News

Older couple standing side by side, arms around each other.

Deacon José Luis Díaz and his wife, Maria Esther, pose before a special Mass for fire victims and first responders at Mission San Gabriel In California Jan. 9, 2025. Deacon Díaz and three others saved Sacred Heart Church in Altadena from the Eaton Fire with only an iron pipe and a water hose Jan. 8. (OSV News/John Rueda, courtesy Archdiocese of Los Angeles)

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As he drove frantically past charred buildings along the smoky streets of Altadena in his SUV early on the morning of Jan. 8, Deacon José Luis Díaz had one prayer on his mind: God, please spare my church.

A few hours earlier, Díaz and his family had been roused from their beds by a cellphone alert ordering them to evacuate as fierce, dry Santa Ana winds pushed the Eaton Fire into their Altadena neighborhood. They packed up a few belongings and went to the Pasadena Convention Center nearby, one of several public shelters set up for local evacuees.

Shortly after falling asleep in a cot, he was awakened again — this time by his wife.

"José Luis, they're saying the church is on fire!" his wife, Maria Esther, told him.

If it weren't for those two fateful wake-up calls — and quick thinking by Díaz a few moments later — Sacred Heart Church in Altadena would not have survived.

By the time Díaz pulled up to Sacred Heart with his son-in-law around 7:30 a.m., he found two other parishioners trying to put out a patch of flames burning the wooden roof near the church's boiler room.

"There were houses next door, in front, and behind the church that were already on fire," said Díaz, who has served at Sacred Heart since he was ordained a permanent deacon for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 2015.

Díaz quickly unlocked a maintenance room and pulled out a ladder and an iron pipe. Then the team got to work: Two of them propped up the ladder so that the deacon could use the pipe to break shingle tiles on a side roof of the church, while another poured water from a garden hose on the flames.

"We almost didn't have water pressure in the hose," said Díaz. "So, we had to do everything we could to put it out."

Their efforts kept the roof fire, which had been sparked by embers flying from burning homes down the street, from spreading to the rest of the church. The four men stayed on the scene for most of the morning, breaking tiles and finally extinguishing the last of the stubborn flames. When Diaz opened the church to look for any damage inside, he was relieved to find the sanctuary in good condition, besides some heat damage to a church door, and likely smoke damage throughout.

"We have a lot of debris but no real damage," Sacred Heart pastor Father Gilbert Guzman told Angelus, the archdiocese's news outlet. "All of the buildings are fine, the rectory is fine. We will just have quite a bit of cleanup afterwards."

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When "afterwards" will be, of course, is anyone's guess, as the bone-dry Santa Ana winds continued to fan multiple large fires in Los Angeles County on Thursday and Friday, spreading ashy air across the area and turning thousands of local residents into refugees in their own cities.

Driving around Sacred Heart's neighborhood afterward, Díaz described an apocalyptic scene.

"It looks like we're in the middle of a battlefield. Everything is wiped out," he said. "There are so many burned homes gone, with only the chimney left."

By Wednesday, Guzman had heard from nearly a dozen parish families who had lost their homes.

The deacon's house, just eight blocks from the parish, has so far remained unscathed by the Eaton Fire. But as he waits at the Pasadena shelter with his family for the fires to subside and recovery efforts to begin, Díaz said he has kept his Bible close by, turning to praying certain psalms of agony, supplication and pleading as he looks to make sense of the sudden destruction.

"Your foes have roared in the midst of your holy place … they set your sanctuary on fire," reads Psalm 74, one of the psalms cited by the deacon in his prayers. "Why do you hold back your hand, why do you keep your right hand in your bosom?"

Prayer, Díaz believes, can also bring about an interior "improvement" in those who suffer. Another one accompanying the deacon this week has been Psalm 85.

"Passing through the valley of weeping, he turns it into a spring," the psalm reads. "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness."