

# CHRISTMAS AFTER

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*Despite the devastation around them, Puerto Rican Saints found peace and joy in remembering Jesus Christ at Christmastime.*

By Breanna Call Herbert

**D**uring Christmastime, families and friends gather together, people celebrate traditions, all for the purpose of remembering the birth of our Savior. The merry Christmas spirit fills the air. But Christmastime can be hard too. It can remind people of lost loved ones and trying times. When challenges take up a big part of our lives, it's easy to lose sight of the Savior. But last year, Church members in Puerto Rico set a strong example of remembering our Savior's birth and His example in spite of devastating trials.

Hurricane Maria crashed through the island on September 20, 2017. With winds of up to 175 miles per hour (280 km/h), lashing the island for more than 30 hours, Maria caused massive damage. It knocked out the island's power grid, leaving 95% of the island without electricity or mobile phone service and a vast majority without access to the water system. This Category 5 hurricane was recorded as being the worst natural disaster to ever hit Puerto Rico.

Elder Hugo E. Martinez of the Seventy, who was born and raised in Puerto Rico, says, "It looked like someone had grabbed a rake and ran it through the land." There was debris everywhere, buildings had crumbled, and the streets were flooded. Elder Martinez's wife, Sister Nuria Merced Martinez, explains that because of the damage, "many people lost their jobs" and "a lot of businesses closed." But in spite of such devastation, members remembered to turn outward and to serve others during the Christmas season.



*Elder Hugo E. Martinez of the Seventy and his wife, Sister Nuria Merced Martinez*



# HURRICANE





Right: Children cut grass and put it in shoeboxes for Día de Reyes.



Arroz con dulce is a traditional Puerto Rican dessert.

## A TRADITIONAL PUERTO RICAN CHRISTMAS

In Puerto Rico, Christmas lasts much longer than December 25. In fact, Christmas starts as early as November and is celebrated through mid-January. Sister Martinez says, “Puerto Ricans love the Christmas holidays! If we could, we would have 365 days of them!”

Marking the beginning of the Christmas season, Christmas trees are decorated and lights are hung up. The people also prepare for Christmas carolers, who can come any night during the Christmas celebration. Normally the carolers come after 10:00 p.m., when families are asleep. When the family hears merry voices and jovial percussion, they open their door and invite the carolers inside for something to drink and eat. And when the carolers head out, the family joins them to spread Christmas cheer to the next house. The caroling party grows throughout the night as they go door to door.

There are also many parties held at work, in the neighborhood, or as families. Neighbors gather together to roast a pig over a spit and to eat *arroz con gandules* or rice and pigeon peas. It’s also normal to eat yummy coconut-flavored desserts and *arroz con dulce*, a kind of rice pudding with raisins and cinnamon. Nochebuena, or Christmas Eve, is when most families gather together to celebrate, eat, and remember the Savior. The festivities will last until Navidad, or Christmas.

Another Puerto Rican Christmas tradition is Día de Reyes, or Three Kings’ Day. Children will cut grass and put it in shoeboxes under their bed or under the Christmas tree. Then while the children are sleeping, the Three Kings searching for baby Jesus will stop by and feed their camels with the grass the children have gathered. To show gratitude for the grass, the Three Kings will leave behind gifts.

## CHRISTMAS AFTER HURRICANE MARIA

But after Hurricane Maria hit the island, the people of Puerto Rico had to celebrate Christmas traditions differently. Sister Martinez says, “There weren’t very big parties or celebrations, but people still visited family members and had some sort of celebration.” Instead of decorating Christmas trees, people decorated the trees and gardens in their yards. “There was some scarcity of food, but Puerto Ricans made do with whatever there was.”

Christmas lights weren’t hung up, but other decorations were put in their place. Not as many traditional gifts were given, but people shared more time and more meals together. Elder Martinez says: “There was a sense of togetherness as a community.” Even though the Puerto Rican people were still suffering from effects of the hurricane, they still remembered Christmas and the birth of the Savior.

People across the country began to serve one another. Elder Martinez says, “Of the few things that you can say are positive after a hurricane, people helping each other is one of them. It brings out the best in people.” Neighbors and friends looked out for one another. Some brought clean water to drink. Some shared the gas they had so that others could run generators. And many others helped clear debris from homes and yards.

Sister Martinez explains: “Christmas is not the trappings. It’s not the look of Christmas that you have to seek. You have to look to the reason for the season—Jesus Christ and what He offers us that is not in the world. And that will help you through anything.”



*Members in Puerto Rico support one another by serving one another and sharing water, food, and gasoline.*

To the people, and especially the youth, of Puerto Rico, Elder Martinez says, “You are very much loved by the Lord. The Lord has your families in mind. He has Puerto Rico in His sights. I know that the





Left: Pasteles are typically eaten around Christmastime in Puerto Rico.

Right: Sister missionaries help clear debris.

Below: President Henry B. Eyring and Bishop Dean M. Davies minister to people in Puerto Rico.



First Presidency and Apostles that have visited Puerto Rico have promised blessings in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those blessings will indeed come about.”

During trials it can be difficult to find hope and happiness—and especially to serve others. But the Puerto Rican people did just that. Though they were enduring many hardships, they served one another in the spirit of Christmas. We can remember their example as we go through our own challenges. This Christmas as we come together, serve one another, and remember the birth of our Savior, we will be blessed to withstand our trials and to feel His love.

*The author lives in Utah, USA.*

## FEELING THE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT AFTER A HURRICANE

After Hurricane Maria, there was no light, no water, no phone service, and no Wi-Fi across much of Puerto Rico. Many power lines had been knocked down, and parts of the island were flooded. Recovery was slow and took months. Two brothers, Diego, 14, and Isaac, 12, share how they kept the Christmas spirit while living through the aftereffects of the hurricane.

Isaac says, “I felt the Spirit by praying that the light would come back on, that water and phone service would come back—everything.”

Diego adds, “We also sang to feel the Spirit. We sang Church hymns and Christmas songs. And we prayed that everything would turn out OK.”

At Diego and Isaac’s house, floodwaters skirted the family’s windows, but water didn’t go



inside. That was a blessing. But a tree had fallen and blocked the only road to and from their home. This meant the family couldn’t drive to get supplies. They had to either walk to the tree and find someone to give them a ride or rely on others to bring them supplies. Fortunately, the family was prepared with food storage, including water. The tree was moved a few weeks later, but there was still a lot of work to do and there were still a lot of people in need.

As Elder Martinez pointed out, Hurricane Maria brought out the best in many people.

Diego and Isaac’s family spread the Christmas spirit by helping others. Isaac says, “We passed out food that was donated to people who really needed it. We also passed out clothes, games, and school supplies.”

“Christmas was different,” Diego says. “Before Hurricane Maria there was more money to buy presents, but after there was little money to buy essential items like water, food, and gasoline.”

Even though Diego and Isaac couldn’t celebrate Christmas the way they were used to, they noticed something positive: “We spent more time together as a family. We were more united than before. This is a blessing we appreciate because we love our family.”

Diego says, “We didn’t feel upset that there weren’t as many gifts or that we couldn’t celebrate Christmas like we normally do. We knew that gifts aren’t Christmas. Christmas is the birth of Christ. That’s what’s important.” **NE**