

California bishops urge water conservation as Lenten practice

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In an unusual example of the traditional Lenten practices of fasting and abstinence, the bishops of California are asking Catholics to "exercise restraint" in their use of water because of an extreme drought in the state.

California is experiencing one of its driest periods since 1895. Last month, the state announced that 17 rural communities were within 100 days of running out of drinking water.

"Our human dignity relies on access to water," the bishops wrote in a statement released Thursday. "That same human dignity is diminished when we let this precious resource slip carelessly through our hands."

Recalling that the 40 days of Lent reflect the 40 days Jesus spent in the desert in prayer and fasting, the bishops said, "Californians are in an actual desert as an historic drought looms over us." The drought, they said, is having serious consequences, including farmers without enough water to irrigate their crops and farmworkers without jobs. Access to clean, drinkable water is at risk in many communities, they added.

They noted that legislators are struggling with how to ensure that both present and future water needs are met in an equitable way.

As the impact of the drought grows, "those with limited resources will be the first to suffer," the bishops said. "Wise conservation practices will mitigate those effects." Some water districts have already implemented mandatory rationing. Other districts are asking for voluntary reductions in water use.

This is the second time in the last two months that California's bishops have spoken about a faith-filled response to the drought. In early January, Sacramento Bishop Jaime Soto, as president of the California Catholic Conference, urged Catholics to pray for rain. "Let us especially pray for those most impacted by water shortages and for the wisdom and charity to be good stewards of this precious gift," read a portion of his suggested prayer.

In their Lenten message, the bishops again linked water conservation with stewardship for the common good. "May we receive the grace to better conserve our natural resources and expend our energies in works of charity so that justice and mutual respect may flow like a river through the cities, towns and fields of our State," they wrote.

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