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Hurricane Dennis hits Pensacola Diocese

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Pensacola

You can tell whether the debris from smashed houses on Pensacola Beach was caused by Hurricane Dennis or Hurricane Ivan by whether it's strewn north or south of the house. A debris field spreading north? That's Ivan damage. A debris field spreading south? Probably Dennis.

For the second time in 10 months, the Diocese of Pensacola-Tallahassee was struck by a major hurricane, resulting in the loss of lives and billions of dollars in damages. Hurricane Ivan, a slow-moving monster of a storm, hit Sept. 16, 2004. Hurricane Dennis made landfall July 10, the earliest Category 4 hurricane since records have been kept. The pre-storm evacuation cleared out about one third of the population of Escambia County.

People on the beaches and in other mandatory evacuation zones took this storm very seriously, due in part to the experience with Ivan. The same was true from Panama City west into the Mobile Archdiocese. All of Mobile County was under a mandatory evacuation on the Alabama governor's orders, including the city of Mobile.

Counting small blessings when possible, residents are grateful the storm lost some of its power literally in the moments before landfall, dropping from the Category 4 designation it had built after raking Cuba, down to a Category 3. In the final hour before landfall, it also turned slightly eastward, sparing Pensacola a direct hit. Navarre Beach, 20 miles to the east, was ground zero for the storm that came ashore with 120 mph winds.

People spared by Ivan were struck by Dennis and vice versa. It was the same with the Catholic churches that the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.

"The damage we've seen with Dennis is eerily familiar to the damage from Ivan, said Deacon Jeff Trumps, diocesan director of finance. "This is yet another costly event, both in human and property terms."

Our Lady of the Assumption Church on Pensacola Beach lost the entire roof over the sanctuary in Hurricane Ivan. Last week, the new pews were finally installed and plans were made to begin using the sanctuary again Aug. 15, the feast of its patron. Hurricane Dennis had other plans, however, and ripped off one third of the church roof again. The new construction, rated to withstand 130 mph winds, didn't withstand Dennis' fury, and was heavy enough, when it peeled off the sanctuary, to crash through the roof of the parish hall south of the church, where



TFC PHOTOS BY PEGGY DEKEY

Hurricane Dennis ripped one-third of the roof off the sanctuary off Our Lady of the Assumption on Pensacola Beach when it made landfall nearby with 120-mph winds. Ten months before, Hurricane Ivan tore the roof off, rendering the building unusable in the interim. New pews were installed in the church two days before Dennis struck in anticipation of reopening the church on the feast of the Assumption, Aug. 15. Now the facility will remain closed for the foreseeable future.

it landed on that building.

Hunt Hall may be a total loss because of structural damage. The parish had operated a community outreach center there since April, providing a place for beach residents to gather as they worked to restore their homes and lives.

The parish community was looking forward to getting back into its sanctuary, but instead will continue worshipping at their parent church, St. Ann in Gulf Breeze.

"If there are blessings to be found in these storms," said Susie Spencer, administrator of St. Ann Parish, "it is that they have brought our entire community together. Not only our two parishes, which now collaborate on ministries and outreach, but the larger community as well." St. Ann belongs to the interfaith organization that has worked hard to provide resources and restore normalcy to the community which now has been buffeted by two major storms.

Farther east between Gulf Breeze and Navarre, St. Sylvester Parish lost much of its "storefront" main entrance. Shattered glass littered both inside and outside of the church and the interior of the church was strewn with insulation where the roof had been breached in several locations. At the old St. Sylvester property, now used as overflow housing of volunteer workers by Rebuild Northwest Florida, a semi-trailer rested on its side, tipped over by the wind. The front door of the unused old church stood open, as the lock had been compromised by Hurricane Dennis. Other than the damaged lock, however, the door and church were unharmed.

Stories came in to the bishop's office of other damage: a fallen tree blocking the entrance and breaking windows at St. Eugene's Chapel on the Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) campus; flooding which although it did not damage church structures, affected parishioners and residents in Apalachicola and Lanark Village; and winds that tossed trees around like toothpicks in northern Escambia and Santa Rosa counties, destroying homes and farms.

Better prepared for this hurricane season by the experience of Hurricane Ivan, the diocese had implemented new protocols for emergency preparations and response in May.

Catholic Charities of Miami arrived on the Monday following the hurricane with three vans and eight employees. They were assigned to St. Rose of Lima Parish in Milton County. Meanwhile, Catholic Charities of Pensacola was set up in Escambia County.

Catholic Charities of Venice arrived on Tuesday with a group of staff and volunteers, bringing with them two trucks and a special disaster response RV donated by St. Thomas More and St. Paul parishes, loaded down with more than \$5,000 in supplies.

Upon arrival, the Venice group was informed about a coastal area in Wakulla County where there was severe damage from flooding.



A portion of the sanctuary roof ripped off Our Lady of the Assumption Church crushed the roof of Hunt Hall, the parish hall at the mission church on Pensacola Beach.

"We spent the better part of the day moving through the scene and what we found was just devastating," Trumps said.

About 180 miles east of the eye of the hurricane, a tidal surge swept up from the Gulf of Mexico into Apalache Bay. It then traveled along the St. Marks and Wakulla rivers, which join a few miles north of the bay, and struck three fishing villages — St. Marks, Spring Creek and Shell Point — nearly three miles inland.

The surge, which hit about 4:30 p.m. and receded by 7:30 p.m., he said, caused flooding upward of 8 feet high in the homes there, so that people were totally flooded out and everything was damaged.

When Routsis-Arroyo and his crew arrived, they found that residents had stripped out their homes of everythi

and were sitting in lawn furniture in their yards, waiting for everything to dry out.

The crew set to work, giving out \$100 vouchers for Wal-Mart while interviewing the residents.

"We began to see that it is, literally, more of a disaster area than where the storm directly passed over," he said. "There wasn't any wind damage, just water, he said, "but it left pure devastation."

The group found that nearly all the cars had been ruined beyond repair from the water damage and that the f of boats in the bay had been swept away so that, as the waters receded, they were left sitting in strange plac throughout the towns.

They took dozens of photos of the area and presented them to FEMA representatives who then declared the towns a disaster area, meaning that the residents were now eligible for federal aid, he said, as most of the families don't have flood insurance.

FEMA set up a relief site at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish in Wakulla County together with the Venice and Mia Catholic Charities groups. The Red Cross joined them the morning of July 14.

The groups set to work creating packs of food, water and cleaning materials, which, said Routsis-Arroyo, they planned to pass out to every family in the three towns between July 14 and 15.

"We're feeling good about what's transpired here in the last few days," said Routsis-Arroyo. "This was part of mutual aid agreement between the Catholic Charities agencies and it did what it was supposed to do."

Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, who had been in Africa on business for the International Policy Committee of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, flew back to Atlanta July 9 in advance of the storm and drove to Pensaco to be present for the storm and its aftermath.

"I am deeply sorry for those who have suffered in Hurricane Dennis and we pledge to provide assistance to he people recover from the effects of the storm. We had catastrophic damage at Our Lady of the Assumption on Pensacola Beach and significant damage at St. Sylvester. Other parishes had moderate to minor damage." The effects of this storm, according to Bishop Ricard, were very different from Ivan, but the people who sustained damage are suffering as badly as before, in some cases for the second time in less than a year.

"This time, we were able to mobilize our church and Catholic Charities response much more quickly, to provid short- and long-term assistance," he said. "We are grateful for the assistance and resources provided by Cath Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami once again. And we are deeply grateful for all who have prayed, and wh continue to pray, for us."

The Archdiocese of Miami's Catholic Charities Disaster Response Team, headed by Deacon Richard Turcotte, arrived in Pensacola July 12 to set up operations in areas of greatest need.

The diocese also resumed operations July 12 at the Pastoral Center in Pensacola, where minor water incursion was the only damage reported. Electricity was restored to the building sometime early July 11, although not a systems, including the diocesan Web site, were back in service due to widespread power outages throughout i two-county area.

Heather Felton of The Florida Catholic Diocese of Venice edition contributed to this story.

More pictures can be found in the July 22, 2005 issue of The Florida Catholic Diocese of Venice, paper edition.

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