News
Religious Life



An undated photo shows a statue of Mary outside the Monastery of St. Joseph in Ava, Mo. Religious at the monastery, home to the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, as well as at Assumption Abbey Nazareth Hermitage all left their properties in the early afternoon of March 19, 2025, as wildfires inched dangerously close. By the next morning all three communities had returned home. (OSV News/Courtesy of the Benedictines of Mary Queen of Apostles)



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Three religious communities in southeast Missouri were temporarily forced to evacuate their properties on St. Joseph's Day as nearby wildfires threatened their safety and well-being.

The communities at Assumption Abbey, the Monastery of St. Joseph, home to the Benedictines of Mary, Queen of the Apostles, and Nazareth Hermitage all left their properties in the early afternoon of March 19 as wildfires inched dangerously close.

Fr. Shoby Chettiyath, vicar general for the Diocese of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, shared with diocesan staff and clergy that the three religious communities had been relocated temporarily and asked for prayers for those impacted and those fighting the fire.

"We ask that you please keep all those impacted by this fire in your prayers, especially the evacuated religious communities," the email shared with OSV News said. "We also ask for your prayers for the first responders working tirelessly to contain the fire, as well as for the swift and safe resolution of the situation."

In an update shared with diocesean staff and clergy March 20, Fr. Chettiyath announced that all three communities had returned to their homes that morning after local authorities had issued the all clear.

"Yesterday, a fire broke out in the surrounding areas of Ava, prompting an immediate evacuation of all religious residents from the St. Joseph Convent,

Assumption Abbey and Nazareth Hermitage in Ava. As of today, we are relieved to report that the Nuns, monks and Hermits are safe and have returned to their cloisters," the vicar general said.

The evacuations came after the surrounding area had been under a red flag warning for most of the week. The first local fires ignited March 17 and other fires broke out throughout the week.

"We've had a lot of red flag days and fire warnings the past few nights ago. We actually could see the fire like not just the smoke with the flames from our monastery windows," Mother Mary Joseph Holcomb, prioress of the Benedictines of Mary community, told OSV News from the Monastery of St. Joseph.

"We heard that there were a number of the volunteer firemen working on that fire and they made some fire breaks with bulldozers so we were safe and didn't need to evacuate."

However, on March 19, winds shifted and the fire began threatening the local religious communities, coming within 300 yards of the Nazareth Hermitage.

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Joseph had believed the monastery was still safe until she watched as a new fire broke out to the west of the monastery.

"I called the fire department about the new fire and they sent a few firefighters to check on the fire to the west of us," Joseph said. "They recommended that we evacuate as well so the 19 of us evacuated yesterday afternoon."

Prior to leaving, Joseph had the sisters ring the monastery's bells and offered a prayer to St. Joseph, entrusting that the monastery's namesake would protect the grounds on his feast day.

"We rang our church bells periodically throughout the afternoon before we evacuated, because the bells have a special blessing to ward off high winds and storms," Joseph said. "It was also the feast of St. Joseph, who is the patron of our monastery, so we were sure that our monastery wouldn't burn down on his feast day."

She said, "We were more concerned for Nazareth and Assumption just because the fire was so much more intense over there."

The sisters joined the hermits and monks at nearby St. Leo Parish to wait out the evacuation orders. While evacuating the property was scary, the prioress said, the sisters and other religious remained in "very good spirits."

"We wanted to be prudent as we have an elderly sister who's 86, so we didn't want to take any unnecessary risks," she said. "But on the other hand, we knew that God was protecting us."

By the evening of March 19, the fire department had issued the all clear for the Monastery of St. Joseph and Assumption Abbey to return to their properties. The following morning, the fire department cleared the hermits to return home.

"We waited a little bit just to be sure, but then returned," Joseph said. She said the hermits left early March 20 and found that Nazareth Hermitage had been untouched by the flames.

"We were very grateful for that good news," she said. "And for being able to return to our monastery and find it untouched."