Opinion
EarthBeat



The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's sign is seen on the podium at EPA headquarters in Washington July 11, 2018. The Trump administration has issued executive orders to close environmental justice offices and cease environmental-justice-related programs. (OSV News / Reuters / Ting Shen)



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Everyone knew it would fail – and it did.

At midnight on March 10, 2023, the levee broke protecting Pajaro, California. Flush with torrential rain, the brown water of the Pajaro River surged through a widening breach and soon sat several feet high in homes, businesses and Our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church, the beating heart of the tiny farmworker town.

"Everything was flooded, all the houses, the small shops, everything," said a resident of the 2,500-person community of mostly Mexican immigrants during an interview at Assumption Church. "It reached high into the houses and damaged beds, refrigerators, stoves, all the cars that were parked there … the water came in, but it came with mud and other substances from the fields. Here in the fields, there is fertilizer, there is a lot of it, there are many harmful things for the house, for the family and for the children."

Two years later, the disaster in Pajaro still warrants attention. It is a warning sign for the vulnerability to flooding of low-income communities, and it is a challenge for Catholic moral thought in response to the reckless dismissal of environmental justice and climate change by the Trump administration.

In "*Laudato Si*', on Care for Our Common Home," Pope Francis said we are living through a crisis that is both natural and social, both a cry of the Earth and a cry of the poor. The situation in places like Pajaro bears that out by revealing the inevitable way that so-called natural disasters impose disproportionate burdens on under-resourced communities.

In an engineering paper, Farshid Vahedifard and Mohammed Azhar of Tufts University and Dustin C. Brown of Mississippi State University referred to the Pajaro levee failure as one example of a "historically underserved" and "socially vulnerable" community positioned behind a faulty levee. They say these communities are overrepresented among the nearly 8 million persons in the United States who are estimated to live behind levees that are at high or very high risk for failure amid the increasing risk of floods brought on by climate change.

Flood damage from a warming climate is estimated to increase by 25% by 2050. Inundation modeling shows a mean increase of 20% in 100-year floods and a corresponding, jarring jump in flood exposure for low-income communities like Pajaro, where the per capita income is $21,000.

Development on flood plains also plays a big role in increased exposure to flooding. Sometimes such development is recent, as low-income persons find new-fangled housing on filled-in flood plains. And sometimes, as in the case of Pajaro, the development of flood plains in the past keeps contributing to disastrous flows of water in the present.

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In the late 19th century, Pajaro — then known as Brooklyn — was constructed on top of filled-in flood plains as a place to house Chinese immigrants, many of whom had come precisely to do the work of filling in flood plains around the vast agricultural region. Floods followed. Even the levee, built in 1949, couldn't stop them. (The most recent major floods before 2023 were in 1995 and 1998).

For decades, government officials knew the levee was inadequate for the amount of water it was meant to hold back, much less for the increased flows associated with intensified precipitation in a warming climate. But for years, the United States Army Corps of Engineers declined to fix the levee because the high cost of construction in the Central Coast region of California was prohibitive compared to the low value of property in Pajaro.

Pajaro's status as an unincorporated town was another barrier. Without the political representation that comes with being incorporated, community residents had little leverage to get the levee fixed amid the complex watershed politics of the Pajaro Valley.

When the flood came in 2023, it was a shock but not a surprise. No one died this time — compared to two people who died in the flood of 1995 — but the water soaked everything in a community where poverty and immigration status inhibit or prohibit access to private and government insurance.

The flood destroyed the strawberry fields and the prospect of work, too. "Definitely the hardest part was having no job," a farmworker and resident recalled in an

interview at a park in Pajaro, "because if we have no money, how are we going to sustain ourselves? All of our savings are gone."

In this dispiriting moment when the Trump administration has rejected environmental justice and climate change, what can the Pajaro flood teach us about how Catholic moral thought responds to such realities?

"Environmental justice" may be a term of derision in a Trumpian worldview, but from a Catholic perspective the phrase is a matter of moral clarity meant to call our attention, for instance, to the disparities in how communities experience the effects of climate change. Its application to flooding is powerful.

In a February 2024 paper, a group of scholars from the University of Arizona defined "flood injustice" as unjustified inequalities among persons in terms of who is exposed to the risk of floods, who can adapt to living amid such risk, and who can recover from such a disaster. Being poor shouldn't compel you to live constantly with fear of a flood and its devastating aftermath.

Floods lay bare hidden motives and raw truths. Catholic moral thought urges us to be intentional about the stories we choose to tell.

In one ancient Babylonian myth, the great gods create humans to do the menial work that the great gods don't want to do. Then, when humans become too numerous, the great gods send a flood to destroy them — before remembering that they still need humans to do the menial work.

That myth uncomfortably evokes comparisons with the habitually indifferent ways we exploit migrants to pick crops and then obsess over mass deportation to make them all go away. Our culture churns out tales that characterize the residents of a place like Pajaro as acceptably exploited participants in a global economy, or as people to be thrown out of the country.

The biblical writers chose to tell a different flood story. In it, God sends a flood over the Earth in response to nonstop human corruption and violence. After the floodwaters recede, God makes a covenant with that which has survived — Noah, his descendants and every living creature. God declares the dignity, not the servitude, of each human being, and demands an accounting for the life of each person. As our part in the covenant with Noah, we can't stop telling that story.