



# The Spirit of the Cenacle

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December 2005

## From the General Custodian ;; Feliz Navidad!!

Dear Family,

"May the grace and peace of the Holy Spirit be with us forever!"

In the first coming, Jesus arrived quietly, a defenseless child, without splendor and fanfare. We know from Scripture that the second coming will be marked by many signs of divine triumph; in the meantime, Jesus calls us to follow him in a spirit of humility. We are challenged to stay awake and to keep those around us awake and ready! Pope Benedict said recently: "The hope of Christians is directed towards the future, but is always well rooted in the events of the past." He added that the liturgical period of Christmas is one during which followers of Christ "need to wake up in their heart the hope of being able, with God's help, to renew the world."

As we work to implement the MCA goal of developing lay apostles who are "passionate about their faith and eager to share it," we constantly seek to discern how best to serve as apostles in the providence of our everyday lives. As we practice the Cenacle virtues so as to become better apostles ourselves, we must constantly remind ourselves that the principal work of the MCA is to form apostles. In short, we must "be good, do good, and be a power for good." We must remind ourselves that having the apostolic spirit means reflecting the life of Christ in our lifestyle. It is only to the extent that our own lives reflect and reveal the life of Christ that we will be effective in carryout our mission.

In this context, Father Judge's words resound with clarity:

What can be done to inspire, to provoke, to lead the everyday Catholic into the missionary work in the providence of his everyday life? What is meant by the providence of his everyday life? You meet certain people, you have contact with certain persons or places, your life has a certain circumscription, God overshadowing and intervening in all. This is called your daily providence. It is yours indeed; it does not belong to anybody else. Like the skin on your face it is yours personally, nobody else ever had it, nobody else ever will have it. Everyone of us is a center of a particular bit of Divine Providence. How can we get our people to realize that in their everyday providence they are the Catholic Church, that they are responsible for the Church, that they should act for the Church, be vigilant for her interests and plead her cause?

How, in a word, can we effect that every Catholic, no matter in what circumstances he or she may be, will be a missionary? If this can be effected then every one of these vexing problems will be solved.

You are to inspire others with this Catholic spirit. It is the will of Jesus Christ, understand, that this fire should spread and that it should spread through you. You should thank God for this grace, for this selection. It should give you, certainly, a holy and tremendous joy to know that His Holy Spirit is to burn in you for others, and is to be communicated through you to others (Missionary Cenacle Meditations, p. 223).

To be a missionary in the providence of your daily life is to bring the apostolic spirit to bear on all your activities and decisions. From the moment you awaken each day to the moment when you are overcome by sleep at night, you must realize that you never stop being a missionary. In this way all our thoughts and actions will take place in the context of the missionary spirit. In this way we will be true to our Cenacle vocation.

During this Christmas season I invite you to meditate on the lives of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph and how they fulfilled their call in their world and how that call affected others. Also meditate on what is the providence of your own daily life and how as a missionary you affect others. Yes, every individual Catholic can be an apostle because every individual impacts lives.

Finally, let us pray with our bishops in the United States: "That our Catholics be set ablaze with a desire to live their faith fully and share it freely with others. May their eagerness to share the faith bring a transformation to our nation and, with missionary dedication, even to the whole world. We ask God to open the heart of every Catholic, to see the need for the Gospel in each life, in our nation and on our planet."

May the joy and love of God fill your hearts and your lives always!

Josie Morales, MCA, General Custodian

## FROM THE INTERNATIONAL SPIRITUAL GUIDE

**Father John Seymour, ST**

My dear brothers and sisters,

The new Advent and Christmas season is once more upon us. In spite of its commercialization and stress it is still a time of abundant grace. It is a time of gratitude for all that is well with us. It is a time of longing for all that is not so well. In the coming of his divine son, the Incarnate Word, God is reaching out to touch and comfort us with his loving grace.

Just as with the coming of the Christ child, God's saving grace seeks hospitality in those parts of us that are most fervently longing for His coming – in those places where we are little, poor, weak, needy, hurt or humbled. These poor and hungry places are like little caves in our soul where God longs to enter and dwell. Archbishop Oscar Romero once noted: "Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God... Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God."

Before we were conceived in the womb of our mothers, we were conceived in the heart of the Triune God. Thus, God's longing to be with us and dwell within us is infinitely greater than our longing for Him. We can be sure that prayer from the empty and hungry places in our hearts will draw His grace to ourselves. In

turn we can share it with others.

I can think of no better way to spend your time than to take 14.4 minutes each day (that is 1/100<sup>th</sup> of our daily gift of 24 hours) to pause and slowly read aloud a short passage of Sacred Scripture. For example, read a selection from the Sunday readings or one of the daily readings of the Advent-Christmas season. Jesus, who is really present in the Word, speaks to us personally, even through passages that we have heard many times before. Asking for the help of the Holy Spirit, read the passage aloud several times, pausing whenever a word or phrase strikes you, listening to the Lord speak. As time permits think about what you hear and allow yourself to respond to him. At the end of the time select a word or phrase to take with you. Repeat it as you go about the day. Welcome this Word into your heart as you would welcome the Christ child into your home. Believe and act on this Word.

May the blessings of this Holy Season be with you and your families. Be assured that you are in my daily prayers.

Fr. John Seymour, S.T,



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## MCA GENERAL COUNCIL MEETING

September 5-8, 2005  
Riverdale, MD

**Present were:** Josie Morales, General Custodian; Joanne Jones, Assistant General Custodian; Alma Robles, San Juan Bautista Region (Puerto Rico); Diane and George Zine, Incarnation Region (Northeastern U.S.); Miguel Juarez and Maria Luisa, Our Lady of Guadalupe Region (Mexico); Mark McGuthrie, Holy Spirit Region (Western U.S.); Kay Knott, Trinity Region (Southeastern U.S.); and Ana Barquero, Our Lady of Angels Region (Costa Rica); Fr. John Seymour, ST, International Spiritual Guide.

### REGIONAL REPORTS

Written reports were submitted to each of the Regional Custodians prior to the meeting. At the Council meeting each region is given time to make comments not included in its report, to answer questions, and to receive counsel. Below are the highlights of those reports.

**Our Lady of Guadeloupe, Mexico:** Following the departure of the religious branches from Michoacan lay persons are now in charge of the work and growth of the Cenacle. The region was congratulated for its perseverance during this difficult time. The Council encouraged the region to select an Area Custodian in each area (Michoacan and Temascalapa) in order to assist the Regional and Assistant Regional Custodians.

**Our Lady of Angels, Costa Rica:** The MCA in Costa Rica is attracting many enthusiastic young people; however, some of the older Cenacle members have become inactive. Ana and Maurilio are attempting to unify the region and plan to establish a Regional Council to assist in these efforts. For the first time, this region is participating in the MCA's stewardship program. Josie and Fr. John approved Ana's request to appoint Jorge Soto as Regional Spiritual Guide, with the stipulation that his position be shared with two other senior MCA members. Fr. John reminded the Council members of the need for formation when selecting Spiritual Guides.

**San Juan Bautista, Puerto Rico:** The Region continues to work on the formation of Spiritual Guides. The Centros Sor Isulina (a social service center) has opened a new satellite office, which has become a new apostolate for the MCA. The Council congratulated Alma for the growth and development in the region under her leadership.

**Trinity Region, Southeastern U.S.:** The Cenacles in the region are responding with charity and zeal to the influx of many new immigrants in the region. This is seen as a sign of the Holy Spirit at work in the region. The Regional Council will hold its first meeting soon.

**Incarnation Region, Northeastern U.S.:** This region is in the reconstruction stages. Many of the members are aging and are in nursing homes. Diane and George are making an effort to get acquainted with the remaining Cenacles and members in the region.

**Holy Spirit Region, Western US.:** Mark McGuthrie and Martin Zavala (Assistant Regional Custodian) share the region's leadership as Co-Regional Custodians. Each delegate who attended the assembly is a recognized leader; Mark has met with the delegates twice since the

assembly to work on the MCA goal. Mark expressed a concern that there were too many meetings in the region.

### Regional Assemblies

The Regional Assemblies were a great success. Regional Custodians shared that the Assemblies:

- deepened the spirituality and the commitment of the delegates;
- challenged the delegates to own the MCA goal and to think in terms of how others can also do the work of God vs. what "I am doing";
- helped us to understand our founding and present identity; and
- strengthened the development of leaders among the delegates.

Every region contributed toward defraying the cost of the assemblies. The General Council unanimously decided that every region is to conduct a Regional Assembly at least every four years prior to elections; and this is to be stated in the by-laws.

### The following counsel was based on the regional reports:

1. **Youth:** We must be prepared to attract and work with the youth: to offer them something that they cannot find elsewhere and to provide direction, love, and a place where they feel secure.
2. **Regional reports format:** It was suggested that the regional reports include:
  - a) Blessings or good things that manifest the presence of God in the region
  - b) Specific concerns
  - c) Names of members who have died, along with the date of death and a sentence or two about them  
Reports should be e-mailed in order to have an electronic copy. A thumb drive was provided for each Regional Custodian for MCA files.
3. **Regional Custodian:** Being a Regional Custodian is a big job. Your family must always come first, and you need to take care of yourself. Regional Custodians need to delegate work and develop leaders.

### FINANCIAL REPORT

Copies of the financial report were distributed and reviewed. Regional Custodians requested a listing of amounts contributed by Cenacle in each region.

### GENERAL TREASURER

After deliberating, Peg Mayne-Clark was nominated and unanimously elected to be the General Treasurer of the MCA.

### BYLAWS

The final chapters of the bylaws were presented and discussed. Appreciation was expressed to the Committee (Kay Knott, Joanne Jones and Fr. John Seymour). The regional custodians are to take this draft back to their region for reflective review and constructive comments which are due back to the committee before December 1, 2005.

Everyone is asked to prayerfully reflect on the terms "Act of

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Consecration” and “Act of Commitment,” and provide counsel as to which term is preferred.

Smittie and Jim Bolner have graciously agreed to edit the by-laws for structure, format, grammar and style, in English. The Council requested that the Bylaws Committee look into the possibility of adding guidelines for the establishment of MCA regions.

### **RULE OF LIFE AND CONSTITUTION**

In 1998 the General Council adopted a resolution calling for the revision of the Rule of Life and Constitution. In 1999 the MCA General Assembly reaffirmed that decision. A committee appointed by Josie began the work of the revision for two years but came to a complete stop. Because the by-laws need the input of the Rule of Life and Constitution, it is necessary that the revision be completed in time for the General Assembly in 2007. The feeling is that major changes to the Rule of Life and Constitution should not be made at this time.

Canonical approval of the Rule of Life and Constitution is also important because the MCA is now in places where there are no STs and MSBTs. This creates a problem in some dioceses as the MCA exists only in the Rule of Life and Constitution of the STs and MSBTs.

The Council decided that Josie should appoint a new committee to work on the Rule of Life and Constitution.

### **COMMUNICATION**

Penny Krautter and Joanne Jones will be working with Jim Bolner in handling MCA communications, especially in the sending out of announcements and prayer requests.

Josie asked that each Regional Custodian make sure that everyone in the region obtains a copy of The Spirit of the Cenacle, the MCA newsletter, which is available on the Internet. If hard copies are needed for duplication, they can be printed from the Internet.

Members are encouraged to submit stories of what is happening in their Cenacles for the newsletter. It was also suggested that brief profiles, stories and pictures of Regional Custodians and other leaders be published in the newsletter.

### **MISSIONARY CENACLE PRESS**

The Missionary Cenacle Ordo and Father Judge's Missionary Cenacle Meditations (in English and Spanish) can be downloaded from the Internet. Copies may be printed and duplicated. A donation of \$10.00 is requested when they are downloaded. Most people still prefer to order the hard copy. The Internet address is: <http://mcenacle.org>.

Sr. Terry Ahearn, MSBT, who directs the Missionary Cenacle Press, needs persons to help with the typing in English and/or Spanish and the translation of the Ordo. Names of persons who

we are willing, capable, and responsible should be submitted to Josie. They must have a computer and e-mail access.

### **MCA GENERAL COUNCIL MEETINGS**

There was a lengthy discussion about having face-to-face General Council meetings once a year rather than twice a year. The Council decided to meet face-to-face once a year and have teleconferences up to 3 times in between to conduct necessary business. The face-to-face meeting will involve six days (four days to meet and two days to travel). The Spiritual Guides will meet during the same time. These meetings can take place in any region.

### **Important Dates**

The next General Council meeting will be October 5-11, 2006; the Council is considering meeting in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Regional Councilors will be contacted concerning teleconference calls in February, April, July, and September, 2006.

The next report of the Regional Councilors is due March 30, 2006.

### **FORMATION**

Much emphasis has been placed on the need for formation. Growing in the Spirit Day by Day is a supplemental formation manual which is currently available in English only.

**Formation Material:** Fr. John reported that he, Fr. Guy Wilson, ST, and Fr. Gary Banks, ST, have been speaking about developing formation material based on the Gospel of Luke, useful to form MCA Cenacles, members and others. Fr. Guy is writing the first draft. Kay will be assisting him. This material is to be used as an orientation and/or introduction to the apostolic life.

**MCA Formation Manual:** Josie requested that a manual be written on basic formation in the MCA from the time of candidacy and that it include specifics of what is to be covered prior to MCA consecration.

**Formation team:** Every region should have a formation team to oversee the formation process. Spiritual Guides should be involved in this team as it is a joint responsibility. Fr. John pointed out that Father Judge spoke of a highly spiritualized laity and was very committed to the spiritual formation of the laity. Formation is crucial to our mission and we should give it high priority.

### **MCA ANNIVERSARIES**

Josie suggested that it would be desirable to celebrate the anniversaries of the acts of consecration of MCA Associates (such as the fifth, tenth, and twenty-fifth anniversaries) Everyone liked this idea, and it is to be discussed at the regional level.

### **MCA GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

The next MCA General Assembly is scheduled at Holy Trinity, AL, on April 19- 22, 2007 (arrival: April 19; departure: April 22).

## MISSIONARY CENACLE FAMILY COUNCIL (MCFC)

**Centennial Committee:** The MCFC has formed a Centennial Committee (with members of the four branches) to coordinate the celebration of the centennial of our founding in 2009. Members of the Missionary Cenacle Family will begin receiving information from the committee in early 2006. There will be activities in various areas prior to 2009 and everyone will have the opportunity and is expected to participate. The major celebration will take place in the Incarnation Region (where the Cenacle originated).

**MCF Response to Hurricanes:** The General Custodians of the Missionary Cenacle Family are requesting your prayers and sacrifices in response to the emergency needs of the victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. An MCF Hurricane Fund has been established for monetary donations: Please mail donations to: Trinity Missions, MCF Hurricane Relief Fund, P.O. Box 7130, Silver Spring, MD 20907-7130.

### JOINT MEETING WITH SPIRITUAL GUIDES

Sr. Brenda Hermann, MSBT, defined her new her role as part of the team with Josie and Fr. John to help the regions develop processes for the implementation of the objectives of the regional assemblies. This would involve reflection on the pastoral realities of the regions, ongoing adaptation of the overall MCA goal, and formation of Cenacle leaders in each of the six regions. The Regional Custodians are to schedule dates for Sr. Brenda and Josie to begin visiting the regions.

### THE MCA ON THE INTERNET

We remind our readers that the MCA's Website address is:

<http://catholicmissionary.org/home.html> (English ) and

<http://www.misionerocatico.com/home-spanish.html> (Spanish).

For the present, MCA materials are also available on the Missionary Cenacle Family website:

<http://mcenacle.org/mca/mca.htm>.

MCA-related **prayer requests and announcements** are sent regularly to approximately 200 recipients who have access to e-mail. If you wish to be added (or removed!) from the list, please write to Jim Bolner at [jimbolnersr@cox.net](mailto:jimbolnersr@cox.net). Penny Krautter and Joanne Jones are now also handling prayer requests and announcements. When sending in items to be sent to the persons on the list, please send to ALL THREE at the following e-mail addresses: [jimbolnersr@cox.net](mailto:jimbolnersr@cox.net), [misspenny22@yahoo.com](mailto:misspenny22@yahoo.com), and [h1434j@bellsouth.net](mailto:h1434j@bellsouth.net).

Also, please remember that *The Missionary Cenacle Meditations* and *The Missionary Cenacle Ordo* are now online on the Missionary Cenacle Family website. In addition, the MCF website features the monthly reflections prepared by the ST community as well as special devotions for the liturgical seasons. To access these materials go to <http://mcenacle.org> and click on the links indicated. If you encounter any problems, please contact Jim Bolner, Sr., at [jimbolnersr@cox.net](mailto:jimbolnersr@cox.net).

## MCA MEMBER SERVES HIS COUNTRY



**Jim Newman, MCA, Followers of the Spirit Cenacle, Wareham, MA, shown here with his children, Abigail, Andrew and Patrick.**

Jim Newman, MCA, an Associate in the Followers of the Spirit Cenacle in Wareham, MA, was sent to Kuwait on November 20, 2005, to meet up with his unit and begin his deployment as a Combat Medic in the National Guard. He was assigned to Fort Dix in New Jersey on August 8, 2005, for training and preparation prior to his deployment.

Jim was consecrated about six years ago at an MCA Day of Reflection on Cape Cod in the presence of John McSpirit, ST, and Marie Boin, MCA, Regional Custodian. He was educated by the MSBTs at St Patrick's Parish in Wareham, MA, and so was familiar with the Cenacle charism for most of his life. Jim is a Eucharistic Minister and a member of the Knights of Columbus. His life is very service-oriented and he is always there with support when called upon. His faith shines through in everything he does.

Jim is 35 years old and lives in Mashpee, MA, with his wife, Amy, and their four children. He signed up for

the National Guard several years ago with the intention of finishing his education and enhancing his skills as an EMT. He has recently graduated from the paramedic course and is now a licensed paramedic. He also recently obtained a position with the city of Fall River, MA, and was due to begin his new job one day before he left for deployment. Jim is in the 3rd/126 Aviation Headquarters Company from Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod, MA.

Amy Newman, Jim's wife, is a chiropractor who works out of their home, and home schools the two oldest children, Andrew who is six and Patrick who is four and a half. Their other two children are Abigail who is two and Gabriel who just turned one year old on Thanksgiving.

Jim is looking at this assignment as a mission and states he will always remember the Rule of Life when doing his job in helping save lives and using his skills as a paramedic. He will be reminded of his vocation when he looks into the eyes of those who are injured. He is asking for prayers from the Cenacle Family as he begins this one-year commitment in the Middle East.

## Incarnation Region – Northeast U.S.

### Incarnation Region Retreat “The Eucharist and Mission”

The Incarnation region held its annual retreat in Philadelphia at the Mother Boniface Spirituality Center on October 28-30, 2005. There were forty retreatants, representing eight Cenacles. The theme of the retreat was “The Eucharist and Mission.” Presenters were Fr. Marco Antonio Sánchez, ST, Sr. Nancy Walsh, MSBT, and Br. Steve Vesely, ST. Josie Morales, our General Custodian, was also in attendance. The facilitator was Shawn Witmer, MCA, director of the Missionary Cenacle Volunteers; Pat Regan, who as scheduled to serve as facilitator, could not attend because of illness in her family. Since the group was made up of English and Spanish speakers, Josie Morales served as translator.

It was soon apparent that the retreatants had one thing in common: we had been invited personally to become associated with the Cenacle. On Saturday morning, Sr. Nancy Walsh, MSBT, joined us. Her topic was “Living the Eucharist, Behold Who You Are, Become What You Receive.” She illustrated her points with anecdotes and historical accounts. Celebration, said Sr. Nancy, is central. The goal of the Eucharist is living the life of the Trinity. Eucharist leads to mission. Christian hope must shine forth, which is why Christ stays with us in the Eucharist. We become a witness of hope in the world. According to Sr. Nancy, Eucharist is a verb--an action word. We are meant to be Eucharistic people, out-pouring ourselves for others.

Fr. Marco Antonio Sanchez, ST, presided at the mass and made a presentation on the Eucharist. He stressed that the Eucharist was a community celebration focusing on Christ’s presence with his people. He asked us to reflect on our initiation to the Cenacle. We took some quiet time to reflect on how is it that we come to the Eucharist.

On Saturday night we had our regional meeting and got to know Diane and George Zine, our regional custodians. At the meeting the formation group distributed a list of formation materials available in English and Spanish.

Our third presentation was by Br. Steven Vesely, ST. His topic was “Eucharist in Our Daily Lives - Making a Difference in the World.” His theme was that vocations are varied and that all vocations are important and blessed by God. Br. Steve gave us a valuable survey of the history of Eucharistic practices. In small groups we discussed how Christ is present to us.

---Margaret A. Flanagan, MCA, Holy Redeemer Cenacle, NYC

**Jim Newman, MCA, Followers of the Spirit Cenacle, Wareham, MA, with wife, Amy, and daughter, Abigail. (Story on p. 6)**



## **San Juan Bautista Region - Puerto Rico**

The San Juan Bautista Region is grateful for your prayers, expressions of love and comforting words towards Sarai Melendez, Regional Spiritual Guide for Puerto Rico. Losing two sons in three months has been a trauma, but Sarai has not felt that she was alone during this time of grief. She and her family send their love and appreciation.

The MCA in Puerto Rico recently celebrated our founding charism—the challenge of Father Judge that every Catholic be an apostle. Our greatest joy during the celebration was to receive and introduce the three groups of Cenacles still in the process of formation. Of the three groups, two of them are youth groups. The adult candidate Cenacle has chosen the name “Followers of Christ Cenacle,” and is made up of residents of Loiza. The two youth groups are from San Juan and have chosen the names “Followers of John Paul II” and “Followers of the Holy Spirit,” respectively. The presence of these adolescents filled our celebration with life and gave hope a new meaning.

During the celebration we also installed our new Regional Spiritual Guides in the presence of Fr. Francisco Conkle, ST. Our new leadership team is made up of Sarai Melendez, MCA (South Area), Francisco Marrero, MCA (North Area), Sister Rose Morales MSBT, and Fr. Vicente Pascualetto, ST.

Our MCA family in Puerto Rico is producing beautiful fruits, all for the glory of the Triune God.

In Love and in Service

Alma Robles, Regional Custodian

## **Trinity Region - Southeastern U.S.**

Resurrection Cenacle of Dothan, AL, held a Commitment Ceremony in October for new member, Nancy Savey. We now have four MSBTs missioned in Dothan. They attend our Cenacle meetings, when they are able. They are Sr. Miriam Fiduccia, Sr. Rose Marie Martel, Sr. Grace Raymond Tighe, and Sr. Luisa Marie Zapata. Sr. Miriam, who is the Director of Pastoral Services for Families and Parish Leadership, works for St. Columba in Dothan, and replaced Sylvia Grant, who retired last year. The other three are working in the Hispanic Ministry in the Dothan Deanery, which includes Dothan and Enterprise. One of our members, Marie Gangle, has been in the hospital and is now receiving therapy for a broken pelvis. Mady Flohr resigned from our Cenacle to form a new Cenacle in Enterprise with Father Francisco Nunez, ST. Father Guy Wilson will be joining us for our prayer meetings and celebrating mass with us. This year and next year we will be studying Pope John Paul II's encyclical on the Eucharist. Peg McElroy will be visiting our Cenacle and several other Cenacles in our area on December 3, 2005.

Betty Wittekind,

Assistant Custodian, Resurrection Cenacle, Dothan, AL



With gratitude and prayers we joyfully celebrate with Vicente and Alma Mora their 16th Wedding Anniversary on December 13, 2005.

### **A REFLECTION ON HURRICANES**

Smittie and Jim Bolner, MCA, Christ the Servant Cenacle, Baton Rouge, LA

For those of us who live in hurricane country, there is always a great sense of anticipation during the hurricane season as we watch the weather forecasts and track the paths of the storms on one of those little maps we get from the bank or from McDonald's. This August was not so different. When we learned that Katrina might be headed our way, we stocked up on batteries, bottled water, and Vienna sausages; we called relatives to make sure that they were evacuating, anticipating that some would come over and we would have a great slumber party. But as we watched on TV as Katrina approached the Gulf Coast, our sense of urgency heightened. On Saturday night, in a state of panic, we urged our son and his wife to leave New Orleans. Like many they were reluctant because this had happened so many times before, and they were afraid of the looting that might occur if the entire city were evacuated. However, at 2:00 a.m. on Sunday morning, they packed clothes for two days and headed north on Interstate 10, where they joined many others who had decided that perhaps this was for real. Other close relatives and friends from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast had evacuated earlier. On Monday, August 29, as the pine trees in our back yard swayed and bent, we once again experienced the eerie feeling that we had gotten many times before during hurricanes. We knew that this one was different. Although Baton Rouge is some 100 miles from the coast, we do get the high winds and the rain. We even know when the "eye" is passing nearby as we feel the cessation of the wind and the quiet. And then it was over, or so we thought. We watched TV

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with disbelief for what seemed like endless days as the cameras captured the images of rising flood waters that destroyed New Orleans. We saw the kindling and the broken walls that were all that remained of the beautiful old homes and the shiny new casinos along the Mississippi Gulf Coast. We saw the thousands who endured untold misery in the Superdome and the New Orleans Convention Center because they were too poor to escape. We watched as the police turned back a crowd of people to prevent them from crossing a bridge to escape the flood waters. We saw the looters as they ransacked offices and shops. First-hand, we experienced the doubling of the population of Baton Rouge as evacuees flooded the city. We heard the helicopters as they whirred overhead taking those in need of medical assistance to a shelter nearby at LSU. And we asked ourselves, "Is this what war is like?"

Two weeks after Katrina, we again experienced the devastation as Rita struck the Gulf Coast. This time our relatives in Cajun country and our brother in East Texas were affected. Whole villages and towns along the west coast of Louisiana were totally destroyed. They have not received the media coverage that has been given to New Orleans or even to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but the losses in this predominately Cajun area are astronomical. Many of the people who live there make a living by fishing or farming. Much of their land is gone, washed over by salt water, their boats are destroyed, and they have lost their homes.

And the stories go on and on. Fredricka, a 10-year old student that Smittie is tutoring, related how she, her two sisters and her mother, with the help of her uncle, escaped their home that was flooded by fourteen feet of water by swimming to an overpass on the Interstate. Later they were rescued by a helicopter, which took them to a shelter in Baton Rouge. She has difficulty concentrating and talks frequently about going "home" to New Orleans and going back to her old school. There are thousands of children like Fredricka scattered throughout the country.

For us personally, the material losses have been minimal. We are saddened by the loss of our son's house and all his possessions and concerned about his future livelihood in a city that is struggling to survive. Our nieces and nephews along the coast and those in Cajun country are rebuilding their homes, and have resumed their daily lives. Our brother in Texas had only slight damage to his property. Our friends from New Orleans have either moved back or have relocated.

What has changed? Even though we have not experienced significant material losses, we are very much burdened by this event. We are devastated over the destruction of New Orleans and the beautiful Mississippi Gulf Coast. We miss the Creole nature trail which wound around bayou country and along the western coast of the state. But it is more than that which saddens us. We are saddened by the poverty and racism we witnessed on TV and which we have seen first-hand in the shelters. We are anguished by the inadequate response by government at all levels—local, state, and national—both before the storms and since.

As we wait for the celebration of the miracle of the birth of Christ, we cannot help but ask "WHY, GOD, WHY US?" We do not believe, as some do, that Katrina and Rita were the work of a wrathful God, bringing punishment to a "wicked" city and to gambling towns. If this were so, why would good people also suffer? We do not know WHY, but we know that we should be looking to ourselves for some answers. We should be asking about global warming, political corruption that resulted in inadequate levees and coastal erosion, and the lack of emergency preparedness. The entire world witnessed the poverty and racism that exists in our state, but New Orleans and rural Louisiana are not unique. We should be asking ourselves how we as a country can allow third-world conditions to exist in our cities and rural areas, how we can allow thousands of citizens to continue to be without adequate shelter four months after Katrina and Rita while Congress wrangles over who is to blame.

Christmas is a time of hope, a time of anticipation. We do see rays of hope. The response of individuals and groups from all over the world to the plight of the hurricane victims was heartwarming. It gives us hope to know that we have been shaken out of our comfortable middle-class lives into the realization that it is time to do something about the problems that confront us. It is good and right for us to help those who have experienced the devastation of Katrina and Rita, but it is also time to protect our lands and our natural resources, to educate all our children, to provide adequate housing and health insurance for those in need, to assure a living wage for the working poor. Let us pray that never again will police prevent thousands of people from fleeing to safety because of the color of their skin. Let us pray that little children and the elderly will be taken care of and not abandoned on rooftops and in nursing homes; let us pray that the message of love and compassion will reach our leaders and that they will govern honestly and justly; let us pray that we have the courage to persevere in the face of adversities, to speak out for what is right, and to respond wisely to help make this a better place to live.