



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

In the Eye of the Storm: Resilient Faith in Puerto Rico



Left: Interior of Maria Madre Parish in the Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao. *Right:* Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao Bishop Luis Miranda Rivera examines the altar in the Santa Rosa de Lima Chapel.

By Rhina Guidos

Water is a blessing and a curse for the island paradise of Puerto Rico. It can take the form of rain that produces the lush landscapes on this U.S. territory, or the form of the soft waves of its idyllic beaches. But in 2017, torrential rains and destructive winds lashed the island during two major back-to-back hurricanes that affect daily life in Puerto Rico to this day.

First came Hurricane Irma. Though it did not hit the island directly on September 7, 2017, it side-swiped the territory with rain and Category 5 winds of 170 to 180 miles per hour that destroyed much of Puerto Rico's infrastructure. Irma tore through roofs, flooded churches, and collapsed chapels where Catholics worshiped. Two weeks later, on

September 20, Hurricane Maria came with even greater force, making landfall as a Category 4 hurricane. Its 155 mile per hour winds uprooted what little Irma had left behind and dealt a death blow to the island's fragile electrical grid.

DIOCESE OF FAJARDO-HUMACAO

"We have some great challenges," says Fr. Robert Medina, vicar of administration at the Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao on the eastern side of Puerto Rico, one of the hardest-hit areas.

Before the hurricanes, the area that now makes up the diocese—the poorest region in Puerto Rico—already faced a host of challenges that had

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Neighbors

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A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers
and Sisters in Christ,

Did you know that Catholic Home Missions supports ministries in dioceses in U.S. territories, in addition to mission dioceses and Eastern Catholic eparchies on the U.S. mainland? In this issue of *Neighbors*, you will see how Catholic Home Missions helps two dioceses in Puerto Rico carry out their mission in the aftermath of natural disasters that

caused wide-scale damage across the island.

In autumn 2017, Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck Puerto Rico within two weeks of each other, killing nearly 3,000 people and destroying infrastructure, homes, churches, and medical facilities. Despite the damage and ensuing migration that these storms caused, the Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao has fostered priestly vocations and covered seminary costs with help from Catholic Home Missions.

The people of Puerto Rico were challenged once again in January 2020, when an earthquake shut down the island's tourist economy, and a third time in March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic reached the island. These subsequent disasters, on the heels of the two hurricanes, exacerbated Puerto Ricans' economic challenges in Fajardo-Humacao as well as in the Archdiocese of San Juan.

The faith of the people, however, is strong, as demonstrated by the volunteers who help in parishes that have been unable to employ staff, by the young men who are responding to God's call to priestly life, and by the elderly Catholics who walk long distances to attend Mass after their nearest parish church closed.

Both dioceses in Puerto Rico are just two examples of the faith and dedication of the Catholics who live in home mission dioceses across the United States. I am thankful for their humble witness, just as I am thankful for the witness of generosity and solidarity that you show by supporting the ongoing work of Catholic Home Missions.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions

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been overlooked over the years, including the inroads made by other faith groups in the region.

Today, just 33% of the population served by the diocese is Catholic. However, blessings followed the decision to erect the new diocese, Fr. Robert says.

"We've had many vocations that have come out of Fajardo-Humacao in recent years," he says.

Helping the diocese serve the dwindling number of remaining Catholics is a step in the right direction. Outside funding, including support from Catholic Home Missions, has helped overcome financial obstacles that some seminarians faced while discerning their vocations—and not a moment too soon. A total of 17 diocesan priests, 8 priests from religious orders, 46 deacons, and 9 seminarians serve Fajardo-Humacao's 93,500 Catholics. One priest on loan from a Haitian diocese serves nine parishes and chapels, the diocese says.

But what the Church cannot rectify are the obstacles Mother Nature has thrown in its path. On January 7, 2020, a magnitude 6.4 earthquake damaged homes and other structures around the island.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March 2020 in Puerto Rico, which was already struggling financially after the previous natural disasters. Officials began shutting down the island, leading dioceses like Fajardo-Humacao down a path of more economic pain. The loss of jobs caused by the pandemic, the suspension of church services, and population flight to the U.S. mainland hindered an economy that was slowly getting back on its feet.

"Things were getting better, but after the pandemic, those who were left and had little to give now have even less to give," says Fr. Robert.

Many Catholics have not been able to return to parishes and missions that were forced to close because their structures were deemed unsafe after so much damage. The island's Catholic population urgently needs to fix some of the most frequented and historically important parishes and chapels on the island, including Fajardo-Humacao's St. James parish, where the church's walls as well as the pastor's living quarters suffered heavy structural damage. A chapel named after the island's patroness, Our Lady of Divine Providence, has not reopened since Hurricane Maria because of damage to the roof, ceiling, and walls. St. Paul parish, attended by about 200 elderly families, also closed because of a major leak during the rainy season. A building that the diocese had acquired and planned to convert into a catechism center is now called "Jurassic Park" because vegetation has overtaken the structure.

However, natural disasters and the pandemic have not been able to break the faith among the island's Catholics.

Exterior of the Sagrada Familia Parish church in Bayamón in the Archdiocese of San Juan.



Many have persevered, including many elderly Catholics whose parishes were damaged but who still walk long distances to participate in Mass and other sacraments at churches that are still open. Even though poverty is widespread and parishes lack the funds to employ full-time staff, parishes are rich with volunteers who are willing to step in.

Wealth comes in a variety of forms, says Fr. Robert. For Fajardo-Humacao, an increase in vocations paints a hopeful future for the Church, and parishioners contribute the extra elbow grease to keep parish life alive. But the diocese still needs a helping hand from outside to continue training lay people in Catholic social doctrine, emphasizing the importance of family, and helping seminarians discern their vocations, in addition to repairing the physical damage to structures.

ARCHDIOCESE OF SAN JUAN

In the larger Archdiocese of San Juan, based in the island's capital, the challenges are magnified. Its 82 archdiocesan priests, 67 priests from religious orders, 160 deacons, and 9 seminarians serve the archdiocese's 143 parishes and 130 chapels. Its population of 651,570 Catholics is the largest faith group on the island.

While more opportunities for employment are found in San Juan than on the rest of the island, the tourism sector, which employed many Puerto Ricans, waned after the capital suffered so much destruction following the 2017 hurricanes, the 2020 earthquake, and ultimately the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most jobs pay \$8.50 per hour, even as the cost of living and housing has skyrocketed. This forces many Puerto Ricans to depend on government assistance to survive. As much as Puerto Ricans love their island, many have made the difficult decision to leave for economic reasons.

After the 2017 hurricanes, the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College in

New York in 2017 estimated the island would lose 14% of its 3.3 million people because of the resulting economic damage and uninhabitable conditions. That estimate predated the economic hurt caused by the pandemic, which cut off tourism to the island and the jobs and other economic benefits it provided.

The archdiocese says about 60% of Catholics in the diocese are experiencing "economic hardship."

As a result, alcoholism, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and school dropout rates are all on the rise, making the mission of the Church on the island more urgent.

The archdiocese says it wants to alleviate some of the pain that has resulted from the "spiritual and moral deserts" that have popped up amid the island's increasingly secularized culture and the challenges arising from economic hardship. The archdiocese's mission became more pressing following disasters that closed some of the Church's sacred spaces, where Catholics and others once found spiritual comfort.

Like the Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao, the Archdiocese of San Juan suffered large-scale structural damage to parish churches and other facilities. The archdiocese's Theological and Pastoral Institute of Puerto Rico, which educates diocesan and parish leaders, has a damaged roof, termites, and broken air conditioning. Some parishes have suffered from an exodus of Catholics heading for the mainland, where prospects for employment and wages are better. Their migration, while understandable, has devastated the coffers at the parishes they left behind.

Following the pandemic, parish collections for the archdiocese dropped 50%. The archdiocese has been trying to keep hard-hit parishes afloat, helping some meet basic needs by paying for utilities, even as the archdiocese, too, struggles to recover financially.

THE BIG PICTURE FOR PUERTO RICO

"Both dioceses face great challenges that cannot be fixed with a single swift action," says Ken Ong, grants specialist with Catholic Home Missions, who visited the Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao and the San Juan archdiocese in 2022. He adds that the "help the communities do receive paves a path toward a better future."

"Some funding has helped the faith stay alive just by keeping open the parishes and chapels that Puerto Ricans frequent," Ken says. "Funding has supported necessities such as salaries for priests and staff at parishes and mission chapels, utility payments to keep the lights on, and training and education for staff and volunteers."

"Pretty much, we're all in this together," Ken says. "We can't fix everything, but we can provide them with help to keep the parishes open."

Catholics on the island have been making a lot of adjustments to maintain an active life of prayer and community, even amid material pain and scarcity.

"Parishes make do with what they have," Ken says. "It has been a struggle."

"They appreciate the generosity of Catholics not on the island who have never forgotten their brothers and sisters living in the U.S. territory."

"It's basically keeping the Catholic faith alive [for] underserved Catholics who have been neglected in a sense," Ken says. "There's not enough staff and not enough to go around."

He says he was surprised to see only small pockets of Catholics in areas that once had been strongholds on the island, which was originally named San Juan after John the Baptist.

The economic aid expresses the solidarity of the Church on the mainland and meets the mission call to support underserved parishes "as best as we can," Ken says. ■



Strengthening the Church at Home

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DID YOU KNOW?

- Catholic Home Missions supports ministry in dioceses not only in the continental United States, but also in U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico.
- Puerto Rico's Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao was created out of territory from two other dioceses in 2008 to better serve Catholics in the far east of the island. Despite economic hardship and devastation caused by natural disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic, the diocese has experienced an increase in priestly vocations since its creation.
- Catholic Home Missions helps poor parishes in the Archdiocese of San Juan with basic needs such as the significant expenses for utilities. Your support of Catholic Home Missions is truly a sign of solidarity that more closely unites Catholics as brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the United States and its territories.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal. iGiveCatholicTogether also accepts contributions to support the Catholic Home Missions program: <https://usccb.givecatholictogether.org/organizations/usccb-catholic-home-missions>

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