Global warming is exacerbating the urgent worldwide problem of the scarcity of safe drinking water. Water is a human right and a public good.

Who among us has not had the experience of working or playing on a hot summer day, and then—“dying of thirst”—running indoors and heading straight to the refrigerator for an icy cold glass of water to quench our thirst? Water is indeed a life-giver and a lifesaver!

Now imagine that same scenario, only this time, transport yourself and your thirst to sub-Saharan Africa. There you would find it impossible to casually take a drink of water! Consider this:

- The minimum daily requirement each person needs for water (including drinking, cooking, bathing, and sanitation) is 13 U.S. gallons. The average person in the U.S. uses 65–78 gallons of water per day!
- By contrast, the average African individual uses 12 gallons at home each day. At least 314 million people in Africa lack access to safe drinking water and 437 million lack access to adequate sanitation. According to the United Nations, women and girls in sub-Saharan Africa spend 40 billion hours per year collecting water, the same amount of time that the total workforce of France spends working each year. The time collecting water is one of the primary reasons African girls cannot attend school.

Lest we be tempted to brush off this data as an extreme example or simply an “African problem,” consider the following:

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• One billion people worldwide do not have any water within a 15-minute walk of their homes.

• There is no more water on the Earth than there was 2,000 years ago. The world population sharing the planet’s finite freshwater supply back then was about 200 million. Today, more than 6 billion people depend on that same finite water supply. Between 1900 and 2000, global water consumption rose seven-fold—that is more than double the population growth!

• Regions of the world that are pumping out groundwater faster than aquifers can be replenished include the western United States; northern China; northern and western India; north and west Africa.

• One-third of U.S. rivers, one-half of U.S. estuaries, and more than one-half of U.S. lakes are not fit for fishing and swimming, let alone drinking.

• Nearly 40 percent of the world’s populations live alongside international rivers. Two billion people depend on international cooperation to ensure an adequate water supply.

It is common knowledge that there is no life as we know it without water: the human newborn is 91 percent water; the human adult is about 75 percent water, while the human brain alone is 75 percent water. A drop in body-water of a mere 2 percent brings fuzzy, short-term memory, trouble doing basic math, or difficulty focusing on a computer screen. As the Pontifical Justice and Peace Council asserted in its 2003 Statement, “Water is an essential element for life.”

The Hydrocycle

What has gotten us into the environmental crisis is that we lost track of the interrelatedness of our entire world. This is glaringly the case when we consider the world’s water supply. The tides, currents, and weather patterns that sustain the water supply in any one part of the globe are intimately connected to all other parts. And, we cannot separate the quality of the air or the soils from the quality of the water. For example, the coal generating power plants of Chicago spew mercury into the air. The mercury filters down into Lake Michigan and enters the food supply of small fish and the plants eaten by humans and other fishes. The toxic effect of mercury bioaccumulates with other toxins, and eventually the remaining plants in the lake can no longer filter out the biological waste contained in the runoff—especially after rains—flowing into the lake from the surrounding rivers, streams, and agricultural lands. The waters become contaminated, making fishing, swimming, and drinking this water hazardous to humans and other living beings.
Privatization of Drinking Water

The infrastructure of many public water systems across the globe—even in the U.S.—are 50 to 100 or more years old and often have not always been properly maintained. With rising populations and widespread citizen resistance to taxation to support the common good, it has become increasingly difficult for cities to maintain these infrastructures. On our present path, by 2025, nearly two-thirds of the world’s population will experience serious or severe water shortages. Whole ecosystems, dependent on water, will suffer devastating effects.

In 2005 the Leadership Conference of Women Religious—Global Concerns Committee published a background paper in support of the LCWR’s campaign against the privatization of water. As Suzanne Golas, C.S.J.P., noted in that document: “The private sector, especially a handful of transnational corporations, has recognized that water is the ‘blue gold’ of the 21st century” (Golas, 1). It was not surprising when, as early as May 2000, Fortune Magazine stated: “Water promises to be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th century: the precious commodity that determines the wealth of nations” (Tully, 2000).

Golas explains further:

Ten major corporations are now delivering freshwater services for profit. The three biggest are Suez, Vivendi and RWE AG. Ten years ago, multinationals serviced about 51 million people in just 12 countries. Today, they deliver water and wastewater services to nearly 300 million customers in more than 100 countries. At their present rate of expansion, in a decade, the top three will control over 70 percent of the water systems in Europe and North America. For these multinational corporations water is a tradable commodity to be bought and sold for profit. (Golas, 1)

Social Analysis

Golas provides the following analysis of this tragic situation:

The privatization of water is part of an economic philosophy that defines natural resources as “commodities,” the availability and delivery of which will be determined by liberalized trade and investment policies of the free market. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are major actors in determining policies that flow from this philosophy. New loans or the renewal of loans to developing countries are dependent on these countries’ agreement to privatize water. In trade agreements negotiated through the WTO, multinational corporations are free to buy and sell water rights. Major
trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) define water as a commodity. Countries risk censure from the WTO if they try to control the export of their water. Multinationals have concentrated on the nations of Europe and North America because of the greater security of their markets. Vivendi, Suez and RWE have bought leading U.S. water companies—United Water, American Water Works, and US Filter—that service many towns and municipalities throughout the country. (Golas, 1–2)

Fortunately the serious flaws in these private takeovers have quite quickly come to light. These flaws included: soaring water prices with cutoffs for customers who were unable to pay, deteriorating water quality, and job loss for local workers (Golas, 2). Often the loss of local control was accompanied by less transparency in the operations and increased instances of bribery and corruption (Golas, 2). A burgeoning international grassroots movement is gradually reclaiming power for civil society and regaining water rights. Successful water rights campaigns against privatization have been waged across the globe, including India, Bolivia, and the United States. But there is much more to be said about the current and impending water crises.

From Facts to Faith—Resisting Denial and Paralysis and Moving to Action

Upon hearing this tragic and depressing state of affairs, we can allow ourselves to become overwhelmed and paralyzed or move into a state of denial and inaction. Or, as people of faith in the resurrected Christ, the one who is the Living Water of Life, we can move forward, analyze the problem, and act to make a difference.

Water is the most frequently named earth element in the entire Bible. The primary meaning is drawn from the physical reality of human existence, namely that without water, humans and all living things die. Both physically and spiritually, water, with its capacity for healing and purification as well as its biological life-giving qualities, is necessary for all of humanity, indeed for all life. A few familiar examples can serve to remind us. In Psalm 51:4, “Wash away all my guilt; from my sin cleanse me.” Or, in John 13:5, “Jesus took a towel and tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and dry them with the towel around his waist.” Again in John 3:5, “Jesus answered Nicodemus, ‘Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’”

Building on the life-giving and necessary nature of water, Catholic social teaching sets out a clear direction for our faith-filled choice to ensure that all peoples
and our fellow creatures have enough water to sustain life and health. The late John Paul II, in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus* admonished: “Water by its very nature cannot be treated as a mere commodity among other commodities. Catholic social thought has always stressed that the defense and preservation of certain common goods such as the natural and human environments cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces, since they touch on fundamental human needs which *escape market logic*” (40). Two foundational magisterial documents shape the basic outlines of Catholics belief and our call to act to bring water-justice to all on our planet, namely, *Water, An Essential Element for Life*, by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (PCJP), and its Update. Both documents were presented to forums of the UN in 2003 and 2006, respectively. The teachings in these documents have been reaffirmed and elaborated in various contexts in subsequent years by the late John Paul II and by Benedict XVI giving greater overall authority to their content while adapting them to current issues.

**Water: A Far-Reaching Right-to-Life Issue**

Obviously, people can exist for substantial periods without many essential goods. But, they can survive only a few days without safe drinking water. As we have indicated, daily the majority of the world faces enormous hardships, having neither sufficient nor safe water; and, women disproportionately bear this burden. Certainly water for the whole human family is a right-to-life issue (PCJP 2003).

Equally important, water is a major factor in each of the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. In this framework, it is understood that water must meet the needs of the present population and those of future generations of all societies. This is not solely in the economic realm but in the sphere of integral human development. Water policy, to be sustainable, must promote the good of every person and of the whole person (PCJP 2003).

**Some Ethical Considerations**

Today the principal problem concerning water is not one of absolute scarcity, but rather of distribution and resources. Access and deprivation underlie most water decisions. The Catholic moral tradition has made a strong contribution to these discussions. Space permits me to highlight only seven key moral principles as they are articulated in the two documents by the Pontifical Justice and Peace Council.

First, the Catholic moral tradition asserts the *respect for all life*, while holding that the dignity of the human person is the ultimate guiding norm. Given what the ecological sciences teach us about the interconnection of the web of life, we...
usually cannot have maximum human well-being without environmental integrity (PCJP 2003).

Second, the centrality of the human person must thus be foremost in any consideration of the issues of water. The human person must be the central point of convergence of all issues pertaining to development, the environment, and water. The first priority of every country and the international community for sustainable water policy should be to provide access to safe water to those who are deprived of such access at present (PCJP 2003).

Third, the principle of the universal destination of the goods of creation confirms that people and countries, including future generations, have the right to fundamental access to those goods that are necessary for their development. Water is the primary common good of humankind. This is the basis for cooperation toward a water policy that gives priority to persons living in poverty and those living in areas endowed with fewer resources. The few, with the means to control, cannot destroy or exhaust this resource, which is destined for the use of all.

Fourth, access to safe water is a basic human right. When addressing 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, governments are obligated to respect the human right to safe, drinkable water, to protect it, and to fulfill it. At present there is no single global organization mandated to coordinate and deal with water and its related issues among the community of nations. However, there are a range of international treaties and declarations that legally support claims 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. All states who are parties to such treaties and declarations have an obligation to ensure that the minimum essential level of the right to water is realized. This means that everyone, without discrimination, has access to enough water to prevent dehydration and disease (PCJP 2006).

In 2009, efforts were made to amend the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to include water as a human right. Defining access to safe water as a human right is an important step because only then is it 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.
The fifth ethical principle is that people must become the “active subjects” of safe water policies. People have the ability to perceive the needs of others and satisfy them. Water management should be based on a participatory approach, involving users, planners, and policy makers at all levels. Both women and men should be involved, have equal voice in managing water resources, and equitably share the benefits from sustainable water use (PCJP 2003).

Sixth, in a globalized world, the water concerns of the poor become the concerns of all in a prospective of solidarity. This solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good, to the good of all, and of each individual. It presupposes the effort for a more just social order and requires a preferential attention to the situation of the poor. Both individuals and nations have the same duty of solidarity; advanced nations have the weightiest obligation to help the developing people (PCJP 2003).

Seventh is the principle of subsidiarity that acknowledges that decisions and management responsibilities pertaining to water 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. The engagement of communities at the grassroots level is key to the success of water programs (PCJP 2003).

Water: A Social Good

While vital to humanity, water has a strong social content. Its role is critical in establishing (1) agriculture and food security; (2) health and sanitation; (3) peace and conflict resolution; and (4) control of global warming and natural disasters.

Water for Food and Rural Development

Globally, agriculture is a key sector in all economies, but it cannot be sustained without sufficient water. Especially in developing countries, agriculture is a major source of livelihood and an essential dimension of local social cohesion and culture. Worldwide, agriculture accounts for 80 percent of the use of water and will continue to be necessary for food security.

Driven by necessity, rural poor peoples exploit beyond sustainable limits the little land they have at their disposal. Special training in water conservation techniques is needed to assist them in maximizing and conserving their precious water supplies. Also the traditional forms of knowledge of indigenous people should be esteemed, and they can be vital and decisive in addressing and solving the question of water.

Lands that have been damaged by waterlogging and salinization must be reclaimed through drainage programs. Policies must encourage harnessing the wider
potential of rain-fed farming, incorporating water management for gardens and foods from common property resources.

**Safe Drinking Water, Health, and Sanitation**

Three crucial concerns are present in the relationship between water and health: (1) managing quantity constraints faced by water-poor countries and their impact on human activities; (2) the maintenance of water quality in the face of growing demand; and (3) the direct link between health and water as pertains to diseases (PCJP 2003).

Management of water quantity can be carried out by: (a) revising the allocation of water to different users; (b) better maintenance and repair of existing water systems; (c) implementing and enforcing water conservation methods such as rainwater harvesting, fog condensation, use of underground dams, stabilization ponds for wastewater and treatment and use for irrigation.

The problem of maintaining and improving water quality is especially acute in the more urbanized areas, predominantly in developing countries. Key solutions include: enforcing pollution controls at the main point sources and establishing sustainable and safe sanitation, garbage collection, and disposal systems (PCJP 2003).

Most of the diseases that contaminate water come from animal or human waste and are communicable. The single most important solution toward eliminating water-transmitted illness is proper wastewater treatment throughout the entire world (PCJP 2003).

Whether it relates to quantity, quality, or disease, the trend away from centralized government agencies and toward empowering local governments and local communities to manage water supplies is key. This necessitates building community capacities, especially in the area of personnel and the allocation of resources to the local level (PCJP 2003).

**Water: A Key Factor for Peace and Security**

Access to safe and sufficient water is a strategic factor for the establishment and maintenance of peace in the world. Water is a dimension of 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. Global warming and climate change is exacerbating this development. Two glaring examples are the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Water scarcity can present a clear danger to the internal stability of countries in entire regions (PCJP 2006).

The good news is that there is also a long, and in many ways stronger, history of water-related cooperation. Past experiences of such cooperation could represent an important road map or best practices framework for future promotion of a hydro-solidarity among countries and communities. The lasting foundations of
water-related solidarity are economic, environmental, and strategic factors, but they also require a strong ethical basis that is key to preventing conflicts over this precarious resource (PCJP 2006).

**Natural Disasters and Risk Management**

In recent years the world has witnessed extreme and devastating natural catastrophes and the increasing effects of global warming. These events have caused a high number of deaths and enormous difficulties, especially among the vulnerable poor. In justice and in a spirit of solidarity, countries and international organizations must 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, while respecting regional ecosystems. 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. 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 participate with the richer nations to invest in mitigation measures to reduce the consequences of floods and droughts (PCJP 2006).

**A New “Culture of Water” Is Needed**

Water is central to life. However, all too often water is not perceived as the luxury it really is, but it is indiscriminately wasted. Wasting water is morally unsustainable. Often water-rich nations carelessly squander their water-wealth without thinking about the consequences of their wasting of water on the lives of their brothers and sisters across the globe. In other situations, water is lost or wasted due to old, poorly constructed, or inadequately maintained infrastructures. There is an urgent need to regain a “culture of water,” to educate society to a new attitude toward an esteem for water. Today the world cannot afford treating water as a mere consumer product. We must remember that all human beings are united by a common origin and the same supreme destiny. Water must therefore be considered a public good that all citizens should enjoy but within the context of the duties, rights, and responsibilities that accrue to each person (PCJP 2006).

In facing the hard challenge posed by the water issue, there are many signs of hope. The United Nations has declared 2005–2015 the “Water for Life” Decade. The issue of access to safe water and sanitation has become one of the top priorities of the international system. As Pope Paul VI declared years ago, “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” (1975).
Without neglecting profound reverence and regard for the natural environment, humans are at the center of the concern expressed in Catholic social teaching about water. Solutions for access to safe water and sanitation should express a preferential love and justice for the poor. The water issue is truly a right-to-life issue.

What Each Person Can Do

Every person has a role to play in the solution to the water crisis. Here are ten ideas to help us on the way:

1. Know your own water supply. Your water company is legally obligated to provide you with this information:
   - Where does your tap water come from?
   - Where does it go on leaving your home/office?
   - Is your company a subsidiary of a larger (private) water company?
   - What is the quality of your water?

2. Bottled water is an aspect of often unjust privatization. Eliminate its use in your home and institution. Use water filters for tap water instead.

3. Place a weighted plastic bottle in the tank of your toilet and use less water for flushing.

4. Take a shower rather than a bath and use about one-third less water.

5. Eliminate use of chemical cleaners, fertilizers, and pesticides. These require large amounts of water in their manufacture and pollute the water supply in the disposal of their containers.

6. Use phosphate-free soaps and detergents.

7. Use gray water for watering gardens or crops. This is water that has been used for laundry, showers, bathing, hand washing, yet safe for such use.

8. When brushing your teeth, turn the tap off while brushing.

9. Learn how trade agreements and policies of the World Bank, IMF, and WTO are influencing availability and delivery of water.

10. As a member of the UN, the United States agreed in 2000 to contribute to the Millennium Development Goal: that by 2015, the UN would reduce by one-half the 1.2 billion people who do not have access to fresh and water and the 2.4 billion who do not have adequate sanitation. Ask the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, the White House, and your congressperson how the United States is contributing to realizing this goal.
Making these changes is not impossible! The key to success is to make a plan to gradually add a new action every week—perhaps during Advent or Lent. All of this is possible. Each time you take action, be conscious of the sacredness of God’s gift of water. Pray with St. Francis of Assisi, the patron of ecology: “Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, who is useful, and humble, precious and chaste” (114).

References


