



## Vincentian Family Gathering 2008

On April 10-13<sup>th</sup>, eight of us from the Emmitsburg Province joined about 200 others to participate in “**Solidarity In Action**,” the annual gathering of the Vincentian Family (VFG) that took place this year in **New Orleans, Louisiana**. It truly was a graced-filled experience for each person! “*What we have heard and seen and touched with our hands, we announce to you*” (1 John 1) - - in order to help touch your Vincentian heart with the same graces we encountered.

Five Daughters (Sisters Mary Frances Hildenberger, Denise LaRock, Patricia Nee, Jean Rhoads, Cora Anne Signaigo), two postulants (Salvatrice Murphy & Tiff Wang), and our Communications Director, Lori Stewart, began the journey on April 10, 2008 and arrived safely in post-Katrina, New Orleans. Representatives from our Vincentian Family included other Daughters of Charity, Vincentian priests, Ladies of Charity, members of the Society of Vincent de Paul, Vincentian Service Corps, and young adults from De Paul University. We truly felt a connection of the heart from the very first moment we entered the gathering room and this certainly grew stronger with each presentation, prayer, and apostolic reflection as the weekend unfolded.



The **goals** of this VFG included the following:

- (1) To listen to stories of hope and despair;
- (2) To experience collaboration by rebuilding and renewing New Orleans;
- (3) To serve, reflect, share and pray together;
- (4) To discern our future commitment to be “a voice with the voiceless”

First, we heard very meaningful presentations, e.g., *Systemic Change* by Sr. Caroljean Willie (Sisters of Charity Federation NGO); *Panel Presentations* on hurricane relief efforts by local leaders in New Orleans; and *Hopes and*

*Dreams for the Future of New Orleans* by local Vincentian leaders. Later we had a partial tour of New Orleans with a focus on areas of hurricane devastation (e.g., Ward 9) as well as the phenomenal ministry response to persons in need. On Saturday, we had the opportunity to participate in a service project to integrate our Vincentian hearts with our Vincentian hands and voices. Finally, we were challenged to identify a tangible way to be in solidarity for systemic change by raising \$1,000 each in order to help make a long-lasting difference for poor persons in New Orleans. Beautiful prayer services were interwoven into this workshop that deepened our sense of call and the need for response.

There is no apt way to fully describe the spirit of this Vincentian Family Gathering. In addition to sharing some photos with this report, we also offer several apostolic reflections where we discovered the face of Christ through many persons still suffering almost three years after Hurricane Katrina.

## *Apostolic Reflections from VFG participants*

### *In the Eyes of a Child*

We were asked many times to reflect and to discuss what touched our Vincentian hearts. What didn't touch our Vincentian hearts! In this reflection I would like to share some situations to which we were introduced. New Orleans has a number of immigrant families, many of whom had to flee from their original countries. Coming to the US, they started life over with little or no resources. These were among the first to return after Katrina. Though difficult, having lost everything was not a new experience for them and they came back to start once more.

Other elderly residents had been born and raised in New Orleans and had never traveled outside of the city, not even for a hurricane. Now they are finding themselves in unfamiliar places. All that is memorable for them is gone; their homes have been washed away; the neighbors are scattered. They are anguishing over whether to return or not.

But it is the third group that is particularly poignant ~ the children. Even heavy rains, and New Orleans has heavy rains, is terrifying as they wonder if their house will be there. One child, when asked to draw a picture of a house, drew only a triangle. This was the roof. The rest of the house was all under water. Yet with all of these memories and emotions, one feels a spirit of hope in New Orleans as they move from relief and recovery to re-build. (Sr. Patricia Nee)

### *Poverty, A "Levee" Broken Wide Open*

As we took the bus tour through parts of New Orleans, our guides from Catholic Charities each shared stories of evacuation and loss of their homes. Their stories brought us to tears. The part that brought me to tears was how strangers helped them so generously and how they returned to New Orleans to help others while they themselves were living in FEMA trailers or with other people. It is almost 3 years since Hurricane Katrina and those who had resources to rebuild are just finishing while others are still caught in bureaucracy. Small homes with 1 or 2 bedrooms that cost \$300/month pre-Katrina now are \$1,200/month. Housing is just 1 aspect of New Orleans that is trying to recover! The problem of poverty that existed before Katrina was broken wide open by the devastation caused by the flooding.

The Vincent de Paul Society and Catholic Charities are helping organize volunteers to restore the gutted homes. The Vincent de Paul Society also runs a thrift store and assists with providing prescription drugs. The Vincentian Priests are working with other non-profit agencies to build low-cost housing which the poor can buy instead of spending such large amounts of money on rent. The Vincentian Priests are an integral part of a center which serves the many homeless and displaced persons in

New Orleans. And the Daughters of Charity are setting up clinics to provide desperately needed healthcare.

The plight of the poor in New Orleans has long disappeared from the headlines. This is a great opportunity for us to work together to make a difference ~ not a temporary difference through charity, but by helping the poor of New Orleans to rebuild their lives and move forward. This is an opportunity for us to bring hope to a city that has lived in misery even before the great flood! (Sr. Denise LaRock)



### *Mini-Katrina Experience*

One element of the VFG in New Orleans that attracted me was the service project scheduled for Saturday. We would each have the opportunity to listen to the stories of some who experienced Katrina or be involved in an organized service project. Our group was on our way to *Chateau de Notre Dame* (a nursing home that had been evacuated and then restored) when our bus was involved in a minor traffic accident. Due to a number of circumstances, we were parked on the side of the road, dealing with the police report as well as trying to arrange alternate transportation to the Chateau. As our delay extended from one hour to two hours, I began reflecting on the experience.

Each of us wanted to be at the nursing home either assisting with a landscaping task or conversing with a resident. Instead, we were frustrated and annoyed, facing bureaucracy, miscommunication and misinformation. There were many unknowns about our transportation, our driver and whether we would even get to our destination, and we felt powerless. Gradually I realized we were experiencing a tiny aspect of what the Katrina victims had been through and are still going through.

Our afternoon had a happy ending with a good visit at the Chateau, but many residents of New Orleans are still facing many of these challenging realities after 30 months. God chose to give me my own mini-Katrina experience in a way I never expected. I pray that this learning will make me more sensitive to those who continue to suffer in New Orleans.

(Sr. Mary Fran Hildenberger)



**Grace in the Flood**

I was deeply moved by our visit to the Rebuild Center, a ministry located behind St. Joseph's Church in New Orleans, because of the way it enflashes St. Vincent's words, *God demands first the heart, then the work*. The pastor, Fr. Perry Henry, CM, collaborates with Sisters of the Presentation as well as many diverse volunteers who give generously from their hearts to provide a meal program, shower and laundry facilities, health and mental health services, legal counseling, and Hispanic ministry to so many persons in need.

The large wooden structure of the Rebuild Center is uniquely designed with air spaces between the walls and roofs as well as an ambience of foliage and a 4-paneled mural (Noah and the Flood, the Parting of the Red Sea, Peter being saved from the water, and the Baptism of Jesus). There the space is one of peace, the spirit is one of welcome, and the service is one of compassion.

At the Rebuild Center, we came face to face with persons who work at daily jobs but who now live in tents under the highway because they can no longer afford housing, food, etc. after prices escalated post-Katrina. Upon completing our tour, one client spontaneously stood up and said, *"I just want to thank you for providing this place for people like me. Knowing you care gives me hope that my life will eventually get better."* As Daughters of Charity, we are called to recognize Christ in each person. It was deeply humbling that this gentleman recognized the face of Christ in us. Being a member of the Vincentian family is grace-filled...even in the aftermath of this terrible flood that forever changed lives and hearts.  
 (Sr. Jean Rhoads)

**Called to Make a Difference**

My trip to the VFG in New Orleans was an eye-opener. I'm sorry to say I did not realize the amount of devastation that still existed as a result from Hurricane Katrina and the poor levee systems. It disturbed me to think how the media had stopped informing our country of New Orleans' continuing disaster, especially since communications is my profession. The media moved on, and most of the country thought, like I did, New Orleans

recuperated. After dealing with my realization of this not being true, I listened to residents of this city and became over-whelmed with the sense of hope. Although New Orleans is continuing to deal with economic and financial strain, the community is taking charge and making a difference. Many support programs and volunteers are rebuilding the region. They are committed to bringing a vision of hope to those whose lives have been changed forever by Hurricane Katrina. The most impressive program was St. Vincent de Paul's Pharmacy ~ a program that gives nearly 8,000 prescriptions on a weekly basis for those who are in need.

My attendance to the VFG was very special. Not only did I learn more of the needs of my own country, but I met and associated with over 200 people who belong to the Vincentian Family such as Daughters of Charity, Ladies of Charity, Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Sisters of Charity, and more. Each person expressed incredible initiative and care for others - truly inspirational. Throughout the visit, we were often asked how the experience spoke to our Vincentian heart. Instead of reflecting on how the experience spoke to me, I reflected on the definition and importance of a Vincentian heart, something we are all capable of having. The strength and desire to help others who cannot help themselves in New Orleans is such a powerful act. We were all drawn by those who are helping this city's victims and I plan to do the same.  
 (Lori Stewart)



**Waterproof Souls**

Shortly after arriving in New Orleans, I spotted a tourism sign that read: *"Soul is Waterproof"* and all that was to follow gave testimony to the truth of that declaration. It was a whirlwind experience with tours of the city, touches of the nightlife, and talks from the experts. We saw washed out communities and "tent city" make-shift neighborhoods, but the enormity of the destruction was dwarfed by the soul of the people. New Orleans was flooded with people who saw the opportunity to live out the Vincentian call to work within the world of the poor, to address structural change, confront injustice, work in communities and meet the needs of individuals. The Vincentian Spirit is the silver lining on the cloud of Katrina.  
 (Salvatrice Murphy)

### **Selfless Service**

I was astonished at the response of those attending the Vincentian Family Gathering this year in New Orleans, over 200 attendees. To see so many of our extended family gathered in one place, to learn, reflect on and discuss Systemic Change and for the opportunity to have the experience of hands on contact with the needs of the people of New Orleans who were so devastated by the results of Katrina.

It was overwhelming to see what has been done and still going on by those who have suffered tremendous loss and suffering, while at the same time, reaching out to help others while still trying to get their own lives back in tact. Such examples of selfless service to those who are suffering cannot help but touch one's heart and soul.

(Sr. Cora Anne Signaigo)



What touches me the most is the faith and the generosity of people of New Orleans and those who are helping them to rebuild their homes and their lives after Hurricane Katrina. As many New Orleans' people try to assist others, they also face many challenges of their own, including rebuilding their own homes, dealing with mental distress, and facing financial difficulty. All of these challenges have not stopped them to reach out to others, especially the more needy ones.

Hearing and seeing the generosity and support of many faith-based charity groups and volunteers really moves my heart deeply. I am sure that it is this generosity and support that gives hope and courage to the people of New Orleans to restore their lives and even make their lives better than before.

(Tiff Wang)



**What will touch your  
Vincentian heart  
today?**

If anyone would like to help poor persons in New Orleans, please send your donation to the

***Daughters of Charity, Post-Katrina Fund***  
***St. Joseph Provincial House, c/o Ashley Long***  
***333 South Seton Avenue***  
***Emmitsburg, MD 21727***

Your money will be sent directly to assist the works of the Daughters of Charity,  
Vincentian Priests, and Vincent de Paul Society in New Orleans.