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EarthBeat



Volunteers work at a Catholic church in Valencia, Spain, Nov. 2, 2024, following heavy rains that caused massive flooding. Spain's deadliest natural disaster in living memory has left more than 200 people dead with untold numbers still missing. (OSV News/Eva Manez, Reuters)

by OSV News

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Valencia, Spain — November 5, 2024

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As Spain mourns the death of over 200 victims of the biggest peacetime disaster in decades, volunteers poured into the country's Valencia region to give a helping hand in cleaning up and to offer support to the devastated community.

Local parishes and the city's cultural institutions turned into help centers — storing supplies sent from all over Spain and assigning those who came to help to cleaning streets and houses.

"The situation is different in each area and in each town. In Valencia, for example, there are towns that are still cut off from communication, without electricity, telephone connection and without food," Caritas Spain director Father Luis Miguel Rojo Septién told the Spanish Catholic news outlet Alfa y Omega.

"It is very dramatic," he said, adding that "the main task right now is cleaning up the mud left by the flood."

"The priority of some parish Caritas (branches) is locating people who were in a vulnerable situation ... and to be able to support them in whatever is necessary — because now their situation is even more complex," the priest said. "We are also offering psychological support and accompaniment. Sometimes an empathetic look in a prayerful silence is enough to say, 'You have lost everything, but I am here suffering with you.'"

It was a true popular movement the morning of Nov. 2 as 15,000 volunteers from all over the region lined up at Valencia's iconic City of Arts and Sciences, a scientific and cultural complex of buildings, and waited hours for the distribution of what tasks were needed throughout the affected districts and towns.

Pope Francis asked for prayers for Valencia during his Angelus prayer Nov. 3.

"Let us continue to pray for Valencia, and the other communities in Spain, who are suffering so much," the pope said. "What do I do for the people of Valencia?" Francis asked. "Do I pray? Do I offer something? Think about this question," he said.

Archbishop Enrique Benavent of Valencia expressed his gratitude "to each and every one of the dioceses of Spain that have been offering their help since they learned of the tragedy" and to "all Valencians, present in their prayers and ready to help in all

needs," the archdiocesan website said.

Amid horrific news of people being killed by the flood in their homes, cars and garages, including one in a shopping center, the archbishop said: "To all those who are suffering, may they feel in us a friendly hand, a brotherly hand that knows how to feel compassion and be attentive to their needs.

"To the people who are now homeless, who are suffering, we want to express the solidarity and closeness of the Church and, to the extent of our possibilities, accompany them and attend to their needs," the archbishop said.

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A crowd of enraged survivors hurled clots of mud left by flooding at the Spanish royal couple Nov. 3 during their first visit to the center of the tragedy.

But King Felipe VI and Queen Letizia continued to walk through the crowd, comforting people, many of whom said that the mud and anger were not for the royals, but for Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, whom officials rushed from the scene soon after his contingent started to walk the streets of one of the hardest-hit areas, The Associated Press reported.

The queen broke into tears after speaking to several people, including one woman who wept in her arms — videos of which have since gone viral on social media.

Father Salvador Pastor, parish priest of Our Lady of Grace in the Valencian neighborhood of La Torre, said that even before the disaster, it was "a working-class neighborhood with families living in very basic conditions, so the consequences are going to be dramatic."

His parish church was completely flooded inside with 50 feet of water Oct. 28 and 29, leaving the premises of the church and the sacristy covered with a thick layer of mud.

"The door of the church collapsed when vehicles were piled up by the force of the water," the priest said, adding that the consequences of the flood are simply "devastating."

But Pastor isn't losing hope as his parish was turned into a help center merely a week later.

The parish community worked against the clock, organizing groups of volunteers to turn the place into a strategic point for distributing food and supplies in coordination with the City Council and the firefighters.

The church turned quickly into a circuit of tables set up with clothes of all sizes, coats, diapers, wipes, sandwiches, milk and medicines, Alfa y Omega reported.

Young people also rushed to the scene, accompanied by their pastors, like 35 volunteers from a parish in Getafe, who arrived in Valencia "to be there and to embrace."

Father Eliert Jerez, vicar of Villaviciosa de Odón's parish church, said, "It was a wish of the young people, who asked to come."

"We took the bull by the horns and asked the people for help, and the people have come out in full force," he said. "We have filled several trucks and vans, eight vehicles in total, with food, tools, toiletries, disinfectants and water pumps, and we arrived in the area on Sunday morning," he added, describing supplies worth $27,000 that they brought along, as reported by Alfa y Omega.

Images of several priests and religious sisters with their mud-stained habits and cassocks went viral on social media over the Nov. 2-3 weekend.

Father Federico Ferrando and Sister Fons shoveled mud for hours, accompanied by young people from different movements and parishes. Ferrando comes from Paiporta and now serves as assistant to the parish in Valencia. "His family has been saved, although he has lost everything. Shovel in hand, he has returned to his neighborhood to clean and comfort those who need it," Alfa y Omega said in its report.

Meanwhile, the parish priest of another Paiporta church, St. George, Father Gustavo Riveiro, showed an image of Christ recovered from the flooded church premises.

"His image with his face covered in mud" reminds all of hundreds of "deaths in Paiporta, the number of missing people that cannot yet be counted, and their families, which is the real tragedy," the parish priest said.