News
EarthBeat



On Sept. 21, 2024, two groups of young people from nearby Wroclaw, Poland, gather to volunteer to help people affected by disastrous floods in southwestern Poland. The Youth Chaplaincy of the Archdiocese of Wroclaw, under the care of Father Piotr Rozpedowski, is seen in front of St. Nicolas Church in Radochów. The young people reached the needy by bus and 14 cars. They brought gifts collected in parishes and helped with disaster relief. (OSV News/Agnieszka Bugala)

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STRONIE SLASKIE, Poland — September 24, 2024
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Throughout the week of Sept. 15-21, all eyes were fixed on the Oder River in western Poland — one of two biggest rivers in the country, and efforts were underway to save major cities through which the river flows.

But after all it was the inflows — small mountain rivers named Nysa Klodzka, Biala Ladecka, Bóbr and Morawka — that mostly devastated the picturesque tourist region in southwestern Poland amid horrendous floods following the torrential rain of Storm Boris Sept. 13-15.

But as Poland was bracing for the biggest catastrophe since 1997 when the so-called "flood of the millennium" killed 114 people in Poland, Czech Republic and Germany, volunteers and help, including loads of supplies and money from Catholic charities, poured into the region to ease the pain of the people who lost everything.

Based on satellite data, an estimated 20,000 buildings may have been damaged.

"It wasn't a flood, it was a tsunami," residents of flooded villages told OSV News Sept. 21 as they were trying to grasp the scale of damage to their homes, only some of which survived the waves on the weekend of Sept. 14-15.

The biggest and still unestimated damage was caused by the bursting of the dam in Stronie Slaskie. More than a century old, the dam had so far effectively protected areas near the Morawka River from possible flooding. In 1997, it fulfilled its task and saved the town and surrounding villages from complete flooding. On Sept. 15, however, it gave up under the pressure of a torrential flood.

Stornie Slaskie, Ladek Zdrój and surrounding villages were flooded by 53 million cubic feet of water. Since there had been no electricity in many localities for two

days, information did not reach them. People expected the river to overflow but the bursting of the dam was unimaginable.

"Some people believed this dam more than the Lord God," a resident of Stornie Slaskie told OSV News, wishing to remain anonymous.

Yet many say it was God who saved them, even though they lost everything. Terrified and unsure of tomorrow, they hug their children and say with conviction that the most important thing is that they managed to escape, that the walls can be rebuilt, the silt and sludge carted away, but the loss of loved ones is the worst.

"We were sheltering with our family, they live higher up, there was never any water there during the floods. But when the wave arrived here after the dam broke, water was everywhere. We took the children and fled even higher, to the forest," said Natalia, Catholic mother of two, who only wished to give her first name.

On Sept. 21 she pushed a wheelbarrow full of damaged, wet equipment — all that remained from the inside of her house. She recounted that once everything quieted down and the water subsided, she and her husband were afraid to go back down, because they were sure that their house had also been carried away by the current. But the house survived "by some miracle," she said.

"Although the first floor was flooded, the water did not demolish the house. It took everything from us — the wooden playground that my husband built with his own hands for the children, the pool and the garden," she told OSV News.

"But we have a house ... and thank God we are alive," she said.

"What happened here is indescribable," said Father Krzysztof Pelech, pastor of the St. Nicholas Parish in Radochów, located just 7.5 miles from the dam in Stronie Slaskie.

"I have never seen something like this in my life," he told OSV News, still exhausted after days without sleep.

"After a while it ripped out the side door and water collapsed into the house," said Jan from Oldrzychowice Klodzkie, 11 miles from the dam. He only wished to give his first name.

The water that destroyed the houses in Radochów carried parts of them all the way to Oldrzychowice. One resident found his concrete mixer 1.2 miles from his home.

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The landscape of the towns where thousands of tourists spend their summer and winter vacation is unrecognizable — where the forest grew is now a meadow. Electric poles lie along the road like broken matchsticks. The gate from someone's garage has wrapped itself around a surviving tree. Cars that weren't swept away by the current stand in alleys like crushed cans.

Many houses are missing. The water has torn them to pieces, revealing parts of a dining room with a set table and someone's bedroom. But the worst, inhabitants say, is traces of their identity forever gone — photo albums, family porcelain and centuries old memorabilia.
Pelech still had a memory of the flood wave following the dam burst in front of his eyes.

"After Mass, I went to take a look at the water, because I heard that the level had begun to drop. I was standing on the stairs on the side, and then I heard a strange, inconceivable sound, a noise — I can't describe it," he told OSV News.

"And then I saw water, more and more water. ... First the garbage flowed, then the trees, bigger and bigger, and suddenly cars, one after another ... cars in the river! ... I stood like paralyzed, I don't know how long it lasted, I think it was a quarter of an hour at the most," the parish pastor said, adding bitterly: "No one warned us. Not even one siren wailed."

Through tiredness and pain of loss, there are however rays of hope.

"Help is coming from all over Poland. I just got a call from a representative of Legia Warsaw football fans, they want to help the residents of my parish. How did they find out about us?" Pelech asked with a shrug.

Help for the affected is needed now and will be for a long time. In Radochów alone, which has a population of about 600 people, as many as 10 houses must be demolished. More than 80% of residents have been affected.

The Sunday collection in Polish churches Sept. 22 has been entirely dedicated to Caritas Poland for the flood relief. While numbers from the collection are still unknown, Poles already donated millions to flood relief efforts through the Catholic

Church's biggest charity.

The last data published Sept. 20 listed what Caritas has purchased: 110 generators, 150 dehumidifiers (with a further 200 ordered), 1,500 shovels, 1,000 brushes, 300 rakes, 300 buckets, 200 wheelbarrows, 1,100 travel bottles, 1,000 burners and more than 400 pressure washers.

"Fundraisers and relief efforts cannot stop, they have to go on as billions will be needed to rebuild homes, health centers, schools, roads and bridges," Marcin Majewski, spokesman of Caritas Poland, told OSV News.

Reaching flooded villages is not easy. Broken bridges and damaged road surfaces make it difficult to deliver supplies to those in need. Despite this, people are coming from all over Poland.

On Sept. 21, three groups of young people from nearby Wroclaw volunteered to help. The Phileo Youth Community and the Girl Scouts of the Federation of European Scouting from Holy Trinity Parish came to Radochów with Father Jakub Deperas. The Youth Chaplaincy of the Archdiocese of Wroclaw, under the care of Father Piotr Rozpedowski, also rushed to help. The groups consisted of 120 people. The young people each reached the needy by bus and 14 cars. They brought gifts collected in the parishes and helped with disaster relief.

"We can't stay in warm homes when people have lost everything, we have to move and help," said Deperas.

Tomasz Wolny, a Polish television star and devout Catholic, announced in his social media Sept. 20 that he headed to Ladek Zdrój to help flood victims with a group of Franciscan brothers and clerics.

"After cleaning the houses from the massacre mud, now it's time for heavy equipment and it is happening in Ladek right now," he wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter, Sept. 22. "Help will be needed for weeks to come," he said.