

A Milestone Anniversary

We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. We celebrate graduations and first steps. We celebrate first pay check and retirement. So, why not celebrate the anniversary of a disaster.

On August 29, 2010, we will celebrate the fifth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Maybe some wish to forget it because they were condemned by it. Others may wish to remember it as a milestone of achievement.

I arrived at Our Lady of the Gulf parish in Bay St. Louis in August 1972 – my first assignment. In visiting people's homes at the time, I was struck by how freely they talked about a recent hurricane, Camille, that struck the area on August 19, 1969. Embedded in my consciousness, was the novel way people marked the destructive force of Camille. I heard phrases like "BC" and "AC" I found out they had nothing to do with a Christian context or air conditioning. Rather, they stood for "Before Camille" and "After Camille."

On August 29, 2005, the sign outside Our Lady of the Gulf Church read: "Sometimes, you have to lose everything in order to do anything." Was it providential, accidental or prophetic? I am always amazed at the irony of how, months earlier, it was scripted for Hurricane Katrina.

Prior to leaving my former parish for Bay St. Louis in September 2000, a parishioner there, with the gift of discernment, told me that "the Lord will stretch you." For five years, I struggled with the meaning and implications of such a challenge. I found out its true meaning and impact following Hurricane Katrina.

The vestiges of Katrina still remain – the unfinished roads; the blighted countryside, the empty, overgrown lots, the contorted trees; the untouched, petrified monumental homes; the scattered exiles in newer and unfamiliar surroundings.

Beneath the surface, a more insidious trauma lurked. A sense of helplessness and paralysis set in; a sense of indecision took over; a sense of defeat threatened; a sense of vulnerability visited. Men cried inside and women talked freely.

Some began to talk in the past tense. "I used to have..." others mourned their losses and healed. Rebuilt houses replaced memory-laden homes with hopes of being homes again. Updates, upgrades changed complexions and a way of life. All were changed, utterly changed; new persons were born.

What have we discovered about ourselves? We discovered how fragile life can be and how we need to handle it with care, concern and love. We discovered that the treasures that really matter are people, not things. We discovered that snapshots of our past are locked deep in our memory rather than in photo albums. We discovered that it is more important to be surrounded by people, not by things. We discovered strangers who became friends; that we are islands of people often brought together through pain rather than through success or achievement. We discovered the inherent goodness of people who are more willing to lend you a shoulder, a hand, a tear and a heart. We discovered that there are people who are willing to mend hearts as well as homes. We discovered deep within ourselves gifts untapped, opportunities unknown and strengths unbridled. We discovered that the power of resilience is much greater than the power of water. We discovered a God who can bring us to our knees in order to teach us his mastery, wisdom and plan. From a faith perspective, we discovered that it was necessary to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust nor hurricane can destroy and where thieves cannot break in and steal.

In the quiet of the evening, God will walk with us on our Emmaus road of recovery, listening to our heartaches as he shows us that lives blessed, broken and offered can be transformed into resurrected hope.

On August 29, 2010, the electronic sign outside Our Lady of the Gulf Church will once again reflect the same message as it did five years ago. This time, rather than being providential or prophetic, it may be a sign of realistic hope, lessons learned and providential care; not just another milestone anniversary.