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Headline: We must act now on climate change

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A few weeks ago, the heads of six Catholic continental bishops' conferences signed a rare joint statement. What topic brought these leaders together? Climate change.

Faced with what they call the "growing urgency of the current ecological and social crisis," continental bishops united to speak as one. Their statement is a clear plea to world leaders to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. They call for "ambitious and immediate action to be taken in order to tackle and overcome the devastating effects of the climate crisis."

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, to which the Philippines belongs, signed the statement. This is important, because solving climate change is a matter of life and death for all of us. The statement signed in Rome offers moral leadership to protect people here at home from the consequences of climate change.

Sadly, as we are all too aware, those consequences are already with us. Five years ago this month, Supertyphoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan) destroyed any illusions we might have about climate change being far off in the future.

Nov. 8 was a day of unthinkable sorrow. As homes were destroyed, communities erased and many thousands of lives lost, we suffered. We encountered the agonizing experience of not knowing our loved ones' fates and the catastrophic experience of loss. But with countless gestures of love and resilience, we endured. We all remember the devastation of the typhoon, but we also remember the small acts of generosity and grace that gave us courage in the days after its passage.

Storms have hit our lands for millennia. But superstorm Yolanda was exactly the type of weather disaster that climate scientists predict for a warming world. Yolanda drew its strength from unusually warm water. Warmer water is a fuel for typhoons. The increasing intensity of superstorms like Yolanda is likely a consequence of climate change.

The poorest among us are more likely to suffer from storms like Yolanda. These sisters and brothers are more likely to live in marginal housing that can be easily blown down or washed away, to have less ability to escape from the storm's path, and to have less resources to rebuild after the storm passes. Just recently, we were given another reminder of this, as Typhoon "Rosita" triggered landslides that killed dozens of people.

As Christians, we believe that caring for "the least of these" is central to our faith. The climate crisis urgently calls us to protect "the least of these."

When Yolanda hit five years ago, the nations of the world were meeting at a UN-convened conference on climate change. Our lead negotiator at those talks, Yeb Saño, was at the UN meeting but speaking frequently with his brother, AG Saño, who was at home in Tacloban, the epicenter of the storm.

As AG worked to uncover his neighbors' bodies, Yeb was tasked with making the world community understand the urgency of the crisis. He wept and pleaded with the negotiators, in a moment that was seen around the world.

Today, the brothers' positions are reversed. Yeb is in Tacloban, attending commemoration services with the survivors. AG is bearing witness on the world stage, walking 1,500 kilometers from the Vatican to Katowice, Poland, the site of this year's UN climate talks. He and other faithful witnesses on The Climate Pilgrimage are crying out for climate justice.

What can be done? We must avoid fossil fuels and build a clean energy economy, and we must do it quickly. Fuels like coal have improved the lives of millions of people, and for that we are truly grateful. However, we now recognize that these fuels do much more harm than good, and stepping away from them is the first step toward protecting all Filipinos.

The world's bishops say that "human dignity and rights, in particular of the most vulnerable, must always be at the center of the climate agenda." I pray that leaders here in the Philippines and at the UN talks will hear them.

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