



REVERENCING AND RESTORATION: Caring for Earth

♦ a SE Portland Vicariate project ♦ 3rd Sunday of Lent ♦ February 27, 2005 ♦ "LIVING WATERS: Care for Creation and the Common Good"♦

The Worldwide Water Crisis and the Role of Christians.

We cannot overlook the basic human need for water. At the U.N., the right to water is considered a basic human right, yet millions of people throughout the world live with barely enough water to survive. Do we realize that the lack of clean water contributes to disease that kills 6,000 children a day? Water is essential to all human life, for basic health and survival as well as food production and economic activities.

In most of the Western, developed world, we need only turn on the faucet to be rewarded with pure, clean water. We seldom give it a second thought that the average American uses 160 gallons of water a day, of which about 40% is wasted. Water is a vital part of our daily life including our religious traditions. We use water for blessing and cleansing and reconciliation. Thank God for water the next time you bless yourself with holy water as you enter a church.

Can you imagine our life without water?

Throughout the world there are many people who live in terrible poverty and face this crisis *everyday*. 1.1 billion people lack access to safe water and 2.4 billion lack access to adequate sanitation services. It is estimated that 80 percent of all disease in the developing world is caused by unsafe water and sanitation.

While it may appear that there is plenty of water on our earth the truth is that although 70% of the world's surface is covered by water, only a fraction of that, 2.5%, is freshwater, of which 70% is frozen in ice caps. The remainder is present as soil moisture. This

leaves less than 1% of the world's freshwater resources accessible for human use. Human survival depends upon the conservation and reclaiming of water.

One flush of a Western toilet uses as much water as the average person in the developing world uses for a whole day's washing, drinking, cleaning and cooking.

What is being done? World leaders at the U.N. Millennium Summit agreed to reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015. In order to reach these goals governments must collaborate and cooperate with each other. People who use water and those who invest in this precious resource must do something as well. It is only when we recognize our *common needs as children of God* and are willing to see our role in this disparity, that real change can happen. Just as the woman at the well gave Jesus a cup of water even though he was not from her culture, so must we recognize the pain of our world family.

To address this situation, wide scale improvements need to be made in the efficiency of water use. Watersheds need to be better managed and leakage reduced, especially in cities, where water losses can total 40 percent or more of the water supply. We must change our behaviors in water use, sanitation and hygiene. The energy and participation of communities must be mobilized.

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The shortage of water has many causes. For instance, in South Africa, the eucalyptus tree that is not native to this area sucks up 12 gallons of water a day. To conserve water there is a government program designed to remove these trees and plant native species. These indigenous alien species (IAS) use 7% of the natural resources, destroy land and change the biodiversity of the region sometimes resulting in major fires. So far more than one million hectares have been cleared of IAS. It is projects like this, supported by various agencies of the U.N. that is bringing about change one community at a time. This is how the U.N. works best, person to person, through research, education and personal contact.

As members of Christian communities, we have an obligation and a challenge. We must recognize our role in this crisis. We can become more aware of the preciousness of water and vow to be caretakers of water. Simple things such as fixing leaks, conserving water, reusing grey water, avoiding polluting and using harsh chemicals, can do a great deal to help. Keep yourself informed, be aware of the role that large corporations play in the privatization of water and refuse to buy their products or hold investments in their businesses. Teach people you meet about water conservation and remind them about the plight of our brothers and sisters throughout the world. Never doubt that one person's contribution can make a difference. We are called through our baptism with water and through our witness as followers of Jesus Christ to take care of each other and our earth. We can do no less.

By Madeline C. Labriola

➤ **Learn more about the living waters of our own Columbia River Watershed on page two ...**

**Blessing waters, waken this day
Our hearts and hopes renew
Wash us in your joy, grace us
With strength to live in faithful love**
From *Blessing Waters*, Monks of Weston Priory



Have you ever been thirsty and the only water available either unfit for drinking or in the control of someone else? At some point we have all longed for living waters to refresh us, heal us and bless us. We, like the Israelites in the desert and the woman at the well, are persistent in our longing for **living waters**.

"Water is the source of all life, and a primary symbol in religious traditions. Water cleanses, purifies, refreshes and inspires."¹ In scripture we hear of living waters, longing for running waters and justice flowing like a river. Our physical and spiritual lives - and the lives of all - are dependent on water. Water is the life-blood of all earth.

Our tradition of Catholic social teaching offers us a distinct perspective on environmental issues. We touched on some of those themes already:

- A God centered and sacramental view of the universe. All life reveals God.
- We humans are invited to care for creation in a way that sustains the mystery of God present uniquely in each aspect.
- A consistent respect for life ... which extends to respect for all creation.

This week our focus is on:

- A worldview affirming our global interdependence and the common good.
- An ethic of solidarity inviting cooperation and a just structure in the world community.

Water serves the common good and is part of the common good. "Every human in the world, every plant in the world, every species in the world has the same fundamental right to water."² Yet, as we have learned, water is threatened everywhere and millions lack access to clean, safe water.

As Pope John Paul II has said in his letter, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*: "Today the ecological crisis has assumed such proportions as to be the responsibility of everyone."

When any part of the commons is weakened, we all are and we must act to make a difference by caring for creation and ensuring the just distribution of all natural resources.

For us Catholics in the Pacific Northwest, the Columbia River Pastoral Letter can guide our response.

Living Waters ... the Columbia River. During this Lewis and Clark Bicentennial year, we are invited to stand within our watershed and with open hearts listen and learn of the health of the commons.

The Columbia River...

- Begins in the Canadian Rockies and journeys for 1,243 miles to the Pacific Ocean
- Is the migrating path for salmon on their way to and from the Pacific Ocean
- Has a network of dams that affects and at times blocks the migration of salmon
- Provides water for a vast system of agricultural irrigation and serves as a highway for barges
- Is a dumping ground annually for 1,048,853 tons of carcinogens (EPA)
- The Columbia River Watershed has been home to the native peoples for 10,000 years

"Today, ecological balance is gone. The wild salmon and sturgeon may soon be gone. As important as the salmon and sturgeon are, they are merely indicators of the sickness that threatens all life on the River."³

The Columbia River Pastoral Letter articulates the values that guide our response to the crisis:

- Conservation of the watershed
- Protection of native species
- Respect for native peoples and their way of life
- Justice for the poor
- Community based solutions in addressing mining, lumber and farming issues.

All of this flows like a river ... from our beliefs that *All life is sacred, revealing God*
All life in diverse forms invites our total respect
What we hold in common we must care for
We stand in solidarity with all and we work to ensure the just distribution of resources.

What can I do in everyday life?

Conserve water. When we use less water we show solidarity with those who do not have enough.

Naturescape your yard & garden. Attend a workshop on March 12 at Tualatin Hills Nature Center or April 2 at Madeleine Parish (both from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.)

Learn about Bioswales. Contact the St. Philip Neri Parish Columbia River Pastoral Letter Committee.

Join the efforts of Columbia Riverkeepers, Friends of the Columbia River Gorge or other local groups.

Visit the Portland Art Museum. The exhibit "People Of The River: Native arts of the Oregon Territory" ends 5/29.

Pray and learn about the International Decade For Action, "Water For Life" (2005-2015) and the World Day for Water (to be celebrated March 22nd of each year).