News
EarthBeat



Local residents take part in a procession carrying a replica of the Our Lady of the Torrents, a virgin historically associated with drought, in l'Espunyola, north of Barcelona, Spain, Sunday, March 26, 2023. Farmers and parishioners gathered Sunday at the small hermitage of l'Espunyola, a rural village in Catalonia, to attend a mass asking the local virgin Our Lady of the Torrents for rain. Prayers and hymns were offered to ask for divine intervention in solving the earthly crisis. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

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L'Espunyola, Spain — March 27, 2023

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When Josep Altarriba looks across his parched fields, the Spanish farmer can't remember a time of such widespread drought in Catalonia. If it doesn't rain in the next two weeks, he says there's little chance of saving the harvest.

What can be done? For the mountain villagers of L'Espunyola, the answer is divine intervention.

On Sunday, around 250 residents brought back the faded practice of a special Mass and procession to pray to Our Lady of the Torrents, a local virgin associated with rainfall.

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Under mostly sunny skies, worshippers lifted the colorfully painted statue of the Lady of the Torrents from its place of prominence in the stone church. She was then nestled onto a wooden litter filled with green branches and hoisted aloft, to be carried around the village followed by the bishop and parishioners.

"It's not a magic act, it is an act of trust," Bishop Francesc Conesa told The Associated Press.



Local bishop Francesc Conesa sits next to the virgin Our Lady of the Torrents as he leads a mass in l'Espunyola, north of Barcelona, Spain, Sunday, March 26, 2023. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

Three years of very low rainfall and high temperatures put Spain officially into long-term drought, the country's weather agency said this month. Last year was Spain's

sixth driest — and the hottest since records began in 1961.

Catalonia, in the country's northeastern corner, is among the worst-affected regions. Agrotourism and farming are the primary sources of income for the 260 inhabitants of L'Espunyola, an hour and a half north of Barcelona.

"If it doesn't rain within two weeks, it's very hard to say what might happen," Altarriba, the farmer, said after celebrating Mass.

Local councilor and firefighter Eduard Perarnau described the special Mass as a last resort. The government has restricted water usage, asking farmers to limit watering crops and trees as much as possible.

All three reservoirs in the area are below a third of their capacity. The nearby La Baells reservoir is down to 25 percent, and in some places only a trickle of water cuts through the layers of silt that used to be underwater.



Local residents take part in a procession carrying a statue of the Our Lady of the Torrents, a virgin historically associated with drought, in l'Espunyola, north of Barcelona, Spain, Sunday, March 26, 2023. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

The last time the village offered prayers and hymns to Our Lady of the Torrents was in 2008, local media reported. And it worked — residents say the rains came not long after.

But this year, the bishop doesn't guarantee success.

"We have asked with faith, and many people have come and prayed with faith," Conesa said. "The Lord will give us what suits us."