

STATEMENT ON

THE RIGHT TO SAFE DRINKING WATER



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*Safe drinking water is the source of life and a human right.
Its safety and accessibility must therefore be ensured.
For the well-being of our entire planet, we are called to action.*

All Catholics are called by their faith to become builders of a new, more equitable world. As pastors, the Catholic Bishops of Canada would like to encourage their faithful to be engaged in the pressing issues of our day. How can we not be disturbed by the injustices, which have only increased in recent years, resulting from lack of access to safe drinking water? In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the Holy Father considered this very issue, drawing our attention to the close link between poverty and the lack of access to safe drinking water. We will begin this statement by reflecting on the important role of water as the source of life for all living beings on earth.

WATER: THE SOURCE OF LIFE

Water is essential to every living thing; it is the cradle from which life on our earth first came forth. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, “since the beginning of the world, water, so humble and wonderful a creature, has been the source of life and fruitfulness.”¹ Although vast oceans blanket our blue planet and host varied forms of life, we human beings depend for our survival on fresh water, which makes up only 2.5% of earth’s water.

Given the intrinsic connection between water and life, it is no wonder that water plays important roles in the thought and rituals of many world religions. In Christianity, water reaches its greatest dignity in the Sacrament of Baptism through which we are cleansed of sin and reborn of water and the Holy Spirit.² The life-giving role of water is emphasized throughout Sacred Scripture, where it signifies not only earthly life, but the divine life which God offers to us.³

SAFE DRINKING WATER: A HUMAN RIGHT

The most fundamental human right is the right to life. It therefore follows that all people have a right to those things

necessary to sustain life, such as safe drinking water: “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.”⁴ Because of this, sources of fresh water are not the private property of anyone, but a public good to be conserved and shared among all.⁵ Governments at all levels, therefore, have the responsibility to manage properly and protect these precious resources. It is not surprising that the sixth goal of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals is to ensure that everyone has access to water and sanitation, since nearly two billion people today live with contaminated water, and 40% of the global population experiences water scarcity.⁶

ENSURING THE SAFETY OF DRINKING WATER

Not everyone has the benefit of safe drinking water. Pope Francis draws attention to this long-standing and widespread problem in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: “One particularly serious problem is the quality of water available to the poor. Every day, unsafe water results in many deaths and the spread of water-related diseases, including those caused by microorganisms and chemical substances.”⁷ Many people are forced to drink unsafe water because their communities lack adequate water purification facilities, or because they cannot afford to buy clean water. This problem is not limited to the developing world, however: in our own Canadian backyard we find it in many remote areas, particularly in First Nations communities.

Currently, roughly 130 First Nations communities are under a drinking water advisory, meaning that their tap water either must be boiled, or cannot be consumed at all. As of May 2018, 76 of these advisories had been in place for over a year.⁸

The specific reasons for the lack of clean water on reserves vary: in some cases, a treatment system is present but it has



The Canadian Press/John Woods

Shoal Lake 40 First Nation has no treatment plant and residents must haul drinking water by themselves.

been improperly designed, installed, or maintained, or cannot meet the required capacity.⁹ In other First Nations communities, toxic chemicals in the water supply, such as uranium, have made the water unusable.¹⁰ And in some communities, such as Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, there simply is no treatment plant and residents must haul drinking water by themselves.

This state of affairs is disgraceful in a country like Canada. We appreciate that the Canadian government has committed to ending all long-term First Nations drinking water advisories by 2021,¹¹ but continued vigilance will be needed to make this a reality.



“Even as the quality of available water is constantly diminishing, in some places there is a growing tendency, despite its scarcity, to privatize this resource, turning it into a commodity subject to the laws of the market.” Pope Francis, Laudato Si’ 30.

ENSURING ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING WATER

“Even as the quality of available water is constantly diminishing, in some places there is a growing tendency, despite its scarcity, to privatize this resource, turning it into a commodity subject to the laws of the market.”¹² Very often, large corporations purchase the rights to local water sources and extract immense amounts of it for sale in bottles. In some places, municipal water purification and delivery has been privatized, resulting in price hikes that make it impossible for the poor to afford clean water.¹³

The privatization of water resources violates the right to water of those who lose access to these resources. In some countries, vast public water reserves have been purchased, denying the poor—particularly small-scale farmers—the water they need. The Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace brought attention to this issue during its 2006 Fall Education Campaign, and successfully persuaded many organizations to stop using bottled water because of its harmful effects on the poor.¹⁴

Ominously, Pope Francis warned in *Laudato Si'* that “the control of water by large multinational businesses may become a major source of conflict in this century.”¹⁵

This problem is not restricted to other countries, however. In 2016, for example, Nestle purchased a well in Wellington County, Ontario, which the town of Centre Wellington had been attempting to buy to ensure water security for its own citizens. Due to a public outcry, the province of Ontario significantly increased the small fee it charges bottled water companies for water they extract.¹⁶ Yet even with the increased fee, this water can still be sold with a markup of more than seventy thousand percent.¹⁷

In response to this controversy, the Bishop of Hamilton, the Most Reverend Douglas Crosby, O.M.I., issued a statement noting that “this extraction of large amounts of water adversely affects the ecological balance of nature over a large area while depriving those who rely on wells of their right to water.”¹⁸ These words remind us that fresh water is needed not just for drinking. Fresh water is also vital to the ecosystems of our planet.

WATER AND ECOLOGY

Fresh water is not only a solution for human thirst. It is also essential to countless other forms of life on which we depend. It is therefore in everyone’s interest to ensure that our bodies of fresh water are pure and unpolluted, and that subsurface water reserves are not depleted. This important and unceasing work deserves our individual and communal support.¹⁹

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

The Christian faith teaches us that the earth is our common home. To use the biblical expression found in the book of Genesis, it is a “garden” to be cultivated with, and for, everyone; it is a gift from God to be preserved and made to flourish for the benefit of all. A garden cannot exist without water, and so with this in mind, we propose the following concrete actions for Catholics in Canada:

- Avoid bottled water whenever possible.
- Be conscious of your own water consumption and reduce it where possible (practical ideas on how to do this are available from various organizations and levels of government²⁰).
- Support, or get involved with, an organization that works to protect lakes and rivers in your area.

- Make your voice heard to your political representatives to ensure that Canada's fresh water remains a public good and is not monopolized by private companies.
- Make your voice heard to ensure that the federal government follows through on its pledge to provide clean drinking water on First Nations reserves.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah announced: "everyone who thirsts, come to the waters!"²¹ We now echo this call, addressing it to all levels of our Canadian community, including institutions and corporations, so that this vital resource may be available to all in abundance. Water, so essential to life on our planet, remains a common good and the responsibility of everyone.

NOTES

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1218.

2. Cf. *ibid*

3. Some examples from Scriptures: the waters bring forth all kinds of living creatures (Gn 1:20-23); Moses brings forth water from the rock to save the lives of the Israelites and their livestock (Nm 20:1-11); Ezekiel sees a vision of water flowing from the temple, becoming a river that brings life and healing (Ez 47:1-12); Isaiah speaks of drawing “water from the wells of salvation” (Is 12:3). Examples from the New Testament include: Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan river, which inaugurates his ministry (Mt 3:13-17); Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well (Jn 4:1-30); Jesus’ invitation to the thirsty to drink from him (Jn 7:37-38); Jesus’ healing of a blind man by telling him to wash in the pool of Siloam (Jn 9:1-11); and the book of Revelation which speaks of the springs of the water of life (Rv 7:17; 21:6-7) and the river of the water of life, which flows from the throne of God (Rv 22:1-2).

4. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 30. This point has been made repeatedly by the Holy See in its interventions at the United Nations. For example, Intervention of Archbishop Bernardito Aua, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, High Level Launch Event of the International Decade for Action of, “Water for Sustainable Development,” 2018-2028 New York, 23 March 2018. <https://holyseemission.org/contents/statements/5ab575b01a6c4.php>

5. Cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 484, “The principle of the universal destination of goods also applies naturally to water ...’ As a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival; thus, everyone has a right to it.” Benedict XVI also made it clear that the Church has a responsibility to protect water as a gift of God meant for everyone (*If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Protect Creation: Message for the 2010 World Day of Peace*, n. 12).

6. United Nations, Sustainable Development Goal #6. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/water-and-sanitation/>

7. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 29.

8. <https://www.canada.ca/en/indigenous-services-canada/news/2018/05/april-2018-continued-progress-on-lifting-long-term-drinking-water-advisories-on-public-systems-on-reserve.html>

9. For example, the Serpent River First Nation near Sudbury has a new treatment plant which was unable to cope with the dissolved organic materials in their source water. A drinking water advisory was issued in September 2015 and remained in place until November 2017.

10. For example, in Grassy Narrows First Nation, which has already experienced a long-standing problem with mercury poisoning, a do-not-consume order has been issued for three public wells due to elevated uranium levels. This has been in place for four years. The majority of the residents of this First Nation, who do not rely on these wells, have nonetheless had a boil-water-advisory in place for almost three years. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/topics/health-environment/water-quality-health/drinking-water/advisories-first-nations-south-60.html#ont>

11. *Achieving a Sustainable Future: A Federal Sustainable Development Strategy for Canada*. <http://www.fdsd-sfdd.ca/index.html#/en/goals/>

12. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 30.

13. Yet the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* 485, states: “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.”

14. A March 16, 2017 op-ed (“Water is a Sacred Gift”), published in the Waterloo region online newspaper *TheRecord.com*, goes so far as to call for the bottled water industry in Ontario to be phased out. The ecumenical letter is signed by Hamilton Bishop Douglas Crosby, O.M.I., along with the following local Christian leaders: Bishop Michael Bird (Anglican Diocese of Niagara), Bishop Linda Nicholls (Anglican Diocese of Huron), Bishop Michael Pryse (Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), and President Gordon Dunbar (Hamilton Conference of the United Church of Canada).

15. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* 31.

16. Until August 2017, the fee was \$3.71 per million litres extracted. The fee is now \$503.71 per million litres.

17. Based on a price of \$4.47 for a 24 x 500mL pack of Nestle Pure Life “Natural Spring Water” from Wal-Mart. <https://www.walmart.ca/en/ip/nestl-pure-life-natural-spring-water/6000016954139>

18. Bishop Douglas Crosby, O.M.I., “Responsible Stewards of Creation” in *Inter Nos*, Online Publication of the Diocese of Hamilton, November 2016.

19. In Canada there are numerous organizations led by concerned citizens that work to protect our lakes and rivers from pollution. For example, Canada is home to nine organizations belonging to the international Waterkeeper Alliance (www.waterkeeper.org), as well as groups like Keepers of the Water, a coalition of “First Nations, Metis, Inuit, environmental groups and watershed citizens working together for the protection of water, land and air for all living things in the Arctic Drainage Basin.” (keepersofthewater.ca)

20. For example, the government of New Brunswick lists numerous practical ways of conserving water. www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/departments/elg/environment/content/water/content/water_conservation.html

21. Is 55:1.



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