

DISASTERS: A Catholic Response

By Lorene Hanley Duquin

(Courtesy of Our Sunday Visitor)

Something terrible happens that leaves people dead, hurt, or homeless. Maybe it's a hurricane, tornado, flood, famine, epidemic, earthquake, tidal wave, or other natural catastrophe. Maybe it's a plane crash, train wreck, industrial mishap, pollution spill, or other horrible accident. Maybe it's a suicide bombing, shooting spree, terrorist attack, or some force of evil caused by human beings.

Whether a disaster happens in your own hometown or on the other side of the world, you may wonder if there is an authentic Catholic response.

The answer is yes.



What Catholics Believe

Active concern for people in need is an integral part of the teachings of Jesus and the traditions of the Catholic Church.

In the Gospels, Jesus assures us that the blessings of God are bestowed on those who help the poor (see Matthew 6:2-4). Jesus shows us a rich man who is denied eternal salvation because he ignored the needs of Lazarus, a hungry beggar (see Luke 16:19-31). Jesus commands us to love one another as He loves us (see John 13:34). Jesus also tells us that when we reach out to others, we reach out to Him. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

In the early Church, the tradition of outreach to the suffering became firmly established. St. Paul paints a picture of humanity as the Mystical Body of Christ. "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12:26). In the early Christian communities, no one was left in need (see Acts 4:32-35).

Many of the great saints dedicated their lives to helping others. St. Gregory the Great made it clear that reaching out to others is not optional. "When we attend to the needs of those in want," he said, "we give them what is theirs, not ours. More than performing works of mercy, we are paying them a debt of justice."

Today, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* asks a poignant question: "How can we not recognize Lazarus, the hungry beggar ... in the multitude of human beings without bread, a roof or a place to stay?" (no. 2463).

Direct aid to those in need is an authentic Catholic response to a disaster. The question that we must ask ourselves is: What is the best way to help others in an emergency?

When Disaster Strikes

There are several stages following any major disaster, and each stage has specific needs.

The **first stage** is the emergency response.

Local medical and service agencies, the Red Cross, and, in the United States, the Federal Emergency Management Agency are the first to appear on the scene to secure the area and provide for the immediate needs of the victims. This initial period can be chaotic and dangerous. Volunteers are not needed at this stage and could actually cause additional problems if they show up unexpectedly. The best thing you can do immediately after the disaster strikes is pray for the victims of the disaster and for those who will come to their aid. Prayer is powerful and can do more to help than most of us could ever imagine, especially in those moments when we feel most powerless to help.

We can never love our neighbor too much.

— St. Francis de Sales

The **second stage** is the relief or recovery period.

At this point, professional and faith-based disaster-response organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services, appear on the scene with trained volunteers, who provide direct assistance to the survivors, organize the clean-up process, and make temporary repairs to damaged homes. Sometimes, an appeal will go out for volunteers with specific skills, such as carpenters, electricians, plumbers, or engineers. If you think you can help, call one of the response agencies first and ask how they can use you and where you should report.

Don't organize a collection of food, clothing, or other supplies until you contact a recognized relief organization to find out exactly what is needed, how it should be packaged, and where it should be sent.

Experts agree that the best way to help is to send a cash donation to a recognized relief organization. Catholic Charities USA, the Red Cross, and Catholic Relief Services are all highly rated agencies with over 90 percent of each donated dollar going directly to disaster relief.

With cash donations, there are no crates to unpack, no sorting, no distribution nightmares, no inappropriate donations to be discarded. Victims receive vouchers to purchase what they need. Cash donations save jobs and help create new businesses in stricken areas because victims buy directly from local merchants and manufacturers. Studies have also shown that disaster victims, who can purchase what they need, recover more quickly than people who receive second-hand items.



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*Make us worthy, Lord, to serve
our fellow men throughout
the world who live and die in
poverty and hunger.*

— Saint Teresa of Calcutta

The **third stage** is the rebuilding period.

By this time, emergency relief groups have gone, and publicity about the disaster has faded, but the victims are still in need. Some are grieving the loss of loved ones. Survivors without insurance and those who do not qualify for government aid or subsidized loans face the daunting task of rebuilding their homes and their lives. This is the point where local church groups and community organizations often come together to help the rebuilding process. They assist with home repairs, filing paperwork, childcare, transportation, bereavement counseling, spiritual support, and friendship.

How Can God Allow This?

Faith is put to the test when innocent people suffer. You may wonder where God was during the disaster. You may wonder why God didn't intervene. If you look at a crucifix, you could ask the same questions — and yet, God triumphed over the “disaster” of Good Friday when Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, “God permits evil in order to draw forth some greater good.” Only in faith can you embrace the mystery of suffering in the world. Only in faith can you accept that God created an imperfect world where good and evil exist for reasons that are beyond human comprehension. Only in faith can you believe that God will bring something good out of every tragedy.

St. Catherine of Siena said, “Everything comes from love, all is ordained for the salvation of man, God does nothing without this goal in mind.”

*Watch, dear Lord, with those
who wake or watch or weep
tonight, and give your angels
charge over those who sleep.
Tend your sick ones, O Lord
Jesus Christ, rest your weary
ones, bless your dying ones,
soothe your suffering ones,
shield your joyous ones,
and all for your love's sake.
Amen.*

— St. Augustine

Talking to Your Family About a Disaster

Horrible images of disaster victims in news reports are upsetting to everyone in the family. Children will sense your emotional response to the tragedy. They may feel frightened or confused. The best advice is to talk to your children about the disaster:

- Encourage young children to express their feelings in words or pictures.
- Answer their questions honestly. Don't be afraid to admit you don't know the answers to some questions.
- Tell young children that disasters are rare. Assure them that they are safe, and that you will always protect them.
- Recognize that nightmares may indicate the intensity of your child's fear. Bless your children at bedtime.
- Monitor your children's exposure to media coverage, including what they see on the Internet. Watch television together.
- Help older children express their concerns about God's role in the disaster.
- Find ways for older children to get involved in helping the survivors.
- Set aside time as a family to pray for the victims, the survivors, and the rescue workers.

What You and Your Family Can Do on a Parish Level

- Organize a Mass or a parish prayer service.
- Set up an information night about the disaster, the needs of survivors, and how parishioners can help.
- Organize a fund-raiser to raise money for Catholic Relief Services or some other emergency response group.
- Invite the Red Cross to sponsor a bloodmobile in your parish.
- Organize a local group to help the elderly and disadvantaged in your own community. Then you'll have a team of skilled volunteers in case of a local disaster.
- Make sure your parish has a bereavement ministry that can also reach out to survivors in the event of a disaster.