

Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes, who was head of the New Orleans Archdiocese at the time, stands amid the rubble of the collapsed roof of Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Slidell, La., after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Aug. 29, 2025, marks the 20th anniversary of the deadly storm, which made landfall in the Gulf Coast region. The powerful storm claimed 1,400 lives, and caused widespread devastation, particularly in New Orleans and along the Mississippi coast. (OSV News file/Clarion Herlad/Frank Methe)



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In late 2005, just two months after Hurricane Katrina, the American Institute of Architects tabbed Boston-based urban planner David Dixon, to organize a national recovery conference with the goal of providing a roadmap for New Orleans out of the chaos unleashed by the most devastating natural disaster in U.S. history.

When New Orleans' federally designed floodwalls collapsed in whack-a-mole fashion under the weight of Katrina's relentless surge, a topographically challenged but cherished international city, which rests in a saucer between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, was swallowed up.

Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast Aug. 29 as a Category 3 storm. At one point, the storm became a Category 5, but weakened before striking land. Upon making landfall, it had 120-140 mph winds and stretched 400 miles across the coast.

New Orleans' battered, 300-year-old history has been marked by fire, pestilence and storm, but Katrina was unprecedented in scope and pain: 1,400 people died; 200,000 homes in Orleans Parish — 80% of the city — flooded; and hundreds of thousands fled or were transported to safe havens across the country, many never to return.

The Mississippi Gulf Coast 60 miles to the east also was pummeled but drew far less media spotlight.

What Dixon recalled from an early recovery gathering, held at a Catholic church in New Orleans, has never left him as a harbinger of generational resilience and

community.

"I was talking to one woman whose life had been devastated, and yet, here she was, at a recovery planning conference," Dixon told OSV News. "She was with folks who hadn't had incomes for months. I asked her, 'What was it like? How are you doing?' And, she said, 'Who knew refrigerators could float?'"

New Orleans Archbishop Alfred Hughes, then 72, had evacuated to St. Joseph's Abbey on the north shore to ride out the storm on Aug. 29. Initially, despite widespread power outages and downed communication lines, New Orleans seemed to have been spared the worst.

Two days after the storm, seminarians and volunteers with chainsaws cleared a path out of the Covington woods for Archbishop Hughes to make his way 79 miles north to Baton Rouge, where he had served as bishop from 1993 to 2001, and establish an emergency headquarters.

It was there — watching the 24/7 cable news on the television at Our Lady of Mercy Parish rectory in Baton Rouge — that Archbishop Hughes got a glimpse of the unfolding catastrophe: Floodwalls on outflow canals, which later were determined to have been poorly engineered, had breached, allowing the river and Lake Pontchartrain into the New Orleans saucer.

The Mississippi River Gulf Outlet became a highway for a water cannon to punch through weak defenses and swallow up St. Bernard civil parish to the east of the city.

Saltwater and God-knows-what-else percolated in a witches' brew for three weeks in the city while the U.S. Coast Guard and Louisiana National Guard recovery teams searched for bodies and removed thousands from rooftops. The Superdome, a last-resort outpost for those who did not have the money to escape the quickly intensifying storm, was shorn of its roof. The stadium saved lives, but when it went dark and hot, unspeakable horrors occurred.

"The human emotions that overwhelmed me were very powerful," said Hughes, now 92 and still providing spiritual direction for seminarians at Notre Dame Seminary as well as meeting and praying weekly with residents of an AIDS hospice in New Orleans. He retired as shepherd of the New Orleans Archdiocese in 2009.

"I was bewildered by the massiveness of the devastation — the helicopter flights over the flooded city. There seemed to be no life — human, animal or vegetative," he said. "The only place I could go to was the Lord."

Every day at 3 a.m., Hughes rose and headed to the parish's adoration chapel.

"In the quiet early mornings of those first few days, it became clear to me in prayer that I could hope to respond only if I developed a new pattern of life," he said.

This was still two years before the invention of the iPhone. Because of the lack of cell tower infrastructure, cellphone communication was limited largely to texting. Few calls got through.

"The lack of solid information was one of the biggest obstacles we had," Hughes recalled, noting that the information hotline was nurtured by daily meetings with archdiocesan staff members who had managed to get to Baton Rouge. Those early meetings focused on the safety of senior residents living in archdiocesan facilities, the whereabouts of priests, and an initial assessment of damages to parishes and schools.

Fr. Arthur "Red" Ginart, the pastor of St. Nicholas of Myra Parish on Lake Catherine, was feared dead because he refused to leave his rectory, which was washed away. His body was never found.

"There was no agenda to those early meetings," Hughes said. "We simply went around the table and asked what light could be shed on anything. That's how we began to get a picture of what had happened."

The archbishop relied on the leadership of Catholic Charities to get initial assessments of the damage and people's most pressing needs through their visits to relief shelters set up in cities across Louisiana.

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Those who went through those first three months remember the utter chaos.

Dr. Elmore Rigamer, a psychiatrist who helped Catholic Charities establish the Louisiana Spirit program in which teams went door-to-door to ask survivors to

identify their daily challenges, told archdiocesan staff members at an impromptu information session a week after Katrina that they would lose all sense of time, become muddled in their thinking and believe they might be going crazy.

"All bets are off," said Rigamer, now 84. "You don't go through these things often — for many of us it was the first time, And, it was total. It wasn't just like a personal tragedy. It was the whole community, the whole city, so normalizing that for people was a big issue. You don't forget this type of stuff. You remember where you were, you remember how long it took to recover — just like people remember where they were when Kennedy was shot."

Rigamer told OSV News he still counsels people who, even 20 years later, feel the Katrina trauma when another tropical storm develops in the Caribbean.

"Some people came out of it more resilient," he said. "I'm not a person who experiences anxiety, and I experience anxiety around this time of the year. Gradually, I think the majority of people not only got through it, but grew from it, and developed resiliency and confidence in themselves, and gained strength to go forward."

One of the bright spots of Katrina was the performance of archdiocesan Catholic schools. Fr. William Maestri, the retired former Catholic school superintendent, accurately predicted that the city's comeback was tied to "power and schools," meaning the restoration of utilities and a safe place for children to resume their education.

"Catholic schools were the first to come back after Katrina, and that's a testament to Father Maestri's leadership," Hughes said.

The brightest spot: the thousands of angels in blue jeans and hip boots who came to New Orleans on their own nickel to help resurrect a drowned city.

"Katrina really elicited benevolence," Rigamer told OSV News. "That's the good part of us as people."

Katrina's impact has been multifaceted on both the city and on the local church. New Orleans and adjacent Jefferson Parish have continued to lose population, not only in comparison to 2005 but also to the most recent census in 2020. The population in New Orleans has dropped from 450,000 in 2005 to 360,000 today.

While New Orleans' hospitality-driven economy provides a lot of fun for visitors from across the U.S. and beyond, it does not produce the type of jobs that attract people to pitch their tents long-term as opposed to the economies of thriving Southern cities such as Houston and Dallas, Austin, Texas, Atlanta and Nashville, Tennessee.

Many African-American residents who left New Orleans after Katrina found better opportunities and higher-paying jobs. On top of that, homeowners' insurance has skyrocketed as insurance companies seek to protect themselves from the fallout of the next major storm.

Hughes made the decision to close or merge nearly two dozen parishes after Katrina. That smaller footprint has shrunk even further while the archdiocese works its way through a bankruptcy process, tied to clerical sex abuse, that has stretched nearly 5 1/2 years and almost certainly will lead to further belt-tightening.

However, as Archbishop Gregory Aymond has noted, Mass attendance has risen since the pandemic by 5% in each of the last two years, and he sees a vibrancy among Catholics who have been through the storm and come out on the other side. In the last two years, the archdiocese has experienced a double-digit increase in the number of new Catholics entering the church at the Easter Vigil.

And, then, there are the Sisters of St. Joseph, who decided after Katrina to lease their 24-acre motherhouse property, which was destroyed by flood and fire, to the city of New Orleans for $1 a year so that an ambitious water retention park could be created.

The congregation could have sold its property for millions as the site for future homes, but they believed in the vision of local architect David Waggonner in creating the FEMA-financed Mirabeau Water Garden as a 21st-century way of removing water from New Orleans' streets and letting it sit for days before being released slowly into the city's drainage system.

The first phase of the garden should be ready next spring.

"Their consistent missionary vision was how could the sisters give back to the city of New Orleans, which had been so good to them for decades," said Ed Sutoris, executive director of the congregation. "This is a key project for water management to prevent flooding and potential loss of life for the people and the city of New Orleans."

After billions of dollars spent shoring up New Orleans' hurricane defenses — the massive, rotating flood-protection wall at the head of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet is a marvel of engineering — locals are hopeful but, if truth be told, anxious viewers of The Weather Channel.

"Could we survive it again?" Rigamer asked. "I hope we're not tested."