

Pilgrimage bus crashes en route to Marian Days; 17 dead

SHERMAN, Texas - Seventeen parishioners from Houston-area Vietnamese Catholic churches were killed early Aug. 8 when the pilgrimage bus they were taking to Marian Days in Carthage, Mo., ran off a highway overpass north of Dallas and crashed onto the road below.

Family members of the dead and injured hurried to Dallas after the early morning crash, while others gathered at Our Lady of Lavang and Vietnamese Martyrs churches in Houston to pray and await word on victims. Special Masses were planned for Houston and Dallas Vietnamese parishes the evening of the accident.

Twelve passengers died at the scene and another five later died in area hospitals.

Annette Gonzales Taylor, communications director for the Dallas Diocese, told Catholic News Service in a phone interview that St. Patrick Church in Dennison and St. Mary Church in Sherman, near the site of the crash, prepared places for family members to gather, rest, get a meal and receive other assistance.

Those injured in the crash were taken to regional hospitals, where chaplains were scrambling to find translators and pastoral assistance from local Vietnamese-speaking priests, Ms. Gonzales Taylor said.

The Red Cross and Catholic Charities of Dallas offered to help families from Houston find lodging while they tended to injured relatives or made arrangements for the bodies of the deceased to be sent home.

Ms. Gonzales Taylor said there was some difficulty identifying victims - both the injured who were unconscious and those who were killed. Because the crash occurred shortly before 1 a.m., many passengers had settled in to sleep and weren't carrying identification, she explained. Hospitals reported treating at least 40 people with injuries.

Tens of thousands of Vietnamese Catholics travel to Carthage, Mo., each summer for

Marian Days, a weekend of prayer, talks and renewal held at the motherhouse of the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix.

Bishop James V. Johnston of Springfield-Cape Girardeau, Mo., issued a statement of sympathy, saying that “our church is profoundly saddened by this tragic accident.” He asked prayers for God’s consolation for the grieving, healing for the injured, and mercy and eternal peace for those who died.

The bus hosted by Vietnamese Martyrs Parish was one of a caravan of buses and cars that left Houston the evening of Aug. 7.

Texas newspapers reported that the National Transportation Safety Board was investigating the accident, and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration quickly ordered the bus company to cease all commercial operations immediately. The news stories said the safety administration called the Houston business, Iguala Busmex, which is part of a company called Angel Tours, an “imminent hazard.”

The safety administration Aug. 10 said the company’s “grossly deficient maintenance” contributed to the crash. Another company bus carrying pilgrims to Carthage from the two parishes arrived without incident, but was taken out of service in Missouri under federal orders.

In Houston, Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo issued a statement saying he and the entire Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston mourned for the crash victims, their families and the spiritual communities from which they came.

“We pray for the intercession of our mother, Mary, that she may grant the families peace in knowing that their loved ones are now with her son, Jesus,” said the statement.

Ms. Gonzales Taylor said another complicating factor for providing pastoral help at hospitals was that many of the Dallas Diocese’s Vietnamese clergy were themselves in Missouri for Marian Days. Dallas Bishop Kevin J. Farrell was out of the country, she said.