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**Heat will drive the next wave of migrants.
Pope Francis thinks it's a grave sin to ignore their plight.**



If you were walking around Midtown New York on Aug. 28, you might have been concerned about rubber soles melting into the pavement. The city reached a scorching 94 degrees just before 3 p.m., a temperature that moved tourists and Midtowners alike into whatever air-conditioned refuge they could find. It has been a dangerously hot summer. In a likely undercount, more than more than 47,000 across Europe and 2,300 people the United States died because of heat in 2023, the hottest year on record. Heat-related death tolls in countries without the cooling resources typical of the United States and Europe were unimaginably higher.

This final heatwave of summer 2024 could have been worse, of course. Much worse. While the U.S. East Coast perspired, cities in the Persian Gulf were roasting under a heat index that meant the “real feel” outside was closer to an astonishing 150 degrees Fahrenheit. Sea surface temperatures in the Gulf had reached 97.7 degrees, one of the highest sea temperatures ever recorded. On Aug. 28, a heat index of 180 degrees and a dew point of 97 degrees were reported in southern Iran. According to extreme weather watcher Colin McCarthy (@US_Stormwatch), commenting on X, “*If these readings are confirmed this would be the highest heat index and dew point ever recorded on Earth.*” *Who could long endure such temperatures?*

There are of course already a number of uninhabitable spots on this big blue marble. Nobody is looking to build a co-op in the middle of the Sahara or at the edge of an ice cliff in Antarctica. But those escalating heat index readings suggest even more parts of the earth will become simply impossible for *homo sapiens* to survive in.

A recent study included in the Proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences worries that in the future, heat extremes “*will lie outside the bounds of past human experience and beyond current heat mitigation strategies for billions of people.*”

Migration has been a defining reality of the human experience; that is not going to change because of 19th-century innovations like national borders. In countries like Iran, Pakistan, China, Myanmar and Bangladesh and in nations across Africa and Latin America, thermal limits will be breached; people will either adapt or, when that is not possible, they will be on the move to escape the heat.

The contemporary immigration crisis that began in Europe in 2015, like a parallel long-term crisis at the U.S. border, is at least partly driven by people escaping excessive heat. Most are forced from home regions by increasingly arid conditions that accompany rising temperatures and by drought that dooms the subsistence agriculture their forebears may have practiced in the same place for centuries. How are people of goodwill supposed to respond?

Pope Francis, speaking at his general audience on Aug. 28, returned to a familiar theme, his concern for the thousands of migrants who perish each year in efforts to reach Europe. “*The tragedy,*” he said, “*is that many, the majority of these deaths, could have been prevented. It must be said clearly: there are those who work*

systematically and with every means possible to repel migrants – to repel migrants. And this, when done with awareness and responsibility, is a grave sin.”

The pope’s comments sparked predictable responses from right-wing voices who have made immigration a preeminent issue in political campaigns both in the United States and Europe and the United States, including smug moronisms like “*well, the Vatican has walls*” or “*if that’s the way he feels,*” the pope should invite the world’s 281 million migrating people to take up residence in Vatican City.

The pope has long been a strong advocate for merciful responses to migrating people, but he may have been responding in his most recent comments to revelations about migrants forced out of North African coastal cities and left to die in the Sahara. Frontex, the E.U. border management and control service, has been paying some nations for “migration management” in efforts to prevent migrants from making perilous attempts to reach Europe across the Mediterranean (not unlike U.S. efforts to persuade Mexico and Central American states to interrupt migrant flows before they reach the southwest border). African governments have been collaborating—for a price—in efforts to suppress migrant numbers to Europe, and some bad actors have taken those efforts to cruel and deadly extremes.

Folks escaping war or human rights violations can make asylum claims that receiving countries have to acknowledge. But the plight of so-called climate change migrants is not formally recognized. Bill O’Keefe, executive vice president for mission and mobilization at Catholic Relief Services, explains, “*The current definition of refugee does not include fleeing from uninhabitable areas because of heat or because of other climate change impacts.*”

People fleeing climate disaster are characterized as economic migrants, meaning their treatment at borders will depend on the whims or domestic needs of the nations where they land. Mr. O’Keefe thinks that has to change.

While they may not fit into protected legal categories, climate migrants do have what should be a noncontroversial moral claim based on the demands of Christian mercy, something the pope was getting at. “*What kills immigrants is our indifference and our throwaway culture,*” Pope Francis said.

Heat and drought are “*massive multipliers*” of all the other reasons people flee “*for their survival and for a better life,*” Mr. O’Keefe says. “*We absolutely should be expecting more people moving for their own survival because of climate change.*”

“*Catholic teaching is clear that people have a right to migrate, and states have a right to manage migration in a safe and humane way,*” Mr. O’Keefe says. “*That’s always going to be a difficult balancing act for our country.*”

But we can do a better job. “*We can help,*” says Mr. O’Keefe.

“*Catholic Relief Services can help farmers grow crops that are more adapted to changing conditions,*” and humanitarian aid agencies like C.R.S. can “*be prepared for disasters and to recover from them more quickly so that these shocks are not as catastrophic as they could be.*”

He suggests wealthy nations like the United States and the nations of Western Europe should have the foresight now to prepare for the inevitable as the world heats up. They surely have the capacity to do so, and that is only fair, since it is Western consumption that has contributed the most to the problem. Affluent states can also commit more resources to confront global warming, and the climate change it is producing. That will help prevent even larger migration waves in the near future.

The West can also help support adaptation efforts like the many that Catholic Relief Services sponsors that help subsistence farmers stay on the land. That would allow people to live where they want and decelerate the migration crisis that so many E.U. and U.S. politicians are worried about.

Other preventative and preparatory measures that make sense in the face of this inescapable contemporary driver of migration are possible now. First, affluent destination states have to acknowledge the reality of it.

“*More people are going to come,*” Mr. O’Keefe says. “*We have to do a better job recognizing that they are coming for legitimate, human reasons.*” Just imagine, he suggests, living “*in those situations where the heat index was 150.*”

We would want to move, too, he says. “*And we’d want to move somewhere where we could survive and our children could find water and food and get an education.*”

Somewhere to escape the heat.

<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2024/08/29/climate-change-migrants-migration-pope-francis-grave-sin-immigrants>