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California bishops pray: 'God, rain o'er me'

Brian Roewe | Jan. 10, 2014 Eco Catholic

Only love can bring the rain
that makes you yearn to the sky.
Only love can bring the rain
that falls like tears from on high.
? "Love, Reign O'er Me," The Who

California's bishops certainly hope The Who know what they're talking about in their 1973 song [1]. Put simply, as the band did in another song [2], the state needs water. Good, good water.

On Tuesday the bishops called for Catholics and people of all faiths in the state to pray for precipitation, even at a time when some West Coasters might be enjoying their sunny skies [3] as elsewhere in the country snow and ice freeze the landscape [4].

"As stewards of creation we can turn to the Divine Master asking that He see our plight and give ear to our plea for rain," said Sacramento Bishop Jaime Soto, president of the California Catholic Conference of Bishops.

The prayer for rain came as the Golden State braces for its third straight year of lower-than-normal rainfall. The California Department of Water Resources said the impact has been particularly noticeable in the central San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

The agency estimated half of the state's precipitation comes December-February, and so far reservoir storage levels sit at 75 percent of the average at this stage. While it forecasts continued dry conditions, the water resources department said it's still too early to call a drought, noting about half of similarly early dry years reached the average by the end of the season.

Since 1900 the state has experienced nine multi-year droughts, the most recent coming in 2007-2009. During that drought the state shifted from surface water to groundwater for irrigation, depleting groundwater storage in the Central Valley the equivalent of the storage capacity of Lake Mead, the largest reservoir in the U.S., according to the 2013 public draft of the National Climate Assessment [5].

Elsewhere in the assessment, climate researchers predicted longer heat waves and a gradual decrease of river basin runoff in California and the Southwest in the next century, further straining already depleted water supplies and impacting everything from health, to energy production, to crops and growing seasons.

"In the Southwest, there has been a trend towards more widespread drought during the 1901 to 2010 period, reflecting both precipitation deficits and higher temperatures," it said.

The report stated that more than 92 percent of region's crops require irrigation, with agriculture, in addition to cooling thermal power plants, accounts for a bulk of its water withdrawal. That more than 90 percent of the region's residents live in cities -- more than anywhere else in the U.S. -- further complicates matters.

"Severe and sustained drought will stress water sources already over-utilized in many areas, forcing increasing competition among farmers, urban dwellers, and the region's varied plant and animal life for the region's most precious resource," the report said.

The impacts of less water reach to other parts of California, with drier conditions feeding forest fires into uncontrollable blazes and leaving coastlines more prone to erosion and landslides. In the assessment's chapter on water [6], researchers highlighted the California Bay-Delta's experience in the complex process of managing limited water supplies, saying that balancing risks and benefits "requires re-assessment of very complex ecosystems, infrastructure systems, water rights, stakeholder preferences, reservoir operation strategies, and significant investments. ...

"To some extent, all U.S. regions are susceptible, but the Southeast and Southwest are highly vulnerable because climate change is projected to reduce water availability, increase demand, and exacerbate shortages," the report said.

In light of those trends, Soto offered the following prayer:

*"*May God open the heavens and let His mercy rain down upon our fields and mountains. 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. May our political leaders seek the common good as we learn to care and share God's gift of water for the good of all."

In addition to suggesting four additional prayers Catholics could recite (view them here [7]) and highlighting the patron saints of farmers (Sts. Isidore and Maria), the conference also drew attention to water's importance, as described in the *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church [8]*.

"As a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival; thus, everyone has a right to it," the document states in chapter 10 (Safeguarding the Environment), paragraph 484.

In the next graph, it acknowledges that water distribution is typically a duty of public agencies, but no matter who is responsible, "By its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many, and it must be used rationally and in solidarity with others."

The right to water, it states, "finds its basis in human dignity and not in any kind of merely quantitative assessment that considers water as a merely economic good. Without water, life is threatened. Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right."

Perhaps a sign of hope to the water plight has appeared in deep space, as a California-based NASA project identified Thursday what they have described as the "Hand of God" [9] in a telegraphed image of a pulsar wind nebula.

Either way, in California, the song remains the same: "Oh God, I need a drink of cool, cool rain."

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[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeLEo318Yec
[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NR5Sr_li7qo
[3] http://www.buzzfeed.com/justinabarca/californians-throwing-their-good-weather-in-everyone-else
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