

CLIMATE REFUGEES — THE FORGOTTEN ONES

“Climate change is the most existential threat of our time,” announced the title character of the CBS television drama *Madame Secretary* in an episode that aired earlier this year called *The New Normal*. Secretary of State Elizabeth McCord tries to relocate the entire population of Nauru, a tiny island in Micronesia, just northeast of Australia. A super typhoon, ironically named Blessing, is on its way to the island. The prediction is made that between the already rising sea levels caused by climate change, and a 20-25 foot storm surge from the typhoon, there will be no island left. Everyone must be evacuated and there will be no place to return to when it is over.



BRIAN SMITH

The entire process to evacuate the Nauruan people would of course take much longer than an hour, but that’s all you have on television! No nation in the world is willing to accept these climate refugees. There are a lot of hoops to go through and people to convince to sign off on declaring another location as a sovereign nation. The

new home for the Nauruans will be an island in Fiji owned by a semi-washed up celebrity who is about to go to prison. Basically, *Madame Secretary* plea deals him out of his island and it becomes the new nation of Nauru. The population is evacuated right before the typhoon strikes, and the original island of Nauru is completely annihilated by the typhoon. There is nothing left but the waves.

Although this particular story is fictional, climate refugees are real. In 2018, extreme weather events such as severe drought in Afghanistan, Tropical Cyclone Gita on nations in the South Pacific, and flooding in the Philippines resulted in acute humanitarian needs. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website, there were 18.8 million new disaster-related internal displacements recorded in 2017. Since 2008, the average number of people displaced by climate and natural disasters averages 25.3 million annually.¹ The World Bank projects that within three of the most vulnerable regions — sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America — 143 million people could be displaced by 2050.²

The United States is not immune to climate

refugees. According to the global relief and humanitarian organization Mercy Corps, an estimated 130,000 Puerto Ricans were displaced by Hurricane Maria and have not returned.³ In addition, the coastal cities of Newtok in Alaska and Isle de Jean Charles in Louisiana have been disappearing in the rising seas for the last 20 years, and residents have been forced to leave their homes. There will be up to 13 million climate refugees in the United States by the end of this century according to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Even if humanity were to stop all carbon emissions today, at least 414 towns, villages, and cities across the United States would face relocation. If the West Antarctic Ice Sheet collapses, researchers predict that the number will exceed 1,000 across the country.⁴

While politicians continue to debate whether climate change is real and whether it is being caused by humans, the seas keep rising, the deserts keep expanding and more people are being displaced. Even the term climate refugees is controversial. Some policymakers prefer the term climate migration or internally displaced persons be used, while others argue if people are displaced by climate-related events and cannot return home, they should be

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called refugees. Some further point to the fact there should be a distinction made between those displaced by a one-time event like a hurricane versus those who must leave their homes because of rising seas and desertification.

CLIMATE REFUGEES

Currently, there is no international agreement on who qualifies as a climate refugee or migrant. To further complicate the issue, since the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, the definition for a refugee is: “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”⁵ Climate refugees have no legal status. “These people fall between the cracks,” according to Erol Yayboke and Aaron N. Milner, lead authors of a report for the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “It’s hard for countries to come to a consensus on something like this.”⁶

So why doesn’t the international community expand the definition of refugees to include those displaced by climate or natural disasters? Dina Ionesco, the head of the Migration, Environment and Climate Change Division at the U.N. Migration Agency, thinks that might have an unintended effect. “Creating a special refugee status for climate change related reasons could lead to the exclusion of categories of people who are in need of protection, especially the poorest migrants who move because of a mix of factors and would not be able to prove the link between climate and environmental factors.”⁷ She further states that to reopen the 1951 Refugee Convention definition because of persecution and ongoing conflicts could actually weaken refugees’ status.

In other words, given the rise of nationalism across the world and the subsequent closing of borders to refugees and migrants fleeing war and poverty, there is little hope that expanding the definition of refugees to include those impacted by climate change will do anything to help their cause. In fact, the definition of a refugee might

shrink and create even greater barriers to the most vulnerable in our world.

The great irony here is that nations whose pollution and waste that have contributed most to climate change are the same countries that are quickly closing their borders to the people who are most impacted by climate change. This irony is not lost to Pope Francis, who weaves the cry of the poor and of the earth together. “We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the underprivileged and at the same time protecting nature.”⁸

When Pope Francis wrote *Laudato Sí* in 2013, he recognized that there would be resistance to his message even among believers. He predicted some will deny there is a problem, be indifferent to it or put their trust in technical solutions. What

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he asked for was a conversion of heart — a universal solidarity.⁹ But if there is to be true solidarity, we will need to put the human family before our self.

“The principle of subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and thus the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and the first principle of the whole ethical and social order. The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property.”¹⁰ This passage from *Laudato Sí* has resulted in Pope Francis being labeled a

“socialist” by many conservative Catholics and politicians. Conversion of heart can be a slow process and sometimes requires the forceful voice of a prophet.

Another prophetic voice on the issue of climate change is a 16-year-old Swedish girl, Greta Thunberg. She sailed across the Atlantic Ocean to New York City for the United Nations climate talks on a boat with solar panels and energy-producing turbines producing zero carbon emissions. Thunberg also has launched a series of school strikes and climate demonstrations across Europe and the world as her generation, who will inherit the climate mess adults have created, demand immediate changes to protect their future. In a 2018 speech, she accused world leaders of stealing their children’s future: “Until you start focusing on what needs to be done rather than what is politically possible, there is no hope. We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis.”¹¹

Pope Francis and Thunberg are among those pleading with the world to face the crisis of climate change and climate refugees. We do not need more arguments over whether climate change is real. Nor does it benefit anyone to debate whether those being displaced from their homes by rising waters and growing deserts are refugees or migrants. Nor should we expect a new definition of refugees by the United Nation to include those displaced by climate change will suddenly open the borders of first world countries.

What will help is to admit that we are in a crisis and that it must be addressed now. It is not someone else’s crisis — it is the whole planet’s. What will help move this to action lies at the heart of true conversion — to acknowledge our faults and repent. We must own how we and our country have contributed to climate change, that it has impacted our planet and it has also hurt the poor and vulnerable populations of the world.

True conversion also requires that we make amends and where necessary, restitution. This means we must help our brothers and sisters who have been harmed by our acts of pollution, waste and indifference. Helping our brothers and sisters does not equate to closing our borders and making it more difficult for migrants and refugees to enter our country. It means demanding our politicians find a just and equitable solution to the crisis. It means those countries that have led in pol-

luting our planet should take the lead in reversing this trend and in assisting the victims of climate change.

While some might argue there is a “national emergency” on our southern border, more people are beginning to say there is an existential emergency that transcends our borders. That is what makes it the existential threat of our time.

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NOTES

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