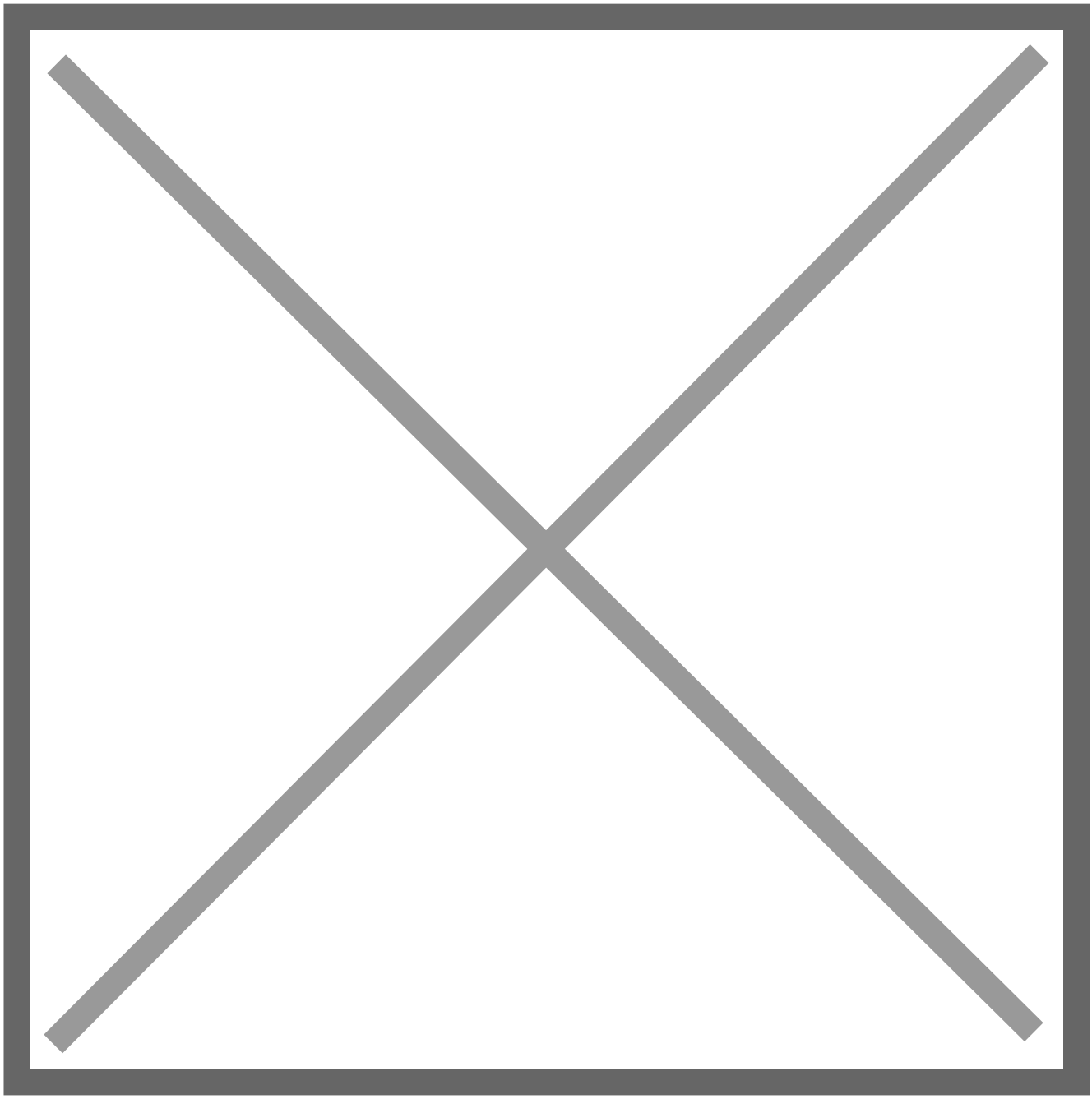


A helicopter in Middletown, Calif., dumps water on a section of the LNU Lightning Complex Fire Aug. 24, 2020. (CNS/Reuters/Adrees Latif)



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Washington — August 25, 2020

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Some of the few Masses available for Catholics in California's Bay Area came to a halt the weekend of Aug. 22 as bishops urged parishioners to pray for one another, for firefighters, and to stay home as air quality diminished in some parts of the state because of some of the largest wildfires in California history.

"People are just stunned, with the pandemic and the downturn in the economy and the racial issues and then on top of that, the wildfires," said Bishop Oscar Cantú, head of the Diocese of San Jose in an Aug. 24 interview with Catholic News Service. "It makes you wonder, what else? All we need is an earthquake."

Evacuation orders have affected more than 250,000 Californians, including many Catholics in the Archdiocese of San Francisco and the dioceses of San Jose, Sacramento and Monterey. All except Monterey are on a list of cities trending at the national level for fast-rising COVID-19 rates.

More than a million acres in the area burned in the span of a week, The Associated Press reported, causing 7 deaths as of Aug. 24. The blazes, which began Aug. 14, are believed to have been caused by lightning strikes and made worse by drought conditions.

Because of the rising rate of contagion, some dioceses in California have only had the option of holding Mass outdoors and like fellow prelates from nearby dioceses, Cantú said he gave pastors the option of canceling them since being outdoors could be harmful to the health of those attending.

The fires have affected parishioners at more than half a dozen of the diocese's 52 parishes, he said. Many others are under threat.

"One of the largest [fires], in East San Jose, is right next to us ... then there's another large fire to the west of us in Santa Cruz," he said. "So, we feel sort of boxed in and so that really has put people on edge."

Even with all the chaos, people have stepped up to help others, he said. The diocese has given pastors information to share with their parishioners, connecting those who have lost their homes to resources available in the area and also issuing information about what to prepare ahead of time should they be evacuated "and to be ready to go at a moment's notice," Cantú said.

"We're sharing that information, as well, and our Catholic Charities continues to distribute food, which they've been doing [because] of the pandemic," he said. "And so, especially now, they're collecting funds to support those families who have lost their homes during the fires."

In an Aug. 23 video message posted on Facebook, Monterey's Bishop Daniel E. Garcia said the fires "in our diocese alone" had caused "profound damage" for hundreds of families.

He called on Catholics to "come together as the body of Christ to pray for one another," even if they couldn't physically gather to do so and asked them to be mindful that pastors could decide to cancel outdoor Masses because of poor air quality.

Sacramento Bishop Jaime Soto, too, asked Catholics in a letter to stay home as much as possible and said he had asked pastors to livestream Masses "for the benefit of

those who have vulnerable health conditions."

The fires come at a trying time for Californians, said Cantú, and have taken away the only respite some had.

"You know, the one piece of joy that that people have [during the pandemic] is to go outside and take a walk or take a jog," he said. "We can't do that now because the air quality is so bad. We're keenly aware of the fires because we can smell the smoke for the past eight days or so and it's been very thick, and it's gotten so bad."

Catholic schools in San Jose had just resumed classes online and the fires now have added a layer of stress, he said.

"Parents are exhausted because, those that are able to work from home, they're multitasking, supervising their children and trying to work from home amid all of the distractions and then, on top of that, to worry about fires," he said. "It's been one thing after another, but there's something about our faith in the message of our God: He's with us especially in difficult moments."

If you look at Scripture, at the lives of the saints, "it's especially in the darkest moments that we are reminded constantly that God does not abandon us, and that's what our message has been to our parishioners," he said.

"Our God is the God who walks with us and Jesus did not back away from crisis, from difficult moments," Cantú said. "In fact, he walked right into them because he knew what people experience in their lives, and he is with us. So, I think that the Christian's message is encouraging, especially in these historic moments."

But it's important to recognize that it's a stressful time for everyone, "for our priests, for our leaders, for our families, for children," he said. And it has been especially stressful for exhausted firefighters trying to get under control some of the largest blazes in California history.

"Government agencies in California have reached out to Canada and to Australia to get help in firefighting because our firefighters are completely tapped out," he said. "They're working 24/7 and they're running thin, they're exhausted because we've never had these many fires all at one time. So, it's really tapped out our resources."

Those who want to help can donate to Catholic Charities, he said, and asked all others to "pray for California."

Advertisement

A version of this story appeared in the **Sept 4-17, 2020** print issue under the headline: Californians 'on edge' as historic wildfires rage.