

On this date, June 23, 1972, Hurricane Agnes became America's costliest natural disaster at that time, affecting 15 states, with 119 deaths and \$3 billion in damage. President Richard Nixon described it as "the greatest natural disaster in the history of the United States".

In dealing with the aftermath, President Nixon realized that local and state governments were completely unprepared. He incentivized these governments to prepare for natural disasters by training emergency managers, creating a disaster plan, mitigating disasters and other key steps. This established the groundwork for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), implemented under the Carter Administration several years later in 1979.

Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. Vulnerable communities often face higher risks from extreme heat, flooding, air pollution, and food insecurity. This leads to physical manifestations such as heat exhaustion/stroke, asthma, infectious diseases, cancers, mental health disorders, and immune disorders. Members of these vulnerable communities are commonly low income and/or persons of color. Environmental Racism is the term describing the disproportionate impact to these communities. Hurricane Katrina (2005) was a perfect example of this.

Catholic Social Teaching provides a clear and uncompromising stance on the issue of environmental justice as well as environmental racism:

“Care for the environment represents a challenge for all of humanity. It is a matter of a common and universal duty, that of respecting a common good, destined for all, by preventing anyone from using ‘with impunity the different categories of beings, whether living or inanimate—animals, plants, the natural elements—simply as one wishes, according to one’s own economic needs.’ It is a responsibility that must mature on the basis of the global dimension of the present ecological crisis and the consequent necessity to meet it on a worldwide level, since all beings are interdependent in the universal order established by the Creator. ‘One must take into account the nature of each being and of its mutual connection in an ordered system, which is precisely the ‘cosmos’”. [*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*]

The Environmental Justice Program of Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton is unique across the network of Catholic Charities throughout the US and its territories. We continue to use our informed and inspired Catholic voice to improve air quality, lower carbon emissions, advocate for sustainable community growth and reduce the impacts of climate change in both Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties. We are particularly concerned with how these environmental challenges harm poor and vulnerable communities. We work closely with parishes in the Stockton Diocese and other local faith communities to provide resources on how to better care for creation, even providing a toolkit to teach parishioners about environmental justice, available in English and Spanish: <https://ejstockton.org/parish>.

Additionally, when disasters do occur within our diocesan region, our Catholic Charities Disaster Case Managers provide individualized support in the areas of survivor advocacy, resource and

referral services, and recovery planning. The goal of the Disaster case Management Program is to support the survivors in the recovery process by developing an individualized long-term recovery plan.

Today, as we remember Hurricane Agnes, we also enter into our own “high season” for natural disasters in our region. Catholic Charities remains committed to healing our environment, the prevention of future disasters, and timely assistance and resolution when disasters do happen. We adhere to the words of Pope Francis: “Where communities are particularly at risk of severe storms, flooding or desertification, obligatory contingency planning obviously applies to governments, but also to the church in its vocation to be a welcoming home, the family of God”.

Blessings

Deacon Mike



9-year old Jessica Solomon, from Harrisburg PA, clings to arm of President Richard Nixon as he met with victims of Hurricane Agnes.