Emergency personnel maneuver a boat used to rescue residents of flooded homes in Stony P

Emergency personnel maneuver a boat used to rescue residents of flooded homes in Stony Point, N.Y., July 9, 2023. Severe storms that left at least one dead in Orange County, dumped heavy rainfall at intense rates over parts of the Northeast, forcing road closures, water rescues and urgent warnings about life-threatening flash floods. (OSV News/Reuters/USA Today Network/Seth Harrison)



Beth Griffin

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Highland Falls, N.Y. — August 3, 2023
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The community of Highland Falls in southeastern New York's Orange County is still reeling after a July 9 rainstorm dumped 10 inches of water on this Hudson River village, turning meandering brooks into raging torrents and causing widespread devastation.

The so-called 1,000-year flood claimed one life and washed out roads into and around Highland Falls and neighboring Fort Montgomery, as well as the adjacent U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Highland Falls has served as an impromptu aid center and shelter for those hit hard by the storm. Before the rain stopped falling, it mobilized to provide sanctuary and aid to people whose homes were flooded. Fr. Joseph Tokarczyk, the pastor, and his parishioners coordinated with the American Red Cross and other local emergency services to welcome overnight guests in the gymnasium of the former school.

In the first week after the deluge, at least 15 people slept on cots in the gym each night while they waited for other temporary accommodations. Many brought their pets.

Lifelong parishioner Jeannette Scott and her volunteer kitchen crew fed 400-450 people each day with donated meals distributed from the school kitchen or delivered to people who could not leave their homes.

Advertisement

The initial response by the community was more than they could have expected, Scott told The Good Newsroom, the digital news platform of the Archdiocese of New York. "Whatever they could bring — sandwiches, nut bread, diapers, formula — they were just bringing everything. We didn't have places for it when they started bringing it. It was overwhelming, the community spirit and the love and the giving. (It) was just incredible."

The gym became an impromptu warehouse for donated water, nonperishable foods, toiletries, cleaning supplies, and diapers, all organized by commodity. Members of the community were invited to drive through the parking lot where volunteers determined what they needed and delivered it to their cars.

Two weeks after the deluge, the Sacred Heart kitchen was still feeding 275 people each day and collecting and distributing donated food and supplies, and the need is ongoing.

Parishioner and village trustee James Ramus said more than 500 individuals in the village of 3,600 people registered damage reports with Orange County, a precursor to seeking aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Longtime Highland Falls Mayor Joe D'Onofrio said the damage included 45 homes that were "red-tagged," or deemed uninhabitable.

Tokarczyk, known to all as Fr. Joe, said there have been 150-200 volunteers since the storm. Donations have come from individuals, local businesses, various religious groups and government entities.

Related: Biden declares state of emergency in Vermont due to flooding

"We open our buildings and our hearts to those who were affected by the floods," he said. "Every day we have volunteer(s) working. (It's) unbelievable. Even little children, children, young people … came to help those who are really in a bad situation."

Scott called Fr. Joe "incredible." "He has learned (to wear) so many hats ... as a pastor, as a friend, as a warehouse leader. I can't tell you how many hats that man has worn and the composure he has shown with this community, you know." He's been "consoling" but also generous with "the giving of our building," and "he said, 'We got to get it done,'" she added.

Volunteer Patrick Flynn, a Sacred Heart parishioner, and his wife and their sons helped set up the parish shelter for storm victims "the first night before the Red Cross arrived and … and just going since then. The help is immense. The people that are coming out locally, the people are coming from out of the community. Everybody's involved and it's just awesome."

Catholic Charities has been on the scene and will continue to respond to needs.

Shannon Kelly, the CEO for Orange, Sullivan and Ulster counties, said Catholic Charities Spanish-language case managers have been at the parish each day to help people complete paperwork and determine what types of assistance are available to them. Building on its experience with Superstorm Sandy, Hurricane Ida and Tropical Storm Irene, Catholic Charities will work both with short-term flood remediation and the longer-term mental health effects of trauma.

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York greets Shannon Kelly, CEO of Catholic Charities of Ora

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York greets Shannon Kelly, CEO of Catholic Charities of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster counties, after celebrating Mass at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Highland Falls July 22, 2023. A steady army of volunteers and Catholic Charities have been working with the parish to provide aid to residents affected by a July 9 storm that devastated local communities in the Mid-Hudson Valley. (OSV News/The Good Newsroom/Beth Griffin)

On July 22, a huge truck backed up in the steep parish parking lot to the school building, and a small army of volunteers from Walmart, the parish and the community offloaded hundreds of cases of bottled water donated by Walmart's regional management. Amid laughter and good-natured ribbing, the volunteers wrangled the cases onto wheeled carts for the uphill trip to the gym's narrow entrance. Before the truck pulled away, the cases were stacked and ready for distribution.

In the afternoon, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York greeted volunteers in the parking lot and toured the warehouse gym with Fr. Joe. The archbishop and the pastor concelebrated the 5 p.m. Mass. Fr. Joe described it as a Eucharist of thanksgiving for the overwhelming and compassionate response to the storm's immense devastation. He praised the empathy and tireless efforts of people from throughout the three communities and said the Sacred Heart team was a host and channel for the outpouring of unconditional love.

Dolan expressed gratitude for the effective disaster response of the parish and Catholic Charities. He gave Fr. Joe gift cash coupons from the Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation for distribution to people in need.

At the end of Mass, New York State Assemblyman Christopher Eachus announced that President Joe Biden issued a major disaster declaration for the Mid-Hudson Valley. The declaration will provide federal support to local municipalities to boost flood recovery efforts.

Ahead of the cardinal's visit, Fr. Joe said the parish and community "were very glad and so happy to welcome him." "We need a lot of prayers at this moment and we need some support, spiritual, psychological, most importantly."

Related: American Meteorological Society's multifaith project responds to Earth's cry