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In this undated photo, parishioners from Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Jude in Columbiana, Ohio, provide a community meal to those living in the East Palestine area, the scene of a toxic train derailment in February 2023 that continues to impact the wider area. (OSV News/courtesy Fr. Chad Johnson)

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February 6, 2024
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One year after a toxic train derailment, an Ohio parish has "solidified" into a "family" that seeks to serve the community, its pastor told OSV News.

"We're stronger. We are more socially conscious and aware of what's going on around us, and we're here to minister to the community as best we can," said Fr. Chad Johnson, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Jude Parish in Columbiana, Ohio.

Our Lady of Lourdes Church, located in the town of East Palestine, was within a mile and a half of a Norfolk Southern train derailment Feb. 3, 2023, that affected some 50 of 150 cars in the 1.75 mile-long lineup. Thirty-eight cars derailed, while 12

additional ones caught fire.

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

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A National Transportation Safety Board investigation found that an overheated wheel bearing caused an axle on one car to separate, resulting in the derailment.

Months later, the long-term environmental damage from the accident still leaves residents in East Palestine and the surrounding area — including nearby Pennsylvania — frightened and uneasy, while raising serious concerns over rail transport safety in general.

In a Jan. 31 statement, the White House said that President Joe Biden would continue to support a "whole-of-government," multi-agency response addressing the derailment's impact on air, soil and water quality, as well as on economic and social well-being.

Since the first moments of the derailment, Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Jude have been assisting the community in grappling with the aftereffects, said Johnson, who was named pastor in September 2023, following Misbrener's appointment as rector of the Basilica of St. John the Baptist in Canton, Ohio.

"Very quickly, the parish became a distribution center for needed supplies," such as water, food, diapers and other necessities, Johnson said Feb. 5.

In addition, the parish organized a community meal, now held on a monthly basis.

"Everyone who shows up — Catholic, not Catholic; it doesn't matter — exchanges fellowship and faith, and they just be (with each other), which is a beautiful, beautiful thing to see," he said.

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the wider area. (OSV News /courtesy Fr. Chad Johnson)

Afterward, the parish hands out "nonperishable foodstuffs, diapers" and even gift cards, thanks to the "generosity of so many people," said Johnson.

"We just financed a blanket gift card that goes to every home in the area code … a $10 gift card that's accepted at about 50 different businesses in East Palestine," he said. "We were fortunate enough … that we could finance that and provide for the entire community."

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He noted that "the one big commodity right now that people are still desiring is water," adding that he knows of "at least one family" in the parish whose well was "contaminated."

Yet the family has chosen to stay in the town, and "they're still very much coming to church and involved in the community — not just with Our Lady of Lourdes, but also with East Palestine."

"From what I can tell, the people that belong to (this parish) are in for the long haul," said Johnson.

The parish's outreach following the derailment has become a means for evangelization, he said.

"I know of at least one woman who is not Catholic, but who experienced the outreach as the living face of Christ in our parishioners," he said. "She volunteers every month at the community meal to partake and to give back again. … She was just so overwhelmed by the outpouring of love and support that the church family, the parishioners, have given her that she just feels called to embrace and to give back."

The distribution center team have "embraced a motto to be the hands and feet of Christ," said Johnson. "And that has really driven them."

The derailment has ultimately shown that "the Holy Spirit is indeed still moving in and amongst us," said Johnson. "It's about having hope and about trusting that at the end of the day, even though we may not see or hear the Holy Spirit talk to us in

the same way that I'm talking to you, he's right here in the middle because there's really nowhere else he'd rather be — right in the middle of our lived experience, showing us that there is in fact not only a better way but that there is just this beautiful, beautiful end in sight — the light which is Christ himself."