

# WATER SHAPES OUR CONNECTION TO LIFE

**T**wenty years ago, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued the document, “Water, an Essential Element for Life.” It outlines the Catholic Church’s position on water, stating that “The management of water and sanitation must address the needs of all, and particularly of persons living in poverty. Inadequate access to safe drinking water affects the well-being of over one billion persons and more than twice that number have no adequate sanitation. This all too often is the cause of disease, unnecessary suffering, conflicts, poverty and even death. This situation is characterized by countless unacceptable injustices.”<sup>1</sup>



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In the document, the Pontifical Council also wrote about the connection of water to spiritual needs: “Water has a central place in the practices and beliefs of many religions of the world. This significance manifests itself differently in various religions and beliefs. Yet two particular qualities of water underlie its central place

in religions: water is a primary building block of life, a creative force; water cleanses by washing away impurities, purifying objects for ritual use as well as making a person clean, externally and spiritually, ready to come into the presence of the focus of worship.”<sup>2</sup>

Catholic ethics on water are grounded in a rich and diverse tradition that spans centuries of theological reflection and practical experience. At the heart of Catholic ethics on water is its recognition as a precious gift from God, one that is intimately connected to the natural world and to human community. This understanding of water shapes Catholic teaching on a range of issues related to it, including water’s access, management and conservation.

## ACCESS TO CLEAN AND SAFE WATER

First, Catholic teaching emphasizes the importance of ensuring access to clean and safe drink-

ing water for all people. Access to water is a basic human right, and it is essential for the realization of other human rights such as the rights to life and to quality and affordable health services.<sup>3</sup> Access to water is particularly important for vulnerable and marginalized communities, such as people who are poor, sick or living in areas affected by drought or water scarcity. Many people around the world lack access to clean and safe drinking water, leading to conflicts over access to water resources. This can be a source of tension between different communities and countries that share water sources.<sup>4</sup>

Pope Francis has repeatedly highlighted the importance of water and the human right to safe and clean access to it.<sup>5</sup> In his encyclical *Laudato Si’*, he mentions water nearly 50 times. In the second paragraph of this document, he states: “We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.”<sup>6</sup> One example of an important Vatican effort to ensure access to safe and clean water is the WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) project, an effort to improve water and sanitation measures in Catholic health care facilities around the globe.<sup>7</sup>

## RESPONSIBLE WATER MANAGEMENT

Catholic ethics on water also emphasizes the importance of managing it responsibly. This



involves knowing about the interconnectedness of the natural world and the need to balance human needs with those of other species and ecosystems. Water resources should be used in a sustainable and just manner in order to ensure that future generations will have access to this vital resource. Climate change has made droughts and water scarcity more common in many parts of the world. This can lead to conflicts over the use of water resources, particularly in areas where it is already scarce. We are just beginning to see these changes in the United States, particularly in the West. Many rivers and lakes cross state and international borders, leading to conflicts between states and countries over the use and management of water resources. Examples include the Colorado River, the Nile River in Africa, the Indus River between India and Pakistan, and the Mekong River in Southeast Asia.

#### WATER CONSERVATION

Catholic ethics on water also emphasize the importance of water conservation. Recognizing the value of water as a precious resource and taking steps to reduce its waste and promote its conservation is essential. Catholic teaching emphasizes the need to adopt more sustainable practices in agriculture, industry and other areas that require large amounts of water.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis called for a “global ecological conversion” that would involve a “profound interior conversion.”<sup>8</sup> This conversion would involve a shift away from a consumerist mentality that values material possessions and economic growth above all else, and toward a more sustainable and just way of living. This would promote a “culture of care” that values the natural world.

#### CARE FOR CREATION AND OUR FUTURE

Catholic ethics on water are grounded in a rich and diverse tradition that emphasizes the importance of water’s access, responsible management and conservation. Catholic teaching recognizes the value of water as a precious gift from God and emphasizes the need to use this resource in a more ecologically sound and just manner. By promoting a culture of care and recognizing the interconnectedness of all species, Catholic ethics

on water offer a powerful vision for a more equitable and sustainable future.

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#### NOTES

1. “A Contribution of the Delegation of the Holy See on the Occasion of the Third World Water Forum,” The Holy See, March 2003, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20030322\\_kyoto-water\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20030322_kyoto-water_en.html).
2. “A Contribution of the Delegation of the Holy See.”
3. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, sections 27-31, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_ enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_ enciclica-laudato-si.html).
4. The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (the successor to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace) continues to be a leader in water concerns. “Aqua Fons Vitae—Orientations on Water: Symbol of the Cry of the Poor and the Cry of the Earth,” Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, March 2020, [https://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/ sviluppoumano/documenti/Aqua%20fons%20 vitae%20\\_%2003%202020.pdf](https://www.humandevlopment.va/content/dam/ sviluppoumano/documenti/Aqua%20fons%20 vitae%20_%2003%202020.pdf).
5. Pope Francis has repeatedly raised this issue: “Message of the Holy Father Francis to the Participants in the International Conference ‘The Management of a Common Asset: Access to Drinkable Water for All,’” The Holy See, November 8, 2018, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/ bollettino/pubblico/2018/11/08/181108a.html>; “The Pope Speaks at Seminar on ‘The Human Right to Water,’” The Holy See, February 24, 2017, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/ pubblico/2017/02/24/170224a.html>; “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of ‘World Water Day 2019,’” The Holy See, March 22, 2019, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont- messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco\\_ 20190322\\_messaggio-giornatamondiale-acqua.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont- messages/2019/documents/papa-francesco_ 20190322_messaggio-giornatamondiale-acqua.html).
6. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, section 2.
7. “WASH in Healthcare in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Official Vatican Newspaper,” WASH in Health Care Facilities, [https://www.washinhcf.org/latest\\_news/ article-on-wash-in-health-care-facilities-published- in-losservatore-romano-the-official-vatican-newspaper/](https://www.washinhcf.org/latest_news/ article-on-wash-in-health-care-facilities-published- in-losservatore-romano-the-official-vatican-newspaper/).
8. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, sections 5 and 217.

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