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-- CNS/Paul Haring

The chimney of the Ursuline convent in New Orleans is seen destroyed and fallen through the roof of the building Sept. 5, 2005, following Hurricane Katrina.

donations.

The months since Katrina “have seemed like one long Holy Saturday” to Mount Carmel Sr. Beth Fitzpatrick. “Like Jesus’ first disciples, we have been bereft of what we knew and loved. Like them we have waited in uncertainty and confusion,” she wrote to her sisters in April.

Fitzpatrick is among many congregational leaders whose lives were upended Aug. 29, 2005. Beyond damage to their property, residences, schools, personal possessions and cars, almost all suffered loss of many sponsored ministries.

The Sisters of Charity Foundation of Cleveland noted eight orders as being the most devastated: the Sisters of the Holy Family of New Orleans, Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, Marianites of the Holy Cross, Eucharistic Missionaries of St. Dominic, Ursuline Sisters, Sisters of Mount Carmel, Dominican Sisters and the Society of St. Teresa of Jesus.

The Sisters of Charity Foundation, in conversation with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the National Religious Retirement Office, sought ways to assist the congregations.

“There was a need for transition planning and crisis management, but there was no one entity coordinating care,” said Kim Hemley, program officer of the foundation.

Though there are no Charity sisters in the disaster area, the foundation’s mission is to support religious sisters and their ministries that are in greatest need, Hemley said. Initially the foundation in Cleveland issued some \$60,000 in emergency aid. Another Sisters of Charity grant-making agency -- the SC Ministry Foundation, based in Cincinnati -- has also aided the recovery effort, issuing disaster relief grants totaling \$225,000.

As responsive as the Charity sisters’ foundations and other religious groups have been, their contributions are only “a drop in the bucket” compared with \$51.4 million in debt facing the eight congregations, Hemley said.

The sisters in all eight communities had to find housing for 400 members working or retired in greater New Orleans last August. Caravans of sisters -- some in ambulances or planes -- took to the road en route to other convents prior to Katrina’s landfall. Within a week many found shelter elsewhere in Louisiana before moving on to other states.

The most daunting task was transporting the elderly. In the case of the Sisters of the Holy Family, an African-American

## Sisters struggle to recover from Katrina losses

By PATRICIA LEFEVERE  
*New Orleans*

When the history of religious women in New Orleans is written, its first 300 years will not lack drama. The city has seen fires, the Civil War, slavery, race riots and tropical storms. In 2005, the chapter on Hurricane Katrina will show nuns on the run, their convents gutted, their ministries halted. Many of these women have smelled the stench of stagnation and death. Some who stayed in the city heard the paddles of boats below and the propellers of helicopters above coming to rescue them five and six days after the winds blasted and the levees burst.

The story of their exodus and their return is one of religious women upholding and sustaining one another with prayers, service and

congregation, it meant relocating 150 sisters whose median age is 74. Within days of their evacuation, funerals were held in Pineville, La., and Houston for two elderly sisters.

### **Raiding retirement funds**

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille raided part of their retirement fund to stay afloat after Katrina. With estimated losses of \$12.1 million, the sisters have already paid more than \$1.4 million to clean and gut their chief residence, Mirabeau.

The sisters had to attain a Certificate of Clean Air to put the property up for sale. If the 62-bedroom complex on 16 acres cannot be sold, the potential loss would be \$9.6 million. Cost of the cleanup has already surpassed the amount of insurance received.

Besides Mirabeau, the sisters lost two of their three other New Orleans homes -- one of which still carried a \$62,000 mortgage. Although not obligated to do so, the congregation chose to pay salaries and offer severance packages to their employees.

Of 27 sisters formerly residing at Mirabeau, 23 have found housing in Baton Rouge, La. Two of the Mirabeau nuns have moved to Kansas, where seven elderly St. Joseph nuns -- previously in assisted living in New Orleans -- were welcomed by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Wichita.

“What seems clear at this point is we won’t return with our sick and elderly sisters,” said Sr. Eleanor Bernstein, the congregation’s vice president and communications head, based in Cincinnati.

Bernstein found it “providential” that the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille will join with six other Sisters of St. Joseph congregations next April to form the Congregation of St. Joseph, a process that began prior to Katrina. Contributions came from many St. Joseph congregations as well as from other religious women’s groups. Women religious donated \$1 million to the St. Joseph sisters, who in turn shared \$331,000 of their total \$1.3 million relief fund with others made homeless or jobless by Katrina.

Three-fourths of the 42 Dominicans who had called New Orleans home evacuated to Houston. The evacuation -- the third in the order’s 145-year history in the city -- showed prioress Sr. Angeline Magro “how little we need to get along.”

After weeks of uncertainty about how soon the Dominican sisters could reopen their flooded high school, some 900 of the institution’s 1,065 students returned Jan. 17. Not only were the library’s contents destroyed by floodwater, but the band room lost all the instruments, uniforms and music too.

“We’re the oldest all-female marching band in the state -- maybe in the nation,” said Magro.

The congregation incurred more than \$8.6 million in damages and lost revenue from Dominican High School, its largest ministry. Almost \$1 million was paid out in teachers’ salaries while the school was closed. Many teachers provided much of the manual labor during weeks of cleanup.

### **Greatest losses**

No congregation took as great a thrashing from Katrina as did the Sisters of the Holy Family, whose motherhouse, schools, nursing home and child-care center in the city’s poorest and most devastated area -- the Ninth Ward -- were either heavily damaged or totally destroyed. Provisional losses run to \$14 million.

In addition, a criminal investigation is underway and the congregation could yet be held liable in the deaths of 14 elderly residents of the 171-bed Lafon Nursing Facility. Some who could not be evacuated from Lafon relied on ventilators, oxygen and feeding tubes that failed when the power failed.

Electricity was restored to the Holy Family motherhouse in March. Currently some 30 nuns reside on its second and

third floors. Superior Sr. Sylvia Thibodeaux supervises operations from a cell phone and kitchen table inside the FEMA trailer that has been her home since February. Several elderly nuns now live in two homes in Alexandria, La., that the sisters were able to purchase with the help of Alexandria Bishop Ronald Herzog.

Much of the area around their convent is still filled with debris, which if not collected soon “could become like a nuclear missile in a Category 1 or 2 storm,” Thibodeaux said. The sisters have decided not to restore the first floor of the motherhouse until the hurricane season ends.

Out of the tragedy of Katrina, God is calling the sisters “to be a shining light in a darkened community,” Thibodeaux said. By coming home, the sisters hope others in the Ninth Ward will find the courage to begin anew.

In September the congregation will open a school for 600 pre-K through 12th-grade pupils at the former St. James Major High School in the Gentilly neighborhood. The school will replace the former St. Mary’s Academy, the Free School and the Lafon Child Development Center.

Some sisters who evacuated to Shreveport and elsewhere in Louisiana have found work in the public schools and will continue to teach in the public system. “We have been given a new way to reach the poor and witness for the church,” Thibodeaux said.

Her order has received \$1 million from sister sources and some \$700,000 from others.

Late last year Our Lady of Victory Missionary Sr. Mary Jo Nelson spent 10 days with the community helping them assess their strengths and liabilities post-Katrina. Nelson said the shock caused by dislocation, destruction and death are still present. “The whole sense of not knowing what the long term and even the immediate future will bring remains traumatic,” said Nelson, a specialist in organizational development and planning.

An African-American priest who has known and worked with the Holy Family nuns for decades suggested that a diocese or several parishes adopt the order. “Nothing less will allow them to survive and grow,” Fr. August Thompson of Pineville, La., told *NCR*.

### **Outpouring of kindness**

Since the levees broke, Carmelite Sr. Beth Fitzpatrick has experienced an outpouring of kindness -- in a van carrying deacons from Chicago to reconstruct her school’s print shop (see sidebar), in envelopes with checks of \$10 and one of \$25,000, in help from the Carmelite provinces, and in \$300,000 donated by women religious.

The Carmelites’ largest school, Mount Carmel Academy, received more than \$300,000 for new equipment from Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah. An alumna who worked for a Saudi firm was able to help the school, which sustained losses in excess of \$15 million.

Above all, Fitzpatrick, who is president of the order, said scripture has guided her through the sorrow and upheaval. “We are waiting and listening and begging for the grace to perceive what God’s plan is for us,” she said.

Her interview with *NCR* was at times interrupted by tears, especially when asked about the 83 pine and oak trees the sisters lost. “I watched them go over,” Fitzpatrick said. “It looked so gentle yet it was so terribly violent. The pines snapped and toppled. One tree fell and pierced the skylight in the dining room.”

Before Katrina struck, 48 Carmelites were evacuated. At least 14 of the most senior nuns have found housing elsewhere in the state. Several nuns have returned and are staying in houses that were damaged, but have proved livable. Two are in FEMA trailers. Some are living with relatives and the rest are in the order’s newly established Spirituality Center, once known as “The Blessing Place.”

Income from the center and from a preschool that was located in the motherhouse has been lost, as was the autumn tuition and development income from the academy, which reopened Jan. 17 with 1,140 of the 1,242 girls back.

A further \$1.5 million loss has been incurred on Carmelite residences.

"I don't have any clear answers yet," Fitzpatrick said, her voice breaking. "Our building is structurally sound; others in the area are not. Where we are was swampland 80 years ago. Is there a message here? Are we meant to stay?"

When Sr. Noel Toomey, a Eucharistic Missionary of St. Dominic, visits the lower Ninth Ward, "it looks like photos I saw of Europe at the end of World War II. People can't comprehend such vast devastation," she said.

The director of the Archdiocesan Spirituality Center, Toomey lost all her resource materials, office equipment, books, retreat and training programs -- valued at \$85,000 -- to flood waters. She hopes to start over in a room that is being renovated on the third floor of the seminary. "But it's so expensive."

Living in a post-Katrina environment requires trusting faith and radical hope, she said, plus infinite patience. "We've waited for everything -- to get our car serviced, to get our mail, to get groceries. We're still waiting."

But in the waiting she has seen the "tenderness with which people have responded to one another. We have tasted what is eternal and what is not," said Toomey.

The nun has also seen much anger -- "over our communal neglect of the environment and over our unjust structures," she said. In the shadow of Katrina, "the residue of our racial prejudice has become so evident."

Twenty-four of the 35 Eucharistic Missionaries became homeless and were on the road for a week before finally arriving at the Dominican Sisters of St. Catharine, Ky., where 11 elderly nuns are now living.

Five of the sisters who were in paid ministries lost months of compensation, which has proved a hardship for the itinerant group that owns no institutions, but "goes to the highways and byways" using New Orleans as its base, said Sr. Suzanne Brauer, a member of the leadership team and the congregation's treasurer. Brauer has used retirement and investment income plus donations to make ends meet while she waits for the group's Central House to be repaired. The congregation also hopes to sell its 1,500-acre novitiate in Covington, La.

The convent where eight sisters of the Society of St. Teresa of Jesus resided was flooded with six and a half feet of water for three weeks. The nuns' central house in Covington, La., lost more than 100 trees. Some had to be removed at a cost of \$6,000 per tree just to enter the motherhouse.

"We did not have flood insurance, don't ask me why!" said Sr. Isabel Ordone, superior.

If anyone asks her what she needs, her answer is simple: "Whatever goes in a chapel, a family room, living room, library, dining room, kitchen, two bathrooms, laundry room and a small office is gone." The convent retained its wooden beams, but not its walls and floors.

The congregation has incurred expenses of \$504,000 from Katrina. By doing much of their own cleanup, the sisters cut their losses to \$425,000. Sr. Delores Rodriguez, a 76-year-old Spanish Teresian, supervised the cleanup of the convent and worked every Saturday with a group of men to remove debris from the premises, receiving no salary for her efforts until December. A volunteer crew of Legionaries of Christ also assisted.

Ordone, who is a board member of the Conrad Hilton Fund for Sisters, received a \$10,000 grant from the fund, as did some other congregations. Gifts of nearly \$75,000 have also come to the Teresians from other women religious.

The nuns intend to stay in New Orleans. Three sisters in their late 80s who were evacuated to San Antonio will remain in Texas.

As a member of an international order, Ordone has known life in nations that lack some of life's basic necessities. She said she is "bothered that we live in a nation with the most progress, greatest technology, a highly educated workforce and yet we find so little improvement. ... Your heart breaks when you see blocks of broken cars, debris and garbage still." She blamed the slow response of federal and state government, a lack of local leadership and a lack of

commitment from those who left the city to return and rebuild their areas. All the money in the world can't put New Orleans back together again, Ordone said, unless people return, reclaim and restore their neighborhoods.

### **National shrine flooded**

A decade after the founding of New Orleans in 1718, Ursuline sisters arrived from France to educate the children of European colonists as well as local slaves and Indians. The order had a continuous presence in New Orleans for 278 years.

That is, until Katrina flooded the 11.5-acre campus that housed their convent, Ursuline Academy, the National Shrine to Our Lady of Prompt Succor and the archives of the oldest, continuously operating school for women in the nation.

On Sept. 4 National Guardsmen came in boats to evacuate the nine sisters and some 20 others who had sought shelter with them for six days.

Flood waters, mold and mildew forced them to suspend their ministry of education for four months. Ursuline Prioress Carolyn Brockland and her staff and alumnae are trying to raise \$4.5 million to compensate for income lost in tuition and development revenue, for salaries to faculty and staff, for loan payments, and for the catastrophic cost of tree removal, cleaning, restoration and repair of their convent, main building and the auditorium and gym at Ursuline Academy, and for restoration of the National Shrine of Our Lady of Prompt Succor.

"We've liquidated everything we could," Brockland said. The Ursulines were able to reopen their academy in January with 79 percent of students returning. Historically the school has served a broad socioeconomic population of some 750 girls of all faiths, ages 2-18. The loss of one-fifth of enrollment will mean a large operating deficit in the school's tuition-driven budget.

Still Brockland remains hopeful "People have been very generous. It's touching to see them giving out of their abundance and out of their want."

### **Mystery unfolds**

Cleaning up mud, mess and mold might not leave much time for meditation, but Sr. Mary Kay Kinberger, president of the Marianites of the Holy Cross, has reflected how in the months after such destruction, "we walk more with mystery and ambiguity and less with certainty."

The Marianite leadership and staff lost the first floors of their offices and their conference center, as well as the first floor of St. Joseph's Convent, where 20 elderly nuns resided. Three other dwellings, each housing four or five sisters, were heavily damaged.

In the weeks after Katrina, in sauna-like conditions, the National Guard occupied the congregational center. "We felt our property was serving the people when it became a place of respite for the Guard," said Sr. Gretchen Dysart, vice president of the Marianites.

The congregation forfeited a semester's earnings at Our Lady of Holy Cross College, but paid salaries to teachers and staff. It reopened in January, but many students have yet to return. Others need tuition assistance.

The leadership has had to cut expenditures and make only minimal restorations until the 2006 storm season ends.

Kinberger has seen Katrina's toll on those who have "lost hope, committed suicide, left or grown angry, resentful and live each day enmeshed in bitterness." But she has also met those who have put their own needs aside to help others, welcomed the stranger and traveled great distances to assist in the recovery efforts.

"We have more friends than we did a year ago," she said. "We have fewer material possessions. We have more people praying for and with us. We have a greater sense of what it means to be displaced and homeless. We have touched the deeper places of disappointment and pain within our own hearts. We have been surprised and embraced with bondless

generosity and kindness.”

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-- Photo courtesy of Carmelite Review

The deacons rebuild the Carmelites' print shop.

out a project,” Lema told *NCR*.

### Illinois deacons came to Carmelites' aid

When Sal Lema, a permanent deacon, considered how Hurricane Katrina had altered the Catholic landscape of New Orleans, he wanted to do more than write a check.

The communications director for the Order of Carmelites in Darien, Ill., focused his concern on people he knew in the wounded city. The Sisters of Mount Carmel, whose school and convent in the Lakeview area had stood for days in 10 feet of water, could use a hand.

Lema knew five more permanent deacons in the Chicago archdiocese who wanted to help -- Tony Cocco, Dan Troy, Chris VIRRUSO, Rich Werner and Joe Winblad. In early January, Lema and Winblad flew to New Orleans “to scope

After consulting with the sisters, it was decided the deacons should try to restore the communications hub of the campus and the order. A print shop, the size of a three-car garage, needed wiring, heating and lighting. It also required new walls, floors, ceilings and doors.

But none of the volunteers was a contractor, electrician or building engineer. Neither were they young. The group ranged from 56 to 73.

What's more, all of the sisters' tools had been ruined in the flooding. Faced with such reality, Lema headed for Home Depot. But he had to park two blocks away and queue two hours to make a purchase. Prices were five times higher than in suburban Chicago stores.

The pair flew home determined to return. They set about raising awareness of the sisters' plight, and raising money. Local hardware and paint dealers donated materials. Yellow Freight offered to drive 7,000 pounds of supplies from Chicago to New Orleans. Parishioners and others donated \$16,000 for the project.

The men found a permanent deacon who lived in New Orleans, Dwight Alexander, who had lost his home and his job in the storm. They agreed to hire him when they came back to the city.

Four of the deacons drove to New Orleans in a van, carrying their tools with them. The 960-mile trip took just 16 hours as each man took a turn at the wheel. The two eldest flew.

Sr. Beth Fitzpatrick, president of the Carmelites, found the men housing at a facility run by Catholic Charities. They slept in bunks in the same room and shared a bathroom.

But it hardly mattered where they slept, said Lema, who along with the others returned exhausted each night after installing insulation, hanging and fitting 71 sheets of drywall, getting doors into place and sanding and painting floors and walls. They labored into the night when supplies arrived late and rigged up a generator when a tornado extinguished the power.

Before leaving, they presented the keys of the shop to resident printer Phil Gosen, and enjoyed a supper of jambalaya with the sisters. “When we left our hearts were bigger than we ever thought they could be,” Lema said.

-- Patricia Lefevere

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