

Notre Dame of Mt. Carmel Parishioner Reflects On His Experiences As A Red Cross Volunteer In The Aftermath Of Hurricane Katrina

Dear Gang,

Well I made it back in one piece but somewhere along the line picked up a devil of a cold. My wife Rose wasn't happy about that as it put a damper on our "reunion". It has taken me until now to shake the darn thing. I guess it came on because I was rundown from getting up the last 5 days there at 3 am.

I left here and caught an early (6 am) flight to Chicago where I transferred to a South West Air flight to Houston. That flight was held for over an hour but finally cleared into Houston. Houston is where they predicted Rita would hit. The flight finally took off and there were only 6 passengers aboard. I was the only Red Cross worker. There were 2 "security" people also aboard - I would have chosen a ballerina to protect me over these two. One talked all the way down there about how important he was.

We were the last flight cleared to land at Hobby Airport in Houston as both airports were closing. Inside the terminal were a bunch of passengers going out and a few police officers. Everyone else had gone home or out of town. I finally located a cab. He was riding on empty but gave me a ride to my destination. I tipped him well as he really didn't have to take me. Houston was closed down and also out of gas - there wasn't a station open all the way from the airport to the Red Cross headquarters.

They got me a room and then we waited for Rita to hit. She took a right turn and 13 hours later came ashore around the Texas/Louisiana boarder near Port Arthur/Beaumont area. I was in my room on the ninth floor of the Holiday Inn Select at the time. We got a lot of wind and heavy rain - kind of like an "American Monsoon". A few trees were down and some minor damage but nothing terrible - now if Rita would have hit Houston it would have been a different story.

I finally met with the Red Cross people in charge and after telling them I wanted to go out in "the field" they placed me in a courier position in the headquarters transportation section. I guess I'm lucky that I didn't go out and get a PhD as I probably would have been cleaning toilets - on second thought, I did refill the soap dispensers in the men's and women's rooms several times.

The courier job meant I got to drive around Houston and deliver things to various places - mainly other Red Cross people to the two airports. I did get over to Beaumont to deliver some chairs and tables to a newly set up shelter/volunteer center. For the first few days I was driving a new Grand Prix. Fast but, I really didn't like it. I acquired a new Chevy Malibu Sport Wagon which also was fast. Then about a week into the deployment I latched onto a 2006 Dodge Magnum. Nice car but this one didn't have a turbo and was sluggish.

On Sunday a week after Rita hit I took a day off and in the Grand Prix delivered several nurses to the airport and then headed to Beaumont and Port Arthur to get a first hand view of the destruction and take some pictures. Although this area was very near where Rita hit it wasn't damaged as much as I thought it would be. The bridge to Louisiana was knocked out so I had to head north to Interstate Route 10 East to get a cross the Sabine River and Lake Sabine.

As I traveled up Highway 87 towards 10 East I went through Bridge City and saw some damage then up through Orange and more damage. Across 10 East into Louisiana and the first stop was the rest area. The place smelled like an outhouse and there was trash from the people who had come before me

all over the place. I went further into Louisiana to a town called Sulphur and then headed south on Hwy. 27. About 18 miles south was Hackberry. It was set in the middle of a bayou. Most think of bayous as the ones they see in the movies. This was more like a low lands swamp with tall grass growing out of it.

At Hackberry I stopped at a Red Cross/Cameron County emergency shelter. They were giving various shots to the locals and passing out food and clothing. I had a chance to talk to the local Sheriff's Deputy. He informed me this was the last inhabitable spot headed south. I was now prepared for what I was about to drive into. I headed south towards the Gulf of Mexico. On my sides of the road (Hwy. 27) was the Sabine Nation Wildlife Refuge and bayous. I started to see the devastation from Katrina about 4 miles from Hackberry. Poles and wires were down, buildings were ripped apart with parts missing. I ventured further south another 10 miles and came upon a water tower with Holly Beach lettered across. Up to now there wasn't one house standing and just a very few businesses. Lots of trash and weeds in the road but the local highway department had made it passable.

I looked at the tower which was unscarred and proceeded another 300 feet down the road. I hadn't noticed it before but there was Holly Beach or I should say, there was where Holly Beach was a little over a week before. Now, as I looked, the resort community of some permanent homes and some mobile homes, home to 3500 was no more. It was leveled. There were a few upside down cars and trucks, poles that were the foundations for the permanent homes, and twisted frames of the mobile homes and lots of trash. About 400 feet to my north was what looked like a large part of a home but it was hard to be sure. There were bent bikes, toilets, refrigerators and even the kitchen sink but not a structure to be seen.

The sight did cause me to cry in the shock I was in. There were some Baton Rouge firemen who noticed some red fish trapped in an inland pocket and unable to get back out to sea. I ventured upon an alligator who was unfortunate and died on the beach. A few snakes and other wildlife but mostly eerie silence. There were some of the previous inhabitants looking for their belongings and the local police but little else. Others had been there I could tell as American and confederate flags were in various home sites flying.

I took about 80 pictures and by this time it was about 3:30 in the afternoon so I decided to return to Houston. Back up Hwy. 27 and passed Hackberry to Sulphur and Hwy. 10 West. Gas was getting low in my tank and there wasn't anything open until I would get nearer to Houston. I decided to stop at the Beaumont shelter/volunteer center located in the Ford Exhibit center just to the west of Beaumont. There I had a dinner of bar-B-cue chicken, rice and vegetables with a nice salad and pickled beets. The only thing I found to be slightly different is that they put gravy over everything. I guess it's a "down south" thing. Messy wasn't the word for it as the silverware was plastic ware and useless on the chicken so fingers had to be used.

I finally headed back to Houston and did find a gas station and got \$5.00 worth of gas to carry me home.

My main job was transporting nurses and other Red Cross personnel to the two airports (Hobby and Bush International) for their flights at various times during the day. For the last week I was up at 3 am each morning so I could pick up the "early outs" who had a 6 am flight. One set of nurses from Pennsylvania requested that I join them on the next disaster as their driver. OK with me. The getting up early did tire me out and by the time I returned home I was exhausted and had caught a nasty cold.

The following morning I packed and got ready to leave. Filled the Magnum up with gas, dropped it off and caught my flight home. It was an experience that to me was very worthwhile. Nice people to work with and an interesting 15 days.

Sincerely,

Tom

Hope all is well with all of you.

Tom Miller

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