

OPTION FOR JUSTICE

OCTOBER 2006

- MIXED BLESSINGS - AN ACCOUNT OF HOLY WEEK 2006 IN NEW ORLEANS

Our story:
told through journal entries,
photographs, quotations
and reflections



Standing L-R: Kathy Przybylski OP, Maria Goretti Beckman OP, Mary Ann Keough, Mary Donnelly OP, Jeanne Lound Schaller, Joan Affen, OP.
Seated: Mary Ann Ferguson OP, Jude Bloch OP, Barbara Hansen, OP

We flew to New Orleans on Palm Sunday to volunteer in the hurricane cleanup effort. We had raised \$7,000 that we put toward expenses and contributions to those in need.



Overlooking the city the sight from the planes seemed rather normal except for the many bright blue "swimming pools" in yard after yard. As our planes dropped in altitude, it was obvious that we were not looking at pools. We were looking at thousands of homes crowned with blue tarp "FEMA" roofs.



Therese Leckert, OP (inset) was our New Orleans contact who lined up opportunities for us and welcomed us to live at the motherhouse of the Dominican Congregation of St. Mary. This photo depicts the interior of Therese's childhood home. All had been gutted. Eight months later standing water still remained.

O God restore us!
Ps. 80

What can separate us from Love?
Will affliction, or distress,
or persecution,
or hunger, or . . .
Rm. 8

A Catholic Charities' work site



We prepared and cooked meals for 200 "Helping Hands" volunteers who were gutting homes as part of New Orleans' Catholic Charities volunteer program.

Sarah Risen-Robertson (on right, in black) was the supervisor directing the meal program. We also cleaned, restocked and rearranged the freezer and storage areas. With the help of donated monies, we purchased mops, pails and an industrial can opener for the program.



"If Sarah wasn't cooking up three meals a week for us, I think I'd pretty much be going hungry. I can't see to cook on that little stovetop in my room."

We served and ate with the residents at Wynhoven apartments for seniors. They shared stories – stories of displacement for over three months to relatives or to temporary shelters in other states. We heard tales of disappointment, for when they returned to their small apartments within the nine-story residence, they learned that the kitchen would not be staffed due to evacuations and a lack of job applicants.

There were stories of answered prayer and goodwill – Catholic Charities agreed to serve three hot meals each week in exchange for the use of the kitchen to prepare meals for the Helping Hands crew. Sarah Risen-Robertson had different volunteers assist her each day. The food was packed and delivered to several sites around the city.

"My daughter evacuated me, her boyfriend and the two dogs and headed for Texas! We made an interesting group with me in my nineties! Them two dogs kept licking me all the way there!"

We gathered at Dominican High School where 900 of the 1,000 young women enrolled had returned. Of the 115 original faculty and staff at Dominican High, 98 returned. Of those, 35 had significant flood damage to their homes making them unlivable.

Students and faculty led the Stations of the Cross from the perspective of those who had suffered great loss from the flooding. The sincere prayerfulness was evident in the silent, respectful and tearful response given. "Jesus Take the Wheel" and "I Hope You Dance" were among the heartfelt songs that were sung like hymns by the young women.

"I evacuated with my family and I was in five different schools before I returned home to my high school and neighborhood. Right now there are four of us living in a FEMA trailer 'til our house is fixed up. They say the trailers will be sent like missiles through the air when the next big storm hits. That's another thing we all get to worry about now!"

"Everything is weeds. Weeds covering the debris . . . We're all grateful for your cleaning up our neighborhood. Most of us haven't had time to get to that yet. Our families and houses come first. Look here, I gutted and redid my whole house - did the drywall, flooring, electrical work all by myself. That trailer in my yard? That's where my mother-in-law stays. She lost everything."



*In the day of distress,
I seek Adonai;
my hands reach out
in the night.
Ps. 77*



The nine of us plus school principal Cynthia Thomas and Therese picked up debris and cut and pulled weeds from the dusty soil in the high school's surrounding neighborhood. A nearby senior housing unit had "HELP" painted on the roof. We were told people had died in that structure while waiting to be rescued from the flooding waters.

Over \$85 million of New Orleans' Archdiocesan property was lost or damaged. We toured St. Anthony of Padua School. There was water damage to most of it. Extensive repairs and clean-up were accomplished by many out of state volunteers. One huge piece of repair work was to kill the mold in the air conditioning ducts and to sanitize them. Built-in shelving units in the classrooms, wooden chairs and tables along with wooden Montessori materials were not salvageable and all needed to be replaced.

A small school bathroom



Ruth Angelette, OP stands before the large school facility telling us about the damage the structure sustained



St. Anthony's was one of the first schools to reopen. Fifty percent of the student body returned as classes resumed in January, 2006. Ruth Angelette, OP, the principal, had experienced Hurricane Hugo 30 years ago and had reopened that school. But as she remarked, "I was a lot younger then."

You have loved me back
to life,
saved me from
destruction.
Is. 38



Note third floor priory windows from which two Dominican Priests escaped the flooding waters

In the Lakeview district we visited St. Dominic's Church and School where Chris Finn, OP and Marty Gleason, OP had tried to ride out the storm and where they had been evacuated by boat from a third floor window of the priory. The entire property was under 12-17 feet of water. Only the church was back in operation. The bronze front doors showed the discoloring that clearly marked the water lines. In the school, the walls had been stripped to the studs and peeling paint, falling tiles and rusted door jambs all needed attention.



Flood waters were up to the fingertips of the statue of St. Dominic. Note water lines on doors and statue as water receded

The school was functioning in a building some distance from the parish. The art teacher and students designed a quilt-like drawing over which a fleur-de-lis was placed and appropriately named *Putting Back The Pieces*.

“This wasn’t just a storm. There are multiple levels of loss here. Whole neighborhoods are gone and no one knows if the churches, the schools, the stores will come back. Heck, we don’t even know if our neighbors will return!

So what will happen to us if we rebuild and no one else comes back? No one can offer us any real assurance.”

Storefronts next door to St. Dominic’s Parish



Inside St. Dominic’s Church was an enlarged map (note photo on right) of the surrounding neighborhood and a listing of names of people who planned to return to the neighborhood. This provided a kind of security and also allowed people to pinpoint the street and address of each family/person intending to return to the area. We found that other churches were doing the same thing. It seemed that the churches and schools provided more emotional support than any governmental agency ever could.



*Deep is calling to deep
as water thunders.
Ps. 42*



St. Frances Cabrini Church and School did not fare as well as others. The cross, broken but still hanging from the steeple, first caught our attention as we drove near the parish located just outside of the Lakeview area. The complex looked like an abandoned piece of property. Throughout the classrooms and halls we saw dusty mold and dirt clinging to walls, chairs, desks, books, bulletin boards and teaching materials. The broken windows charted the levels of receding waters. Nothing looked salvageable. Given the extensive damage throughout this particular area, we wondered if such a parish would ever function again.



“When we saw that the water was just getting higher, we packed up our bikes and rafted out of our house and down this street. Do you see the corner there? When we rafted around the corner we saw a bunch of people standing chest high in the mucky water, all smoking cigarettes and watching three houses burn down. It was surreal . . . the whole experience was surreal.”



We met Margie (in red), the youngest sister of Mary Ann Keough, who gave us a firsthand account of evacuating during the flooding. She and her family spent time in a FEMA holding area - an open space under a freeway abutment with hundreds of other evacuees all standing in water. Many were ill-prepared for the traumatic experience where there was no assigned authority. Margie said, “We handed ourselves over to a FEMA camp” after having failed to make it to higher ground on mountain bikes.

“We did the right thing, but it wasn’t a ‘good’ thing. Our experience in the FEMA camp was not good at all. We were looking out for ourselves and for a young girl who was high school age.”



Waters burst forth from the clouds;
the heavens thundered;
the earth trembled and quaked.
Ps. 77

“What good came of it? Well, we know our neighbors now. I’m no longer afraid to have my son play in front of our house. We’ve begun to share things with our neighbors and call people by name. None of that was happening before Katrina.”

Eight months after and we found that everyone had some kind of Katrina story to tell:

*How long will you pursue me,
intending to break me down
as if a sagging fence
or a leaning wall?
Ps. 62*



“I thought, what’s that boat doing in front of that school? Katrina put it there, I think.”

“In my neighborhood all the magnolia trees are gone, bushes and grass too, even the birds were gone for a long time afterward.”



“In the beginning, when we tried to get back to our home, guards told us we needed documentation. Then if we needed to travel to another parish, say to go to the airport, the guards required a different kind of documentation. It was a frightening experience.”



“I’m from the 9th Ward. My home is gone. We’re livin’ in a FEMA trailer now. My house, I’ve been back to see it. If I touched it, it’d fall in a heap.”

“We stood in lines for everything. We applied five times for FEMA assistance. They kept losing our applications.”

We saw many things that were out of place - houses off foundations, cars and boats piled atop one another, roofs smashed and on the ground, hundreds of vehicles filled with dried, cracked mud, mold-covered interiors of buildings. Like debris hanging from trees, the people showed signs of the trauma that hung on their psyches.



“There were so many things we couldn’t take with us. They’re all destroyed and I miss them so much, yet the family is safe and sound.”

“It wasn’t the hurricane that did all the damage, it was the flooding from the broken levees that killed my neighborhood. Lots of people have hurricane insurance, but not many have flood insurance. That’s what ruined us.”

“I just have to think about today. I can’t let myself think about a future. I have only a past and a present now.”

“This was not an act of God, this was a human miscalculation - a huge, human miscalculation.”



“All I know right now is loss. My prayer is one of loss for my New Orleans.”

We also heard valiant stories of people who helped. Those individuals who simply appeared and assisted wherever they could.

*May your gracious spirit lead me
to ground that is smooth -
in your mercy deliver me.
Ps. 143*



A restored preschool classroom at St. Anthony's School

“This wonderful carpenter came back weekend after weekend. He tore out the wet, warped shelving and built new wooden bookshelves throughout our school.”

“We had gobs of cold food in our coolers, it was our restaurant food. We went to the Red Cross but, after two days of red tape, we decided we’d just put it all in our trailer and distribute it ourselves. People were so grateful.”



“We have about 200 volunteers gutting houses at any one time. The owners are contacted first and we ask if they want us to go through their belongings and store what is salvageable. I think deciding about another person’s private belongings is the more difficult task for our volunteers.”

“I’m an electrician by trade. Every few weeks I travel to New Orleans and just walk down streets asking if anyone needs some electrical help.”

I reflect on former days,
years long past I remember.
Ps. 77



Twice we went to a bayou neighborhood to help clean out and clean up the flood-damaged home of the

Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic, another congregation in our extended Dominican Family.



We followed those who ripped up carpeting and floor boards, tore out wet drywall and wood, sanitized studs and finished the new flooring and walls. Our goal was to clean the furniture, all rooms and closets, put order to patio storage units and pull dead bushes and overgrown weeds in hopes of leaving the house ready to be lived in. But it would take many more hands and more weeks of work. The Eucharistic Sisters of St. Dominic had permanently moved two of their leadership to the Kentucky Dominicans as well as their Sisters who were elderly/disabled. Only those few Sisters whose ministries were still functioning stayed in New Orleans. This was to be their Central House.

“See how we’re by this bayou? We’re on higher ground than our neighbors across the street - maybe 8 to 10 feet higher. We had only a few inches of water and it’s taken us eight months to get to the point of moving back in. Look over there, across the street - they weren’t so lucky and we don’t see much activity over there either. My heart goes out to our neighbors.”



“The roses were blooming when we were finally allowed to return to our home. That gave us hope.”

Both the St. Mary and the Eucharistics noted how significant were the relationships developed through the Dominican Alliance. The St. Mary Sisters were housed with the Houston Dominicans; the Eucharistics with the Kentucky Dominicans. Other congregations, including Grand Rapids, sent financial resources and volunteers from Dominican congregations continue to be graciously welcomed.

Early Good Friday morning we took the Greyline bus tour of the city. The company offered the tour because they feared the trauma of Katrina was falling out of the U.S. public eye. The tour wound its way through devastated areas of New Orleans: Lake Ponchartrain Marina, the Lakeview neighborhood, the 17th Street and London Ave. Canals where the levees were breached. The buses were not allowed into the 9th Ward where the flooding caused the most massive destruction. We were told that only politicians were allowed to take bus tours through that area.



FEMA trailers



A room in a Lakeview district home after the flooding



Working on the 17th Street canal

My dwelling is picked up
and removed from me like a sheherd's tent;
like a weaver you have rolled up my life;
you have cut me off from the loom.
Is. 38

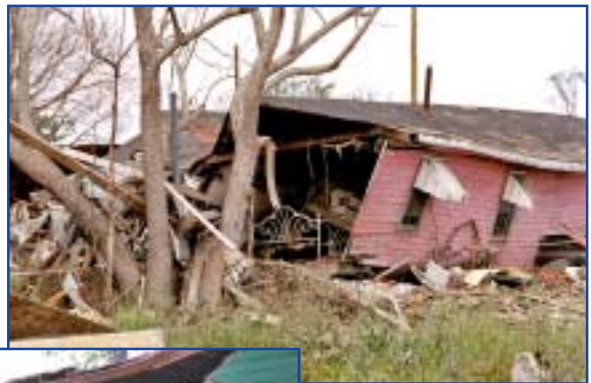
We went to see the 9th Ward on Holy Saturday morning. All was total devastation. There the water's force smashed houses, floated rooftops, overturned trucks and sat engulfing the neighborhood for weeks. Little had been done to begin cleanup or restoration.



“What y'all doing down here in the 9th Ward, ladies?”

Will you tell the story using your photographs?

That's my house over there. It's all gone - can't be fixed up.
It sat under water too long.”



“The 9th Ward is quiet. You don’t see hardly anybody fixing up their houses. All you see is those working on the levee that probably won’t hold back a flood of water with the next hurricane. Can’t find anybody who can assure me that thing will hold.”



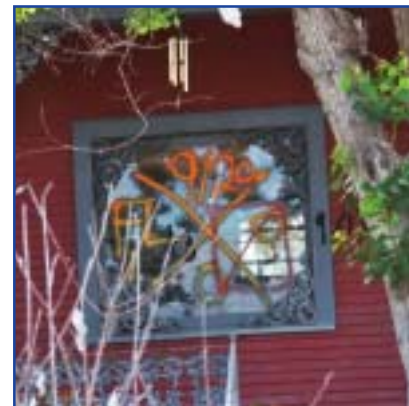
Repair work on Industrial Canal in distance, overlooking Ninth Ward.

The ghost town atmosphere filled us with a sense of loss and sent us looking for signs of a people whose spirit was stronger than the overwhelming flood. We noticed painted words of desperation pleading that nothing be touched and stating that they would be back. A small Buddha and a piece of china were deliberately placed on the fender of a car whose windows were blown out as if to say that all was not lost.

We became conscious of the lack of sound from normal neighborhood activity. We could hear the repair work on the broken levee. Then, in the distance, we heard the repeated sound of nails driven through new shingles and new roofing studs and boards of a small apartment complex and then there came to us the innocent notes of chimes in the wind.



Note the NO BULLDOZING sign on the house of those expecting to return



I believed even when I spoke,
“My suffering is great.”
+ In my confusion I said,
“No one can be trusted.”
Ps. 116

We were blest to have Jim Marchionda, OP as presider for the Triduum Services. His preachings were powerful and touched us all very deeply.



or a leaning wall?" were made so present to us that at times our prayer together was overwhelming. (The scripture used in this document came from our common prayer during that week.)

For the services a wooden cross constructed from boards pulled from hurricane debris was placed in the chapel. The preaching fleshed out the Friday ritual of kissing the cross: "The cross is a symbol of torture and our kiss is the gentle response of nonviolence in the face of torture."

At the Last Supper liturgy we were asked to have our feet washed. It would have been much easier had we not been asked to turn our chairs to face the sisters in that community. Each had her own private suffering of loss, displacement and grief. The preaching was "Eucharist without service is not Eucharist."

We met in the motherhouse courtyard and prayerfully considered the effect of our individual experiences. Words were somewhat difficult for how does one describe a good-bad, poured out-filled up, painfully-wonderfully, life giving-life altering experience such as this?

As Dominicans often do, we went to the holy words of our common prayer. The psalms were prayed in new ways from the gut. "*O God, restore us!*" and "*How long will you pursue me, intending to break me down as if a sagging fence*

The Gospels led us through a torturous passion. We witnessed it in people who had lost everything and were showing symptoms of trauma. Yet it was the very same people who talked about being "blest" because possessions were not the meaningful gifts that last. Lasting gifts for them were family unity; neighbor helping neighbor; people in FEMA camps watching out for the most vulnerable; volunteers stepping in; non-profits reaching out with resources of support and aid; employers trying to do the right thing for their employees and local churches becoming information centers. There was a faith there that lifted them well beyond the horrific waters that hurricanes and undermined canals could ever pour out over them.

For us, to be welcomed to join in another's experience of loss was the highest form of gracious welcome. Surely the call to be a resurrection people is being borne out in both the volunteer efforts and the gracious acceptance and warm welcome of the people of the city of New Orleans.

"My house is gone, gone . . . but I'm blest because I was able to stay with two young men in my family. They're pre med students and I got to know those boys over the months. They helped me set up housekeeping in an apartment now on the other side of the river."

"We were so fortunate, our house is gone but the Sisters gave us a place to stay . . ."

"I still live with some kind of fear. The only thing I can do - the only thing anyone can do is hang on to our blessings because there's nothing else left."

Send forth your breath,
they are recreated
and the face of the earth
is renewed.
Ps. 104

We end with poetry by Mary and Jude respectively. Perhaps better than prose, the poems convey the emotion of what we saw and how we are still trying to make sense of it all.

New Orleans

Mary Donnelly, OP 2006

Silence

eerie

unnatural

too quiet

Destruction

death

dismay

despair

All is lost

*Piles of broken bricks and shattered dreams
 are all that remain.*

Where to begin?

Glimpses of hope in the midst of destruction

The pounding of a hammer

the voices of children

the tenacity of weeds

the beauty of a spring flower

all speak of the cycle of life, death, resurrection, and new life

*That is what I witnessed and felt and was graced with
during Holy Week 2006 . . .*

the passion, death and resurrection

enfleshed in the city and the people

of New Orleans.

New Orleans/Good Friday 2006

J. Bloch 2006

Her New Orleans

remains

a storm-tossed, remnant city

whose indigo tarps on rooftops

flap and clap;

whose drowned magnolias

bear anew –

“strange fruit”

Traumatic stress settles

against Southern foreheads like thorny crowns

for a boarded up,

stripped,

gutted

and marked people

who talk about being blest

(There is a 1-hour Powerpoint presentation of the New Orleans experience appropriate for small or large groups. Contact Barbara Hansen OP at 616-774-0843 or bhansen@grdominicans.org)