

‘Water as the Source of Life’

Document issued 30 March 2020 by the Vatican Office for Promoting Integral Human Development.

Latin title: *Aqua Fons Vitae*, 45pp.

Summary by Brian Grogan SJ.

Introductory

Few people will read this document--it is not user-friendly. But it is exhaustive: everything relevant gets due mention. Its endless references from international sources show that global attention to Water is high, at least on the level of science if not of praxis. I capitalise ‘Water’ deliberately!

Its title might well have been: **‘Water is the Burning Issue!’** Its theme is that nothing, nothing, is more important than Water, the most studied substance on the planet and the key to future life on planet Earth. Those who with Pope Francis desire to promote the fair global distribution of clean Water will be energised by its positive approach. Here are some hints of its contents.

Vision

The opening Meditation encourages us to contemplate and to share the wonder, beauty and mystery of Water: it is the source of life of every living being. Because it is a divine gift, all forms of Water can be contemplated as reflecting a ray of the infinite wisdom and goodness of God and so can act as an unending source of inspiration.

How we respect and share Water is a key indicator of how we are carrying out the mission God has entrusted us with, that of caring for our earthly Garden. To counter despair over the plight of Water, researchers must hope that the Author of nature has in store secret possibilities--yet to be discovered-- which will help us to care rightly for it. It is not a commodity to be marketed.

The Bible has 1500 verses referring to Water. Wells, it says, were created so that all could share in Water as a divine gift: no human has absolute rights over it. The abundant uses of Water across all religions include Purification, Healing, Blessing, New Life, Baptism etc. Water is rightly experienced as ‘holy’ and a symbol of divinity: thus the Nile, the Ganges and Mecca’s Well of Zamzam--and we may add, the Holy Wells of Ireland.

There are three sections: 1) Water for human use; 2) Water as a resource for farming, industry and 3) Water as space (seas and oceans). *Analysis* is followed by *Challenges* which lead to *Proposals for Change*, both international and local.

Challenges to the Churches

- Surprisingly, the document calls first on the Catholic Church to put its own house in order: every Church facility across the globe must provide an adequate supply of good Water and sanitation, and reduce pollution. Plastic should be used only when strictly needed.
- Next, the Church must defend the 'unreachable' and the 'discarded' of our world, and those caught into new forms of slavery because they lack Water. Right relations and reconciliation must be promoted between God, oneself, neighbour and creation. Water is to be defended for the common good of all.
- The Church cannot be a neutral mediator but must side with those who suffer most: it must promote Water dialogue through an interdisciplinary approach. Every change to the environment affects water and all living things around.

Conflict

Water as a source of beauty and wonder connects communities but can also inspire conflict. Water is meant to be a link between peoples, not a pawn in conflicts. Hence Water diplomacy is required so that it works for peace. Its privatisation would be disastrous for the poor: only profitable Water schemes would be maintained. 'Price-gouging' around Water already goes on, while sexual exploitation of women is common as payment for Water.

'Ocean-grabbing' is addressed, as is piracy and corruption. We must defend the oceans as the common heritage of humankind and support indigenous communities which depend on the sea for a livelihood. The sea-bed and ocean-floor are to be defended as the common heritage of humankind.

Education on all levels must serve a rich humanism and train those who will be involved in water governance.

Facts

Of the Water on the planet, Saltwater represents 97.5%; Fresh Water 2.5%, of which 1.2% is accessible. Its quality however is constantly deteriorating.

Only 38% of poor homes have basic handwashing facilities with soap and Water. This means that for 3 billion people lack of drinking Water is a daily and terrible reality. One third of all primary schools lack basic drinking Water, sanitation and hygiene services. Lack of toilets affects millions of school children and keeps many girls from school.

A person needs to be able to access, within 100 meters of home, 50 litres of good Water daily—for drinking, cooking, washing. Bad Water brings two million child deaths annually. We carry some responsibility here: Pope Francis states, ‘When parents say to me, “He has a rare illness!” I know it is due to the sickness we are inflicting on the environment’.

Sound Bites

The preciousness of Water requires us to revise careless patterns of behaviour. John the Baptist’s style of life calls for moderation in ours!

The human need for Water must take precedence over industrial and recreational needs.

‘Out of sight, out of mind!’ – such indifference is intolerable regarding the discharge of toxic waste into rivers and oceans.

The slogan for World Water Day 2019 was: *‘Leaving no one behind’*.

\$1 investment in Water saves between \$4-\$12 in care costs.

‘To throw food away is to throw people away.’ Water plays its part in all food.

The poorest have no insurance.

Poison from land is absorbed by marine organisms, hence we are gradually being poisoned when we eat seafood.

Migrants and refugees suffer most from Water stress. Be aware of their Water needs.

Waste-water management can be an act of love.

Human trafficking on the oceans is *‘an atrocious scourge, an abhorrent plague and an open wound on contemporary society’* (Pope Francis)

END-NOTE: You can download the English text from the Vatican Dicastery for Integral Human Development. Thank you. Brian Grogan SJ