Beautiful Islands Struggle Financially

BY BETH GRIFFIN

Tourists are readily drawn to the lush, tropical beauty of the U.S. Virgin Islands in the Caribbean Sea. But the people who live there year-round also experience poverty related to limited employment, scant educational opportunities, and the high cost of living. “It’s a visual paradise, as long as you don’t make a left turn when you should have taken a right,” says Jerome (Jerry) Esterson, director of finance for the Diocese of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands.

The diocese covers the four inhabited islands in the U.S. Virgin Islands and includes more than 30,000 Catholics among a population of 109,000. Despite the challenges of geography and economics, the expression of faith in the diocese is vibrant.

The Diocese of St. Thomas, established in 1977, receives grant monies from Catholic Home Missions to help it minister to Catholics associated with eight parishes and two missions on the three largest islands. It’s an example of how a very small Catholic presence can make a significant impact on a large area.

Redemptorist Fr. Patrick Lynch has served the diocese for 10 years, following assignments in Annapolis, Maryland, and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He says, “There are a lot of nice, very devout people here. The culture is simpler, more laid-back, and the attitudes are down-to-earth. Everything is on a much smaller scale.”

That includes the economy, he says, because “the economic levels are not as high as in the States.” The islands display the classic features of both rural and urban poverty. In the Virgin Islands, the primary jobs are related to tourism and government. Tourism lags when the national economy declines, and seasonal employment in the hospitality business does not pay well. Many people work two jobs to make ends meet. Travel to and among the islands happens by plane or boat, which raises the cost of consumer products and makes it expensive for job-seekers and church workers to get to where they are needed.

Until recently, a large petroleum refinery contributed 20% of the Virgin Islands’ gross domestic product. The February 2012 closing of the Hovensa refinery had a tremendous impact on the economy. More than 2,000 well-paying refinery jobs were lost, and hundreds of other people face unemployment because their jobs served refinery employees. “The jobs are gone. There’s been a very depressing domino effect, which we’re seeing even in our Catholic schools,” Fr. Lynch says.

In the best of times, the Catholic Church social service network is a beacon, but with the dramatic increase in unemployment...

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FROM THE CHAIRMAN

Dear Friends,

As newly appointed chairman for the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions (CHM), I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. I have been honored to serve on this subcommittee for the past three years. Since my very first meeting, I have been so deeply impressed with the generous financial support given by parishes across the country, enabling us to meet the basic spiritual and operational needs of our 85 beneficiary dioceses.

Prior to ordination as a bishop, I served as a pastor in a large parish in a neighboring archdiocese. Although as a parish priest I knew the parish was in the custom of supporting Catholic Home Missions by taking up a yearly collection, I knew little of the extent of influence and blessing that this collection has on nearly 45% of the dioceses in the United States. Once appointed bishop of Superior, I became painfully aware that the parish budget and staff that I was accustomed to administering more than doubled the operations of the entire diocese I now serve. What I had experienced earlier as a pastor was soon to be understood as a luxury—one that I had taken for granted—and a manner of daily operating that not all shared.

All the more today I appreciate the generous and steady support that our home mission dioceses receive from so many of our faithful Catholics each year. Many of the services and programs that CHM offers by way of grants from collected funds would not be possible otherwise. As you will read in this newsletter, a quote given by Bishop Bevard beautifully expresses the gratitude of all those who benefit from this essential collection. As the bishop of the Diocese of St. Thomas says, “Through the tireless efforts of our priests, deacons, religious, and laity, we are caring for the spiritual and temporal needs of our people. Our parishioners are church-oriented and generous with what they have, and I am grateful that we can count on Catholic Home Missions to help us.”

It is my hope, as well as that of my brother bishops who also serve on the Catholic Home Missions subcommittee, to do all I can to see that the generous support received from you and from all our parishes is put to the intended use of our struggling dioceses. It is also my hope to raise an awareness of this all-important charitable work, especially among those who, perhaps like I was, are unfamiliar with the excellent care offered by Catholic Home Missions.

And now I offer my sincere gratitude for your understanding and participation, with every good wish and blessing in Jesus Christ.

Bishop Peter F. Christensen
Diocese of Superior

“Our willingness and ability to serve all those in need gives us a major role in providing social services to the poor. Quite frankly, we are the only organization in the islands capable of [undertaking] a lot of this work,” Jerry says. “We’re carrying on the 2,000-year-old mission of the Church and demonstrating our love for neighbor. You don’t have to be Catholic to benefit from our Catholic institutions.”

The diocesan Catholic Charities program operates homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and counseling and referral services for individuals with mental illnesses. Funding cuts from government and other secular sources have challenged the diocese’s ability to meet a growing need.

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The Virgin Islands are an unincorporated territory of the United States, purchased from Denmark in 1917.

The territory consists of four main islands—St. Thomas, St. Croix, St. John, and Water Island—as well as several dozen smaller islands.

The population is approximately 80% black, with many Islanders tracing their ancestry to enslaved Africans.

Christian denominations active today, such as Moravians, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Methodists, reflect the faith of the original settlers. The diocese works collaboratively with Protestant churches as part of an Interfaith Coalition.

The Diocese of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands has 12 active priests and one retired bishop, who work in eight churches and two chapels. Nine of the active priests are diocesan and three are Redemptorists. The Redemptorists have served St. Thomas since the middle of the 19th century.

There are at least 30,000 registered Catholics out of a total population of 109,000. There are an estimated 20,000 additional undocumented workers who are Catholics.

Religious sisters from many congregations are present in the diocese. They include the Missionaries of Charity, Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, West Indian Franciscans, and Dominican Sisters of the Immaculate Conception.

The only religious brother, a member of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, fills many roles, including high school science teacher and webmaster for the diocese and three of the parishes.

Twenty-four permanent deacons serve the diocese. Five seminarians are preparing for ordination at various locations in the United States.
In this issue . . .

The Diocese of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands, located in the Caribbean, faces its challenges with help from the Catholic Home Missions. Look inside to learn what faith life is like in this diocese that encompasses four islands.

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Your generosity to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal supports essential ministries in poor dioceses across the United States and its territories. THANK YOU for being part of our efforts to strengthen the Church at home.