

Kerala-born priests devastated by news of disastrous flooding back home in India

The news footage and photos are shocking. Millions of men, women and children are struggling – and helping others – under the weight and power of wave upon wave of fast-moving current.

For some, their lives hang in the balance. For many, their homes and livelihoods are destroyed.

Thousands of kilometres away, priests serving in the Edmonton Archdiocese can only watch and pray as a once-in-a-generation flood wreaks havoc on their home state of Kerala in southwestern India.

All but one of Kerala's 14 districts has been devastated by the floods. It's been described as the worst flooding since 1924.



Father Varghese Munduvelil

"We've had heavy rains before but this was beyond imagination," said Father Varghese Munduvelil, the pastor at Sacred Heart Parish in Edson, who left for his home in Kerala on Aug. 27.

"This is the biggest flood in 100 years. Inside our family's home there is five feet of water."

"Whole cities and towns were submerged, like a complete river," added Father Joby Augustin, pastor of St. Anthony and St. Agnes parishes in Edmonton. He had

just returned from a vacation in Kerala in early August when the disaster began.

Nearly 400 people have died in floods and landslides since Aug. 8. A million are in temporary relief camps after incessant rain caused 44 rivers to overflow and inundate homes and farms. Road and rail lines remain flooded in several parts of the state.

The Catholic Church is providing relief efforts in Kerala. Development and Peace, the international development arm of the Church in Canada, announced last week that it has allocated \$50,000 to provide food, blankets, hygiene kits to approximately 13,000 people through Caritas India.

They will also provide help to repair 450 homes and to restore the livelihoods of 1,250 people with small farms and small businesses.



Flood victims carry relief material in the Indian state of Kerala. Catholic News Service

Development and Peace – Caritas Canada is accepting donations to support emergency relief efforts in India through its website under Emergency – India.

Authorities are still trying to get the airport functional, so Father Munduvelil said he may have to travel a fair distance to get to his family's

two-bedroom house in Edathura.

“I have no idea what it will be like. The water is still there and it will be dirty and muddy,” Munduvelil said. “We will need to clean the place. The biggest is the threat of an epidemic because the bodies of animals are floating in the water. All of the families have animals, dogs, cows, goats.”

It was a pre-planned vacation, but now he will be checking on the family home and on relatives and friends in Kerala. Residents there are accustomed to the monsoon season, but this level of flooding has been unprecedented.

“People in Kerala are used to the unexpected. They will deal with it as effectively as they can,” said Father Mundevilil.

For more than a week after the flooding began, priests from Kerala state had no contact with family.

“My brother was in a relief camp and there was no communication for a week, no information because there was no electricity,” he said. “It was very stressful. There was constant anxiety. I tried to contact relatives and neighbours and they were in the same situation.”

Father Augustin, whose family lives in Kochi, said: “We were in a panic because the only news we were receiving was from news channels, social media, Facebook.”

“People were pleading for their life from the rooftops because the water filled the other floors completely submerged. It was really distressing for me, and for all the priests. It’s so helpless when we see the news coming up from there. If we were there, we could help physically. It’s almost as if our hands are tied, being away from our homeland.”

There are an estimated 30 priests from India serving in the Edmonton Archdiocese, six from Father Augustin’s religious order, the Sons of the Immaculate Conception based in Kerala.

And many members of Edmonton’s St. Alphonsa Parish trace their roots to Kerala, where their Syro-Malabar Catholic Church is based. About 700 people attend Mass there each Sunday.



Father Joby Augustin watches news coverage of the flooding in his home state of Kerala.

Father Augustin said his parents, his two brothers – one of whom is a rickshaw driver – and a sister and their families live in Kochi. And while their house was undamaged, flood destruction surrounds them.

The Indian army was helping flood victims, Augustin said, but it was difficult because of the fast-moving current, and airlifting was not possible because of the trees and narrow spaces.

The water is receding slowly, but there are still areas where help hasn't reached people. And then there is the recovery.

"It will take years. It will take years. More than 80 per cent of the whole province needs to be rebuilt completely," Augustin said, adding there is also a risk of famine with crops and fields destroyed.

Despite the disaster, Father Augustin puts the flood into perspective.

"I definitely believe God has something to teach us as a community back home. Also, I believe He wants to bring something to that particular part of the world," Augustin said. "Through that tragedy God wants to bring the people beyond their selfishness, their pride and also their differences of faith."



Rescue workers evacuate people from flooded areas after the opening of a dam near Cochin, India. Catholic News Service

Augustin cited a wealth and power disparity in Kerala, as well as religious and political conflict.

Kerala has a largely Christian population in a predominantly Hindu country, and the ruling political parties in the state are different than those in the capitol – so providing relief is less of a priority, Augustin said.

“God wants to give the message: It’s not your money. It’s not your power. It’s not your name and fame. It’s God above all,” Augustin said. “I can only ask the prayers of people from the Archdiocese and also the parishioners and also possible help for the people in their struggle and distress.”

As the waters have receded, Augustin’s fears have eased a bit. At one point it was so bad he had trouble sleeping and there were times he apologized to his congregation because he couldn’t concentrate.

Augustin told them: “I’m sorry but I’m not here. My mind is back home.”

-With files from Catholic News Service