

The Water of Life

This Good News is not just a word, but a person, Christ himself, risen and alive! By the grace of the sacraments, the water flowing from his open side on the Cross has become an overflowing spring, "rivers of living water," a flood that no one can halt, a gift that restores life.

Pope Benedict XVI, December, 2006



During this Easter season, we are blessed with the living water that flows from the Paschal Mystery of sacrifice and Resurrection. It is an appropriate time to reflect on water and its importance in faith rituals and in human life.

With water, we are baptized into the community of faith and take on the responsibilities of people of faith. We are blessed with water, and we are called to share our blessings, especially in a time of a growing crisis: more and more people have less access to clean water and adequate sanitation.

The Human Right to Clean Water

Pope Benedict, addressing visiting diplomats in 2006, declared: "Water is much more than just a basic human need. It is an essential, irreplaceable element to ensuring the continuance of life. Water is intrinsically linked to fundamental human rights such as the right to life, to food and to health. Access to safe water is a basic human right. In 2004, Pope John Paul II wrote, 'as a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival, thus everyone has a right to it'."

The United Nations, as part of its "Water for Life" Decade, 2005-2015, has proclaimed every person in the world should have access to at least 20 liters (or 21 quarts) of clean water a day.

The UN promotes the right to water as a basic human right and is encouraging the development of policies to protect current water supplies, to develop sustainable strategies to ensure future water supplies, and to make clean water available to those in poverty at no or low cost. People of faith are called to support these policies.

The Global Water Crisis-Fast Facts

- 1.1 billion people have no clean water; that means 1/6 of the world's population lacks access to safe water.
- In 2006, 700 million people lived in "water stressed" countries (countries that have problems with drought, with access to sufficient water supplies, etc.); by 2025, 3 billion people will live in water stressed countries.
- 2.6 billion people do not have access to adequate sanitation; that is 1/3 of the world population.
- Water-borne disease kills 1.8 million children in developing countries each year, or 1 child every 3 minutes.
- Disease caused by bacteria and viruses in polluted water kills more people than HIV/AIDS or malaria.
- The poor are paying more for water as supplying it becomes a business: slum dwellers in Manila pay more for water than people living in London or New York, who have access to public supplies of clean water.

(all statistics are from www.unesco.org/water/wwap as of 2006)



Catholic Social Teaching on Water

Prayer

The flowing streams of Creation,
Lord, Shower grace upon us.
We are grateful.

Teach us to cherish this gift of water,
This liquid of life,
this healing balm.
Teach us to share this gift of water,
Passing the cup to those who thirst.

Wash us clean and renew in us
The desire for the common good
And for the springs of solidarity.
In Christ's name we pray,
Amen.

Respect for life and the dignity of the human person must be the ultimate guiding norm for all development policy, including water policy. Powerful international interests, public and private, must adapt to serve human needs rather than dominate them.

The human person must be the central point of convergence of all issues pertaining to development and water. The first priority of every country and the international community for sustainable water policy should be to provide access to safe water to those children, women and men who are deprived of such access.

The earth and all that it contains are for the use of every human being and all peoples. This **principle of the universal destination of the goods of creation** confirms that people and countries, including future generations, have the right to fundamental access to goods necessary for their development--such as water. This is the basis for cooperation toward a water policy that gives **priority to persons living in poverty** and those living in areas endowed with fewer resources. Those with the means to control water must not destroy or exhaust the resource of water, which is destined for the use of all.

People must become the **“active subjects”** of safe water policies. It is their creativity and capacity for innovation that makes people the driving force toward finding new solutions. It is the human being who has the ability to perceive the needs of others and satisfy them. Water management should be based on a **participatory approach**, involving users, planners and policy makers at all levels. Both men and women should be involved and have equal voice in managing water resources and sharing benefits of sustainable water use.

In a globalized world the water concerns of the poor become the concerns of all in a prospective of **solidarity**. This solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the **common good**, to the good of all and of each individual. It presupposes the effort for a more just social order and requires a preferential attention to the situation of the poor. The same duty of solidarity that rests on individuals exists also for nations: advanced nations have a very heavy obligation to help the developing people.

The principle of **subsidiarity** acknowledges that decisions and responsibilities pertaining to water usage should take place at the lowest appropriate level. While the water issue is global in scope, it is at the local level where decisive action can best be taken. The engagement of communities at the grassroots level is key to the success of water programs and is one of the essentials of life. Among the important social characters of water is its role in human nourishment, health and sanitation as well as peace and conflict avoidance.

From: *“Water, An Essential Element for Life,”* The Delegation of the Holy See to the Third World Water Forum, March 2003.

