News



A man collects water along the Pacific Coast Highway, as powerful winds fueling devastating wildfires in the Los Angeles area force people to evacuate, in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood on the west side of LA on Jan. 8. Several Catholic parishes opened their doors to families evacuated from their homes as wind-driven fires continued to burn through parts of Los Angeles County Jan. 8. (OSV News/Reuters/Daniel Cole)



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Los Angeles — January 13, 2025
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A conflagration of almost biblical proportions has killed at least two dozen people, destroyed thousands of homes and numerous churches and schools but has also inspired a groundswell of Catholic support for Southern California's dispossessed.

As a parish in Pacific Palisades copes with the total destruction of its church and many parishioners' homes, Catholics across the region were adjusting to being suddenly homeless and many Catholics stepped up to offer aid.

More than 100 diocesan schools were listed as closed on Jan. 9 because of the wildfires, according to the archdiocese's news site.

Other houses of worship were destroyed in the Los Angeles wildfires, including a century-old synagogue in Pasadena, a mosque in Altadena and at least a number of Protestant churches. The Pasadena Jewish Temple & Center posted this message on its website: "We are here. We are strong. We are here to stay."

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles established a donation portal to assist parishes, schools and communities affected by the fires while Catholic Charities USA is accepting donations for relief to families from the wildfires fueled by powerful Santa Ana winds whipping through the region in drought conditions.

Loyola High School, a Jesuit boys school in Los Angeles which draws students from throughout Southern California, including Pacific Palisades and Pasadena, opened its Caruso Hall to offer aid, such as food, showers and resources, while also taking donations of nonperishable food, clothes, hygiene products, blankets and supplies.

American Martyrs School in Manhattan Beach informed parents that it is working with parents of students who lost their homes and schools in the fire and to see if the school could arrange with teachers to place homeless students into the appropriate classes.



The skeletal remains of Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Pacific Palisades, in Los Angeles (Matt Skiba)

"A number of families from Corpus Christi parish and school have reached out to American Martyrs School in the hopes that we will be able to welcome their families to our community," a note sent to parents last week said. "While our school may be fully enrolled, we are called to provide the necessary community, academics, spiritual and emotional support these children and families are in need of right now."

Parents were told over the weekend that at least two dozen students from affected schools are expected to be joining classes at American Martyrs School.

The school had also collected donations of toiletries and hygiene products, new undergarments, snacks, nonperishable foods and bottled water. "Our community will welcome these families with open arms and provide support and care," the school note said.

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In Los Angeles, Sisters Servants of Mary evacuated 13 nuns to its motherhouse in Oxnard, in Ventura County, as a precaution, said Sr. Mercedes Escamilla. The order, which serves the sick, has three Southern California locations, including a nursing home in Newbury Park. The Los Angeles nuns canceled their home visits. "We are so blessed, we have a place to be evacuated, thanks be to God. So many others don't have a place to be evacuated to," Escamilla said.

In Altadena, site of one of the three devastating wildfires, an act of heroism saved Sacred Heart Church on Jan. 8. Deacon José Luis Díaz was asleep on a cot in the Pasadena Convention Center when he was awakened by his wife. "José Luis, they're saying the church is on fire!" his wife, Maria Esther, said.

He and his son-in-law sped to Sacred Heart, arriving around 7:30 a.m., where they found two other parishioners trying to put out a patch of flames burning the wooden roof near the church's boiler room. They climbed onto the roof and smashed shingle tiles on a side roof of the church, and then poured water from a garden hose on the flames, preventing the flames from spreading.

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

Scanning the neighborhood around the surviving church, Díaz described an apocalyptic scene to OSV News. "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."

In nearby Sierra Madre, the Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center sustained major damage on the 83-acre campus that has hosted days of prayer, retreats and spiritual programs for more than 100 years.

About 60 people at the retreat center were evacuated as the wildfire swept into the foothills of the San Gabriel mountains, Passionist Fr. Febin Barose said in a Facebook post.

While the main retreat center is still standing, the workers' apartments, garage and hermitage burned to the ground, Barose, the center director told Angelus News. The center remains closed.

"My dear friends, at this point, we are unsure about when we can get back to our property and resume our mission and ministry," Barose said on Facebook. "It makes complete sense to understand that our faith is tested on fire! But we are pilgrims of hope as Pope Francis exhorted us this year. Hope will not disappoint us."



Msgr. Liam Kidney, pastor of Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Pacific Palisades, greets people following a Mass Jan. 9, celebrated by Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels to pray for those affected by the fires raging through parts of Los Angeles County. Corpus Christi Catholic Church was destroyed in the fire. (OSV News/Courtesy of Archdiocese of Los Angeles/Isabel

Cacho)

In Pacific Palisades, the popular Corpus Christi Catholic Church was destroyed in the fire and there are also reports of at least damage to the school. The parish was to hold its Sunday services, led by their pastor, Msgr. Liam Kidney, at nearby St. Monica's Church in Santa Monica, which has served as a gathering place for wildfire refugees.

The fire's impact has reached across the country. In a Jan. 8 post on X social media, Greg Erlandson, a Maryland resident and former editor-in-chief of Catholic News Service, said:

> The #PacificPalisadesFire has gutted me. The church where I was married [was] reduced to ashen foundations. My in-laws' house, their pride and joy where they had lived for 50 years, reportedly gone. It was not just a celebrity community. Many ordinary souls lost everything.

On Jan. 9, as fires remained uncontained, dozens of Corpus Christi parishioners attended a special Mass at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. The celebrant, Archbishop José Gomez, said there are no "easy answers," and that God calls each person "to be instruments that show his compassion and care to those who are suffering."

"Love is what is asked from us in this challenging moment," Gomez said.

The Mass ended with the popular Catholic hymn "Be Not Afraid." Corpus Christi parishioners began to cry, among them were Ed and Chris Amos, Angelus News reported. After evacuating on Tuesday (Jan. 7), they watched a live feed from their home security camera.

"You could see the flames approaching the house, and then [the feed] went dead," Ed Amos said.

This story has been updated with additional reporting.