



A Message from the Bishop
to the Clergy and People
of the Diocese of Southeast Florida

The Commemoration of James Otis Sargent Huntington
25 September 2017

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is hard to believe that it was only two weeks ago today that Hurricane Irma came ashore in South Florida. So much has happened, and so much has already been done since the storm, that it is a little difficult for some to remember exact passages of time.

Kate and I paid a pastoral visit to the Keys last Friday and Saturday. We visited all our congregations, along with the Lutheran congregation in Big Pine Key for which we also have responsibility, met with our clergy and lay people, examined the damage to our churches, helped in some of the work, heard about so much more work, met with community leaders, prayed with individuals and groups, handed out gift cards and wooden crosses, and saw for ourselves the extent of the destruction of homes and businesses. We saw exhaustion and despair, as well as hope and determination, in equal measure. And we were glad to bring the solidarity of our entire diocesan family to our sisters and brothers.

We have all been saying that we were not as badly hit by Hurricane Irma as we might have been. While that is the case for many in our diocese and region, it is not so for the Lower Keys. It is also not so for some of our neighbours, especially in Puerto Rico and the Northeastern Caribbean, where whole islands have been levelled and entire populations have been displaced. Many in the Keys have lost everything, and some individuals and businesses will not recover for years, if at all. The populations of the worst hit areas are often at extreme risk: the working poor, the elderly, children, the ill, those with no family to help.

Kate and I visited one elderly woman whose home was completely wrecked inside, and who was having to move all her things out into the driveway by herself. As she fell weeping into the arms of Canon Debra Maconaughey, who knows her, she said “I am all alone, with no one to help.” This is the great threat of this time: isolation, hopelessness, and the grief of loss. While we can be dismissive of possessions as “just things,” when one has lost everything, the evidence of a life and the connection with loved ones now gone, especially when one is on one’s own, it is special bereavement.

People are desperate for accommodation. They are in shelters, sleeping in their cars, or having to stay in their water-soaked, mold-infested homes because there is nowhere else to go. I was in a queue on Saturday morning and witnessed the sheer anxiety of five people who were simply trying to find a hotel room for a few nights so that they could get some sleep and so be able to carry on with digging out their homes. Nothing can happen quickly, and everything takes so much more time and energy – even the basics.

Let us therefore not allow the individual and communal tragedies that are unfolding in the Keys to be masked by our collective sigh of relief. Let us keep giving, and keep serving, for as long as it takes. And let us also reach out to our neighbours in the region.

Thank you to all of you who have already responded to the appeal for money, in-kind goods and materials, and physical help. The greatest needs remain for money and now for people, individuals and groups, to go to the Keys to help in the clean-up. The sheer amount of rubbish to clear is astounding, and only people can move it. We hope that as many able-bodied adults as possible from our diocese will find a day or two to spend in the Lower Keys to do this work. We did some of this last weekend, and I intend to return in about three weeks to work again. As we all know, this grinding kind of work goes so much more smoothly when it is shared: you will not just be bringing muscle; you will be bringing companionship.

Let me explain why your gift of money is so important. At great risk after storms like this is the local economy. On the economy depend jobs and livelihoods for local folk, who are most at risk of losing everything and having to leave their communities. The more money that we can send to our congregations, the more they can use local services and spend in local stores, and so save jobs. When you go down to help, please do the same thing. Buy local. Go to a restaurant for at least one meal. Tip generously. Many of the communities that have been hardest hit are not big tourist places, but areas where the most vulnerable live.

Today in the Church's calendar we remember James Huntington, the remarkable priest and founder of the order of the Holy Cross, a monastic order for men that still serves the Church. But it is a special day for us in this diocese, because Father Huntington and a couple of his brother monks came here in the earliest days of Miami in 1896 to help establish congregations and do missionary work. They lived on a houseboat not far from the then still unfinished Trinity Church (now our cathedral), where they served, and they also served the Overtown neighbourhood and established the first church for the new congregation of Saint Agnes. Several years after the Holy Cross Fathers left, the Church of the Holy Cross (now combined with Resurrection as Santa Cruz Resurrection in Biscayne Park) was named in honour of the hard work they did here.

Throughout our history as the Church in this part of the world, we hear of clergy and laity who are described as "energetic and resourceful." Father Huntington was just such a one, and holy, too. This spirit of energy, resourcefulness, and holiness is in our DNA, and we are being called to renew this same spirit in our own time – both in the wake of Hurricane Irma, but also in the mission of our diocese as a whole. Our missionary forebears are our great inspiration, and from their witness and all that they handed down to us we share in the same purpose of preaching the Good News and living the Christian life in our own day.

May the holy, energetic, and resourceful Father Huntington, who is one of our fathers in the faith here in South Florida, pray for us now, that, strengthened by his prayers and God's grace, we may follow in his example of faithfulness and service.

With every blessing.

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