the physical and the emotional needs of Louisiana residents (Wadge 2006). One of the major programs is Operation Helping Hands. This program mobilizes and oversees volunteer groups in gutting and renovating flooded homes of the elderly, the disabled, and the uninsured. Over 1,000 volunteers from across the country have taken part in Operation Helping Hands, the first step toward the rebuilding phase. So far 167 homes have been gutted, with 700 more on the waiting list (Borysiewicz 2006).

The psychological impact of the hurricane on the community is a chief concern. “A huge impact of the storm is in the mental health dimension,” Wadge said. “The rate of attempted suicide has increased tenfold [since Hurricane Katrina]” (Wadge 2006). Because of this, Catholic Charities, in partnership with the State Office of Mental Health, has organized 125 crisis counselors in the Louisiana Spirit program. Louisiana Spirit is a counseling service that goes door-to-door throughout three civil parishes inquiring about people’s needs and comforting fears. Catholic Charities is also developing mental health programs for children, families and faculty of Catholic schools in Louisiana to confront the trauma and stress caused by Katrina. In addition, ten community centers have opened throughout the region to provide counseling, case management, and resources for people wrestling with federal aid agencies. Wadge points out that the latter is a prominent problem for many seeking assistance. “One of the big challenges for people is navigating the crazy FEMA systems and the Red Cross systems,” he said. “So we put people in [community centers] who are knowledgeable and experienced...so they can help people figure out how to get that kind of assistance” (Wadge 2006). With these programs, Catholic Charities extends its plan of “Response, Recovery, Rebuild” to all aspects of life as it has done and continues to do in its traditional services and agencies.

### **KATRINA-EXPERIENCES OF CATHOLIC CHARITIES ARCHDIOCESE OF NEW ORLEANS EMPLOYEES**

The employees of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans know first hand what the victims of Hurricane Katrina have experienced, since they are victims too. Yet, despite personal tragedies, they continue serving others for others’ sake and for their own. “Many of [our employees and volunteers] have lost their homes,” Wadge said. “But it is productive, cathartic, and helpful for people who have lost themselves to help other people” (Wadge 2006). This is the attitude of many working for and with the organization, including Wadge himself. Gordon Wadge, the president of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, with Jim Kelly, CEO, took active roles in responding to the threat of Katrina. They stayed in the Superdome, the shelter of last resort for the people of New Orleans the day before and the day after the storm. They assisted the sick and elderly and counseled the 30,000 distressed people trying to live in the Superdome. Wadge described the situation in the Superdome as trying and very sad saying, “The air conditioning goes out. The lights go out. We had auxiliary lights going on and food and water get a little stretched. So it was kind of difficult” (Wadge 2006). As the storm bore down upon the city, electrical and water systems shut down, leaving the many people in the Superdome without communication and utilities. Wadge recalled:

We had no way of knowing at that time that the levees had been broken. There was no water in the streets.... The National Guard started bringing people in by trucks—truck, after truck, after truck.... I am standing by the door as everybody’s coming in and I’m visiting with people in the line. And so many people are shell-shocked. So many people have only the clothes on their back, no shoes on, and they’re soaking wet. You can see by the water stain on people’s shirts and blouses how deep the water was that they were standing in, or surviving in. So I started visiting with people and asking them what neighborhoods they had come from in the city.... We came to the realization that the whole city was under water. That was the only way we knew that—by the survivors being rescued (Wadge 2006).

Inside the Superdome, resources were stretched, including medical resources and care. Ninety senior citizens who could not evacuate were left at the Superdome by their nursing home. Wadge and the medical staff provided by Catholic Charities attempted to make them as comfortable as possible under the circumstances, but many suffered greatly. “We had no beds to lay [the elderly] on,” Wadge said. “They just sat in wheelchairs. It was kind of tragic. [...] I had to take care of this one elderly woman who died. We didn’t want to put her in a body bag because we didn’t want to alarm anybody else...so we had to walk her down in a wheelchair like she was sleeping to the coroner” (Wadge 2006).

Wadge was able to drive out of the city before the water around the Superdome prevented it. He reunited with his family in Baton Rouge, where Catholic Charities had established temporary headquarters. He and his family were safe, however, his home in Metairie, Louisiana flooded. Yet, in the face of the tragedy he experienced, Wadge still remains spiritual and hopeful. “I think [Katrina] challenges faith to say where is God in this? [...] It is [also] a deepening of faith in some respects, to appreciate the value of family,” Wadge said. “I think we have incredible opportunity [in the aftermath of Katrina]” (Wadge 2006).

Beth Millbank, director of communications for Catholic Charities, also lost her home to flood waters. Millbank was able to evacuate before the storm hit the city; however, she and her family spent many days hopping from place to place trying to find adequate housing. Initially, Millbank and her family evacuated to Jackson, Mississippi. Katrina managed to knock out utilities in the hotel where they were staying. Consequently, they bounced from Jackson to Greenwood, Mississippi, to Baton Rouge, and finally back to New Orleans when Catholic Charities reestablished administrative operations in the city. Throughout this stressful and often angry time, Millbank remained dedicated to her work with Catholic Charities and to helping others despite her own troubles. Immediately after arriving in Baton Rouge, she returned to work at Catholic Charities’ temporary headquarters (Millbank 2006).

Like Wadge, Millbank can take an optimistic view of this tragedy. “I think we have been blessed, not because we did anything wonderful, but because we were taken care of,” said Millbank. “From [a] woman in the parking lot saying, ‘Would you like our hotel room?’ to a waitress coming back after she’s off shift to say, ‘Get in your cars. Follow me. I’m going to take you to get gas,’ I mean, the face of God; they had the face of God.... I mean, think of the pictures [of Katrina victims] you saw. You saw the worst, but you also saw the best. That’s the face of God” (Millbank 2006).

Sister Judith Bright smiles softly and nods her head as she tells how her life has changed since Hurricane Katrina. Daily, she counsels up to 25 people at St. John the Baptist Community Center, one of the ten regional community centers staffed by Catholic Charities. “We’re trying to do case management and not just be the hand-out,” Bright said, “to help people plan what it is they need...their goals, and trying to help with jobs, job placement, and trying to help them get rest” (Bright 2006). Bright feels that her efforts are quite small compared to the astronomical need created by Hurricane Katrina throughout the New Orleans community and the state of Louisiana.

## CONCLUSION

In the midst of this tragic and trying time, Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans sees hope and opportunity in its employees and volunteers, in the people of New Orleans, and in the future of the city. Through numerous social services and community outreach programs, this

Catholic organization attempts to show the teachings of Jesus Christ in action and a most positive side of the Catholic life. Catholic Charities' diverse ministries offer understanding, compassion, and hope to those affected by Hurricane Katrina. "The hand of God is here," said Bright confidently. "And so we'll be able to get through this and life will continue. It may not be the way [it was] in the past, but it will definitely go on for the future" (Bright 2006).

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