

Catholic Extension brings parishes together for recovery

WASHINGTON – Two years after Hurricane Katrina swept through the Gulf Coast, Catholic parishes are facing the lingering effects with some churches still holding Mass in outdoor tents while others are abandoning immediate plans to rebuild.

The Chicago-based Catholic Church Extension Society, which runs the Parish Partnership Program, has been aiding in the recovery of the region since September 2005.

The program links parishes in the Gulf Coast with others across the U.S. in a buddy system whereby donor parishes send funds and items to parishes in need. There are 317 donor parishes from 113 dioceses enrolled in the program.

“It’s hard to keep the awareness that these (Gulf Coast) dioceses are still struggling,” said Bridget Monahan, Catholic Extension’s director of special projects.

“The biggest goal of this program is to remind parishes to look outside themselves.”

Since September 2005, more than \$1 million has been donated and sent to parishes hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina. Monahan said that donations began to slow down only months after the hurricane, but said the need for continued support is still great.

Father Charles McMahon of St. Peter the Apostle Parish knows all too well about the continued need.

Nearly three feet of water swept through the parish convent and rectory in Pascagoula, Miss., when Katrina hit. The church was also damaged, he said, so for months Mass was held in a small tent; the school building was destroyed and along with it nearly 100 years of history. The parish will celebrate its centennial in December.

The parish is still in the process of rebuilding, he said in a phone interview with Catholic News Service Aug. 16.

Still, Father McMahon said the parish would not have made the progress it has without the help of the Parish Partnership Program. He said that St. Peter the Apostle has received thousands of dollars in aid from parishes across the country.

But money is not the only thing donated.

Parishes have sent clothes, gifts, Bibles and even manpower to help rebuild fellow

parishes.

St. Eleanor Parish in Collegeville, Pa., sent a carload of Christmas gifts to children in St. Thomas Parish in Long Beach, Miss.

"They (the children) didn't have toys," said Susan Gordon, stewardship coordinator at St. Eleanor. "Their toys were washed away."

St. Eleanor asked its parish partner what people needed and tried to accommodate those needs.

Gordon said her entire church helped raise funds and donate items. The pastor of St. Eleanor wanted to make a personal connection with the people of St. Thomas and arranged for parishioners to hand-deliver the gifts. Schoolchildren at St. Thomas had no idea they would be receiving Christmas gifts during class, so it was an unexpected surprise for them, Gordon said.

"The room went into an explosion of paper and excitement" as the gifts were unwrapped, Gordon said. "The children were just ecstatic."

Another goal of the Parish Partnership Program is to let parishes in the Gulf region know that they have not been forgotten.

"It's important for parishes to know other parishes across the country care for them," Monahan told CNS.

Despite the destruction that Katrina caused, residents see their journey in recovery as an inspiration.

"It's such an uplifting story from misery to blessing," said Bragg Moore, director of youth ministries in the Diocese of Biloxi, Miss. "I sit and marvel every day."

Moore said there is still plenty of recovery that needs to be done. The Biloxi Diocese lost 10 buildings during Katrina and hundreds more were damaged.

"Hurricane Katrina just went up the heart of Mississippi," he said, referring to how far inland the damage occurred.

Those involved with the Parish Partnership Program stress the need for continued support. And Monahan said that does not always mean sending checks.

"It doesn't have to be a financial commitment; it can be a spiritual commitment," she said.

Likewise, Father McMahon said it was easy for those outside the Gulf Coast region to forget about the hurricane, but "Katrina is not history here. We live it every day," he said.

Editor's Note: The Catholic Church Extension Society has launched a new Web site,

www.parishpartnership.org, for existing parish partners to communicate. It also enables other parishes to sign up for the program.