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Archbishop Roberto O. González Nieves recognized for shepherding Puerto Rico through largest rebuilding project in American Christianity

Catholic Extension Society Honors Archbishop with 2023 New York Spirit of Francis Award

Chicago, IL — Catholic Extension honored Archbishop Roberto Octavio González Nieves of San Juan, Puerto Rico with the 2023 [Spirit of Francis Award](#), which recognizes an individual or group who has made a significant impact on the mission of the Catholic Church in America through service or philanthropy, at their ninth annual New York City Spirit of Francis Award dinner. Archbishop González Nieves grew up in New York and describes himself as a “child of the Puerto Rican diaspora” and has faithfully served the Archdiocese of San Juan since 1999. He has been a vital leader to the Puerto Rican community, shepherding and advocating for Puerto Rico through the long, ongoing recovery following Hurricane Maria, other natural disasters, the pandemic and economic downturn.

Catholic Extension brought together five U.S. Cardinals in New York to honor the archbishop at the awards dinner, standing in solidarity for his good works and greater awareness in the rebuilding efforts in Puerto Rico. The notables in attendance were Cardinal Blase Cupich, Archdiocese of Chicago, Cardinal Wilton Gregory, Archdiocese of Washington, Cardinal Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, and Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, Archdiocese of New York. Bishop Luis Miranda Rivera, of Diocese of Fajardo-Humacao, PR, and Bishop Angel Luis Rios Matos, Diocese of Mayaguez, PR, were also in attendance.

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, Archbishop of New York, said of the award dinner, “Tonight, as we celebrate the life and ministry of Archbishop González and Catholic Extension Society’s work of rebuilding the Church in Puerto Rico, we are reminded of the deep-rooted connections that bind us together as one human family and as a people of faith.”

He continued, "We gather in this spirit of friendship, reaffirming our commitment to stand in solidarity with one another, even as we care for the poor, the downtrodden, and the vulnerable of our society."

Father Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, said, "Tonight, it is our joy to present the Spirit of Francis Award to one who possesses a passionate heart, that beats with a pastor's love for his people, for the people's growth and well-being, and for the future of the people of God in Puerto Rico. Archbishop Roberto is truly a good shepherd leading, nurturing, strengthening, and giving his very life every day so that God's people in Puerto Rico may continue to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities, especially among the poorest of the poor on the island."

Upon receiving the award, Archbishop González Nieves provided gracious and humble remarks saying, "The award you are kindly bestowing upon me this evening is an honor that I know I am unworthy. I accept it as a call and a grace to renew my vowed service to the Lord, his people and his church."

Archbishop González Nieves concluded, "Thank you, Catholic Extension, for financially and spiritually supporting the Church in Puerto Rico since 1905 to the present time. Extension has helped repair and rebuild damaged church structures, and helped us secure necessary funding, which we otherwise would not have been able to secure. This is an extraordinary expression of ecclesial and missionary solidarity and love."

Since 2017, Hurricane Maria and a series of earthquakes crippled the Island's economy and infrastructure, damaging more than 600 facilities, many of which include historical, centuries-old Catholic churches, Catholic schools, and mission chapels serving the island's most remote communities, across five Puerto Rican dioceses affected from the natural disasters. While FEMA was slow in response, the Catholic Church was not. For the past six years, Catholic Extension has organized and led the disaster recovery program for five Catholic dioceses in Puerto Rico, who collectively seek to rebuild facilities across the archipelago of Puerto Rico, making it perhaps the largest rebuilding project in American Christianity.

After six long years, Catholic leaders are optimistic that the goal of rebuilding is within reach. And as the majority of damaged Catholic churches and schools are located in San Juan, Archbishop González Nieves has emphasized the importance of reconstruction saying, "Christians and Catholics need a place to come together, as one, to worship and glorify the Lord. Places are important. And when a place is destroyed, we must rebuild and begin again."

The status of the rebuilding efforts in Puerto Rico gives us hope. To date, \$332.2 million of the estimated \$400 million in damages have been obligated by FEMA to the Puerto Rican dioceses, and now, the Church in Puerto Rico can begin the long-awaited reparation of facilities and continue its vital mission. Currently, 15 projects, consisting of 58 facilities are underway, with architectural contracts being signed. Catholic Extension's recovery team also secured an additional \$43 million in a competitive grant program, which will enable Catholic schools to receive "404" hazard mitigation funding. This grant will allow these structures to be rebuilt more resiliently to serve as safe shelters during future disasters, which will ultimately save lives.

Catholic Extension has supported the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico for more than 115 years, dating back to its earliest years as a territory of the United States. It shares the dream of the bishops, pastors, the faithful and all those served by the Catholic Church—whether they are Catholic or not—that the Catholic Church in Puerto Rico will begin a new chapter in its mission of service.

Also inspired by the mission of service, Spirit of Francis Award recipients are laudable for their commitment “to reach out to the margins of society” in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis, and the founder of Catholic Extension, Father Francis Clement Kelley. The Spirit of Francis Awards dinner is benefiting the work of Catholic Extension in Puerto Rico.

For more information on the recovery in Puerto Rico and the Spirit of Francis Award, please visit catholicextension.org.

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About Catholic Extension: Founded in 1905, Catholic Extension works in solidarity with people to build up vibrant and transformative Catholic faith communities among the poor and in America’s poorest regions. For more information visit www.catholicextension.org; follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/catholicextension or on Twitter at [@CathExtension](https://twitter.com/CathExtension).