



Climate Crisis

Peter McVerry SJ, noted campaigner on homelessness, reflects on how, during the COVID-19 crisis, we have rediscovered our sense of common purpose. Could this sense of a common purpose be required again, for crises to come?

If only we had seen it coming, but there were no warning signs. COVID-19 hit the world like a nuclear bomb. It brought the global economy to its knees, and transformed our daily lives and restricted our movements. Towards the end of March, one third of the world's population was on lockdown. It has, of course, hit poorer nations the hardest, where health services are inadequate – or even non-existent – and where poverty, hunger, war, overcrowding and inadequate sanitation have already ravaged peoples' health.

If only we had seen it coming. We could have produced in advance the test kits, the protective equipment, the ventilators, and built the extra hospitals that were needed. We could have introduced social isolation and safe spacing before the virus even took hold. We could have prevented the worst effects of the virus. But because the virus attacked so suddenly, there was little time to prepare, and even when it began to infect people, we had no idea of the extent of the damage and devastation that it was going to cause. Some were hit harder than others: reduced income, loss of employment, business failures, but no one was spared. It was a pandemic, the likes of which only

come once in a hundred years.

We realised during the course of this virus that the only protection against it was to rediscover our sense of common purpose, which we had lost. We were all in this together. Everyone, without exception, had to play their part: social distancing, washing hands frequently, social isolation when necessary. Those who failed to play their part put themselves and everyone else at risk.

Because we didn't see it coming, the failure of our leaders to take precautionary actions cannot be faulted. When they took the necessary actions, all they could do was to try and mitigate the damage as best they could. But there is another crisis, even more deadly and devastating, coming down the road and we can see it coming. We have about ten years left, at most, to prepare for it. There is no excuse for not taking the actions now that can prevent its worst effects. This crisis is climate change.

Like the virus, climate change, if not addressed in advance, will bring the world economy to its knees and transform our daily lives and routine. It too will hit the poorest nations the hardest. Small, low-lying, island nations will disappear. Hunger in many nations will increase as crops can no



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longer grow. The number of refugees seeking food and shelter in wealthier countries will increase. None of us will be spared. Like the wind before the storm, the world is already beginning to experience its destructive effects – bush fires, floods, drought, storms and extreme temperatures.

Climate change is like no other disaster that has ever occurred in human history. There is no precedent from which we can learn.

However, we can see it coming very clearly. We can prepare. Some of our leaders, however, are in denial, others are hoping, without any evidence, that technological advances will make it go away, and many others, because they do not want to alienate some of their supporters, refuse to take the

radical actions now that can prevent it. History will rightly blame them for what is going to happen.

We look to our leaders for a national and global response, but everyone, without exception, has to play their part. Reducing our carbon footprint, using public transport, cycling or walking instead of getting into the car, reducing our electricity and gas consumption, and reducing waste are the responsibility of all of us. Those who fail to play their part are putting themselves and everyone else at risk.

It is coming, maybe even faster than we think. COVID-19 taught us the need for a common purpose. We now, again, need that sense of common purpose to confront the coming climate crisis. ❤️