



**PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE  
VATICAN CITY**

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**WATER, AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT FOR LIFE**

**Introduction**

In 2003, the Holy See delegation to the 3rd World Water Forum in Kyoto prepared a document on water entitled "Water, an Essential Element for Life." The text noted and highlighted ethical considerations which must underlie any reflection on the issue of water. The document, starting from the point that water plays a central and critical role in all aspects of life, analyzed water as a social good, an economic good and an environmental good while briefly treating a limited number of other issues impacting water. In concluding, the text highlighted the central role of the human being in caring for the environment and its constitutive elements.

Since 2003 the awareness and attention on the issue of water and sanitation has increased. There is greater recognition that water, particularly access to safe water, is at the root of some of society's pressing concerns. Today common agreement exists that the survival of humanity and all species on earth depends to a great degree on the fate of water.

The 4th World Water Forum, organized by the World Water Council together with the Government of Mexico, presents an opportunity to reflect attentively on the issue of water. Access to safe water and sanitation is important for the human family and thus of direct concern to the Holy See and the Catholic Church. The Holy See has chosen to present this update to its initial observations contributed on the occasion of the World Water Forum in Kyoto.

**I. Water: A concern for all**

"Today the means of mass communication have made our planet smaller, rapidly narrowing the distances between different peoples and cultures." [1] This "togetherness," our ability to know almost instantly about the needs of others, challenges us to share their situation in life, even their difficulties. Despite the great advances made in science and technology, each day we see how much suffering there is in the world due to poverty, both material and spiritual. The times call for a new readiness to assist our neighbors in need. [2]

The problem of water scarcity and water deprivation is experienced most dramatically by men and women living in poverty and often in the poorest countries. However, the concept of "family of nations" recalls that responsibility for the destiny of the less favored countries rests also with those more richly blessed. In a family, every member is responsible for each and every other member, the suffering of one becomes the suffering of all. The many children who die each year in poor countries due to the lack of access to

safe water and sanitation are a loss for the future of the whole world and for humanity as a whole.

The challenge faced today in the water and sanitation sector is also an opportunity, both from a social as well as an economic perspective. Properly addressed, this challenge has the possibility to unlock huge potential and to transform countless lives. Investments for safe water and sanitation can, in their turn, be an engine for accelerated economic growth, sustainable development, improved health and reduced poverty.

The requirements of developing countries in the water sector are at times so great that they cannot be resolved by developing countries themselves. Developing countries require the necessary know-how and technology along with developmental assistance of a scale sufficient to address major projects needed to guarantee access to safe water and sanitation for present and future generations. Development efforts in poor countries risk being in vain without a deep and worldwide engagement in favor of increased access to safe water and sanitation. In an authentic spirit of solidarity, rich countries need to foster increased assistance to be placed at the service of the poor.

## **II: Water: Fundamental good of God's creation**

Water is a natural resource vital for the survival of humanity and all species on earth. As a good of creation, water is destined for all human beings and their communities. God intended the earth and all it contains for the use of all, so that all created things would be shared fairly by humankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.[3]

Human beings, and the communities in which they live, cannot do without water since it corresponds to their primary needs and constitutes a basic condition of their existence. All depend upon the fate of water. Access to safe water and sanitation is indispensable for the life and full development of all human beings and communities in the world.

Common good is understood as the social conditions that allow people to reach their full human potential. Water is a universal common good, a common good of the entire human family. Its benefits are meant for all and not only for those who live in countries where water is abundant, well managed and well distributed. This natural resource must be equitably at the disposal of the entire human family.

## **III: A human right to water**

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 a Message to the Bishops of Brazil 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."

A human right is generally protected by internationally guaranteed standards that ensure fundamental freedoms for individuals and communities. It principally concerns the relationship between the individual and the State. In this regard, governmental obligations vis-à-vis the right can be broadly categorized as: to respect it, protect it and fulfill it. However, the international human rights system today lacks an explicit agreed acceptance of the right to access to safe water.

Yet, a range of international treaties and declarations are invoked when stating that the access to a regular supply of safe water clearly falls within the category of guarantees essential for securing an adequate standard of living.[4] All States Parties to such

instruments have an obligation to ensure that the minimum essential level of any right is realized; in this case of the right to water, which is considered to mean non-discriminatory access to enough water to prevent dehydration and disease.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recalls that the full realization of these rights has to be achieved progressively utilizing, to the maximum, available resources.[5] The principle recognizes the constraints of available resources and identifies a constant and continuing duty of the State to advance quickly and effectively toward full realization of the right.

Defining access to safe water as a human right is an important step in making this access a reality in the lives of many people living in poverty. A rights-based approach places the human being at the center of development. Access to safe water is made a legal entitlement rather than a service or commodity provided on a humanitarian basis. Those least served can be better targeted and many of the discriminatory practices and inequalities be decreased.

Communities that may have been vulnerable or marginalized can more easily enter into the decision-making processes. The means and mechanism to hold governments accountable for the access of their citizens to safe water will have been realized. Taking all this into consideration, a rights-based approach would lead to acceleration in achieving basic and improved levels of access to safe water.

#### **IV. Water: A key factor for peace and security**

The vital importance of water to humanity means also that it is a strategic factor for the establishment and maintenance of peace in the world. Water is a dimension of what is referred to today as resource security. Conflicts have already occurred for control over water resources and others may come center stage the more water scarcity manifests its consequences on the lives of the human beings and their communities.

It might be useful to take two examples: the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. The extreme drought in the Horn of Africa is intensifying ethnic tensions and conflicts for the control over the few, still available, water resources. This drought is threatening the food security of already poor populations and has led to a food emergency situation. In the Middle East, the main problems with water are related to tensions among countries generated by water scarce environments, although often masked by ongoing political tensions. Water scarcity can present a clear danger to the internal stability of countries in the region.

Water can in so many ways become an indispensable element for the security of peoples and nations. To foster peace and an appropriate level of security in the current world situation, governments and international organizations will inevitably have to increase efforts to ensure that every person has access to safe water.

The current historical context, however, is not only a record of conflicts. There exists also a long, and in many ways deeper, history of water-related cooperation.[6] Focusing on the past experiences of such cooperation could represent an important road map or best practices framework for the promotion of a hydro-solidarity among countries and communities. The lasting foundations of water-related solidarity are economic, environmental and strategic factors but also require a strong ethical basis.

Sharing water and sharing the benefits which water brings, in a mutually agreed, equitable and sustainable way is the key to preventing conflicts over this precarious resource

whether at the local or international level, whether regarding major hydropower projects or neighborhood projects in local villages.

## **V. A "culture of water"**

Water is central to life. However all too often water is not perceived as the luxury it really is, but is paradoxically wasted. This action of wasting water is morally unsustainable. Citizens in some countries are used to taking advantage of a privileged situation without thinking of the consequences of their wasting water on the lives of their brothers and sisters in the rest of the world. In other situations, water is lost or wasted due to an infrastructure that is old, badly or improperly constructed or inadequately maintained.

There is an urgent need to regain a "culture of water," to educate society to a new attitude toward water. In many ways our esteem for water has fallen. Traditionally water was revered and protected, even celebrated. Today it runs the risk of becoming a mere consumer product. In the face of waste, water cannot be treated as a mere product of consumption among others since it has an inestimable and irreplaceable value. Cultural traditions and societal values determine how people perceive and manage water. Using solely pricing mechanisms as a response to the wasting of water will not foster a culture of water and ignores the factor of the poor who also need water to live.

It is necessary to recall that all human beings are united by a common origin and the same supreme destiny.[7] Water must therefore be considered a public good,[8] which all citizens should enjoy, but within the context of the duties, rights and responsibilities which accrue to each person.

## **VI. Water Governance and Management: A question of justice and responsibility**

Poor water management is a major contributing factor to most of the water problems evidenced today. Governance is therefore perhaps the most important requirement for solving problems of access to safe water and sanitation. The problems and challenges must be looked at by all: national governments, international agencies, the private sector and local communities. More attention must be given to coordination and cooperation between these actors at all levels. It must be noted that at present there is no single global organization mandated to coordinate and deal with water and its related issues among the community of nations.

An essential component of good management is community participation and ownership. Marginalized groups within the community need to be consulted about appropriate solutions to their needs. Traditional knowledge can be vital in planning water resources. More highly technological solutions can often ignore local knowledge regarding terrain and climate and more importantly the human component. Respect for the principle of subsidiarity should, therefore, be a part of all water management policy.

Management decisions that impact the distribution of water must also respond according to the criteria of justice. The human right to access to safe water and sanitation must be promoted in such a way that existing inequalities are reduced to the greater well-being of the least advantaged.

Public private partnership can play an important role in providing access to safe water, provided that the different stakeholders work together for a common objective: that of guaranteeing access to safe water and sanitation for all. This does not negate the principle role of the State in fostering the realization of the right to access to safe water and sanitation. Linkages between development strategies and issues of water allocation,

supply [and] participation etc., must be understood clearly by decision-makers since such decisions have hidden implications for people living in poverty.

There are particular ethical issues involved in water management decision-making. Perhaps the most controversial and contentious of these issues is water pricing. At present, people living in poverty often pay substantially more for access to safe water and sanitation than those more financially secure. The payment by the poor is not limited only to the financial realm. Many times they pay more also in terms of physical effort and in terms of their health.

Good management of natural resources is clearly coupled with the requirement that users pay the true cost of services. It has been substantiated that when water is subsidized it tends to be wasted. If however it is acknowledged that access to safe water and sanitation is fundamental to the alleviation of poverty, then water and sanitation cannot be treated as a commodity among other commodities.

Pope John Paul II recalled that there exist important human needs which escape the market logic[9] and water is precisely one of these. It cannot be used solely as a means for profit because it is essential to the survival of the human person and thus cannot be transformed into a good reserved to the exclusive advantage of only those who can afford to pay for it.

## **VII. Natural disasters and risk management**

In recent years the world has witnessed extreme and devastating natural catastrophes, which have caused a high number of deaths and enormous difficulties, especially among the poor. It is they who live in precarious conditions which increase their vulnerability to harmful natural occurrences and they who are most affected by price increases of natural resources in periods of scarcity and emergency. The need for ethical and moral considerations as regards actions to reduce the risks for those living in poverty cannot be overlooked.

In a spirit of solidarity, countries and international organizations should respond to the devastating natural events with generous support and aid. At the same time, it is of utmost importance to invest in the prevention of natural disasters. In fact, if human beings cannot avoid certain natural catastrophes, it falls to them to use their creativity and capacity for innovation to limit potential damages whether in time of drought, flooding or other disasters.

However, interference in one aspect of the ecosystem should not be undertaken without paying due attention both to the consequences of such interference in other areas and to the well-being of future generations.[10] Natural disasters are not solely caused by nature, but also by an inconsiderate use and consumption of the earth's resources.

The world's population should share equitably in the benefits of modern technological means for early disaster risk assessments. Disaster risk assessment is an integral component of the development plans and poverty eradication programs and ways need to be found to break the vicious circle between poverty, environmental degradation and lack of preparation that turns natural hazards into disasters that destroy development gains.

Poor countries, especially, should be encouraged, with the help of the richer ones, to invest in mitigation measures to reduce the consequences of floods and droughts. For example, water reserves to face periods of drought should be created. But all such initiatives should be implemented with an active involvement of the local communities.

They should be accurately informed of the impacts on the environment and on their lives of any infrastructure built with the aim of reducing vulnerability to natural disasters. This is, indeed, an important element which contributes to the sustainable development of a country. The required large-scale nature of such activity will necessitate the provision of additional resources by developed countries while not reducing the small and medium projects funded in the water sector.

## Conclusion

In facing the hard challenge posed by the water issue, no one should lose hope. Indeed, there are many signs of hope. The issue of access to safe water and sanitation has become one of the top priorities of the international system. Identification and increasing recognition of water as a component of our lives, health, livelihoods, social and economic well-being have taken place in response. The political will to tackle the water sector, which has been lacking for years, has begun to be evidenced.

All men and women must be animated by the confidence that nature has in store secret possibilities which it is up to intelligence to discover and make use of in order to reach the development which is in the Creator's plan. This hope in the Author of nature and of the human spirit, rightly understood, is capable of giving new and serene energy to all of us.[11]

The human being is the center of the concern expressed in this updated document. Solutions for access to safe water and sanitation should express a preferential love and consideration for the poor. It is for them that the water issue is crucial for life. The water issue is truly a right to life issue. It is mainly they who are deprived of the right to water, to health and to food. The human family must be served, not exploited. The primary objective of all efforts must be the well-being of those people -- men, women, children, families, communities -- who live in the poorest parts of the world and suffer most from any scarcity or misuse of water resources.[12]

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- 1 Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter "Deus Caritas Est," No. 30.
  - 2 Cf. Ibid.
  - 3 Cf. Second Vatican Council, "Gaudium et Spes," No. 69.
  - 4 Cf. U.N. Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Supervisory Body of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment in 2002.
  - 5 Cf. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 2, §1.
  - 6 The Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Workshop entitled "Water Conflicts and Spiritual Transformation: A Dialogue," Oct. 13-15, 2004.
  - 7 Cf. Pope John Paul II, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, "Do Not Be Overcome by Evil, But Overcome Evil with Good," Jan. 1, 2005, §6.
  - 8 Cf. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, No. 485.
  - 9 Cf. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter "Centesimus Annus," No. 40.
  - 10 Cf. Pope John Paul II, Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace entitled "Peace with God the Creator, Peace with all of Creation," Jan. 1, 1990, No. 6.
  - 11 Cf. Pope Paul VI, Speech to the Members of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, April 19, 1975.
  - 12 Cf. Pope John Paul II, Message to Jacques Diouf on the Occasion of the World Food Day, Oct. 13, 2002.