



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Spreading the Gospel in Puerto Rico



People gather for Mass as part of the celebration of the National Day of Our Lady of Divine Providence at Palacio de los Deportes de Mayagüez.

By Beth Griffin

Puerto Rico is a beautiful Caribbean island territory blessed with an abundance of priestly vocations to serve its mostly Catholic population. It is also challenged by widespread, extreme poverty, a crippling outbreak of the Zika virus, and a growing indifference to the practice of the faith.

Catholic Home Missions is an ardent supporter of the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico and provides substantial grant assistance to five of its six dioceses. Funds from Catholic Home Missions support the neediest dioceses and help them sustain pastoral, youth, catechetical, and spiritual formation programs, as well as caring for the sick.

The strengths and concerns of the funded dioceses are described in detail in this newsletter, but all share the same economic and social challenges. Puerto Rico, an American territory, went into an economic slump during the US recession and has not recovered. The island's government has been unable to make

timely payments on more than \$70 billion in debt, and its finances are being monitored by a federal oversight board.

The bleak economy has driven migration to the United States and other countries in the Caribbean. The sad result is a decrease in population and increased poverty for those who remain. More than 40 percent of the population lives below the federal poverty line.

Although Catholicism is the primary religion in Puerto Rico and the vast majority of the people are baptized into the faith, fewer identify themselves as Catholics. Church attendance has dropped to ten percent of registered Catholics in some areas. Diocesan officials attribute this to a diminished understanding of what it means to be Catholic; indifference to any faith; growing interest in other religions; and the prevalence of a secularist, consumerist society that discounts Christian values.

Despite extraordinarily slim diocesan budgets, the bishops of Puerto Rico are devoting considerable energy and resources to sustaining, strengthening, and spreading the faith.

MAYAGÜEZ

The Diocese of Mayagüez on the western side of Puerto Rico includes 14 towns spread over 630 square miles. Unemployment in the urban areas is 15 percent, and it is higher in the rural regions where agriculture is no longer as dominant as it once was. Mayagüez has the largest percentage of poor and elderly on the island.

"The jobs infrastructure is unstable, the government is collapsing and many towns have more deaths than births," according to Fr. Jose

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Neighbors

FALL 2016

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In his Jubilee Audience on works of mercy, Pope Francis shared with us that, “What

makes mercy come alive is its constant dynamism in order to go and meet those in need and the necessities of those in spiritual and material hardship” (June 20, 2016).

As you will see in this newsletter, those living in Puerto Rico are faced with very real spiritual and material hardships. In the face of challenges, including poverty, disease, and low church attendance, the dioceses on this island are striving to be beacons of light and mercy to the faithful there.

Your contributions to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal give the dioceses of Puerto Rico, and others like them, strength to continue representing the merciful face of Christ. As you will read, many different ministries, such as the formation of seminarians, rely on your support to this appeal.

Thank you for your continued support through your contributions and especially through your prayers. With your help those who struggle in our mission dioceses can experience the healing power of mercy.

May God bless you and your loved ones abundantly.

In the Heart of Christ,

Most Reverend Paul D. Etienne, DD, STL
Archbishop of Anchorage

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Aponte, SJ, the diocesan chancellor. In the parish where he serves, abandoned homes are daily reminders that the younger generation has moved out of the area and off the island in search of work, leaving elderly parents to struggle with the high cost of medicine and utilities. More than two-thirds of the families in the diocese receive food assistance.

There are 30 parishes and more than 155 chapels in the diocese. “Most parishes are losing contributions because the offering has become very limited and funds are scarce,” Fr. Aponte says. The strongest parishes are those with stable families, he says. Nevertheless, although 80 percent of the people in the diocese are Catholic, only about 10 percent are active. The diocese is challenged to reach out to those who are inactive.

Priestly formation and the promotion of vocations are the highest priorities of the diocese and Bishop Alvaro Corrada del Rio, SJ, says Fr. Aponte. “We want our seminarians to receive a well-rounded education in matters of the Catholic faith, especially in areas pertaining to theology, to be beacons of the light and truth of the Word of God in today’s secular world,” he explains. There are 13 seminarians studying in Puerto Rico, Boston, and Spain. Throughout the diocese, there are 42 active diocesan priests, 27 active religious priests, 25 deacons, and 140 women and men religious. Volunteers serve in parish administration and staff small chapels in different communities.

“Even though we have a lot of challenges, people have a sense of belonging to the church that incorporates faith and culture. There’s a sense of identity and community. We can nourish it by helping people see that their lives matter for the life of the church,” Fr. Aponte says.

“Some people go to church like they go to the gas station: they get what they need and then leave. Our challenge is to connect them to something larger



The people of Hormingueiros in the Diocese of Mayagüez gather outside for their diocesan Lent mission.

and transcendent that has significance in their daily lives,” he says.

FAJARDO-HUMACAO

The young diocese was established in 2008 in the northeast part of the island. Its 22 parishes serve 295,000 people from ten towns in an area whose population is roughly one-third Catholic. There are 28 diocesan priests, 5 religious priests, 28 deacons, and 37 women and men religious.

Finance Administrator Deacon Hector Gonzalez Rubio says local poverty has increased in the past few years, making Catholic Home Missions funds even more crucial to the diocesan operation. “We are able to run our evangelization and pastoral programs because of the help we get from Catholic Home Missions,” he says.

Family catechesis is the primary program for evangelization “and our main hope for the future,” according to Deacon Gonzalez. The instruction includes the entire family and includes catechesis on the Mass, sacraments, and the Bible.

“Families who participate together respond more enthusiastically than if the class is only for the children,” he says.

In addition, youth ministry programs promote “an encounter with the living Christ and encourage participation in liturgy and the life of the parish,” the deacon says.

Bishop Eusebio Ramos Morales and his staff have prioritized pastoral

planning and the formation of religion teachers and lay ministers as areas of primary concern. Deacon Gonzalez says small steps are being taken to strengthen the faith in the diocese. Since the Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao was formed, one new parish has opened. Deacon Gonzalez says it is a hopeful sign for the Catholic Church.

CAGUAS

Caguas is one of the poorest dioceses in Puerto Rico, yet has an abundance of vocations. The diocese has 34 parishes and 200 missions spread among 14 municipalities on the east side of the



A statue of Our Lady of Divine Providence, Patroness of Puerto Rico, at the celebration of the National Day of Our Lady of Divine Providence at Palacio de los Deportes de Mayagüez.

island. They are served by 49 diocesan priests, 27 religious priests, 87 deacons, and 110 men and women religious. Only about 14 percent of the identified Catholics attend Sunday Mass regularly, although 70 percent of the population is Catholic. There is a tremendous opportunity for evangelization.

Under Diocesan Administrator Fr. Antonio Cartagena Veguilla, Caguas concentrates its efforts on seminary formation. There are ten seminarians studying in five seminaries outside the diocese.

The Catholic Church in Caguas is also reaching out to strengthen the spiritual life and participation of youth. Programs include a massive three-day retreat during Advent that draws more

than 600 people and a weekend-long training session for youth leaders preparing to help their contemporaries observe Lent and celebrate Easter. The Lenten program culminates with a Palm Sunday youth convocation.

ARECIBO

The Diocese of Arecibo, covering Puerto Rico's northern mountains and coastal plain, is investing in its seminarians and in religious education for children, youth, and young adults. The six seminarians study in Pamplona, Spain, and there are ten pre-seminary students at a program within the diocese. Although having the seminarians at a distance is challenging, Bishop Daniel Fernandez Torres finds that the students who complete the program are well-prepared and mature in their faith.

Arecibo has 59 parishes and 241 missions served by 112 diocesan, religious, and international priests, 34 deacons, and more than 175 women and men religious.

PONCE

In the south of Puerto Rico, the Diocese of Ponce uses radio, television, and internet as tools in its evangelization program. Two women religious and 27 volunteers reach 50,000 families in the diocese and across the island. They use email and social media and produce 20 radio programs that air on 13 stations in their mission to "Communicate the Truth."

Bishop Ruben Gonzalez Medina leads a diocese that includes 43 parishes and 248 missions served by 99 diocesan and religious priests, 97 deacons, and more than 250 women and men religious. There are eight seminarians preparing for ordination.

Catholic Home Missions is proud to provide significant support for these five dioceses that struggle with disproportionately large challenges in their important ministries.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Puerto Rico is a US territory that was ceded by Spain in 1898 after the Spanish-American War.
- Puerto Rico officially became a US Commonwealth in 1952.
- Puerto Ricans are considered natural-born citizens of the United States.
- The island is 3,515 square miles, which is larger than Delaware but smaller than Connecticut.
- Puerto Rico imports almost 85 percent of the products used on the island.
- The economy of the island depends on manufacturing and the service industries, including tourism.



The diocesan Lent mission at Mayagüez town square.



The faithful process through the streets of Hormigueros for a diocesan pilgrimage.



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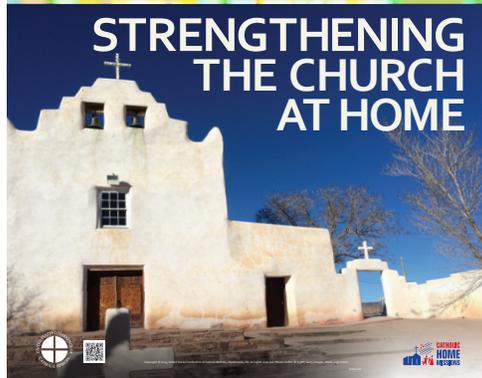
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READ ABOUT HOW THE Church in Puerto Rico is sustaining, strengthening, and spreading the faith in the face of many challenges.



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.

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