



Catholic Social Teaching

Heat Wave: A Natural or Social Tragedy

In July 1995, a major heat wave hit the Midwestern United States. If you were that eighty-year-old person, you might not have lived. In the course of one week, over 700 people in the cities of Chicago and Milwaukee died of causes related to the heat. Hundreds of young people were hospitalized, but the elderly, and especially the elderly who lived alone, were most vulnerable.

In August 2003, a major heat wave hit Paris, France. During that month, over 14,000 people died of causes related to the heat. Most of them were elderly. In both Chicago and in Paris, many bodies were not discovered until several days (or more) after the people had died.

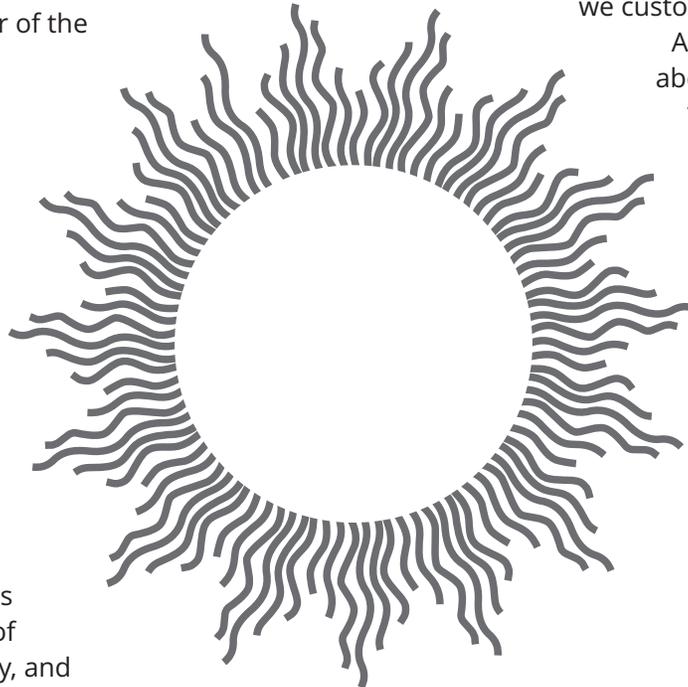
Eric Klinenberg, author of the book *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), was asked if the heat wave of 1995 was primarily a natural disaster or a social disaster. He said, "Of course forces of nature played a major role. But these deaths were not an act of God. Hundreds of Chicago residents died alone, behind locked doors and sealed windows, out of contact with friends, family, and neighbors, unassisted by public agencies or community groups. There's nothing natural about that."¹

In another article, Klinenberg is quoted as saying that these victims "often weren't discovered for days and were found only because neighbors smelled something strange or because mail piled up." He says, "heat waves receive little public attention, not only because they fail to generate the massive property damage and fantastic images produced by other weather related disasters, but also because their victims are primarily social outcasts from whom we customarily turn away."²

Option for the Poor

Christians put the needs of the poor and the vulnerable first. We reach out to and help those who are on the fringes of society— those who are lonely, abandoned, and without social networks, such as family and friends, to protect and care for them.

A woman's comment about the Paris tragedy, 14,000 deaths later, was simply this: "I guess we all learned that making a special effort to check on—or get someone to check on— your neighbor can save a life."



¹"Dying Alone, An Interview with Eric Klinenberg," University of Chicago Press

²"The 1995 Heat Wave: Autopsy of Disaster," July 9, 2002, Northwestern University