Theology of Disaster
God and the Broken Spirit

NACC National Conference
Sunday March 12, 2006
Columbus, Ohio
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OUTLINE

- Defining Disaster
- Our Christian Call (Luke 10:25)
- 4th Century Early Church ~ Diaconia
- Encyclicals
- Deus Caritas Est
- God in the Rubble
- Humility and Loss ~ Katrina Reality
- Practical Tools for Chaplains
DEFINITIONS

Disaster
• (Latin: dis-, bad + astro, star) (bad for one’s stars) an occurrence causing widespread destruction & distress

Catastrophe
• (Greek: katastrephe to turn around): A great, often sudden calamity

Cataclysm
• (Latin: cataclysmos – deluge): A violent upheaval that causes great destruction or brings about fundamental change.
“Order is indeed the dream of man, but chaos, is still the law of nature.”

Wallace Stegner

Crossing to Safety
Rooted in a Parable


- The Scholar of the Law, an expert in Mosaic Law

- Who is my neighbor?

- Moved with compassion, poured oil and wine, showed mercy
4th Century
“Catholic Charities”

- **diakonos** (διακονος); waiter, servant
- **Institutional Diaconia**: The earliest legal structure in the Catholic Church within each Monastery responsible for all the works of relief for the service of charity.
- *(Acts 6:3-8) Stephen & Lawrence*
• **32 Encyclicals** were written from the 1800’s until today, referencing our Christian call to respond to those in distress and affected by disaster.
• *Praedecessores Nostros* ~ 1847, Pope Pius IX
  On Aid for Ireland, *(During Great Potato Famine)*

• *Optatissima Pax* ~ 1947, Pope Pius XII
  On Prescribing Prayers for Social & World Peace
  *(Following WWII)*
Deus Caritas Est ~ Dec. 25th, 2005
Pope Benedict XVI
On Love & Charity

• Part One – LOVE
  Unity of Love in Creation & Salvation History

• Part Two – CHARITY
  The Practice of Love by the Church, as a “Community of Love”
The Church’s Deepest Nature is expressed in Her three-fold responsibility:

1. Proclaiming the Word of God (kerygma-martyria)

2. Celebrating the Sacraments (leitorgia)

3. Exercising the Ministry of Charity (diakonia)
Deus Caritas Est:

“There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable” [28b]
“The Church is one of those living forces: she is alive with the love enkindled by the Spirit. This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support.”

[28b]
Deus Caritas Est:

**Individuals who care for those in need:**

- “Must be Professionally Competent”
- “Properly trained in what to do and how to do it”
- “And Committed to Continuing Care”
- Moreover, “They need humanity & heartfelt concern and formation of the heart.” [31a]
Deus Caritas Est:

Proselytism

• “Charity cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays called proselytism.”

• “Love is free; it is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends.” [31c]
Deus Caritas Est:

• “Those who practice charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others.”

• “A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and let love alone speak.”

• “…knows God is Love (1 Jn 4:8) and that God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love.” [31c]
Deus Caritas Est:

• “It is the responsibility of the Church’s Charitable Organizations (i.e. NACC) to reinforce this awareness in their members.”

• So that by their activity – as well as their words, their silence, their example – they may be credible witnesses to Christ.” [31c]
Deus Caritas Est:

**When we are overwhelmed**

“When the burden of need and our own limitations tempt us to be discouraged, we are helped by the knowledge that we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands; and this knowledge frees us from thinking we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility, we do what we can, and in all humility we entrust the rest to the Lord.” [35]
Our Lament Before God

- “Certainly Job could complain before God about the presence of incomprehensible and apparently unjustified suffering in the world.” (23:3,5,15)
- “Often we cannot understand why God refrains from intervening. Yet He does not prevent us from crying out”
Our Lament…

• “We should continue asking the question in prayerful dialogue: ‘Lord, How long will it be?’” (Rev.6:10)

• “Our crying out is the deepest and most radical way of affirming our faith in God’s sovereign power. …even when God’s silence remains incomprehensible.” [38]
Theology & Experience

• Unpacking a Disaster
• Theological Reflections
• Communion at Ground Zero
• Dispensation on Sunday
• Family Grief
• Psalm 23 & “the evil I did fear in the valley of the shadow of death” (Staten Island landfill)
Six Months Later ~ Katrina

- Unpacking an Active Disaster
- A new 9/11/2005 – Sunday in the City at 4am
- Sentries – protecting the flame of dignity for one’s humanity
- The sheer humility experienced in the presence of 56 lives lost
Practical Tools Before Going

- Pre-Deployment Stress Inoculation Guide
- Grief Guide for Caregivers
- Responding to Disasters
- Finding Meaning in a Moment

- Questions, Comments?