News

Police officers walk near a destroyed home along the coastline in Port Aux Basques, Newfoun

Police officers walk near a destroyed home along the coastline in Port Aux Basques, Newfoundland, Sept. 25, 2022. (CNS photo/John Morris, Reuters)

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Damage inflicted to church properties throughout the Maritimes by post-tropical storm Fiona has yet to be tabulated, but it seems for the most part Catholic Church property escaped relatively unscathed after one of the strongest weather systems to ever hit Atlantic Canada.

Many eastern Canadian dioceses -- in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick -- were still without power by midday Sept. 27. The Catholic Register tried to contact the dioceses to determine the extent of damage caused by the high winds and seas that wreaked havoc on the Maritimes, destroying houses and killing at least two people.

Of the dioceses The Register was able to contact, minimal or no damage was reported.

Calls to the Diocese of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, went unanswered.

However, Fr. Frank Jay, pastor of St. Mary's-Holy Family Parish in Kensington, wrote in a Facebook message that the storm "stripped off the vinyl siding on the east side" of the church, "sending it all over the center of town." Also, "the plastic shield outside on the large Holy Family stained-glass window broke, but so did the plastic shields of the United Church beside us." The sign in front of the church also splintered in two pieces and flew across the street onto a neighbor's lawn. And an "attic window glass in the rectory flew out and spread glass 100 meters down the street."

Jay shared thoughts about the most pressing problems facing Prince Edward Island after Fiona.

"The serious problem on P.E.I. right now is the loss of so many dairy cows, destruction of barns and wharves, devastation of the orchards, flooding of the potato land and flattening of the grain. Our farmers and fishers are going to take the brunt of the suffering. All of the church building losses are covered by insurance, and we will repair and go on as we always do," he said.

Churches of the Archdiocese of St. John's in eastern Newfoundland and the Diocese of Corner Brook and Labrador in western Newfoundland avoided Fiona's fury, according to diocesan officials. No one from the Diocese of Grand Falls responded immediately to calls.

But television images from Port aux Basques, on Newfoundland's southwest coast, showed the destruction brought by the high winds and seas. That area suffered some of the worst damage. Numerous coastal properties were swept into the Atlantic Ocean as a storm surge resulted in giant waves crashing onto land. One 73-year-old woman was swept out to sea along with her house.

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Fr. Ciro Perez, pastor of St. Teresa's Parish in St. John's, said he had been watching images of the calamity in Port aux Basques via the news and online.

"We are very fortunate, 950 kilometers (590 miles) away, to avoid the devastation experienced in Port aux Basques," said Perez. "Our prayers are with them. We have

parishioners who have family and friends in the area, and they are working hard to get in contact to receive more information. Absolutely there will be prayers for the victims at Masses this upcoming weekend."

Communication has been an issue, with Fiona's high winds and heavy rain knocking out power to much of the Maritimes. At the peak of the post-tropical storm, more than 500,000 Canadians were in the dark.

The Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth had yet to receive any reports of major issues after the storm hit Sept. 24.

"The debris in front of churches was cleared and our parishes celebrated Sunday Masses without power in the building," said Aurea Sadi, the pastoral life and new evangelization coordinator for Halifax-Yarmouth. "The Diocese of Antigonish received the brunt of Hurricane Fiona in Nova Scotia."

That said, the Antigonish Diocese reported little damage to church structures even as power outages and unsafe roads covered the area in the days following the storm. Schools, hospitals, businesses and governmental buildings were closed.

Matt Drover, the storm lead for Nova Scotia Power, told media that restoring electricity and cleaning up the deluge represents "the biggest mobilization that we have done in our company's history." A similar message was being shared in the other Atlantic provinces.

More than 300 military personnel, working under the leadership of Rear Adm. Brian Santarpia, the Joint Task Force Atlantic Commander of the Canadian Armed Forces, were aiding the effort.

[Amundson is a reporter for The Catholic Register, Toronto.]