

Water and the community of life

Reflections from the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

In almost every community in every country where Maryknoll missionaries live and work, water is of urgent concern. With many other people of faith and good will, we are searching for a deeper understanding of our “sister” water and are calling for a more just distribution of water for all creation and its peoples.

Many in the Maryknoll family are already working specifically for water justice and ecological integrity:

In **Bolivia**, Maryknoll lay missionaries are engaged with neighbors in El Alto to stop the privatization of water services and have joined with people from all parts of the country to form a National Assembly for the Defense of Water, Basic Services and Life.

In **Panama**, the Maryknoll Sisters are pressing for action on a growing threat, hidden for the most part from local people, to drain an essential, large fresh water lake in order to expand the Panama Canal and facilitate mega-ship traffic.

In **Tanzania**, the available water supply is under serious strain due to severe, endemic drought, the rapid growth in population and increased cattle raising. To improve the drinking water supply, especially for health reasons, a Maryknoll priest, working with local villagers and District officials, has helped build windmills to pump clean water from sandy river beds into village centers, plus small dams and water catchments to hold the scant rainwater that falls. Another has encouraged the planting of trees in a desperately dry area to restore the water cycle and improve local agriculture.

In the **Philippines**, water is an important theme for study and reflection at the Maryknoll Sisters’ Ecological Sanctuary in Baguio.

In **Kenya**, a Maryknoll priest has set up irrigation projects to help small farmers grow better crops. He has also assisted in projects to dig boreholes and wells to bring clean water to the slum areas around Nairobi and provide water for local schools run by Kenyan Sisters.

In **Nepal**, where water is abundant and even exported to India, Maryknoll Sisters point out that it is neither utilized well nor conserved due to many local and government problems.

Others have listened with care to the wisdom of indigenous peoples about water.

Through our work, our listening and our reflections, we have come to believe:

WATER is its own reality, a dimension of planet Earth, ancient and life-giving. It claims its own “right to be” by the very fact that it is! Oceans probably arose over four billion years ago from the condensation of the vapor in the atmosphere. All the water now in circulation has been here since the Planet was first formed, no more, no less. So water, having maintained its integrity over eons of time, has its own story to tell and plays its own role in the on-going cosmic venture. Life in all its expressions has emerged from water. It is generous gift and gracious friend. St. Francis named it our “sister.” To honor water in and of

itself is to go deep into cosmic origins and the very mystery of creation.

WATER is the common heritage of all creation as it is an essential dimension of the journey of life. No single species nor any region of Earth, no economic class nor political party, can claim water as its own. Its cycles and seasons have nurtured civilizations from the beginning. Its deep mysteries have inspired spiritual practices in all the great religious traditions. In the presence of water, all creatures and all creation stand in need, side-by-side, dependent and grateful.

WATER is an “endangered species,” its purity, nurturing power, free-flow and availability for all under attack. Due to human activity, water is being poisoned by massive dumpings, polluted by excessive runoff. On every continent, it is dammed and re-directed, robbed from the poor, wasted by the rich and ignored as an essential element that belongs to all creation. The disparities between those for whom it is readily available and those who trek long miles to obtain a bucket are all too apparent. The competition only increases as the supply diminishes. Wars over access to water are already being waged, and the threat of more is on the horizon.

WATER is on the world agenda today as an “economic good,” a commodity that can be owned by powerful entities and distributed according to the highest bidder. Under this rubric, the privatization of water has grown into an immense industry and threatens communities worldwide. Bottled water, a privatization privilege for the powerful, has become ubiquitous. It is urgent to explore practices where public water management is accountable to the people and where the common good of the entire community, human and other-than-human, is served.

WATER is both a sacred gift and a central symbol in all religious traditions. For Christians, water is essential to the initiation ritual that invites a new person into the beloved community of all life and into the Christian family. The Bible abounds with water references, as do the sacred writings of all religions. Perhaps no other dimension of Earth life has such spiritual meaning as water. When water is neither pure nor clean its ability to carry such symbolic weight is threatened.

WATER concerns are front and center across the globe as enlightened peoples awaken to this crisis. Community groups and governments, international bodies and non-governmental organizations, scientists, ecologists, marine biologists -- all are raising alarm signals and moving aggressively to put remedial policies in place. The task is monumental and urgent.

To understand water in this light, as a member of the community of life on Earth, and to speak out of that truth challenges our assumptions, our thinking, our language, our practices and our policies. We struggle to be faithful to the change in consciousness this demands as we address this extremely important issue.

Our way forward

Studies and the experiences of Maryknollers around the world make it abundantly clear that the future of our sister water and the future of planet earth are inextricably linked. This sobering fact, the essential role that water plays in the life of the whole earth community, faces us all. It will not grow less urgent or disappear with a single well-designed plan or program initiated in

one or another spot on the planet. Piecemeal repairs will not work unless they fit into the life-support systems of the whole – specifically, into the integrated system that water comprises throughout the earth.

Leaders at every level of society, communities and individuals must awaken to the urgency of this matter and the magnitude of the task before us. We need a complete transformation from a human community acting as despoilers of water to a worldwide community acting as lovers and friends of water.

As Maryknoll embraces this new vision of community and offers its gifts to help address the many problems that face our sister water on all continents, three principles have emerged to guide us. Other principles may well unfold as we continue to move forward.

Principle #1: For the common good

In every instance where water is endangered and Maryknoll is engaged in addressing the matter, we should be guided by Catholic social teaching on the common good, namely, that the “goods of the earth are meant for all.” No one person or group, no single species, has exclusive claims on earth’s bounty. Historically, we have understood this teaching to apply solely to the human community, i.e., that the common good demands the same rights to earth’s abundance for the poor as for the wealthy. It is this teaching that has been the foundation of our work over the years to ensure that the rights of the poor and their ability to carry on in a viable manner are protected.

However, as we better understand the full implications of our being members of a single, sacred earth community, we realize that the notion of the common good must be expanded to include all other expressions of earth life as well, human and other-than-human. We now grasp the reality that we do not exist in isolation from the rest of the natural world. Therefore, our concern for the common good must reach out and incorporate the “good” of water and forests, of wetlands and meadows, of oceans and atmosphere, of the bees and the birds, of plant and animal life ... all must be within the embrace of the common good. In fact, we might better broaden the expression to speak of the “common good and the good of the commons.” So, as we engage water issues in the future, we uphold this first principle and stand with all of creation in seeking to ensure the rights of the full community to this essential life source, sister water.

Principle #2: Participation

Over the years, we have taken seriously the Church’s social teaching that people have not only the right but also the responsibility to participate in shaping the institutions that control their lives. Whether in the political, economic, religious, educational, or social realm, participation is to be guaranteed to all those who are impacted by the policies, laws, actions of these systems. How often over the years has Maryknoll stood with communities, especially of people who are poor, in their demands for a place at the table where laws and rules that they must obey are created! We have raised our voices and given our energies to shape more just and inclusive societies.

But now, in light of our broadened sense of the earth community, our call for participation must go beyond the demands of the human community to ensure that the rights of the natural world are also represented at the table. Today we are being called to speak out, not only with

impoverished people, but also for the waters of the Hudson, the Ganges and the Amazon Rivers, the Great Lakes of Africa and the U.S., the ocean waters as they flow freely throughout the planet. We join with guardians of the Appalachian mountains, the Serengeti, Indonesian forests, the Arctic glaciers, the great white bear, the disappearing songbird ... all those who are speaking up in the name of the voiceless members of earth community, expanding the table and broadening the debate into new realms of consciousness and concern. Our work with sister water moves us beyond social participation to include ecological participation.

Principle #3: Accountability

In all that we as Maryknoll undertake to address concerns about water, the need for accountability is essential at every level and among all who are involved. This principle is of critical importance to the integrity of any undertaking. To insist that leadership answer to the people and the full community of life is non-negotiable. It requires continual consultation with those who have an investment in the outcome of the effort; the frequent testing of our own assumptions and plans; and an openness to the wisdom and insight of others. Accountability to the local community can restore the trust and confidence of the people and guarantee an outcome for the good of all creation.

Conclusion

In local communities around the world and at an international level,

- we will continue to nurture a new understanding of our relationship with sister water;
- we will support practices and policies appropriate to that understanding;
- we will promote “the common good/the good of the commons,” social and ecological participation and accountability at every level to the full community of life.

Many partners, faith-based organizations and others, have produced excellent resources on water :

- National Catholic Rural Life Conference http://www.ncrlc.com/water_commons.html
- La Red Vida <http://www.laredvida.org>
- UNESCO's water webpage, <http://www.unesco.org/water/>
- Friends of the Earth, <http://www.foe.org/index.php>
- International Water Working Group, <http://www.citizen.org/cmep/water>
- “Twice as Thirsty: Women, Children and Water,” a document from Church World Service, http://www.churchworldservice.org/pdf_files/EA/womenwater.pdf
- Theological reflection on water by Dr. Heather Eaton, KAIROS (Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives), <http://www.kairosCanada.org/e/ecology/water/reflectionWater.asp>

These links and additional resources are available on the website of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns www.maryknollogc.org (Ecology section).

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