Rich Reynolds and his son, John, fill sandbags in Tampa, Fla., Sept. 26, 2022, as Hurricane Ian

Rich Reynolds and his son, John, fill sandbags in Tampa, Fla., Sept. 26, 2022, as Hurricane Ian spun toward the state. (CNS photo/Shannon Stapleton, Reuters)



by Catholic News Service

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ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — September 28, 2022
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Editor's Note: This story was updated at 3. p.m., central, with additional reporting from the Diocese of Venice, Florida.

As the Tampa Bay area on Florida's west coast prepared for what was expected to be a direct hit from Hurricane Ian, Bishop Gregory Parkes of St. Petersburg invited all in the diocese to pray to God "for the protection of life and property as we face this serious threat."

"As Hurricane Ian approaches our area, as we make our final preparations, and as we begin to feel the effects of the storm, I invite you to pray with me," he said in a video message released Sept. 27 to the diocese, which includes Tampa.

"Loving God, maker of heaven and earth, protect us in your love and mercy. Send the spirit of Jesus to be with us to still our fears and to give us confidence. In the stormy waters, Jesus reassured his disciples by his presence, calmed the storm and strengthened their faith," he prayed.

"Guard us from harm during the storm and renew our faith to serve you faithfully. Give us the courage to face all difficulties and the wisdom to see the ways your Spirit binds us together in mutual assistance," he continued. "With confidence, we make our prayer through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

News reports said Hurricane Ian hit the western side of Cuba early Sept. 27, moving north and growing in strength to a Category 3 storm with 125 mph sustained winds. The National Hurricane Center predicted the storm would grow bigger before making landfall on Florida "likely near Tampa Bay" late Sept. 28 or Sept. 29.

Parkes is the spiritual leader of 500,000 Catholics who live along Florida's Suncoast, Tampa Bay and the Nature Coast.

"May God bless you and stay safe," he said in his message.

The bishop's prayer was airing on the radio on Tampa's Spirit FM 90.5 starting Sept. 27. A video was emailed to pastors at the Catholic parishes in the diocese and to 11,000 parishioners.

It also was posted on the diocese's Facebook page, which has 13,000 fans, and on the diocesan website, https://www.dosp.org, and its YouTube channel.

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In the Venice Diocese, Bishop Frank J. Dewane also urged local residents to pray as Hurricane Ian approached Florida's west coast and the diocese put into action plans to ensure safety and recovery after the storm passes.

"As people of faith, we are called to pray to Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin Mary in times of peril," Dewane said. "May we find comfort in the Lord as Hurricane Ian threatens, and that our suffering brothers and sisters quickly find safety and comfort in the Lord."

The storm was expected to move over central Florida during the night Sept. 28 and into the next morning.

Close to midday Sept. 28, AccuWeather reported that Hurricane Ian had strengthened and was packing sustained winds of 155 mph -- "just shy of Category 5 force" -- as it inched closer to Florida, "where it's expected to bring catastrophic

impacts from Tampa to Naples."

Other reports said the Orlando Diocese also was expected to be hit hard.

In the Venice Diocese, Dewane met with members of the Diocesan Emergency Response Team Sept. 23 and 26. The initial meeting was to review and implement emergency plans for all parishes, schools and other entities within the diocese.

The emergency plans include checklists and basic guidance to ensure that the people and the buildings within the diocese are secured and rendered as safe as possible before a storm arrives. They also direct actions needed to respond to the impacts of a storm.

People at Lockhart Elementary School in Tampa, Fla., leave the shelter for evacuees ahead of

People at Lockhart Elementary School in Tampa, Fla., leave the shelter for evacuees ahead of Hurricane Ian Sept. 28, 2022. (CNS photo/Shannon Stapleton, Reuters)

By implementing these plans, diocesan parishes and schools first follow local emergency management guidance, and using this as a base, start making plans to close offices, secure and limit access to buildings and take other necessary actions.

All diocesan Catholic schools in Venice were closed either Sept. 27, or Sept. 28, following public schools, and each will reopen as soon as possible.

Jesuit Fr. John Belmonte, diocesan superintendent of Catholic education, said "any decision to reopen will be made when the diocese is confident individual schools have power and all facilities are safe for our students and faculty."

Parishes in the diocese follow local guidance in terms of evacuation orders and several canceled daily Mass, as well as other activities, with expectations to reopen when a safety assessment is completed as needed. Parishes in areas which have limited impacts (such as no loss of power or minimal damage in the area) would be expected to reopen within a few days.

In addition, Catholic Charities in the Diocese of Venice also was prepared to respond and set up distribution points in areas of greatest need. These locations, established in coordination with county and state emergency management officials, will include the distribution of water, ice and food.

After Hurricane Ian passes, those interested in volunteering to assist, donating unused hurricane supplies, or offering financial support for the recovery effort need to visit www.catholiccharitiesdov.org for details on how to help.

The Diocese of Venice also will update its website -- www.dioceseofvenice.org -- and post on social media information on where the greatest need is and how people can help.