



## Department of Social Development and World Peace

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October 19, 2005

United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The waters of Katrina and Rita have receded, leaving our country and the Congress to face the urgent and enormous national task of recovery and rebuilding. How we meet this challenge will be a test and an important sign of what kind of a nation we are and wish to be.

The Catholic community is both a victim of the destructive power of the hurricanes and active in providing emergency response and continuing assistance. Our dioceses and parishes in the Gulf Coast are overwhelmed by the destruction of churches, schools, and other facilities that house and support our ministries to the sick, the poor, and the vulnerable. These same dioceses and parishes, along with Catholic Charities agencies and Catholic healthcare facilities, have joined with other government and charitable agencies to bring assistance in the form of medical care, food, water, temporary shelter, and social services to the many whose lives have been upended and overwhelmed by Katrina. But the efforts of those motivated by compassion and charity in responding to the hurricanes' devastation, while essential, cannot take the place of a strong federal commitment to just public policies and wise public investment. Government must play an essential role in assuring that the basic needs of all American people, including these affected by the hurricanes, are met.

As you make funding decisions and policy choices in rebuilding the Gulf Coast at this important time, we wish to emphasize several fundamental points based on a recent statement of the bishops' Administrative Committee:

1. The needs of the poor and most vulnerable must have first claim on our common efforts. The poor and vulnerable cannot be left behind again. Each step of the way, the response to this disaster and plans for future recovery must be judged by how they touch the lives of "the least among us." (Mt. 25)
2. Our nation cannot assist the victims of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita by reducing essential help for the poor and vulnerable elsewhere in our nation. The costs of recovery should not be borne disproportionately by those most in need. It would be wrong to cut essential food, housing and health care for the poor while the rest of us make no real sacrifice and, in fact, benefit from recent tax cuts. We call upon you to make a commitment that the needs of hurricane victims will be readily met, through benefits such as food stamps, Medicaid and housing, without harming or taking benefits from other poor and vulnerable people who depend on them as well. We will oppose any effort to pay for the costs of Katrina and Rita

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by cutting services in essential programs that serve the basic needs of low-income or vulnerable people.

3. Those most affected should have a meaningful role in the decisions being made about their families and their homes, and clear and effective ways to participate in recovery and rebuilding. Planning for the future must include those with the most at stake. For example, the work to be done in rebuilding should offer decent jobs at decent wages for those who have lost work and opportunity.
4. Our nation has many responsibilities and priorities at home and abroad. Our country is a nation at war, it faces large deficits, and now must rebuild after the worst natural disaster to hit us. To meet these demands, spending and tax policies, existing or proposed, must be reviewed in light of our shared obligation to the most vulnerable, wherever they are. Adequate federal resources must be available to help protect the life and dignity of all our sisters and brothers. The burdens and costs of these challenges must be shared widely and fairly.

(The full statement of the Administrative Committee is enclosed for your information.)

In addition, while we are rebuilding our own communities we must maintain our commitment to providing essential assistance to those suffering deprivation and destruction in other countries. When observers note in amazement that the Gulf Coast looked "like a Third World country," we are challenged to remember how most of the world lives and called to solidarity with those outside our national borders, as well. Finally, we are also deeply concerned about sweeping efforts to ignore or set aside federal wage, environmental and civil rights protections.

We hope Congress can put aside differences and work in a bipartisan spirit of mutual commitment to the common good, to plan for the rebuilding of healthy, thriving communities in a revitalized Gulf Coast. The human loss and ongoing costs of these horrible storms have touched us all. Our common response and our care for the most affected and the most vulnerable will test us all.

Be assured you have our ongoing help and prayers as you face the responsibility before you.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend Joseph A. Fiorenza  
Archbishop of Galveston-Houston  
Chairman, Hurricane Relief Task Force



Most Reverend Nicholas DiMarzio, Ph.D., D.D.  
Bishop of Brooklyn  
Chairman, Domestic Policy Committee

**Hurricane Katrina:  
Reaching Out, Renewal and Recovery  
in Faith and Solidarity**

**A Statement of the Administrative Committee  
of the  
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**

**September 14, 2005  
The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross**

A terrible storm and its horrible aftermath have destroyed lives and homes, torn apart families and communities, damaged our nation and God's creation. Katrina wounded and devastated millions of our sisters and brothers along the Gulf Coast and in and around New Orleans and Biloxi. This hurricane has also touched and now tests the rest of us. It tests our faith, our capacity to help and our vision of what kind of nation we are and wish to be.

Our hearts and prayers go out once again to all those whose lives, homes and families have been damaged or destroyed by Katrina. Within the Catholic community, many of our people have lost everything and our Church has lost parishes and schools, hospitals and charitable ministries, and many of the structures which help us preach the Gospel, educate the young and serve the vulnerable. The loss of these institutions affects not only our Church, but is a significant loss for the entire community.

In a particular way, we extend our personal and ecclesial support to our brother bishops called to lead the Church on the Gulf Coast in these trying days. We also express our gratitude, respect and admiration to all the bishops, priests, deacons, religious and lay leaders who are bringing the helping hand and sustaining words of Jesus Christ to those who have lost so much.

As powerful as the winds and water of Katrina have been, our ongoing care and help, our practice of charity and search for justice must become more powerful. The hurricane and the flood came and went in a matter of hours and days. Our support, compassion, and commitment to help make things right must last far longer – not days, but months and years.

In light of the overwhelming extent of the damage and loss, the enormous generosity of the Catholic community and the enduring, long-term requirements for recovery, we are establishing a new Task Force to Coordinate the Catholic Response to Katrina. This unprecedented Task Force of bishops and leaders of the Catholic organizations already deeply involved in the ongoing effort will work under the leadership of Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston. It will build on what is already being done and seek to:

- support the many efforts of the affected dioceses.
- encourage a sustained response from the Catholic community.
- coordinate the many diverse efforts in order to increase effectiveness, assure accountability and eliminate duplication.
- examine the future moral and policy implications of this disaster for the Church and society.

### **The Catholic Community's Response**

Beyond the heroic efforts of the local Church in the region to respond to the human needs of all those suffering after Hurricane Katrina, the Catholic community nationwide has already responded in so many ways to the horror and heartbreak we have seen.

We are praying every day for those who have died and who are struggling to live in the aftermath of the hurricane.

Pope Benedict XVI immediately offered special prayers for the victims and relief workers and sent a personal envoy to visit the people struggling to rebuild their lives. Catholic leaders from around the world have also expressed concern and solidarity.

Millions of Catholics nationwide have responded with generous donations.

Catholic Charities USA and other national Catholic groups have mobilized to collect donations, respond to critical needs, and help relocate those displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Dioceses throughout the country have mobilized thousands of volunteers, held countless collections of money and goods, and provided extensive relocation assistance.

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops offices, religious communities and many other groups have offered help with relief and relocation assistance.

Catholic Extension will help reconstruct parishes, schools and other Church facilities damaged or destroyed by the disaster.

Catholic colleges, seminaries, high schools, and elementary schools nationwide have generously opened their doors to students and teachers who have been displaced by the storm.

As we care for and stand with our sisters and brothers along the Gulf Coast, we cannot forget that the lives and dignity of many others are threatened around our world by the powerful winds of hunger and disease and the flood of deprivation and despair. Responding to this catastrophe should open our eyes and hearts to other human calamities which haunt our world. When observers say in amazement "it looks like a Third World country," they are saying something profound not only about New Orleans, but also something important about how most of the world lives.

### **A Way Forward: Catholic Social Teaching**

Beyond the stunning outpouring of money, food and water, volunteers and welcome to thousands upon thousands of displaced persons, the Catholic community has something more to

contribute to the ongoing response and recovery. This is a set of principles, a moral framework to assess what has happened and to guide what must be done. Along with others of every faith and background, we offer our Catholic tradition of teaching about the challenges we now must face together. These principles offer moral direction and guidance for continuing response, recovery and rebuilding:

The Life and Dignity of Every Human Person: Human lives have been destroyed and human dignity has been assaulted. At times respect for life and dignity was lost in the midst of this disaster. Our faith and what we have seen call us to insist that every aspect of recovery, every plan for rebuilding should be measured by how it protects human life and how it threatens or enhance the dignity of all those touched by this catastrophe, especially the weakest and most vulnerable.

The Option for the Poor and Vulnerable: Our faith insists that the poor and vulnerable should have first claim on our common efforts. They cannot be left behind once again. We should assess this disaster, the response, and the future recovery for how it touches the lives of the least among us (Mt. 25). In light of what we have seen and heard, this is a time for constructive dialogue to address how poverty and race divide our society and challenge our nation.

Subsidiarity: Katrina demonstrates the wisdom of this traditional principle, which specifies the appropriate responsibilities and limitations of institutions in their common duty to protect human life and dignity. It warns against larger institutions overwhelming smaller ones but calls on larger institutions to act when smaller ones are unable or unwilling. Where families cannot meet their own needs, the larger community is called to assist them. When community institutions cannot or will not act, local and state governments have obligations. Where they cannot respond adequately, the national government must act to safeguard human life, dignity and rights. The continuing and future response should reflect these realities so the challenges ahead do not once again overwhelm the institutions of our society.

Solidarity: Katrina is teaching us we are all members of one human family. "Loving our neighbor" has new meaning in the aftermath of Katrina. Wherever we live, what ever we have or don't have, whatever our race or background, we are all God's children and are worthy of respect and care.

Family, Community and Participation: The storm has torn apart families and communities. The recovery and renewal must unite families and restore communities, not just as physical realities, but as fundamental moral building blocks for the future. "Participation" of those most affected must be at the center of the recovery and planning for the future.

Human Rights and Responsibilities: Our social tradition begins with the right to life and extends to those rights which make life truly human — faith and family, work and education, housing and health care. Restoring institutions of faith, work, education and health care and providing shelter and decent housing are not just signs of generosity; they are required by justice.

Care for Creation: The renewal and recovery which is to come must seek to acknowledge and repair the damage the storm and the floods have done to God's creation along

the Gulf Coast. The recovery efforts to come should seek to protect and safeguard that environment in the future.

Dignity of Works and Rights of Workers: In the aftermath of the storm, people not only lost their homes, they lost their work and their ability to support their families. Recovery requires more than food, water, and a place to live, but also a chance to make a contribution, to have decent work, wages and working conditions.

Common Good: The storm brought out the best and worst—heroic efforts of service and abandonment of duty, sacrifice for others and evil acts of opportunism. Renewal and recovery should not become a battle over blame, or a contest of interests, or an opportunity for the well connected to overwhelm the weak. After Katrina, we have all learned once again that we are in this together and a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

### **Conclusion**

For Christians, this is not just a work of humanitarian outreach. When we help those whom this storm has ripped from their homes and livelihoods, we are helping Jesus in our midst. We cannot be the Church of Jesus Christ unless we reach out in persistent and powerful ways to serve "the least of these." (Matt. 25) Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, bringing drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger are not simply acts of generosity, but acts of faith. These traditional works of mercy are not options, but obligations for each of us and the entire Catholic community.

For us as Catholic Bishops, Katrina is more than a terrible natural disaster and human catastrophe. It is a test of our faith, our hope and our love. Faith in Jesus Christ insists life conquers death, resurrection follows crucifixion, recovery comes from suffering and hope overcomes despair. This is a time to live out the Gospel, turn our love into care for others, move our words into action, and practice the solidarity we proclaim.

We take comfort in the courage and strength of those who have lived through these terrible days. We take strength from the remarkable and ongoing response of the Catholic community. We take hope from knowing the Lord is with us in this time of trial and challenge:

*"Had not the LORD been with us...  
[t]he waters would have engulfed us,  
the torrent overwhelmed us;  
seething water would have drowned us.  
Blessed be the LORD, who did not leave us...."  
(Psalm 124:2-6)*