

Oklahoma tornado victims receive 'overwhelming' outpouring of prayer, support

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Oklahoma City

As communities across central Oklahoma continued to recover from the "powerful and deadly tornadoes" of May 19 and 20, they have experienced an "overwhelming" outpouring of "prayer, love and support from across our great state and from around the nation," said Oklahoma City's archbishop.

"It is bringing comfort to those who have lost loved ones, suffered injuries and whose homes, businesses and properties have been damaged or destroyed," Archbishop Paul S. Coakley said.

He made the comments in his column, "Put Out Into the Deep," in the latest online issue of the *Sooner Catholic*, the archdiocesan newspaper.

"The emergency response efforts are still fluid and adapting to changing needs and circumstances," he wrote.

But in the days since the tornadoes, "emergency responders, relief workers, counselors, chaplains, friends, neighbors and strangers," have come together "to bring comfort and sustain hope where hope has been shaken," Coakley said. "And Jesus still weeps. God is with us."

The Catholic community "stands shoulder to shoulder with religious, government and volunteer organizations and agencies" to assist in the recovery, he continued.

He noted that each has had a "different role in the response."

"Some are first responders. Others offer assistance with cleanup and with immediate needs such as temporary shelter, meals and clothing. Some help facilitate spiritual, physical and emotional healing. Still others focus on long-term needs in accessing community resources," he added.

He said parish clergy and staff members in the affected areas "have been engaged from the beginning. They have been contacting parishioners and assessing needs."

He praised Catholic organizations such as Catholic Charities USA, the Knights of Columbus and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul for "reaching out and providing support in the various areas affected by these devastating storms."

The Knights' national organization set up relief efforts in St. Andrew Church in Moore, where the twister hit hardest, to coordinate response to community requests and to register volunteers. A few days after the tornado members of the local Knights council visited parish families to assess property damage and people's needs.

Archbishop Coakley called the Knights' efforts "incredible" and said that in addition to addressing immediate needs and offering counseling, Catholic Charities and St. Vincent de Paul "are offering long-term case

management to help storm survivors rebuild their lives over the course of many months to come."

The archbishop also said the damage sustained by the area's religious institutions was "minimal."

During a May 26 visit to Moore to view the devastation, President Barack Obama praised residents for inspiring the nation "with their love, their courage and their fellowship."

"This is a strong community with strong character. There's no doubt they will bounce back. But they need help," he said, assuring the community of the federal government's ongoing help with cleanup and rebuilding efforts.

The tornado killed 24 people, 10 of whom were children, including seven from an elementary school that was destroyed. About 350 families lost their homes.

Archbishop Coakley expressed gratitude for Pope Francis offering a special prayer for the tornado victims during his early morning Mass May 21 and that he sent his condolences. He said he was thankful, too, for the letter he received on behalf of the Catholic community from Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

At the request the USCCB, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley of Boston authorized a special second collection to be taken in U.S. dioceses the weekend of June 1-2 or June 8-9, according to individual parish schedules.

"The purpose of this collection is to assist those affected by the recent devastating tornadoes in the Archdiocese of Oklahoma (City), as well as other natural disasters in the United States," said a statement about the special collection.

"The funds collected in this one-time special appeal for the 2013 storms and disasters will be utilized to support the efforts of the USCCB and Catholic Charities USA," it said, "as they respond to the immediate emergency needs for such necessities as water, food, shelter and medical care, as well as to the long-term need to rebuild after widespread destruction, and to the pastoral and reconstruction needs of the church."

"Many bishops have assured me that they will host a collection," said Archbishop Coakley.

Businesses are pitching in too. Love's Travel Stops & Country Stores, a chain of more than 200 truck stops and convenience stores, announced it will donate \$3 million to support immediate and long-term relief efforts in Oklahoma; \$500,000 will go to Catholic Charities.

The recovery ahead, Archbishop Coakley said, "is going to be a marathon, not a sprint. We are never alone in our distress and suffering. Through the love and kindness of both neighbors and strangers Jesus is demonstrating his faithfulness."

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