

Recovery Requires Help and Prayer

The Catholic Review

One of the things I appreciate and admire most about the generous people of this Archdiocese is their instinctive desire to help others, especially in times of crisis.

Over the course of the past several days, we have watched seemingly in helpless horror the images of suffering and destruction that have emerged from the Southern and Midwestern United States. The powerful and violent tornado that ravaged much of Joplin, Mo., was just the latest in a series of weather-related disasters that have befallen many communities in our nation this spring.

With characteristic empathy, the people of our Archdiocese once again have asked how they can help their suffering sisters and brothers, knowing full well that any aid they might offer cannot replace the lives lost and the homes destroyed. Nonetheless, they want to do something, anything to ease the suffering of others, strangers though they may be, if only temporarily.

Ever eager to serve as a conduit for providing that assistance, our parishes stand ready to do just that as special collections are taken up and poor box donations are re-directed to aid those who have lost everything. Donations to parishes in our Archdiocese will be amassed and forwarded to Catholic Charities USA, which has already begun serving the needs of those whose lives have been so suddenly and shockingly uprooted by the natural disasters that have taken place of late.

This is one of a stream of occasions in which our people have come forward to help others who are suffering.

How can any of us forget the television images from Haiti following the massive destruction left behind by a powerful earthquake there some 16 months ago?

Then, we relied on our partners at Catholic Relief Services to collect and deliver the aid given by parishioners with such generosity and compassion. I recently spoke to the president of CRS, Ken Hackett, who provided the following update on their work

in Haiti. Through CRS alone:

- 1 million people have received food assistance;
- 290,710 people have received emergency shelter;
- 5,466 transitional shelters have been built or partially built;
- 73,522 outpatient medical consultations have been conducted;
- 1,341 water and sanitation units have been installed;
- 1,049 separated children have been registered and are receiving care;
- 500,000 medical supplies have been distributed for cholera response;
- Over 10,000 people have been employed in cash-for-work programs to clear rubble, clean out drainage canals and build transitional shelters;
- Twice as many full-time CRS employees, approximately 600, are working on the ground in Haiti as were prior to the earthquake;
- Of the 600 employees, the vast majority, probably 95 percent, are Haitian.

The work is far from over, however. Dr. Rodrigue Mortel, a Catholic deacon of our Archdiocese who is also the director of our Missions Office and our Archdiocesan outreach efforts in Haiti, reports that the overall recovery effort has been “painfully slow at best” and that “the small progress noted in some areas is due mainly to the effort of non-governmental and charitable organizations like CRS.”

Dr. Mortel, a native Haitian with family still living there, estimates that less than 10 percent of debris has been removed (mostly by hand) and that most partially-collapsed buildings, including the national palace and most government buildings, are still standing. All schools in the capital of Port-au-Prince, he reports, are functioning, but classes are still held in courtyards under tents or hangars. The number of individuals living in the tent cities that sprung up from the devastation has grown considerably, he says, noting that “non-quake victims continue to migrate to these areas where various forms of assistance are provided.”

One of the major challenges for CRS and other organizations attempting to distribute aid for the rebuilding country has been the lack of government leadership in Haiti. There is hope that this will soon change, though, as a newly-elected president promises to bring the stability and honest leadership the long-suffering people of Haiti so desperately need and deserve.

Though the lives of nearly everyone in Haiti have been upended, one thing that hasn't been shaken is the faith of the Haitian people. Collapsed churches - including their cathedral - have not been rebuilt, yet the number of Masses and those attending remains the same as before the earthquake.

In Haiti, as in the case of Joplin and all other tragedies, financial assistance is needed to rebuild homes and towns, but prayer is needed to rebuild lives, to restore hope and to solidify faith.

In a telegram last week to Bishop James Vann Johnston of Springfield-Cape Girardeau in Missouri, Pope Benedict XVI, through Cardinal Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, wrote that the Holy Father has "followed with deep concern the aftermath of the catastrophic tornado which struck Joplin ... and he asks you to convey to the entire community the assurance of his closeness in prayer. Conscious of the tragic loss of life and the immensity of the work of rebuilding ... he asks God, the Father of Mercies, to grant eternal rest to the departed, consolation to the grieving, and strength and hope to the homeless and the injured."

To assist with disaster relief efforts in the South and Midwest, contribute to collections in the parishes of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, or visit www.catholiccharitiesusa.org