Drone footage taken Feb. 6, 2023, shows a freight train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. So

Drone footage taken Feb. 6, 2023, shows a freight train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio. Some 50 cars from the train derailed the evening of Feb. 3 near the Pennsylvania border. The crash sparked a massive fire that continued to burn Feb. 4. The derailed train was carrying toxic substances. (OSV News/Reuters/NTSBGov handout)

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May 17, 2023
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More than three months after an environmentally hazardous train derailment, Catholics in an Ohio town are still facing "a lot of uncertainty" about their surroundings, while working to support their community, a pastoral worker told OSV News.

"The concern is what's in store for them down the road," said Patty Zocolo, administrative assistant at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish in East Palestine, Ohio.

The church was within a mile and a half of a 38-car Norfolk Southern derailment Feb. 3, which sparked a massive fire that damaged an additional 12 cars. Of the 20 cars

carrying hazardous materials, 11 derailed, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. The NTSB is pointing to an apparently overheated wheel bearing as a possible cause of the derailment.

No injuries or deaths resulted from the derailment, which was "a miracle," Fr. David Misbrener, pastor of both Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Jude Parish in Columbiana, Ohio, told OSV News hours after the derailment.

However, the environmental damage from the wreck has left residents frightened and uneasy, while raising serious concerns over rail transport safety in general. Days after the derailment, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine said it was "absurd" the train had not been deemed a "high hazardous material train" by the state's public utilities commission, and called on Congress "to take a look at how these things are handled."

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The derailment has been discussed in both the U.S. Senate and House, and the NTSB and the Environmental Protection Agency continue to investigate. DeWine said in an April 20 update that Ohio EPA officials have so far removed about 12.8 million gallons of liquid wastewater and almost 32,000 tons of soil from East Palestine, with 6,800 tons of soil pending removal.

Although DeWine said ongoing testing has not revealed any significant levels of contamination, "water is still the issue," Zocolo told OSV News. "People are still seeking out donation sites where they can pick up water. They test the water quite regularly and are finding it's just fine, but the people still don't want to drink it."

Instead, residents are "opting for purified or bottled water," said Zocolo, who has spearheaded parish-based relief efforts that have drawn donations from near and far.

"We actually had a family from Cincinnati, Ohio, that had absolutely no connection with East Palestine, but bought 140 water purifying systems that use reverse osmosis," she said. "Our parish distributed them throughout the community."

Zocolo said she has been "amazed" by the generosity of those who have enabled the parish to aid the community.

"Probably that first month, there wasn't a day I didn't go to work and find packages piled up at the door — deliveries from Walmart, Sam's Club and Amazon without even a message (from senders)," she said.

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, and the surrounding community gather at a town hall meet

Residents of East Palestine, Ohio, and the surrounding community gather at a town hall meeting Feb. 15, 2023, to discuss safety and other environmental issues they were facing following a train derailment that spilled toxic chemicals Feb. 3. Months later residents continue to cope with the aftermath. (OSV News/Reuters/Alan Freed)

In addition, "people emptied out their pantries," dropping off everything from cleaning supplies and paper goods to perishables, she added.

Parishioners "have been absolutely wonderful" in making sure the donations get to their destination, said Zocolo.

Whether a small bundle or a shipment on a semi truck, Zocolo can "put the call out to (the parish's) different apostolates, especially the Knights of Columbus, and they pass on the word. Within a short period of time, parishioners show up to man our distribution center. They're there for the community."

Parishioners have even welcomed fellow area residents into their own homes — including Zocolo and her family, who hosted a husband and wife for several days after the initial mandatory evacuations from the area closest to the derailment.

"He had just had major surgery, and I said, 'Come stay with us,'" she said, adding that families with young children are more reluctant to return home because "they're concerned about the long-term effects (of the derailment) on their children."

Amid the fears and frustration, parishioners' faith remains intact, Zocolo said.

"Something so horrible can turn out to reveal good," she said.