

Catholic Charities: Spill 'worse than hurricanes'

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Father Mike Tran, pastor of Our Lady of the Isle Church in Grand Isle, La., and Rob Gorman, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, La., are shown surveying the contaminated beach in Grand Isle June 18. (CNS photo)

WASHINGTON

The ultimate tally of the devastation wrought by the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in April could be "worse than hurricanes," said the director of Catholic Charities for the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, La.

"The level of anxiety is incredibly high," said Rob Gorman, who has been with Catholic Charities since 1982 and married the daughter of a French-speaking bayou fisherman. "If you're a trawler, you don't know if you're going to be able to trawl this year, or if you're going to be able to trawl next year, or the year after that, or the year after that."

The same, Gorman said, applies to fishermen, crabbers and shrimpers.

While "we all get very anxious at the start of hurricane season," he said, "folk here are adept at recovering from hurricane damage" since they know what to expect should a hurricane come. If hit, "we start rebuilding and recovering," he added. "It's all very predictable."

It's not knowing the extent of the continuing crisis in the Gulf of Mexico that is ratcheting up anxiety in southern Louisiana, Gorman said during a June 23 conference call with reporters arranged by the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change.

The millions of gallons spilled into the Gulf linger in the water as "not one solid blob (but), hundreds of thousands of little, smaller blobs (which) when gathered together can go in any direction," Gorman said. "If they start sneaking under the booms we've tried to set up," he added, "it's worse in the sense that we just haven't a clue how this is going to play out."

Gorman cited an unnamed professor at Loyola University in New Orleans who told him the spill "is going to have ripple effects all throughout the country. ... If you don't have plankton, you don't have a little fish called the menhaden. The biggest port for landing that fish is in our diocese. Menhaden is a hugely important fish for us particularly. If you don't have menhaden, you don't have chicken feed. And if you don't have chicken feed,

you've got a crisis for the chicken growers."

It is the unknowns that are gnawing at Gorman.

Would a hurricane help or hurt matters? "It's still being batted around (by scientists). They just don't know," he answered. "I think there's growing concern on the part of Louisiana scientists that even a tropical depression will kick up this oil from the surface of the water and from underneath the water and deposit it inland. But really they just don't know. ... It's never happened before."

Hurricane Katrina, which battered New Orleans and other areas in the Gulf five years ago, "was the costliest natural disaster in U.S. history," Gorman said, "and now we've got this oil spill, which is the costliest man-made disaster in US history."

Gorman did not give specifics on how Catholic Charities is helping those in the Houma-Thibodaux Diocese get through the spill, but he spoke of the spill's human costs as well.

"Drilling mud -- that's a misnomer. It's a toxic lubricant," Gorman declared. "It's a mixture of heavy metals and volatile organic compounds; that drilling mud is just very dangerous stuff."

Add to that the oil and the chemical dispersant and "we have this toxic soup in the Gulf. And the folks from Alaska are saying, 'Do not take these health concerns lightly.' And the respirators are good for only 24 hours," Gorman said.

Alaska's Prince William Sound was the site of the Exxon Valdez oil tanker mishap in 1989, which likewise spilled millions of gallons of crude oil into the water.

"The other thing they told us is to look for a spike in mental health concerns," among them depression and suicide, as "folks have a growing sense of anxiety," Gorman said. "These mental health issues are going to become much more prevalent."

The apparent June 16 suicide of an Alabama charter fisherman who was hired by BP, the oil company whose rig exploded in April, for cleanup work may be indicative of the troubles ahead.

"There are very few people with respirators out there. They wear boots and gloves and in some cases protective goggles and in some cases protective suits, but it's just so hot out there," Gorman said. "The people from Alaska say you're really putting yourselves at risk" by not wearing the protective gear, he added.

Gorman said there are 1,100 crabbers, 232 seafood dealers, 375 seafood transporters and 135 recreational charter fishermen in the two-and-a-half-county (called "parish" in Louisiana) diocese.

"The spill has hit primarily our diocese and the Archdiocese of New Orleans," Gorman said. "It's spreading to Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and it may well get to Texas. There are people who lost jobs from the spill, but now from the moratorium on drilling.

"The (Louisiana) governor's office is saying when all this is said and done, we could lose 1,200 jobs permanently," he continued, "but in the short term we've got 8,000 guys in offshore drilling who are out of work. Caterers and other guys, that brings it up to 40,000.

"Some estimates range to 75,000 jobs, and that's just the moratorium," he said. "We support 140,000 restaurant workers, and then again you've got all the attendant industries that will be impacted. And it's not just us."

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