By Beth Griffin

The brilliant blue skies and white sandy beaches of the U.S. Virgin Islands are postcard-perfect and generally attract a steady stream of sun-loving tourists. Tourism is the main industry on the islands of the tropical Caribbean territory. But two crippling hurricanes in 2017, along with the hospitality business de facto shutdown due to COVID-19, have strained personal, governmental, and church resources to their limits.

In the best of times, the people of the Virgin Islands live in considerable financial insecurity because of limited jobs, scant economic opportunities, and the high cost of basic necessities, according to Warren Bush, the chief financial officer for the Diocese of St. Thomas. "The economy is a complex structure built on tourism and reliant on small businesses. There is no large industry, and fewer than 2% of the jobs are in manufacturing," he says.

The pandemic has had a "catastrophic impact" on the islands, said Warren, and created the proverbial "perfect storm" in terms of the destructive impact on the diocese. "There have been no significant cruise ship dockings since March, air travel is restricted, jobs have been lost, and shops have closed. Safety restrictions imposed by the government resulted in restricted access to the churches. As a result, parish contributions dropped," Warren says. Although parishes have reopened, attendance is limited, and offertory revenues are insufficient to address expenses.

The Diocese of St. Thomas was established in 1977. It receives grant monies from Catholic Home Missions to help it minister to Catholics in eight parishes and three missions on the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John.

St. Thomas's recently retired bishop Herbert A. Bevard* says that without Catholic Home Missions funds, the diocese would cease to exist. He explains that the CHM grant is used for vital day-to-day operational expenses, not programs that could be trimmed or eliminated if money were not available.

"It would be a terrible thing if we didn’t have Catholic Home Missions at our back and at our side as we strive to be a good, vibrant, life-giving church," Bishop Bevard says.

*Pope Francis accepted Bishop Bevard’s resignation for health reasons on September 18, 2020 and named Father Jerome Feudjio as Bishop of Saint Thomas on March 2, 2021.
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we begin the year 2021, please be assured of my prayers for your health and well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted our lives in ways unimaginable to us just last year about this time. We pray for the hundreds of thousands who have died of the illness in our country, and for their grieving families and friends. Additionally, we pray for the poor, vulnerable, and unemployed who have been most affected by isolation and loss of income.

While we pray for a quick end to the pandemic and for the success of vaccines in stopping the spread of the COVID virus, we know that the effects of the pandemic and the closure of churches, schools, businesses, and public gathering places will continue for some time. It is no different in our Catholic Home Mission dioceses. As such, I ask you to make every effort to support this year’s Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

In this issue of Neighbors, it is my pleasure to introduce you to the Diocese of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, a territory consisting of three main islands in the Caribbean (St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas). Two hurricanes in 2017 and the travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have profoundly affected the U.S. Virgin Islands’ already fragile local tourism-driven economy. With crucial support from Catholic Home Missions, however, the Diocese of St. Thomas continues to meet the needs of its parishioners in eight parishes and three missions, the children in the diocese’s four Catholic schools, and the poor through its Catholic Charities outreach.

Also in this issue, you meet Catholic Home Missions grant administrator, Elena Baydina, and learn how her crucial role helps mission dioceses navigate the grant application process.

Your dedicated support assists the invaluable work of Catholic Home Missions in both good and challenging times such as these. I am grateful for your continued prayers and contributions that make possible the evangelization and outreach ministries of the Diocese of St. Thomas and all the other home mission dioceses in the United States and its territories.

With kind regards and prayerful best wishes, I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions
and fishes. “These people in the chancery, the parishes, and
Catholic Charities are just really committed. Other than
those restricted by COVID-19 rules, there’s not one per-
son who is not coming to work every day, rolling up their
sleeves, and getting it done. They are doing more and work-
ing longer hours without complaint. They are identifying
what actions can be taken to generate the greatest results,”
he says.

“It’s sobering to realize things will not be going back to the
way they were,” he adds. “We need to find ways to be there
for our people when the situation continues to take whatever
form it will take.”

Nonetheless, “we never stop trying. We have a strong faith
in God and trust that whatever we do will be reciprocated,”
Warren says.

In 2021 Catholic Home Missions awarded one of
the highest grant amounts to the Diocese of St. Thomas
in the amount of $170,000. In addition, the Office of
National Collections gave $1.7 million from two emergency
collections in the aftermath of the hurricanes to help rebuild
Church properties. The Federal Emergency Management
Agency (FEMA) earmarked funds to rebuild churches and
schools, but progress slowed because those grants come as
reimbursements after the fact. Warren says it is a “constant
challenge” to finance ongoing construction projects pending
FEMA reimbursements.

“In spite of the challenges here and with the help of
Catholic Home Missions and many people who love and
support us, we are able to do a good job as missionaries for
Jesus Christ and his Church,” Bishop Bevard concludes.
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www.usccb.org/home-missions

READ ABOUT HOW

The Diocese of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands overcomes unique challenges, joyfully shares the Gospel, and ministers to the needy with assistance from Catholic Home Missions.

LEARN MORE BY READING

The most recent CHMA Annual Report, past issues of the newsletter, and 2021 promotional materials for examples of CHM’s accountability and transparency practices at www.usccb.org/home-missions.