

## THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND WORLD WATER DAY

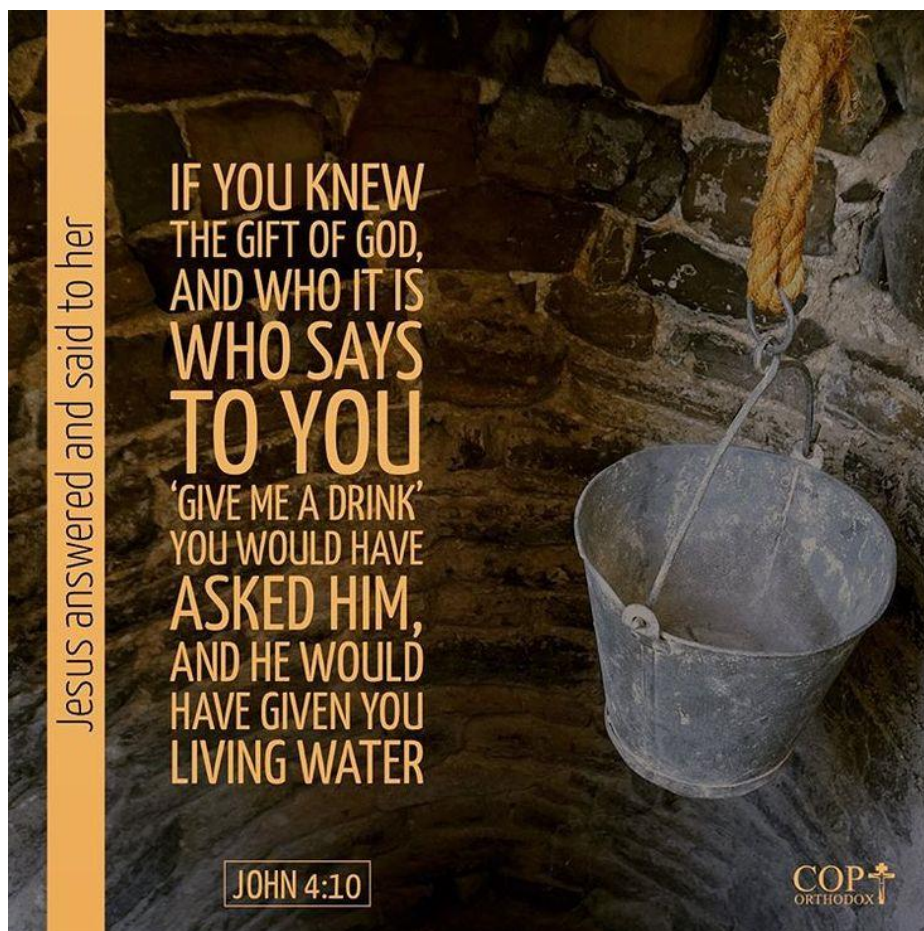


Figure 1: John 4:10

For Catholics, as indeed for most Christians, water is much more than being essential for the life of Creation, including us human beings. Water has profound spiritual and sacramental dimensions because Jesus Christ, the Son of God, referred to himself as “**living water**.” Who of us can but be moved by Jesus saying to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well,

“If you knew the gift of God and who it is saying to you ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you **living water**.” [John 4:10]

Water is sacred. The source of all life. Without water there can be no life. No earthly life, and no spiritual life. We are taught in the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC] that the “symbolism of **water** signifies the Holy Spirit’s action in Baptism, since after the invocation of the Holy Spirit it becomes the efficacious sacramental sign of new birth...” [CCC 694]

Water is sacred. Water should never be a commodity to be sold to the highest bidder, or frivolously wasted while three billion of our neighbours across Earth, our Common Home, have no access to safe drinking water. Indeed, the Catholic Church teaches in the Social Doctrine of the Church [SDC] that the right to water is a fundamental human right:

**“The right to water, as all human rights, finds its basis in human dignity and not in any kind of quantitative assessment that considers water as merely an economic good. Without water, life is threatened. Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right.”** (The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 2004, #485)

Frank Turner, SJ wrote the reflection “Water in Catholic Social Teaching” in 2013, which you are invited read by using this link: <https://www.ecojesuit.com/water-in-catholic-social-teaching/> (You may want to check updated statistics, however.)



Figure 2: © BOSCO PETERS

**“Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,  
who is very useful; and humble and precious and chaste.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures* 1224

### **“WATER” in the Laudato Si’ encyclical letter**

“Water” is of such great importance to Pope Francis that he refers to it 47 times in the Laudato Si’ [LS] encyclical! In this article we examine what Pope Francis teaches in **“THE ISSUE OF WATER”**, which is Section II of the first chapter **“WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OUR COMMON HOME?”**.

The Holy Father prefaces his teaching on ‘water’ with the words of alarm that he has sounded repeatedly throughout the encyclical letter:

**“We all know that it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding had reached unprecedented levels. The exploitation of the planet has already exceeded acceptable levels and we still not have not solved the problem of poverty.”**

[LS#27]

In **“THE ISSUE OF WATER”** Pope Francis addresses four points at issue.

**“Fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.”** [LS#28]

1. The basic problem relating to sustainably accessing sufficient water for life and livelihood for all is that **‘...now in many places demand exceeds the sustainable supply...’**. Unequal consumption, or rather, overconsumption by some of the wealthier and more powerful populations has led to water shortages in large cities, and tragically, to the development of ‘water poverty’ in, especially Africa.

In many parts of Africa ‘water poverty’ translates into not having sufficient clean water for consumption, hygiene, sanitation, healthcare and the sustainable production of food. It translates into children and women spending the better part of their daylight hours seeking drinking water and carrying the heavy load of water back to their homes. In turn, this means that children are denied the right to a sustained basic education, while the women cannot contribute to either growing food or working to buy food. Hence the chances of breaking through the cycle of poverty are factually very slim, if not to say, unrealistic.

To watch a VIDEO of Pope Francis speaking on the topic “Water, the most essential element for life” use the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UdNzFatRn4>



Figure 3: © UNICEF/UN060803/Dejongh

2. In paragraph 29 Pope Francis states unequivocally: ‘**...one particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor**’. [LS#29] Here our Holy Father focusses on two issues:

- i. Prevalence of water-borne diseases and the ensuing suffering of poor and vulnerable people;
- ii. Pollution and contamination of underground water.

The issue at stake is the paucity of safe (uncontaminated) and unpolluted drinking water in many parts of the world. Linked to inadequate access to sanitation and to malnutrition, the child and infant mortality rate is very high as poor and malnourished children succumb to preventable diseases such as cholera and dysentery.

The second issue is that of pollution and contamination of groundwater. While the main culprits are certainly the mining companies, industry and agribusinesses, everyday products like household and industrial detergents, chemical fertilisers for gardens and beauty care products also contribute to groundwater pollution and contamination as well as of rivers, lakes and the seas. This is of great concern in countries and regions where there is a glaring lack of pertinent regulations and controls for water usages

To read the UNICEF press release ‘**Children suffering dire drought across parts of Africa are ‘one disease away from catastrophe**’ use the following link:

<https://www.unicef.org/wca/press-releases/children-suffering-dire-drought-across-parts-africa-are-one-disease-away-catastrophe>

3. In paragraph 30 Pope Francis expresses consternation that, despite the lack of equal access to and availability of safe drinking water for all people, there is a tendency to commodify water, subjecting it to the laws of the market:

*“Yet access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights. Our world has a grave social debt to the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to life consistent with their inalienable dignity. [LS#30 italics in the original text]*

The Holy Father then appeals for a fund that supports water, hygiene and sanitation services among the poor. However, he does censure those developing countries which have more than enough safe and clean water, but which waste water.

Pope Francis reaches the conclusion this reckless wasting of water **'shows that the problem of water is partly an educational and cultural issue, since there is little awareness of the seriousness of such behaviour within the context of great inequality.'**[LS#30]

4. In paragraph 31 Pope Francis decries that a  
**'...greater scarcity of water will lead to an increase in the cost of food....Some studies warn that an acute water shortage may occur within a few decades unless urgent action is taken. The environmental repercussions could affect billions of people; it is also conceivable that the control of water by large multinational businesses may become a source of major conflict in this century.'**

By way of a conclusion, consider the very profound question set by Daniel P. Horan, OFM when he refers to Jesus's final words on the Cross: **"I THIRST"**. [John 19:28]  
Horan asks, **what does it mean if the Body of Christ "thirsts" today?**

To listen a video recording of Horan's reflection of *Laudato Si'* chapter 1, part 1 which specifically contemplates on the question of 'water', use the following link: <https://eco-catholic.com/understanding-laudato-si-episode-3-our-common-home/>