

A statue of Mary rests nearly untouched in the rubble of a destroyed home in Altadena, Calif., Jan. 17, 2025, in the aftermath of the Eaton Fire, which began Jan. 7. (OSV News/Bob Roller)



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On Jan. 8 — less than 24 hours into the unprecedented wildfires surrounding Los Angeles — Sr. Maribeth Larkin decided the Sisters of Social Service needed to prepare to evacuate, though she was sure they wouldn't need to as the Palisades fire was miles from their Encino campus.

Two days later, evacuations were mandatory, and the plans to extract 15 sisters — seven of whom need assistance or are in wheelchairs or use walkers — were put in motion. Larkin, the congregation's general director, supervised the five vehicles that would take them to their prearranged refuge: the Sisters of Notre Dame convent in Thousand Oaks, about a half hour away.

Fortunately, everyone already had go bags packed and transportation was arranged, but it still took an hour to get everyone collected and into their vehicles.

Larkin said their extended sleepover has come with a mix of emotions: gratefulness that the Sisters of Notre Dame had rooms for them and welcomed them in, and also sadness at the tragedy unfolding around them.

"I can only watch the news for a few minutes at a time," Larkin said. "It is heartbreaking. Absolutely heartbreaking. It's neighborhood after neighborhood that are just rows of ash."

Larkin said they're doing everything they can to distract the more fragile sisters from what is happening.

"Because of the trauma, this is impacting everybody, but a couple of our sisters have dementia and are not understanding at all where they are and why they came and why they can't go home," she said. "There's just a lot of fear."

Catholic sisters are not the only religious affected by the wildfires. Religion News Service reports that more than 12,000 buildings have burned, including at least a dozen houses of worship, including mosques, Jewish temples, and churches from across denominations.



Firefighters walk near a destroyed Methodist church Jan. 10, 2025, following the Palisades Fire in Los Angeles. (OSV News/Reuters//David Ryder)

The Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center had several of its buildings burn, but the main retreat building — though it was surrounded on all sides by fire — suffered only minor damage. Corpus Christi Catholic Church in Pacific Palisades was destroyed, the National Catholic Reporter reported. The Parish of St. Matthew, a large Episcopal congregation, before the fires had 21 buildings on its Palisades campus; now there are eight. The pastor said three-fourths of the congregation had their homes destroyed.

The Sisters of Social Service campus is only 1.25 miles from the fire zone; all the roads in the area are closed.

Sr. Lisa Megaffin, the Sisters of Notre Dame's director of mission advancement services, said they're glad to have their community of 28 expanded by their 15 guests. The extra rooms now occupied by the Sisters of Social Service are usually used for people on retreats or for their Language School, where students stay for a

couple of weeks while learning English.

"They're wonderful guests," Megaffin said. "We're trying to make them feel very welcome, very much at home."

Larkin had first called the Maryknoll Sisters in Monrovia, California, but they had already evacuated ahead of the Eaton Fire, which devastated parts of Altadena and Pasadena.

Maryknoll Development Director Leslie Mancuso said the sisters evacuated as a precaution, but were able to return a few days later once it was clear they were safe from the fire and smoke.

Students, sisters flee to safety

Just a few miles south of the Sisters of Social Service, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet have a campus on a hill that is home to the Carondelet Center and Mount St. Mary's University. The campus was evacuated Jan. 7; maps show the flames were just over a mile away when they were stopped by planes dropping fire retardant.

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Kim Westerman, the congregational communications director, said only a handful of sisters live there now, but that wasn't the case during the Getty Fire in 2019, which surrounded the campus. After that fire, the sisters in skilled nursing care were moved to a more central location in Los Angeles and away from the fire-prone Santa Monica mountains.

This time, the evacuation took place before officials ordered it, and though the area is no longer under mandatory evacuation orders, the center remains evacuated and without electricity.

"It's been a mess," said Sr. Mary Ann Martin, who is semiretired but was in leadership during the Getty Fire and still works on the campus. "They've been working on the electricity, but we've also been having some winds, so we don't know when they'll have it back on."

Martin said the campus is home to six sisters, but also has the leadership offices and other facilities. When Mount St. Mary's evacuated, she said, it was clear they all needed to leave.

"The way it was spreading was way too fast," she said. "We had ash all over our complex. You could smell the smoke."

She said some of the teachers and staff from Mount St. Mary's lost homes in the fires, as did students who are from the immediate area.



Destroyed homes are seen in Altadena, Calif., Jan. 17, 2025, in the aftermath of the Eaton Fire, which began Jan. 7. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Have up-to-date plans

Larkin said she is grateful for many things, especially that the Sisters of Notre Dame campus has five washing machines — the Sisters of Social Service only brought two or three days' worth of clothing with them.

"None of us had any idea we would be gone this long," she said. "But if I had said pack a bag for two weeks, we would have never gotten out of there."

Larkin said they haven't had a drop of rain since May 6, making the area exceptionally vulnerable to fires.

"This is not what we know," she said of the drought. "Our climate is not what it was and it won't be in the future."

The fires turned into a conflagration, she said, when they were driven by hurricane-force winds, and there was no predicting which way they would go.

"There was no particular direction, they were going wild," Larkin said. "One hour they were blowing northeast, an hour later it was southwest."

She said her best advice for other congregations is to talk to each other. Because the religious in the area all know one another, it was easy to make plans for emergencies.

"And you need to have an up-to-date plan, not one you dust off from 20 years ago," Larkin said.

Plans should also account for the need for visible leadership.

"There is a real, important pastoral need to be with the sisters here," Larkin said. "It's so important for the sisters to see me here, so important to be present. The blessing of it is my calendar says I'm supposed to be in Mexico, so I don't have a lot of other things to deal with right now."