

St. Mary's/Catholic Charities
Water Presentation
Rev. Jeffrey S. Tunncliff
September 29, 2009

What are the questions we must ask ourselves or that others might ask about “Water Issues” according to Catholic Social Teaching?

Q: The church is not made up of scientists. Why does it speak about environment issues?

A: The Bishops admit they are not technical experts in “Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good”

http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/ejp/background/archives/climate_statement.shtml

As bishops, we are not scientists or public policymakers. We enter this debate not to embrace a particular treaty, nor to urge particular technical solutions, but to call for a different kind of national discussion. Much of the debate on global climate change seems polarized and partisan. Science is too often used as a weapon, not as a source of wisdom. Various interests use the airwaves and political process to minimize or exaggerate the challenges we face. The search for the common good and the voices of poor people and poor countries sometimes are neglected.

At its core, global climate change is not about economic theory or political platforms, nor about partisan advantage or interest group pressures. It is about the future of God's creation and the one human family. . . . The dialogue and our response to the challenge of climate change must be rooted in the virtue of prudence. While some uncertainty remains, most experts agree that something significant is happening to the atmosphere. Human behavior and activity are, according to the most recent findings of the international scientific bodies charged with assessing climate change, contributing to a warming of the earth's climate. Although debate continues about the extent and impact of this warming, it could be quite serious (see the sidebar “The Science of Global Climate Change”). Consequently, it seems prudent not only to continue to research and monitor this phenomenon, but to take steps now to mitigate possible negative effects in the future.

And Pope Benedict writes

The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim “to interfere in any way in the politics of the States.” She does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish, in every time and circumstance, for a society that is attuned to man, to his dignity, to his vocation (CV, 9).

Q: Why do we care about water?

A: Tonight we have heard Dr. Lambert speak about local water issues and Sr. Phyllis Tierney speak about global water issues. We are concerned with both. Why? Water is necessary for life.

Local Water Issues

Of course, this is the most tangible for us in that we might see how it affects us directly but even that may be difficult. We can't "see" the effects of what we are doing. We need to look at these issues from a Catholic world view perspective. By this we are talking about "a sacramental view of the world." By sacramental view we mean that we understand God as creator of the world and thus present in all things. As Rev. Tetlow writes

Ecological spirituality begins in the acknowledgment, grateful and joyful, that all creatures owe their existence to God. Humans are not somehow separate from the rest of creation. We share it intimately with other creatures. We acknowledge God as Creator of us all.

God has given us dominion over the world. What does it mean to have dominion? In paragraph #451 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (SC) we read

The Lord entrusted all of creation to their responsibility, charging them to care for its harmony and development (Cf. Gen 1:26-30).

Our dominion over the world is not unconditional (cf. SC 461). We must use our resources wisely and with concern for others.

Global Water Issues

Some of our concern here lies with the very basic notion of survival. *Clean* water is necessary for the very survival of life. Because it is necessary for physical life, water becomes a symbol of both physical and spiritual life as life-giving and cleansing. It permeates all parts of our lives including social, economic, ethic, and religious. Pope John Paul II writes on the occasion of World Food Day 2002.

This year's chosen theme: "Water, source of food security" is an invitation to reflect on the importance of water, without which individuals and communities cannot live. As an indispensable factor in human activity, water is a basic factor of food security. Nor can we forget that water, a symbol used in the communal rites of many religions and cultures, signifies belonging and purification. In Christian terms, water is used as a sign of a process of interior transformation and conversion ("Message of John Paul II to Jacques Diouf on the Occasion of World Food Day").

(cf. A Contribution of the Delegation of the Holy See on the Occasion of the Third World Water Forum).

The USCCB presents seven Themes of Catholic Teaching on their website at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml>. The themes are

- Life and Dignity of the Person
- Call to Family, Community, and Participation
- Rights and Responsibilities
- Option for the Poor and Vulnerable
- The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers
- Solidarity
- Care for God's Creation

Obviously, the last theme is exactly where we are here tonight but as we consider these water issues, *solidarity* is a very important concept. Remember the two greatest commandments? The first is to love God and the second is to love our neighbor. In loving our neighbor we are called to be concerned for their needs whether they live next door or across the world. Water is one of the most basic needs and thus we *must* do we can to help them in their needs. This makes concern for the environment a moral imperative. This solidarity extends not to current people of the world but also for the future (SC 467).

Q: Isn't the world mostly water? Why do we need to be concerned about using it up?

A: Yes, there is a lot of water in the world but is it available *where it is needed* from a clean water supply? It is not just enough to know there is water available. On the occasion of the Third World Water Forum the Pontifical Council for Justice and peace wrote

The principle water difficulty today is not one of absolute scarcity, but rather of distribution and resources.

The question of polluted water must be considered in the availability of water. Any water that is polluted cannot be used.

Q: It is still hard to imagine running out of water. Many people can't accept the idea that we will run out of water, especially when we hear the ice caps are melting because of "global warming." What can we say to encourage them for "smart use" of water?

A: This question returns us to the discussion of our sacramental view of the world and the world as God's gift to us. There can be a temptation when we receive a gift to say it didn't cost us anything and that we should use it in the way that gives us the most pleasure. Should we enjoy ourselves? Yes, but we need to look beyond ourselves and the moment. To appreciate a gift is to use it well.

In our consumer based society, life is about having more. This tends to lead to overconsumption. Such indulgences are not a good use of the gift of creation. "Smart use" of water and the land is biblical. Leviticus 25:8-22 speaks of the sabbatical year to

give the land a year of rest. Farmers know that to keep planting the same land over and over will drain the soil of its nutrients. Fertilizers help but do not stop the problem. We can overuse water. If in our use it becomes contaminated then it is no longer available for us. Even if it does not become contaminated, the unnecessary of water often requires unnecessary use of energy resources to pump or purify the water.

That is why Pope John Paul writes in “Peace with God the Creator, Peace With All of Creation

Modern society will find no solution to the ecological problem unless it takes a serious look at its life style.

And in his message on World Food Day 2002

The first step in this effort is to regain a sustainable balance between consumption and available resources.

Q: How might I speak to an atheist about protecting our water supplies? A sacramental view of the world means nothing without a belief in God.

A: In our country we are very much concerned with *rights*. *The Declaration of Independence*, the founding document of our country states

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

(For Catholics, this concept of rights is a basic concept and discussed in Pope John XIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris Peace on Earth*). We take our rights very seriously. Water is a basic building block of life. Life cannot exist without water, let alone be a happy life. Thus, *the right to water is a basic right*. This right is expressed in Universal Declaration of Human Rights art. 25

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Water is not listed but it should be seen as part of food for obvious reasons. Ensuring the right to water is also essential to peace. Wars have started over lack of water, leaving one to fight for what is necessary for life (cf. “A Contribution of the Delegation of the Holy See on the Occasion of the Third World Water Forum”). Pope Benedict has declared the theme of the World Day of Peace (Jan. 1st) 2010 to be “If You Want to Cultivate Peace, Safeguard Creation,” (Catholic News Service, “Pope Will Focus on Environment for World Peace Day 2010”)

Q: Do we own the water on land we own?

A: This becomes a touchy question. You have a basic right to that water. The Catholic Church believes in the ownership of private property. Yet, your ownership of the water must be balanced against the principle of “Universal destination of goods.” Water is not a commodity to be bought and sold. For instance, if you have a creek or river on your property your ownership gives you the right to use of the water but it does not give you the right to dam the creek or river to stop all flow of the water. Everyone has a right to water. To think of it in another way, the water did not originate on your property. It passes through your property. Therefore, it is not yours for the taking.

As a gift from God, water is a vital element essential to survival; thus, everyone has a right to it (SC 484).

This leads to a justification for government action for the regulation of water resources. It is for the common good (*Caritas Et Veritate*, 7). In the paragraph *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* we read

By its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many, and it must be used rationally and in solidarity with others. The distribution of water is traditionally among the responsibilities that fall to public agencies, since water is considered a public good. If water distribution is entrusted to the private sector it should still be considered a public good. *The right to water*, [1011] 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. Without water, life is threatened. Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right.

Q: The Ten Commandments don't say anything about the environment, do they?

A: The Seventh Commandment is ‘You shall not steal’. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* writes

The seventh commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbor and wronging him in any way with respect to his goods. It commands justice and charity in the care of earthly goods and the fruits of men's labor. For the sake of the common good, it requires respect for the universal destination of goods and respect for the right to private property (2401).

And paragraph 2415 writes

The seventh commandment enjoins respect for the integrity of creation. Use of mineral, vegetable, and animal resources of the universe cannot be divorced from respect for moral imperatives. Man's dominion over inanimate and other living beings granted by the Creator is not absolute; it is limited by concern for the

quality of life of his neighbor, including generations to come, it requires a religious respect for the integrity of creation.

It is a violation of the Seventh Commandment to use more of our natural resources than is our due if it deprives others of what they *need*.

Q: How important are these environment concerns?

A: Care for the “smart use” of our natural resources, water included, should be an important consideration in all our decisions. However, there is one thing that is always more important than the environment. Pope Benedict XVI writes

Nature is at our disposal not as “a heap of scattered refuse” but as a gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). But it should also be stressed that it is contrary to authentic human development to view nature as something more important than the human person (CV 48).

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