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Deidre McLoughlin

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# Will Katrina open our eyes?

Deirdre McLoughlin, Lay Spiritan



**T**he Old Testament stories of famine, floods, wars and pestilence come to mind when I think about the last nine months: the tsunami in Asia, the war and its aftermath in Iraq, HIV/Aids rampant particularly in Africa, Hurricane Katrina and the floods, loss of life, livelihood and property in her wake. It was overwhelming to hear accounts of lives in ruins in the U.S., the wealthiest country in the world.

The plight of so many, mainly marginalized, was heart-breaking and provoked real anger. Most of the people who could not evacuate when orders came were the little ones: the powerless, the poor, the frail elderly, the mentally ill, the illiterate, the homeless — those who eked out an existence even at the best of times. They had probably slipped through the frayed security safety net in Louisiana and Mississippi, two of the poorest states in the U.S. Overlooked by the powers that be, they had no way of leaving the doomed city of New Orleans. Mostly African American, they remained trapped by poverty and class as Katrina crashed into the coast without mercy followed by ocean surges, broken levees, and floods of unimaginable depth. Even after five days, the scene in New Orleans, the Big Easy, home of jazz and Mardi Gras, looked like a war zone. People were dying with no water to drink, just putrid water all around, no food to eat, and no power electrical or otherwise. Help was

haphazard or totally unavailable. They were refugees in their own town.

It is difficult not to compare the immediate rescue effort on September 11, 2001 at the Twin Towers in New York, the centre of wealth and power, and the initial abysmal effort in New Orleans, the home of the invisible, les misérables. Katrina unmasked the “dirty little secret” of pockets of poverty hidden in most towns and cities of the world.

Help eventually arrived amid much confusion, most people got water and food and were evacuated. Many perished. The President visited and made official tours of Louisiana and Mississippi. He promised billions of dollars in ongoing aid and declared an official Day of Prayer.

## A wake-up call

It is so easy to apportion blame, to sit in one’s armchair and have all the answers, but perhaps this tragedy can be a wake-up call. Katrina happened in North America. Surely the mayhem, the chaos, and the dreadful confusion will make us more aware, raise our consciousness to a new level where we can truly open our eyes to that “dirty little secret”, that hidden face of poverty invisible to most of us in our cities and towns, but now made visible through our sisters and brothers in New Orleans. As Marcus Borg, theologian and author, said, “We have to crack open our hearts” and see we are all interconnected whatever our colour, race or

religion. In the eyes of God not one of us is greater or more important than the other.

## Concern for others

It was most striking that many of the impassioned pleas for help heard in the Superdome were not from people pleading for themselves, but for someone else whom they considered worse off. Their concern was often for someone frail and sick, or for a young mother with no food or water or washing facilities for her little ones. TV captured the amazing scene of the young diabetic lapsing into a coma before our eyes, the presence of the only nurse among 10,000 people, herself a refugee, testing the glucose level, begging the crowd for insulin which was offered almost immediately, administering it, and reviving the young girl from certain death. I was reminded of the empathy of Jesus for the widow of Naim whose only son had died, and how, seeing her sorrow, he was moved to restore the boy to life. In New Orleans too, despite the abominable conditions, it was evident that mercy, kindness, concern and compassion were present.

I continue to pray for everyone involved in assisting the people of the stricken Gulf Coast, but most of all I pray for the permanently dispossessed, the poor, the frail and the weak. The words of Jesus, “the meek shall inherit the earth”, seem lodged in my heart. ■