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CNS Story:

GULF-PARISH Mar-8-2006 (680 words) With photos. xxxn

New Orleans pastor urges returning parishioners to reclaim their city

By Carol Zimmermann
[Catholic News Service](#)

NEW ORLEANS (CNS) -- Each Sunday, more and more parishioners return to St. Peter Claver Parish in New Orleans for Masses celebrated in the school cafeteria while the flood-damaged church is being repaired.

On March 5, the first Sunday in Lent, the cafeteria was overflowing with churchgoers who started filling the seats an hour before Mass. Parishioners also sat on chairs on the stage, or stood in the back and in doorways. Prior to Mass, the atmosphere in the hall was akin to a family reunion as people greeted those they hadn't seen in months.

The expression of the morning, and of many previous Sundays, was: "Are you coming back?"

"It's crowded, but it's good to have people in the church," said Edmundite Father Michael Jacques, pastor of St. Peter Claver.

In his homily, he said, "Folks every Sunday are coming back. They lost everything, but they want to be at Mass."

When he asked members of the congregation where they had been or were still staying, responses included Texas, Ohio, Colorado, Georgia and other cities and towns in Louisiana.

Pre-Katrina, St. Peter Claver, with its 2,500 families, was known as the largest African-American church in Louisiana. It has a reputation for being a vibrant parish community. Five years ago, a study by the University of North Carolina at Wilmington named it one of 17 exceptional parishes in the United States.

Today, as its members slowly make their way back, they find themselves not only surrounded by the trail of destruction left by Katrina and the broken levees but under the shadow of a Feb. 9 announcement that seven parishes in New Orleans will be closing in mid-March.

St. Peter Claver Church, which sustained \$2 million in damages and is currently the site of ongoing construction, is scheduled to reopen on Easter. A neighboring African-American church, St. Augustine, will remain open only as a place of worship and the parish will merge with St. Peter Claver. Father Jacques will remain the pastor.

A few parishioners from another parish that is closing, St. Philip the Apostle in New Orleans, attended the March 5 Mass at St. Peter Claver.

"We're about healing these days," said Father Jacques, head of the archdiocesan Council of Deans, which coordinated the plan to reconfigure the parishes. "We were about evacuating. Now we're about rebuilding so we can have a better city."

The pastor, who has been at St. Peter Claver for more than 20 years, encouraged parishioners to remain steadfast in their reliance on God and persistent in their efforts to rebuild the city, doing everything from getting their own homes back together to appealing to city officials for community needs such as housing, electricity, phone service, education, low-income food programs and crime prevention measures.

The congregation resounded with applause when Father Jacques told them, "We're about rebuilding our city and our neighborhood

and nobody can tell us we can't rebuild."

He hardly needed to encourage longtime parishioner Donald Jones to speak up to elected officials.

Prior to Mass, Jones told **Catholic News Service** that his wife's death was a result of the hurricane, which also destroyed most of his home.

His wife of 31 years, Roslyn Mary Moss Jones, was scheduled for a heart procedure the week Hurricane Katrina hit. The couple evacuated to Baton Rouge, where they stayed for several weeks and were unable to get the procedure she needed.

After she died of heart failure, Jones received paperwork from the Federal Emergency Management Agency stating that his wife's death was a result of the hurricane. The agency also paid for her Nov. 11 funeral. Now, he wants a memorial in the city for all those whose deaths were hurricane-related, and he plans to bring his request to the mayor.

In the meantime, Jones said, "it's just me and God," and he noted that God is molding him "to a new way of life."

In between passing out bulletins to parishioners he said, "God is in this; we just have to trust him."

END

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