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Biloxi bishop discusses the losses in his diocese after Katrina

Bishop Thomas J. Rodi of the Diocese of Biloxi, Miss., granted The Florida Catholic an interview Oct. 27, nearly two months after Hurricane Katrina caused in excess of \$100 million damage to churches and schools in the Biloxi Diocese. The province of Miami adopted the diocese shortly after the storm, pledging long-term assistance as people along the Mississippi coast rebuild their lives.

The Florida Catholic: Bishop, what do you want to tell the people of Florida in the aftermath of this catastrophic hurricane?

Bishop Rodi: First of all, pray for us. It means a tremendous amount to us to know that people are praying for us and supporting us by prayer. It helps us not to feel isolated or forgotten. Prayer is very important. The response of the people of Florida has been outstanding. The people who have come here and who keep coming here, bringing material relief in the way of food, baby supplies, cleaning supplies and other material goods and financial assistance — we are so grateful for all the assistance. Our rebuilding and our recovery, as people in Florida are so aware from hurricanes there, are long-term processes. Recovery from this worst natural disaster in the history of our country will take years. We will recover; we have a bright future. But the road of recovery will be a long one for us. To have volunteers continue to come to help and continued financial assistance will mean a lot to us in the coming months, if not years.

TFC: Much of the infrastructure and economic base of the diocese was destroyed by the storm. What do you see as the future for the people of the diocese, for their livelihoods and for the church?

Bishop Rodi: There is a lot of suffering right now in the community because people have lost both homes and jobs. A lot of individual stories of loss and struggle and suffering surround us. I remain convinced that our area will have a very strong economy in the future. For a while, we will struggle. For a while, people will go through very painful experiences. In the coming years — in the not-too-distant future — we will have a very strong economy.

I rely on the studies by economic experts, who say we will attract a lot of retirees. As baby boomers look at retirement, we will be a very attractive area for them. We will also be an area that increasingly has a lot of hotels and casinos. There are already new developments being planned around new casinos, new high-rise condominiums, new hotels. I think that because our civic leaders are investing so much of the casino taxes into

infrastructure, we will be an attractive place for other industries and businesses to relocate, businesses that are completely unrelated to casinos or hotels. They will say "This is a pleasant area, and we want to be here." So we'll attract businesses and jobs that are unrelated to tourism, unrelated to casinos, but will want to be here because this will be a nice area to live.

TFC: Many poor people were displaced from their homes by the storm, homes that were either rentals or had been in families for generations. What will happen to them when the new casinos and condominiums are built?

Bishop Rodi: In the planning of the last several weeks as the coastal counties of Mississippi, we've continued to bring up that, in all of this planning for the future — and we have a bright future — there will be people who will continue to lack resources — financial resources, opportunities. We have to make sure that they are not forgotten. There were people who didn't have much before Katrina, and they don't have much now. It would be a scandal, if, in the shadows of beautiful new hotels and condominiums, we would have low-income people living a very difficult life, not having the opportunity to participate in the good economy that I believe we will have in our area.

TFC: How do you foresee meeting the housing needs of the poor in the diocese?

Bishop Rodi: Currently, we're concentrated on providing, through FEMA and others, trailers for people to live in. That is the best possible solution at this moment. A lot of attention has to be given to long-term provisions for people who don't have the financial resources to build a home. We hope to, as a diocese, hire someone who will work with first-time homeowners to help them qualify for different sources of financing that will enable them to buy a home. That will be our contribution to the community. They would be helped with the necessary paperwork, with the necessary training that they would have to go through before they could qualify for these grants. We can help them set this up and become a homeowner.

But the homes have to be there also. According to what I saw in the media even before Katrina, we had a shortage of affordable housing. Much of the housing being constructed before the hurricane was upper-end housing. We have to take a hard look now at providing housing that will allow people to move out of trailers so they don't become a permanent solution. They were never intended to be a permanent solution. Sixty-five thousand homes have been destroyed. I'm not a contractor, but I think it would be impossible to build 65,000 homes in any community in a limited time period. It would overwhelm the available resources. I don't know how long people will be living in trailers.

TFC: Beyond prayer, financial help and volunteers, what do you need?

Bishop Rodi: Volunteers are doing amazing work here: cleaning schools, gutting homes, removing downed trees, particularly for the elderly, who can't do this sort of work. Our challenge has been to find places for volunteers to live while they are here. We have no place for them to stay. Our parish halls have been destroyed. We don't have homes for people to stay in. With so many homes being destroyed, people are already doubling up, living with extended family and friends. We would love to be able to accommodate volunteers over the coming months, because we know that there are many willing volunteers who so generously would like to give of their time.

We had a group from Notre Dame University that came last week on their fall break and stayed in Mobile (Ala.) and drove to work each day in Pascagoula. But some of our hardest-hit areas, in the western part of the diocese, one can get there, but there are no parishes that can support volunteers. People can stay in Mobile, but that's such a long drive every day to get in to work. On the other side is New Orleans, which of course was devastated. In that whole area, there aren't many places that we can house volunteers, in the areas that we most need help.

TFC: How are people, especially those in ministry, dealing with the stress?

Bishop Rodi: It's hard on everyone. It is difficult to put into words what people are experiencing right now with the devastation of Katrina. The only time in my life that I've felt so cut off from my past, personally, was when my parents died. There was a tremendous sense of loss of my past. I no longer had my mother and my father, but it was a personal loss.

Right now, our entire community is feeling a tremendous sense of loss. We've experienced the loss of so much of our past. People have lost their family members and friends, lost the family home and not only the family home, but the whole neighborhood. They've been cut off from the friends and neighbors that had lived around them. They've lost the homes that held so many memories. As a community, we've lost so many landmarks that from the time we were little children and up, we always knew were there and now they're gone. The sense of loss, individually and as a community, that we are coping with is very, very difficult. There are people who tell me that at times they just cry for no reason at all. Just something will strike them and they just cry. It is affecting all of us. At the same time people have a strong spirit of determination to rebuild. But this is very painful. I see it among our people.

Our religious and clergy and staff have been wonderful, outstanding in ministering to people, but they also, so many of them, nuns and deacons and priests and laity, lost all their personal belongings in the storm. In the midst of that they're doing a wonderful job, but we're all feeling that loss.

And now the initial shock has worn off. I've been talking to people and now the holidays are coming. It will be very difficult for people to eat Thanksgiving dinner gathered around a folding table with paper napkins. The dining room table is gone. Grandmother's china is gone. It will be very difficult to go and look for the Christmas ornaments. It will be very difficult to come to the realization that so many of those family keepsakes and mementos have been destroyed. We've lost so much of our past. It's like a death of someone close to us, but instead of being personal, it's everyone, the whole community.

I was driving down a street in Bay St. Louis. My parents lived in Bay St. Louis for 15 years. I passed their house where they used to live. The house is gone. It's just a pile of debris pushed onto the back of the lot. And once again, it was just one more sense of loss because although my parents have long since left that house, so many memories were there. And driving down the street, all the houses were gone. And I knew the people who lived in those houses and I had memories of them. And the devastation is that pronounced.

I've known this area all my life; literally since I was a toddler, I've known this area. And yet I drive around in some places today and I'm not sure where I am because every landmark, every building is gone. At times I don't know whether to laugh or cry, driving down a street that I know so well, and I don't know where I am.

We had a church, a small wooden church, in Bay St. Louis. Immediately after the hurricane, I couldn't get to that area to check on the church. I asked one of the priests who had gone in there, "What about the little wooden church?" He said, "Bishop, I know it's been destroyed, but I couldn't find where it used to be." It was just this sea of debris. He couldn't find the exact place where it used to be. He couldn't find enough identifiable debris to tell where it was.

TFC: What changes do you see going forward? How will things change because of what people have learned from this experience?

Bishop Rodi: We will give more planning to preparing for future hurricanes. I hope we never have another hurricane. We had done a lot of preparation for hurricanes, especially for how to evacuate our senior citizens' housing. We have 700 apartments of senior citizen housing. We did that very well. We had not prepared for a catastrophe of this magnitude.

This was the worst natural disaster in the history of our country. We anticipated something that would affect us for a few days and then we would be back. Camille in 1969 was the benchmark for the diocese — a storm with 200 mph winds, but a relatively compact storm. We never could have imagined a storm with a surge as high as 30 feet striking our whole diocese — from Lakeshore and Waveland in the west to Pascagoula in the east. We lost churches and schools along the entire coast.

Our pastors and our diocesan offices, with tremendous help from the dioceses of Florida, were very good at bringing in food and materials and supplies. But it is also apparent that we as Catholics need to take a look at how well we do this. Our gift to the community is that we're here for the long haul. Long after the emergency is over, we are here to give help for years to come. We have a national collection that is used to help people. But we have not been as effective as I think we can be at giving immediate help and we're going to take a look at that.

As far as rebuilding, we're also taking a look at where we want to rebuild and how we want to configure our schools and our churches. The Bible calls us to be good stewards of our blessings and we have many blessings. In heeding the call to be good stewards, I think it would be irresponsible to rebuild the church as it existed Aug. 28, the day before the storm.

We're looking at where we should rebuild our churches and schools to best serve the needs of the people. Right now I'm going around the diocese holding listening sessions with several of the parishes that have been affected by destruction and talking about where we should rebuild the churches. We're going through a similar process with our principals and our pastors to look at where we will rebuild our schools.

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