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Editorial: Marry action to words on climate change

NCR Editorial Staff | Jul. 18, 2012

It is hot. That is the official word from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. For the contiguous United States, July 2011 to June 2012 was the warmest 12 months on record since record-keeping began in 1895. Those 12 months averaged 3.2 degrees warmer than the long-term average.

More than 170 all-time warm temperature records were broken or tied in June, the administration's State of the Climate National Overview reported. The U.S. State Climate Extremes Committee thinks that South Carolina (113 degrees Fahrenheit) and Georgia (112 degrees Fahrenheit) set all-time statewide temperature records last month. Washington state, however, had its seventh coolest June on record.

The report says, "The first six months of 2012 were also drier than average for much of the contiguous U.S., with a nationally-averaged precipitation total 1.62 inches below average. Some 56 percent of the contiguous United States is in drought, but Minnesota, Oregon, and Washington had six-month precipitation totals among their ten wettest."

We all saw the news about the derecho, a line of fast-moving severe storms with high winds that knocked out power to 3.4 million households from Illinois to Virginia.

What we're now seeing is "a window into what global climate change really looks like," Princeton University geosciences professor Michael Oppenheimer told The Associated Press for a story on this freakish weather. "It looks like heat. It looks like fires. It looks like these kinds of environmental disasters."

The fires referred to are June's monster blazes burning out of control in the West. Within Colorado's second-largest city, a fire forced more than 30,000 people to hurriedly pack belongings and flee. (See related story on Page 15.)

The burning bush and the pillar of fire are both potent Old Testament images of God. Now they point to the New Testament's question: What then must we do (Luke 3:10)?

In 2010's World Day of Peace address, Pope Benedict XVI framed the answer well: "Our present crises -- be they economic, food-related, environmental or social -- are ultimately also moral crises, and all of them are interrelated. They require us to rethink the path which we are traveling together. Specifically, they call for a lifestyle marked by sobriety and solidarity, with new rules and forms of engagement, one which focuses confidently and courageously on strategies that actually work, while decisively rejecting those that have failed."

At the forefront of this effort to forge a new path are the world's Catholic women religious and an organization, the Catholic Climate Covenant, devoted to linking care for the poor with climate change.

They realize, as Passionist Fr. Thomas Berry counseled, that achieving right relationship with the planet is the great work of our time. They know that this is a critical time, that the Earth, our home, is subject to irreparable damage, that our very existence as a species is in jeopardy, that it is only through widespread eco-friendly

practices, justice-seeking and peacemaking that the human species will have a future, that we must shift our very foundations from the sand of consumption and competition to the rock of sustainability and mutuality.

Or, as Barbara Marx Hubbard, keynote speaker at this year's annual conference of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, says: "Now there is a wake up call for the social, psychological and spiritual maturation of our species. We must be present now to do something new, something creative, that is pressing us from within toward emergence."

In mission statements and rules for women's communities, we read statements like this: "We seek daily to approach our lives and ministries with an awareness of God's gift to us -- our co-creative role and our interrelatedness to all Earth life." The sisters are marrying action to those words in many ways:

- In Monroe, Mich., the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary recently renovated their motherhouse using sustainable technologies and methods including a geothermal heating and cooling system and gray water recycling system. The design of the motherhouse maximizes daylight, incorporates retrofitted period light fixtures and restored original wood windows. The sisters also sponsor the St. Mary Organic Farm Community Garden.
- The Canadian Sisters of St. Ann in British Columbia sponsor a variety of environmental ministries, including Providence Farm, a therapeutic community that provides programs for people encountering barriers to education and employment with the guiding principle that "life is renewed in the cycle of people caring for the soil and the soil nurturing people."
- In Wicklow, just south of Dublin, Irish Dominican Sisters established An Tairseach, a farm and ecology center. It's the Gaelic word for threshold, and "suggests a new beginning, an alternative and more sustainable way of working with the land as well as a new relationship with the whole community of life, human and non-human."

These are just a few examples. This newspaper, together with the EcoCatholic blog on *NCR*'s Web page (NCRonline.org/blogs/eco-catholic), has covered many of these "green" sisters' enterprises and will continue to do so. Excellent interfaith resources can be found on the website of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (www.nrpe.org).

Visit the Catholic Climate Covenant's Web page (www.catholicclimatecovenant.org), take the St. Francis Pledge, then browse for concrete ways to reduce your own carbon footprint and read about other bold steps Catholics are taking to advocate on behalf of people in poverty while protecting God's creation.

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