

Water for the World

A Reflection on World Water Day 2017

by Mary C. Sullivan, RSM

A fearsome question could well be on our lips at the end of our human days: “Lord, when was it that we saw you thirsty and did not care for you?” And Christ may then have reason to answer: “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matt. 25: 44-45). He may also ask us: How come you in the 21st century did not read “the signs of the times,” did not take seriously the basic and universal right to water, and did not hear the cry of vulnerable peoples who “have no access to clean drinking water” (Laudato Si’, #28)?

How come you continued to drink bottled water (when you experienced no true emergency), and how come you wasted water and polluted it with your unneeded chemicals, while “each day a thousand children die[d] of water-related diseases” (Pope Francis, “The Human Right to Water,” Pontifical Academy of Sciences, February 24, 2017)? How come you did not alter your own lifestyle and your personal, institutional, and governmental habits?

The well of Earth's water is the most necessary and precious material gift in the Creation of our planet. In his Canticle, Francis of Assisi praises God for Sister Water, for “greatly useful, lowly, precious, chaste is she.” Astro-scientists continually search for signs of water on other planets, knowing that only where there is water are living organisms possible.

Most of us are not scientists and were not educated as scientists. Nonetheless, as the Mercy family we are profoundly committed, from our very founding, to the removal of debilitating ignorance. Such ignorance may presently include our own personal and communal ignorance about Earth, about current global conditions, and about water.

Therefore, we must now study and learn the current and harsh realities surrounding water, that humble substance that sustains all created life – all plants, all animals, all human beings, and all food. The United Nations World Water Reports and other environmental studies will help us. And then we must strenuously act and advocate, for the protection and just management and governance of Earth's water.

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Through the Mercy International Reflection Process, hundreds (perhaps thousands) of us have been contemplating the gift of water. But contemplation and reflection, no matter how reverent, are not enough. “Our right to water is also a duty to water...an inseparable duty.... God the Creator does not abandon us in our efforts.... But the work is up to us, the responsibility is ours” (Ibid).

So, if we truly wish to take Matthew 25: 31-45 seriously, we must not only alter our personal and communal lifestyles, which often give priority to our own “convenience” and “comfort.” We must also act “to bring about political and juridical commitments” to support the universal right to water (Ibid.). We must put our words and realizations to work – to defend safe, clean water and slake the thirst of the millions who do not have it at all, as in Somalia today, and the millions more who do not have it at the twist of a kitchen faucet.

To act on behalf of water is a complicated and difficult task. Competing economic and political interests often do not place Matthew 25 at the top of their decisive criteria. Moreover, the sheer magnitude of what’s to be advocated can overwhelm us; or worse, short-sighted indifference can shade our consciences. Then water is contaminated by fertilizers, detergents, and needless cosmetics; impervious corporations drain aquifers to bottle water for profit, or contaminate them with the waste from fracking; governments treat water not as a human right, but as a commodity available to the highest bidder; and “developed” countries (the word is often a misnomer) fail to help vulnerable countries where global warming causes persistent drought conditions.



To turn all this around, we ourselves, our religious and social institutions, and our nations will need to surrender to the integral ecological conversion that Pope Francis urges (*Laudato Si'*, #216-221) – in very small and very large ways, from not showering every day to getting our own governments and the United Nations to enact binding clean water regulations and distribution and conservation measures. Contrary to the nationalist rhetoric we may hear, our “town” is now global, the size of “we” and “us” has expanded, and the geographic range and responsibilities of Matthew 25 have enlarged.

On Good Friday, we will hear Jesus say from the cross “I am thirsty” (John 19:28), an avowal that expresses both his bodily pain and his desire for God’s embrace. As we hear his words, let us also hear and heed the parched cries from Earth’s numerous Calvaries where today our sisters and brothers cry out for safe, clean drinking water, not the vinegar of the world’s indifference and neglect.

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