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Debris is seen Sept. 29, 2024, where homes were destroyed after Hurricane Helene passed through the Florida Panhandle, severely impacting the community of Keaton Beach. (OSV News photo/Octavio Jones, Reuters)

Gina Christian

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Catholics in the U.S. offered steadfast support to those impacted by natural disasters throughout 2024, Archbishop Nelson J. Pérez of Philadelphia told OSV News.

The archbishop, who chairs the board of directors for Catholic Relief Services, reflected on the impact of Catholics' assistance as communities around the world grappled with "devastating natural disasters" that included "landslides in Ethiopia, Hurricane Beryl in the Caribbean, and six successive typhoons in Southeast Asia."

CRS — the official overseas relief and development agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S. — serves some 255 million in 122 countries, and is a member of Caritas Internationalis, the Catholic Church's global humanitarian aid network.

"Time and time again, when crises strike, the faithful in the U.S. (respond) with unwavering solidarity through prayer, action, and generous giving," said Pérez. "They put their faith in action by following Christ's commandment to love one another as He loves us."

As of Nov. 1, the past year saw at least 24 confirmed "weather/climate disaster events with losses exceeding $1 billion each" in the U.S. alone, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Among the U.S. disasters tracked by NOAA were "17 severe storm events, 4 tropical cyclone events, 1 wildfire event, and 2 winter storm events," according to the agency's website. "Overall, these events resulted in the deaths of 418 people and had significant economic effects on the areas impacted."



A drone view Sept. 29, 2024, shows rescue personnel working in a flooded area in Asheville, N.C., following the passing of Tropical Storm Helene. The storm made landfall at 11:10 p.m. (Eastern time) Sept. 27 in Florida's Big Bend as a Category 4

hurricane and was downgraded to a tropical storm the next morning. (OSV News/Marco Bello, Reuters)

In report after report, scientists have concluded climate change is supercharging hurricanes and other tropical storms as they absorb more heat from warmer ocean waters, providing fuel for heavier rainfall and higher storm surge once they make landfall. Rising temperatures are also connected to more prolonged heatwaves and droughts, and feeding conditions that result in larger, more destructive wildfires.

Human activity, primarily burning fossil fuels (coal, oil, gas), is the primary driver of climate change. Catholic and other faith leaders have pointed persistently to the disproportionate harm the impacts of rising temperatures have on poor and marginalized communities, both in the U.S. and abroad.

In some cases, disasters struck almost back-to-back as communities were still reeling from a previous crisis. Hurricanes Helene and Milton, which made landfall in late September and October respectively, pounded the nation's Southeast just days apart. Milton spawned 15 tornadoes that ravaged Florida. Western North Carolina saw incredible devastation as flooding from Helene swept away entire mountain communities, taking more than 100 lives.

In response, Catholic Charities USA — the official domestic relief agency of the Catholic Church in the U.S. and a member of Caritas Internationalis — launched dedicated disaster relief donation campaigns for the storms.

Along with monetary aid, Catholics have provided material and spiritual assistance to those whose homes and livelihoods were swept away by a single stroke of nature.

Related: As climate intensifies weather disasters, Catholic Charities deploys for recovery

Catholic faithful have also turned to prayer in sustaining all those afflicted by natural disasters.

Ahead of Ernesto, the Diocese of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands reposted on its Facebook page a "hurricane prayer" used in July as Hurricane Beryl approached.

- The Los Angeles River in Studio City, Calif., Feb. 5, 2024, is pictured during heavy rains.

The Los Angeles River in Studio City, Calif., Feb. 5, 2024, is pictured during heavy rains. One of the wettest storms in Southern California history unleashed at least 475 mudslides in the Los Angeles area after dumping more than half the amount of rainfall the city typically gets in a season in just two days, and officials warned Feb. 6 that the threat was not over yet. (OSV News/Reuters/Aude Guerrucci)

- Scattered debris and houses with missing roofs are seen in a drone photograph July 2, 2

  Scattered debris and houses with missing roofs are seen in a drone photograph July 2, 2024, after Hurricane Beryl passed the island of Petite Martinique, Grenada. (OSV News photo/Arthur Daniel, Reuters)

- Smoke and flames rise from Park Fire burning near Chico, Calif., July 25.

  Smoke and flames rise from Park Fire burning near Chico, Calif., July 25. A man has been charged with arson, accused of pushing a burning car into a ravine near the fire. (OSV News/Reuters/Fred Greaves)

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A man walks on the dirt and sand foundation of Harbor Road in Stony Brook, N.Y., Aug. 19, 2024, after it collapsed earlier in the day when torrential rain caused a dam beneath the road to burst. The storm unleashed flash floods in parts of Long Island, N.Y., and southwestern Connecticut, where two women were found dead after they were swept away from their vehicles. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

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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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without power. (OSV News photo/Ricardo Arduengo, Reuters)

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Displaced residents take shelter from Hurricane Helene at Leon High School near downtown Tallahassee, Fla., Sept. 26, 2024. (OSV News/Octavio Jones, Reuters)

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A drone view shows debris surrounding some homes left standing in Horseshoe Beach, Fla., Sept. 28, 2024, after Hurricane Helene swept through the area. Helene caused at least 52 deaths and billions of dollars of destruction across a wide swath of the southeastern U.S. as it raced through, and more than 3 million customers went into the weekend without any power and amid a continued threat of flooding. (OSV News/Marco Bello, Reuters)

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Floodwaters surround buildings Sept. 27 in Newport, Tennessee, in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene. (OSV News/Curtis Hance/H&H Vapors via Reuters)

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Debris is seen Sept. 29 where homes were destroyed after Hurricane Helene passed through the Florida Panhandle, severely impacting the community in Keaton Beach. (OSV News/Reuters/Octavio Jones)

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  A woman stands where the Jet Broadcasting radio station once stood in Erwin, Tennessee, Sept. 29. The staton's entire building was swept away in the flood waters caused by Hurricane Helene. (OSV News/USA TODAY NETWORK via Reuters/The Knoxville News-Sentinel/Saul Young)

- A drone view shows a home destroyed by a tornado as Hurricane Milton approaches Fort

  A drone view shows a home destroyed by a tornado as Hurricane Milton approaches Fort Myers, Fla., Oct. 9, 2024. (OSV News photo/Ricardo Arduengo, Reuters)

- Asheville, N.C., residents residents line up for gasoline at a gas station in Asheville Sept.

  Asheville, N.C., residents residents line up for gasoline at a gas station in Asheville Sept. 29, 2024. The remnants of Tropical Storm Helene caused widespread flooding, downed trees and power outages in western North Carolina. The storm made landfall the night of Sept. 27 in Florida's Big Bend region as a Category 4 hurricane and was downgraded to a tropical storm the next morning. (OSV News photo/Travis Long, The News & Observer handout via Reuters)

- Charles English and his daughter Sabra, walk through his badly flooded home in Barnard

  Charles English and his daughter Sabra, walk through his badly flooded home in Barnardsville, N.C., Oct. 2, 2024, as they retrieve belongings after the remnants of Hurricane Helene hit the town. The storm made landfall the night of Sept. 26 in Florida's Big Bend region as a Category 4 hurricane and was downgraded to a tropical storm the next morning. (OSV News photo/Jonathan Drake, Reuters)

- A destroyed house with a car under it in Chimney Rock, N.C., is seen Sept. 29, 2024, afte

  A destroyed house with a car under it in Chimney Rock, N.C., is seen Sept. 29, 2024, after the remnants of Hurricane Helene hit the town. The storm made landfall on Sept. 26 in Florida's Big Bend region as a Category 4 hurricane and was downgraded to a tropical storm the next morning. (OSV News photo/Khadejeh Nikouyeh, The Charlotte Observer handout via Reuters)

- The bishop, wearing habit, shakes hands with a woman. The two stand amid large stockp

  Charlotte Bishop Michael Martin talks with a volunteer Oct. 4, 2024, at Immaculata Catholic School in Hendersonville, N.C. The school, although suffering flood damage and power loss, has become a major aid distribution site for the area in the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene. Martin, who was ordained bishop of Charlotte only four months ago, traveled the region to survey the damage, bring aid supplies and speak to aid volunteers, and offer spiritual comfort. Nearly half of the parishes in the Diocese of Charlotte are located within the federal emergency disaster zone of western North Carolina. (OSV News/Gabriel Swinney for the Catholic News Herald)

- Marie Cook reacts to the damage to her home in Wellington, Fla., Oct. 10, 2024, after a t

  Marie Cook reacts to the damage to her home in Wellington, Fla., Oct. 10, 2024, after a tornado formed by Hurricane Milton touched down striking homes in the neighborhood and surrounding area. (OSV News photo/Bill Ingram/Palm Beach Post/USA Today Network via Reuters)

In Ketchikan, Alaska, parishioners and staff of Holy Name Parish rallied around a family displaced by a deadly Aug. 25 landslide that killed one and ruined several homes.

With the approval of Holy Name pastor Fr. Armand Dice, staff, parishioners and local members of the Knights of Columbus moved to temporarily house a family with six small children in the church's parish hall, according to the North Star Catholic, the newspaper of the Archdiocese of Anchorage-Juneau.

When Tropical Storm (and later Hurricane) Ernesto struck Puerto Rico in August — endangering the island's already fragile energy grid, which has been hammered by numerous disasters — San Juan Archbishop Roberto O. Gonzalez assured Catholics 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."

Related: Puerto Rico parish aims to be climate resilience hub to respond to extreme storms

Catholics also helped each other endure devastating wildfires in the U.S. and abroad.

The South Fork and Salt fires in New Mexico, which broke out June 17, took lives, homes, and caused enormous pain to the people who lived there. But Catholics in the state's city of Roswell, for instance, responded by providing temporary accommodations, basic necessities and compassionate support.

The San Juan Bautista (St. John the Baptist) Parish's adjacent Franciscan Center opened its doors to fire victims, offering showers and serving as a hub for aid collection. The generous outpouring was so extensive the center had to stop accepting clothing donations, and put out a plea for containers to organize existing drop-offs.

In September, the bishops of Bolivia urged their country’s authorities to act quickly in staving off irreparable harm to people and the environment as raging wildfires continue to devastate millions of acres. They warned the country is suffering from "an ecological disaster caused by human hands" that demands “a prompt response."

As the Christmas season marked the end of 2024 and the approach of the New Year, Pérez, the Philadelphia archbishop, prayed that not only would Christ's "peace and joy fill every heart and home," but that the "light of Christ inspire us all to continue answering His call to serve and to love."

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