Opinion

Guest Voices



Courtney Polk, cousin of LaTasha Polk, who was killed in the New Year's Day attack, reacts at a memorial on Bourbon Street and Canal Street in New Orleans Jan. 4, 2025, (AP/Matthew Hinton)



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New Year's dawned with numbing reports of a man who maneuvered a truck around barricades onto Bourbon Street, mowing down late night revelers before New Orleans police officers shot him dead. Stories of accomplices were soon quashed by an FBI spokesman who said the Texas-born killer, inspired by the Islamic State group, acted alone.

Fourteen people died; at least 57 were injured. In a cruel twist of irony, the city in 2024 saw a sharp downturn in crime, with homicides at one of the lowest levels since the 1970s.

The post-Hurricane Katrina déjà vu rolls in: *Disaster again. Why? How do we get through this one?*

As the years rolled on since Katrina in 2005, an oil spill, more hurricanes, more evacuations, more damage followed in south Louisiana. Home insurance rates escalated. New Orleans streets are literally sinking. A Mother's Day parade in 2013 saw 19 people wounded in a crossfire among feuding drug gangs. When more mass shootings followed, the legislature passed more permissive gun laws, all of it rattling the shared psyche.

With each epic assault, the search starts anew: a spiritual quest for stability, the life we once knew, the life we now seek amid madhouse politics mocking virtues that once held American society together. In a world gone haywire, how does the human spirit balance grief and hope?

On Jan. 6, President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden flew in for a memorial service. First stop: Bourbon Street, that rowdy admixture of strip joints, grand restaurants and hard-party thumpers, to lay flowers on a makeshift altar.

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Here, artists Roberto Marquez of Texas and Jodesha Baldwin of Florida had created "an impromptu shrine, marked with rows of handmade crosses commemorating the 14 victims, a tangle of well-meant graffiti messages on the walls, a selection of artwork devoted to the tragedy, and a sidewalk layered with innumerable bouquets, stuffed toys, prayer candles, and photos of the victims," wrote Doug MacCash of The Times-Picayune.

The Bidens met with survivors and attended a prayer service at St. Louis Cathedral. "New Orleans is unique in that its cathedral, right there in the French Quarter, is a ceremonial space for many public rituals," says James Carville, the Democratic strategist who has lived here since 2008. "In Washington, many people have no idea who the cardinal is. Here, the archbishop is a major public figure."

In his remarks of consolation, Biden addressed Archbishop Gregory Aymond as "Excellency," a touch of tradition for Catholics of the president's generation. Aymond, mired in an endless bankruptcy over clergy sex abuse cases, looked beleaguered as he sat on the altar, his face a mirror on the city's trauma.



President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden walk alongside New Orleans Archbishop Gregory Aymond as they arrive Jan. 6, 2025, at St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans for an interfaith prayer service in memory of the 14 people killed during New Year's celebrations in the city's famed French Quarter early Jan. 1. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

The day after the prayer service, on Tuesday, Jan. 7, the fires began in Los Angeles, spreading initially across 29,000 acres or 45 square miles, roughly twice the size of Manhattan. The footage was riveting, like scenes from *Paradise Lost*: houses, schools, buildings incinerated in Altadena and Pacific Palisades, people fleeing the flames.

My thoughts flew back to September 2005, when a New Orleans area seven times the size of Manhattan was evacuated. Craig's List posted the names of Orleanians and where they relocated.

My wife and I landed in Lafayette, Louisiana, staying nearly a month with friends. One morning we drove to nearby Grand Coteau, a village where the Jesuits have a retreat center. We met friends, equally numb and displaced, and found peace in the liturgy and in strolling the oak-lined grounds while news channels showed images of our city on life support.

In those raw weeks, friends from far-flung places sent us money. It helped to get my older daughter, Simonette, a Tulane sophomore, on a plane to Boston University, where she had been accepted for "the Katrina semester," since all of the colleges in metro New Orleans were closed until January. She stayed with friends of ours in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

In early October that year, we returned home to a "dry" house: Water trashed the yard but did not rise to the porch. Around the corner, a full block of old buildings owned by the archdiocese burned to a crisp across from Notre Dame Seminary and the archbishop's mansion. The fire department had no official cause of the blaze; a spokesman speculated that gas mains, erupting under the weight of water, caused flames elsewhere in town.

In those aching weeks after the flood, church bells tolled benign echoes of continuity as military helicopters churned across the sky. Miles of neighborhoods, off the grid, black at night, houses empty with waterlines across the front stretched out endlessly

like a broken mud town. When people met at the hardware store or pharmacies, the first words, inevitably, were: *How did you do?*



Houses in New Orleans are seen underwater Sept. 5, 2005, after Hurricane Katrina swept through Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. (CNS/Reuters/Allen Fredrickson)

I asked the question one night to attorney Ben Bagert, a former state senator who had once helped me on an environmental pollution story, at the supermarket. His house near Lake Pontchartrain had finally drained.

"These Christians gutted it down to the studs," he said with a look of dazed amazement. United Methodist Church members from several northern states had come like a spiritual army to help the flooded city.

"They did a lot of hard dirty work getting the drywall out and saved some of my mementoes," Bagert told me when we spoke again just the other day. "I worked alongside them. I think the same thing will happen in LA. We hear news stories about dastardly deeds of malicious people, but I believe for every one of those kinds,

there are thousands of benevolent helpful people."

As the fires were spreading in Los Angeles, here in Louisiana lawsuits were being filed against the city of New Orleans on behalf of victims' families, alleging failure to use available barriers to protect Bourbon Street — failures being probed in The Times-Picayune, New York Times, Washington Post and other media.

Meanwhile, at a city council meeting that opened with a prayer, council members praised police officers who charged the gunman; two of their colleagues were in the hospital.

New Orleans is beefing up security for the Super Bowl on Feb. 9. The din of ill-preparedness echoed as the city of angels burned: Mayor Karen Bass was off in Ghana for a presidential inauguration, as the Los Angeles Times reported, with focus on her budget cuts to the fire department.

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In New Orleans, the funerals of victims had begun as I grew increasingly addicted to Los Angeles coverage. Disaster stories do this to me, stirring memories that take on new incarnations across time. I have several friends in LA.

The first call came from Bill Bentley, a music writer, former publicist for Warner Brothers Music, producer for Lou Reed and Neil Young, among other industry bona fides. Seeing his name appear on my iPhone, I blurted: "Bill, *how did you do?*"

Yes, his house was safe; he was heading north to visit his brother.

I hadn't seen Bentley in ages when we met up in December 2023 at the University of Southern California for a screening of my documentary "City of a Million Dreams" at the I've Known Rivers Film Festival. The film treats jazz funerals as a historical lens, culminating with the city's post-Katrina comeback.

The Los Angeles venue boosted our outreach efforts for distribution of the film. The festival director, Torrence Brannon-Reese, a rhythm-and-blues vocalist raised in New Orleans, moved to LA in the late 1980s and in 1993 founded FA-MLI Inc., a nonprofit providing educational support services, arts programming and mentorship to underserved youth. Torrè radiated righteous purpose.

As I watched Malibu burning, following maps and TV coverage, CNN ran a report on parts of Topanga Canyon that had been seared as well. I contacted Torrè and sent funds as I could afford.

When we eventually caught up for a longer conversation, he said, "For me the fires have been surreal, reminding me of Katrina, where my family was affected. ... Back in 2005, I threw a fundraising concert to help my family and others in New Orleans. The winds here have been 100 mph this week, like a hurricane."



Topanga Canyon inhabitants look on as the Palisades Fire burns in the hills between Pacific Palisades and Malibu Jan. 8, 2025, in Topanga, California. (AP/Etienne Laurent)

"We're seeing the contrast in class status. ... Sentiments of people shift depending on who they think are affected by the fire. When they see wealthy people hit, they think they have insurance, they'll do OK. But every story is unique. ... A family of five can't cook; they have to eat out. The average motel is $125 per night, you're talking $3000 a month. ... The housing market is off the chain; many more people are

homeless. People who were homeless before the fires see the opportunities for housing tighten as resources go to fire victims. That's something I don't see people talking about."

As the fires raged on, Biden went to Los Angeles, pledging Gov. Gavin Newsom support for state and local officials as first responders battled the blaze. Biden called the devastation "catastrophic," stressing the loss of life and "families forever changed."

Keen to the moment, Donald Trump blamed "Governor Gavin Newscum" for refusing to send water down from Northern California to fight the fires, a charge Newsom dismissed as false and invited Trump to see the damage firsthand.

But in an interview with NBC News, Newsom worried that as president Trump would withhold or delay disaster aid, citing his record of doing so in states of leaders with whom he feuded. "He's done it in Utah. He's done it in Michigan, did it in Puerto Rico. He did it to California back before I was even governor, in 2018," Newsom said. "So he's been at this for years and years and years."

As the days ticked down to the second coming of President Trump, his cynicism toward Angelenos fleeing burned out homes should have sparked moral indignation among his putatively Christian base. But to most of them, it seems, he can do no wrong.

In a recent essay for The Washington Examiner titled "Caligula on the Potomac," Republican pundit Quin Hillyer wrote: "Trump II's pending reign bears too much resemblance to that of Caligula. The Roman emperor from 37-41 A.D., Caligula was known for trying to expand the absolute power of the emperor, humiliate the Roman Senate, spend the public Treasury down to oblivion, and promote an orgiastic culture of decadence in his court."

As Los Angeles burns, Trump crows.

Donations to assist fire victims may be sent to www.famlisoul.org.