

neighbors

WINTER 2012

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

Faith IS THE SPICE OF *Life* IN BILOXI

BY BETH GRIFFIN

The Diocese of Biloxi in southern Mississippi is like a pot of gumbo, with people and cultures mixed together for an intensely flavored experience, akin to the regional dish of the same name. Shirley Henderson, the veteran diocesan communications director, says, “The seasoning is the Catholic faith. We have beautiful liturgies and celebrations that appreciate what other cultures bring.”

Biloxi covers 17 counties along the Gulf of Mexico, stretching from Louisiana in the west to Alabama in the east and 100 miles north into agricultural heartland. Catholics have been a small but steady presence since the French settled the area in 1699. They now comprise just 8% of the population of the diocese. Biloxi receives critical support from Catholic Home Missions.

In the coastal area of the diocese, people make their living in the fishing, shipping, ship-building, and tourism industries. Many also work at military installations or for the National Aeronautics



Fr. Greg Barras of St. Michael Parish in Biloxi blesses a passing ship at the 82nd annual Blessing of the Fleet. Hosted by St. Michael's, the event marks the beginning of the fishing season for shrimp fishermen with prayers for safety and prosperity. Photo/Shirley Henderson

and Space Administration (NASA). Inland, rural areas support poultry raising and plant nurseries. The University of Southern Mississippi at Hattiesburg is also a major employer.

Still, unemployment is high, and the area's economic challenges were compounded by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The eye of Hurricane Katrina hit the Biloxi diocese directly, and almost every parish sustained damage. Only three of the 433 parish buildings in the diocese were spared. While most of the post-Katrina spotlights shone on New Orleans, Mississippians also rolled up their sleeves, started to clean up, and welcomed people displaced from other areas. But it's a long, expensive haul. The water-dependent industries are struggling to rebound,

and some parishes are still trying to raise enough money to rebuild. Parishes and parishioners alike are impacted by the cost of purchasing insurance in a hurricane-prone region.

*continued from page 1***FROM THE CHAIRMAN***Dear Friends,*

On the summer morning of August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast with sustained winds of up to 145 miles per hour and with a storm surge as high as 30 feet. In some places, the water raced seven miles inward. In the Diocese of Biloxi, certainly one of the poorest dioceses in the United States, the property damage cost nearly \$70 million.

Six years later, faith and perseverance have won out despite the staggering devastation. Homes, businesses, schools, and churches have been rebuilt. People have returned to their homes and local communities. The many struggles this diocese faced before the storm are still being addressed today amid the rubble. The shape and direction of people's lives have been altered, but not their will.

Situated just blocks from the Gulf of Mexico, shell-shaped St. Michael's Parish church took a direct hit from Katrina. The walls held through the storms, but little survived inside the church when Katrina crashed ashore. Even the massive two-ton marble altar was pushed aside. Yet, a crucifix still hung in the shadows, presiding calmly over a tangle of exposed wiring, broken glass, and scattered mounds of muddy debris. Today, this crucifix hangs over the main altar of a church lovingly rebuilt by faith and hope. If the Jesus on the Cross could speak, we might hear these words: "I am still with you."

I am grateful for your support of mission dioceses like Biloxi through the Catholic Home Missions Appeal. Together, we continue to strengthen the Church at home.

Michael W. Warfel

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee
on Catholic Home Missions

"Some people put Mississippi at the bottom of the totem pole in everything," says Henderson, "but people here are most helpful and welcoming. And when there is a disaster elsewhere, we pack our shrimp and our gumbo and take it there and feed those people, too."

Msgr. Dominick Fullam, Biloxi vicar general, says parishioners are fed spiritually as well. "There is a vigorous faith among the people, and the priests are happy. People care about their faith and they're happy to share it. Their parish is their home," he says.

Msgr. Fullam says parishes came together after Hurricane Katrina to be centers of service to their communities, helping one another and hosting groups of volunteer workers from outside the area.

The diocese will always need to be prepared for inevitable, but unpredictable, hurricanes, according to Msgr. Fullam. "The Church is here because the people are here and will continue to be here because it's a wonderful place to live," he says. "We will face the storms and challenges that come our way."

Perhaps the most enviable challenge for the diocese is the education and support of 11 seminarians. "It's a good problem to have," Msgr. Fullam smiles, but notes that seminary training costs "tens of thousands of dollars" per student each year. A Catholic Home Missions grant helps Biloxi pay for seminary expenses. Biloxi seminarians hail from parishes in Mississippi, Mexico, and Poland. They study at a regional seminary in New Orleans.

In recent years, Vietnamese and Hispanic immigrants have contributed to the gumbo pot effect established by generations of Mississippians with European, African, and Caribbean roots. Funding from the Catholic Home Missions Appeal helps the



St. Thomas the Apostle pastor, Fr. Louis Lohan, turns a spade of dirt at the groundbreaking for the new church in Long Beach. The original church, offices, parish hall, rectory, and school were all destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Photo/ Shirley Henderson

Diocese of Biloxi sustain active Vietnamese and Hispanic ministry programs.

Henderson says the last 30 years have seen a growth in the number of Vietnamese Catholic fishermen, who have lived and worked alongside several generations of their families to achieve the American dream of owning their own businesses. The diocesan Vietnamese Apostolate serves more than 1,000 families and is staffed by Redemptorist priests.

"Passing on the faith, reaching out to new immigrant populations and making the Catholic presence stronger will always be a challenge," Msgr. Fullam says. "We're the point of contact with immigrants who don't always speak the language."

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Nonetheless, Msgr. Fullam says the people of the diocese are open to newcomers. “We don’t see the divisions some people might expect to see. A number of priests are able to speak Spanish, and the people are welcoming.”

The Hispanic population grew by more than 100% after Hurricane Katrina, according to the 2010 census. Fr. Sergio Balderas, director of Hispanic Ministry, says some people came from other parts of the country to fill jobs generated after the hurricane, and others immigrated from Mexico, Panama, and El Salvador. He says Mass is celebrated in Spanish in 10 parishes of the diocese.

To serve the growing community, Fr. Balderas invited the San Antonio, Texas-based ACTS Missions to conduct a retreat program. “ACTS stands for Adoration, Community, Theology, and Service. With these retreats, God touched the lives of Hispanics in many ways, leading them to a conversion of heart and a greater love for the Catholic Church and service to it,” he says. “Before the retreats, I was calling the parishioners for help. Now they call me, saying, ‘If there is anything I can do for you, Father, please let me know.’ This is the kind of call every priest would like to receive, to help him continue the mission entrusted to us by the Lord.”

Fr. Balderas expanded the religious instruction and catechesis program for Spanish-speakers. In 2010, for the first time, diocesan Bishop Roger P. Morin conferred the Sacrament of Confirmation on adults and children from five parishes at a Mass offered in Spanish.

Fr. Balderas also invited couples married in civil ceremonies to validate their marriages in Church. He describes celebrating two festive Masses where 12 couples received

the Sacrament of Matrimony, and the Hispanic community sponsored dances and receptions afterward.

Henderson says the colorful Church festivals celebrated in the diocese evolved from traditions brought by various groups. St. Patrick’s Day parades abound, thanks to early Irish immigrants, and Mardi Gras may sound secular, she says, but is actually “a kind of evangelizing.”

One of the most picturesque annual celebrations is the Blessing of the Fleet, where the banner-festooned boats glide along the waterfront as a priest invokes God’s protection and abundance on the shrimpers.

Bishop Morin, who was installed as bishop of Biloxi in 2009, says, “We



Elders carry incense sticks in the entrance procession for the Tet celebration at Holy Family Parish in Pass Christian, Mississippi. Tet is the Vietnamese New Year celebration. There are numerous Vietnamese Catholics on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and Tet is celebrated in at least three parishes each year. Photo/Shirley Henderson

are extremely grateful for the generous assistance provided to us by Catholic Home Missions and its benefactors. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, for us to render many of the services we’re able to provide without their help.” ♦

DID YOU KNOW?

- Since it was settled by French explorers in 1699, Biloxi has been under eight different flags.
- Biloxi covers 9,653 square miles in 17 counties. There are more Catholics near the coast than there are inland, where Baptists are the largest denomination. One parish serves three counties in the northern part of the diocese.
- Biloxi’s Catholic population of 59,525 is served by 50 active and retired diocesan priests, 24 priests from religious orders, and 31 permanent deacons. There are also 9 men and 38 women religious.
- The diocese has 42 parishes and 11 missions. There are 10 Catholic elementary schools and five Catholic high schools in the diocese.
- Schools devote 17% of their budgets to property insurance. The rates reflect the likelihood of hurricane damage in the diocese.
- The Diocese of Biloxi operates the de l’Epee Deaf Center, the only such facility in the state. With help from Catholic Home Missions, it serves deaf and hard-of-hearing people of all faiths, with programs to promote independence, inclusion, and spiritual well-being.
- Gulf Pine Catholic, the diocesan biweekly newspaper, takes its name from the breadth of Biloxi’s reach: from the Gulf of Mexico to the piney woods of the heartland.



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In this issue . . .

Six years after Hurricane Katrina, the home mission Diocese of Biloxi is rebuilding and continuing its mission to serve the nearly 60,000 Catholic faithful in the area. From celebrating the diverse Vietnamese population to blessing the shrimping boats as they head into the Gulf, the 42 parishes of the diocese continue their good works with the help of the Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

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