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Oklahoma earthquake fells Catholic university turret

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Nov. 8, 2011

WASHINGTON -- A turret fell from the main building at St. Gregory's University in Shawnee, Okla., during a rare earthquake the night of Nov. 5.

The 5.6-magnitude quake also damaged the other three turrets that sat atop the 98-year-old building. All of the turrets will have to be taken down, said university president D. Gregory Main.

Classes were canceled Nov. 7, as most of the classrooms at the 500-student school are in that building, Main added. The building also houses the college's library, administrative offices, president's office, and admissions and registrar offices. Classes were to resume Nov. 8.

"We are scrambling to find other places on campus" to conduct classes, Main told Catholic News Service in a Nov. 7 phone interview.

Main was calling from outside the university's cafeteria because the building was closed to protect students and staff from getting injured. "Any of those (turrets) could fall down at any time," Main said.

He added the turrets stand 24 feet in height from the roofline. "And they are masonry construction. There's no reinforcement. That's why it fell," Main said.

The building at the Benedictine-sponsored university had originally been used to house a Benedictine monastery and an art museum. Both now have separate buildings on the campus.

Main said the only other damage sustained by St. Gregory's in the quake were of "a few broken windows, exterior windows when a few (turret) bricks bounced after hitting the ground."

While there was no cost estimate for the damage, Main said he expected it to be low. However, removing the turrets "needs to be started in the next couple of days. I've got to put this building back in service," he said.

In the temblor, a section of highway buckled, and, according to Main, "a few buildings were badly damaged, closer to the epicenter" 20 miles from Shawnee. But St. Gregory's damage, he said, was "the biggest, most visible damage, especially the iconic building that it is."

The quake, which hit at 10:53 p.m. local time, was centered in Sparks, Okla., about 44 miles northeast of Oklahoma City. People as far away as Wisconsin said they could feel the quake. A second, 4.7-magnitude earthquake struck a few hours after the first Nov. 6, with its epicenter about 50 miles east of Oklahoma City, and aftershocks continued through the weekend.

On the East Coast, parts of a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes damaged in a quake that rocked that part of the country Aug. 23 were removed Nov. 3 from atop a New Jersey Catholic hospital. The 30-foot, 15-ton statue has stood on top of Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center since 1949. The quake caused sections of it to shift several inches, resulting in chipping and vertical cracking.

The Camden, N.J., hospital said that since the quake, the statue had been secured with scaffolding while a decision was made on the best way to fix it. Three sections of the statue were brought down to be repaired, and the remaining sections also will be fixed.

In Washington at The Catholic University of America, Marist Hall remains closed because it sustained some structural damage in the August quake. Facilities for the School of Library and Information Science and various academic departments housed at Marist have been temporarily relocated to other buildings.

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