

Parishes in and out of tsunami inundation zones go with the flow

HONOLULU - While the large tsunami waves predicted to hit Hawaiian coastlines Feb. 27 turned out to be much smaller and left no damage, local Catholics took the threat seriously.

Many parishes canceled events and services, sent their priests to higher ground and took other precautions.

La Salette Father Efren Tomas, pastor of Christ the King Parish on the island of Maui, said he found that the tsunami threat made for a good homily tie-in to the weekend Masses' Gospel reading about the Transfiguration.

"I told of how I had to go up the mountain just like in the Transfiguration, but I had to go up a different mountain - Haleakala," he joked.

Haleakala, Maui's highest peak, is upcountry from his parish in Kahului, one of the lowest areas on the island. Father Tomas said his parishioners convinced him to go to higher ground until the threat passed.

"Everybody was on their toes," he told the Hawaii Catholic, Honolulu's diocesan newspaper. "They told me that during the 1964 tsunami the water reached the front of Christ the King. And people were picking up fish all over the place."

The tsunami warning for Hawaii was triggered by an 8.8 magnitude earthquake in Chile, which left nearly 800 people dead. Tsunami sirens went off at 6 a.m. and Hawaii residents in coastal evacuation zones were told to head to higher ground by 10 a.m.

The large waves predicted to roll in around 11 a.m. on the island of Hawaii - known as the "Big Island" - didn't materialize, but water level fluctuations were noticeable on several islands.

The Diocese of Honolulu used e-mails, its Web site and Twitter to send out updates

during the day.

Parishes well out of the tsunami evacuation zone carried on as usual and were sometimes the go-to places for parishioners living near the ocean.

St. Jude Church in Kapolei on Oahu sits safely on a hill, and parish secretary Caren Argenzia said the church parking lot was packed by late morning Feb. 27 with parishioners' cars.

"People had their chairs and coolers set up and they were just waiting for the all-clear sign," she said.

The church's bathrooms were open for the tsunami tailgaters, but the church was otherwise occupied. That's because Richard and Amanda Evans were getting married at 10:30 a.m., about a half-hour before the first tsunami waves were predicted to hit. The Evanses didn't get their centerpieces because the florist shop had closed, but their wedding Mass and reception at a nearby Chinese restaurant went on with no other tsunami complications.

St. Jude's pastor, Father Joseph Diaz, in his wedding homily pointed out that the Evanses would have a truly memorable wedding day.

On Hawaii island, Edwina Fujimoto was leading a "Life in the Spirit" seminar for youths and young adults at St. Theresa Parish in Mountain View, well situated on higher ground.

Two attendees were late because they had joked to their parents that they wanted to go wave-watching instead of to the seminar. They were promptly grounded and not allowed to head to St. Theresa until around the time the tsunami warning was canceled at 1:38 p.m.