News

An older man in a quarter zip sweater stands before white crosses outside

Fr. Jack Wall, president of Chicago-based Catholic Extension, prays in front of the Robb Elementary School memorial in Uvalde, Texas, Oct. 19, 2022, where 19 children and two teachers lost their lives in a mass shooting May 24, 2022. (OSV News photo/courtesy Catholic Extension)



by OSV News

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"Uvalde, Texas" — March 30, 2023

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It has been 10 months since a lone gunman with a high-powered weapon entered Robb Elementary School in Uvalde and took the lives of 19 children and two teachers, and things are far from normal.

What the community has been going through "can give some insight into the long road ahead" for Nashville, Tennessee, or "any community ... witnessing such senseless violence and disregard for human life," said Catholic Extension in a March 28 post on its website about an update the Chicago-based agency had received from the Texas community.

On March 27, Nashville became the site of the country's latest deadly shooting at a school. That morning a shooter, later identified as 28-year-old Audrey Hale, left three adults and three children dead at The Covenant School in the city's Green Hills neighborhood. The private Presbyterian school educates students in preschool through sixth grade.

Hale, who was armed with two assault-type rifles, was fatally shot dead in interactions with officers who responded to the scene.

The violence of school shootings "is perhaps one of the greatest forms of injustice that we routinely witness in our country. Lives are taken, hearts are broken and innocence is shattered all for nothing," Catholic Extension said. "But, it is after these shootings fall from the headlines when the true extent of the damage is realized."

People do not simply bounce back from something this traumatic, and even the simple pleasures of life can seem daunting, according to Teresian Sr. Mary Lou Aldape, who is in Uvalde working with students who had attended Robb Elementary and transferred to Sacred Heart Catholic School with the help of scholarships from Catholic Extension.

The children "are worrying about being safe and being able to be outdoors, playing baseball, visiting friends ... all things that they miss or are somehow different than they used to be." Aldape said.

She said students seek counseling on a daily basis. "Sometimes they want to talk about their pets, or their brothers and sisters, or family matters, or schoolwork, or needing help with an issue with a friend."

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The trauma is as deep for the parents as it is for the children, she added. Despite the "world-class" security and safety systems that have been implemented at Sacred Heart School, families are anxious about their children's safety while at school, she said.

"Last month we had a lockdown created when a person was in the church and a parishioner became alarmed," Aldape recalled. "The police were called and it soon became evident that no one was in danger of getting hurt. However, families were alarmed and rushed to the school to gather their children. While this did not last long and all was attended to, we could see and feel the terror in the parents and children."

Catholic Extension said it has made a long-term commitment to fund mental health services, Catholic school scholarships and extracurricular activities for the children

and families of the Uvalde community.

It also supports religious sisters, like Aldape, who provide onsite emotional assistance to students and teachers of Sacred Heart School and serve the wider community in various capacities.

Catholic Extension and Uvalde share a long history. Uvalde was one of the first communities the nonprofit agency supported, helping build Sacred Heart Church in 1906 and Sacred Heart Catholic School in 1912.

Since its founding in 1905, Catholic Extension's mission has been to build up Catholic faith communities in underserved regions by raising funds to help these communities. It helps construct churches in U.S. mission dioceses, many of which are rural and cover a large geographic area. Many have limited personnel and pastoral resources.

Besides Uvalde, Catholic Extension has supported 1,400 other church communities in rural Texas and along the U.S.-Mexico border.