

St. Paul-Minneapolis Catholics responds to bridge collapse

WASHINGTON - Upon hearing of the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, priests from the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis traveled to the scene, as well as to nearby hospitals and medical centers, to see how they could help victims of the tragedy and their families.

Although Dennis McGrath, archdiocesan spokesman, said that travel between the two cities has been “virtually impossible” since the disaster, the archdiocese held two noon prayer services Aug. 2 - one in St. Paul at the Cathedral of St. Paul and the other at St. Olaf Catholic Church in Minneapolis.

Coadjutor Archbishop John C. Nienstedt presided over the ceremony at the cathedral, and Father Kevin McDonough, vicar general, celebrated the prayer service as well as the daily Mass at St. Olaf.

Archbishop Harry J. Flynn said both churches had a “great number of people who came together to offer their consolation and their prayers for those who died, for those who are injured, and for their families.”

Archbishop Flynn said he prayed for the victims as he offered Mass in the morning Aug. 2, and he planned to address the crisis in a statement within the next few days.

“Something like this shatters us,” he said in a telephone interview Aug. 2 with Catholic News Service. “But as one woman said to me, ‘I don’t know what we’d do without faith.’ It’s the only thing ... to get through something like this.”

Father Mark Pavlik, pastor of St. Olaf, was one of the priests who responded to the crisis. He and another priest traveled to Hennepin Medical Center on one side of the river in the early evening, he said.

Chaplains from other faiths were also present “in full force.” He said other priests traveled to hospitals on the other side of the bridge to see if they were needed for counseling, but most of the people involved weren’t ready to talk.

“For many people it’s just not quite sunken in yet, because it’s still definitely going on,” Father Pavlik said. “People are so close still. It’s all still happening.”

Father Pavlik said the subject of the bridge collapse has “taken the whole city by storm, overtaken the whole city in every aspect of everything.”

Communication is difficult and the phone lines have been “in and out” because of the number of people making phone calls, he said. People who make the daily commute across the I-35W bridge have mostly been in silent shock, realizing how close they were to becoming victims themselves, he said.

Some have sought refuge at St. Olaf Church, and at noon Aug. 2 those who regularly attend the parish’s daily Mass joined with those present for the prayer service.

“Our parish is right in the heart of Minneapolis, so people come here to pray all day long,” he said. “I’m used to that, but today has been just a tremendous outpouring of people who just want to stop in and pray. Not much talking yet.”

The latest tallies Aug. 2 confirmed seven people dead, and estimated 60 injured and at least 20 missing.