

Oklahomans say electric power a blessing after ice storm

TULSA, Okla. – When a businessman donated a generator to the Church of the Madalene Dec. 15, grateful parishioners responded in kind, preparing a big spaghetti dinner and going door to door in their power-starved midtown Tulsa neighborhood to invite people to come for a hot meal.

“Since we had been so blessed, we decided the least we could do was try and help our neighbors who were still without electricity,” said Father Jack Gleason, the pastor.

“All in all, about 80 people were treated to a nice meal. We had planned to have games available; however, most people preferred to sit around and talk – some lamenting the difficulties of the week, others sharing stories of the many acts of kindness given them,” he said.

The Church of the Madalene initially lost power the morning of Dec. 9 when an ice storm snapped huge trees like kindling and triggered a massive power outage across Oklahoma. Father Gleason celebrated Mass that day “by candlelight and flashlight, with my yelling the homily, I suppose like in the ‘good old days’ before sound systems.”

A week later, Bishop Edward J. Slattery celebrated Mass at Holy Family Cathedral, which still did not have power Dec. 16. However, a generator given by a benefactor provided enough power to activate the electrical system that turns on the steam-powered radiators lining the east and west walls of the downtown Tulsa cathedral, built in 1914.

Candle power and light coming through the cathedral’s many stained-glass windows provided sufficient light for the Mass, although many people wore coats throughout.

At the Church of the Madalene several miles away, power was back only intermittently for more than a week. A funeral vigil scheduled for Dec. 9 was moved to the funeral home. The next day, Father Gleason was able to celebrate the funeral

Mass back at the parish – with heat and lights – but the power went off again a half-hour later.

“The first few days were cold but quaint, as I thought the power would be restored at any minute,” he told the Eastern Oklahoma Catholic, Tulsa’s diocesan newspaper.

“We began trying to check on people who live alone and had no immediate family in the area. Most of them had neighbors who were offering assistance. People were incredibly generous in opening up their homes if they had power,” the priest said.

In preparing for Sunday Masses Dec. 16, Father Gleason realized power was not coming back, but “the difference was that this time the church had been without heat all week and was frigid in the freezing temperatures.”

A resourceful parishioner contacted a community businessman, Felix Ontiveros, who offered a generator from his company, Tulsa Restoration Corp. Ontiveros’ employees installed the generator and refueled it each day at no charge to the parish.

“There is the saying that ‘no good deed goes unpunished,’” Father Gleason said. “I would say for us this past week no good deed has stayed with the recipient of the good deed – the person has passed it on to others.

“Advent is about preparing to welcome Christ more fully in our lives. This Advent, I have recognized him in countless people and pray that these lessons of generosity will stay with me long after Christmas has come and gone.”

In Oklahoma City, Catholic Charities was able to give in-person help to about 300 families affected by the ice storm, according to Kay Smith, director of family support services.

“Most of the people we assisted were the poor and the marginalized,” she said. “They were people who were in homes (rented or owned), but lost power, food or ... income. Many were hourly employees who lost wages when they couldn’t get to work or their place of employment closed due to power outage.”

Most of those helped, Smith added, were parents concerned about providing shelter and food for their families. “One family said they had to return their Christmas

presents to buy groceries,” she said.

“It is our goal to help people return to their pre-disaster level. However, for many of these low-income families, they have limited resources. It makes it a tough road for most of them,” Smith said.