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Air pollution 'kiss of death' for 7 million in 2012

Megan Fincher | Mar. 25, 2014 Eco Catholic

?Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust of the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.? (Gen. 2:7)

Since the beginning of time, the air we breathe is given to us as a free and ever-present gift from God. Unlike food and water, which is often too scarce for the poorest of the poor, no one can horde, process, package or sell oxygen. Unfortunately, due to humanity?s carelessness, the breath of life is now the kiss of death for seven million people a year.

According to a World Health Organization report released Tuesday [1], ?In 2012 around 7 million people died -- one in eight of total global deaths -- as a result of air pollution exposure. This finding more than doubles previous estimates and confirms that air pollution is now the world?s largest single environmental health risk.?

Breaking down the data, 3.7 million deaths are attributed to ambient air pollution, and 4.3 million deaths are attributed to household air pollution. What does this mean exactly?

Ambient air pollution is outdoor air pollution -- literally, the air we have no choice but to breathe. Outdoor air pollution, however, is grossly concentrated in developing countries.

?Some 88% of those premature deaths [attributed to ambient air pollution] occurred in low- and middle-income countries, and the greatest number in the WHO Western Pacific and South-East Asia regions,? WHO explained [2] in a March fact sheet.

In other words, combine the high concentration of people in countries like China and India, plus lax laws concerning emissions from transportation, housing, power generation, industry and waste disposal, and you have a global health crisis.

The greatest number of global air pollution deaths, however, occurs right in the home.

In the United States, we take for granted that 3 billion people [3] worldwide cook and heat their homes with either open fires or small stoves, using wood, manure, crop waste, trash or coal as fuel. Living in a cramped space and breathing in dirty air causes over four million premature deaths annually, and more than ?50% of premature deaths among children under 5 are due to pneumonia caused by particulate matter (soot) inhaled from household air pollution,? WHO states.

Since it is generally women and children who spend most of their time in the home or cooking meals, they are exposed to extremely high levels of soot.

?In poorly ventilated dwellings, indoor smoke can be 100 times higher than acceptable levels," WHO said.

The burdensome task of gathering fuel also takes children away from school and women away from income generating jobs, and the lack of electricity lowers the ability to study, read, make crafts, or complete other

activities due to poor lighting.

And even though this seems like a problem confined to the lower classes, WHO warned, ?Black carbon (sooty particles) and methane emitted by inefficient stove combustion are powerful climate change pollutants.?

Is there a solution to this seemingly daunting crisis?

In 2011 U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon launched a global initiative called ?Sustainable Energy for All [4] .? Working with more than 80 developing countries, the program is helping to convert dirty energy sources to renewable ones, like wind, water and solar power.

In addition, the Clean Energy Ministerial [5] is composed of 23 governments that account for 80 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions -- including the U.S., various European countries, Canada, China, Brazil, India, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates and others. Together, they are working to expand clean energy access and supply.

Most recently, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, introduced March 10 the ?Clean Cookstoves Support Act [6].? The bill, co-sponsored by Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., has a goal of ?spurring the adoption of clean cookstoves in 100 million homes by 2020.?

Of course, each and every one of us has a duty to care for the earth and our global brothers and sisters. This means reducing our individual carbon footprint by making difficult choices. Can you ride your bike to work once a week? Can you shop at local farmer markets and stores? Can you buy recycled or pre-used products? Can you lower your heater a few degrees?

As we are taught, God is found in the air, the gentle breeze. If we continue to pollute that air, where will we find God?

?*And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of a gentle blowing. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave*.? (Kings 19: 11-13)

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Links:
[1] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/air-pollution/en/
[2] http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs313/en/
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