

INTRODUCTION

The first sentence of the revised Good Shepherd Destination Justice Focus Statement says much:

*“We believe that the celebration of the Eucharist
is inseparable from a concern for and pursuit of justice.”*

Social justice is inherently part of who we are as Church, and pursuit of justice is at the innermost core of our collective being as the body of Christ. Therefore, we are suggesting this month that you take action advocating for environmental justice for the victims of Hurricane Katrina.

BACKGROUND



Environmental groups are sounding the alarm about the toxic chemical contamination in sediment and soil left in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The hurricanes created 22 million tons of toxic debris, now dispersed throughout Greater New Orleans. Insufficient action has been taken to clean up the toxic contamination. No decision has been made as to whether there will ever be a coordinated government effort to rid storm ravaged communities of toxic substances.

Testing by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and other independent organizations reveal that the sediment contains dangerous chemicals such as lead, arsenic, petroleum products, and other industrial contaminants. Still, officials have declared Greater New Orleans safe for residents. Environmental groups are

concerned that the EPA has based its safety evaluations on short-term exposure measurements. Long-term exposure of these dangerous chemicals is linked to significant health problems. Additionally, the EPA has not tested private yards and houses where people will spend large amounts of time.

A MATTER OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Katrina disaster highlights race and class issues for all Americans. While the hurricane certainly hit wealthier, predominantly white communities that deserve full protection and cleanup, the hurricane's impact was especially devastating for low-income communities and communities of color. These neighborhoods, which are closer to toxic industrial sites, now have the highest concentrations of contamination and mold. Furthermore, there tends to be less community money to pay for privately funded cleanup and more limited access to health care. In general, a number of studies have demonstrated that certain communities – namely minority and low-income populations – experience a disproportionate burden of environmental pollution. Hurricane Katrina merely exacerbates the problem.

ACTION

Scripture and Catholic tradition, including Catholic Social Teaching, Vatican II documents, and USCCB instruction, advise us to provide preferential options for the poor.

Call or write EPA Administrator Stephen L. Johnson. Tell him you share the EPA's concern for the health and safety of all citizens of New Orleans – but that you are particularly concerned about the poorest residents. Urge that the EPA meet its legal obligation to remove dangerously contaminated sediment and to assess the full scope of the mold hazard affecting Greater New Orleans. In addition to such action, ask that authorities fully inform people in the region of the precise scope and nature of environmental health threats, and that they issue clear guidelines about appropriate measures to take when cleaning and repairing homes.

To write or call the EPA Administrator:

Administrator Stephen L. Johnson
USEPA Headquarters
Ariel Rios Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N. W.
Mail Code: 1101A
Washington, DC 20460
Phone: 202-564-4700
Email: johnson.stephen@epa.gov



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