



Working to Reduce Poverty in America

PARISH SOCIAL MINISTRY

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By Colleen Mayer

When Dorothy Day reflects on the childhood roots of faith that led her to the Catholic Church, she shares an early memory of a California earthquake that shook her home into pieces, leaving her family with almost nothing. Yet despite the devastation, her community came together to care for those without homes, giving away “every stitch of clothing” they had. Even as a child, she sensed that the community’s compassion was a sign of what the Church is called to be: people of faith coming to the aid of brothers and sisters most in need.

Following disasters, the Church’s social tradition calls for a charitable response that respects human dignity and shows solidarity with victims. That’s why Catholic Charities has always been at the forefront of providing relief services. For example, in the recent disasters that struck Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands Catholic Charities USA raised over \$20 million to provide both immediate relief—cash assistance, food, water, personal care supplies and resources for long-term recovery.



Winter 2018 issue of **Charities USA:**
<https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/magazine/charities-usa-winter-2018/>

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CCUSA DISASTER RECOVERY DISTRIBUTION

TEXAS TOTAL:

\$7.1 MILLION

FLORIDA TOTAL:

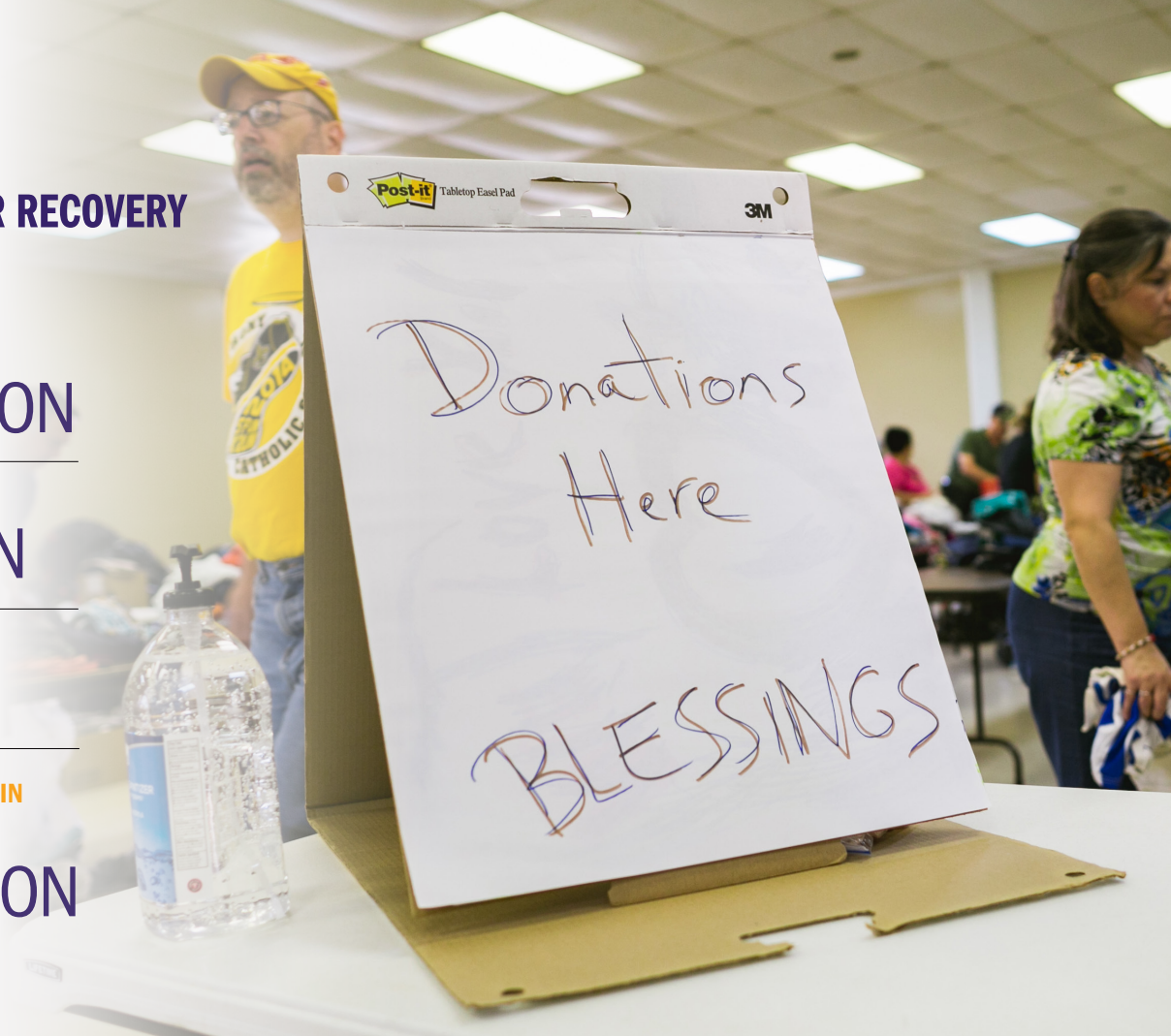
\$6 MILLION

LOUISIANA TOTAL:

\$10,000

PUERTO RICO & US VIRGIN ISLANDS TOTAL:

\$7.5 MILLION



Catholic Charities USA is the official domestic relief agency of the U.S. Catholic Church and is available to assist any parish in the U.S. and its territories. Catholic Charities supports disaster response and recovery efforts with direct assistance, home repair, home rebuilding, health care services and other programs that enable long-term disaster recovery.

Yet the Church's social doctrine also asks us to recognize the underlying structures in society which cause injustices. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis notes the disproportionate impact that disasters have on the poor: "Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited" (25).

Furthermore, Pope Francis insists that massive disasters are a sign of earth crying out for relief: "We need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair...

we can see signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters..." (61). He insists that to heal our planet, persons of faith must be open to an "ecological conversion" which leads to a "selfless ecological commitment" (217).

As we reflect on how faith communities can respond to natural disasters, we follow the examples of both Pope Francis and Dorothy Day, who stress that Catholic Social teaching invites an immediate compassionate response while also demanding deeper structural renewal in the face of poverty and climate change. ■

Collen Mayer served until recently with Catholic Charities of Tennessee and is now COO of Nashville's Safe Haven Family Shelter.

Parish Social Ministry & Disaster “How To”

By Sr. Betsy Van Deusen, CSJ



Tragically, we have seen and undoubtedly will see many more disasters in the United States. We hope and pray that our communities will not experience a disaster, but working to **prevent** and **prepare** will make a huge difference in the ability of communities to **respond**, **recover** and be **restored** after the event.

As Pope Francis has written, “We are stewards of the GIFT of creation. The cry of the poor and the cry of the earth are inter-twined. We need to examine relationships between persons, communities and the natural environment. I therefore encourage institutions and those who hold public and social responsibility increasingly to promote a culture that has the aim of reducing exposure to risks and to natural disasters.”

In athletics we have heard, “The best defense is a good offense.” This is also true for disasters. Having a plan will help to shape the outcome. What can your parish do? First, become a part of a local group involved in disaster: a COAD (Community Organization Active in Disaster) or VOAD (Volunteer Organization Active in Disaster). If there is not one in your community, contact your local government’s Emergency Manager or the Disaster Operations office of Catholic Charities USA. The presence of parishes in a COAD or UOAD offers

local knowledge and influence, as well as a commitment to the community and people to be of service. The relationships formed through these groups enable the work of response and recovery to begin sooner and the **long-term recovery** to continue years after the disaster.

In addition, it’s essential to develop a parish Emergency Operations Plan using resources from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

What can your parish do after a disaster strikes? **Pray – Pay – Stay (away)**. Our hearts are deeply moved in the face of disaster, but in its immediate aftermath **we need to let the first responders respond**. When it is time for our help, they will communicate that through social media, print and television media, and through the local VOAD and/or COAD. Parishioners’ role in this first phase is to pray and offer financial help. Also, purchasing assistance items from local business helps the local economy and avoids the difficulty in transporting goods from great distances.

When the timing is appropriate, parishes can provide safe places to gather and meet, serve as a staging area to administer aid and receive donations, and offer spiritual care and the essential services of volunteers whose faith has called them to assist during this time of need. ■

Sr. Betsy VanDeusen, CST, is Director of Community Partnerships with Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Albany.

Coming Fall 2018 from CCUSA: PLAN.PREPARE.PROTECT.

This four-level program is designed to engage individuals, families, parishes, and community-based organizations in conversations focused on disaster preparedness to create stronger, more resilient communities. It is informed by Catholic Social Teaching, which reminds us of our Gospel call to respect life, protect the vulnerable, and serve those most in need.

FOCUS ON THE PARISH:

Mary Queen Catholic Church, Friendswood TX

By Sheila Herlihy

No parish expects to be the site of a natural disaster. This was true for Mary Queen in Friendswood, Texas, located about 20 minutes south of Houston. Although a number of creeks run through the city, parishioners never anticipated what happened in August 2017, when Friendswood received 56 inches of rain during Hurricane Harvey. In response, Mary Queen became one of the many churches that worked to address the immense challenges presented by the floods.

Though the community maintained electricity, and the water supply was not contaminated, thousands of homes were flooded, and the streets were only accessible to boats for many days. In response, the city took a strong leadership role in divvying up between local churches the aid that would need to be given. For instance, one church was in charge of baby supplies, and a different church gave out cleanup supplies. Since Mary Queen had suffered minimal damage and was already known in the community for its food pantry, the church was asked to be a distribution point for groceries. Because it had moved church structures, the parish was blessed to have a big open building where the old sanctuary had been, perfect as a warehouse for food.

With the help of many volunteers and donations, the church provided groceries for 8,000 people over 14 days. The parish learned essential lessons while doing this important work. First and foremost was to cover the relief effort in prayer, both for the victims and for the workers. Additionally, parishioners discovered that social media was a great way to communicate needs, both locally and nationally.

Prior to a disaster, it is very helpful for parishes to have a working contact sheet of local resources and organizations. It was through such a list that Chris Austgen, Social Services Coordinator at Mary Queen, was able to be in touch with Catholic Charities' disaster relief operations. Mary Queen also had working connections with the Salvation Army, St. Vincent de Paul Society, and free legal assistance organizations.



Additional Contacts and Resources

Catholic Charities USA Disaster Response Office:
703-549-1390 and disasteroperations@CatholicCharitiesUSA.org

FEMA's "Developing Emergency Operations Plans for Houses of Worship": https://www.fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1919-25045-2833/developing_eops_for_houses_of_worship_final.pdf

"Parish Social Ministry and Disaster Services," a webinar by CCUSA's Parish Social Ministry Leadership Team: <http://bit.ly/2EDBCfV> (recording); and <http://bit.ly/2E BLJ4Y> (slides)

For people around the country who hear about a national disaster, a good rule of thumb is to "Pay, Pray, and Stay (away)." Prayer and donations are always needed, but frequently many people come to volunteer who aren't able to offer concrete help. With donations, it's important to find out what the situation is locally. For example, don't send pallets of bottled water if the local water isn't contaminated. Mary Queen parish still has water to give away over six months later.

Even in the midst of the greatest struggles, the generosity of people and the presence of God have been very apparent to the parishioners at Mary Queen. They are still a part of the recovery effort in Houston and Friendswood, and they know their work glorifies God through his children. ■

Sheila Herlihy is coordinator of Justice and Charity at the Church of the Incarnation in Charlottesville, VA.