

Combat disaster fatigue with compassion

Remember Hurricane Florence, which slammed into the East Coast in August, killing at least 30 people and destroying property with wind and water?

Remember the earthquake and subsequent tsunami that hit Indonesia in late September? It left at least 2,100 people dead and more than 70,000 homes destroyed.

Remember the magnitude 5.9 earthquake that struck Haiti Oct. 6? At least 12 people died in that poverty-stricken country.

At press time, we still remember Hurricane Michael, which hit the Florida Panhandle as a Category 4 storm Oct. 10. That storm caused at least 33 deaths in Central America and the United States and caused new flooding in areas affected by Florence. But some other disaster could bump that out of your mind by the time this magazine lands in your mailbox.

Given all of that, it's not difficult to understand why we are no longer concerned about Hurricane Maria, the effects of which are still being felt in Puerto Rico more than a year after the Category 5 storm barreled through the Caribbean. More than 3,000 people are estimated to have been killed by the hurricane and its aftereffects.

A similar case can be made for mass shootings such as Parkland, Fla.; Las Vegas; and in our own area at the Rite-Aid distribution center in Aberdeen and at the Capital Gazette in Annapolis.

Do we have disaster fatigue?

At this point, we are so immune to tragedies – natural or man-made – that it's hard to keep mustering compassion. When we are so beset by such things, it's difficult enough to care about our neighbors, much less people several states away or in a country halfway around the world.

Some psychologists believe that disaster fatigue can lead to anxiety and mood problems. And that's just by the people who consume such news. It also leads to fewer people volunteering to help in disaster areas and fewer donations.

It's obviously worse for those directly affected, who have lost homes, livelihoods and loved ones.

We are reminded of the psalmist's phrase, "Oh, that today you would hear his voice: Harden not your hearts" (cf. Heb 3:7-8, 4:7). Fortunately, the Catholic Church has agencies ready to help at home and abroad.

Catholic Charities USA (and its local partner, Catholic Charities of Baltimore) helps people in need while advocating for justice – and not just in times of disaster. If you want to help those affected by the recent hurricanes, make a donation at catholiccharitiesusa.org. CCUSA will forward 100 percent of the funds raised to local Catholic Charities agencies serving the affected communities.

"The scenes of destruction are heart-wrenching, knowing that when we see a place where there once was a house, a family used to live there and is now homeless," Bishop William A. Wack of Pensacola-Tallahassee said in an Oct. 12 letter to the diocese.

Some church buildings, parish halls, rectories, schools and other buildings may be a total loss, but the damage was still being assessed, he added. Insurance will help with rebuilding, Bishop Wack said, who added, "I know that we will come together and do what we need to pull through this."

The U.S. bishops' international humanitarian agency, Catholic Relief Services, is based in Baltimore. CRS works in more than 100 countries around the world, including Haiti and Indonesia. Visit crs.org to help.

Harden not your heart. Combat disaster fatigue with compassion.

Now, if we could only do something about election-ad fatigue.