

J/P Alert

CONFERENCE OF MAJOR SUPERIORS OF MEN *JUSTICE AND PEACE OFFICE*

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Hurricane Katrina

As this is written, it is nearly two weeks since Hurricane Katrina roared ashore just east of New Orleans, causing unimaginable devastation both to the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts and the lives of the people who called that area of the country home. The aftermath of the storm has horrified even hardened disaster responders and called into question our ability as a nation to cope with such massive dislocations of our civic life.

The destruction and suffering caused by the storm has led to outpourings of compassion across the country, with offers of long and short-term shelter, school placement, medical supplies and services of all kinds from doctors to teachers to fire fighters. Religious orders have been in the forefront of these responses, even as many of their own members have been impacted by the storm and its subsequent social and personal trauma.

A time for reflection, outrage, and action

Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, of course, and there is nothing anyone could have done to prevent it. The consequences of the storm, however, are quite another matter. It is important to

reflect, in the light of the Gospel's call to love especially those who must live in poverty and want, how different those consequences were for those with resources from those without.

There has been no shortage of commentary in the press about the inadequate response of the federal government to the disaster. But there are broader questions that have to be raised. In times of natural calamity, it is always those who are poor and marginalized who suffer the most. The reasons are not far to seek: poverty brings with it consequences like inadequate shelter, poor public services, and vulnerability to the manipulation of the organs of government to serve the well-off at the expense of the poor. People who are poor have no access to the levers of political power, and as a result they are pushed to the edges of society until they become invisible.

The following is a quote from "In Tale of Two Families, a Chasm Between Haves and Have-Nots," by Jody Wilgoran in the September 5th *New York Times*:

John Edwards, the former senator whose presidential primary campaign last year was based on the theme that America is a country torn in two by race and class, sent an e-mail to supporters last week, saying that the

hurricane's destruction exposed "a harsher example of two Americas."

"Every single resident of New Orleans, regardless of their wealth or status, will have terrible losses and life-altering experiences," Mr. Edwards wrote. But poor people, he added, "suffered the most from Katrina because they always suffer the most."

Examples from recent history are not far to seek. During the devastating earthquakes in El Salvador in 2002, whole neighborhoods in poor areas were buried under landslides because the developers of luxury houses along the ridgelines had deforested the hillsides so those who lived in the affluent ridgeline communities could have an unobstructed view. During the tsunami last winter, there were no warning buoys in place to warn of the impending disaster. Examples like this could be multiplied: the New Orleans hurricane is only the latest in a long line of "natural" disasters, the consequences of which are in no small part the result of human decisions and human greed.

The divide in American society revealed by the Katrina phenomenon is not a result of the storm: it has existed for decades, and not just in New Orleans. The following is from Education for Justice <<http://www.educationforjustice.org>> :

- The poverty rate for the city of New Orleans is an astounding 27.9%, as reported by the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau.
- Poor people live in homes which are not as sturdy, stable and safe as others. Many homes of the poor in New Orleans were old, one story wooden structures.

The places where those in poverty live are often the most vulnerable, overcrowded and the first to flood.

- It is much more difficult for the poor to evacuate. Many don't have cars. They cannot afford to get train or plane tickets for their families and they have no place to go.
- Low income people are least likely to have insurance to rebuild. They often have no savings for emergencies. When jobs are lost in disasters,

their jobs are often the first to go.

- Poor people can become emotionally dysfunctional because of constant crises, no hope and little resources to deal with living on the edge and post-traumatic stress.

To this we might add that, unlike members of the middle-class, people who are poor do not have credit cards or bank accounts, making it impossible for them to stay in hotels or rent transportation.

It has not been lost on commentators that the majority of the worst-affected victims of the storm were people of color. Gary Younge writes in the September 5th *Guardian*:

The fact that the vast majority of those who remained in town were black was not an accident. Katrina did not go out of its way to affect black people. It destroyed almost everything in its path. But the poor were disproportionately affected because they were least able to escape its path and to endure its wrath....

Nature does not discriminate, but people do. For reasons that are particularly resonant in the south, where this year African-Americans celebrated the 40th anniversary of legislation protecting their right to vote, black people are disproportionately represented among the poor. Two-thirds of New Orleans is African-American, a quarter of whom live in poverty.

Both the 1971 Synod of Bishops and Pope John Paul II have called for a "preferential option for the poor." Hurricane Katrina presents us with an existential challenge to make that option a reality in our lives. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, SJ, Superior General of the Jesuits, says that the option for the poor results in their humanization and personalization. He says, "the option for the poor is above all a relationship, an alliance, a casting of one's lot with them." Allowing a black-poor/affluent-white divide to remain in our society is an affront to God. As long as it exists, it is evident on which side of the divide religious need to be.

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