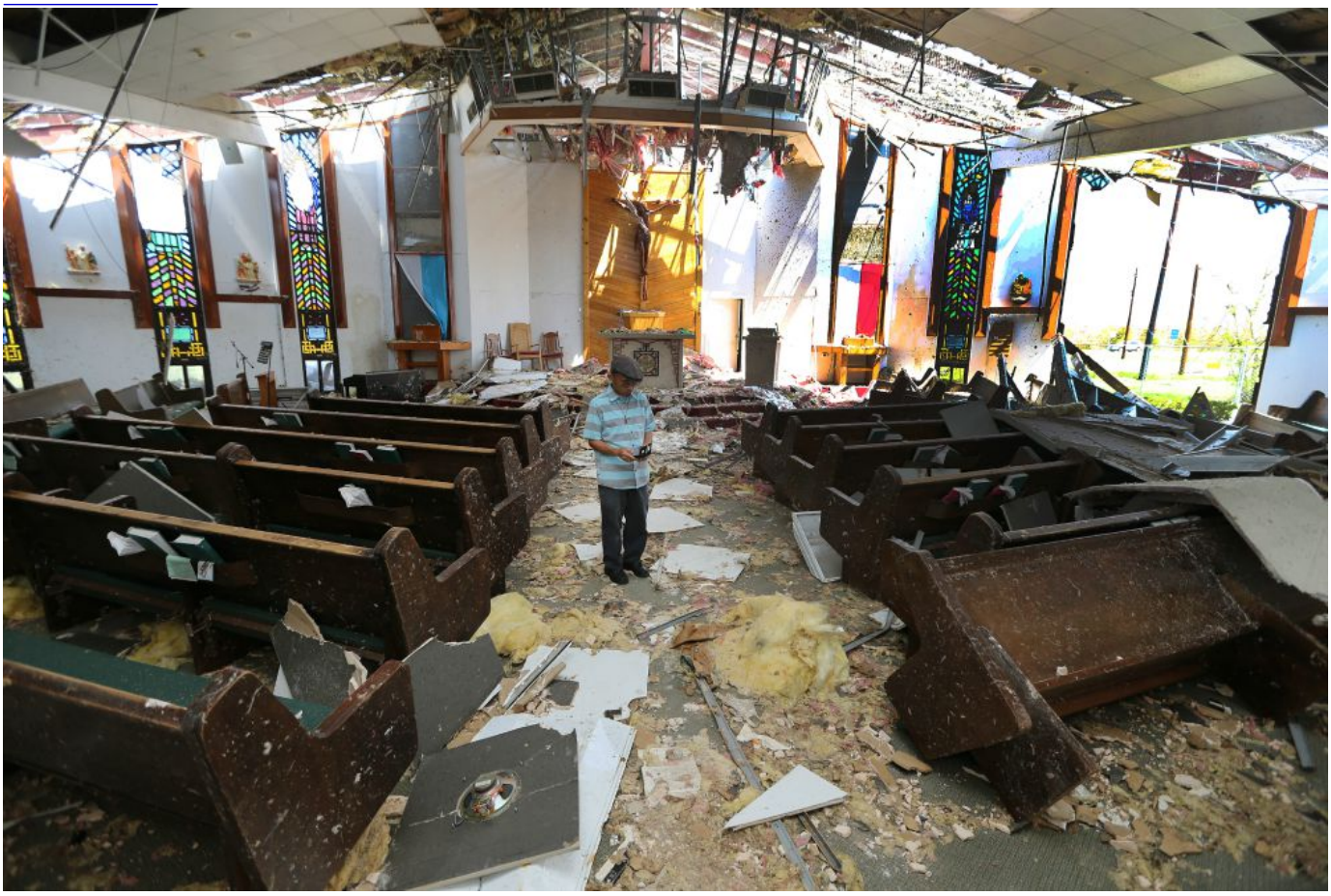
Spirituality
EarthBeat



Franciscan Fr. John Tran Nguyen, pastor of St. Peter Church in Rockport, Texas, Sept. 8 in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Donna Schaper

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In Puerto Rico, those people who have electricity probably treasure it more than they used to.

In Florida and Texas, California and Louisiana, people are still filling out FEMA applications to have their roofs fixed or their lawns cleared. Once a storm or a fire comes through town, the damage lasts.

The original trauma turns into clean up. And more clean up. And even more clean up. Then some people begin to look at the emotional trauma of being under water or on fire.

One story may help us all remember what it's like to suffer a storm.

A youth group showed up at a house in Houston following Hurricane Harvey. An elderly couple who just didn't have the strength to remove the debris from their front yard after the storm own the house. The youth group started cleaning up the yard as soon as they arrived, using a pick-up truck that their church had rented.

The adult leader of the group asked the couple to initial the waiver they had signed earlier, giving the kids permission to clear. The couple said they had never seen any paperwork before and had signed nothing. They were just grateful for the yard's being cleared.

It turned out that the group was at the right number house on the wrong street. The right street was one block over but because the street signs were down, they didn't know. Most of the work had been done before the paperwork had even appeared.

The couple had tears in their eyes as they realized how lucky they were. And the youth group had sufficient energy from the tears to go clean up at the right house, too.

Many climate activists join clean-up crews as a modern form of penance. We want to help. We do help, even when we get the paperwork wrong.

One of the largest consequences of unnatural disasters is a loss of faith. When we join a clean-up crew or send a water filter to Puerto Rico, we are helping people restore their faith. We are saying that, on behalf of God, we care.

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We are saying that "Your damage is our damage. Your debris is our debris."

William Sloane Coffin, the late Presbyterian minister and civil rights activist, said that the issue of faith is not that God is too hard to believe in. Instead, he said, "God is too *good* to believe in, we being such strangers to such goodness. The love of God is, to me, absolutely overwhelming."

Coffin also chided anyone whose God is too small:

"It's a profound Christian conviction that we all belong one to another, every one of us on the face of the Earth — from the pope to the loneliest wino, and that's the way God made us. Christ died to keep us that way. Our sin is always that we're putting asunder what God has joined together. For every serious believer the question arises: Who is big enough to love the whole world?"

Some youth groups certainly are, one house at a time.

The Christmas Prayer

> You who clear the midnights and encourage heaven and nature to sing a duet,
> You who silent the night and mildly lay your glory by,
> You who find a solemnity in stillness,
> And rise with the completeness of the Full Moon,
> DRAW NEAR and accompany
> Those beneath life's crushing load, those with hurricane winds still roaring in their ears, those who stood on roofs, fearing the rise of the water, those who were evacuated,
> Those whose joy the world ignored and who cried today, so far from home or money or friends, who feel abandoned by good people, who think no one cares,
> Those who still refuse to mildly lay their glory by, and don't answer the phone calls from those needing help,
> And then be with us as we learn how to put first things first and last things last. Somehow let us be a part of a working group. Be our Alpha and our Omega, Our Day Spring and our heavenly sleep, our shovels and our water

bottles, our ashes and our stardust.
Amen

[Donna Schaper is senior minister of Judson Memorial Church in New York City.]