

Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago is greeted by a community group Dec. 5 in Punta Santiago, Puerto. The cardinal was on a pastoral visit to Puerto Rico Dec. 3-6 on behalf of Pope Francis. With donations from the Archdiocese of Chicago and Catholic Extension combined, total giving for hurricane relief is now $750,000. Cupich is chancellor of Catholic Extension. (CNS/Rich Kalonick, Catholic Extension)

by Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

San Juan, Puerto Rico — December 11, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

What Chicago Cardinal Blase Cupich learned in visiting and talking to the people of Puerto Rico Dec. 3-6 is that "there's a lot of work to do, a lot of people suffering" nearly three months after Hurricane Maria devastated the island.

In a pastoral visit made on behalf of Pope Francis, the cardinal traveled throughout Puerto Rico, meeting with its bishops, priests and laypeople

The pope had sent the cardinal to the hurricane-battered island to make a visit before Christmas to express his deep concern for the people and reach out in solidarity on his behalf to those who are suffering.

Cupich, who also is chancellor of Catholic Extension, tapped the Chicago-based papal society to assist with his trip.

Making over a dozen stops, the group visited a variety of people and places, including the motherhouse of missionary sisters, an orphanage, and numerous parishes and chapels. They met with the bishops, with scores of pastors, lay leaders and deacons serving the poor.

Catholic Extension has a long history of working with the six dioceses of Puerto Rico, providing about $1 million annually to support church construction and ministry. Since its first assistance to the island in 1908, Catholic Extension's most notable contribution to Puerto Rico has been its support for the construction and repair of 1,400 church buildings.

"In my nearly 10 years at Catholic Extension, one of the aspects of my job that I have appreciated the most is my work with the vibrant Puerto Rican church," said Joe Boland, vice president of mission for Catholic Extension. "What has always set

them apart, I believe, is their joy and their unwavering belief in God's providence, come what may."

This year, Catholic Extension provided an additional $400,000 in immediate support following the hurricanes and is currently fundraising to further help the Puerto Rican church with its post-hurricane rebuilding efforts.

As the group traveled throughout the island, the pain and misery caused by Hurricane Maria were still on full display.

Once-bustling town centers and business districts were shuttered in cities large and small, signaling a massive loss of income and livelihood. Collapsed buildings, flooded homes, and roofless structures abounded. There were barely any stoplights in operation, forcing drivers to engage in a white-knuckle game of "chicken" at nearly every intersection, which snarled traffic.

Throughout the island, many power lines were still down, usually tangled like spaghetti next to thick wood, and concrete poles that were snapped like twigs in Maria's ferocious winds.

More than anything, the group noticed the darkness after sunset. With so many still without electricity, some of the only lights piercing the darkness were from households that could afford the large expense of running a power generator at night.

Boland had last visited Puerto Rico in June to understand how the island's worsening economic recession was impacting the Catholic Church. He said that on that trip, he was struck "that the church in Puerto Rico is so amazingly resolute in spite of the many challenges they were facing. That same impression was solidified on my trip last week with the cardinal to the island."

Boland added, "It is no coincidence that the patroness of Puerto Rico is Our Lady of Divine Providence, who nurtures a firm belief among the faithful that God will continue to provide for their every need. This is the oldest Catholic community in the Western Hemisphere, founded more than 505 years ago, and seemingly no economic crisis or hurricane can wash away their faith and hope for the future."

That was evident when the group visited St. Martin de Porres Chapel, located on top of a mountain near Cidra. This is a thriving faith community, but the hurricane

ripped open the roof of their building space like it was a piece of foil, flooding the parish hall and chapel, and rendering the structure completely useless.

Out front on the gate was a sign advertising Mass times at nearby parishes, and at the bottom of the sign someone had written, "With God, Puerto Rico rises." The note was a religious adaptation of the rallying cry for the island, "Puerto Rico Rises," which is ubiquitously displayed on marquees, banners and billboards across the island.

Down the mountain, the delegation visited Our Lady of Perpetual Help Chapel in a poor neighborhood of Caguas.

Randy Tejada, a 21-year-old man with an infectious smile, is the lay coordinator who takes care of this mission. He and a band of volunteers cut down all the trees and debris that buffeted this small, inner-city chapel, which was built with funds from Catholic Extension.

They have yet to remove the giant palm tree that fell on the adjacent parish hall, also built with Extension funds. The tree crushed the side of the building, destroying the place they stored food and clothing for the poor and where they offered religious education. It is now infested with iguanas and rats.

Yet, Tejada is not giving up. He said that he and his volunteer team would keep plugging along with cleanup; they also have already begun fundraising to help get their beloved church community back on its feet.

Advertisement

On the eastern coast of the island, in Punta Santiago — where Hurricane Maria first hit Puerto Rico and effectively flattened this community with winds that reached nearly 200 miles per hour — Cupich and the rest of the group pulled up to the small Chapel of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

As soon as Cupich got out of the car, the church bells began to ring and church members huddled inside their Catholic Extension-built chapel. It was one of the few buildings in the community left standing.

The pastor, Fr. Jose Colon, offered a passionate message to the cardinal describing all the ways the tiny Catholic mission had helped the community after the storm by feeding people and helping clean the homes of the elderly.

As he concluded, Colon implored Cupich: "Tell the pope that we have seen the fruits of giving of ourselves and that the Lord has blessed us with the cross, but through it all we have experienced the balm of his mercy. We, from this periphery of pain and poverty, ask the pope for his blessing."

Cupich said that many people have the capacity to be resilient, but that in a special way the Puerto Rican Catholic community is "resilient with joy and happiness, and that is something that I am witnessing on this trip."

Boland agreed, "We should all admire the Puerto Rican people for their passion, perseverance and joy, especially in this moment of great difficulty. Indeed, Puerto Rico is a unique and important part of the rich landscape of our diverse American culture."

He added, "Like Catholic Extension's founder, Fr. Francis Clement Kelley, who began sending Extension's support to the Puerto Rico Church exactly 110 years ago, we must embrace Puerto Rican Catholics as our fellow American Catholics. The need continues to be great on the island, and will be for the foreseeable future."

"These are fellow Americans," Cupich said. "Let's not forget that, these are countrymen and we need as a nation to rally around the people who are suffering."

- - -

Catholic Extension is raising funds to support the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico at www.catholicextension.org/PuertoRico.