

After fire destroys Arizona shrine, threatens thousands, bishop leads prayers

TUCSON, Ariz. – Across the state from the more publicized Wallow fire, a second wind-whipped wildfire forced thousands of people in southern Arizona to evacuate their homes and destroyed a Marian shrine.

Just a fraction of the size of the enormous Wallow fire farther northeast that had burned more than 527,000 acres as of June 21, the fast-moving Monument fire in the Huachuca Mountains south of Sierra Vista had left more than 27,000 acres and about 65 homes and businesses in ashes.

More than 10,000 people were evacuated June 29 from the southern subdivisions of Sierra Vista, a city of about 43,000 adjacent to the Army's Fort Huachuca. Meanwhile, Tucson Bishop Gerald F. Kicanas celebrated Mass at St. Andrew the Apostle Parish in Sierra Vista June 18, leading the community in prayers for the firefighters. He also reminded the congregation packed into the church that God's mercy and love can be seen in times of crisis in the way people step up to help those in need.

Bishop Kicanas also visited two shelters in Sierra Vista for evacuees, accompanied by Father Greg Adolf, pastor of St. Andrew. Father Adolf told the New Catholic Vision, newspaper of the Diocese of Tucson, that "volunteers were everywhere. People have been bringing food, clothes, blankets and pillows. ... Kennels have been set up for displaced animals. The whole community has come together in support of the people who have lost homes and animals."

Father Adolf had taken in the tabernacle and sacred vessels from Our Lady of the Sierras Marian Shrine, a hillside chapel and prayer spaces built by Jerry and Pat Chouinard in Hereford, south of Sierra Vista, as a place of prayer and comfort. The rock walls of the shrine survived the fire that blazed across the hill a few days after it started June 12. But the shrine's wooden roof and interior were destroyed, as were

the Chouinards' home on the property, the stations of the cross, a prayer grotto, a prayer house and a guesthouse.

Bishop Kicanas said the fire turned the chapel's rock walls into a blast furnace. "The heat (was) so intense that the tabernacle was left scorched, the pyx and ciborium blackened and twisted and barely recognizable."

A note on the webpage of the shrine said the Couinards plan to rebuild. It was opened by the couple in 1998 as a tribute to Mary after they returned from a visit to Medjugorje, a popular pilgrimage site in what is now Bosnia-Herzegovina that is believed to be the scene of Marian apparitions. A 75-foot Celtic cross, a 31-foot statue of Our Lady of the Sierras, both made of concrete, and other marble statues around the shrine grounds survived the blaze.