



## Acknowledgements

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Deirdre Mullan, **Mercy Global Concern**  
 777 UN Plaza 6H, New York, NY 10017, USA  
 Tel: +1 646 227 1878 Fax: +1 646 227 1879  
 Email: [mercyun@aol.com](mailto:mercyun@aol.com)  
[www.mercyworld.org](http://www.mercyworld.org)  
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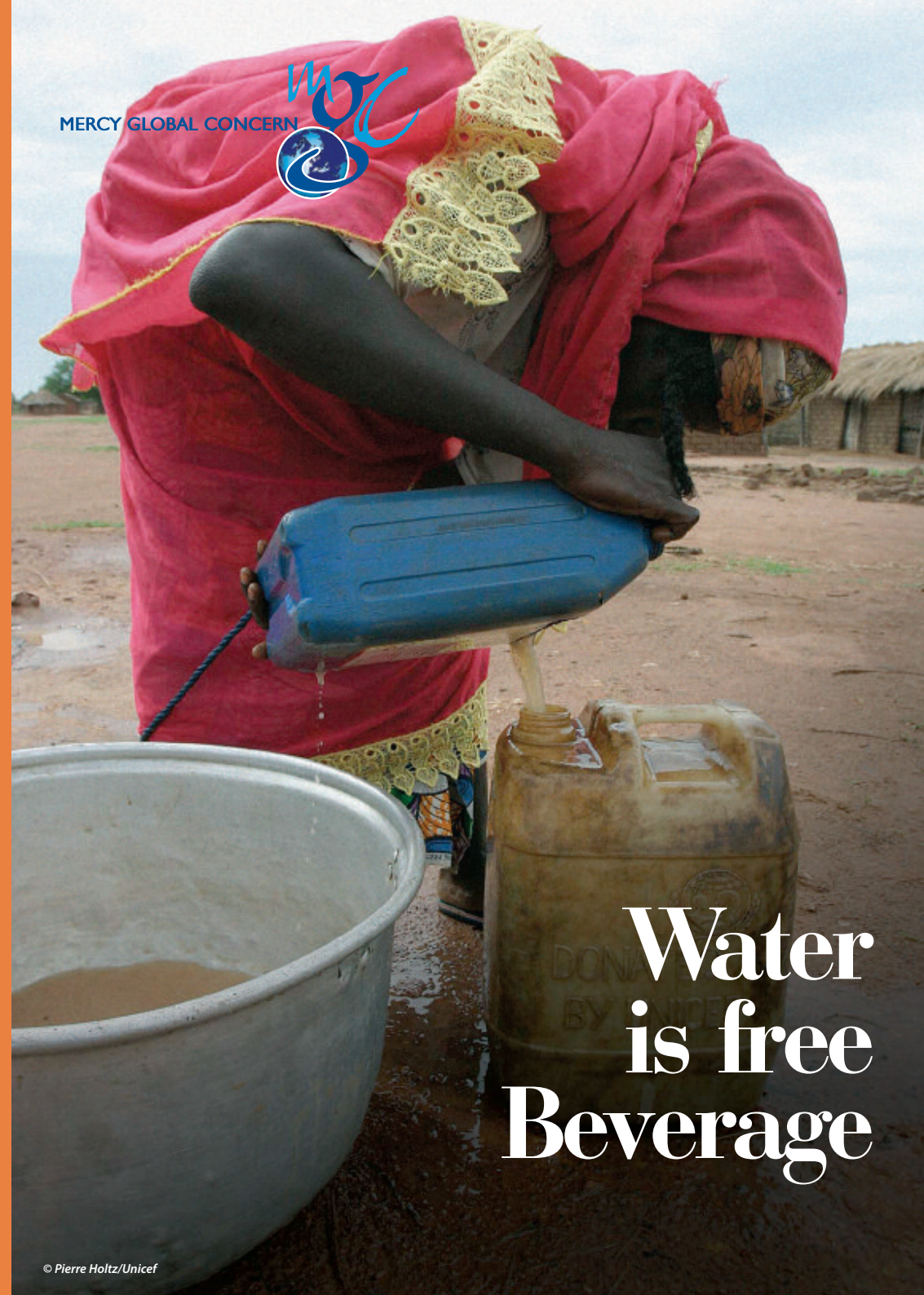
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MERCY GLOBAL CONCERN



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# Water is free Beverage

# Water is free Beverage

Catherine McAuley, Foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, 1840

In 1840, Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, said: "Water is free beverage."<sup>1</sup> If Catherine McAuley lived in the flesh today, she would exert herself and her Sisters to challenge some of the abuses of our world today – including the abuse of using bottled water.

Right now, people living in developing countries often lack access to water for drinking, growing food and practising basic hygiene and sanitation. Privatization by corporations and the diversion of the world's water supply for commercial interests are exacerbated by climate change – a combination that leaves the poor thirsty, hungry and ill. The Sisters of Mercy work throughout the world to provide for the needs of the poor and marginalised, those who suffer the most from water scarcity and the lack of improved sanitation.

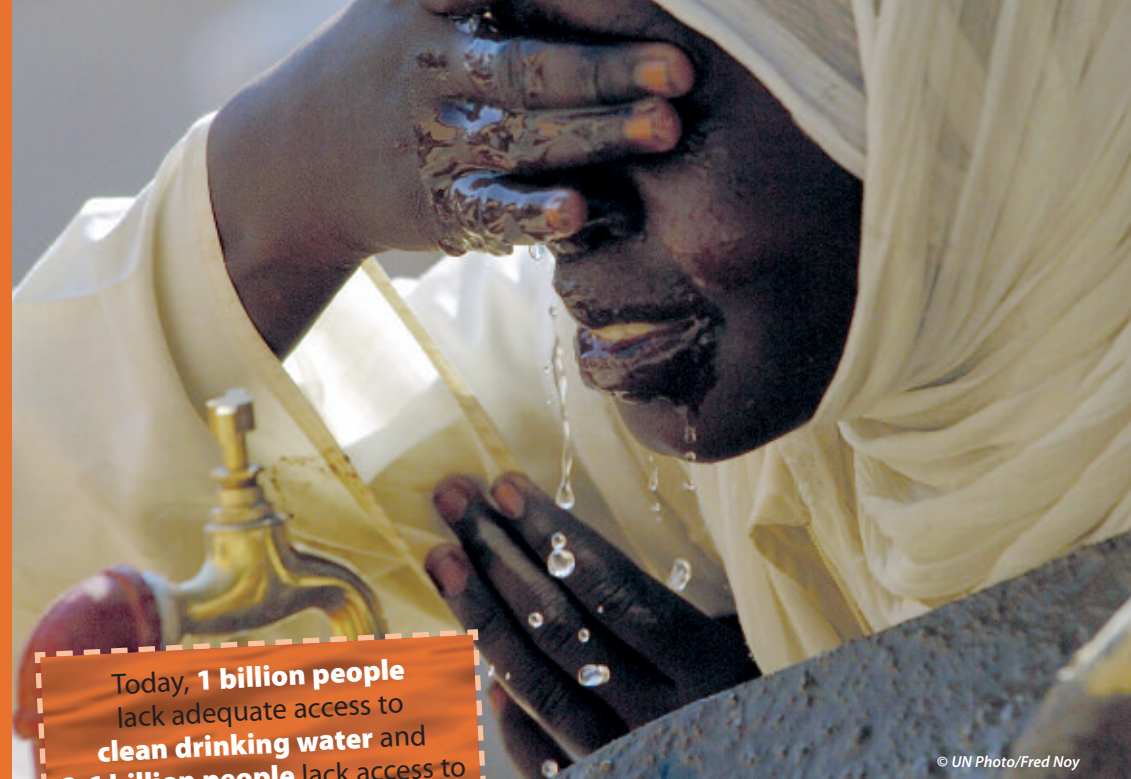
Catherine McAuley,  
Foundress of the Sisters of  
Mercy:

*"Pure sparkling  
spring water,"  
... a "great  
comfort".*

15 January 1941<sup>2</sup>

*"I really think  
a few drinks of  
the waters of  
Birr – hot and  
cold – will cure  
me."*

28 April 1841<sup>3</sup>



© UN Photo/Fred Noy

Today, **1 billion people** lack adequate access to **clean drinking water** and **2.6 billion people** lack access to **basic sanitation**.<sup>4</sup>

As Sisters of Mercy, we are called to recognize the dignity of all human beings and to protect the resources of the earth. Indeed, we can all agree that life is impossible without water; it is one of the most necessary of God's given resources. However, rich nations are using far more than developing nations, diverting resources and denying some people the fundamental right to water. For humanity to enjoy its full dignity, an adequate supply of clean water is indispensable.

Although the earth is abundant in water, only 2.5% of the waters on our planet are fresh water, and most of this is locked up in ice and snow. While global population is growing and the consumption of water doubling every

twenty years, continental rainfall is holding steady. This means that water will continue to get scarcer, a cause for major global concern.

When you flush a toilet, you use the same amount of water as someone in the developing world uses all day to wash, clean, cook and drink.<sup>5</sup>

## Contaminated Water

Water scarcity forces people to consume contaminated water, leading to the spread of waterborne diseases.<sup>6</sup>

**Each year, more than 2.2 million people in developing countries – most of them children – die from preventable diseases such as malaria and diarrhoea, associated with unsafe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene.**<sup>7</sup>





## What We Need Per Day

5 litres for drinking and cooking  
+25 litres to maintain personal hygiene  
+20 litres for food production

**50 litres total per person<sup>8</sup>**

## What We Use

**600** litres per person in the USA

**300** litres in Europe and just

**10-20** litres in sub-Saharan Africa.

***“The village needed water, wanted water.”***

*“I went to the village of Chiquimula, Guatemala, in 1973. There were 153 families with no water. The daily wage was less than a dollar a day, or the equivalent in corn or beans. During the rainy season, water was collected in buckets to save the women from going to the polluted holes to collect it. The needs were many, but access to clean water was the big priority.”*

*“A village water committee was formed, and men, women and children worked very hard to trap the water from a natural spring six miles away in the mountain. Mercy motivated every movement of this project, with the heavy work being undertaken by the people of the village.”*

Sister Caridad, RSM

## Water Scarcity and the Food Crisis

Dealing with water scarcity is not just about thirst. Per person, we need much more water to produce food than we do to drink. With the world's population expected to rise to more than 8 billion people by the year 2025, we will need to be able to improve water efficiency and increase the amount of water available for irrigation.

## Water is a Human Right, not to be Bought or Sold

The United Nations Environment Program has a dire warning: “The world's thirst for water is likely to become one of the most pressing resource issues of the 21st century... in some cases, water withdrawals are so high, relative to supply, that surface water supplies are literally shrinking and groundwater reserves are being depleted faster than they can be replenished by precipitation.”<sup>9</sup>

As water scarcity intensifies, governments around the world, under pressure from transnational corporations, are advocating a radical solution – the privatisation, commoditisation and mass diversion of water. Privatisation of water is virtually imposed on developing countries by the World Bank and the IMF, as both institutions make it a condition for debt relief and funding for water programmes.<sup>10</sup> With 5.5 billion people expected to face water

shortage or scarcity by 2025, multinational corporations are rushing to control the water supply, purchasing groundwater and distribution rights wherever they can.

According to *Fortune Magazine*,<sup>11</sup> the annual profits of the water industry in 2002 were already substantially higher than those of the pharmaceutical sector, close to 1 trillion dollars. We are talking **about huge profit potential as the water crisis worsens.**<sup>12</sup>

However, the Sisters of Mercy and others who work on behalf of poor people have seen how treating water like any other commodity further decreases access. The United Nations recognises access to water as a human right. The November 2002 ruling of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that access to adequate amounts of clean water for personal and domestic use is a fundamental human right.<sup>13</sup>



**By 2025, 2/3 of the world's population – about 5.5 billion people – will live in areas facing moderate to severe water stress.**<sup>14</sup>

We are called to reverence Earth and work more effectively toward the sustainability of life and toward **universal recognition of the fundamental right to water.**

*Sister of Mercy, 2005 Critical Concerns, USA*

“The idea that water can be sold for private gain is still considered unconscionable by many,” says James Olson, one of America’s preeminent attorneys specialising in water– and land-use law. “But the scarcity of water and the extraordinary profits that can be made may overwhelm ordinary public sensibilities.”<sup>15</sup>

The bottled water industry is an important component in the drive to commoditise what is a basic human right: access to safe and affordable water. Estimates variously place worldwide bottled water sales at between \$50 and \$100 billion each year.<sup>16</sup>

## Water and the Millennium Development Goals

In September 2000, world leaders came together to adopt the United Nations Millennium Declaration, committing their nations to a new global partnership to reduce extreme poverty, and setting out a series of time-bound targets – with a deadline of 2015 – that have become known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

**Target: To reduce by half the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.**

Progress has been made on the MDGs, specifically in increasing access to safe drinking water. However, the latest report on MDGs highlights access to improved sanitation as one of the areas desperately in need of accelerated progress. In order to meet the target, the number of people using improved sanitation facilities must increase by about 1.4 billion in the next six years.<sup>18</sup>

# 5:1

It takes 5 litres of water to produce and distribute just 1 litre of bottled water.<sup>19</sup>

Even in countries where the poor suffer from lack of access to clean water, the rich can take their choice of bottled waters. In Brazil, for example, there are 74 brands of water, but 42% of the residents in rural areas don’t have sustained access to clean water.<sup>20</sup> The bottled water industry is big business.

**Here’s a look at bottled water brands in countries where the Sisters of Mercy currently work:**

Argentina (26 brands)	Lebanon (5 brands)
Australia (55 brands)	Mexico (16 brands)
Bolivia (3 brands)	New Zealand (22 brands)
Brazil (74 brands)	Pakistan (19 brands)
Cambodia (1 brand)	Peru (5 brands)
Canada (91 brands)	Philippines (6 brands)
Chile (7 brands)	Samoa (1 brand)
France (216 brands)	South Africa (52 brands)
Guatemala (3 brands)	Uganda (2 brands)
Ireland (15 brands)	United Kingdom (157 brands)
Italy (586 brands)	USA (183 brands)
Jamaica (2 brands)	Zimbabwe (1 brand)
Kenya (18 brands)	

## Bottled Is Not Better – 3 Reasons Not to Drink Bottled Water

Bottled water is healthy water – or so marketing departments would have us believe. In reality, bottled water is just filtered tap water that is expensive, bad for the environment, and diverts resources from the developing world.

**1. It’s more expensive than gasoline.** A bottle of water costs approximately \$1 more than an equal amount of gasoline. That’s why there’s no shortage of companies that want to get into the business. In terms of price versus production costs, bottled water puts the ‘big oil’ industry to shame.

**2. Plastic bottles are bad for the environment.** Plastic is derived from coal and oil, both non-renewable materials. Most bottles end up in landfills, but even recycling requires the plastic to be burned, creating two toxic chemicals: dioxins and furans – said to cause cancer and disrupt the body’s hormones. The production of a single plastic bottle releases 250 grams of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.<sup>17</sup>

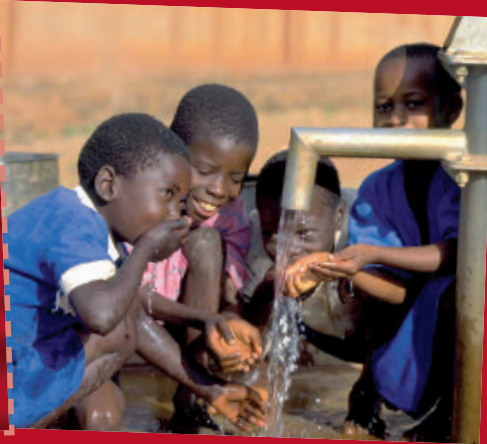
**3. It distracts from providing access to clean water for all.** Only the world’s rich can afford to switch their water consumption to bottled sources. Once distanced from public systems, these consumers have little incentive to support the provision of safe, clean water to all. We are literally pouring money into bottled water when we could be increasing access to clean potable water.



## The Poor Pay More

Poor residents of big cities in South Asia often have to fight for buckets of water delivered via truck, a process that is time-consuming and expensive. "The rich end up paying just a fraction of the price to water their lawn than the poor do just to stay alive," says William Fellows, water, sanitation and health adviser for UNICEF/South Asia.<sup>21</sup>

The population of Nairobi, Kenya, pays five times more for one litre of water than a resident of North America.<sup>22</sup>



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## Water and the Girl Child

In Nigeria, the construction of a tourist resort on the Obudu plateau led to deforestation and exacerbated pre-existing pressures on water resources and the environment. The local women complained about wasted time in collecting water, poor water quality and poor family health. Women leaders were elected onto the management committee and became involved in the construction and maintenance of a water reservoir. The reduced time spent collecting water allowed women more time for generating income through farming and marketing. Moreover, the women's healthcare burden was reduced, with a 45 per cent reduction in cases of diarrhoea in 2004.<sup>23</sup>



© Action Against Hunger Nepal

## Free, easy access to water means freedom for girls

In the spirit of Catherine McAuley's commitment to women and children, the Sisters of Mercy work across the globe for girls' education. When it comes to ensuring that girls complete their schooling, access to clean water at home, and improved sanitation facilities at school, are of central concern. UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women) estimates that in developing countries, women and girls spend 8 hours per day gathering water for their families, carrying 15-20 litres on each trip, an activity that steals precious time from their education and development.<sup>24</sup> Also, schools without sanitation facilities and flushable toilets often force girls who are menstruating to stay at home.

As girls are more likely than boys to be kept home from school to take care of basic family needs like fetching water, easy access to clean water is therefore critical for another of the Millennium Development Goals: To ensure that by 2015 children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

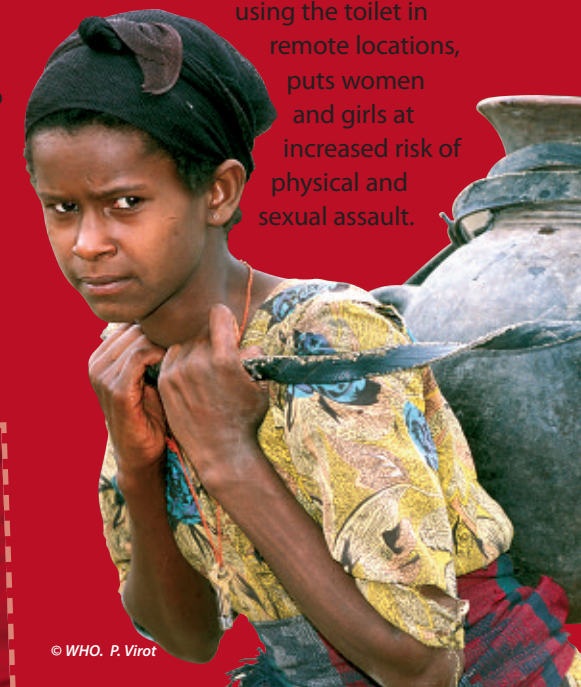
**1 in 10 school-age African girls** do not attend school during menstruation or drop out at puberty because of the absence of clean and private sanitation facilities in schools.<sup>25</sup>

In Pakistan, a school sanitation project with separate facilities for boys and girls helped **boost girls' school attendance by 11 per cent per year on average**, from 1992 to 1999.<sup>26</sup>

## Access to water and private sanitation keeps girls safe

Convenient access to water and sanitation facilities increases privacy and reduces risk to women and girls.

Travelling long distances for water, or using the toilet in remote locations, puts women and girls at increased risk of physical and sexual assault.



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## Clean potable water for all

We who are committed to the Gospel know that one step towards improving the lives of people living in poverty is to avoid buying water in disposable bottles and instead to support the use of clean potable water, available for all. This hope is real. There are good grounds for it. Something is clearly afoot. Local citizens' movements are emerging, including many Sisters of Mercy, associates and friends, who are all trying to create an environment which epitomizes Catherine's words of 1840:

"Water is free beverage."

## In Praise of Water<sup>27</sup>

*The imagination of the  
primeval ocean*

*Where the first forms of life  
stirred*

*And emerged to dress the  
vacant earth*

*With warm quilts of colour...*

*The courage of a river to  
continue belief*

*In the slow fall of ground,*

*Always falling further*

*Towards the unseen ocean...*

*Seldom pushing or straining  
Keeping itself to itself  
Everywhere all along its flow...*

*Let us bless the humility of  
water*

*Always willing to take the  
shape*

*Of whatever otherness holds  
it...*

*The innocence of water,  
Flowing forth, without thought  
Of what awaits it,*

*The refreshment of water,  
Dissolving the crystals of  
thirst.*

*Water: voice of grief  
Cry of love*

*In the flowing tear.  
Water: vehicle and idiom  
Of all the inner voyaging  
That keeps us alive.  
Blessed be water  
Our first Mother.*

by John O'Donohue

