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A drone view shows a bridge submerged by the flooded La Plata River in Toa Baja, Puerto Rico, in the aftermath of Hurricane Ernesto Aug.14, 2024. Archbishop Roberto O. Gonzalez Nieves of San Juan suspended Masses and pastoral activities Aug. 13 and 14 as Ernesto battered Puerto Rico, leaving hundreds of thousands without power. (OSV News/Ricardo Arduengo, Reuters)

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San Juan, Puerto Rico — August 16, 2024
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Prayers and power grid repairs are underway in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as Hurricane Ernesto roared through the Caribbean.

Ernesto struck Puerto Rico late Aug. 13 as a tropical storm, then strengthened into a hurricane the following day as it moved toward Bermuda. Winds in excess of 70 mph battered the island, which in some places saw as much as 9 inches of rain.

Archbishop Roberto O. Gonzalez of San Juan, Puerto Rico, issued an Aug. 13 message, posted to the archdiocese's Facebook page, recommending the temporary suspension of liturgies and parish events for that day and the following.

He assured faithful they would "be able to count on their parish Caritas groups for any emergency or care necessary after the storm passed in their respective communities."

As of Aug. 15, some 700,000 customers were without power after the storm, according to LUMA, the energy company that oversees Puerto Rico's electrical transmission and distribution system.

The island's energy grid remains fragile after multiple impacts from natural disasters in recent years.

In September 2017, Hurricane Maria resulted in the nation's longest blackout, with "almost the entire island … left in the dark," according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Some households were not reconnected to the power grid until almost a year later, and thousands died in the months after the storm as basic services and infrastructure were impaired.

Compounding that damage were a series of earthquakes and aftershocks that began in late December 2019 and continued into 2020, with a magnitude 6.4 earthquake striking southwestern Puerto Rico Jan. 7, 2020.

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Just over 100 miles southeast of Puerto Rico, faithful in the Diocese of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands were breathing a sigh of relief that they had largely been spared serious damage from the storm.

"Thank God we didn’t (incur) any major effects from tropical storm Ernesto," the diocese wrote on its Facebook page Aug. 14.

Ahead of Ernesto, the diocese had reposted on its Facebook page a "hurricane prayer" used in July.

"Save us from all harm, draw us ever closer to you as we confidently seek your protection from the destructive force of all storms which frighten us," read the prayer. "Let every hurricane or natural threat of disaster serve only to blow us ever more securely into your loving, merciful embrace."

In an Aug. 14 Facebook post announcing the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the diocese reiterated the need for ongoing prayer.

"As we go through the hurricane season, let us come together in prayer and seek Mary's intervention for protection and guidance during this challenging time," said the diocese. "Let us unite in faith and ask for Mary's intercession as we navigate through the uncertainties of the upcoming hurricane season."