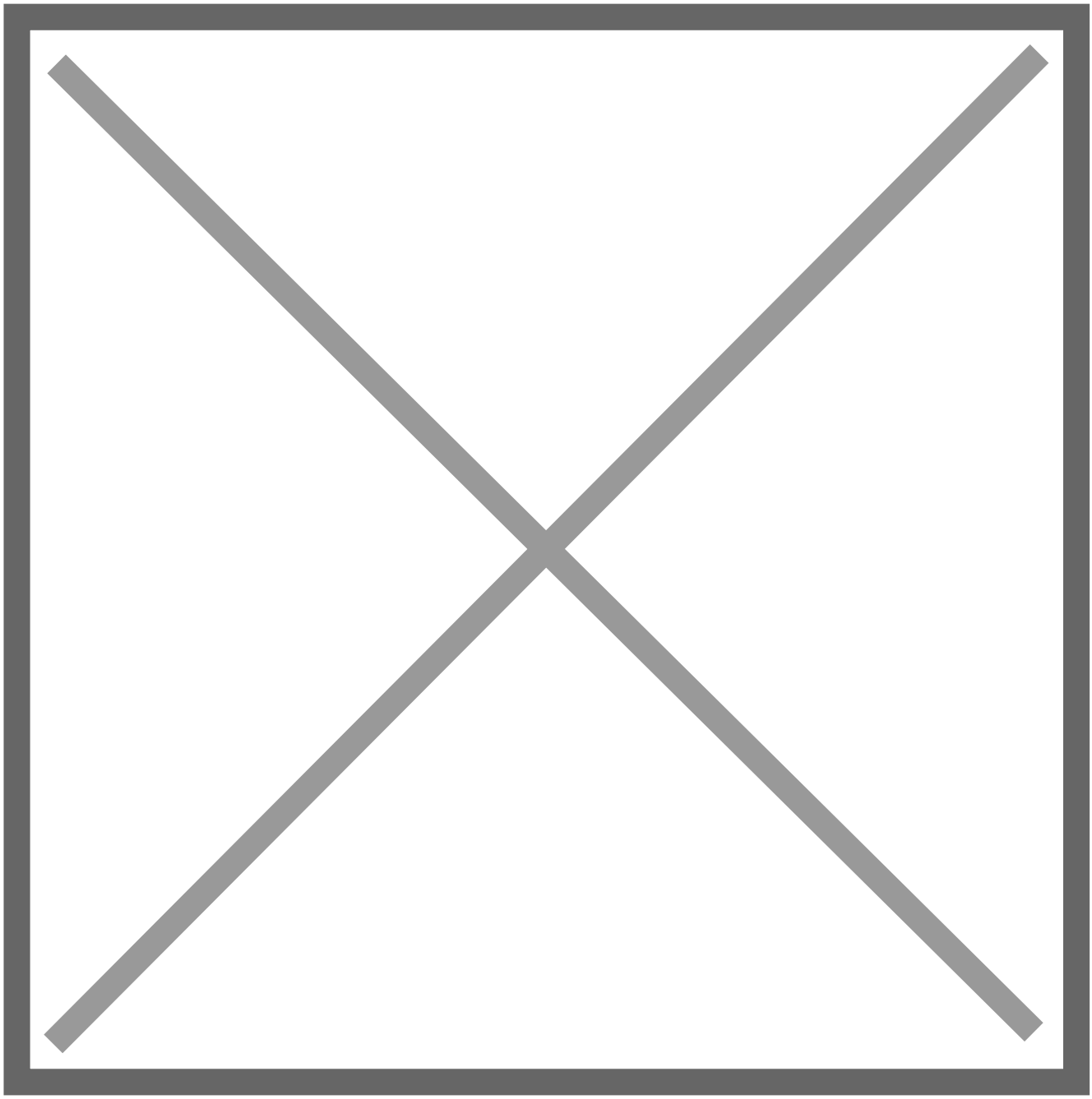


Deacon Don Schultz of St. John and St. Mary Parishes in Menasha, Wis., center, poses July 30, 2026, with altar server Zach Beyer, left, and Green Bay Diocese seminarian Kyle Rohan, who has been assigned temporarily to the parishes. After a tornado swept through the town July 27, they were delivering bratwurst — that the deacon grilled himself — and drinks to tornado-damaged Doty Island, an area of Menasha where the deacon lives. (OSV News/Courtesy St. John and St. Mary

Parishes/Deacon Don Schultz)

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MENASHA, Wis. — August 6, 2026
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"Nobody was killed. In all that destruction, that's an absolute miracle — that no one died."

These are words Fr. Matt Settle keeps repeating. The pastor of the linked parishes of St. John and St. Mary in Menasha was not in town when an EF-3, 1-mile-wide tornado hit at midday on July 27.

"I rushed back," he told OSV News, "and all my usual highway exits are completely blocked off. I drove around, drove around. Finally, about an hour and a half later, I parked at the hospital and then walked out to the church."

What he found was "beyond any description. … I have been through some tornadoes, and I've never seen a populated area destroyed like this one."

The tornado, with winds of 146 mph, traveled on the ground for 20 minutes, cutting a swath of 12.5 miles, over three cities and one village. Menasha, population 18,000, was hardest hit.

Houses and businesses were destroyed, lifted off foundations and tossed into other buildings. Few trees remain and those are damaged. Cars were flipped, sometimes with people inside. Snowplows were needed to clear some streets.

Yet only 68 people were reported injured.

Jennifer Lee, a member of St. John, rushed home from work. She remembers "walking/running the last half-mile to my house like a character in some post-apocalyptic movie to see for myself. ... I lost almost every tree that my grandma had planted, years before I was even born. Magnolia, maple, cedar, pear, lilac ... I burst into tears when it came into view. And then... some relative of a neighbor — a total stranger — walked up and gave me a hug."

Her house and her mother's still stand.

Deacon Don Schultz of the linked parishes has lived in Menasha for 30 years. He and volunteers have been walking the streets, praying with people. He found one woman in his Doty Island neighborhood bringing garbage out from her relatively undamaged home. Those around hers, though, are not, and many bear red "unoccupiable" signs.

"And she just started crying when she saw us with our rosaries in the hand," the deacon said. "We gave her a hug and she said, ‘I'm just going to be so lonely. I'm going to be living on the edge of a ghost town.'"

It took four days for power to be restored to the parish offices. Other places remained dark as of Aug. 6. The water plant was all but destroyed and water mains had to be linked to the neighboring city of Neenah.

On Aug. 1, weekend Mass was celebrated at St. Patrick Church, the only one of Menasha's three churches still usable. The parish has offered the use of its church for as long as needed. "It was the least we could do," said Fr. Tom Reynebeau, pastor.

After Mass, Settle and business manager, Steve Siegel, updated parish members.

St. John's 1890 Romanesque Revival-style church sustained structural damage to its towers, a hole over the sanctuary and cracks along the nave. An outside brick wall was torn off.

"If you would walk into St. John's Church (closed for now)," Settle said, "what you would see is a mess all over the floor. You look up and think, 'Oh, it doesn't look so

bad from here.' There's a tarp so you don't see the sunshine shining through the roof. But there's plaster from the ceiling all the way down the church, into the choir loft, from front to back. So that ceiling was doing this" — he made a shimmying hand motion — "in the storm. And we don't know the structure of the ceiling now."

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St. Mary's Church sustained rectory damage and its steeple, an area landmark, has brickwork damage. Danger tape surrounds its base now and its bells are silenced so reverberations don't send bricks to the street nearly 200 feet below. The entire 1883 German Gothic-style church needs structural evaluation. For now, a small chapel near the altar is accessible and will be used for daily Mass.

The school's roof is broken through, and classrooms are water damaged. But Siegel said the hope is that the school will be ready for the scheduled first day of classes on Aug. 25.

In the meantime, people have stepped up. A temporary emergency volunteer coordination center had 2,000 on each of its first two days sign up to go into the damaged areas.

Settle remarked often on "the openness and generosity of people. All of a sudden they're talking to people, to neighbors they never knew before."

Aid is pouring in from not only the area, but around the country.

"Our Facebook followers have grown," said Schultz. "We've gained 600 followers because of this. I got an email from a lady who lived in Colorado, who wanted to have protein stuff delivered from the local Walmart to us. So, she was buying it from Colorado to send it to us here."

Around the city and its outskirts, tables sit on street corners offering free snacks, food and water. People take what they need or give what they can.

Schultz said this spirit impressed an emergency response team from Samaritan's Purse, a North Carolina-based group that helps in natural disasters. One of them took down a damaged tree for the Schultzes. "And he said to me," the deacon recalled, "you know, we respond to a lot of disasters. And never have I seen a

community that has pulled together like Menasha."

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Green Bay has an emergency team at the parish, to coordinate offers of aid. These range from homes, campers and duplexes, even Air BNBs to stay in and grocery and hardware store cards. Collections from parishes and non-Catholic churches pour in.

St. Mary/St. John is setting up a long-term parish response team for the weeks and months ahead for its people. How many people?

"Did you know that St. John the Baptist, St. Mary's has 18,000 parishioners?" Siegel asked those who were ready to volunteer Aug. 1. "18,000. Most of them don't know they're parishioners."

"Yes," Settle added. "18,000 (the population of Menasha.) What it means to be a parishioner of a Catholic parish is that you live in that area. So, they're our mission. And that's where we need to be. Those are the ones we need to reach."

The staff and volunteers are out in the streets, including the youth, praying the rosary with people, handing out water, talking with anyone who needs a shoulder to cry on. And bringing food.

Schultz, seminarian Kyle Rohan and altar server Zach Beyer spent two days carrying food bags filled with the bratwurst the deacon had grilled and offering them to anyone. The first time, when they had given out all their food, they were stopped by a woman driving by. "Do you want any pizza?" She asked, pulling boxes from her trunk. When they returned to the deacon's home, an ice cream truck stopped, and its driver gave them ice cream bars.

The deacon, in his Aug. 1 homily, compared these events to that weekend's Gospel from Matthew about the multiplication of five loaves and two fish (14:13-21).

"That, you see, is how compassion is multiplied," Deacon Schultz said. "One act of kindness inspired another. That, my friends, is how the kingdom of God works. Jesus takes ordinary people, ordinary gifts, ordinary acts of kindness, and multiplies them into extraordinary grace."