Opinion

News



Miami's skyline is seen before the arrival of Hurricane Irma Sept. 9, 2017. The scientific community has concluded that what we have been witnessing in recent years in terms of extreme droughts, heat waves, wildfires, flooding and other destructive weather phenomena is only going to worsen in the decades ahead. (CNS/Reuters/Carlos Barria)



by Daniel P. Horan

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

August 18, 2021
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Those of us who have been following the ravaging consequences of global climate change for some time were not surprised by the major report issued last week by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In short, it is "terrifying," as one headline in The New Yorker accurately described it.

The gist of the findings is that the persistent denialism and widespread inaction on the part of many nations and global corporations over decades has set in motion an irreversible sequence that will result in the planet's warming "intensifying over the next 30 years."

We have done this to our planet and we, as a species, are responsible.

As The New York Times reported, "This report is the sixth assessment of climate science by the U.N. group, and unlike previous reports, this one dispenses with any doubt about who or what is responsible for global warming. 'It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land,' the report says in its very first finding."

No words adequately express the magnitude of my frustration when I think about the unjustifiably willful ignorance that so many of our fellow humans insist on maintaining in the face of the greatest threat to life in human history. There is no longer any room for reasonable doubt about the human role in climate change, which we have witnessed firsthand and from which devastating consequences continue to take life and property.

Related: Climate change evidence 'unequivocal,' some impacts irreversible, report says

Pope Francis anticipated the conclusive results of this latest IPCC report six years ago in his encyclical letter "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," when he dedicated an entire chapter to the theme "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis," and opened it with these bold lines:

> It would hardly be helpful to describe symptoms without acknowledging the human origins of the ecological crisis. A certain way of understanding human life and activity has gone awry, to the serious detriment of the world around us. Should we not pause and consider this? At this stage, I propose that we focus on the dominant technocratic paradigm and the place of human beings and of human action in the world.

As I read through this recent IPCC report and reviewed the coverage of it, I found myself struggling with how to respond.

On the one hand, the last thing I wanted to do was to write yet *another* column about global climate change. For those who may feel that my attention to this matter is as familiar as the tune on a broken record, know that I am equally aware of my continual return to this theme. It is tiresome, not because the subject matter is unimportant, but precisely because the opposite is so true and yet nothing seems to change. Frankly, there is absolutely nothing else more important — no niche issue, political agenda, personal crusade, or narrowly defined "life issue" supersedes the urgency and importance of global climate change.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of such persistent confusion (at best) or malice (at worst) that motivates the denialism of so many within our human family to disregard the existential threat to us and all life on this planet compels me to use what means I have to keep drawing attention to this terrifying reality. We have to keep speaking about this, writing about this, and protesting the inaction and apathy of our governmental leaders and community members. We have to do *something*.



Environmental activists protest outside the White House in Washington June 30 to demand President Joe Biden stop fossil fuel projects and put "climate justice" at the heart of his infrastructure plans. (CNS/Reuters/Evelyn Hockstein)

Sometimes I find myself at the doorstep of despair, wondering what it could possibly take for those who willfully and actively refuse to accept basic facts, the truth of science, the evidence of ecological destruction in our own backyards, to see the world as it actually is and not what their chosen spin doctors and fiction narrators would have them believe.

Is this behavior by climate-change deniers what Sigmund Freud meant by the "death drive," that inherent and often unconscious tendency toward self-destruction? Or is it something far simpler: the inability for people to think on a scale of such enormity, so that climate change escapes the ability to be comprehended by those who do not have the time or interest to consider the complex realities and consequences it presents?

Whatever the underlying cause of some peoples' refusal to accept the truth, persisting down the path of inaction, the recent IPCC report offers those with "eyes to see and ears to hear" (Matthew 13:16) a grim reality check. As a result of our pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere for more than a century, the planet has already "warmed about 1.1 degree Celsius (about 2 degrees Fahrenheit) since the 19th century." The scientific community has concluded that what we have been witnessing in recent years in terms of extreme droughts, heat waves, wildfires, flooding and other destructive weather phenomena is only going to worsen in the decades ahead.

More troubling is the longer-term consequences of what we have done and what we have failed to do as a species. Namely, as The New York Times summarized from the report, "The enormous ice sheets in Greenland and West Antarctica will continue to melt at least through the end of the century. Global sea level will continue to rise for at least 2,000 years."

Advertisement

When Pope Francis, drawing on the earlier teaching of Pope John Paul II, talks about the need for intergenerational solidarity and justice, this is the kind of consequential impact the pope has in mind. Francis says in *Laudato Si*', "The notion of the common good also extends to future generations." He adds:

> Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences.

What the IPCC report reveals is that we are exercising the opposite of intergenerational solidarity, behaving with a kind of hubris, selfishness and generational solipsism that is condemning future generations — your children,

grandchildren, great-grandchildren and beyond — to a world characterized by what Francis bluntly referred to as "desolation and filth."

I do not know what it will take for some people, including self-identified Christians and even many religious leaders, to accept the basic truth of our dire circumstances, and then do something about it. As the United Nations Secretary General António Guterres described the IPCC report, this news is a "code red for humanity," adding: "The alarm bells are deafening."

We have very little time and fewer and fewer options to make any meaningful impact on the course of planetary history, but we can at least put some effort into trying.

If people will not be convinced by the blunt facts expressed with concern by the global scientific community such as we saw this week, then I worry nothing will. And if that is true, I have no idea how will we individually and collectively answer for the gravity of our persistent and willful "ecological sin."

Related: Earth's climate outlook grim but not hopeless, faith leaders say