News
EarthBeat



by Julie Bourbon

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December 21, 2017

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Puerto Rico Archbishop Roberto González at a prayer vigil for Puerto Rico held in a congressional office building Dec. 20. (NCR Photo/Julie Bourbon)

Washington – About two dozen people prayed Dec. 20 in a congressional office building with the archbishop of San Juan de Puerto Rico, who was in the nation's capital seeking legislative assistance and international solidarity with the people of his island home.

Puerto Rico, already in the midst of an economic crisis, is in a halting recovery from the effects of Hurricane Maria, which devastated the small island when it made landfall there September 20.

Archbishop Roberto Octavio González Nieves of San Juan met earlier in the day with Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-Wisconsin) and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) to discuss debt and hurricane relief for Puerto Rico, more than half of whose residents are still without electricity. The archbishop's residence has been without power since Hurricane Irma struck, three weeks before Maria, said González.

"I'm hopeful," said González after the vigil, , before heading to the airport and back home. "I find a genuine desire to be of help and a willingness to work out legislation that enables Puerto Rico to continue on the road to recovery."

The vigil, which was held in the Cannon House Office building was sponsored by Jubilee USA Network, an interfaith alliance of more than 750 local, national, and international faith communities that works to build an inclusive global economy.

Representatives from Catholic Charities USA, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Franciscan Action Network, and the United Church of Christ, among others, spoke at the vigil. Rep. Glenn "G.T." Thompson (R-Pa.) offered some words of prayer, and Rep. John Larson (D-Conn.) was present for part of the vigil but did not speak.

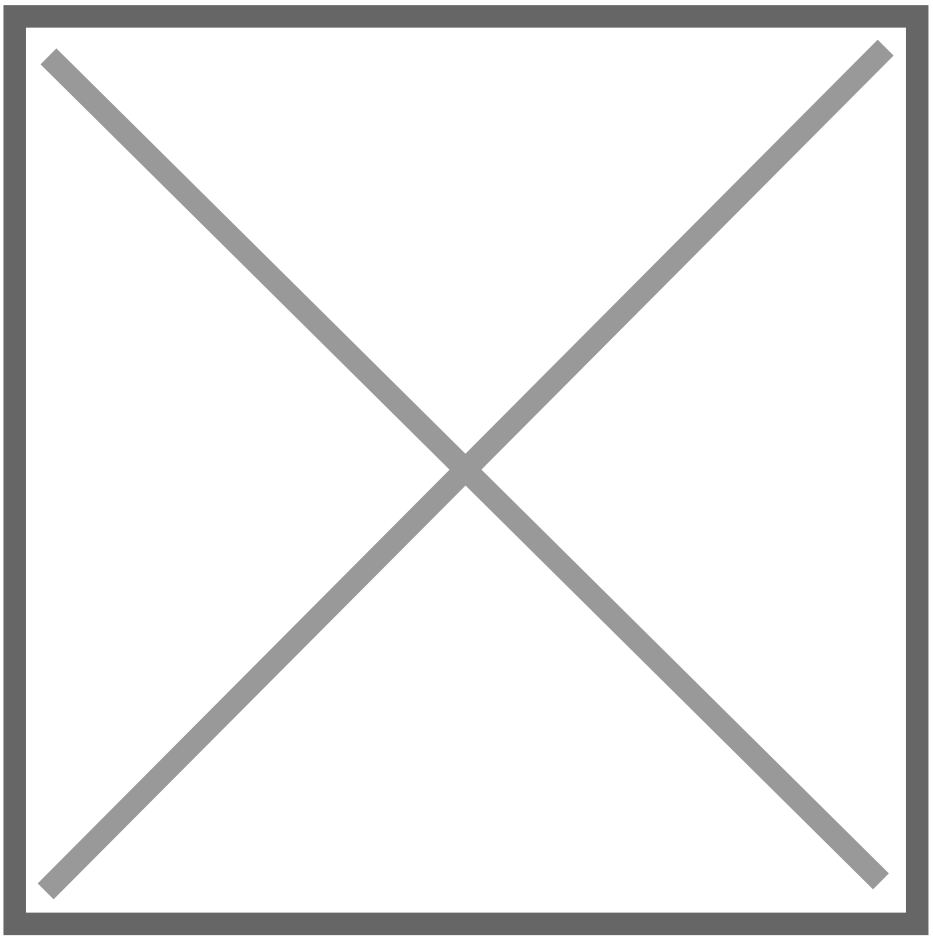
Economic concerns were very much in evidence, as members of Congress were working on the Republican tax overhaul plan in the Capitol building, not far away. On Dec.20, House Republicans introduced an $81 billion natural disaster aid package for recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Florida, and Texas, all of

which were hit hard by hurricanes this past fall. The House passed a $36.5 billion disaster aid package in October.

Eric LeCompte, executive director of Jubilee, articulated several priorities for Puerto Rico, including debt relief and a debt moratorium, a better building provision, and allowing residents of the island full access to Medicare and Medicaid benefits as well as the child tax credit.

Under the Stafford Act, LeCompte said, aid must be sufficient to rebuild infrastructure as it was. Jubilee and others are calling for the better building provision so that the island's already failing infrastructure will be improved.

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Puerto Rico Archbishop Roberto González and Kim Burgo, senior director of disaster operations for Catholic Charities USA (NCR Photo/Julie Bourbon)

“We know in Puerto Rico, if we rebuild what was, when the hurricane comes next year, what is rebuilt will not stand,” LeCompte said. “The reality is the situation was tragic before the storm. What was a tragedy before has become a full blown humanitarian crisis.”

LeCompte, who was part of a delegation that visited the island in November, noted that one in two Puerto Rican children lived in poverty before the storm, and tens of thousands of residents have left the island for mainland United States, including many healthcare professionals. Many still do not have access to clean drinking water.

Recent New York Times reporting estimated the number of dead killed by the storm’s aftermath to be close to 1,000, much higher than the official death toll of 64. Another article predicted a looming wave of foreclosures on homes, thousands of which, LeCompte said, are still waiting for blue FEMA tarps to cover up holes in roofs.

“It’s a really important time to shine the light on Puerto Rico,” he said.

In his remarks, González cited the struggles Puerto Rico was already facing before the storm, including bankruptcy, unemployment, and migration, as well as a history of colonialism, both American and Spanish.

Puerto Rico, he said, “needs a Congress that respects Puerto Rico’s right to reconstruct with dignity [and] stands in solidarity with its right to create economic progress for all.”

González and LeCompte lauded Congress for removing a 20 percent excise tax in the tax overhaul legislation that would have treated Puerto Rico as a foreign trading partner and potentially cost it 250,000 jobs. Both criticized a remaining 12.5 percent tax on intangible assets that could hurt the manufacturing sector.

Kim Burgo, senior director of disaster operations for Catholic Charities USA, returned just days before the vigil from a two-month stay on the island. While she said the experience of living without power and water is “draining on the human spirit,” she expressed admiration for the way Puerto Ricans are carrying on with the business of life as best they can.

The people she encountered are resilient, she said, quipping that resilience is “one of the newer disaster words that’s out there.”

They are relying on hope and faith, Burgo said. Many told her, “It’s going to be OK, because Christmas is coming, and Jesus was born in the darkness just like we are in darkness. And he is the light, and we take that light in.”

[Julie Bourbon is a freelance writer based in Washington.]