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Hurricane Ivan slams Pensacola and the panhandle coast

Ivan completes hat-trick of hurricanes to hit Florida as it slams the Pensacola-Tallahassee Diocese

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Pensacola

In a year of unparalleled hurricane devastation, the panhandle of Florida was struck a lethal blow by Hurricane Ivan in the early morning hours of Sept. 16.

Hurricane Ivan cut a deadly path across the Caribbean before roaring through the Gulf of Mexico to draw a bead on Pensacola. Jamaica, Grenada, Haiti, Venezuela, Tobago, Barbados, the Dominican Republic all suffered loss of life and mayhem at its hands. Then, as panhandle residents watched in horror, Ivan veered east in the final hours before making landfall as a strong Category 3 hurricane, just one mile per hour shy of being a Category 4 storm.

Ivan's eyewall slammed into Gulf Shores, Ala., bringing 130-mile-an-hour winds, up to 16 inches of rain, and a lethal storm surge to Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, lying in the most dangerous eastern quadrant of the storm. Farther east, Panama City and Blountstown had already felt Ivan's fury in the form of fatal tornadoes.

"Of all the things that a hurricane can hit you with — wind, rain, storm surge, and tornadoes — Ivan hit us with every single one of them," said Ron McNesby, Escambia County sheriff, on the Sunday after Ivan wreaked havoc on the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee.



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Bishop Houck of Catholic Extension and Deborah Roberts survey the wreckage of several homes, washed into what was the Roberts' back yard by Hurricane Ivan.

Hardest hit were coastal areas, although little between Pensacola and Panama City escaped Ivan's wrath. In Escambia County, the Grande Lagoon subdivision off Gulf Beach Highway was one of Ivan's victims. Several residents of the neighborhood drowned while trying to ride out the storm in solid-brick homes. Holy Spirit Catholic Church, across the two-lane blacktop from Grand Lagoon Yacht Club, experienced some physical damage from the storm with the loss of roofing tiles and leaks in the sanctuary and family life center. The pain in the parish, according to Msgr. James Flaherty, pastor of Holy Spirit Parish, extends far beyond the physical loss, though.

"Nearly 40 percent of our parishioners have either lost their homes or had them damaged beyond repair," Msgr. James Flaherty said. "It will be so difficult for the parish to recover from this."

The difficulty was reflected in the face of Marie Vogt, who made it to the 11 a.m. Sunday Mass after the storm. Ivan reduced her home, across the highway from the church, to rubble. "I did manage to get my family pictures and my jewelry box out when I evacuated. Everything else is gone," she said. "The only thing left at my house, ironically, is the statue of St. Francis that was in my garden. I laid it down just as I was leaving, so the wind wouldn't blow it over. Now there's no house, no garden, nothing but a slab, but St. Francis is still just exactly where I left him. Isn't that remarkable?" she said.

Historic St. Joseph Church in downtown Pensacola was another victim of Ivan's rage. In addition to suffering extensive damage to the interior of the church, the parish is mourning the loss of longtime parishioner Dr. Lois Zaragoza-Goode, who drowned in the Grande Lagoon subdivision during the storm.

Ivan hit Navy Point and Warrington in southwest Pensacola with an estimated 30-foot wall of water, a combination of storm surge and waves. Small-frame bungalows are now just piles of debris, with family possessions strewn through the branches of the few trees that remain.

St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church and School in Warrington took a major blow. A large live oak tree crashed through the pre-K classroom at the school, taking a whole wall of the building with it. Within the school and parish families, more than 45 percent lost their homes. Many others, civilian and military employees at nearby Pensacola NAS, have lost their employment for the foreseeable future, as the base was also decimated by Ivan.

"Every day another family comes in telling their story of horror. They've lost absolutely everything," Sister Patricia Ann Pepitone, principal of the school, said. "It just hurts so



TFC PHOTO BY PEGGY DEKEYSER

The interior of St. Joseph Church in downtown Pensacola sustained heavy damage from Hurricane Ivan.

much; I'm just hurting for all my people."

On Pensacola Beach, Ivan showed no mercy to Our Lady of the Assumption church, ripping off the roof of the five-year old sanctuary. Somehow, in a landscape wiped clean of recognizable features, the cross marking the first Mass in the area in 1559 survived on a nearby dune. It is the only dune left intact on Pensacola Beach.

St. Rose of Lima Parish in Milton lost its rectory when trees were blown through the roof. St. Ann in Gulf Breeze had major damage. Little Flower Parish in Myrtle Grove lost many old Spanish-style roof tiles. St. Anne in Bellview lost many of its trees, already strung with Christmas lights in preparation for the annual festival in December. Ivan also damaged the bishop's residence, knocking down the chimney with falling trees. St. Paul's school flooded. On and on the list goes. Virtually no parish in the western half of the diocese escaped untouched.

As if to add final insult to injury, the Mercy Convent adjacent to St. Michael Interparochial School in Pensacola went up in flames on Sunday after the storm's Thursday arrival. The historic building, once home to as many as 19 sisters, had been vacant since February when Sister Maura Delaney, RSM, moved to a retirement center in Mobile, Ala.

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