

Relief given to fire victims

JUDGE ORDERS REMOVAL OF SCHOOL'S CRUCIFIX

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — A judge's order to remove a crucifix from an Italian classroom has provoked strong criticism from some sectors of the Vatican and cautionary words from Pope John Paul II.

Some Vatican officials were reluctant to wade into the controversy lest they help fuel a new Christian-Muslim conflict.

"It is a complicated Italian question, involving religion, politics and culture. We are not saying anything about it," said Msgr. Khaled Akasheh of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, which coordinates Vatican-Muslim relations.

Adel Smith, a Muslim activist for Islamic rights and a more multicultural society in Italy, his adopted country, first asked that a verse from the Quran be displayed next to the crucifix in his children's classrooms. When that was denied, he sued, saying he's exercising his constitutional right against religious discrimination.

GERMANS PROCEED WITH WYD PLANS

ROME (CNS) — German Catholics are proceeding with plans to welcome Pope John Paul II to World Youth Day, Aug. 16-21, 2005, in Cologne, Germany.

"We are planning to accommodate a handicapped pope with limited mobility," said Matthias Kopp, event spokesman.

Organizers, who expect 800,000 young people to attend the event, said, "he truly wishes to participate, if it is God's will."

THIS WEEK'S READINGS

Sun., Nov. 9: Ezekiel 47:1-2, 8-9, 12; Psalms 46:2-3, 5-6, 8-9; 1 Corinthians 3:9C-11, 16-17; John 2:13-22

Mon., Nov. 10: Wisdom 1:1-7; Psalms 139:1-10; Luke 17:1-6.

Tue., Nov. 11: Wisdom 2:23-3:9; Psalms 34:2-3, 16-19; Luke 17:7-10

Wed., Nov. 12: Wisdom 6:1-11; Psalms 82:3-4, 6-7; Luke 17:11-19

Thu., Nov. 13: Wisdom 7:22-8:1; Psalms 119:89-91, 130, 135, 175; Luke 17:20-25.

Fri., Nov. 14: Wisdom 13:1-9; Psalms 19:2-5; Luke 17:26-37.

Sat., Nov. 15: Wisdom 18:14-16, 19:6-9; Psalms 105:2-3, 36-37, 42-43; Luke 18:1-8.

SAN DIEGO (CNS) — As fire-weary residents began returning to their homes in many Southern California communities in early November, Catholic dioceses and parishes began turning their attention from emergency refugee relief to follow-up aid for victims of the fires.

More than 3,300 homes were lost and at least 20 people killed between Oct. 24 and Nov. 3 in the six Southern California fires that destroyed nearly 700,000 acres.

St. Gregory the Great Parish in San Diego's Scripps Ranch community, where 343 houses were destroyed, stopped accepting clothing donations Nov. 2 because the response was so great.

Carmen Gronich, the parish director, told Catholic News Service Nov. 3 that parishioners and other members of the community had contributed some \$200,000 in cash and checks in addition to emergency supplies for those who lost their homes. Aid collections after Sunday Masses Nov. 2 alone totaled \$30,000.

Of the parish's 2,400 families, 55 lost their homes.

People seeking to donate food and clothing were asked to bring it to the St. Vincent de Paul store in downtown San Diego.

San Diego diocesan spokeswoman Bernadeane M. Carr told CNS that the diocese was coordinating its response efforts through Catholic Charities.

Most of the Whispering Winds Catholic Conference Center, a retreat center in La Mesa in San Diego County, was destroyed. Only a couple of buildings in the complex remained standing.

In the community of Crest, which is east of San Diego, a firestorm Oct. 26 destroyed 21 houses along a quarter-mile stretch of road, but left 16 others and St. Louise de Marillac Catholic Church standing. The church had broken windows, a charred roof and smoke damage.

As the fire swept toward the church, the pastor, Father Robert Irwin, had only 15 minutes to evacuate. He grabbed the Blessed Sacrament and the parish sacramental records and fled to a motel with a convoy of neighbors. There he started organizing things for the relief effort to come.

As soon as he could return two days later, he turned the property into a base for serving hot meals and distributing water, as well as for consoling neighbors. The tiny, 40-family parish celebrated Sunday Mass outdoors under canopies Nov. 2.

Bishop Gerald R. Barnes of San Bernardino went to San Bernardino



Reuters/CNS

Elizabeth and Hector Pujol look through debris from their fire-ravaged home in Claremont, Calif., Oct. 31. Wildfires destroyed more than 3,300 homes from north of Los Angeles to the Mexican border. Catholic Charities and other local charities were attempting to support the thousands left homeless.

International Airport Nov. 2 for an outdoor Mass with refugees from the fire who were gathered at the Red Cross evacuation center there.

"These fires have reminded us there is great love in the community," he told the congregation seated around the temporary altar. He urged people to continue relying on one another as they face loneliness and frustration in the long rebuilding effort after the devastation.

The Mass at the evacuation shelter replaced a planned celebration that day of the diocese's 25th anniversary. The anniversary celebration was postponed in light of the wildfire emergency.

In a radio address Oct. 28, Bishop Barnes urged prayer and solidarity for people affected by the fires.

"Many of us may be experiencing a wide range of emotions: shock, a sense of loss, feelings of hopelessness, questions of 'why me?'; a sense of guilt as we see others whose lives have been forever changed while we remain safe," he said. "Words, at times, ring hollow in the face of such horrible circumstances. But all of us in some way can stand together in mutual support and solidarity."

He scheduled a special collection for disaster relief to be taken up during weekend Masses Nov. 8 and 9.

At Holy Cross Church in Moorpark near Los Angeles, a planned 10th anniversary celebration of the dedication of the church Oct. 26 became a much quieter, perhaps more prayerful, gathering.

"People gathered outside after Mass for coffee and doughnuts, and to support each other," said Msgr. Joseph Cosgrove, pastor of the east Ventura County parish, the scene of some of the worst Southern California brush fires in a decade.

Father Tom Welbers, pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Claremont, at the eastern end of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, visited refugees at Hughes Community Center in Claremont, one of many shelters set up near affected neighborhoods. He said he "walked and talked" with the people and, with a rabbi, organized a prayer service.

"People appreciated our presence," he told *The Tidings*, newspaper of the Los Angeles Archdiocese. "They knew all too well what was happening. Many did not know if their houses were burned or not, so there was a lot of uncertainty. Most people wanted someone to listen to their story."

Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles encouraged contributions to Catholic Charities Fire Disaster Aid program.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Contributions for fire relief may be made through Catholic Charities USA, by phoning: (800) 919-9338; by visiting the agency's Web site: www.catholic-charitiesinfo.org/fires.htm; or by sending a check to: Catholic Charities USA, Southern California Fires, P.O. Box 25168, Alexandria, VA 22313-9788.