

Pope donates \$50,000 to help victims of Australian flooding

PERTH, Australia – Pope Benedict XVI has donated US\$50,000 to help the victims of the worst floods the state of Queensland has suffered in 50 years.

The flood, which has claimed at least one life and has affected more than 200,000 people in two dozen towns, is estimated to have already caused nearly \$5 billion in damages, devastating much of Australia's coal, beef and agriculture industries.

The country's military has been dropping supplies into towns and is on standby for evacuations.

"The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, having been informed of the recent flooding in northeastern Australia, has wished to express his closeness to the victims and their families," said a letter dated Jan. 10 and released that day by the apostolic nuncio to Australia, Archbishop Guiseppe Lazzarotto.

"As a gesture of solidarity, His Holiness has instructed the Pontifical Council Cor Unum to allocate the sum of \$50,000 in response to the urgent needs of those affected by the natural disaster," the letter said.

At the epicenter of the floodwaters is the town of Theodore, surrounded by cotton and citrus crops, cattle farms, coal and gold mining operations. The town, including Sacred Heart Catholic Church, was submerged on Christmas.

Father Noel Milner, who travels more than 370 miles each Sunday to celebrate Mass in three towns in the flooded area, told Catholic Mission Australia: "We just have to sit it out, knowing that the cleanup will be a huge job and heartbreaking for those who have lost everything – home, furnishings and livelihood."

Bishop Brian Heenan of Rockhampton has pledged that the Catholic Church will do everything it can during the recovery process, and parishes have collected money.

The pope's statement came the same day that Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard

announced income assistance payments of about \$500 every two weeks to workers affected by floods, saying: "This measure is to assist people who are not able to do their normal income-earning work and get their normal income."

A nationally televised program, "Flood Relief Appeal: Australia Unites," also raised \$10 million. More than 12,000 calls in the first minute of the show crashed the phone system set up for pledges.