
Deadly wildfires on the West Coast. Churches are shelters for the displaced

School will remain closed until September 21 in many districts of Portland, Oregon. Today would have been the first day, but all educational activities will take place online only. The air is unbreathable, the sky is red, with ash-covered roofs and roads from the wildfires that burnt some 3 million acres, raging across small towns and communities not only in Oregon, but also in California and Washington State for the past weeks. *24 people have been confirmed dead, but dozens are missing, while the figures for the millions of acres of land burned and thousands of buildings destroyed are not yet available.* Parks have been closed in Portland, outdoor meeting areas, a zoo, libraries and two prisons have been evacuated. *For the time being, churches have been spared from the blaze, and provide shelter to tens of thousands of displaced people.* Milly and Mike from St. Alice's parish in Springfield are among them. They suddenly found themselves amidst a half a million people in Oregon, 10% of the overall population, who had been ordered to evacuate. For Mike, "only by some miracle will we find the houses in our neighbourhood still standing. Also Milly is hoping in a miracle. When she received the order to leave their home, she and her husband had to make the painful choice of what to take and what to leave behind after 53 years of marriage: *"We took our wedding album and discovered boxes of photographs of our and our children's childhood."* That's all they put in their suitcase along with medication and a small stash of clothes. Some priests still manage to celebrate Mass and Adoration in one of their parishes. Father Luan Nguyen celebrates Holy Communion in a safe church, but he saw the small city of Detroit, in the Salem area, and the Catholic mission, already in disuse, go up in flames. Benedictine monks at Mount Angel, including many elderly monks, are preparing to evacuate, as are the seminarians at the hilltop. Fitness facilities and parking lots in the churches of the Sacred Heart, the Shepherd of the Valley at Central Point and St. Anne's at Grants Pass are home to hundreds of displaced people, increasing day by day. "The wildfires destroyed us all," the Archbishop of Portland, **Alexander Sample**, wrote in a message to his congregation, pointing out that the tragedy weighs on the tragedy of the pandemic and the struggle for civil rights that has plagued the city for months. *The bishop calls on parishes to provide practical assistance to those who have lost their homes and businesses, and to encourage everyone to "help their neighbours and friends in whichever way they can."* President Trump will visit California today to assess the damage caused by the fires, which the global scientific community ascribes to an acceleration of climate change, while the US President continues championing a different agenda aimed at supporting fossil fuels for electoral gain, regardless of greenhouse gas emission concerns. Political denialism is not the priority of the United Sikhs association which, amid the havoc, offers 700 meals every day to those who lost everything or were forced to leave their homes. The North Complex Fire has burned more than 252,000 acres in Plumas, Butte and Yuba counties and the Baptist Church charity brought together dozens of volunteers who offered to help clear at-risk areas and assist the many displaced people sheltered in facilities set up by the Red Cross. *"People who lost everything are volunteering here and caring for their neighbours,"* said the director of the organization, Bivins, who sent dozens of chaplains to offer spiritual support to the survivors, in accordance with anti-Covid measures. Thus, protective clothing, masks and gloves are mandatory, so as not to further aggravate the disaster.

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