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Minneapolis to Mississippi, thoughts, prayers - and politics

Michael Humphrey | Sep. 1, 2008

St. Paul, Minn.

Prayers of the Faithful during 5 p.m. Mass at the Cathedral of Saint Paul took on a somber addendum that resonated throughout the host city of the 2008 Republican National Convention.

St. Paul and Minneapolis Archbishop John C. Nienstedt saved his last prayer for the people of the Gulf Coast, now staring down the eye of Hurricane Gustav, praying that they avoid, ?the experience of the terrible natural disaster just three years ago.?

What was supposed to be one Mississippi River town?s big week has been usurped by the frightening hurricane bearing down on another river city, some 1224 miles away. And it is clear that Hurricane Katrina?s devastation of New Orleans, and much of the northern Gulf Coast, was still fresh on everyone?s mind.

Two hours before the near-capacity Mass, just blocks away, Republican presidential nominee John McCain appeared on large screen television in the XCel Center Press Conference Room to announce that all non-essential convention agenda items were cancelled for Monday. And the rest of the convention would be planned day-by-day, based on how severely Gustav ravaged Louisiana, Texas, Mississippi and Alabama.

McCain also took the opportunity to predict where weakness might arise in response to another major Hurricane hitting the Gulf Coast.

?Search and rescues capabilities still aren?t the levels we?d like to see them and communications among first-reponders are not quite at the level we would seek,? McCain. ?But I can also tell you that the level of cooperation ? is excellent. And I have every expectation that we will not see mistakes of Katrina. As (Mississippi) Gov. Haley Barbour said, we need to pray for the best and prepare for the worst.?

McCain also used the time to make it clear that he was ceding floor time, a day that would have been all about attacking his opponent Barack Obama, for the greater good.

?Of course this is a time when we have to do away with our party politics,? McCain says. ?We have to join the 300 million other Americans on behalf of our fellow citizens. It?s a time for action.?

Needless to say, McCain had no choice. But equally true is he had not missed the key lesson of Katrina ? never seem indifferent to the plight of the least fortunate.

Three years and three days ago, a storm began that wrought over 1,800 deaths, over $81 billion in destruction and countless weeks of outrage for the inept and frequently flippant response from all levels of government. Ironically, the primary student in that harsh political lesson, President Bush, was set to speak tonight to the RNC delegates. He cancelled his trip to St. Paul in order to be prepare for the response to Gustav. When Katrina hit, Bush was at his ranch in Crawford, Tex.

At a conference last spring, Rev. Bryan Massingale, professor of social ethics at Marquette University, said, ?Katrina revealed, as no other recent event, the tragic confluence of racism and poverty present in our nation's cities -- a poverty and racism exacerbated by decades of social callousness and public neglect.?

As McCain courts the moderate Catholic vote, along with other faith-based movements that are blending some socially conservative positions with activism for the poor, he simply could not afford to miss on this one.

The McCain campaign flew delegates home to be with their family and retrieve whatever belongings they could. They have also started planning fundraisers for potential victims if Gustav strikes.

?We?re trying to be sensitive to human need,? says U.S. Rep Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ). ?It?s appropriate, given the catastrophic nature of Gustav.?

Whether it proves to be a plus or minus, politically, won?t be clear. Neither Smith, nor McCain?s campaign manager Rick Davis, wanted to address that issue.
But you can bet that Nienstedt?s prayer resonated with the McCain campaign for more reasons than one.

?We hope and pray that conditions in the Gulf don?t deteriorate and that there is minimal loss of property and life,? said Davis, ?and hopefully we can restore some of the activities in our convention program.?

One hour before McCain spoke to the convention press corps, peace protestors wound up a march and considered the implications of Gustav, both as an imminent human tragedy and as an omen for the party that was in power when Katrina hit.

?Our hearts go out to the people there, but that storm could turn the convention in a fundraiser,? says Will Thomas, who flew in from New Hampshire to march in a series of protests of the current administration?s views of militarism and poverty. ?But what about three years ago? Where were they then??

(Humphery is a freelance writer who is covering the Republican Party Convention for NCR.*)*

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