

Church continues to support relief efforts as Midwest flooding worsens

Heavy spring rains have caused major flooding in many Midwestern states, damaging homes and businesses and bringing significant challenges to the lives of many. Among those affected are the Catholic dioceses located along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, as parishes and parishioners' homes have been flooded, with victims being forced to flee until the water recedes. But with hard work and the help of neighbors, communities are recovering, even though more severe days of flooding may be yet to come.

St. Patrick Parish in Grafton, Illinois, is located in the Diocese of Springfield, across the street from the Mississippi River. Its historic church was built in 1871 and serves 90 families. The river began rising in April and began to flood the church by May. The church building is filled with 3 feet of water; the parish hall, 7 feet. The rectory, positioned higher on the property, has three inches. It was the first time the grounds have been flooded since 1993, when the river rose even higher.

The parish has been proactive in preparing for the flooding, said Father Martin Smith, pastor of St. Patrick's. "As the river was rising, we got the word out that we needed help."

Parishioners volunteered to remove pews, statues and other furnishings, putting some up on scaffolding and others in the choir loft. Father Smith still anticipates damage to the church's door frames, wood and carpeting. There is also a risk of mold developing, as well as residue of mud and sediment from the river being left behind.

Want to help?

Visit the following websites to offer assistance to the flood and storm victims:

- [Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of St. Louis](#)
- [Catholic Charities of Eastern Oklahoma](#)
- [Diocese of Jefferson City](#)
- [Diocese of Springfield, Illinois](#)

While local authorities reported that the river crested at 35.1 feet on June 7 (as compared to 38 feet in 1993), thunderstorms could return, and “things have the potential to get worse,” Father Smith said.

Grafton’s beautiful landscape draws tourists, and the area’s hotels, restaurants, bars and wineries offer jobs to residents. However, the flooding has forced many business closures and has put some people out of work. There is additional concern that residents with limited mobility, such as the elderly, could have their homes surrounded by water and be trapped without food or services.

“It’s been a devastating experience to our tight-knit community,” Father Smith said. “When you live by the river, you know the reality of what can happen, but it’s still taken a huge emotional toll on us.”

Masses have been cancelled at St. Patrick’s since April, and parishioners have been encouraged to attend nearby parishes. Hence, St. Patrick’s has lost all income from Sunday collections until Mass is able to return. Father Smith encouraged Catholics wanting to help to watch the diocese’s website, as he hoped an account for donations would soon be set up, as well as posts with updates on the flooding. And, once the waters recede, he predicted that many volunteers

would be needed for cleanup.

“We’re grateful to all who have volunteered, and who are praying for us,” Father Smith said. “Complete strangers are willing to help. It means so much to us.”

Ten feet of water

The Archdiocese of St. Louis has seen its properties flooded as well. Immaculate Conception Parish in West Alton, Missouri, filled with 10 feet of water and is completely destroyed, reported Deacon William Twellman, parish life coordinator.

The entire community has been flooded, he noted, making the church “look like a brick building in the middle of a lake. West Alton has been decimated.”

A second parish he serves, St. Francis of Assisi in Portage des Sioux, is situated on high ground and has not been flooded, but it is completely surrounded by water. “It’s become an island. You cannot reach it by the roads,” Deacon Twellman said.

Mass has been suspended at both churches, and people in the surrounding areas have left the area.

Although the rain has stopped, Deacon Twellman expects the cleanup to take years. The full extent of the damage has yet to be assessed, but he welcomed donations for recovery efforts to be made through Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

The Diocese of Jefferson City, Missouri, is bordered on the eastern side by the Mississippi River, and two major tributaries, the Missouri and the Osage rivers, run through the diocese. Most of the parishes in the diocese have been adversely affected, not only by flooding, but also by tornadoes that recently tore through Jefferson City and Eldon, Missouri.

“It’s been devastating, and a lot of people have been displaced,” said Frank Cordie, a volunteer with the St. Vincent de Paul Society at St. Brendan Parish in Mexico, Missouri. They have not only lost their homes, but all their possessions.”

Society volunteers are working to “get people back on their feet,” he said, not only by distributing gift cards to Walmart, “but taking the time to listen to the victims and hear their stories.”

Dan Lester, executive director of Catholic Charities of Central and Northern Missouri, which serves Jefferson City, said that many communities in the diocese have seen significant flooding, and water levels have remained high for weeks at a time. Although most of the rivers have crested, he said, “We can’t even begin to do a damage assessment until the water levels go down.”

Catholic Charities, Lester said, was currently recruiting volunteers for relief and cleanup efforts, and “to let parishes know that we’re here and that we can be of assistance.”

He noted that tornadoes had destroyed many rental units, leaving many people in Jefferson City and Eldon homeless. “We have limited housing stock, so finding people a place to stay is one of our most pressing needs,” Lester said.

Total loss

The Diocese of Tulsa, Oklahoma, has received significant flooding from the Arkansas River. While no parishes have yet been flooded, homes of some parishioners are a total loss. St. Patrick’s Parish in Sand Springs, a Tulsa suburb, has seen some of the worst flooding. Six of its 210 families have had water in their homes over the past few weeks, reported the pastor, Father Todd Nance, and are rushing to save what

possessions they can.

“The other day after Mass a man broke down in tears and told me, ‘I don’t know how much longer I can keep up this pace,’” Father Nance said.

The last home he visited had 5 feet of water. Half of those with whom he has spoken, he said, have no flood insurance.

The last time flooding was this severe, people in his community tell him, was in 1986. And while the river is receding, forecasters have predicted a wet summer.

Parishioners are helping one another to recover through monetary donations and by sending out teams to help victims begin the process of cleaning up their homes. The parish itself is providing space where donations can be stored and distributed. They’ve also joined a network of churches that is assisting victims.

“I hope this experience is not one we will have to relive,” Father Nance said. “There is no quick fix. We have an incredible amount of damage, and it is going to take years to recover.”

Jim Graves writes from California.