
Australia wildfire. The words of the bishop of New South Wales: “Many are asking: where is God?”

It's a time of sorrow, of reckoning the damage, of tears for those who are no longer there, but it's also a time of solidarity and prayers that the rain may soon wash away all the smoke and the dust that now envelop and cover everything. Msgr. **Brian Mascord** is the Bishop of Wollongong, a coastal city in south-eastern Australia, located in the State of New South Wales that was most affected by bushfires along with the State of Victoria. Tourist websites depict this place with images of lush nature, veritable paradises of ocean, mountains and vegetation. Pictures taken just a few days ago by the bishop sadly reveal a very different landscape of devastation, burnt sites, destroyed fields and smoke, smoke everywhere. The bishop has just returned from an on-site visit to the parishes (in particular St Mary Star of the Sea Catholic Church) and the communities in the diocese devastated by the flames.

Msgr. Mascord, could you describe what you saw and the present situation in your diocese?

At the moment our area is in the so-called "recovery" phase. This means that after the devastation caused by the fires, we are reckoning the damage. It's a traumatic moment: many people have lost their homes, subsistence means and some unfortunately also lost family members. And the alert is not over yet. Forecasts for today (Friday, January 10) are of extreme fire conditions. We have been warned to prepare for very high temperatures and very strong winds, which are never a good combination. Our diocesan community was very fortunate not to have lost Church property, however a number of families from our schools and parishes have lost their homes. I have visited one of our parishes.

The fire stopped a few meters from the church, the school and the priest's house. It was a horrible experience.

You said there were victims also in your diocese.

Sadly, two young firefighters have lost their lives: a tree fell over the truck where they were about to extinguish a fire in an area of the diocese. They left widowed spouses and orphaned children. At least 25 people have died throughout the country, not only firefighters, but also ordinary men and women who failed to escape the flames.

As many as 1800 properties in New South Wales have been destroyed by wildfire. This means that an equal number of families will have to make a fresh start. Many of them are elderly, retired people.

How is the population coping with this state of emergency, children in particular?

Constantly changing conditions, unending fire alerts with dense smoke persisting in many areas of the country: people know they could be evacuated at any time depending on the situation, and this inevitably produces a very high level of anxiety. Some feel guilty because their property has been spared but not their neighbours'.

They ask, 'Why have we been so lucky and they haven't?'. Many are angry and raise a different question: "Where is God in all this?" The answer is that God is in those people who are fighting the fires, in those who join forces and face the pain together, in those who are helping wherever they can and doing all they can with generosity. That is where God is.

What action has been taken by the dioceses and parishes in Australia? What kind of help do you need the most?

Many communities are mobilising to provide food and fresh water, since many areas lack the infrastructure to support their community at the moment. Many people were left stranded on the beach, the Navy and the military helped people evacuate with amphibious vehicles. It was the only way they could be saved.

A national appeal will be read during Masses across Australia over the weekend of 25-26 January asking for financial support that will be channelled through the St Vincent de Paul Society, and will be used to help assist people and communities who have been affected.

How can the Churches and Christian communities around the world respond?

Just pray, it's the best thing you can do. Pray for rainfall. We have been plagued by severe drought for many years, and the lack of moisture in the soil intensified the fires. So please pray for rain in Australia. It will regenerate the forests that have been lost, it will allow the pastures to produce food, it will clear the smoke from the sky, allowing everyone to start breathing normally again.

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