

Tribute to Fr. Peter Mockler

By Steve Hulst, Founder of Project Hope & Compassion

Though Fr. Peter Mockler was in Ireland visiting his family during the Katrina hurricane and its immediate aftermath, he was in constant contact with his parish and deeply concerned for the welfare of his people and the greater Gulf Coast community. My son Nathan and I entered the scene a couple of days after the storm hit as volunteers to help with search and rescue. While our services were not able to be used for that purpose, it did put within our hearts a desire to return with whatever volunteer interest and humanitarian assistance we might be able to generate back home in Michigan.

This resulted in a return to Gulfport a few days later with 3 volunteers and myself, some supplies to distribute, and a desire to help spread the word wherever we could of the great need. We ended up by "chance" at the doorstep of St. Ann's Catholic Church in Lizana with our supplies and a fortuitous meeting with a certain parishioner, Karen Parker, who after consulting by phone with Fr. Peter, offered to have us stay and use the St. Ann's fellowship hall as a headquarters for whatever relief effort God might put on our hearts and bring together. This was the birth of Project Hope and Compassion (PHC) which, now over 8 years later, has attracted several thousand volunteers from all over the country who have come to pray, to serve, to distribute, to clean up, to build, to encourage and to touch in some way over 30,000 Gulf coast residents who have been in need and hurting.

Soon thereafter Fr. Peter returned from Ireland and he immediately became a supporter, mentor and friend of the Project. He ensured that the full parish of St. Ann's got behind what we were doing, and made any and all facilities available to us. Fr. Peter always acted with interest, care and pastoral concern for the needs of the volunteers who were beginning to stream in, and provided wise and timely counsel to me on important direction and decisions as the Project expanded in numbers and scope. Without his steady hand, PHC would have floundered and been short lived. (Let me also say here I would be remiss if I did not mention how kind, thoughtful and supportive all the parishoners of St. Ann's have been these past eight years despite the many inconveniences brought on when up to 100 or more volunteers show up at its doorstep several weeks during the summer for a place to sleep, eat, pray and go off to work each day wherever the need was.)

In December of 2005, I made a decision that it was time for me to return to my home and job in Michigan, and turn the leadership of the Project over to Fr. Peter. Along with the tireless efforts of Karen and Glen Parker (and of course others too numerous to mention), they became the formidable team that was to see PHC through the next eight years, and help facilitate, care for, love and encourage the more than 6,000 volunteers who have since come to give and to serve. As now Director of the Project, it was Fr. Peter who provided the stability needed through the many challenges that came with such an endeavor.

On a typical volunteer day, Fr. Peter could be seen offering special masses, eating with volunteers, consulting with group leaders, dealing with finances, and enjoying warm conversations and the stories volunteers would bring back at the end of the day. All this he did without complaint (remember that he still had all his regular duties for two parishes!) and with the devotion of someone who genuinely saw from God's perspective the value to the larger community what these volunteers were accomplishing.

I am convinced Fr. Peter will have a special place in heaven, and will be treasured by all whose lives he has touched, among whom I am honored to be a considered member. May God grant him the rest he so richly deserves.