

St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**



A woman prays during Mass at Holy Family Church in St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

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.

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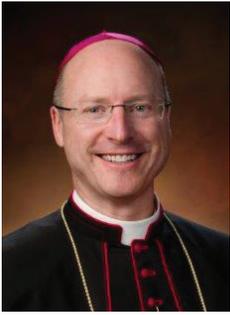
*Pope Francis accepted Bishop Bevard's resignation for health reasons on September 18, 2020 and named Father Jerome Feudjio as Bishop of Saint Thomas on March 2, 2021.

Neighbors

ISSUE 1 2021

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



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.

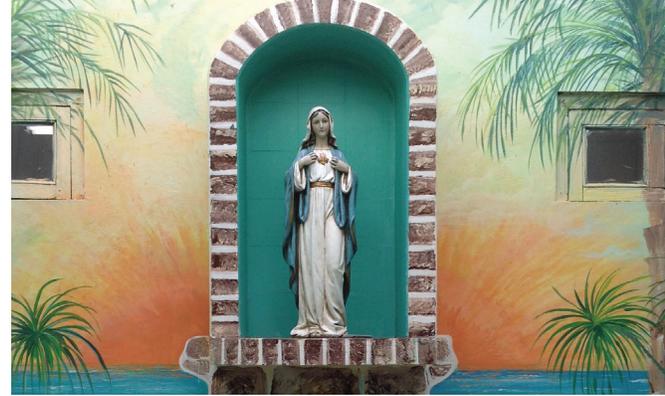
Also in this issue, you meet Catholic Home Missions grant administrator, Elena Baydina, and learn how her crucial role helps mission dioceses navigate the grant application process.

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



Marian grotto at St. Patrick's Catholic Church, Frederiksted, St. Croix. (Catholic Home Missions staff photo)

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"In the Virgin Islands, you have evangelization on its feet," he adds. "It's not just talking or wishing or hoping or planning, but bringing many people to know Christ and his Church much better."

Catholics make up approximately 29% of the population that lives within the diocese. They are served by 12 diocesan priests, one Redemptorist priest, two seminarians, and 29 permanent deacons. The diocese also has four Catholic religious institutes of women.

During and after the pandemic shutdown, the diocese livestreamed weekly Masses from the two largest parishes on St. Thomas and St. Croix. "It has really been a lifeline in every sense of the word," Warren says.

Despite many challenges, the four Catholic schools in the diocese are operating via online instruction and anticipate inviting students back to the campuses in January 2021. Parishes and schools applied for and received funds from the Paycheck Protection Program of the CARES Act. Warren says these funds have enabled them to retain staff at a critical time.

The largest outreach operation of the diocese is Catholic Charities. "It's a bellwether entity in terms of providing individuals with food, clothing, and housing. During the pandemic, the workers and volunteers have gone the extra mile and put themselves at risk to get resources to the poor," Warren says. "They fed people through soup kitchens, mobile vans in neighborhoods, and even delivered food to people's homes."

"They are still in the trenches, finding creative ways to overcome accessibility issues," Warren adds.

The entire chancery staff consists of three people, including Bishop Bevard. Asked how so few can meet the needs of so many, Warren says it's like the parable of the multiplication of the loaves

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 person who is not coming to work every day, rolling up their sleeves, and getting it done. They are doing more and working longer hours without complaint. They are identifying what actions can be taken to generate the greatest results,” he says.

“ ... WE NEVER STOP TRYING. WE HAVE A STRONG FAITH IN GOD AND TRUST THAT WHATEVER WE DO WILL BE RECIPROCATED ... ”

It is a challenge for the diocese to form vocations or recruit priests, Warren says, because the islands are isolated and impoverished. Young people are moving away in large numbers. By one measure, the islands have experienced an 8% reduction in population since the twin Category 5 Hurricanes Irma and Maria devastated them in 2017. According to Warren, half of the diocesan priests come from Cameroon, thanks to a connection forged years ago by the diocesan vicar general.

Planning for the future of the diocese is also challenging. “The territory’s economy is on life support, and we can’t really spread out negative impacts because there is no diversity of jobs,” Warren says. “As a diocese, we have to provide the same services as any other, but on a smaller scale and with fewer resources and people.”

“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.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Before becoming the grants administrator for Catholic Home Missions (CHM) six years ago, Elena Baydina says she did not realize the extent of the needs within the Catholic Church in the United States. “I worked for a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit grantmaker, but when I came here, I developed a much broader view.”



Elena splits her time between CHM and the USCCB program in support of the Church in Central and Eastern Europe. At CHM, she supports the full-time director and full-time grants specialist by organizing applications from mission dioceses and later processing funding payments.

“Although I don’t play a direct role in the funding decisions, I always feel good when grantees call or write to express their appreciation,” Elena says.

The grant application process begins in January when she sends an email to current grantees to let them know the electronic application portal is open.

As the applications are submitted via an online portal, Elena checks to make sure all the elements are complete, including a diocesan financial audit and a letter of support from the bishop. She also rechecks the math to make sure individual program figures correspond with the total grant request. Then she uploads all of the application information into the grants management system.

“If something is missing or inaccurate, I contact the diocese to correct it,” she says. “And if I see that a diocese that received funds last year has not submitted a new application, I will follow up with them.”

Because chancery staff at mission dioceses often wear many hats, Elena says the follow-up calls are gratefully received. “It’s not really my job to remind them over and over, but I don’t want to see them penalized in any way for submitting a late or incomplete application,” she says. “I feel better when I know they have all their information in. Then it can be assessed by the CHM staff and the bishops who serve on the USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions.”

The subcommittee awards the grants at an annual meeting. Elena notifies the dioceses and schedules payments. The grants are disbursed in two payments during the year.

While she does not meet with the grantees herself, Elena takes a personal interest in their needs and is proud to ensure their paperwork is in order. “If I could approve all of their requests, I would!”



Strengthening the Church at Home

SUBCOMMITTEE ON CATHOLIC HOME MISSIONS

Office of National Collections

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

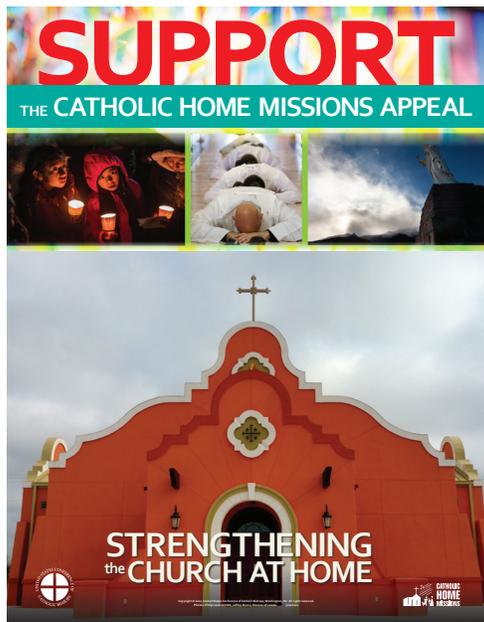
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READ ABOUT HOW

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.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you miss your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

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