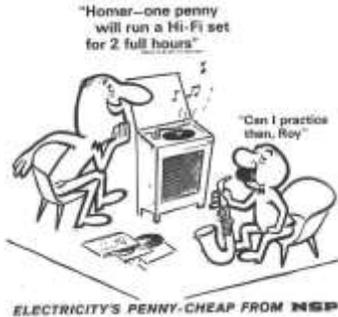


## The Blessings of Water and Electricity

“Electricity is penny cheap!” That was the phrase Northern States Power (now Xcel Energy) used in ad campaigns from 1959 to 1973 promoting more use of electricity. Not my dad’s phrase! He believed that saving pennies results in saving dollars, and was constantly after us to turn off lights when we weren’t using them. Electricity is definitely penny-cheap here. Although consumption is metered in some sections of Puerto Ordaz, the more modern city across the river from us, people here in San Felix pay a flat rate the equivalent of 10 cents a month, a far cry from the average \$90 Minnesota households pay Excel.... even cheaper for the many folks who connect cables directly to power lines and pay nothing. When it comes to water and sewer, there is a wide range of rates in Minnesota determined by each municipality. At 6,000 gallons per month, families pay \$47 in Eden Prairie, \$77 in Minneapolis, \$108 in New Hope. Here in San Felix, families pay around 5 cents, and, as with electricity, many pay nothing. You might think, “How lucky!” True in a way, but there are some significant problems with this.



Many people here consume electricity and water like some folks with food at all-you-can-eat-for-the-same-price buffet restaurants, piling their plates high and wasting a lot. It’s not unusual to see water just left to run from a tap, lights left on in the middle of the day with no one around, and air conditioners (mostly old high energy-consumption models) running full blast with little or no insulation, often with windows and doors wide open. Why spend money insulating when energy is more than penny cheap? My dad would have been aghast!

Developing and maintaining the infrastructure needed to produce and transmit electricity and purify and pump water to hundreds of thousands of homes is expensive. Someone has to pay. Excel can keep electricity surging through power lines to your home because they receive over \$3 billion a year from customers to do so. With so little money generated from consumers here in Venezuela, it falls to the government, which nationalized all private energy producers, to finance far and away the majority of the expenses.

Given the economic woes of Venezuela over the past several years, most of the funds needed to maintain and update the electrical and water infrastructure have been spent elsewhere, leaving the entire system from transmission lines to water mains in poor repair and constantly breaking down. At Guri Dam, once the highest producing hydroelectric power plant in the world, seven of the ten gigantic turbines are no longer functional and transmission lines are so broken down that regional power outages are a regular event. In March of 2019 the entire country was without power for three days, over a week in many areas.



A fire caused by an explosion in a substation here in our city last year.

As far as water is concerned, most barrios like the one where we live now only receive water at night, and it’s rare to go an entire week without water being shut off for an entire day or more. In some parts of our parish people get their water from the Caroni River. In countless locations water gushes from broken water mains while wastewater bubbles up from cracks and potholes in the streets.

With water shortages and electrical outages happening with such regularity, people adjust and take things in stride. Everyone keeps a few buckets or tubs of water to tide them over. If there is not enough pressure for water to get to their houses, they open up fire hydrants and wait in line with buckets and bowls. The rainy season has begun. We’ve had a few good downpours and the river is up several feet. Lots of people collected rainwater in barrels and buckets. When the electricity goes out in the evening, people bring chairs out on the sidewalk and street and turn the outage into a neighborhood block party. When the lights come back on and the water flows, everyone applauds and cheers...and life in the “new normal” goes on.

### Points to ponder

We tend to take blessings like water and electricity for granted until we don’t have them. Have you ever lost power or water for an extended time or a furnace quit working out on a cold winter night or get snowed in and couldn’t get out? If so, how did you get through? What would you do if it was a regular occurrence?

*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 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at [ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org](mailto:ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org) or 651-368-7324.*