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# Engaging Aging

## Preparedness as Ministry: A Faithful Approach to Disaster Planning and Community Resilience

**Ray Mattes, IHM, D.Min.**

*“... social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a “culture of care” which permeates all of society.”*

*Pope Francis*

*Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*

In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis offered a sweeping vision of ecological and social responsibility rooted in Catholic social teaching. He called upon humanity to recognize the interconnectedness of all creation, the dignity of every human person, and the urgent need for a “culture of care” in the face of environmental degradation, climate change, and social inequality. While *Laudato Si’* addresses a wide range of ecological issues, its teachings are especially relevant to disaster preparedness—an increasingly critical area of concern in our time.

Disasters, both natural and human-made, reveal the fragility of human systems and the inequities embedded within them. They disproportionately affect the poor, the elderly, and the marginalized, and often lead to long-term disruption, displacement, and trauma. Integrating the insights of *Laudato Si’* into disaster preparedness allows faith-based organizations, religious communities, and individuals to respond not just effectively, but compassionately and justly. This essay explores key ways to incorporate *Laudato Si’* into disaster preparedness as an expression of faithful stewardship and solidarity.

**Ray Mattes, IHM, D.Min.**, a member of the Immaculate Heart Community of California, serves as Director of the Office of Well-Being for the Los Angeles Province of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. He earned a doctorate in counseling and spiritual care and masters’ degrees in gerontology and public administration. As a professional gerontologist and licensed counselor, Ray specializes in holistic approaches to elderhood and the spirituality of later life. He has served in various managerial roles and as a consultant, spiritual director, retreat leader and facilitator to religious institutes, not-for-profit organizations and faith communities.



## Preparedness as Ministry, continued

*Laudato Si'* emphasizes that caring for the environment is not merely an ecological concern—it is a moral obligation grounded in our responsibility to God, creation, and one another. Pope Francis writes, “Our common home is falling into serious disrepair” and warns of the consequences of ignoring both the environment and the poor. Disaster preparedness can be understood as a proactive way to fulfill this duty.

By preparing for emergencies, communities acknowledge the reality of climate-related risks—such as more frequent and severe storms, floods, and wildfires—and take steps to mitigate their impact. This shift in mindset—from reactive to proactive, from fear to care—aligns with the encyclical’s call for an “integral ecology” that connects environmental, social, and spiritual well-being.

Preparedness, then, becomes a modern work of mercy. It reflects a commitment to protect life, maintain human dignity, and honor the sanctity of creation. Religious institutions, by integrating preparedness into their mission, bear witness to this holistic understanding of care. Thoughtful and collaborative disaster planning becomes more than a task; it becomes an act of love. It is a tangible way to uphold human dignity, preserve community resilience, and ensure the continuity of mission and ministry, even in crisis. Incorporating this principle into disaster planning means intentionally designing preparedness measures that address specific needs.

This article offers a practical yet mission-rooted guide to disaster preparedness for religious communities and ministries. It explores how planning can embody hope—hope that lives will be protected, that services will continue, and that the Church’s presence will endure, even when the lights go out and the winds rise.

### A Culture of Readiness Begins with Awareness

Disaster preparedness is not merely about equipment, checklists, or policies—it begins with aware-

ness and intention. This mindset shift from reactive to proactive planning starts by identifying the types of disasters most likely to impact your region, mission, and population.

One of the first and most essential steps in disaster planning is assessing location-specific risks. Agencies like FEMA and local emergency management offices offer hazard maps and risk profiles to guide communities. The website [www.Ready.gov](http://www.Ready.gov) provides comprehensive information on disaster types by region and practical resources to begin local planning.



For religious institutes, risk assessment should go beyond physical damage and consider the vulnerability of the populations served. For example, in eldercare settings or ministries serving individuals with chronic health needs, a power outage can shift from an inconvenience to a life-threatening event.

### Preparedness as an Expression of Ministry

Disaster preparedness should not be seen as a bureaucratic obligation. It is a spiritual and pastoral commitment. Whether one is a maintenance worker in a convent, a sister managing an eldercare home, or a director of a social service ministry, all are participants in what the Church calls the *works of mercy*.

- Planning for evacuations becomes a work of **compassion**.
- Stockpiling medications is a form of **healing**.
- Coordinating a response team reflects **community and justice**.

## Preparedness as Ministry, continued

Preparedness should be integrated into the mission of the organization. Planning must be inclusive and collaborative, never left solely to one person. All members of a religious community, from kitchen staff to pastoral care providers, have a role to play.

### Benefits of Inclusive Disaster Planning

- Enhanced safety for members and staff
- Reduced risk of liability and property loss
- Faster recovery after disruptions
- Alignment with Catholic values, especially care for creation and vulnerable populations

Establishing relationships with local emergency management offices or Catholic disaster response partners such as Catholic Charities or VOAD (Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster) before a crisis arises is critical. These relationships save time—and lives—when a disaster does occur.

### Building Organizational Buy-In: Readiness as a Shared Mission

Effective disaster planning must be collaborative. It is not the responsibility of one safety officer or

administrator. From leadership to kitchen staff, from healthcare aides to pastoral ministers, every member of the community has a role.

### Forming a Disaster Planning Committee

Many organizations benefit from a dedicated Disaster Planning Committee, which may include representatives from

- Administration
- Facilities
- Healthcare
- Ministry or outreach programs

Alternatively, preparedness can be integrated into existing health and safety or pastoral care teams. The goal is to create **shared ownership** and ensure diverse perspectives are included.

### Articulating the Benefits

Organizations are more likely to commit to planning efforts when they understand the benefits:

- Enhanced safety and security for residents and staff
- Minimized property damage and operational downtime
- Stronger alignment with Catholic social teaching
- Better coordination with local civic agencies

Engaging a liaison from the local emergency management agency or Catholic Charities early on strengthens relationships and streamlines responses during a crisis.

### Embracing the “All-Hazards” Approach

“All-hazards planning” refers to an approach that prepares for a wide range of emergencies using a unified, functional framework. The principle recognizes that while disasters may differ in origin, their effects often require similar responses: evacuation, sheltering, communication, and recovery.

There are two core components of “All-Hazards” planning:

1. Hazard risk assessment: Focus resources on the risks most likely to affect your community. For



*Left:* Mr. Joseph Thompson is Executive Director of Operations for the Sisters of St. Joseph, Baden, PA. One of his responsibilities is oversight of the Emergency Action Plan and Crisis Response Team. Sisters and staff collaborate to ensure the safety of all.

## Preparedness as Ministry, continued

example, a coastal convent may prioritize hurricane planning, while an urban mission might focus on utility outages or civil unrest.

2. Functional planning capacity: Develop plans for key response functions (e.g., evacuation procedures, emergency communication) that can be applied across multiple types of disasters. This foundational capacity enables flexible responses, even to unexpected events.

### Creating and Updating a Disaster Plan

Once risks are identified and roles are engaged, the next step is to create—or revise—a disaster plan. This document should clearly state what to do before, during, and after an emergency, ensuring safety, continuity, and effective communication. A strong plan is both **simple under stress** and **comprehensive in scope**.

### Core Elements of an Effective Disaster Plan:

1. Emergency Contact List
  - Local emergency responders, hospitals, and utility providers
  - Internal leadership and staff contacts
  - Emergency contacts for residents and clients
2. Communication Plan
  - Designate who communicates with whom and through what channels.
  - Include backups for internet or cell outages (e.g., phone trees, emergency apps).
  - Coordinate with diocesan offices and outside partners like Catholic Charities.
3. Evacuation and Shelter-in-Place Procedures
  - Post floor maps and exit routes.
  - Plan transportation for those needing assistance.
  - Identify pre-arranged off-site shelters (e.g., retreat centers, parish halls).
4. Medical and Accessibility Protocols
  - List individuals with medical needs, medications, and mobility support.
  - Outline refrigeration needs and medication storage.

- Include medical directives and emergency response notes.
5. Utility Management
    - Label shutoff valves for gas, electricity, and water.
    - Assign trained individuals for emergency shutdowns.
  6. Roles and Responsibilities
    - Appoint an Emergency Coordinator and a backup.
    - Delegate clear responsibilities (e.g., grab-and-go kits, roll call, securing property).
    - Cross-train where possible in smaller communities.
  7. Continuity of Ministry
    - Plan to maintain essential spiritual services, if safe to do so.
    - Identify partnerships for temporary relocation of ministry operations.

Disaster plans should be reviewed **at least annually** and after any major event or staffing change. Regular drills and tabletop exercises are essential to building confidence and identifying gaps.

### Disaster Supply Kits: Planning for Practical Needs

A well-stocked and accessible disaster supply kit can make the difference between hardship and security. These kits should be prepared with the aim of **sufficiency, not abundance**—enough to protect life and dignity during and after a disruption.

Standard Kit Essentials (Adapted from FEMA and Red Cross)

- Water (1 gallon/person/day for 3 days)
- Non-perishable, easy-to-open food
- Manual can opener
- Flashlights and extra batteries
- NOAA Weather Radio (battery-powered or crank)
- First aid supplies

## Preparedness as Ministry, continued



*Left:* Ms. Joyce Cipriani, RN, serves as the Health Care Liaison for the Sisters of St. Joseph, Baden, PA. Available for emergency care, she maintains the health information for sisters and offers guidance navigating health care systems. A ready supply of masks and hand sanitizing materials are always available outside her office door.

- Masks, gloves, emergency blankets
- Prescription medications and copies
- Hygiene supplies and garbage bags
- Copies of critical documents in waterproof container
- Cash (small bills)
- Phone chargers (solar or crank)
- Whistle or signaling device
- Area maps

### Additional Items for Vulnerable Populations

- Medical equipment and backup power
- Incontinence or mobility aids
- Dietary supplements or special food items
- Contact information for healthcare providers
- Glasses, hearing aids, and spare batteries
- Extra doses of critical medications

Kits should be **personalized, clearly labeled**, and **reviewed quarterly** in partnership with the individual's caregiver or responsible staff member.

### Low-Tech and Moderate-Tech Tools

While apps and cloud tools can enhance preparedness, communities should never rely solely on

high-tech solutions. Blended options might include

- Printed contact lists
- Battery-powered radios alongside smartphones
- Paper checklists as backups to digital records

Disasters often affect infrastructure. Phones, power, and internet may not be available. Preparedness must account for both high and low-tech realities.

### Recovery and Resilience: Rebuilding with Faith and Compassion

Responding to a disaster is only the beginning. Recovery may take weeks, months, or years—and requires attention not only to physical infrastructure but to the human spirit.

### Trauma Awareness

Disasters trigger trauma responses such as anxiety, confusion, sleep disruption, or spiritual crisis. Elders and individuals with past trauma may be particularly vulnerable. Understanding these reactions as **normal**, not pathological, creates space for healing.

A trauma-informed approach to care emphasizes safety and trust, empowerment and collaboration, and cultural sensitivity. This will help to ensure that recovery efforts are not re-traumatizing and that emotional and spiritual well-being are part of the response.

### Safe Reentry and Structural Assessment

Returning to a site requires structured reentry protocols

- Clearance from emergency authorities
- Documentation of damage
- Use of personal protective equipment
- Inspection of utilities
- Evaluation of long-term safety

It is important to work with local agencies, insurance providers, and diocesan offices to ensure compliance and support.

## Preparedness as Ministry, continued

### Community Support and Staff Care

Healing requires community. Support strategies include

- Hosting prayer or reflection gatherings
- Providing mental health referrals
- Encouraging peer support groups
- Educating staff on stress recognition

Caregivers and leaders are also at risk of burnout. Build in rest periods and communal rituals to protect their well-being.

### Debriefing and Continuous Improvement

Following the acute phase, schedule a full debrief to evaluate your strategies. This can be done by asking three simple questions:

- What worked?
- What didn't work?
- What gaps were revealed?

Let this debriefing help you to update your plan, revise supplies, and strengthen relationships. Apply for FEMA assistance if appropriate. Document the experience to benefit others within your network.

### Long-Term Resilience: Building for the Future

Resilience is the ability to endure and adapt—not the absence of hardship but the strength to move forward.

Long-term actions include

- Investing in backup systems (e.g., solar, generators)
- Cross-training staff and volunteers
- Participating in regional coalitions
- Advocating for systemic improvements

Resilience is also spiritual. When communities stand together after disaster, they witness to God's presence and promise.

### What You Can Do in the Next 30 Days

Even small actions build momentum. Consider the following:

- Hosting a leadership planning session
- Reviewing or creating an emergency plan
- Conducting a fire or evacuation drill
- Inventorying supplies and updating kits
- Reaching out to local emergency contacts

Each step taken is a step toward safety, peace, and mission continuity.

### Hope, Stewardship, and the Call to Prepare

Preparedness is not about predicting the future—it is about preparing hearts and hands to meet it with faith and resolve. It calls us to ask

- How will we care for one another when the unthinkable occurs?
- What witness of peace, order, and compassion will we offer?
- What legacy of readiness will we leave for the next generation?

Informed by the values of *Laudato Si'*—solidarity, stewardship, and dignity—disaster planning becomes a ministry in itself. It affirms the sanctity of life, the strength of community, and the enduring presence of the Church in times of darkness.

### Final Encouragement

Let preparedness be part of your community's ongoing formation and ministry. Take steps to

- Review your disaster plans regularly. Make them living, evolving tools.
- Build relationships with local partners. Resilience is a shared mission.
- Foster a culture of readiness grounded in compassion, not fear.

By preparing faithfully and collaboratively, religious communities can embody hope and healing before, during, and after disaster strikes.

## Preparedness as Ministry, continued

## Takeaway Resources

Below is a summary to begin exploring additional resources:

### FEMA Resources:

Emergency Planning Templates ([ready.gov](https://ready.gov))  
Online Training ([training.fema.gov/is/](https://training.fema.gov/is/))  
Preparedness App

### American Red Cross:

Disaster Preparedness Checklists ([redcross.org/prepare](https://redcross.org/prepare))

### Catholic Charities USA:

Disaster Response Overview  
([catholiccharitiesusa.org](https://catholiccharitiesusa.org))

**FEMA Faith-Based Toolkit:** guidance tailored to houses of worship and religious nonprofits.

**CDC Emergency Preparedness for Older Adults:** useful for elder care centers.

**Ready.gov – Faith-Based and Community Organizations:** general planning and training materials.

**National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (NVOAD):** potential collaboration and training resources. (<https://www.nvoad.org/>)



## From the Editor's Desk

### Sister Sherryl White, CSJ, Ph.D.

It is a particular delight to welcome Dr. Ray Mattes, IHM, back to the pages of *Engaging Aging*. This will be Ray's third article for NRRO, the first appearing in 2011 and the second in 2018.



You may have noticed at first glance that this issue is not in our normal format of narrative text. If you find it reading more as notes from a PowerPoint presentation, you'd be correct. The material is from a webinar on emergency preparedness that Ray presented in May 2025, sponsored by NRRO and the Avila Institute of Gerontology. We felt that the information was of such critical importance that we asked Ray to share it with our readers again. Upon seeing the material, we decided the bulleted format would make the material more clear and accessible.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, Los Angeles, and Ray are no strangers to emergencies. In 2017, the sisters were forced to evacuate to the homes of staff members as the Skirball fire approached their campus. Then again, in 2019, the Getty fire threatened their campus as the sisters had to shelter in place, guarded by police and firefighters who determined it was impossible to evacuate the sisters down the road surrounded by smoke, fire, and toppled utility poles. All emerged safely.

No one wants to imagine that disasters will happen to them, but acknowledging the possibility and even probability of emergencies becomes a mandate for responsible behavior in the face of our changing global environment. Continued vigilance is especially important in light of preparation paradox research that shows when predicted disasters don't occur, people tend to minimize the need for preparedness.

We certainly pray for the well-being of all and hope the material offered here will help to ensure your continued safety. May all be well.

**U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops**  
National Religious Retirement Office  
3211 4th Street N.E.  
Washington, DC 20017-1194

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## National Religious Retirement Office

**Sponsor of the Retirement Fund for Religious**

**3211 4th Street, NE**  
**Washington, DC 20017-1194**

**Phone:** (202) 541-3215

**Fax:** (202) 541-3053

**Email:** [retirement@usccb.org](mailto:retirement@usccb.org)

**Websites:**

[www.usccb.org/nrro](http://www.usccb.org/nrro)

[www.retiredreligious.org](http://www.retiredreligious.org)

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**Staff**

**Director**

John Knutsen  
[jknutsen@usccb.org](mailto:jknutsen@usccb.org)

**Grants Specialist**

Monica Glover  
[mglover@usccb.org](mailto:mglover@usccb.org)

**Program Associate**

Karen Canas  
[kcanas@usccb.org](mailto:kcanas@usccb.org)

**Affiliated Independent Consultant**

Ms. Dayna Larson-Hurst  
[NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org](mailto:NRROConsult-DLHurst@usccb.org)