

Traveling Companion: Where are the Catholic volunteers?

Fr. Michael Tracey

A group of Methodist volunteers stopped by a few weeks ago. They were also helping at the local Methodist Church. Mary introduced herself as Catholic from California. She had left California a week earlier, hoping to find some Catholic group to do volunteer work in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She called the national Catholic Charities office and asked about volunteering and was told, "We are not taking volunteers. We are only taking money." Undaunted by the response, she contacted the local Methodist Church and was put in contact immediately with a Methodist group working in the Bay St. Louis area. She was totally dismayed at the lack of cooperation and response from the Catholic Church as far as volunteers were concerned.

In recent weeks, I have heard and seen the same scenario played out hundreds of times. My parishioners have asked hundreds of times: "Where are the Catholic volunteers?" They indicate that there seems to be no groups of Catholic volunteers working in the area. They remind me that they have depended on Baptist, Methodist, Mormon, Pentecostal, Presbyterian and other denominations to single-handedly clean out their homes. They also remind me that the presence of non-Catholic groups working in the area is obvious. Their disaster relief conveys are everywhere. Their feeding stations are dotted around the place. Their supply and staging centers are very noticeable and prominent.

Many of our parishioners have experienced a group called "Samaritans Purse." The group, under the auspices of Franklin Graham, son of the famous Billy Graham; mucked out houses, took out sheetrock and disinfect them. They were even conscious of people's possessions and memories. They walked with children through the debris and allowed them to talk about their experiences and help begin the healing process for them.

My parishioners still ask: "Where are the Catholic volunteers?" I do not have an answer for them. In fact, the absence of identifiable Catholic volunteers is obvious to the people suffering most from the hurricane.

Yesterday, a young woman who is very active in the church and school stopped by to chat with me. She shared her frustration with the national Catholic Charities organization where she had been continually stonewalled in any efforts to enlist help. They finally sent her a "Needs Assessment and Work Request Form." She commented that it was too late and wondered where the organization was earlier when the needs were obvious. She also mentioned that other church groups didn't send forms for people to fill out. Instead, they sent teams of people who actually cleaned out people's homes of the mud, mold, sheetrock and debris.

This morning, I noticed a Baptist Disaster Team from Tampa, Florida, pass by as I was doing my car line duty at our elementary school. I thought it was rather ironic.

I think about the volunteers who are helping our parish clean up and help us in the rebuilding process. Individual parishes in Wisconsin, Georgia and Mississippi send volunteers to help us. We initiated the contacts ourselves. But we have had large groups from non-Catholic churches and universities in various places arrive with heavy equipment to help us with the cleanup process.

Catholic Charities gave 3 million dollars to our diocese which is wonderful. Obviously, it is an indication of the generosity of people around the country.

At a time of disaster, such as Hurricane Katrina, visibility and action are not only a priority but a necessity. The greatest witness is for church volunteers to be working at the grassroots, immersed in the lives and struggles of the people most affected. From a grassroots perspective, people will continue to ask and wonder: "Where are the Catholic volunteers?"