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Priests secure churches for hurricane

By Peggy DeKeyser, Pensacola

Check the supply of plywood, tarps, bottled water and bleach. Board the windows, put away the lawn chairs, move the ATM, gas up the cars and pack the evacuation boxes with family pictures. Florida residents all have their own versions of the litany of hurricane preparations.

How is securing a church for an oncoming hurricane any different from securing a home or business?

"In addition to the usual preparations a family might make, we've got to consider how to ensure that sacramental records are safely maintained through the storm," said Msgr. James Flaherty, pastor of Holy Spirit Parish in Pensacola, one of the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Ivan last September. "We also have to arrange a safe storage place for the Blessed Sacrament and the holy oils."

Because of the experience with Hurricane Ivan, the Pensacola-Tallahassee Diocese began coordinating hurricane preparations in January of this year. "We started by meeting to capture any lessons learned from Ivan," said Msgr. Flaherty, who is also president of the priests' council. "We wanted to make sure that we were ready in time for this hurricane season. We just had hoped we wouldn't need it so often or so soon."

Preparations for the arrival of Hurricane Dennis were hampered somewhat by the fact that at least two parishes, St. Joseph in downtown Pensacola and Our Lady of the Assumption on Pensacola Beach, had not yet returned their sanctuaries because of destruction from Ivan.

Others have gathered for Mass in facilities outside of their sanctuaries because of repairs currently under way.

Holy Spirit in the southwest corner of Escambia County is in a mandatory evacuation zone. Since Ivan, the parish office has had a view of the Perdido Key and the Intracoastal Waterway, a view they never had before because houses and trees stood between the parish and the Gulf. Msgr. Flaherty and his staff have no choice but to leave. "We've had to do some searching to locate everything. We moved out of the sanctuary on Easter Monday so permanent repairs to our church roof could begin. We've had Mass in the parish hall ever since. We'll secure everything before leaving and are taking the Blessed Sacrament and holy oils with us when we evacuate."

The diocese has made other changes based on the experience gained from Ivan. Clergy who live in mandatory evacuation zones must leave, setting an example for their neighbors and ensuring their own safety.

"Most will stay in a safe location close to their parishes, so they can get back quickly after the storm," said Msgr. Flaherty, who plans to relocate to a local motel farther inland in Pensacola when ordered to evacuate.

The priests' council approved a new communication protocol in May, just in time for the start of hurricane season, to enable them to more quickly know how to contact one another and to report damages and needs faster.

Parishes have also prepared for storms by setting up communications plans to locate and account for all parishioners and begin to address their needs after the storm. St. Ann Parish in Gulf Breeze and its mission parish, Our Lady of the Assumption, were able to account for more than 900 families within the week after Hurricane Ivan. "Of course, the news we heard from so many was sad, that the families had suffered such losses," said Msgr. Luke Hunt, pastor. "But it was good to begin to re-establish connections, to come back

together as a faith family, to begin the healing and to direct resources, as we could, where they were most needed."

Another change at many parishes is the establishment of an emergency food bank, even in parishes with normal food bank operations. Following Hurricane Ivan, St. Joseph Parish in downtown Pensacola opened its food bank to neighbors, most of whom were not parishioners. "We were happy to be able to do it," Father Pat Foley, pastor, said. "Our parishioners are spread far and wide, but our neighbors were in need. We helped as much as we could, even though we had a lot of damage to the property."

As parishes become better equipped with technology, additional means are in place to protect those resources from storms. Father Joe Fowler, assistant chancellor, who rode out Hurricane Ivan at the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart where he serves as parochial vicar, carries his "hot stick" everywhere. The device, small enough to fit on a key chain, allows him to back up his computer hard drive frequently. Church staff members and clergy who have cell phones now all have car chargers for their phones, making it possible to maintain use even when the electricity is off for extended periods.

Even though not a single stained-glass window was broken by Hurricane Ivan, they were boarded up this time around in the more vulnerable locations. Lectionaries and the Book of the Gospels were stored in secure, waterproof locations. Communion vessels were carefully tucked into locked cabinets and altar linens stored high and dry.

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