Opinion
EarthBeat



Smoke rises as the wildfires burn in the Los Angeles area Jan. 9. One of the biggest fires, the Eaton Fire in Altadena, Calif., badly damaged the Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center in Sierra Madre. (OSV News/Reuters/Ringo Chiu)



by Matt Kappadakunnel

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The new year is often a time of hope and optimism. However, as a Los Angeles County resident, 2025 has been a heartbreaking and challenging time.

I have friends, colleagues and acquaintances who have lost their homes and possessions in the LA wildfires. Some of their valuables cannot be quantified, including generational gifts and family heirlooms.

Some people have fallen into the temptation to use this disaster as an opportunity for polarization and political grandstanding. However, amid destruction and loss, emphasis ought to be on comforting those most impacted.

Pope Francis has expressed his spiritual closeness and solidarity with the people of Los Angeles County, and he offers all of us guidance on evaluating the destruction and responding to the disaster through his encyclicals *Laudato Si*' and *Fratelli Tutti*.

Care for our common home, in conjunction with care for our neighbor, is the necessary response to the LA fires.

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Laudato Si', which often is lambasted by conservatives for propping up conversations about climate change, recognizes that there are climate-related calamities around the globe, whether they be hurricanes, earthquakes or wildfires. Not only is the environment suffering, but the people in those areas are suffering as well.

In *Laudato Si*', the pontiff says, "On many concrete questions, the Church has no reason to offer a definitive opinion; she knows that honest debate must be encouraged among experts, while respecting divergent views. But we need only take a frank look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair … evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises, for the world's problems cannot be analyzed or explained in isolation."

Regardless of one's political or environmental views, the LA fires reveal the importance of being aware of and sensitive to environmental conditions — water shortages, insufficient rainfall, high winds — and investing in ways to ameliorate these dynamics through technological innovation and thorough changes in consumption habits.

In *Fratelli Tutti,* utilizing the parable of the good Samaritan, Francis emphasizes that ideological enemies still are part of our human family for which we must care.

"[L]ove does not care if a brother or sister in need comes from one place or another … Jesus asks us to be present to those in need of help, regardless of whether or not they belong to our social group," he says.



A member of California Regional Urban Search and Rescue Task Force 5 (CA-RTF-5) looks over a destroyed home in Pacific Palisades on the west side of Los Angeles Jan. 15, 2025, in the aftermath of the wildfires. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

The fires impacted the wealthy and the poor, conservatives and liberals, Democrats and Republicans. Regardless if one lost a mansion or a trailer, a catastrophe can reduce one to homelessness. The socioeconomic divide can be blurred in minutes.

Having said that, cities in Greater Los Angeles such as Altadena, which became a home for many Black families during the Great Migration in the 1960s and 1970s — particularly amid the heightened practice of redlining — experienced the loss not only of their homes, but also their generational wealth and community ties. While this does not diminish the loss experienced by those in Malibu or Pacific Palisades, the impact of the fires is multifaceted and can affect marginalized communities in a magnified manner.

Still, all people who experience tragedy deserve to be cared for, and it is our duty to do so.

Francis states in *Fratelli Tutti*, "To care for the world in which we live means to care for ourselves. Yet we need to think of ourselves more and more as a single family dwelling in a common home." Thinking of the whole world as our common home promotes solidarity with and compassion for everyone as our neighbor.

The Southern California fires reveal this need for solidarity and interdependence in a place known for privacy and independence. But this call to solidarity is one we should notice, reflect on and practice not only in difficult times, but throughout our lives as Catholics.

Amid the continued fires and their aftermath, let us heed Pope Francis' messages of care for our common home and for one another, relinquishing our ideological fixations to serve and support our neighbors in need.