

Diocesan relief team seeks needs input after Rita

HACKBERRY -- Members of the Diocesan Relief and Recovery Team met with parishioners of St. Peter the Apostle Church Tuesday in the continuing program of the Diocese of Lake Charles to assist people affected by Hurricane Rita in Southwest Louisiana.

The meeting was held in the Parish Hall of St. Peter the Apostle Church, which is now being used for a myriad of events, including daily and Sunday Mass until the church building can be repaired. The Diocesan Relief and Recovery Team, appointed by Msgr. Harry D. Greig, Diocesan Administrator, includes Msgr. Greig,

Rev. Henry Mancuso, Deacon George Stearns, Deacon Ed Lavine, Sandy Gay, Kyra Randall and Morris LeBleu. Father Mancuso, who serves as the chairman of the group, led the meeting and introduced Team members in attendance as well as Rose Graham from the Diocese of Erie, Pa. and Jose Sanchez of Camden, New Jersey who are in the diocese through the auspices of Catholic Charities U.S.A. to assist in setting up the program to provide aid.

In his opening remarks Father Mancuso said, "All of us when we hear the words, waiting, anticipation, expectation come with a different

sense than we have ever had before. We have heard priests and preachers and other people tell us before that this is a time to wait, to prepare, to get ready, to expect. With the experiences of last three to four months, we know waiting like we have never known waiting before. We know expectation like we have never known it before and in a real sense we know disappointment like we have never known it before.

"We come here tonight not only as people in Advent but we come as Catholic Christians, as an Easter people to proclaim over and over that Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

And, we say over and over that the Paschal mystery - the death and resurrection of Jesus - isn't just for Easter but it's for all of life. Again, more than ever, if we don't put what we are doing right now in a context of faith we will lose faith, we will lose our balance, we will lose ourself and we can't lose our hope.

"That's what it is all about. We die and we rise. We let go of and we take up again. The death and the resurrection of Jesus tells us that no matter how many times we go down, it is possible to get back up. And, no matter how many times it is dark, the sun is going to rise again. It is in faith that we do what we do."

The session was used to elicit immediate, short term, and long term needs of the communities in the western portion of lower Cameron Parish. Church communities affected by the storm along with St. Peter the Apostle, were the missions in Holly Beach (Holy Trinity, destroyed) and Johnson Bayou (Our Lady of the Assumption, badly damaged but repairable).

Father Mancuso noted that the Catholic Church has been on the ground since Rita first hit trying to put things back together. "Msgr. Greig and I rode out the storm with members of the Lake Charles and Westlake fire departments," Father Mancuso said. "We were among the first back into the city after the storm passed. Priests and others have been on the ground since then,

trying to put things back together.

"In the early days after the storm hit someone told me that if an emergency lasts five days, the relief effort will usually last 50 days and the recovery will last 500 days." Father Mancuso continued. "As I heard that, I said that's not true. They don't know us people here in Southwest Louisiana. We are going to bounce back a lot quicker than that.

"But as time has passed, I have begun to say, those people know what they are talking about, it is going to take 500 days. It's going to take more than a year to create a new 'normal'. The old normal doesn't exist anymore"

The Diocese has been informed of major funding coming from a grant from Catholic Charities U.S.A. to aid in recovery efforts here in Southwest Louisiana. "Those funds are now coming to us," Father Mancuso said. "We are beginning the process to assess what your needs are - you telling us your needs and we developing the process to take care of those needs. This is what we are beginning to address tonight, the long-term recovery - responding to the needs that have not yet been met. Our Catholic Church has been offered support - financial assistance, building materials, food and medical care - and now we are beginning to say what do we need to do for the next 18 months."

"We are at the time where local church agencies come forward. After groups like

the Red Cross and the Salvation Army and relief teams of various denominations, who are the first responders who have come in immediately after a storm to make sure there is food, there is water, there is immediate medical care leave, it is the time where local agencies come forward."

According to Father Mancuso, the program must be a "good faith operation." "Deacon Stearns keeps us on task in that area - by saying that we don't want it to become more difficult for people."

Those in attendance were asked to complete a form providing personal information as well as an assessment of current needs, short term needs, and long term needs. Fr. Mancuso asked that the people also take back forms to those who were unable to make the meeting and others who those in attendance knew had unmet needs, so that a more firm idea of the overall scope of need in the communities - Catholic as well as those of other faith traditions.

Fr. Mancuso noted that once the needs of the people have been fully determined, a center will be established in Hackberry, along with similar centers in the Sweetlake area (near St. Patrick Chapel) and in Lake Charles where those in need can come to receive direct assistance. "It will be out of those three centers that we will operate," Father Mancuso said.



Sandy Gay, standing, along with Fr. Henry Mancuso, seated left, listen to suggestions from the crowd attending the Tuesday night meeting at St. Peter the Apostle Church in Hackberry. The Diocesan Relief and Recovery Team is doing a needs assessment of the areas in Cameron Parish devastated by Hurricane Rita.

"So What's the Good News?"

By Rev. Whitney Miller, Ph.D., LPC

As friends and family sat around chatting after our Thanksgiving meal this year, we playfully started a "round robin" of the bad news/ good news game. Each person would call to mind some sort of "bad news" which might have unfolded in his/her life over the past few weeks or months, and then, jokingly look for the good news hidden even there. This activity got downright ridiculous, but it did manage to get us laughing at ourselves. Something many of us needed to do.

As we did so, I was reminded of the story of the little boy who was selected to be an angel for the Christmas play at his school. Of course, he was told that, at the proper time, he would need to say his one line to the bathrobed shepherds, "Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy!"

The young boy was not so sure exactly what glad tidings meant, and so he asked the teacher. She said, "It means good news!" And so, as can be expected at these nativity pageants, when it came time for the angel's big announcement, he smiled like a shining star of the heavens above and shouted, "Hey, everybody! Have I got good news for you!"

Into the barren landscape of our post-Rita hurting hearts, the angels still announce to us this heavenly message to ears open enough to hear, "Hey, everybody! Have I got good news for you!" A word of angelic encouragement many of us, especially this year, need to hear.

Loss is all around us. The life that many

of us knew before this 2005 hurricane season will never be the same again. Much has been taken away, it is true. But into the midst of the emptiness of all that is gone, newness can still be seen blossoming. As seldom experienced before in many of our lives, we recognize the goodness of still having each other, the solidarity that is born when good folks share hard times, and the eternal comfort that through it all, we have got God, and this God has got us all in the palm of a heavenly hand, larger and bigger and broader than any hurricane can muster or imagine.

These "holy days" of the holidays between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day are also suppose to be "happy days." Our eyes are flooded with media images of twinkling lights, dancing children, laughing faces around a Christmas tree where "all is calm and all is bright." But these days are also "hard days" for many folks who struggle with sadness, loss and loneliness. Often these feelings are intensified by watching such glittering advertisements and alluring commercials. "There must be something wrong with me," some folks sense, "all of this happiness in the air and I feel so blah!"

The good news in the midst of such honest bad news is Emmanuel, "God-is-with-us!" No matter what we are feeling, in whatever condition we find ourselves living, in devastation and in delight, God is with us. As the evergreen branch of the Advent wreath would remind us, hope springs eternal. "Hey everybody, have I got good news for you!"



Deacon Ed Lavine and parishioners from Our Lady Star of the Sea in Cameron load quilts for Hurricane Rita victims who have relocated in the Grand Lake area.

Disaster relief and recovery efforts continue in Diocese

The Monday after Hurricane Rita made landfall in Southwest Louisiana, Deacon Ed Lavine, director of Catholic Social Services for the Diocese of Lake Charles traveled to the Diocese of Shreveport Catholic Center and met with Bishop William Friend and Deacon Clary Nash, the director of the Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Shreveport.

Bishop Friend gave Deacon Lavine permission to use an office and phone to check on the conditions to be found in Lake Charles. Unable to make contact with Monsignor Harry D. Greig, the Administrator of the Diocese, Deacon Lavine called the Diocese of Lafayette and was informed that Msgr. Greig was in Lake Charles. Deacon Lavine left Shreveport and returned to Lake Charles to secure the Catholic Service Center, which had been badly damaged during the storm, and to offer help to the northern outlying parishes that had become evacuation centers during Hurricane Rita.

Deacon Lavine brought supplies and financial support to St. Joseph Church, DeRidder; St. Joan of Arc Church, Oberlin; and Sacred Heart Church, Oakdale, which was not an evacuation center but was host to over three hundred people for supper meals.

Through the diocesan connection with the Presbyterian outlet in the Thibodaux, a tractor-trailer of food and water was sent to the Vinton Red Cross Shelter. Deacon Lavine had secured a warehouse to assist Hurricane Katrina victims, offering and distributing food and other supplies to area churches. The Glad Tidings Church parking lot in Lake Charles was used as a distribution point. The churches receiving supplies included First Baptist Church of Maplewood, New Covenant Faith Baptist Church, Greater St. Mary Baptist Church, Messiah Baptist Church, Eastwood Pentecostal Church of Lake Charles, and the First United Methodist Church of Lake Charles helped to distribute bibles and supplies.

The tractor trailer had food, clothing, shoes, and other supplies needed by the Katrina victims staying in Lake Charles. Once distribution of these Hurricane Katrina supplies was completed, Deacon Lavine received permission from a local warehouse owner, Lincoln Richardson, to store the remaining food, water, and clothing in the L & M Traffic Warehouse.

Afterward, Deacon Lavine began ordering supplies from his contacts to have an ample supply of goods to dis-

tribute. Following the interruption by Hurricane Rita's appearance, Deacon Lavine continued to order food and supplies for Hurricane Katrina and Rita victims and churches that needed supplies. Deacon Lavine also field inspected the Vinton and Starks area as well as Creole, Cameron, Grand Lake, and Hackberry area to determine the needs of the people.

A tractor trailer went to the Grand Lake Community Center and food and supplies was distributed to Christ's Vineyard Church on the Gulf Highway. Other churches, such as Our Lady Queen of Heaven and Christ the King, picked up food and supplies from the warehouse. Dr. Lynn Foret and other volunteers used three utility vehicles, two pick up trucks, and a trailer to bring clothing and school supplies to Grand Lake High School.

The Catholic Service Center has been relocated to 416 Iris Street at the Catholic Deaf Center.

The Diocese through the Catholic Service Center continues to support the local community with relief supplies to Calcasieu Parish Schools, Friendships, Greater St. Mary Baptist Church, First Presbyterian Church in Lake Charles, Faith Hope Sanctified Church, Oak Park Food Pantry, and the surrounding Catholic parishes of the Diocese of Lake Charles.



Deacon Ed Lavine, right, checks a bill of lading to verify the pallet of goods delivered by Second Harvest to aid community organizations who are assisting individuals affected by Hurricane Rita.