



A Year of Hurricanes

Hurricane Helene toppled trees and power lines last September in Perry, Florida.

Florida Parish Forges Faith Through Hardship

By Kara Storey

Late last September, Father Matthew Busch knelt before the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe on St. Juan Diego's tilma in Mexico City. He had received word that in just hours his community of Perry, Florida, would get hit by Hurricane Helene. Surrounded by some of his parishioners, the group of pilgrims pleaded with Our Lady for protection of their church and their community.

"I'll be honest with you, just based on the laws of physics, I did not expect our church to be standing," said Father Busch, 43.

Anxious to know the fate of his church, the priest stayed up late, scouring YouTube for any amateur storm chasers driving through Perry.

"I found one who was just driving up and down our highway because we were, once again, ground zero for a major strike," he said. "The lights were all out, so it was hard to see, but at one point, his car turned around right by where our church is, and although he was from a distance, I could see that the church was still standing up."

A Rough Year

Hurricane Helene was the third hurricane that Immaculate Conception Catholic Church endured in just over 13 months. First came Hurricane Idalia in late August 2023, followed by Debby in August 2024, and then

Helene a month later—Father Busch confessed that he still gets confused by the names because there were so many. The church, which sits in a town of just over 7,000 people a few miles inland from the Gulf Coast, is the only Catholic Church in Taylor County, the eleventh largest county in Florida ranked by geographical size. Known for its hunting and fishing, the county is also called the "Tree Capital of the South" due to its 525,000 acres of forested land. The area is mainly rural, with a few farmers and some smaller industries. Father Busch noted the area is changing

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as some of the industries shut down. Right around the time Idalia hit, the local paper mill closed, taking with it some of the highest-paying jobs in the area. In turn, it led to the shuttering of the sawmill.

The church itself sits in a field next to an orange grove, though Father Busch noted as he looked out the window that a recent cold snap seemed to have killed off the fruit. Although the church's walls were still standing following three hurricanes, the building

and property did sustain much damage. Hurricane Idalia, which made landfall as a category 3 storm, caused a number of the area's pine trees to snap, including on parish property. The large amounts of yearly rain that Florida receives didn't help, as the soft, muddy ground made it easier for the trees to uproot.

"Our entire parish looked like a big pine tree, basically, afterward," Father Busch said. "It was unrecognizable because there were just so many pine trees down that you could hardly figure out where you were looking and where you were going."

The other hurricanes also created damage, though Father Busch said by that time there were fewer trees to fall on buildings. Throughout the three storms, the church and hall roof needed to be replaced, and the parish's shed, pavilion, and playground were destroyed.

"We're still working to fix the bell tower of the church from Idalia," he added. "It basically opened up a little bit of a crack between our bell tower and the rest of our church structure, so we're going to have to bring the whole bell tower down and replace it."

Community Impact

Besides Immaculate Conception Church and property sustaining extensive damage, Father



Immaculate Conception's playground was destroyed by falling trees from a hurricane.

Busch said the wider community also experienced much destruction. One of his parishioners, who had a house on the beach, lost everything.

"Her entire house just floated off into the deep blue," he said. "Luckily, she was not there at the time."

A great gift throughout such tragedy was the generosity the town and surrounding area receive from others. Organizations, such as World Central Kitchen and the Knights of Columbus, came in and passed out meals during cleanup. In October, on the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, Immaculate Conception passed out numerous pounds of cat and dog food for people's pets.

Within 24-48 hours after each storm, locals and out-of-town volunteers arrived to get cleanup in full swing, said Father Busch, who jokingly referred to the constant buzz

from chainsaws after every hurricane as the "Florida Chainsaw Massacre."

"There are people moving things, people slicing, cutting," he said. "It's amazing what you can do in the first 24 hours after a storm. You have people who are able and willing to pitch in. We have a place called Mission 850. It's a Catholic charity here that will also go down and cut trees for people, trying to get them off the roofs, trying to clear their yards so that they can get in and out of the driveway. So a lot of chainsaws."

While the community works together to pick up the pieces of their physical property, they also must pick up the pieces of their hearts. Father Busch admits that after three successive hurricanes, the community was demoralized. It's not uncommon for him to take phone calls from parishioners after a storm who are stressed or shaken up and just need to talk, especially if it's their first experience of a hurricane. He noted it's not unheard of for people to experience PTSD after a severe storm.

"It can be a frightening experience when you have constant howling that won't stop for sometimes an hour and a half," he said. "You get to the eye of the hurricane, it stops, and then it starts up again. And it's just very dark outside. The lights go out. There's a wailing sound. Your house is shaking. You don't know if your roof is going to peel off at any moment. It's almost like a freight train is coming through all around you."

Following Helene, which was rated a category 4 hurricane,



A volunteer and Father Matthew pose with emergency aid following a hurricane last year.

conspiracy theories started to spread and people began to ask: Is God trying to tell us something? Although Father Busch did his best to offer words of comfort and encouragement, he said his message needed to change after each hurricane as he searched for the right words to share with his people.

It begs the question, what does a spiritual leader say to his congregation after a third round of destruction?

“Jesus fell three times with his cross. He got back up three times, and He kept on his mission, and it’s not easy,” Father Busch said. “But I’m with them here, and I’m going through it as well. At the end of the day, your most popular resource is human beings and your family in Christ. I think, as Paul tells us, we have to do good to all men, but especially those of the household of God. And these are moments where we can really be bound together, and they’re great opportunities for charity.”

The moments of humble charity and gratitude that Father Busch witnessed in his community have been an immense gift to his priesthood, he said.

“I can’t tell you how many times I heard while we were distributing food or water to people driving up: ‘It could have been worse. It could have been worse. Thank God, it wasn’t worse. I’m glad to have what I have,’” he recalled. “It was very fulfilling for me because I got to see mercy, love, and just the spirit of gratitude. It’s been humbling and spiritually nourishing for me to see.”

After the past year and change, it would be understandable if most people packed up

and moved away. But many choose to stay. It is their home. Father Busch said many families have lived there for generations, some of whom have ancestors buried on their property—a legal practice in Florida.

“They are attached to these places,” he said. “Perhaps there is an old fishing hole that they go to that their great-grandfather may have fished in as well. People are farmers, they’re hunters. They work the land. They put their sweat equity in it. They’ve constructed their own houses in some cases.”

Even though love for their homes and community exists, it must remain a healthy attachment, with their work and homes remaining dependent on God’s will, Father Busch said. After shepherding his people through several natural disasters, he said he keeps a quote by St. Mother Teresa in the forefront of his mind: “God doesn’t ask that we succeed in everything, but that we are faithful. However beautiful our work may be, let us not become attached to it. Always remain prepared to give it up, without losing your peace.”

“Everything we have is a gift from Him, and He can take it all away and give it all back again,” Father Busch said. “No matter what else we may or may not have, we always have ourselves, and this is what God truly desires from us. Everything else can and will crumble, but we are made to give ourselves, day by day, freely and eternally for Him.”



Hurricane Idalia opened up a crack between Immaculate Conception Church's bell tower and foundation. Photos on pgs. 18-19 submitted by Father Busch.