

L.A. cardinal seeks prayers for victims

Wind-swept fires destroy homes

By Mike Nelson
Catholic News Service

LOS ANGELES — Fires in the dioceses of Orange, San Bernardino and San Diego and the Los Angeles archdiocese had destroyed as many as 700 homes as of Oct. 29. Although many injuries were related to the fires, no deaths had been attributed to them.

The Altadena fire in the hills north of Pasadena came within 50 yards of a 62-year-old retreat house operated by the Passionist priests. A monastery on the grounds of Mater Dolorosa was so severely damaged in a 1991 earthquake that it was razed. But the retreat house survived the quake and the fire.

"At one point we had 60 people on the fire line last night keeping the flames away," said Mary Lou Buler, business development director at Mater Dolorosa. But weekend retreats were going to continue as planned. "We're out of danger now."

Alverno and La Salle Catholic high schools in Sierra Madre and Pasadena, respectively, were closed for two days because of smoke and ashes in the area, although both were distant from the fires.

Father Richard Prindle, pastor of St. Elizabeth Parish in Altadena, returned

early from an archdiocesan priests' assembly in Palm Springs. By Oct. 28, the day after more than 100 Altadena homes were destroyed, parishes were collaborating to collect food, clothing and bedding for affected residents.

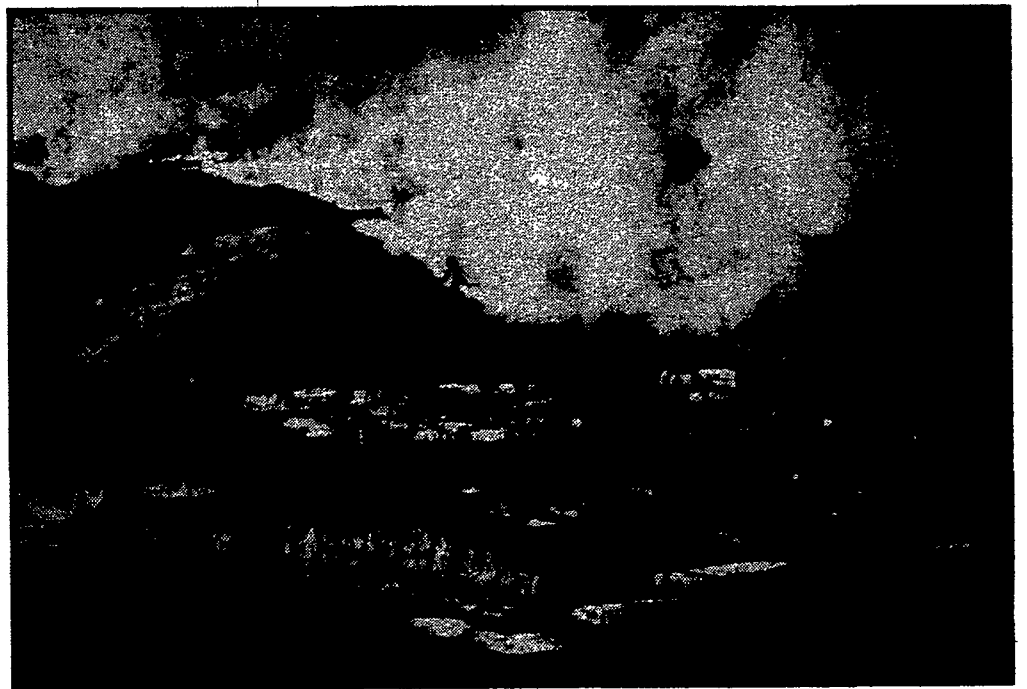
Northwest of Los Angeles, a fire near Santa Paula forced the closure of roads near Thomas Aquinas College because of dense smoke. At one point flames were burning just across the street from the college, said public affairs director John Hollecek.

The largest fire physically in the region was near Hemet in the San Bernardino diocese. It burned tens of thousands of acres but because of the area's low density rate, comparatively few homes were destroyed.

In the Orange diocese, Bishop Norman F. McFarland asked people of his diocese to offer "in a neighborly fashion" whatever assistance was necessary to residents of the hard-hit Laguna Beach area, where the entire city was evacuated at one point and hundreds of houses, many expensive, burned to the ground.

"We have witnessed a human tragedy of devastating proportions ... The enormous loss and personal suffering that have afflicted so many in our area, as they saw a great portion of their lives devoured by flames, call forth our deep sympathy and prayers that they may find the strength to cope," he wrote.

"At the same time, we express our



AP/Wide World Photos
A brush fire descends on Emerald Bay, north of Laguna Beach, Calif., on Oct. 27. Southern California wildfires burned nearly 100,000 acres and damaged or destroyed 700 homes, including some 330 in the Laguna Beach area.

admiration and gratitude for the heroic efforts of the firefighters during this ordeal, and we thank God no lives were lost," he added. "We have had a vivid reminder of how fragile is our existence on this earth ..."

St. Edward Parish in Dana Point and St. Catherine of Siena in Laguna Beach served as evacuation centers for Laguna-area residents.

As residents of the damaged areas worked to re-establish their lives and millions of Southern Californians coped with the smoke and ash from the fires, Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony asked for prayers for firefighters and victims. He also announced that emergency financial assistance was available from the archdiocese's Cardinal McIntyre Fund for Charity.

"Seeing the pall of smoke hovering over so much of our area causes us to raise our hearts and minds to Almighty God in prayer for our neighbors who have been made victims by this monstrous disaster," he said in an Oct. 27 statement.

President Clinton declared five California counties as disaster areas, which qualifies them for federal recovery aid. The counties are Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Diego and Ventura.

Contributions to the Cardinal McIntyre Fund for Charity may be sent care of Catholic Charities, 1400 W. 9th Street, Los Angeles, Calif. 90015, Attention: Director Susan Weight.

Contributing to this story was Patricia Zapor in Washington.



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Geneticist: Experiments on embryos no breakthrough

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Recent steps toward the artificial creation of human twins represent "not a breakthrough of science but a breakdown of common sense," according to an internationally known geneticist.

Dr. Jerome Lejeune, the French scientist who first identified the gene that causes Down's syndrome, said in an Oct. 29 interview with Catholic News Service that the experiments at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington should not properly be termed the "cloning" of human embryos.

Scientists in the university's in vitro fertilization program recently reported that they had successfully split single human embryos into twins or triplets. All of the embryos died within six days.

To call such results "cloning" is an "abuse of words," Lejeune said. "Cloning is used when you reproduce beings bypassing the sexual reproduction system."

But the Washington scientists "started with fertilized eggs" and were able to produce artificial twins or triplets from the eggs. Such results already have been achieved in goats, cows and sheep and are "no novelty" in science, Lejeune said.

But many animal scientists have stopped experiments in artificial twinning because "the amount of failure is too high to consider that it would increase the yield," he said.

Although the George Washington researchers said their efforts were

aimed at increasing the chances that an infertile woman could give birth, Lejeune said the likely death of many embryos in the process makes it "perfectly wrong."

"I honestly cannot see how this argument has been put forward," he said.

Even if artificial twinning could take place without one death of an embryo, it would still be subject to tremendous abuses, Lejeune said.

One much ballyhooed possibility would be for twins to be created in the lab, with one implanted in the womb and the other "put in the fridge" for future use, the French scientist said.

If the first twin were to get sick and need a transplant the second twin could be implanted in a donor and grown as a "stock of spare pieces," he added.

In addition to the fact that he believes such a process would not work scientifically, "it's a totally inhumane way of thinking about your brother," Lejeune said.

He said he thought noted British geneticist J.B.S. Haldane was "extremely wise" when he said 30 years ago that he "could not find a name in history, male or female, that should have been reproduced to the benefit of mankind."

According to Lejeune, Haldane said that if, for example, a few hundred Albert Einsteins had been cloned, with every noted university being able to have one on its physics faculty, the result would be "a little blossoming of that science" but eventual sterilization of ideas in that area.

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