

Priests find light amid fiery dark of Australia

Priests in Australia's bushfire-ravaged heartland have praised the courage, and "generosity of spirit" of their communities. But they have also warned of the long-term impact of disaster trauma.

"We have parishioners fighting fires, those who have lost their homes, and those who are playing a part with the evacuation centres," said Fr Luke Verrell from the New South Wales south coast town of Bega, an evacuation hub for thousands fleeing danger.

For the last week Fr Verrell, an emergency chaplain, travelled to evacuation centres offering solace to farming families, elderly rescued from nursing homes and thousands of holidaymakers caught up in one of the country's worst and ongoing fire disasters.

During the past six months, Australian fires have burned more than twice the combined area consumed by California's 2018 fires and the Amazon's 2019 fires.

The latest blazes since New Year's eve have claimed dozens of lives – 25 at the last count. They have left dozens more injured including firefighters, destroyed hundreds of homes and killed more than 500,000 animals, including livestock and wildlife.

Further south in the state of Victoria, Fr Michael Willemsen, at St Mary's parish priest Bairnsdale, East Gippsland, was reflective as light rain fell to bring a short reprieve for volunteer firefighters.

"All of this is mixed blessings for the 'firies' (firefighters). These weather conditions can make for bush tracks to be more slippery, adding to the challenges."

Among Fr Willemsen's congregation, many are volunteer firefighters and they are exhausted after days on the fire frontline.

"Their actions are heroic because as people are coming away from danger, they are heading towards the danger," he said. "It's impossible to count the number of selfless acts that have been carried out and continue to be carried out by all sorts of people. The whole community is giving in whatever way people can."

In Bega, Fr Verrell proudly explains that even in apocalyptic conditions, Sunday Mass went ahead.

He was not daunted, as veils of smoke turned the sky from blood red to pitch black.

"Yesterday was 24 hours of darkness," said Fr Verrell. "Now you can't even see the sky because there is so much smoke. In a dark place we keep on going and know the light of Christ will lead us along the way."

"It is inspiring to go to the local relief centre and see the number of people bringing donations, and number of people there to accept them, sort the goods and distribute them."

The St Vincent de Paul Society is one of the frontline agencies providing food and clothing for fire-ravaged communities and the Order of Malta has provided money from its Natural Disaster Fund.

Adding to local efforts, donations have poured in after social media posts went viral showing thousands of stranded tourists on the beach in the town of Mallacoota getting evacuated by the navy, and singed, distressed koalas being bandaged and bottle-fed.

International celebrities have donated tens of millions of dollars while many overseas media outlets' coverage has focused on Australia's perceived inaction on climate change.

"I urge political and community leaders to continue efforts to identify and respond to the underlying causes that have contributed to the heightened risks we are facing this summer," said Bishop Shane Mackinlay of the Diocese of Sandhurst, also hit by bushfires. "We pray for those who lost their lives, and for the safe recovery of people who are missing."

Fr Verrell said there was no doubt bushfire trauma would leave long-lasting scars in his community.

"The reality is that many people won't stay and rebuild. The community is going to be devastated by people leaving," he said. "Those who want to stay will have to be very patient waiting for builders. They'll have to go through anniversaries, significant events and daily reminders of the tragedy they have gone through as they try to get their lives back together.

"There are those who have lost everything and those who have saved everything. There's a disparity. There will be a hyperawareness of the threat of fire. And there will be a weariness for those who helped."