



Water: The Source of Life

Brian Grogan SJ, author of *Creation Walk* (Messenger Publications), reflects on 'Aqua Fons Vitae', a document from the Vatican Office for Promoting Integral Human Development that re-emphasises Pope Francis's commitment to the equal access to water throughout the world.

When scientists first examined rocks from the Moon and Mars, they searched, not for precious metals or oil, but for water, because water is the source of life. Even to have discovered one living plant on either planet would have caused huge excitement and hope. Our Earth is known as the 'blue planet' because it is blessed with water. Saltwater represents 97.5% of the water on Earth and fresh water 2.5%, of which 1.2% is accessible, but its quality is constantly diminishing.

Nothing, nothing, is more precious than water and only when we value it will we protect it and play our part in promoting its sharing. Even a single drop of water is full of wonder and mystery.

The Bible has 1500 verses on water, making plain that it is a divine gift over which no human being has absolute rights. The abundant uses of water across the great religions include healing, blessing and baptism.

But today only 38% of the world's poorest homes have basic handwashing facilities. This means that three billion people are denied them. Lack of drinking water causes 'water stress' for billions. One third of primary schools across the globe

lack drinking water, sanitation and hygiene services. This affects the health of millions of school children: shortage of toilets keeps many girls from school. People need fifty litres of good water daily – for drinking, cooking and washing – and it needs to be accessible less than 100 metres from home.

Two million deaths occur annually among children due to bad water. Pope Francis says: 'When parents say to me that a child has a rare illness, I know it is due to the sickness we inflict on the environment'. Scientifically this is true: if we create an open sore on a living thing, it will fester: likewise when we misuse nature it reacts in viral or other forms.

Last March the Vatican issued a landmark document in defence of water. Its message supports Pope Francis, who never misses an occasion to emphasise the significance of water for civilisation and to promote its fair distribution across the globe. How we respect and share water is a key indicator of how we are carrying out God's mission to us of caring for our earthly garden, as in Genesis 2:15.

This document calls first on the Church to put its own house in order:



every Church facility across the globe must have an adequate supply of good water.

Next, the Christian community cannot be a neutral mediator but must side with those who suffer most from lack of water. We must defend the 'unreachable', the 'discarded' and those caught into new forms of slavery because they lack water. Water, which is God's gift to all living things, must be enabled to play its part in maintaining right relations and reconciliation between God, ourselves, our neighbours and creation.

While water connects communities it can also inspire fierce conflict. Hence 'water diplomacy' is required so that it works for peace. Water must never be understood as just a market

commodity: its privatisation would be disastrous for the poor because only profit-making water schemes would be maintained. Yet 'price-gouging' already goes on, with sexual exploitation of women common as payment for water.

'Ocean-grabbing' is addressed in the document, as is piracy and corruption. We must defend the oceans as the common heritage of everyone, and support those who depend on the sea for a livelihood.

The document asks that the young be educated to appreciate the gift of water as reflecting a ray of the infinite wisdom and goodness of God: in this way water can be for them an unending source of inspiration for right living. ♡