

A firefighter examines trees damaged by the Camp Fire in Paradise, Calif., in this Nov. 13 photo. (CNS/Terray Sylvester, Reuters)

by Catholic News Service

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Cal Fire officials reported that the death toll had reached 77 in the Camp Fire north of Sacramento, one of the deadliest blazes in the state. The number of people who are missing has reached almost 1,000.

At the Vatican Nov. 18, Pope Francis said, "A special prayer goes to those affected by the fires that are plaguing California. ... May the Lord welcome the deceased in his peace, comfort their families and support those who are involved in relief efforts.

As of Nov. 19, 150,000 acres had been scorched and 12,794 structures destroyed by the Camp Fire. Containment of the fire was 65 percent to date and full containment was expected Nov. 30.

"The tremendous loss from the Camp Fire ravaging parts of the diocese is devastating," said Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento. "The families in Paradise and the surrounding communities affected by the fire can rely on the support of our prayers."

The entire population of Paradise of about 30,000, was forced to evacuate Nov. 9; the town was destroyed.

"We also pray for the brave men and women responding to this disaster and battling the fires," the bishop added in a statement posted on the diocesan website, www.scd.org. "May all those who have died in this catastrophic inferno be granted eternal repose in the merciful hands of the Lord Jesus."

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Soto celebrated Mass Nov. 18 at St. John the Baptist Church in downtown Chico for all those affected by the Camp Fire. He especially invited the community of St. Thomas More Parish in Paradise; their church was in the direct line of fire.

Many of St. Thomas' parishioners have lost their homes. The Sacramento Diocese confirmed that the church and school buildings survived the fire. The new rectory, old rectory and parish hall were destroyed.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul and Northern Valley Catholic Social Service were working with partner organizations on local relief and recovery efforts. Donations can be made through the Sacramento Diocese by visiting www.scd.org/donate (choose the Fire Assistance Fund).

Residents of Southern California have been coping with the Woolsey Fire near Los Angeles, which started Nov. 8, the same day as the Camp Fire. Both fires were fueled by low humidity and strong winds.

As of Nov. 16, residents displaced by the Woolsey Fire were being allowed to return home. Full containment of the fire was expected by Nov. 22. It burned close to 97,000 acres in Los Angeles and Ventura counties, destroyed 1,452 structures and damaged another 337. Three fatalities were confirmed.

In a Nov. 14 statement, Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez asked all people of faith and goodwill to join him in offering prayers and support for everyone affected by the fires in Southern California.

"The devastation of the wildfires continues throughout our state. We need to keep praying for those who have lost their lives and their homes and livelihoods, and for all the men and women fighting the fires," said Gomez.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles has started a fund to help the victims of these fires. Donations can be made at www.archla.org/fires.

"These funds will assist families within our parish communities in their recovery efforts," he said.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles has been providing support to the communities affected by the fires through Catholic Charities of Los Angeles and local parishes and schools.