News
EarthBeat
The bishop, wearing habit, shakes hands with a woman. The two stand amid large stockpile o

Charlotte Bishop Michael Martin talks with a volunteer Oct. 4, 2024, at Immaculata Catholic School in Hendersonville, N.C. The school, although suffering flood damage and power loss, has become a major aid distribution site for the area in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene. Martin, who was ordained bishop of Charlotte only four months ago, traveled the region to survey the damage, bring aid supplies and speak to aid volunteers, and offer spiritual comfort. Nearly half of the parishes in the Diocese of Charlotte are located within the federal emergency disaster zone of western North Carolina. (OSV News/Gabriel Swinney for the Catholic News Herald)

Christina Lee Knauss

View Author Profile

Amelia Kudela

View Author Profile

Liz Chandler

View Author Profile

The Catholic News Herald

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

## Join the Conversation

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

Hendersonville, North Carolina — October 7, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

As soon as Bishop Michael T. Martin of Charlotte arrived, he hugged Margaret Beale, the principal of Immaculata Catholic School, and Melissa Stuart, the new principal of nearby Asheville Catholic School. Both burst into tears as soon as they saw the bishop.

"I think broken hearts are crying out," said Martin, pausing while handing off items that he and other diocesan staff had brought with them from Charlotte on Oct. 4. They had come to survey the damage from Tropical Storm Helene firsthand and help with aid delivery efforts.

Helene — which made landfall in Florida late in the evening of Sept. 26 as a Category 4 Hurricane and was downgraded the next day — has been reported to be one of the deadliest storms in the U.S., with more than 215 people confirmed dead. The storm has left a path of devastation across six states, with North Carolina being greatly affected. The scope of the disaster in the Diocese of Charlotte is vast, with more than half of the diocese's counties declared federal disaster areas.

"The only thing I can do here is to be with people, pray with them, and remind them that Jesus never leaves them," said Martin. "They're tired, they're worried, and they're just overwhelmed. Jesus steps into that (situation) all the time. My goal was just to get here and be with people."

Moments later, Stuart described how this week has felt. "This has been a difficult experience, not only as a principal but as a mom," she said. "I'm from Miami, I've been through hurricanes before. This is different."

We're facing weeks, possibly months without water. How do you prepare for that? How do you run a household for months with no water? We're overwhelmed with the longevity of this crisis."

"You don't think of the mountains of North Carolina as the place where this type of misery takes place," Martin said. But the church is there to give people hope and

"remind them that the Holy Spirit is in their midst. Jesus shows us in the midst of devastation, we can begin seeing God's healing grace."

Since Sept. 29, when the widespread extent of the damage from Tropical Storm Helene became apparent, truckloads of emergency supplies have been running multiple times each day from Charlotte to Hendersonville and other western North Carolina communities to help residents who are desperate for water, food and other essentials. Catholic Charities and the diocese have provided a majority of the relief items at Immaculata. Other churches and schools are also serving as aid centers.

At Immaculata, Beale and Father David O'Connor, parochial vicar at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, have been on the scene organizing the distribution effort since putting out the call for help Sunday morning to diocesan officials.

"Margaret Beale is our hero," said Immaculate Conception parishioner Terry Fishleigh, who's been volunteering all week. "She started this at Mass on Sunday. Father announced, 'If anyone can help, this is what we're going to do.' And everybody showed up."

Not only has the volunteer turnout been amazing, but so has been the answer to prayer," Fishleigh told The Catholic News Herald, the newspaper of the Diocese of Charlotte. "We're just watching God's work going on here. Every time we are running low on something, someone pulls up with a donation of that item."

Volunteers, including entire families, are coming in from all over to help in the relief effort, working from 7 in the morning to 7 each night.

Immaculata students have also been getting involved, writing notes of comfort and encouragement to hand out with the bottles of water and baby formula, plus handing out rosaries. Many people are taking them even if they're not Catholic.

Immaculata student Williams Schwartzman has volunteered each day this week — unloading trucks, stocking supplies, and handing items to tearful recipients. "It allows me to help people in a time of need," said the seventh-grader. "Since I don't need help, I think it's best to give to others."

Sixth-grader Samantha Montano added, "Jesus sacrificed His life; I should pay that back by helping people going through hard times."

On the morning of Oct. 4, two lines of cars snaked efficiently through the school's large parking lot as volunteers carted out supplies from the school building to put in the trunk or the back seat. The operation was running like "a well-oiled machine," Catholic News Herald reporter Christina Lee Knauss said from the scene.

Advertisement

Residents from surrounding rural areas where large aid trucks can't reach are among those coming to Immaculata to load supplies into their cars to bring back up the smaller roads.

Brevard resident and Sacred Heart parishioner Frank Scarduzio escaped the worst damage at his house, with just power loss. He was at Immaculata this morning, filling the back seat of his car with food, wipes and diapers to bring back to people in the towns of Brevard, Rosman and Sapphire. His wife works at Immaculata, and they've been making daily supply runs to get donations out to where they're needed most.

"We're taking our load back to Sacred Heart and from there, they're distributing it out," Scarduzio said. "Then for the church in Sapphire, we're meeting halfway and unloading the stuff and they're distributing it up that way."

Fishleigh added, "We have a lot of people coming through. Carloads of people have been coming in saying, 'I'm going to Asheville, what can you give me,' 'I'm going to Swannanoa, what can you give me.' Everything that gets donated here, we're dispersing."

Minutes after Martin arrived at Immaculata on the morning of Friday, Oct. 4, he got right to work unloading supplies into the school gym and moving furniture into hallways to make space for more aid as it arrived.

He encouraged the volunteers — calling them "rock stars" — and he spoke to residents in the car line, praying over them and asking how they were holding up.

"It's a beautiful thing to see people from Charlotte come and roll up their sleeves," Beale said, adding that everyone there at Immaculata was extremely grateful for the outpouring of support.

"I'm very happy to get this water," said Mickey Mahaffey, who had driven to Immaculata to pick up bottled water for his family. His house has water, but they've been advised not to drink it.
"One of things I've been most impressed about is all of the volunteer help, plus the government has been on the spot. They have sent so much help to us," he said.

Hendersonville resident Toni Wickersham was also at Immaculata this morning to get a few supplies — not much, she said, as she wanted to leave items for people worse off than her. She and her elderly mother have running water at their house, but no electricity.

Despite the ongoing tragedy, Wickersham said she's seen some good coming out of it all.

"Actually, it's been heartwarming to see the whole community coming together. You see volunteer efforts like this. You see people grilling food out so it doesn't spoil. You see neighbors cutting and clearing trees for each other," she said. "Even though we've had this terrible flood, it's been good to see the local community coming together."

Before leaving Hendersonville, Martin said the aid distributions would continue as needed, and he and the entire diocese remain "very committed to making whatever relief possible that we can."

The tremendous response from people across the diocese and the region is inspiring but not surprising to the bishop. That's how most people are, because we are made in the image and likeness of a loving and generous God, he said.

"He's created us to be that loving, that caring, and that responsive because that's who He is — and we reflect that in the way in which we see a need and try and respond to it. We see someone hurting and we try to care for them. I'm glad to see that being made so real here in western North Carolina."

"That's the beauty of the church," he said. People "love the Lord and they love each other, and they want to build the kingdom."