

The Florida Catholic

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Florida bishops announce adoption of Biloxi Diocese for long-term outreach

By **Jean Gonzalez**, Lakeland

In response to the absolute necessity for aid and a structure to distribute it, the Catholic Province of Miami, which includes all seven Catholic dioceses in Florida, has joined a cooperative effort to develop a sister diocese relationship with the Biloxi, Miss., Diocese

Although the efforts are in the infancy stage and plans are developed day by day, Deacon Marcus Hepburn, Catholic Charities statewide disaster coordinator out of the Florida Catholic Conference, and the heads of three of Florida's Catholic Charities — Peter Routsis-Arroyo of Venice, Mark Dufva of Pensacola-Tallahassee and Deacon Richard Turcotte of Miami — traveled together to Mississippi to witness the damage and develop a plan of action. One day during their weeklong sojourn, Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, of Pensacola-Tallahassee, joined the group and Arnold Andrews, president-emeritus of Catholic Charities in St. Petersburg, met briefly with the group and then headed to Jackson, Miss.

Although the members had collectively witnessed the destruction left in the aftermath of Andrew, Ivan, Charley, Frances, Jeanne and other major storms, they agreed the magnitude of Katrina is unmatched.

"The devastation is unlike any we have ever seen. You have 120 miles of just pure devastation," said Routsis-Arroyo, who added the group had not yet seen locations west of Gulfport,

Distribution and storage sites (accepting donations of non-perishable food items, drinking water and cleaning supplies. No clothing will be accepted.)

- **St. Anthony Parish, 1815 N. 6th Ave., Pensacola, Fla.**
- **St. Mary Catholic Parish, 8343 Woolmarket Road, Biloxi, Miss. Contact: Routsis-Arroyo, 941-468-6440**
- **St. Theresa Catholic Parish, 3521 19th St., Gulfport, Miss. Contact: Routsis-Arroyo, 941-468-6440**
- **State VOAD Warehouse, 840 Boling St., Jackson, Miss. The site is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and arrangements can be made by calling 601-969-6155.**

Please call to arrange the shipping of goods. If organizations wish to transport their donated

Miss., where many residents lived in substandard housing. "The dynamic of this story is unlike any other. I saw Charley, and Charley cut a path in which you saw utter destruction. Well, think of that path 100 miles wider."

goods to Mississippi, it must first be cleared with organizers and those transporting items must be willing to help unload the items and immediately leave for their own safety.

It became clear during the group's travels that the Biloxi Diocese and even the state of Mississippi did not have an infrastructure developed to handle the large-scale relief effort. And the need for volunteers, donations and sites are great in the Biloxi Diocese, a mission diocese, to which the Catholic Extension Society provides assistance. The society defined a mission diocese as one in economically poor or disadvantaged areas or remote, isolated regions where diocesan resources are insufficient to sustain the Catholic Church presence.

With the blessings of Bishop Ricard and other bishops of Florida, Routsis-Arroyo said the Province of Miami and all of the Catholic Charities in Florida would provide that type of infrastructure for the state. The group was joined Sept. 8, by Father Roberto Garza of the Miami Archdiocese and seven other staff members from Catholic Charities in Miami.

While plans are still evolving, Routsis-Arroyo said plans include having Catholic Charities from across the state of Florida arrive in Mississippi to staff distribution and recovery centers that the church has started to get up and running over the past week.

According to Routsis-Arroyo, all of the Catholic Charities offices along the Gulf Coast are in daily communication to develop relief together and monitor activities. The Jackson Diocese has a good, strong infrastructure at its own Catholic Charities. The Biloxi Diocese does not have a Catholic Charities office, but instead has Catholic Social and Community Services, which is overwhelmed with the amount of relief. The overwhelmed agency also cannot rely on many of its parishes.

As an example of the need for staffing and aid, Routsis-Arroyo said 26 parishes and missions are located south of the I-10 corridor that passes through the Biloxi Diocese. Only nine of those parishes are in a sense "operational."

Those issues spurred Florida's Catholic Charities to begin their cooperative efforts. Routsis-Arroyo added the Province of Miami is not ignoring what is going on in Louisiana, as they receive daily updates of activities there. But there is a sense that fewer resources are available in Mississippi.

As of Sept. 8, there are four distribution and storage sites available that are accepting donations of non-perishable food items, drinking water and cleaning supplies. Routsis-Arroyo emphasized that no clothing will be accepted. A collection site is located in Pensacola and three sites are within Mississippi and are staffed by members of Catholic Charities offices of Florida and Mississippi.

Routsis-Arroyo will serve as the contact person for the Mississippi sites at the two Catholic parishes. He urged anyone wishing to donate to contact him via his cellular phone (941-468-6440) to discuss the shipping of goods

and routings. If organizations wish to transport their donated goods to Mississippi, it must first be cleared with Routsis-Arroyo, to make sure someone is available at those sites to unload.

He added that those transporting donations must be able to help unload and immediately leave for their own safety. There is no guarantee for lodging in Biloxi or any outlying areas, or for gasoline. Florida Catholic Charities' staff members are staying in Mobile, Ala.

Routsis-Arroyo added it is for those reasons — lack of gas resources and lodging — that he asked for volunteers to hold off on coming to Mississippi until those issues could be better resolved.

"There is a need and a desire for volunteers, but for now it is a safety issue," Routsis-Arroyo said, adding he hopes volunteers will continue to call and find out when it will be safe to arrive.

But as he continued his discussion from the back seat of a car traveling to Biloxi, a voice could be overheard from the front seat that summed up the crisis volunteers could face: "They're out of gas too."

It took a while to gas up the tank. Gasoline shortages affect even the presidents of Catholic Charities.

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