

Hard times – like now – require strong faith



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GUEST COLUMN

Life is hard. I was struck by the May 25 article in The Times-Picayune entitled, "Tension Follows Archbishop's Mass." The headline said it all: the "Archbishop's Mass."

There seems to be the impression that church buildings, schools and parishes are owned by the people who worship in them. The inference created by the headline

is that the Holy Eucharist that was offered at Our Lady of Good Counsel belonged to Archbishop Hughes. I was equally struck by the story of the confrontation between Archbishop Hughes and parishioners in a June 1 article in The Times-Picayune and in similar articles in the Clarion Herald. These reports of the exchanges between parishioners and Archbishop Hughes reveal a basic misunderstanding of the teaching of the Gospel on perseverance during tough times.

It is a well-accepted fact that most people assume ownership of their places of worship. But, should they?

Acts 2:44-45 tells us: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need."

Yes, life is hard in post-Katrina New Orleans. The protesting parishioners exemplify the troubled times in which we live. Surviving the devastating loss of loved ones and property during and since Hurricane Katrina has been excruciating. The failure of leadership at all levels is discouraging. Yet, as Catholic Christians, we are reminded that our faith was born in hard times.

Our own struggles are strengthened by difficult times because such sufferings for Christ have been sanctified by the Blood of the Lamb. As St. Peter reminds us: "Do not be surprised that this trial by fire is taking place as though something strange is happening. These hard times are testing our fidelity to the Gospel." Instead we should rejoice in this suffering because we are partaking in the sufferings of Christ. We should not suffer as unbelievers who reject the realities of our spiritual connection to Jesus Christ. If we must suffer let our cry be: "To God be the glory!" (1 Peter 12-19)

Perhaps these mergers and closings could have been enacted in another fashion. As Catholic Christians, we should embrace these merg-

ers and closings, as difficult as they may be, as opportunities to spread the Gospel by the way we move through these times. We are called to preach the Gospel by the way we live and "even use words when necessary."

We should also remember that the kingdom of heaven is not a building but the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every one of us, the Spirit that we share with each other. The kingdom of God comes alive when the people of God come together. Rather than protest the closing of a building, we should celebrate the opening of new opportunities to grow in faith by living what we believe. We don't belong to St. Simon Peter parish, Blessed Sacrament parish, St. Henry parish or St. Maria Goretti parish. Because of our baptism we belong to Christ.

The church is not a building. It is the community of believers. It is the assembly of the holy people of God who can congregate anywhere.

Life is hard. The confrontation between flock and shepherd revealed pain on both sides. There is the pain felt by the protesting parishioners and the pain of the archbishop in the abject rejection by a portion of his flock. But beneath all of this is the painful reality that the merging and closing of parishes are, at least in part, due to a loss of vocations.

While the world was busy moving away from the par-

ishes in New Orleans to avoid racial integration, or to find lower taxes, better schools or better shopping, we Christians failed to give our prized possessions – our children – to the priesthood and religious life. In many ways it is easier to give money and meet financial goals and conduct bingo and fund-raisers than it is to create an environment in our homes and community that develops the spiritual qualities necessary to become a priest, deacon or religious.

Perhaps we, too, should go and learn the meaning of the words, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" (Matt 9:13).

We must all realize that even though we are three years past Hurricane Katrina, we have just started to recover. The emotional scars of personal loss are still fresh. These scars should remind us of how we were welcomed by people of God in other parishes throughout the state and country. These scars should remind us how we celebrated the Holy Eucharist in parishes we neither built nor supported. We simply brought the God in us to meet the God in the people in those places to worship together. His love and mercy is not confined to a building or a parish.

Yes life is hard. But hard times require strong faith. How strong is your faith?

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