



MARYMOUNT HERMITAGE NEWSLETTER

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THE MESA FIRE: Four Days of Danger

By Sister M. Beverly, HSM

Lightning started a fire very unexpectedly on the Midvale hill about midday on Wednesday, July 25. The fire was burning in steep, rugged canyon terrain and was growing rapidly, driven by strong, steady winds. Fires in that location in the past have jumped Highway 95, so this was an early concern for fire fighters and locals. The only N/S highway in western Idaho was closed that first day and this fire and the extreme situation were very much on my mind and in my fervent prayers. I usually try to drive to Fruitland, ID for Saturday evening Mass and shopping and chores in Ontario, OR, but that weekend, I knew it would not be safe to attempt to do so. With the Keithly Fire an hour south of me, imagine my shock and horror when I went to close the blinds in my living room at 8 PM on Thursday, July 26, and saw what looked like a major fire in my “front yard”!



Day One of the Mesa Fire the evening of July 26, 2018: looking east to Mt. Council, chapel and Mercy House visible to the right of the photo.

I called it “The Mesa Fire” and, as it turned out, that became the official name. Apparently, at about 7 PM, a vehicle traveling north on Highway 95 lost a wheel and the incident started a small grass fire about 6 miles north of Marymount Hermitage. Drivers passing by immediately stopped and attempted to

suppress the fire. This is typical of the admirable pioneer spirit very much alive in rural Idaho. Even the Council Fire Chief traveling back from the Keithly Fire arrived just in time to help the first volunteers with the initial attack. Unfortunately, both the Council and Indian Valley Volunteer Fire Departments were deployed to the Keithly Fire and could only send a



Day One of the Mesa Fire: late night photo by Mike Nourse.

token crew when the Council Fire Chief called for them later that night.

The one thing in our favor is that some planes working the Keithly Fire were quickly diverted to Mesa. The strong NW winds fanned and quickly spread the flames. By 8 PM when I first saw the fire, it was miles long and widening along the east side of Highway 95, marching up the slopes of Mt. Council.

In the past 34 years, I have lived through many fires near Marymount Hermitage. I have learned a lot from those experiences, but this fire was the largest and closest one I have ever lived through.

My first reaction was to pray. Rather than in chapel, I just prayed in my chair in my living room where I could also look out the picture window to keep track of the progress of the fire. The biggest question was: will it jump the highway to my side?! I thought I would never sleep a wink that night. I am not easily

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frightened, but that first night I was really scared. The danger was real and serious. About 10 PM, I finally thought of communicating my situation to a few people...my bishop and my closest friends...whom I knew would want to know and who would definitely pray for protection for me and everyone. I called a few and emailed others. Some responded immediately, like Bishop Peter—such a good shepherd.

By about 11 PM, I began to think about what I should do if I needed to evacuate. My first concern was for the safety of the Blessed Sacrament. So I decided to consolidate all the consecrated hosts in one ciborium and bring the sacred vessel to the small tabernacle in my living room, which I use as an oratory during times of retreat. In the chapel, I discovered my nearest neighbor, Mike Nourse, was there praying, and had been for over an hour. It was such a comfort to me that dangerous night. Prayer is always my greatest need and best protection.

I can only say that it was the sacramental presence of Jesus and the prayers of others that helped me to start relaxing and trusting God that everything would be okay. By midnight, I was finally able to go to bed, even though I left my hair braided and slept fully dressed in case of an emergency. I did sleep for about six hours, but was not truly rested the next morning.



Day Two, July 27: smoke billowing up behind Mercy House.

Friday, July 27, was a very tense day. The fire had grown in acreage, burning up the slopes of Mt. Council, to the north, south and east. I tried very hard to stay focused and keep up my normal routine of prayer, reading and work, but it was difficult because I was so worried and distracted. I was making wildflower cards for the next scheduled parish sale in Coeur D'Alene. Just the

thought that the mountain places where I had picked these flowers would be burned and gone forever made me sad. All one can do is soldier on. A daily routine is such a blessing. Friday night the fire was still near and dangerous, a vivid orange glow on the horizon showing its location. One could only wait to see what the morning would bring.

Day Two: the Mesa Fire has burned the east side of Highway 95 into the foothills of Mt. Council.



Saturday morning, July 28, we in

the Mesa area received the official information that we were on evacuation alert and “to be packed and ready to go at a moment’s notice”. I did pack a suitcase and backpack of items I would need or were necessary and irreplaceable for Marymount Hermitage, but I did not load my luggage into the car because these were belongings I was using...like my office book and prayer beads. I wanted to be civically responsible, but I was beginning to get the impression that the fire would not jump the highway and we, on my side of Hwy 95, would not need to evacuate. As it turned out, that is indeed what transpired.

On Sunday morning, July 29, we received notice that the evacuation order had been lifted. The last of the four dangerous days was coming to an end. While that was a relief, the fire was growing and becoming more of a major event. It had quickly doubled and then tripled the size of the Keithly Fire.

Sunday night, a public meeting was scheduled at the Council Elementary School and I decided to attend. I knew I would be glad for the information. I wanted local people to see me and know that I was as concerned as they were, and I figured I would learn a lot which was unspoken. However, I had never been to such a meeting and did not know exactly what to expect.

The reason for the meeting was

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threefold: to give people current information about the fire, to explain how the fire started and what was done initially to suppress it, and finally to communicate to the public the important decision that this effort was being taken out of local hands and being turned over to a national agency. For my part, I was glad about this because that meant we would be receiving more available fire crews, more equipment, a professional management team of forty people, and government funds and resources...all badly needed.



Day Two: scene of the Mesa Fire from Old Highway 95 near the town site of Mesa. I was getting my mail that afternoon wondering how the mail was getting through.

The presentations by the management team leaders were very professional, interesting and educational. Ever the teacher, I took four pages of notes! The Mesa Fire was designated a “Great Basin Level 6 Incident”, the number indicating the size and complexity of the fire. (It was later elevated to Level 7 status.) The United States is divided into ten large regional units for fire protection. “The Great Basin” unit includes the entire states of ID, UT and NV and small pieces of CA, AZ and WY. We were informed that new fire crews were already arriving and would be camping in a “tent city” at the Incident Base at the Council Fair Grounds, and that the Incident Commander would officially take over beginning Monday morning, July 30.

Based on people’s questions at the end of the meeting, I realized how stricken the community was. Jobs and income will be lost due the closure of the Payette National Forest in our area. Loggers and truckers are some of those workers principally affected by the restrictions. Certainly prayers are needed for families whose lives are financially marginal at best and are now devastated by this tragedy.

At the end of the meeting, I heard what was the best news for me: “The Mesa line of the fire is secure.” With the fire only 5% contained at that point, the small section that faced me and Marymount Her-

mitage was safe. If that is not a miracle, I do not know what is! People’s prayers for me and Marymount Hermitage were answered. God is good!

Day Four: the Mesa Fire continues to burn up the slopes of Mt. Council into the trees, producing smoke which creates these spectacular morning skies and a blood-red sun at dawn.



Epilogue: To close my report on the Mesa Fire, as of August 12, the fire has burned almost 35,000 acres and is 72% contained with 457 people working on it. Living with airplanes and helicopters working constantly overhead reminds one of being in a war zone. I pray daily for the safety of fire fighters, pilots and heavy equipment operators. Their work is heroic for the common good; their courage and strength in triple digit temperatures is truly admirable. The estimated fire containment date keeps being pushed back and is currently set for August 15. Locals say a fire like this will burn until the snow flies. God alone knows.

I would like to thank the many people who prayed for me during the initial danger of the Mesa Fire. So many people called or emailed me to see if I was okay, especially after the Boise TV stations began broadcasting information about the unfolding drama. You can access information on the Boise-based National Inter-agency Fire Center’s website. There is also a Mesa Fire Incident website currently available.

COMMUNITY NEWS

DAY OF PILGRIMAGE, JULY 13: The mini-retreat and two classes on sacred icons by Nancy VanDyken, iconographer from Bozeman, MT, was well attended. Visiting priest, Father Phil Wells, offered Mass for us. The catered lunch was outstanding. More on this in the September newsletter, barring any future fires!

SUMMER THEOLOGICAL CLASSES: The series on the Trinity at Mercy House seemed to fill a local need and participants were very appreciative. Next year the summer series will be on Sacred Scripture.

NAZARETH RETREAT, BOISE, FALL SERIES: I will begin a four month set of two-hour classes on “The School of Prayer: the Saints teach us how to pray”. See the Calendar of Events for more details.