

The Effects of Katrina on Marianites' Property and Ministries
by Sister Clarita Bourque, M.S.C.
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(# 1) "The 29th will remain a well-remembered day in the annals of the Marianites in New Orleans. At five o'clock p.m. the velocity of the wind was 125 miles per hour. There was nothing but desolation and ruin. The damage to our property has been estimated at thousands of dollars and it will take the entire session to restore our property. We have, however, much to be grateful for."

This quote is from a letter written by one of our sisters living at Holy Angels. **(# 2)** However, she was not referring to Hurricane Katrina but to a hurricane which ravaged our city on September 29, 1915. **(# 3)** This is a 1915 photo of the streetcar barn which was located just a few blocks from Holy Angels. The first Marianites of Holy Cross arrived in New Orleans, with four Brothers of Holy Cross, in 1849. We have lived among the people of this area for the past 164 years. We have ministered in the area at a high school and at three elementary schools. Our novitiate was located for many years on this property.

New Orleans is a city with a unique culture. Often when we're traveling, people will tell us that they'd love to visit New Orleans. **(# 4)** We say, "Oh, please do come visit us." Very often they do. **(# 5)** Unfortunately, in August 2005 a wild, rambunctious gal named Katrina took us up on our invitation and turned our lives upside down! **(# 6)** I'm sure you remember photos of people on rooftops and flooded streets. 80% of our city was under water. Where were we in all of this? Our sisters, like others in Louisiana and the Gulf Coast of Mississippi, were scattered everywhere. We lost three houses, a dozen cars, and had great damage to our properties. At Holy Angels we had three feet of water in our buildings, roof damage, broken windows, etc.

We occupy the complete block. The area is known as Bywater because of its proximity to the river. It has more artists and musicians than any other part of the city. It is low and medium income with 30% of the population, before Katrina, living below the poverty level.

We're presenting now a virtual tour of Holy Angels, which you'll be visiting on Saturday. **(# 7)** This building for many years served as our chapel. To the left of the chapel is the oldest building on the property, built in 1851 as an industrial school for girls. **(# 8)** It is now our novitiate and home to four of our sisters and contains the offices of our Congregational Administration. Next to it was the faculty residence for Holy Angels Academy, our high school, until 1992. It now houses eight of our sisters. Across the street we own two houses. One is the home of our Congregational Administrator. **(# 9)** Next to that is the office of our Treasurer, Sr. Chris Perrier. **(# 10)** There is also a cafeteria and a large meeting room on the property. Directly across is a residence for 33 low-income senior citizens. It was formerly our high school, Holy Angels Academy. That plot of land was purchased from a free woman of color for \$275.00. The building was constructed in 1865.

Shortly after Katrina, ten of our sisters met to formulate a plan outlining what we could do to assist the residents of the area in rebuilding their homes, their lives, and our city. We brought our ideas to our administration. They not only approved our project, they also provided seed money.

We returned to New Orleans in mid-January of 2006. We were gone for four and a half months. I was named Coordinator of the project, henceforth named the Marianite Bywater Project. We began offering services in February of 2006.

The Advisory Board of the project, comprised of those of us who had formulated the plan, came up with three objectives ...

- 1) to offer financial assistance to residents of the Ninth Ward for rent, utilities, mortgage payments, health care, etc.
- 2) to offer our facilities for gatherings and to sponsor activities to restore the community
- 3) to become involved with planning groups working to bring back our city.

What does our score card look like almost seven years later?

We have assisted more than 1000 families financially. (Rents have doubled and tripled, utility rates are still very high; some are paying rent and a mortgage on a house they have not yet repaired; some returned to New Orleans needing furniture, appliances, etc.) We've also assisted with the purchase of furniture; paid medical and dental bills and covered transportation costs.

Our second objective: to make our facilities available and to sponsor events to bring back our community - Our facilities have been used by everyone from federal governmental entities to small, poverty-stricken churches. (It has become so popular as a meeting place that, during the first couple of years, our Property Manager, Sr. Joyce Hanks, had to scan our newspaper every day since some people would forget to tell us they were coming!) **(#s 11, 12)** A weekly Farmer's Market was held in our parking lot for three years. We still have no large grocery store in our area. **(#s 13, 14)** STAIR, a tutoring program for second grade students, met regularly in our cafeteria.

We have sponsored many events. For the first three years after we returned, we sponsored **(#s 15,16,17)** the Bywater Awards Night in which we honored individuals and groups which have improved the area and its people since Katrina. We've honored artists, activists, and social service groups. **(#18)** We also sponsored a Thanksgiving Dinner and Prayer Service, both of which were attended by more than 100 persons. That first Christmas, we opened our doors and to our neighbors to attend dinner with us. **(#s 19, 20)** We have hosted countless groups of adults and youth who have come to our city to offer assistance, many of them from Holy Cross institutions. They tell us, "We were told to be sure to visit the Marianites while we are in New Orleans. **(#s 21, 22, 23, 24)** Just last week NETWORK'S Nuns on the Bus were with us on their tour promoting Immigration reform.

(#s 25,26,27) The Senior Citizens of this area lost their meeting place so we now sponsor and host a Senior Citizens meeting monthly. We begin with a prayer service, present speakers, make announcements of interest, and provide a meal for them.

(#s 28, 29, 30)In conjunction with St. Jude Center and the Diocese of Youngstown, Ohio, the Congregation refurbished a house for one of our employees. For the first time, she and her family will own their own home.

Our third objective, to participate with groups working to rebuild our city, has proved to be an interesting one. Three of our sisters have been very active in the Bywater Neighborhood Association. (# 31) We have attended meetings, ad nauseum, as we strive to bring back our neighborhoods.

There is still much to be done. Although visitors to our city can see progress in rebuilding homes and our infrastructure, there is still so much you cannot see. (# 32) There has been so much psychological damage, so much loneliness and depression. The scars run very deep. We do what we can to bring love and hope to our friends and neighbors. New Orleans is a very family-oriented town. (# 33) Many family members have not been able to return.

Holy Angels Center is located just a block from Desire Street. (# 34) To most people, that brings back memories of "A Streetcar Named Desire." After Tennessee Williams presented *Streetcar* on Broadway sixty-nine years ago, it didn't take long for the world to realize what a great playwright he was. However, no one realized how prophetic his work was. Toward the end of the play, Blanche DeBois, one of the play's leading characters, is in need of medical attention. One day a young doctor appears at her door. She is very grateful and says, "I realize now that I have come to depend on the kindness of strangers." And now, the citizens of New Orleans are echoing these same sentiments. Millions of volunteers have come to help us rebuild. Individuals, religious congregations, schools have been most kind and generous to us. (# 35) Many members of religious congregations have come to minister beside us; they have provided financial and moral assistance. *Truly, we have come to rely on the kindness of strangers.*

Katrina was a life-changing experience for us, in a good way, we hope. The Director of Unity for the Homeless in New Orleans says that she sees a great change in the attitude of the people of New Orleans toward the homeless, since we were all homeless, even for a short time. We feel greater empathy for the millions who suffer natural disasters throughout the world. We know what it's like. We are very happy that we are here to assist our friends and neighbors. The people have been very good to us for the past 164 years. It's pay-back time!

(# 36) At our first award ceremony in 2006, we received a rousing thank you for making our facilities and ourselves available. It is the least we can do.

In the documentary, *We Shall Not be Moved*, which you will have the opportunity to see during this conference, Sr. Kay Kinberger speaks of how important it is that we never forget – (#'s 37, 38, 39) how our city looked after the levees broke or (#'s 40, 41) the condition of our own home at Holy Angels. We want to remember, too, how a disaster like this can bring out the best in people – our own people and all who came, and are still coming to our aid. As one of our own commented in 1915, "We have so much to be grateful for."

Clarita Bourque, MSC