News

Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, presents Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves o

Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, presents Archbishop Roberto Gonzalez Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico, center, with Catholic Extension’s 2023 Spirit of Francis Award in New York City Nov. 28. Also pictured are Cardinals Blase Cupich of Chicago, left, and Christophe Pierre, nuncio to the United States. (OSV News photo/courtesy Catholic Extension)



by OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

New York — December 5, 2023

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Archbishop Roberto González Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico, "possesses a passionate heart that beats with a pastor's love for his people, for the people's growth and well-being, and for the future of the people of God in Puerto Rico," said Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension.

The priest made the comments in presenting Catholic Extension's Spirit of Francis Award to the archbishop, who, he said, is "truly a good shepherd leading, nurturing, strengthening and giving his very life every day so that God's people in Puerto Rico may continue to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities, especially among the poorest of the poor on the island."

The award recognizes an individual or group who has made a significant impact on the mission of the Catholic Church in America through service or philanthropy.

González received the award in New York City at Catholic Extension's ninth annual Spirit of Francis Award dinner Nov. 28. The Chicago-based nonprofit bestows the award annually on an individual or group who has significantly impacted the Catholic Church in the U.S. through service or philanthropy.

Five cardinals attended the dinner, including Blase Cupich of Chicago, who is chancellor of Catholic Extension; Wilton Gregory of Washington; Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States; Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston; and Timothy Dolan of New York. Also in attendance were Bishop Luis Miranda Rivera of Fajardo-Humacao, Puerto Rico, and Bishop Angel Luis Rios Matos of Mayaguez, Puerto Rico.

González "has been a vital leader to the Puerto Rican community, shepherding and advocating for Puerto Rico through the long, ongoing recovery following Hurricane Maria, other natural disasters, the pandemic and economic downturn," Catholic Extension said in announcing the award, which is inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis and its founder, Fr. Francis Clement Kelley.

In his remarks, González said it is an honor he is "unworthy to receive."

"I accept it as a call and a grace to renew my vowed service to the Lord, his people and his church," he said, thanking Catholic Extension "for financially and spiritually supporting the church in Puerto Rico since 1905 to the present time."

"Extension has helped repair and rebuild damaged church structures, and helped us secure necessary funding, which we otherwise would not have been able to secure," González said. "This is an extraordinary expression of ecclesial and missionary solidarity and love."

The prelate, who grew up in New York and describes himself as a "child of the Puerto Rican diaspora," has headed the Archdiocese of San Juan since 1999.

The archbishop's reference to 1905 in his remarks is the year Catholic Extension was founded to build up Catholic faith communities in underserved regions, including Puerto Rico.

Since 2017, Hurricane Maria and a series of earthquakes crippled the U.S. island territory's economy and infrastructure, damaging more than 600 facilities, many of which include historical, centuries-old Catholic churches, Catholic schools, and

mission chapels serving the island's most remote communities, across five Puerto Rican dioceses affected from the natural disasters. The majority of damaged Catholic churches and schools are located in San Juan, according to Catholic Extension.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency "was slow" to respond but "the Catholic Church was not," according to Extension. For the past six years, Catholic Extension has organized and led the disaster recovery program for five Catholic dioceses in Puerto Rico, "who collectively seek to rebuild facilities across the archipelago of Puerto Rico, making it perhaps the largest rebuilding project in American Christianity."

To date, $332.2 million of the estimated $400 million in damages "have been obligated by FEMA to the Puerto Rican dioceses," which allows them to "begin the long-awaited reparation of facilities." Currently, 15 projects involving 58 facilities are underway, and in addition Catholic Extension said its recovery team also secured an additional $43 million in a competitive grant program that will enable Catholic schools "to be rebuilt more resiliently to serve as safe shelters during future disasters, which will ultimately save lives."

Advertisement

In an interview before the dinner, Cupich discussed the efforts of Catholic Extension to help Puerto Rico's dioceses rebuild and restore churches and schools, but he emphasized that the Catholic Church is "not about buildings" but "about communities." By giving the faithful "a space where they can gather, a place that they can call home, where children can be educated and the faith passed on and celebrated, we're doing something for not only this generation but future generations," he said.

Cupich added that he has known Archbishop Gonzalez for many years. As a Franciscan, Archbishop Gonzalez "really is steeped in the tradition of St. Francis" and his desire "to serve the poor … to preach the Gospel in a way that allowed the faith of others to be nourished," the cardinal said.

González has a "love of people" and "really cares about human beings so that they flourish in every way possible," he added. "He's just a great human being."

At the dinner, Dolan said the evening of celebrating "the life and ministry of Archbishop González and Catholic Extension's work of rebuilding the church in Puerto Rico" was reminder "of the deep-rooted connections that bind us together as one human family and as a people of faith."

"We gather in this spirit of friendship, reaffirming our commitment to stand in solidarity with one another, even as we care for the poor, the downtrodden, and the vulnerable of our society," he added.

Proceeds from the dinner will benefit the work of Catholic Extension in Puerto Rico.

[Julie Asher, OSV News senior editor, contributed to this story.]