



Perils of Climate Change

A timely alert to the issue of our climate crisis from one of Ireland's leaders advocates for understanding this crisis. **Seán McDonagh** is a Columban priest, and organises many courses in Dalgan Park.

Since the beginning of the industrial revolution the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased from 280 parts per million to over 416 parts per million today. The reason is that humans are burning fossil fuels, such as coal, oil and gas to heat their homes, power their industrial and transport sectors and increase their agricultural production.

The report makes it clear that the concentration of carbon dioxide is greater than at any time in the past two million years. As a result, the average global temperature has increased by 1.1 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. The warmer atmosphere, land and oceans has caused more and severe droughts, floods and typhoons in recent years. In July 2021, heavy rains in Germany, Holland and Belgium caused riverbanks to burst, flooding entire towns and villages and destroying highways. More than



160 people lost their lives. Massive wildfires burning in Siberia, Greece, Turkey and California bear the hallmark of climate change.

Most of the carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere over the past 200 years has come from rich, industrialised counties, yet the worst impact is often felt in poor countries such as Mozambique where a prolonged drought is currently causing a famine.

The warmer atmosphere and oceans mean that the late summer Arctic Sea ice has decreased by 40 per cent in a mere 30 years. In this warmer world massive icebergs and glaciers are melting in Greenland, Arctic and the Himalayas leading to a significant rise in sea-levels. If this continues, many coastal cities will be flooded and some island nations such as Tuvalu in the Pacific Ocean may disappear in



Flood rescue in York City Centre after heavy rain

the next fifty years.

While the IPCC report is certain that major climate changes are inevitable and irreversible, there is much that humans can do to stop global warming from intensifying in the coming decades. The most important action is to cut emissions by 50 per cent by 2030 and by 2050 to eliminate them completely.

That will not be easy as 34 per cent of greenhouse gases in Ireland come from agriculture. The Irish government's Food Vision 2030 plans to increase agricultural exports, mainly dairy and livestock by 50 per cent in the next decade. Little thought is given to lowering our methane emissions by reducing our dairy herd which has doubled in the past 10 years. Similarly, there is little talk of moving to more plant-based agriculture, which

would lower Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions significantly.

Retrofitting homes will also be quite expensive. In Ireland it is estimated that retrofitting a house will cost between 25,000 and 50,000 euro. The cost for retrofitting 1.5 million houses will come to between 10 to 15 billion euro. Very few people have access to this kind of money. Since most churches are heated by oil, parishes will have to spend significant resources retrofitting these churches during the next ten years.

People are asking whether Britain is leading by example. In early August 2021, Keith Starmer, the leader of the opposition, warned that Boris Johnson's 'failure of leadership' on tackling climate change could seriously damage the success of a solution to the climate crisis. Others point out that the British government's recent cut in foreign aid has damaged the chance of such success. Asking poor countries to undertake serious climate action while giving them less money to pursue clean energy strategies does not make sense.

Given the seriousness of the crisis, every parish needs to set up a climate change committee and work with other Christian Churches and other religions to address this critical issue of our time. Such a context of support, at local and national level, will make it possible for people to implement the radical changes in our lifestyle which are demanded by this new IPCC report. And the time to achieve this is very short. 💚