

The days after Hurricane Ida: A long Reflection

Our ordeal began on Saturday morning, August 29th with a visit to an Evacuation Center in town where almost a hundred people were gathered to wait the storm. We met, talked and prayed with our local people some of whom were known to us.

On the way in the shelter we first encountered a young man nervously pacing outside the building. As soon as he saw us, tears filled his eyes — he was very worried about his wife who was 6-month pregnant, as well as the rest of his family. Unable to do anything and go anywhere, he was just hoping for the best. The Bishop and I prayed with him and then went inside to visit the young man's family.

After our visit at this shelter, we drove to another shelter located on the other side of our city, in another town. However, the wind and rain was already picking up so fast that we have no choice but to return back to the rectory; the hurricane is fast approaching. After the Angelus bell rang that night, we hardly did much but to each go to our rooms or our small prayer room to pray, and wait. It didn't take long before the winds came with the rain — we saw them coming! By evening the whole city was in darkness and all you hear is howling of the wind, the pounding of the rain with debris on our rectory walls, and sounds outside that seemed to tell us Ida is here and she's in full control.

We woke up last Monday morning, August 30th to sights I haven't seen in the 34 years that I've been living in my adopted home of Thibodaux, Louisiana. This city and the whole of our diocese covering 5 civil parishes (counties), with a total population of 237,171, (Catholics 90,000), just suffered the wrath of Hurricane Ida, a Category 4 storm pounding us with 145-150 mph wind and rain that lasted for 18 hours. The electricity went out, the phone signals

disappeared, sirens from ambulances, police and firetrucks were the only sound you'll hear.

We immediately took off from the comfort of my Rectory, the Bishop, our Vicar General and I anxious to check on our people and places. We didn't have to go far to see the immediate effects of the storm for right there outside the back door of my Rectory were broken branches from our century-old Live Oak trees, parts of the copper roof from the Co-Cathedral church, broken pieces of my rectory and buildings. I didn't even thought of checking our campus for damages — I just want to go out, out there where I know our people are.

As soon as we pulled out of our driveway parking lot, the leaning, bent and fallen electric posts and wires dangling from them were the first things we saw, calamity-pruned trees and debris from houses everywhere littered the roads. People who stayed were already outside their homes, picking up broken pieces of properties they worked so hard to build, throwing away damaged belongings that once held memories, pausing every now and then to look around, look at each other, and with humble submission continue on the clean-up. This scene was repeated at every home and place we passed by.

The word "catastrophic" is the best word to describe the scenes around us. There were homes without walls, buildings without roofs, places without people. Some people were desperately driving trying to get to their homes and places hoping to save what was left behind, and to some, not much. We drove as far as we could in the areas surrounding us trying to see people, places and check on our churches. 36 of our 38 churches suffered significant damages with 2 churches that needs major repairs. Approximately 90,000 homes & businesses were destroyed & about 20,000 were inhabitable and their owners homeless.

For the next few days we did the same thing with occasional breaks to attend briefings of local EOC officials, have meetings with our diocesan leadership, meet donors and organize donations, prepare & distribute meals — over and over again. And each day, we saw people as above and sights that haven't changed much. The reality of our situation became clear: it will take a long time for us to recover.

I spoke with so many grandparents with tears in their eyes, worried parents, and exhausted few volunteers. We are slowly being drained of many things: it has been 7 long days.

Yesterday after spending all day down the bayou (Golden Meadow, Galliano, Cut Off, Larose) from 7 am till almost 6 pm, I finally got to return to my Rectory. I started driving down the road watching the now familiar scenery. Caught in a long traffic I turned the radio on but what came out are same reports and stories about the devastations in NOLA that has saturated the airwaves but not much mentioning the bayou communities who were deeply and mostly affected by the hurricane. I decided to turn the radio off and will just listen to some music to give my mind and soul a rest. When I turned on my carplay, I was surprised with the music that came on from one of my favorite artists. I was listening to her long before the storm came and the words of her music brought tears in my eyes; that moment everything came together, and then some. The song is "How can I keep from Singing" by Eva Cassidy.

The traffic very slowly started moving with the music in my car playing along. As I passed by the road, I saw made-up distribution stands and locations organized randomly by people, businesses and churches. There were truckloads of donations scattered everywhere brought about by people from Nebraska, Michigan, Texas — everywhere! Our good neighbors from the Dioceses of Lafayette and Lake Charles sent their Catholic Charities personnel, crews

and volunteers to help us bringing with them food, supplies and "faithful-power"! There were people helping people, neighbors reaching out to neighbors, people praying for and with each other. Smiles and laughters, hugs and kisses were shared. What little they have, they gave and shared without regard or distinction. Seeing all these, "How can I keep from Singing?!" And I know more of this will come, I already saw it coming. In the midst of all the devastation and destruction I saw faith comes alive and hope slowly trickle in brought about by generous people who gave from the richness of their hearts.

In just a few minutes I will celebrate my Sunday Mass — the ultimate gift of God that made of these things possible. This core of our faith is what made us rise above every situation, endure all things and hope beyond hope. With this in our hearts and minds even surrounded by tragedies, we have reasons to sing and believe and celebrate. We may have lost roofs, walls, walls, homes and businesses — but we have God who gave us everyone and everything! And God will see us through this as always, just keep on believing and singing His love & praise.

<https://youtu.be/0QAIUPwfj6o>

Father Vic+

**Prayer to St. Joseph during the
YEAR OF ST. JOSEPH
(08 December 2020-08 December 2021)**

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer, Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary. To you God entrusted his only Son; in you Mary placed her trust; with you Christ became man. Blessed Joseph, to us too, show yourself a father and guide us in the path of life.

Obtain for us grace, mercy, and courage, and defend us from every evil. Amen