

MUSTARD SEED FAITH IN NEW ORLEANS

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During the week of March 26, Affiliates from Seattle, Davis, California, Missoula, Montana, Houston, Boston, New Orleans, and Zellwood, Florida, participated in short term mission immersion program in New Orleans. Along with prayer, reflections, and analysis, the group cleaned out four homes flooded by Hurricane Katrina.

The first day, the group did a complete tour of the devastated city. Sr. Jane Remson from Bread for the World lead the tour. We began at a disaster center called Emergency Communities in St. Bernard Parish (aka. County)—a huge complex that has developed from the initiative of one man.



Houses Were Totally Wrecked by Raging Waters: We began the week touring the devastated city; for miles and miles one sees utter devastation of homes, cars, property, etc.

The area looked like the 60's—with young people living in tents and volunteering to do cooking, cleaning, etc. Emergency Communities serves over 1000 disaster victims and workers every day.



Devastated Homes: When you see stand before everything and nothing at the same time, one begins to know the meaning of "ya gotta have faith."

After touring the place and talking with volunteer workers and victims, we joined the lunch group under the huge mess hall tent. We then traveled from East to West, in and out of hundreds of neighborhoods, most of which are still uninhabitable, except for a FEMA trailer here or there.

Following the tour we met in my Maryknoll Center (newly

renovated) and did a little de-briefing. In the evening, we had a panel discussion and interview with Bob and Diedre Mauss and Janet Rousso as they shared with us "The Face of the Poor who seek aid from Catholic Charities." It was very moving as these three Catholic Charities "first line caregivers" shared story after story of people they are ministering to daily. They talked about the Face of the Poor, which they see in the people coming to them, but in these three ministers (who themselves have lost home, work site, friends, etc.) we saw the Face of Christ. We ended the evening as we centered around them, extending our arms in prayer, asking God to give them strength and wisdom as they continued to minister to those seeking aid.



House Front Steps

The next day, after our Beatitude Prayer at the Conference Center, we went to clean out the first home we were to be working on, located in New Orleans East. It was flooded with over five feet of water.

On Saturday morning I visited the home with Byron, Phyllis and their daughter Bridget, one of the families we were to help. It was the first time Byron had seen his home since the Hurricane.



Mary with Mask: Even the Blessed Mother has to wear a mask in New Orleans these days.

As he walked up and saw the total devastation in his home, he choked up and tears welled in his eyes. I put my arms around his shoulder and tried to comfort him—words are very inadequate. We walked in and it looked as if someone had come in and totally ransacked the house from one end to the other. Furniture was turned upside down, dishes were broken all over the floor, the refrigerator lay on its side; there was a big gaping hole in the ceiling that the National Guard had opened up in the early days after the flood to see if anyone was in the home and needed to be rescued. Ceiling insulation kept soggy by rains lays heaped under the hole.



Surveying the Kitchen

A big tree had fallen on the back of the house. The family automobile sat in the driveway—it was totally submerged and still covered with a grey ash. The tow trucks have not begun to reach this neighborhood. I prayed with them before I left to pick up the first of our group at the airport. They were so grateful that we were coming to help them. It took us the better part of two days to clean out their home and gut the walls, etc. of sheetrock.



Ruth Kleeman Crawling Out: The suits were hot but did protect us (somewhat!) from mold and dirt.



Our Last house: If you need a good cleaning lady, Carolyn Creighton from Seattle cannot be beat!



Group Reflecting: We had time every day for prayer, reflections, presentations by local leaders and interviews with victims.



Hans Looking Over Day's Work: This front yard was empty when we began in the morning!

When you see the vastness of the disaster, you are tempted to think "what little is accomplished by cleaning three homes?" But to each of these families it is not little; it is a sign that people care and to see their homes "cleaned" brings them relief and a sense that a new day is coming. It really demands of all of us "mustard seed faith"—that little by little, the people will recover and homes will be rebuilt and new life will spring forth. It really is a Paschal Mystery experience.

