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Q & A: Catholic Charities in New Orleans

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we are looking at the distinctiveness of Catholic charitable activity. This topic was suggested by two facts, the release of the USCCB report on the CCHD, about which I wrote yesterday, and by the news that Catholic Charities was one of the few charities in the U.S. that saw contributions increase last year.

Today, we hear from Jim Kelly and Gordon Wadge, co-presidents of Catholic Charities in New Orleans. That city was still recovering from the failure of the levees after Hurricane Katrina when its economy took another hit this year from the Gulf oil spill. Readers are encouraged to visit their website and make a contribution.

The question: What is most distinctive about Catholic charitable work?

Jim Kelly & Gordon Wadge: Our lived experience has been that Catholic charitable work has the ability to move swiftly, when government moves at a slow and deliberate pace. We are also able to provide more than clothing, food and sustenance. We follow Jesus' example and words in the Gospel ? we empower people to take care of themselves through pastoral ministry and ministry of service. Through pastoral care, we provide emotional support that lets the recipient know that we act out of love. We did it after Hurricane Katrina, and again after Rita and Gustave. We did it yet again after the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

In 2005, the entire Archdiocese of New Orleans was crippled by the flooding caused by the failure of the federal levees after Hurricane Katrina. All services were disrupted. Nearly every one of Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans 1000 employees became hurricane victims. Our staff was scattered across the country. Just days after the storm, a small core gathered in Baton Rouge with then-Archbishop Alfred Hughes. Our entire focus was on human need and human services. Archbishop Hughes instructed that the care of God's people came first and foremost in recovery and response.

We all saw and experienced the glacial pace of government response. Church response was immediate. The displaced were fed, clothed, counseled and comforted. Catholic Charities? began the long-term work of gutting and repairing homes by October of 2005, when sections of the city were still shut off to the general public. The work continues to this day, thanks to an army of volunteers from across the globe, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

The lessons we learned through Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Gustave served us well when tragedy struck in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010. Catholic Charities and the Archdiocese of New Orleans moved quickly to establish relief programs for fishermen in our Archdiocese who were out of work because of the oil spill.

There is a place for government response in disasters. We cannot build levees or clean the oceans of spilled oil. But we can help those in need and we can do it from the heart. Recently, Archbishop Gregory Aymond said to a group of Catholic Charities volunteers, "Why do we do the work we do? Because God told us to."

Our mandate to serve comes from the ultimate authority, Our Lord and Savior. And that is our true distinction.

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