

Oil Will Not Overwhelm Us:
Encouraging the Laity to Respond Prayerfully to the Disaster in the Gulf
By: Mr. Anthony M.J. Maranise

August 29th, 2005 will be a day forever remembered by residents of the United States Gulf Coast. It was the day Hurricane Katrina slammed into the region causing more than eighty-one billion dollars in damage and taking the lives of well over one-thousand, eight-hundred people. For a storm like Katrina, property damage costs were easily overlooked and an intense focus rightfully turned to the unbelievable human suffering, physical and emotional pain that followed it. As vividly as Gulf Coast residents may recall Hurricane Katrina, nearly five years later, the focus now is on another disaster which also formed far from land in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. A new date – April 20th, 2010 – is being added to the “memory banks” of many coastal residents, tourists, workers, and those who rely heavily on the products of the Gulf for their sources of income. On this day, the Deepwater Horizon Oil Rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana regrettably claiming the lives of eleven workers who were manning it at the time of the explosion. This disaster, different from Hurricane Katrina in its number of fatalities and the means by which it affects coastal residents, carries with it similar concerns and anxieties for many. We must face the “surprising reality” through this disaster as well as every disaster that we are, in fact, responsible for our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. I call this a “surprising reality” because in my years of theological experience studying the human responses to disaster and suffering, it is always remarkably beautiful to witness the ever-abiding willingness to stand together, to come together, to greet one another as brother and sister when we are faced with overwhelming circumstances. We certainly saw the collective faith, fraternal sense of togetherness, and effort to rebuild and restore after Katrina. As faithful Catholic-Christians, we readily have an answer to that age old question found in the book of Genesis: “Am I my brother’s [and sister’s] keeper” (cf. Genesis 4:9)? It is quite clear. We are indeed! So, faced with this newest disaster, one which will have lasting environmental and economical impact, how are we to respond to the plight of our brothers and sisters along the Gulf Coast? We must begin with reality of life itself.

Spiritual Siblings

On April 20th, something much more horrific occurred than a simple oil leak. Eleven human beings lost their lives in this tragedy, which according to Congressional reports, could have been prevented if the Deepwater Horizon rig would have been regularly maintained. Before we even dare move forward in our thought processes about the impact that this oil disaster will have on jobs, the coastal economy, coastal wildlife, or the environment, we must prayerfully call to mind the fact that in this disaster, before we began to lose vacation time, beaches, wetlands, or wildlife, we lost our very own “spiritual siblings.” As the words of the Holy Mass proclaim, they have “gone before us marked with the sign of faith.” What can we do about this? Many of us are inclined to think, “There is nothing we can do in the face of death,” but so quickly we forget that Jesus, our Heavenly Father is the source of our eternal life. He says Himself, “I am the Resurrection and the life. Whomever believes in me will live, even if he dies” (John 11:25). Our “spiritual siblings” may have departed their earthly journey, but we must realize that their journey through life has only begun. They now stand perpetually in adoration before He who is Love Himself (cf. 1st John 4:8). It is our responsibility as their brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus to remember them in our prayers for the faithfully departed, to learn from their example that each day we must strive for eternal life and work to better Christ’s kingdom on earth. Even if we work in a field or industry that is somewhat removed from recognizable Christian presence, we must be the bearers of that Christian presence in our places of business and work. This we learn from our beloved “spiritual siblings” who began their life-eternal on the oil rig, Deepwater Horizon. As for their families, friends, and loved ones left to carry on, it is our duty as their brothers and sisters to also pray for them as they continually mourn the loss of their loved ones. We are called to mourn with them. In St. John’s Gospel, one of Jesus’ Apostles, St. Thomas, says to Jesus upon the news of the passing of His (Jesus’) beloved friend, Lazarus, “Let us go now to die with him” (John 11:16). This is what we are called to do. Dealing with the death of our loved ones forces us into an “emotional death,” or an “absence” of our own. Let us lovingly embrace the attitudes of our mourning brothers and sisters and spiritually, “go to die with them.”

While remaining ever-mindful of the loss of life which occurred as a result of the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion, we may begin to focus our attention on our spiritual response and assistance to those who will have their residences and work affected by the continuously leaking stream of oil. Portions of coastal Louisiana as well as their surrounding wetlands have

already reported wildlife such as marine birds with feathers coated in the thick crude oil. Presently, the recognizable oil slicks have reached coastlines as far as the mid-Florida panhandle with the most recent reports of “tar balls” washing up along stretches of white-sand beach in Pensacola and Navarre. The spreading oil, which is diffusing with greater rapidity, is obviously causing great natural conservation and environmental concerns, but directly linked to this is the concern that the oil spread will impact coastal tourist economies if beaches are damaged, as well as the commercial fishing and seafood industry.

Just Pray

Speaking now from personal experience, two weeks ago, I had the privilege of vacationing for two weeks in Santa Rosa Beach, Florida with my family and friends. Santa Rosa Beach is located approximately fifteen miles east of Destin and nearly equidistant west of Panama City on the Florida panhandle. During my time, using my experience as a writer and spirituality scholar, I spoke with local restaurant owners and some commercial fishermen who had just docked one morning and were unloading their catch. I asked each of them almost the same question: “Are you concerned about the oil spill?” One of the most startling responses I received was from the restaurant owner. Her restaurant is a staple in the city of Destin which locals and tourists alike often frequent and which prides itself continuously on having fresh seafood unloaded at their own docks just outside the restaurant and served daily, caught only early that very morning. Touching her hands to her chest over her heart, she said to me, “We are heartbroken. The oil has not even reached us yet, but we know its coming. The economy itself has already made a rough year for us, now this.” After receiving her reply to my question, I asked her, “Is there anything that can be done?” Her response was remarkably uplifting and courageously faithful. She said, “Just pray. We’ve made it through hurricanes; we can make it through this.” Her faith was certainly admirable, and it was that very faith that inspires the writing of this article today.

All of us, Catholic-Christians, are encouraged to offer our prayers for the well-being of all people of the Gulf Coast states: residents, tourists, fishers, crabbers, and all those who frequent the sea. Even those who work in the tourism and the hospitality industry will be and already are being affected simply by fears of oil ruining coastal beaches and the beauty in which they pride themselves. On my recent trip, I also spoke to a Condominium manager. He said, “It’s

not even into July yet and already we have had twelve families cancel their reservations here within the next month. The oil is not yet to our shores, but they canceled already. They're afraid!" Can we be doing more than simply praying for our brothers and sisters along the Gulf Coast? Certainly, and we are encouraged to do so. We can contribute our time, talents, and treasures to the efforts of safeguarding at least a basic quality of life for all of them. Time, talent, and treasure are three benchmarks of Christian stewardship, or the idea of "caring for Christ's creation." Our brothers and sisters are Christ's creation and we can care for them by financially sacrificing and contributing to those whose mission is to assist the people of the sea throughout this disaster. Our own Apostleship of the Sea in the United States has already taken major strides in this direction. We can give of ourselves from our wealth of time to pray daily for resolution to the continuous leak and for a rapid containment and clean-up of the oil. The Confraternity of Our Lady, Star of the Sea in Morgan City, Louisiana has organized a scheduled time for prayer aimed specifically at asking for divine assistance in bringing resolution to and peace amidst the oil disaster. We all can join them. At 6:15PM each day, no matter where we are or what we are doing, let us all pause, even if for a brief time to ask God for His divine assistance in the Gulf and along the coast, even in our own lives should we so desire.

Spiritually Assist

Finally, we can use our talents to spiritually assist. Today, I am using my talent for writing to encourage all who read this article to trust not only in the resilience of the people of the Gulf Coast, but in their human spirit, their steadfast abilities to recover quickly and maintain a sense of normalcy, but most of all, I wish to encourage the people of the Gulf Coast and all of us, in a firm, unwavering faith in Jesus Christ and the intercession of His Mother, Mary Immaculate, the Star of the Sea! Of the people of the Gulf Coast and their vibrant trust in Jesus, a woman was quoted in contemporary historian, Douglas Brinkley's book, *The Great Deluge: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast*. She said, "We don't let go of Jesus' unchanging hand just because of a hurricane." Her statement has certainly been true in the history of the Gulf Coast and not only am I confident, but I encourage all who make their home along this region, as well as all of us, not to let go of Jesus' unchanging hand because of an oil spill, but to trust that God's divine providence will intervene and "oil will not overwhelm us!"

About the Author:



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