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Cars were swept away by the force of water on Oct. 31, 2024, on a road on the outskirts of Valencia, Spain, where torrential rains caused flooding. (OSV/Reuters/Eva Máñez)



Eliana López Álvarez

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Translated by Magda Bennásar

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Valencia, Spain — January 23, 2025
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***Editor's note:*** *Various congregations of Catholic sisters provided support to those affected by the devastating floods in Valencia, Spain, in October 2024. This report mentions the Institute of the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará, the female branch of the religious family of the Institute of the Incarnate Word, which is currently under Vatican intervention. In January 2025, Pope Francis appointed Sr. Chara Echarte of the Daughters of Jesus as a pontifical delegate to investigate complaints of abuse and alleged irregularities within this community of religious women.*

On the afternoon of Oct. 29, 2024, the Valencian community was hit by what is known in Spain as a DANA (isolated high level depression), a meteorological phenomenon that left what has been considered the worst natural tragedy of this century in Spain. More than 200 people died, dozens have disappeared, and towns in more than 75 municipalities in the Province of Valencia were destroyed by the force of the water.

In 2025, there are still towns that continue to pull mud out of their garages. José Luis Cordero, a victim of the disaster from the town of Cata Roja, said that, thanks to the work of the volunteers who are also being coordinated by sisters, the community has been able to continue with the cleanup work, despite the exhaustion.

"The volunteers and the sisters have managed to have the courage to keep going," Cordero told Global Sisters Report.



Sister María Palestina delivers a *Niño Jesús* in Paiporta. (Eliana López)

This devastating event has meant a before and after for the people of this country, particularly for the Valencian community. In addition to the loss of human lives, the material damage in the affected towns has been so severe that the losses have not yet been quantified. Many companies and small businesses will not reopen their

doors while others are doing everything in their power to return to normal.

The city of Valencia was spared the damage, but not the surrounding towns. The most affected area was Huerta Sur in the Province of Valencia, a sector with important industrial parks and large agricultural areas.

In the midst of the tragedy, almost immediately a great wave of volunteers turned up to help the affected towns, united with religious of different congregations from various cities and towns of Spain. Images of sisters with their habits full of mud, side by side with the volunteers, giving physical and spiritual help, have been part of the scenes of this tragedy.

The Sisters of the Incarnate Word, with convents and monasteries throughout Spain, have been doing apostolic work from the first moment of the disaster.

> Some affected people from the town of Sedaví have cataloged the volunteers, including the sisters, as 'angels falling from everywhere, because the help has been tremendous since everything began.'
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A group of sisters from the Incarnate Word Religious Family with the volunteers who visited homes in Paiporta on the feast of the Holy Innocents on Dec. 28 (Eliana López Álvarez)

"One comes to bring them comfort, and they give it to us, because when they lost everything, they really appreciated that their lives were saved and that material things are not worth it. We have received more than what we could offer them," said Sister Maryem Ana of the Incarnate Word Religious Family.

From the first moment of the tragedy, the religious went daily from different communities in Spain to help the victims. At first, the work was mostly physical, helping to remove all the belongings and furniture that the flood had swept away, and then they began the work of cleaning the houses.

"When they saw their houses empty, that gave them more hope to start again," Sister Maryem Ana said.

For her part, Sister María Fons Signatus explained that although the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word has cloistered convents (where they dedicate themselves to prayer and contemplation, without going out to the streets), this did not prevent the contemplative sisters from also helping those affected by the DANA.

From their cloistered convents, the sisters have done the valuable work of cleaning and repairing the liturgical ornaments that were damaged inside affected churches, and have also made new chasubles for the parish priests of several churches.

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> —Sister Maryem Ana
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Nuns and volunteers bring the joy of the birth of Jesus to those affected by the DANA. (Eliana López Álvarez)

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Contemplative sisters of the Religious Family of the Incarnate Word wash liturgical ornaments swept away by the rains. (Courtesy of Religious Family of the Incarnate Word)

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  A woman walks with her children along a street in the town of Catarroja, in Valencia, Spain, on Nov. 11, 2024, as they look for a church to provide them with cleaning products following heavy rains that caused deadly flooding in late October. (OSV News/Reuters/Eva Máñez)

## Angels from everywhere

Affected individuals like Ana Pérez, a resident of the town of Sedaví in the Huerta Sur region, Valencia province, have described volunteers (including the work of the sisters) as "angels falling from everywhere, because the help has been tremendous since everything began."

Pérez lost her job and her car (her home is on a high floor, thus remaining untouched). With the help of the sisters and other volunteers, she was able to clean the apartments of her neighbors on the lower floors, clean the streets, and receive food for her family and her neighbors, who had been completely isolated and without basic services.

Pérez said that thanks also to the emotional and spiritual support she received, she found the courage to start a new life, and see in the midst of the tragedy the opportunity to start from scratch. Since her workplace was destroyed, she has decided to start her own small business that will allow her to support her family and contribute to the return of normality in her community.

"Above all," Sister Maryem Ana said, "being there, from the people who rang the doorbell and told them that a group of volunteers were coming to clean what was needed in the house or in the garage, the gratitude is immediate."

> On the feast of the Holy Innocents, the sisters of the Institute of the Servants of the Lord and the Virgin of Matará (Incarnate Word) made their annual Christmas mission in Paiporta, the most affected town in Huerta Sur of Valencia.
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The nuns' good disposition is shown on their faces during their work in a collection center. (Eliana López Álvarez)

She added that they have been in the streets giving comfort to those in need, meeting elderly people crying because they lost children and grandchildren. "People need to tell you once, twice and three times what they have lived through," the

sister said. "People who have lost relatives, have lost everything, and they have a peace that one cannot believe — you learn from them, too. The consolation is mutual."

This tragedy has taught those affected, the volunteers and also many of the sisters that it is not only physical work that is required: It is spiritual help and giving joy in the midst of pain.

A young Incarnate Word Sister, who lives in Tarragona in Catalonia, Sister Bendición stressed that her apostolate work also consists of bringing joy, because "joy is seen and comes from God, that is why today we sing. That is already a way of doing apostolate."

Almost two months after the tragedy, on Dec. 28, 2024, the day on which the Catholic Church celebrates the feast of the Holy Innocents, the Sisters of the Incarnate Word decided to carry out their annual Christmas mission in the town of Paiporta, considered the most affected in the Huerta Sur region in Valencia.

To do so, they delivered more than 350 Niños Jesús (handmade by the sisters of the cloistered convents) and all that day walked the streets of Paiporta, visiting the houses and singing Christmas carols, together with young volunteers.

Sister María Palestina, also an Incarnate Word Sister, emphasized that they did this Christmas mission "to bring joy to homes that have lost everything."




A person walks through a flooded street on Oct. 30, 2024, in Llombai, in Valencia, Spain, after the Spanish meteorological agency put the region on maximum red alert for extreme rainfall. (OSV News/Reuters/Eva Máñez)

## Still much to be done

More than two months have passed since the disaster, and the work of material and emotional recovery still has a long way to go.

Among the apostolic work of the various religious congregations to continue helping those affected by the DANA: In various convents in Valencia, they provide accommodation for volunteers who travel from all parts of Spain, including young people who belong to lay groups whose apostolate includes international work; families who travel on their own initiative; or lay individuals who wanted to lend a hand.

Due to the current conditions of the towns of the Huerta Sur region of Valencia, the Religious of the Family of the Incarnate Word have planned to continue going to the

affected towns until February 2025, but they do not rule out the possibility of extending their activities for more months if necessary.

Although the work has been arduous, the villages still look like devastated areas: Dust, mud, and belongings in the middle of the streets are part of daily life. It is for these residents that the sisters will continue helping as much as necessary.

In a society where we use cellphones all day long, where we are so preoccupied with ourselves, Sister Maryem Ana said, "we do not realize the value that people have. That is what is valuable, and we must dedicate more time to them."

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*This story was originally published in Spanish.*