



Propane and Firewood

What did people in Minnesota do during this past summer of social distancing? On the backside of a few months sequestered in their homes, people took to the outdoors. Many an evening, gas and charcoal grills were fired up for a delicious meal on the patio. Weekends were spent at lake cabins, and those without cabins filled campgrounds in record numbers. I read that the number of hikers trekking North Shore trails doubled from the previous year, and it was difficult for canoeists to find open campsites in Voyageur's National Park and the BWCA. In addition to all the meals cooked outdoors, be it at lake cabins, at campgrounds or in the boundary wilderness areas, part of the experience many an evening was sitting around a campfire, a practice that will be repeated in many a backyard now that fall is upon us.

All that outdoor cooking and campfires require a good supply of propane and firewood, which brings me to the point of this article. Nearly 90% of Venezuelan families cook with propane gas. Venezuela is blessed with more extensive oil reserves than any other country in the world. Propane, natural gas compressed into a liquid form, is extracted in the process of refining petroleum. Due to the petroleum industry's decaying infrastructure, propane production and availability in Venezuela is suffering a similar fate to that of gasoline. When gas stations are open, people wait in lines of hundreds of cars to buy gas at 50 cents a liter or \$1.90 a gallon. However, stations are rarely open, forcing people to purchase gas on the black market where it is going for \$5 a liter or \$19 a gallon. Back to propane, the government arranges collection sites in the various neighborhoods or barrios. People drop off their propane canisters on a given day and return a few days later to pick them up. Prices are great. A typical 22 lb. canister refill goes for less than 25 cents. The scene on collection day is like a street rally, people crowding around to make sure their canister makes it onto the truck. Unfortunately, such collections have become rare events, going from every couple weeks to every couple months. In the meantime, with other vendors who do have supply, that 25 cent refill goes for up to \$25, a price poor folks cannot afford to pay.



This situation is better for the relatively small percentage of families who have electric stoves and ovens, but even then, frequent power outages become problematic. Here is where firewood comes in. People here in our

part of Venezuela don't waste it on bonfires. They have no desire to make their evenings warmer. Firewood for cooking has become a standard commodity. I regularly get out biking past the undeveloped areas and outskirts of our city. It has become a common sight to see people coming out of the woods and passing by with machete in hand and a load of scavenged firewood on their shoulders or in a wheelbarrow. What they don't use for their own cooking needs will be bundled and sold. Just as Minnesotans who don't have their own supply of firewood can



purchase it at a variety of locations, bundles of firewood are now being sold at many a location around town. Dead trees and downed branches in our parks and woods are all being cleaned out. Tree branches being trimmed at people's homes no longer end up in trash piles but are dried and put to use for cooking.

Even were there to be a change of government opening Venezuela to a tremendous infusion of foreign investment in all of Venezuela's major industries, it would still take years before the country's infrastructure could be restored to the point that petroleum and hydroelectric production levels would be sufficient for Venezuela's domestic needs much less for exportation on which Venezuela's economy previously depended. In the meantime, Venezuela could more quickly develop new localized energy sources with solar and wind power as well as biogas. Already in use in regions of Africa and Asia where other fuels are scarce, a family can produce sufficient biogas in their own home for all their cooking and electrical needs just from table scraps and other organic matter that would otherwise end up in the garbage...so much for propane and firewood!

Points to ponder

What kinds of energy do you consume in your home and your family's activities? Do you know what each form of energy costs? Are you trying to conserve energy for less cost as well as the good of our planet?

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These "Did you know?" papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofst dominic.org or 651-368-7324.