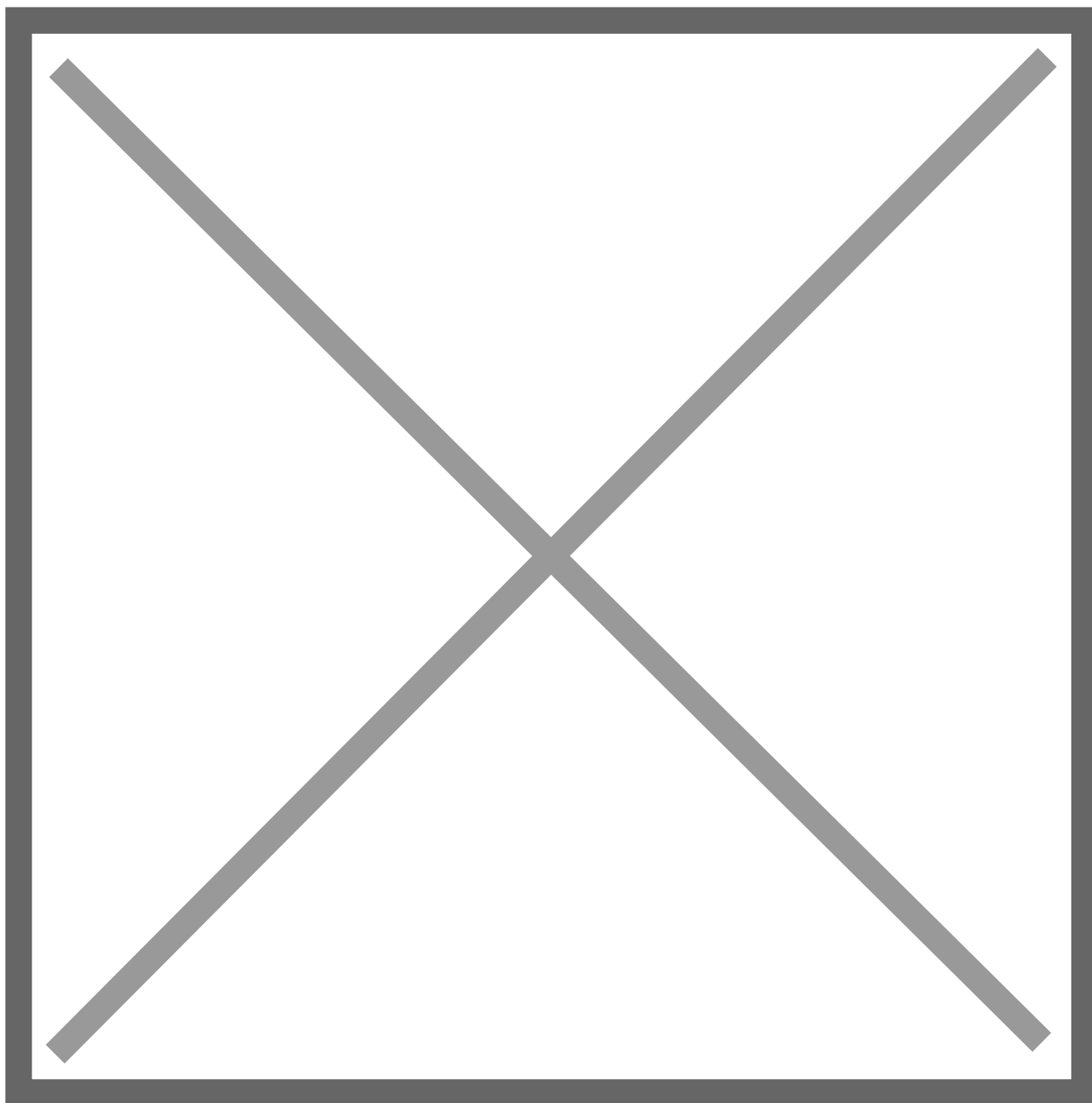




A damaged sign is seen in front of Sacred Heart Church in Naalehu, Hawaii, Aug. 20, 2026, where cleanup efforts continued after Hurricane Lala barreled across the Hawaiian Islands Aug. 15-16. The parish office was flooded. (OSV News/Hawaii Catholic Herald/Lisa Dahm)

by Lisa Dahm / Hawaii Catholic Herald

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NAALEHU, Hawaii — August 27, 2026

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As Hurricane Lala barreled across the Hawaiian Islands Aug. 15-16, several Catholic organizations kept close watch over one of the hardest-hit areas — Hawaii Island's Kau district, home to Sacred Heart Church in Naalehu and Holy Rosary Church in Pahala.

Fr. William "Pila" Tulua — pastor of the two parishes, the southernmost on Hawaii island, also called the Big Island — stayed in touch with members of the Knights of Columbus, EPIC Ministry and the Military and Hospitaller Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem.

Tulua, who is also the senior chaplain for the Order of St. Lazarus, sent photos and provided an account of the devastation in the Kau district as it unfolded — until he ran out of power.

"During the hurricane, we were on the phone with him (Father Tulua) and texting with him and seeing his pictures and the last thing we heard from him was, 'It's getting bad.' Then he dropped off, which was very scary," said Steve Brock, leader of the order's Hawaii cadre and chief marshal in the order's national office, known as the Grand Priory of America.

Through photos and other accounts, the groups learned that Sacred Heart's parish office flooded, as did the local cemetery in Naalehu, resulting in unearched coffins.

"There are walls missing (in residents' homes). There are houses that were moved and smashed into the neighbor's house," Tulua told the Hawaii Catholic Herald, news outlet of the Honolulu Diocese. "At the hotel, the rooms were destroyed. ... The new cultural center for Naalehu, that was destroyed. They just built it."

Roads and bridges were washed away, with Highway 11 severely damaged; immediately after the storm rolled through, the area was completely inaccessible.

Homes flooded, families were displaced, and residents faced shortages of potable water and electricity. They could not bathe or use their toilets, despite the heat and high humidity.

Downed trees blocked the 12-mile road between the two parishes, creating a physical barrier for the peripatetic priest. Father Tulua had to rely on assistance from Michelle Andrade, Holy Rosary's parish secretary, to organize the effort and maintain the Pahala church.

EPIC Ministry member Tyler Johansen and his family, residents of Naalehu, began to rescue residents immediately. They used their farm tractors and bulldozers to begin the cleanup effort.

"The driveways were full of (about eight inches of) mud," Tulua said. "The Johansens brought their skid loader, and they cleaned out the driveway. Otherwise, I would have been stuck."

As soon as the Johansens freed Tulua's car, the priest began assisting parishioners with rides.

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"We are incredibly grateful to Tyler, his family and all those in Kau who did not wait for outside help but immediately began taking care of their neighbors," said Dallas Carter, president of EPIC Ministry, in an email to the lay organization's members.

After passing Hawaii island, Lala was downgraded to a tropical storm as it moved beneath the island chain, according to AccuWeather.

Heavy winds and rain pummeled Maui, Oahu and Kauai through early Aug. 17.

During the storm, more than 25% of utility customers lost power statewide, with 65% losing power on Hawaii Island alone. Many people were left without power and internet access for most of the weekend; days after Lala's worst impact, tens of thousands were still without power.

On Aug. 26, President Donald Trump signed a disaster declaration for Hawaii County — which covers Hawaii Island — making it eligible for federal assistance for storm recovery.

While Hawaii Island bore the brunt of Lala's fury Aug. 15, on Oahu, members of the three groups pooled their resources. They managed to raise \$17,000 within 48 hours.

"They're going to see about getting these things done," Tulua told the Hawaii Catholic Herald of his friends on Oahu.

For Anthony Selvanathan, a member of the Order of St. Lazarus, the disaster in the Kau district was deeply personal.

"Fr. William isn't simply a priest serving an affected area. He is a friend and someone whose ministry I have supported and worked alongside," Selvanathan said. "Through the Order of St. Lazarus and our shared life in the Church in Hawaii, I have come to know his deep commitment to the people he serves in Kau. His parishioners aren't statistics on a damage report to him — they are people he knows, loves and serves."

This is not the first time that members of these three fraternal and lay organizations came together to provide assistance during a disaster.

The groups coordinated to gather much-needed immediate resources for survivors of the deadly Maui wildfires in 2023. They also provided help and resources in Waialua this past spring after back-to-back Kona low storms devastated the rural Oahu town — bringing generators, water, propane and satellite networks while providing physical cleanup and other assistance wherever they could.

To assist during Hurricane Lala, Brock from the Order of St. Lazarus and John Fielding, Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus Council 5000, flew to Hawaii island Aug. 18 to gather up and transport five containers of supplies that included potable water, gas, propane and propane burners for cooking, flashlights, generators and Starlink internet connectivity.

Brock drove to Holy Rosary Church in Pahala to drop off the supplies and set up the Starlink internet connection. He also brought a satellite phone for Father Tulua to use as emergency communication.

"We want to make sure that he always has a lifeline out," Brock said in a phone interview with the Herald before his flight.

Brock also conducted a needs assessment to see how the groups could continue service until power is restored to the area and the community recovers.

"We, as a people of God, will show the witness to the people in this community," Tulua said. "We have been blessed. We're still hurting, but it's going to be OK. I think this is going to be a long journey in repair and healing."

While Hawaii Island saw the majority of Lala's force, other islands also were significantly affected. In addition to widespread power outages, the relentless wind and rain wreaked havoc on communities on Maui, Oahu and Kauai.

At St. Joseph Parish in Makawao, Maui, a tree fell through the roof of the two-story convent there, according to a Hawaii News Now report.

Mass attendance was sparse across the diocese as wind, rain and loss of power kept parishioners away. (As Lala bore down on Hawaii, Honolulu Bishop Michael Castori granted a dispensation Aug. 13 for parishioners who would not be able to attend Mass due to the storm.)

At Sacred Heart Church in Honolulu, Fr. Ese'ese "Ace" Tui said that the early morning Mass on Aug. 16 was canceled due to heavy rain.

Tui, who is pastor of Sacred Heart, said conditions then improved, allowing the subsequent Sunday Masses to be celebrated.

"One surprising thing during the storm was the power situation," he added. "With all the outages in our area, the only building on our campus that did not lose power was the church. The hall attached to the church lost power, as did the rectory and the school buildings, but the church itself had power throughout the entire storm.

"One parishioner asked me, 'Father, why does the church still have power? Do we have a generator?' I jokingly responded, 'Yes,' and pointed to the tabernacle. Apparently, we have a different kind of backup power!" Tui said.

EPIC Ministry's Carter, who works at St. Louis School in Kaimuki, said one storm event that hit particularly close to home for him was when a large portion of a student's family's roof in Kalihi Valley was torn off by the wind.

"Seeing a disaster on the news is one thing; knowing personally one of the children who went through it is another," Carter said in an email to the Herald.

EPIC Ministry assisted the family, as well as that of another student whose home sustained damage, with a monetary donation for food and necessities.

"There are undoubtedly many more families across Oahu with similar stories that we simply have not heard yet," Carter said.

EPIC Ministry has started a donation site for relief efforts at relief.raiselysite.com.