

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

November 7, 2012 at 8:35am

Interrupted lives

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

You tend to say grace before government-issued Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs). I am a New Yorker. I live at the beach.

By now, the pictures are around the world. Huge swaths of New York and New Jersey coast soaked by tides and inundated by rising bays shudder in the face of freezing cold and impending disease. Whole towns slump evacuated since the storm named Sandy whipped through their streets. There is no power. There is no water. Some have natural gas, but it may be shut off soon.

A 30-foot-tall ocean buoy sits on the empty beach, left by a storm surge they say reached 20 feet. The driftwood and storm fences are gone, claimed by the hearty to warm homes they cannot abandon.

The sea is calm, but the bay is high. The moon is dark, or nearly so.

National Guard helicopters buzz aloft, more in the night than in the day. Their infrared equipment finds whoever is outside after dark. They send a car and forestall the looting that has not yet started in the next town over, though it might.

For days before, they gave out sandbags (six per person), but not sand. For that, you stripped the fragile beach of its top layer in the hope that one more grain would keep the ocean or the bay outside the house.

Sandbag the garage. Take up the rugs. Secure the outdoor furniture. Bring the potted plants in. Remember the garbage pails. Get the ice cream out of the freezer. Photographs, papers, passports. And medication. Oh, money! Get cash. And gas the car.

Then lock the door and leave.

Some people stayed. The ocean smacked the dunes at high tide the day before the storm. I left.

Even in safety, there was the dark and cold and fear. For three days, I did not know if there would be anything left when I returned, if I could even get there. I heard four feet of ocean water raced down the street at moon high tide amidst the highest winds and deepest rains. I collected firewood where I was and hoped.

State troopers closed the parkway and kept it closed. Unless you live on the barrier island, you cannot go there. No sightseeing. No scams. No robbing homes left open by broken windows and dislodged doors.

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I did get home. That day's New York *Times* was in the driveway.

I lost a lot, but not that much. The house itself withstood the surge; the garage did not. Two trees went down; one clipped the house. The Catskill (N.Y.) Fire Department pumped out the crawl space a few days later. They drove 100 miles to help us at the beach.

Gratitude is too mild a word. I think we all feel grateful at this end of the beach, just an eighth of a mile from the start of the real damage. Hundreds of buildings now sit there -- in the current redundant phrase that does not say enough -- completely destroyed. Boats and cars remain tossed about; some sailed through plate glass and landed in living rooms. Sand is everywhere.

It is cold in houses at the beach, even with the sun that dries belongings spread out in the driveway and takes some moisture from the firewood. The fireplace throws some warmth, but not enough. Today, my MRE heater didn't work, but cold beef stew from SOPAKCO in Mullins, S.C., or from The Wornick Company in Cincinnati is food, and I found an apple in the house. The soldiers gave out cases of water. God, with help from the National Guard, is good.

We voted at the church recreation hall -- the local school is flooded -- and every day, there is a noon meeting at the firehouse for updates and to find out who needs what. The civic association sends a nightly email to those of us now housed with friends or relatives in warmth and heat and light. We are the lucky ones. It will take a long time to rebuild.

It is a time of genuine despair for thousands, but also one of gratitude.

I often tell folks that if they can't find Jesus, they should first look in a mirror. I do believe that. But if you could come down to the beach, you'd see as well Gordon, the state trooper. You'd see Craig and Patrick and Bobby, the firemen from Catskill. You'd see Charlie T., the handyman, and his helper, Theo. You'd see Christopher from across the street. You'd see relatives and friends, neighbors and strangers. You would see the face of Christ.

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