

Five Years after Hurricane Katrina, Jesuits Continue to Help Rebuild New Orleans

by Brooke Arceneaux-Iglesias

Gumbo.

Gumbo is perhaps a perfect symbol for New Orleans: a mysterious bowl, originating out of necessity, of multifarious ingredients and spices, time-tested and blessed by the “Holy Trinity,” beyond the onions, peppers, and celery. The city's positioning in the Mississippi River delta made it a natural port for early inhabitants--royalty, Native Americans, slaves, missionaries, pirates, and prisoners, as diverse in their beliefs, traditions, and experiences as one might imagine. The Jesuits were among these early residents, spreading the Gospel as missionaries here beginning in the 18th century, and today's Jesuit ministries in New Orleans remain just as critical as they were then.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nearly one quarter of men, women, and children in the city of New Orleans currently live below the federal poverty level, and in August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina laid bare for all the world to see the intense neglect of this vulnerable population. Five years later, newly elected Mayor Mitch Landrieu's recent announcement of a \$79 million budget shortfall weighs heavily on the minds of residents of all socio-economic circumstances. It presents an enormous challenge to a city, particularly in light of the April 20th BP oil spill that continues to threaten livelihoods and cultures. But the Jesuits, having bounced back from the storm with the prayers and support of so many people, continue to serve the people of New Orleans as best as they can.

When 80 percent of the city was submerged under stagnant water for two weeks, the Jesuits knew the need for assistance would be greater than ever. Together with province staff, they began assessing the severity of the situation and creating plans of action. “The immediate focus was getting current ministries back on their feet,” recalls Fr. Fred Kammer, SJ, then provincial of the New Orleans Province. Temporary province offices opened in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, (about 140 miles west of New Orleans, where the old province offices laid submerged in filthy water) and as soon as phone lines were reconnected and mail service was restored, calls from aid groups and donations began pouring in. The province initiated Katrina Relief Services to assess needs, allocate funds, and organize volunteers to aid with rebuilding efforts.

Rebuilding physical structures was only one part of the recovery effort. “We needed to bring people back to normal as quickly as possible,” says Fr. Anthony McGinn, SJ, president of Jesuit High School in New Orleans. “Our urgency to reopen was to help parents return.” The school's entire first floor would need gutting and complete renovations after four and a half feet of water destroyed the auditorium, cafeteria, gymnasium, spirit shop and classrooms. While the school worked to clean up debris and reorganize classes into unaffected classrooms, its brother school in Houston, Strake Jesuit Preparatory, and a temporary campus organized at St. Martin's Episcopal in Metairie, Louisiana, just outside of New Orleans, welcomed approximately 1,000 of Jesuit High's students. Another 300 students completed course work at other high schools outside of New Orleans. By January 2006, 89 percent of students were back on campus, and today, Jesuit High counts 1,349 students enrolled for the 2010-2011 year. Thanks to the generosity of its devoted alumni and benefactors, the school continues to offer students a Catholic, college preparatory experience at one of the lowest tuition costs in the Greater New Orleans area, where for 163 years, no academically qualified student has been denied admission due to financial hardship. The school's unique approach to financial aid does not offer academic or athletic scholarships. Instead, young men receive scholarships based solely on families' needs for tuition assistance.

Tuition is no burden for the students of The Good Shepherd School either. Founded by the late Fr. Harry Tompson, SJ, and based on the Nativity/Miguel model of educating children from families living at or below the federal poverty level. Its physical structure suffered only minor damage, but its students bore the brunt of the storm. About a month and a half after Katrina, only 24 students were in New Orleans and 16 students were waiting for the school to reopen before returning. Thirty-eight students were with families who were unsure about returning to New Orleans, and six students remained unaccounted for. With more than half of Good Shepherd's students having deceased or incarcerated parents, support for returning students was critical.

The Good Shepherd School reopened early in January 2006 with 38 students and a scaled back staff, but with its donor base in flux, and funding for the school at risk. Today, the school benefits in part from Louisiana's Student Scholarships for Educational Excellence Program, which offers tuition vouchers to students living below the poverty level and in failing school districts. The school's kindergarten through seventh grade enrollment for the 2010-2011 academic year meets pre-Katrina enrollment at 90 students. "More than half of last year's students performed above grade level in both reading and math, and the school's second graduating class of seventh graders have been accepted and enrolled in some of the region's best high schools, including Jesuit High School," reports Ronald Briggs, president and chairman of the school. However, funding continues to be a concern because the school operates year round to offer students stability and summer learning opportunities. In addition, the school operates a Graduate Support Program that assists alums with the high school and college admissions process, tutoring, mentoring, and counseling. With Tompson's vision for these children in mind, the school's board, faculty, and staff work doubly hard to support students with the means available to them.

Just down the street from The Good Shepherd School is Immaculate Conception Jesuit Church, where the smell of diesel fuel still occasionally wafts about after the flooding of the church's basement boiler room; it does not seem to deter parishioners, however. "Our focus has been to animate our congregation," says pastor Fr. Stephen Sauer, SJ, who has organized First Tuesdays, a new speaker series, and the Young Professionals and Graduate Society. The revitalized Racial Harmony Committee welcomes over 100 parishioners and friends to its annual Thanksgiving meal, and due to church closures post-Katrina, the parish's St. Vincent de Paul Society works in coordination with the Archdiocese of New Orleans to help serve people in need beyond parish boundaries. Also popular is its concert series, originally started to aid local musicians suffering from lack of work immediately after the storm. At-will donations from concert goers help to support the musicians and to perpetuate New Orleans' musical heritage, and as Sauer puts it, "Music becomes a healing prayer." He adds, "There is a great sense of solidarity among our parishioners for having gotten through together, and we have turned a corner. We are building a parish for the 21st century that empowers parishioners more than ever before."

One ministry of Immaculate Conception that seeks to empower others is Café Reconcile, an outreach to the people of Central City New Orleans that began offering culinary training to young people from this at-risk corridor ten years ago. This historic neighborhood that was once a thriving commercial district for minorities before desegregation sunk into decline in the 1960s and has since become one of the poorest and most violent areas of New Orleans. Café Reconcile is an anchor for this community, not only as a lunch house and employer, but in helping to spur revitalization of Central City. Reopening only five weeks after Katrina, it served meals to first responders and operated as a gathering place for residents in need of support. Since then, its supportive presence has led to the revitalization of the neighborhood, which now includes urban gardens and several new businesses and organizations. Its mission also adapted to meet the needs of its post-Katrina community by initiating the Reconcile Construction Program, offering opportunities for local youth to rebuild their own community with on-site construction training.

In hopes to accommodate growing classes of culinary program applicants, expansion efforts are underway and include a banquet hall to complement catering services. “We are rebuilding from an innovative place,” says Executive Director Sr. Mary Lou Specha, PBVM. “We are no longer recovering. We are creating.” She admits that job placement for culinary program graduates has been considerably difficult with the economic downturn, gulf oil spill, and the resulting reduction in tourism. “But,” says Specha, “we remind students that we walk together, and that this is a place they can call home.” Programs are in place to support graduates, helping them with GED completion and life skills training. “It’s difficult to be released from poverty, but we can help to instill power and strength in students, and we can continue to provide them with something to come back to,” she says, referring to Café Reconcile.

For thousands living without homes, due both in part to pre-Katrina hardships and because of the storm’s devastation, there is the Harry Tompson Center, a day center for the poor and homeless that cares for roughly 250 men and women daily. This larger collaboration—the St. Joseph Rebuild Center—managed by the Jesuits, the Presentation Sisters, the Vincentian Fathers, and Catholic Charities’ Hispanic Outreach Program, is a testament to strength in numbers. “In collaborating, we can really increase the efficiency and comprehensiveness of our efforts,” says Executive Director Don Thompson, recalling the challenges of working alone and out of a tiny space near Immaculate Conception pre-Katrina. Now located near St. Joseph Church, just off the I-10 overpass, a few blocks from Immaculate Conception, the new structure was designed in-kind by the Detroit Collaborative Design Center of the University of Detroit Mercy. It consists of service trailers equipped with climate-controlled food storage, showers, laundry facilities, and a few offices, all contained within a “framework” of trellises—decks and roofs that allow for breezes in the hot summer months and shelter from the elements. Lush green shrubbery and plants add a peaceful element to this respite center, and the homeless of New Orleans are free to find rest and support here Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

A lack of affordable rental housing and physical and mental illness issues exacerbated by Hurricane Katrina have left approximately one in 25 residents homeless (or about 4 percent of the city’s population, a number that is more than four times that of most U.S. cities, according to UNITY of Greater New Orleans), and the closure of hospitals and clinics has decreased medical and mental health services available to the uninsured and working poor. Since the center’s reopening in September 2007 through this past June, volunteers have served 126,598 guests with meals, medical and mental health aid, showers and hygiene kits, laundry service, phone service, and legal assistance. But, the lack of affordable and appropriate housing for those with mental illness and addiction highlights the need for the support of case management. “A real dent could be made in the homelessness population if funds could be unlocked for supportive case management,” says Thompson.

Studying poverty, race relations, and immigration is the mission of the Jesuit Social Research Institute (JSRI), a collaboration of the New Orleans Province and Loyola University established post-Katrina “to promote research, social analysis, theological reflection, and practical strategies,” with an aim to improve social and economic conditions in the South. The institute is hosting a conference this September to discuss the city’s attempt to woo back residents through proposed education, housing, and health care reforms. Also on the agenda are the changes wrought by many newcomers to the city since the storm: the rebuilding contributions of immigrants, crime against these newest residents, and immigration legislation. JSRI uses Katrina as “an opportunity to help people understand the bigger picture,” according to Kammer, who is currently its director.

Students at Loyola University New Orleans, many of whom first visited New Orleans as volunteers, have benefited from the work of JSRI with a variety of guest speakers, panel discussions, and film screenings, and the university looks to keep students engaged. Ranked as one of the top ten universities in the South for the past twenty years by *the U.S. News and World Report*, Loyola has

boasted a record number of applications over the past two years. This year's newest students will join other students, faculty, and staff in "Into the Streets," a day of service to the community meant to encourage students to follow in the Jesuit model of service and to bond students to their new community and school.

Serving a community well beyond the bounds of campus is its president, Fr. Kevin Wildes, SJ. Wildes was appointed chair of the New Orleans Ethics Review Board, the board empowered to appoint the city's inspector general who is tasked with investigating and preventing corruption, fraud, and other illegal activities involving city government. An independent police monitor has also been appointed to aid the inspector general. These improvements, coupled with the aid of the federal government to local law enforcement, seek to transform a city with a history of well-documented violence and corruption. "We must transform the culture of death on the streets of New Orleans to a celebration of life and freedom, joy and possibility," declared Mayor Mitch Landrieu, a Jesuit High School alumnus, at his inauguration. In that address, he urged residents to "spend less apart and more time together fighting the common enemies that threaten us all."

Barriers to education and housing, poverty, and crime remain common enemies, and local Jesuit ministries continue to provide support to and facilitate change in New Orleans. The ministries in the city do not stand alone, but rather "they are part of an Ignatian family," says Mary Baudouin, provincial assistant for social ministries, recalling the past five years of hard work and companionship shared among the ministries. "Because we banded together post-Katrina, every one of our ministries survived and possibly served better as a result." Fr. Mark Lewis, SJ, provincial, wholeheartedly supports the coordination of ministry efforts. "We have to become more interactive with one another," he says. "We have to look at what has worked and reapply it based on the endemic needs of the city."

This strength in numbers is a common theme among the people serving and being served by the city's Jesuit ministries, and overwhelming gratitude is another common thread. The disaster has changed how people view their communities and how they can help one another heal. The recovery from total devastation is perhaps once of the best examples of self-help by a community ever attempted in our nation, due largely in part to neighbors' generosity and support of one another, the optimism of a new mayor, and the celebration of the Saints' Super Bowl victory. "Think of the five people you are most thankful toward during this experience, and express your thanks," McGinn once prompted students and parents at a school assembly. If through people's rebuilding, volunteering, donations, and solidarity they continue to offer their thanks, they have heeded the call of St. Ignatius to "give and not count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not seek for rest, and to labor and not ask for reward" except that knowing they are doing God's will.

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