

SACRED WINDOWS



Sunday – August 20, 2023

Three Churches That Miraculously Survived Disasters

At Sacred Windows, we try to dwell on eternal values rather than current affairs, but sometimes a current event **opens an uncanny window of grace** and leads us to deep truths about our faith. In fact, we saw one such window open this past week.

Who hasn't heard of the recent inferno that has consumed almost the entire **city of Lahaina** on the Hawaiian island of Maui? Reports are now coming out that the lone Catholic Church in the area survived the fire intact, while everything around it was burnt to a crisp.

You've probably seen the pictures by now, but if not, here are two of the Church of Maria Lanakila, **surrounded by acres and acres of cinders**. (On the left is from the parish's website showing an aerial photo of the church and school intact after the fire.)



A Clear Victory

The Hawaiian name "Maria Lanakila" roughly translates to "Our Lady of Victory" in English. The original church was built in 1858, replacing a ramshackle wooden structure set up by **the first Catholic missionaries to Hawaii** in 1846.

It was in this structure that Fr. Damien DeVeuster preached to gain support for his mission to the lepers of Molokai. The current church of concrete block was built in 1928 on the foundations of the earlier church. And then in 2023, **the worst fire in Hawaii's history didn't touch it**.

Can we say it was mystically protected by its namesake, Our Lady of Victory? Why not? Grace works in strange and mysterious ways, but we must have **eyes to see and hearts to believe**.

Not every Catholic church is saved from catastrophic damage by any means, but this one seems to be **a sign from Heaven to our faithless age**: it speaks of divine protection. Here, the miracle was protection from a natural evil, but the deeper message is that Christ offers us protection from something worse: spiritual evil.

Our society *used to believe this truth*, but in recent times a significant portion of the culture has **vigorously rejected the Christian faith**, whether in theory or, more commonly, in practice.

Maybe, just maybe, God is showing us the kind of spiritual peril we risk by rejecting His protection. The hellscape around the Catholic parish in Lahaina would be **a fitting warning**.

The Indian Ocean Tsunami

God's protection was also evident in **the miracle that occurred in 2004** in the midst of one of the worst natural disasters in history. How does a church endure a direct hit from a catastrophic tsunami without a scratch?

You may recall the Indian Ocean Tsunami that struck just off the coast of Indonesia on the day after Christmas in 2004. It is reported to have **killed 300,000 people** who lived around the rim of the Indian Ocean.

Memories of **the humanitarian disaster** still bring tears to my eyes. I happened to be working internationally at the time, and one of my co-workers went to Banda Aceh, Indonesia several months after the incident to report on the situation.

He recounted in great detail the human catastrophe that it produced. I kept his eyewitness accounts (text messages) because they were such a **frighteningly vivid portrayal of the aftermath**. Here are the three shortest:

"Banda Aceh is a militarized zone, but many people carry guns, soldiers and militants. Please pray for me."

"I am living in hell, there's bombing nearby, army tanks are all over the place. I have gone to rehabilitation areas and am going to villages today. Please pray."

"I was interrogated by the police. They told me to leave Aceh today because I am a Christian. I will catch my flight to Jakarta tonight. Don't worry, I am ok. Thanks for your prayers."



Please pray!

Whenever I lament my own misfortunes, I have only to reflect on the people who died in that tsunami and those others who could not get on a plane like my friend and leave the disaster area.



The Miracle(s) of the Milk

Yet, the spiritual protection pattern was also evident directly **across the Bay of Bengal** on the day of the tsunami itself.

The Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health (sometimes called Our Lady of Velankanni after the name of the city in India), stands as **a Catholic enclave** in the midst of a majority Hindu nation.

The town only has a population of about 10,000, but the Catholic shrine gets **20 million visitors a year!**

The oral history of the apparitions (from the 1500s) records two instances in which Our Lady came to the place with the Child Jesus in her arms and **spoke to two local boys** who were milk sellers.

The story says that she asked each boy to **give her Child some of the milk** that he was selling. When they did, they received their rewards. The first boy found his sparse milk pot filled to the brim when he finished his delivery.

The story of the second boy, who was crippled, gives the name to the apparition. Our Lady told the boy to go to a certain Catholic man in a nearby village, and on his way, **the boy was cured** of his lameness.

The boy didn't recognize the beautiful lady and her Child, but when the Catholic man heard the story, he immediately understood that **Jesus and Mary had**

appeared to the boy. He then built a makeshift shrine to “Our Lady of Good Health” on the spot of the apparitions, and the rest is history.

But why are these boys’ stories important? They show God opening a **window of grace** into human history, right there in a pagan land.



The Miracle of Protection

As you might have noticed from the map above, the town of Velankanni is right on the coast and was one of the worst areas affected by the tsunami. The shrine, however – literally a couple blocks from the water! – was miraculously protected from the catastrophic effects of the tsunami.

It is said that a **wall of water 30 feet high** hit the coast, but when it reached the shrine’s property, it did not breach the low walls of the compound. The water flowed *around* them. In all the pictures of the shrine, you can see that the walls were not exactly impermeable to water!



600 pilgrims and other citizens who were outside the walls of the shrine at the time were swept away in the flood. However, **all pilgrims who were attending Mass inside the basilica** were saved. Not a bit of damage was recorded to the church. The shrine's name is fitting: *Our Lady of Good Health*.

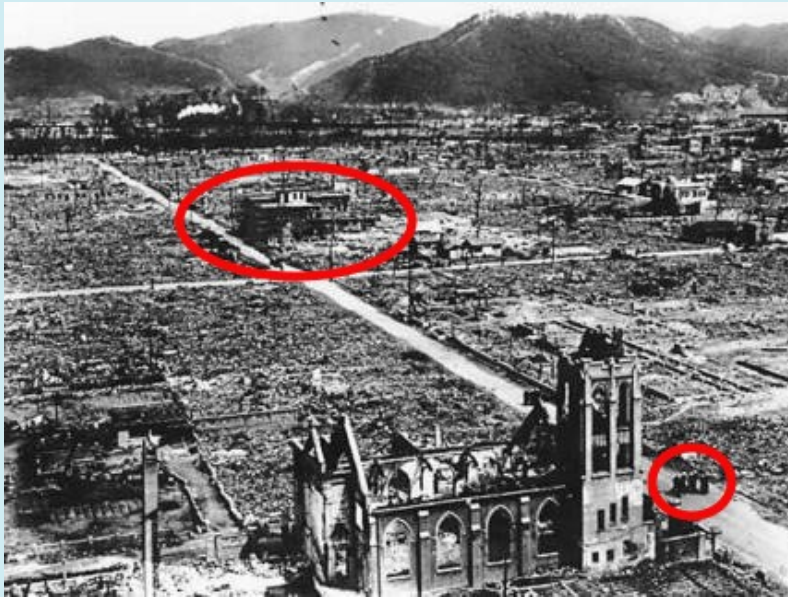
Atomic Fallout Averted

Then there was the protection of a Marian church and priests at Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. You may recognize the name and the infamous date, and you may very well know the inspiring story, which bears repeating: God protected a Catholic church and its consecrated men **even from a nuclear explosion!**

As is evident from the picture below, the church did not survive the explosion entirely intact (notice the group of priests in front of it). The square building a block away was the priests’ residence, which fared somewhat better, but there are **two “protections” that emerge** from an analysis of this catastrophe.

1. The church and rectory actually remained standing while **virtually everything else** within a four-and-a-half mile radius **was obliterated**.
2. The eight Jesuit priests who were within the rectory at the time sustained minor injuries due to the blast and the falling debris, but they suffered *no ill-effects of the radiation* in the aftermath or even during the rest of their long lives.

This was not because the church was out of harm's way. It was just **eight blocks from ground zero!** (The immediate blast area was 4.5 miles, but the effects of the blast were felt as far away as 37 miles.)



In the 200 or so interviews that the German pastor of the parish, Fr. Hubert Schiffer, gave after the incident, he credited their miraculous survival to the fact that **the Rosary was prayed** in the religious house every single day.

He added, as a confirmation, that the priests "lived the message of Fatima." The Marian apparition at Fatima, Portugal, was where the Miracle of the Sun took place in 1917. It very dramatically **featured the sun as a nuclear fireball** that appeared to fall to the earth. And Father believed

that this fact was the source of their protection from radiation.

Our Lady of the Assumption church. Our Lady of Fatima's message.

Mystical and Spiritual Lessons

If the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah and the flood in Noah's time teach us anything, it's that God has been known to **punish sinful people and nations for their wickedness**. By doing so, He calls the rest of humanity to conversion.

Of course, it's not always helpful to interpret natural disasters as divine judgment because **nature has its own rules**. In the case of Indonesia, however, there might be some merit to the designation.

After the disaster, it came to light that **the area hit hardest** by the tsunami on the Indonesian coast was the very "epicenter" of the international sex trafficking industry. Some messages are clear.

The problem is that, in immense catastrophes like these, **the innocent get swept away with the guilty**. But in an indirect way, this could also be a sign of God's severe mercy when society has gone so wrong.

Natural disasters can also **cause people of good will to turn back to Him** or increase their devotion. This is severe mercy, like the "tough love" that parents need to practice with their children at times. Both personal and societal wake up calls are good things, despite the hardships the innocent must endure in the process.

Disasters also remind us, metaphorically, of the protection that only God's grace can provide from spiritual evil, which does more harm than natural disasters. **Our eternal souls** stand no chance against the devil and his minions without God's protection.



Three Churches, Three Signs

These stories are stories of real disasters, not the kind that do a little damage or qualifies as "acts of God" **for insurance purposes**. In these cases, the real act of God was the preservation of churches and people from disasters that literally wiped out everything in their wake.

Our Lady of Victory in Hawaii (2023), Our Lady of Good Health in India (2004), and Our Lady of the Assumption/Fatima in Japan (1945). **Three Marian churches. Three windows of grace.**

Feature



Speaking of churches! If you didn't see last week's email from **Sacred Windows Vignettes**, take a look at the short piece called, "This Church is Perched on the Tip of a Needle."

The church on top of the needle is not a miracle church, as such, but it is an astonishing human endeavor and a real act of faith that dates back to the 900s AD. Would you have been one of those faithful men who hauled stones and building materials **286 feet up a sheer cliff** to build this house of worship? More than a thousand years later we can still appreciate their gift.

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Many blessings to you and your families during the rest of the summer.



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