

Catholics respond to Midwest flooding

Historic levels of flooding in the Missouri and Mississippi River basins have killed several people and caused billions of dollars in damage. Thousands of homes and businesses have been flooded, and large swaths of farmland are covered with water, resulting in huge losses of livestock and harvests.

Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said there was “widespread devastation” in his state, with 85 percent of its counties declaring emergencies and 20 percent of its roads affected. While the waters have receded, more flooding is possible in the upcoming weeks as northern snow continues to melt and spring rains still to come.

Many Catholic dioceses along the river basins have been adversely affected, including those in Iowa, Nebraska and Missouri, and local bishops are soliciting prayers and donations to help victims.

Donate

- To donate to relief efforts for the Diocese of Des Moines, visit:
dmdiocese.thankyou4caring.org
- To contribute to the Archdiocese of Omaha’s relief effort, visit:
archomaha.org

Encouraging community

On the morning of March 18, Father Raphael Assamah, pastor of St. Mary’s Parish in Hamburg, Iowa, received word that floodwaters soon would swamp the small farming community located just a few miles away from the Missouri River. Recalling the severe flooding that struck the community

in 2011, he took what furnishings he could. "We took some tables and chairs out of the basement, but the bigger things like the appliances, we weren't able to lift," he said.

Father Assamah headed over to the second parish of which he is pastor, St. Mary's in Shenandoah, Iowa, to wait out the flood. He knew it was going to be severe, but "we did not expect the water to come so quickly and in such a high volume."

The following day he discovered that his Hamburg parish had completely flooded and was only accessible by boat or helicopter. In the days following, the waters had sufficiently receded to return to the property, but extensive cleanup was needed. "It wasn't a good sight," he said. "Everything was muddy, and mold was beginning to grow."

Although the water has been pumped out of the basement and buildings, significant damage remains. A new furnace installed last year, for example, is a total loss. Homes, farms and businesses around the parish have suffered similar damage and will take months to clean up. "The water came so quickly many people didn't have time to save their cars or farm equipment."

One of his saddest experiences was visiting a low income apartment building in Hamburg where the water level had gotten to be 6 feet or more high. As the waters receded, he said, "I watched these poor people salvaging what they could out of these apartments, but most of what they dragged out they had to throw away."

Father Assamah requested that Catholics pray for the people of Hamburg and noted that community members "are encouraging one another and beginning the process of cleaning up."



Hamburg, Iowa, experienced severe flooding in mid-March. Photos courtesy of the Diocese of Des Moines by Ken Seeber

Families lost everything

Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Des Moines, in which St. Mary's is located, noted that the people of six of its parishes were particularly hard hit, with St. Mary's being among the worst. Des Moines Bishop Richard E. Pates has been in touch with the pastors serving the six parishes, including Father Assamah, to offer support, and he has encouraged Catholics of his diocese and elsewhere to donate to relief efforts.

According to Debra Powers, development director of Catholic Charities in Des Moines, funds collected will help victims with "intermediate needs," such as rent, insurance deductibles for car repairs, day care, fuel and utility bills. While many victims are having their immediate needs met, she said, "We know of families who have lost everything and left the area."

Father Dan Siepker, pastor of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Church in Glenwood, Iowa, another Des Moines parish about 40 miles up the Missouri River, has seen 10 families in the parish displaced. Although his parish buildings were

undamaged, many homes and farmlands nearby are underwater. "Our people are experiencing a lot of stress, and a lot of frustration," he said. With the poor quality of the river levees nearby, "We're likely to see more of this in the future," he said.

Whereas the 2011 flooding in the area flooded fields and farms, he continued, "It didn't reach the towns. Now we have two towns in Mills County [in which Glenwood is located] that have been lost, and a total of 410 families displaced."

Father Siepker suspected there might be flooding after winter's heavy snow was followed by two spring rains, which drained into the river, but "I don't think anyone expected flooding to quite the extent it occurred."

People in his parish have donated fresh water to provide to victims, as well as a site to serve meals to about 90 at each sitting. "The outreach from people nationwide has been tremendous," Father Siepker said. "I hope and pray it continues. It demonstrates how God is at work in our world."

Solidarity in trial

Across the Missouri River in the Archdiocese of Omaha, Nebraska, flooding has been severe as well, particularly around Offutt Air Force Base. The archdiocese held a special collection to help flooding victims, reported Deacon Timothy McNeil, chancellor and promoter of justice for the archdiocese.

Father Leo Rigatuso, pastor of St. Matthew Parish in Bellevue, Nebraska, located three miles away from Offutt, noted that several of his parishioners living near the Missouri River had "lost everything completely. They had no more than 30 minutes' notice that the floodwaters were coming, and only had the time to grab a few basics and get out," Father Rigatuso said. "It's been pretty traumatic for them."

Father Dan Andrews, pastor of Sacred Heart Parish in Norfolk, Nebraska, noted that the foresight of city planners to build and maintain a good levee system a half-century ago saved the town from flooding, but those living outside of town were not as fortunate. In those areas, he said, "We have homesteads and farms flooded out, washed out roads and significant loss of livestock."

Most tragic was the son of a parishioner, who drowned in his car when the flooding first struck.

His parish has been generous in donating to victims, he said, as Nebraskans "have a sense of solidarity and do what they can to care for their neighbor. Despite the tragic circumstances, it's a beautiful thing to see."

Jim Graves writes from California.