



January 2012

Development Directions

REMEMBER, RECOVER, RENEW: THE REBIRTH OF ST. GENEVIEVE PARISH

By

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On Sunday, January 15, 2012, I had the honor of speaking at the dedication of the new church for St. Genevieve Parish in Slidell, Louisiana. There were two churches that were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina – my family’s parish, Our Lady of Lourdes, which has been rebuilt, and St. Genevieve, a small 500-family parish located on the banks of Bayou Bonfouca. This parish is one of the most unique parishes we have ever worked with – a multi-cultural mix of some of the most genuine people you would ever want to meet. From the first time I stepped foot into the parish hall where we began to meet, I knew I was in the presence of a very warm, engaging, and appreciative community. Here were the challenges with which these parish families were faced:

- *Begin to pick up the pieces as a parish community by getting the parish hall in shape as a place of worship, knowing they could not use the church built in 1958 because it had been destroyed beyond repair;*
- *Raise \$1,500,000 in a parish of 500 families whose average weekly collections was \$3500.00;*
- *Rebuild their own homes, of which 90% were either destroyed or heavily damaged;*
- *Organize a local, regional and national Campaign that would reach out and state the case for this wonderful little community who believed they could do it.*

With the above background, I would like to share with you the presentation – one of many that clearly shows the value of faith, the value of community, and the value of believing that God’s hands were with this group of wonderful people every step of the way.

From the early beginnings in the 1800’s with a pioneer brick chapel, to the confirmation of 47 adults and children in 1888 by Archbishop Francis Janssens, to Father E.J. Lavaquery’s visits in horse and buggy in 1890, to the building of the church in 1958, St. Genevieve Parish has stood out as a beacon of light for the many families who worshipped and grew along the banks of this bayou community. St. Genevieve: a very faith-filled, closely-knit, intimate family of believers.

But on August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina came ashore and life, as we knew it, drastically changed. The church, the rectory and the CCD building were devastated with over six feet of water; many St. Genevieve families also lost their homes and family members spread throughout the region. The following weekend, Mass was celebrated outdoors under the same oak tree where a Benedictine monk from St. Joseph Abbey once celebrated Mass close to 100 years before. A group of five parishioners the week after the storm grew to 600 people toting chairs and umbrellas as Father Jose Roel Lungay, the pastor, was able to return from the Philippines. Eventually, the parish hall was pressure-washed and repaired, and that became the hub of all activity. Meetings were held, yet pieces of normalcy were hard to be found.

Meeting with parishioners, the Archdiocese, FEMA, and others began in late Fall, and key challenges were faced in regards to the future of the parish and how it would navigate through the devastation. The decision was made to demolish the old church, and on January 19, 2007, it was deconsecrated. Katrina had blown off the steeple and the roof, flooded the sanctuary and destroyed the rectory.

Parish leaders formed a Building Committee to address the challenges, and the clean up continued throughout the campus and throughout the neighborhoods. With much input from the Building Committee, many parish families, led by Father Roel, Deacon Dan Haggerty, Deacon Paul Mumme, and Deacon Reggie Seymour, the design for a new church began to emerge, and in addition, on August 21, 2008, Archbishop Hughes dedicated the new 2,400 square foot rectory. Progress was being made – slowly but surely.

In the spring of 2008, St. Genevieve received permission from the Archdiocese to conduct a Financial Feasibility Study. The Institute of School and Parish Development (ISPD) began to work with parish leaders in this Study and eventually the Capital Campaign. It was determined that a campaign could generate between \$1.4 - \$1.8 million. With Hurricane Katrina donations and some insurance money already on deposit with the Archdiocese, another challenge was ready to be met. Campaign leadership was formed and in January 2009, the Campaign kicked off to invite three gifts for the new church: the Gift of Prayer, the Gift of Service, and the Gift of Financial Participation.

The Pacesetter Phase of the Campaign wrapped up in late April of 2009, and the Public Phase kicked off in early May. Operation Homestretch! was held in the summer, as the Campaign continued to gather steam. Over 95% of parish families participated! The real great news was that in October 2010, groundbreaking on the new church was held.

And, today, January 15, 2012, the wait is over; the anticipation is nearing its end. One day St. Genevieve Parish will look back at these past years and talk about “the way things were back then” -- when Mass was celebrated out under the oak the weekend after Katrina, and the parish hall was the place they welcomed back more and more families as they showed up weekend after weekend, and chaos was normal, and being a steward and a neighbor meant more than most any other time in their lives, and life as they knew it back in the Fall of 2005 was entirely different from the way they were in the Summer of 2005.

The road back has been a long one for so many individuals and so many families -- some are still here, others have moved on, and still others are kept in prayers and memories. One glance around St. Genevieve today, and it is plain to see that a lot of progress has been made -- the landscape of St. Genevieve has been changing from a visual on an easel to a church with a foundation.

To heap praise on a few people or one group would be unfair -- it has been a total community effort. More than 95% of parish families have participated in the Campaign and this effort; many have spread the news and the word of the needs of this community has been heard throughout the region. Committees and teams and ministries have met for hundreds of hours since that fateful day in late August 2005 to bring all to this one focal point in history -- the dedication of the new church. Thank you to those who answered the call to help rebuild. And, thank you to the leaders of St. Genevieve -- the pastor, the deacons, and especially all of the parishioners -- together you have built your place of worship for families of today and for many future generations. It is wonderful to finally be home.

LIGHT ON THE BAYOU

(written by a St. Genevieve parishioner)

Darkness covered the abyss, and the Church on the bayou was drowned.

But, as our faith was laid upon the wood of a cross,
We gathered around the wood of this massive oak and prayed.
Under those branches we found shelter,
Though some had to branch out.

And then, there was light --
A light we found in each other.
We mourned the loss of our Church --
Through its doors new life was found and
Through those doors life and death passed ---
Sacraments and sacrifice.

And so we buried the memory of our Church on holy ground,
But amazing grace was found --
We had the ultimate cornerstone; we had faith.

The history of St. Genevieve is not lost but carried
In the descendents of its founders --
A family by blood and bond --
We celebrate the ultimate sacrifice together.
A new Church will be built, and new doors will be opened --
Our story will be passed on through those doors --
Our legacy will be lasting.

The Church on the Bayou -- when darkness fell, we found the light.