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A person wades through floodwaters in Guelle, Netherlands, July 16. A record rainfall caused dams to burst and rivers to overflow into towns and streets across western Germany, Belgium, as well as parts of the Netherlands, Switzerland and northern France. (CNS/Reuters/Eva Plevier)



by Daniel P. Horan

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Like all individual or collective threats to safety and security, the clear and present danger of global climate change is as much a spiritual crisis as it is an existential crisis.

So far this summer, the world has witnessed a range of disturbing climate-related catastrophes that on their own are shocking and considered together ought to strike fear into the hearts and minds of us all.

Included among these terrible events are record-breaking heat waves in the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Canada, killing more than 100 people; the early onset of wildfires in the West; devastating droughts across many parts of the United States, while in other parts we see "monsoon rains"; and horrible flooding in Germany and Belgium that destroyed communities and killed at least 165 people.

What is significant about events like these is not that they are tied to global climate change, since that has already been scientifically established. Instead, what is common to these events that have dominated our news headlines in recent weeks is that they are affecting many of the most prosperous communities and nations of the world.

Those who have insisted on denying reality and falsely asserting that climate change is not real or is some kind of political hoax are those who have, until now, lived within a context of luxury and comfort that has insulated them from the harsh facts of the world as it exists today. Meanwhile, billions of people have not had the privilege of such willful ignorance, since the global poor have been bearing the brunt of the most extreme climate phenomenon for decades and continue to suffer in a manner unthinkable to citizens of the so-called "First World."

In "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis identified precisely this global inequality as it pertains to the consequences of climate change:

> It represents one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day. Its worst impact will probably be felt by developing countries in coming decades. Many of the poor live in areas particularly affected by phenomena related to warming, and their means of subsistence are largely dependent on natural reserves and ecosystemic services such as agriculture, fishing and forestry. They have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt to climate change or to face natural disasters, and their access to social services and protection is very limited.

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He went on to describe the emergence of a new and painful humanitarian crisis that is inextricably tied to global climate change — the rise of environmental migrants and refugees. The pope explains:

> For example, changes in climate, to which animals and plants cannot adapt, lead them to migrate; this in turn affects the livelihood of the poor, who are then forced to leave their homes, with great uncertainty for their future and that of their children. There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation. They are not recognized by international conventions as refugees; they bear the loss of the lives they have left behind, without enjoying any legal protection whatsoever. Sadly, there is widespread indifference to such suffering, which is even now taking place throughout our world. Our lack of response to these tragedies involving our brothers and sisters points to the loss of that sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.

This last part about the indifference millions of men and women display toward climate change in general and its disastrous consequences for our fellow human beings is at the core of what I'm calling a spiritual crisis. I believe that what makes global climate change a spiritual crisis for many is reflected in at least three major failures that Christians and many people of goodwill demonstrate.

First is the failure to recognize our inherent interconnectedness. Francis talks about this in terms of the phrase "integral ecology," which is the idea that "everything is connected." This pertains as much to the nonhuman world as it does to the human world in the age of globalization.

The fact that so many people have been suffering on a scale that is unimaginable for most affluent citizens of the world, and yet little or nothing is done and most people do not care, represents a clear failure. Francis says in *Laudato Si'*: "We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference."

In the face of massive humanitarian crises, wealthy nations are putting up ever greater "frontiers and barriers" to our sisters and brothers who are dying. The fact that so many self-identified churchgoers can continue to think of themselves as faithful Christians while displaying such insidious indifference is indeed a spiritual crisis.



A makeshift memorial is seen in St. Paul, Oregon, July 3, where Guatemalan-born farmworker Sebastian Francisco Perez died during the heat wave a week earlier while moving field irrigation lines. (CNS/Reuters/Alisha Jucevic)

The second failure follows from this indifference. It is the individual and collective inaction, which includes a failure to embrace what the pope calls the necessary "ecological conversion" required for us to begin seeing the world in a new way. Most of the affluent world can't bring itself to even muster the energy to care. And this is indicative of a spiritual crisis because it is inherently sinful.

I am reminded of what the Boston College theological ethicist Jesuit Fr. James Keenan said in his book *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Christian Tradition* about the core definition of sin. He wrote that sin is "the failure to bother to love" our sisters and brothers.

He explains, "Our sin is usually not in what we did, not in what we could not avoid, not in what we tried not to do. Our sin is usually where you and I are comfortable, where we do not feel the need to bother."

Sin, according to Keenan, has a lot to do with operating from a place of strength and comfort, which leads to complacency. In the context of global climate change, there are no more strong, comfortable and complacent people than the globally affluent who only now seem to be experiencing the first tastes of our failure to bother to love one another and the planet. Sin calls for repentance and conversion. Ecological sin calls for the same, which is needed now more than ever.

The third failure is the narrowness of most people's conception of what should be included in prayer. The evil of global climate change and the suffering of so many will not change merely by our prayer alone. But it is important to recognize that prayer is key to conversion and living out our Christian vocation. One way that climate crisis is a spiritual crisis is that many Christians compartmentalize their relationship with God from their relationship to the natural world.

This sort of artificial separation, one that might be motivated by a distorted view that the "sacred" is different from the "secular" or the "supernatural" from the "natural," leads many to exclude serious spiritual reflection on the interconnectedness of the "cry of the earth" and the "cry of the poor."

As things continue to get worse, human and nonhuman lives continue to be threatened and killed, and decisions have to be made by individuals and communities alike, we cannot afford to ignore the spiritual dimension of the climate crisis in our midst. Indeed, as Francis regularly reminds us, *everything is connected*, and that includes not only the vast community of creation of which you and I are a part, but it also includes what we bring to prayer and what flows from it in terms of action.

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