



Matthew 25

...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine,
you did for me.

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Clean Water: Some of us have it, others don't

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“...they could not drink the water, because it was too bitter...” (Exodus 15:23)

Water is perhaps undeniably the world's most valuable commodity. Access to water is a basic human right. Less than 1% of the earth's water is available for consumer use. Imagine if all the water on the entire planet fits into a bathtub. In that bathtub, the amount of water available for human consumption is equal to one teaspoon. This precious substance is often taken advantage of and squandered. Water is life. This is evident throughout the history of the human race. Our civilizations have evolved along coasts and rivers. Having too little to provide for our growing global population is a fear that constantly troubles many people.

The agricultural industry is the leading consumer of water: two-thirds of our water is utilized to produce food. Much sacrifice and compromise will be required by those in this field to ensure that there will always be enough water for future generations. Techniques such as water harvesting and simple irrigation systems are considered proven technologies of more efficient water management. Individuals should also be concerned with making the most of natural rainfall, a natural solution to the impending water shortage. Taking advantage of all water resources should be made a primary objective of farmers, ranking as high on the priority list as crop yield. The leaders in the field should emphasize advanced hybrids and biotech seeds that will help reduce the use of water by farmers without introducing detrimental cost on yield or quality. In addition to biotechnology, plant breeders can use conventional breeding methods selecting plants featuring better-adapted root systems that can take advantage of the earth's groundwater, thereby reducing the need for heavy irrigation. In general, the likelihood of running out of potable water is infinitesimally small because, as a whole, humanity will not permit it.

Americans use nearly 100 gallons of water at home each day, while millions of the world's poorest survive on fewer than 5 gallons. In developing countries, people walk an average of 3.7 miles to get to water and it is often unsafe and contaminated by untreated wastewater, a leading source of infectious diseases including hepatitis, typhoid, guinea worm, and cholera. Dirty water and lack of a toilet and proper

hygiene are responsible for killing 3.3 million people around the world each year. Although, in many cases, the use of technology as simple as a filter can be enough to significantly reduce the number of deaths associated with water-related diseases. In addition, lack of water often leads to violence in many countries.

The number one thing Americans can do is strive to live in solidarity with the rest of the world. Brainstorm ways of conserving water in your own home. Every person has a contribution to make and no amount of effort is too small. As Catholics we are called to live by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. In structuring our lives after this model, we may find that to not do everything in our individual power to conserve water for the benefit of all mankind is to commit a terrible act against our fellow man. Water has the potential to change economies, social dynamics and improve the quality of life for many cultures if used more efficiently by everyone on the planet.

An extreme example can be emulated from Louise Pape of northern New Mexico. Ms. Pape bathes three times each week in a military fashion (wet body, turn off water, lather up, rinse and get out). She reuses her drinking cup for several days, recycles her dishwater to water house plants, and reuses her unheated shower water to flush her toilet. On average, Louise Pape utilizes approximately ten gallons of water each day. Compare that to the national average of one hundred gallons used daily! While Ms. Pape's example is about a lifestyle, this level of commitment is not necessarily feasible for all. We can, however, derive some hope and inspiration from her extreme dedication to conserving water. Considering that farmers have the greatest potential for becoming more efficient in using water, we can see that it is far from impossible to achieve better water management.

References

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Catholic Social Teaching

Respect for life and the dignity of the human person is the ultimate guiding norm for all development policy, including water policy. In issues such as development and water, policies must be centered on the human person. The priority for sustainable water policy should be to provide access to safe water to the people who are deprived of such access, as stipulated by the Church's option for and with the poor and vulnerable.

The principle of the universal destination of the goods of creation affirms that Earth and all that it contains are for the use of every human being. All people, including future generations, have the right to fundamental access to goods necessary for their development - such as water.

In a globalized world the water concerns of the poor become the concerns of all in a prospective of solidarity, a commitment to the good of all and of each individual. 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, involving users, planners and policy makers. The engagement of communities at the grassroots level is key to the success of water programs.

"I was thirsty and you gave me water to drink." (Matthew 25:35)

Facts

- 97.5% of the earth's water is naturally salty; 2% of freshwater is locked in snow and ice, leaving the remaining 1% for humans
- The amount of moisture on the earth has not changed; the water the dinosaurs drank millions of years ago is the same water that falls as rain today
- 16 billion gallons are produced by the world's 14,450 desalination plants
- 1/6 of the world's current population does not have access to fresh water; that is 1 out of every 8 people!
- 300 billion people obtain their water from the sea or from brackish groundwater that is too salty to consume
- More than 10% of water is often lost to leakage due to century-old pipes in many Western cities

What others are doing

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) partners with groups ranging from local governments and community water associations to international organizations on projects designed to improve water supplies for domestic, productive, and environmental purposes in the poorest of the world's communities. In 2008, some 80 CRS projects in East Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, South Asia, and Southeast Asia focused at least in part on water and sanitation. Projects identify local needs and challenges through participatory assessments, and build capacity in local partners and communities. Participants include households, community water committees, women's groups, farmers' associations, schools, and health clinics. (www.crsprogramquality.org/water-and-sanitation)

Emergency water purification procedures: One example is the SODIS method that is being implemented globally in cooperation with international relief agencies like CRS, Red Cross and CARE to provide drinking water to approximately four million people! The program is designed to be simple, free and effective. You can try this at home. Here's how: retrieve discarded water bottles; remove labels and fill with any water that is not too murky from a creek, standpipe, or puddle; place the bottle on a piece of metal in full sunlight for six hours, and the UVA radiation from the sun will kill viruses, bacteria and parasites in the water, rendering it safe for human consumption. [Tips to aid the process: use bottles of clear PET plastic rather than glass; DO not disturb the bottles while they sit in the sun; store water in the bottle to prevent recontamination.] (www.sodis.ch/index)

What can you do

Support: The Global Water Initiative is a coalition of seven international organizations, including Catholic Relief Services, dedicated to providing long-term access to clean water and sanitation in some of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in thirteen countries across Africa and Central America. (www.globalwaterinitiative.com)

Act

At home: shorten your showers; turn off the water while brushing teeth, washing hands or rinsing dishes; install a low-flow showerhead or toilet; use only a pencil-width flow of water at the sink; recycle batteries to avoid contaminating ground water post-disposal; reuse dishwater or collect rainwater to water house plants and gardens; pour unfinished drinking water into a pet's water dish.

At work: use reusable mugs for the water cooler and your morning coffee; avoid continuously running water when washing hands; promote water conservation practices by sharing these tips with coworkers.

*"By its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many, and it must be used rationally and in solidarity with others. The distribution of water is traditionally among the responsibilities that fall to public agencies, since water is considered a public good. If water distribution is entrusted to the private sector it should still be considered a public good. *The right to water*, as all human rights, finds its basis in human dignity and not in any kind of merely quantitative assessment that considers water as a merely economic good. Without water, life is threatened.*

Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right."
(Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church", 2004)