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Catholic organizations responding to Chile quake

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Residents recover their belongings from their house destroyed by a major earthquake in Pelluhue, Chile, Feb. 28. (CNS/Ivan Alvarado, Reuters)

Two days after a massive earthquake in Chile that has killed more than 700 people, response efforts by Catholic organizations and church leaders are already underway.

Catholic relief organization Caritas Internationalis reported that Bishop Alejandro Goic, president of the Chilean bishops' conference, said that parishes and local Caritas centers have already begun moving to help those most affected by the quake.

Caritas Chile, the national arm of the international organization, has offices in 23 different areas already providing food and other relief. The first emergency aid is being distributed in Maule and Bío Bío, the regions most affected by the 8.8 magnitude earthquake that struck the country Feb. 27.

In a press statement released today, Caritas Chile director Lorenzo Figueroa said, "Caritas Chile is working in coordination with governmental and civil society organizations in establishing a national help network in spite of enormous communications difficulties."

"We are collecting food to be sent immediately to communities which have been most affected by the earthquake and where shortages are already being reported. Our own communications network and capacity to offer warehouses and points of collection and distribution are immediately available," Figueroa said.

The Chilean government reported that at least 2 million people have been affected and 1.5 million homes have been destroyed in one of the biggest quakes on record.

Goic has already promised unconditional support of all relief efforts, the Vatican missionary press agency Agenzia Fides reported.

"Faithful to her mission, the church is committed to providing spiritual support and joint action for solidarity in this hour of tragedy," said Goic. "In the strength of the Gospel, we must bring hope in times of fear, pain, and disaster. We pledge our assistance to the authorities, officials, and volunteers."

Pope Benedict XVI used his weekly Sunday blessing to pray for the victims of the earthquake and assure them assistance from Catholic organizations, Catholic News Service reports.

"My thoughts are with Chile and with the populations stricken by the earthquake, which caused great loss of life and terrible damage," the pope said after the reciting the Angelus prayer Feb. 28.

"I am praying for the victims and am spiritually close to those affected by this serious catastrophe. For them, I ask God to grant relief of suffering and courage in this adversity. I am sure solidarity will be shown by many, in particular by church organizations," he said.

Among those affected by the quake are U.S. students studying in the country with Catholic university programs.

Although reports are coming in slowly, and it's not clear exactly how many U.S. students are in the country, *The Observer*, the independent newspaper of the University of Notre Dame, reports that all Notre Dame students and faculty in Chile are safe.

Catholic News Service reported that a group of Marquette University students traveling with the Notre Dame students was also safe.

"For the second time this semester, we are immensely grateful that Notre Dame students, faculty and staff are safe in the wake of a devastating natural disaster," University President Fr. John Jenkins said in a press release Feb. 27. "As was the case last month for Haitians after an earthquake hit that nation, the prayers of the Notre Dame family now are with the people of Chile."

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