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Natural disasters in 2011 prompt outpouring of charity

by Carol Zimmermann by Catholic News Service



John Olson, a parishioner at St. Mary's Catholic Church, holds a Liturgy of the Hours book he found in the remains of the rectory in Joplin, Mo., May 25. The church, rectory, school and parish hall were destroyed by a massive category EF5 tornado May 22. (CNS photo/Dave Crenshaw, Eastern Oklahoma Catholic)

WASHINGTON -- Natural disasters around the world and all across the United States this year prompted prayers, charitable giving and outreach amid unthinkable destruction.

The devastation across the globe included an earthquake and tsunami in Japan, flooding in Australia and a drought in Africa.

The United States also was particularly hard hit with a string of natural disasters: unprecedented summer heat and drought in the Southwest, deadly tornadoes, a massive blizzard in the Northeast, major river floods in the Midwest, an earthquake on the East Coast followed by a hurricane that caused massive flooding.

There also were a record number of wildfires in the Southwest and strong windstorms in Southern California to end the year.

In January, a flood in Queensland, Australia, killed 13 people and devastated much of Australia's coal, beef and agricultural industries. The Queensland chapter of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul set up a flood relief committee in response to the plight of more than 200,000 people affected in at least two dozen towns.

In early March, a tsunami and magnitude 9 earthquake struck Japan, devastating parts of its coast and leaving nearly 20,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands homeless. It also triggered a meltdown at a nuclear power plant, releasing radiation and forcing tens of thousands of Japanese to evacuate their homes.

Maryknoll Father Jim Mylet, who lives in Japan, noted that in the midst of the devastation, Catholics and others there were buoyed by the support they had received. "The prayers and support from around the world," he said, "are a great source of strength and reinforce the image of us all sharing a common humanity under God our Father."



Initially, church relief activities coordinated by Caritas Japan

largely focused on cleanup and delivery of aid to survivors in the disaster zone. Months later, volunteers were still helping those who took temporary shelter in local schools, gymnasiums and town halls.

Meanwhile in Africa, the ongoing drought and famine afflicting Somalia and other East African nations this year was "a humanitarian crisis that cries out for help to Christians throughout the world," said the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, and the chairman of the board of Catholic Relief Services, Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz.

CRS, the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency, estimated in October that more than 12 million people were in urgent need of aid in Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia. The drought caused failed crops, deaths of livestock and critical shortages of food and water.

CRS expanded its food distribution program in the region, working with local partners to provide livelihood support, water and sanitation.

Through its appeal campaign, Caritas Internationalis had raised about \$41.7 million by early October and expected to raise another \$40 million to provide emergency food aid, clean water, sanitation, drought-resistant seeds, and develop water conservation systems.

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In the United States this spring, over the course of several weeks, tornadoes caused death and destruction in Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Tornadoes leveled parts of Joplin, Mo., and Tuscaloosa, Ala.

The tornado that ripped through Joplin May 22 claimed at least 125 lives and flattened every building in its path including St. Mary's Catholic Church. Parishioners retrieved the Blessed Sacrament from the church's shattered tabernacle. Only the large steel cross at what had been the church's entrance remained, towering over the wreckage.

Father Justin Monaghan, St. Mary's pastor, said he was overwhelmed by the outpouring of support after the tornado. "My faith has been strengthened by the amazing response of people in our parish and in the community. And to see the cross still standing reminds us what our mission is all about."

The storms that tore through Alabama killed more than 350 people.



"Quite tragically, the severity of this spring tornado and storm

season has taken lives and created destruction in unheard of proportions," said Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, April 28. Catholic Charities USA and Catholic Charities agencies provided immediate relief to disaster survivors.

An unusual Aug. 23 magnitude 5.8 earthquake on the East Coast shook the region. Historic churches in Washington, Maryland and Virginia were among buildings with the most serious damage of the quake which was felt as far away as Detroit, north of Toronto and into Florida.

The archdioceses of Washington and Baltimore each reported damage to several churches. But in the Diocese of Richmond, Va., where the quake was centered near the town of Mineral, the town's St. Jude Church had the only reported damage in the diocese, and it was relatively minor.

Just days later, Hurricane Irene swept up the Atlantic Coast causing dramatic floods, wind damage and other disruptions.

More than 40 people in various states were reported to have been killed by floodwaters, falling trees, car accidents and powerful waves. Parts of New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Vermont experienced extreme flooding.

Immediately after the storm, Catholic Charities USA said its agencies up and down the East Coast were assessing damage and assisting people with food, shelter and other needs. An Aug. 30 statement said the year's natural disasters were straining financial resources at agencies around the country.

In the Southwest, wildfires burned for 296 straight days, particularly in drought-stricken Texas. After a surge of blazes in early September, more than 1,000 homes in the state were destroyed and four deaths were attributed to the fires.

Ascension Parish in Bastrop, Texas, served as a shelter and nerve center for relief efforts related to the wildfires.

"We're not turning anybody away," said Steve Venzon, one of four parishioners who oversaw relief

efforts. The town of Bastrop and Bastrop County were in the heart of the fire zone in the 25-county Austin Diocese.

Christian Gonzalez, diocesan communications director, said the wildfires were a combination of drought, heat and the winds of Hurricane Lee.

This year, most of Texas, and significant portions of New Mexico and Oklahoma, were in a "D4" drought zone as assessed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. D4 is equal to "exceptional" drought -- the most intense level on USDA's scale.

The year came to a close with fierce winds sweeping through Alaska and Utah and the Santa Ana winds hitting Southern California.

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