

Nashville parishes begin long process of rebuilding after March tornado

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (CNS) – The historic Church of the Assumption in Nashville has started the long walk back from the damage it sustained from the tornadoes that swept across the middle of Tennessee March 3.

The repairs to the church, which was built in 1859 to serve German-speaking Catholics in Nashville, could take several years to complete and will cost an estimated \$4 million to \$6 million, said Father Bede Price, pastor.

“They just don’t know” the full extent of the damage, Father Price said.

Construction crews already have been removing everything from the church, including pews, statues and other artwork, the Stations of the Cross, the pipe organ and all of the stained-glass windows. The items will be put in storage until they can be reinstalled.

The work crew plans to remove the plaster on the ceiling so they can inspect the roof and assess the full extent of the damage, Father Price said.

The church “blew up like a balloon,” Father Price told the Tennessee Register, Nashville’s diocesan newspaper. “The pressure on the windows was tremendous. They were saved because the roof popped off, releasing the pressure.”

In the sacristy, debris came through the 14-inch thick brick wall “like a cannon ball,” causing the wall to collapse, and then hit the bell control box on a wall about 10 feet away, destroying it, Father Price said. “I can’t even imagine the

force to go through a 14-inch wall.”

The bricks from the wall have been saved and will be used to rebuild it, he said.

Although the building sustained significant damage, it will be rebuilt, Father Price said.

“Given its historical value and architectural value,” he said, for the Diocese of Nashville and the Catholic Church in Tennessee, “it has to stay. It’s a unique church. It survived the Civil War, two world wars. It’s not going anywhere.”

“The people understand this church is the Diocese of Nashville,” Father Price added. Throughout its long history, people have moved from Assumption to help establish other parishes, he said, adding that “practically every old Nashville Catholic family has a connection to this church.”

Some aspects of parish life have continued despite the damage. “Since the storm, we’ve already had six baptisms and one wedding,” all with limited attendance because of restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, Father Price said. “At the wedding, there were just four people.”

Since the tornado, the parish has received support from Bishop J. Mark Spalding of Nashville and from friends around the country who have donated money to help pay for the repairs.

“But if it weren’t for the insurance,” Father Price said, “I think we’d be doomed.”

The damage from the tornado was followed by a second blow caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the cancellation of public Masses.

“We had two Sundays after the storm and before the coronavirus” to bring the community together, Father Price said. With a small staff and no internet service for more than a month after the storm, “we were completely cut off,” he

said. "It was like going back to the Middle Ages."

The parish is preparing for the day people can return for Mass. Meanwhile, two chapels have been set up, one in Father Bernard Hall, next door to the church, and a second one in the second-floor ballroom in the Buddeke House across the street. Each weekend, there will be two Masses in each of the chapels, one in English and one in Latin.

"Two-thirds of the parishioners come here for the Latin Mass," traveling from throughout the diocese and beyond, Father Price said. "What they're drawn here for is the celebration of the liturgy and the beauty of the church."

The road back from the tornado damage won't be as hard for St. Vincent de Paul Church, about a mile west of Church of the Assumption, because the damage was not as extensive.

There was damage to the roofs of the church, rectory and gymnasium of the former St. Vincent de Paul School, which now houses the St. Mary Child Development Center, said Carl Hobson, the facilities manager for the parish.

One classroom sustained water damage when rain leaked through the hole in the gym roof, Hobson said. Bricks on the back wall of the office were blown off, and the wall will have to be replaced, he said.

The estimate for the total cost of the repairs, including the heating and ventilating system, is about \$225,000, most of which will be covered by insurance, Hobson said.

Like Assumption, St. Vincent was hit by the one-two punch of the storm and the pandemic.

"Right after the tornado, about a week after, is when we were hit with this crisis," said Heather Wilson, the parish secretary. "We had one service, then we were closed."

The parish has been trying to stay in touch with parishioners

through social media, Wilson said. The parish has continued its outreach to its neighbors in North Nashville, which was hit hard by the tornado.

The parish is providing food, gift cards and some financial assistance to help people pay their utility bills, Hobson said. "We're still trying to do our part. ... People are really hurting."