

Water: Essential for Justice and Peace

An Interfaith Statement to the 4th World Water Forum

March 2006

We, members of the faith community within the United States, offer this statement for consideration by Ministers and all stakeholders participating in the 4th World Water Forum as solutions are sought for existing and expected water problems around the world. Of special significance to us is how the most vulnerable and voiceless will fare: future generations, low-income and otherwise marginalized people, other threatened species and whole bioregions. We hope that the principles presented herein will continually be raised up during the Forum as decisions are made and as the Ministerial Declaration is prepared. We believe that the observance of these principles can help people of good will reach solutions that will demonstrate justice and nurture peace throughout the world.

Water and Faith

Our physical dependence upon water and the graciousness of a loving creator is reflected in the central place that water takes in the practices and beliefs of world religions and the spirituality of indigenous peoples. Water, a creative force, is essential for all life. It is the common heritage of all creation, a sacred gift. Water cleanses: it washes away impurities, purifying objects for ritual use as well as making a person clean, physically and spiritually. No other substance on Earth carries so profound a spiritual meaning.

For Judaism and Christianity, water is prominent in initiation rituals. The pouring of clean, fresh, living water, symbolizing the spirit of God, makes manifest a new spiritual life. Cleansing with water consecrates the body and is understood as a preparing of oneself for a closer communion with God. The cleansing character and power of water is essential in Islam as well, as Muslims become ritually pure before approaching God in prayer. Water also has a special place in Hinduism because of its spiritually cleansing powers as Hindus strive to attain physical and spiritual purity. For Indigenous peoples, water is sacred, offering life and connecting everything in a vast unity celebrated through rituals of cleansing and gratitude.

The contamination of water or the act of withholding it from anyone is an affront to the sacredness of water. Preserving and making available fresh water as a sacred legacy is a collective responsibility that includes the involvement and participation of all.

The Situation

The principal difficulty today is not one of absolute scarcity of water, but rather fairness of distribution and water quality. Of special concern to us are the increased instances of the commercialization, commodification, and contamination of water and water services which often result in the disturbance of the natural flow of water systems disrupting ecosystems and decreasing accessibility of water for marginalized people.

1. Nearly 1.1 billion people (17% of world population) are without access to improved sources of water, and about 2.4 billion (40%) have no access to any form of improved sanitation services. As a consequence, 2.2 million people in developing countries, most of them children, die every year from diseases associated with lack of safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene.
2. By 2025, at least 3.5 billion people or nearly 50% of the world's population will face water scarcity. In addition, 29 of the world's river basins -- with a projected population of 10 million each by 2025 -- will experience further scarcity.
3. About 40% of the world's population depends on water flowing through, in groundwater of, or stored in a neighboring country. Of the more than two hundred river systems shared by two or more countries, several have already caused international conflict. There are now more than 2,000 treaties between countries that relate to water rights.
4. At least 90% of potable water in the world is groundwater. This source of water is increasingly threatened with depletion and contamination.
5. In part because of poisoned waterways, one-fifth of the world's freshwater fishes are either endangered or extinct, according to the World Resources Institute.

Considerations for Decision-Making

We come together to express agreement that water management and decision-making must be guided by the following considerations for the common good of the people of the world and the natural systems of the planet itself.

1. Water has intrinsic value in itself, independent of its utilitarian and commercial value.
2. Access to enough safe, clean and affordable water for personal and domestic use is a basic human right.
3. Water should be held in the public domain, as a common good for all people. Governance decisions should not be based on profit, but should be made according to the criteria of equity and human dignity, sustainability of all life, and meaningful community participation.
4. If a government decides to shift the public responsibility for providing quality water to private entities, it should ensure the protection of the public interest so that the rights of poor and low-income people are not denied, and that principles of sustainability are protected. Decision making should be characterized by openness, transparency, and strong public regulatory oversight. All local, national and international public institutions have responsibility to ensure these conditions.
5. Water must not be used as a tool of oppression. Political boundaries should not hinder access to water.
6. Water resource management should be based on the principle that water is an integral part of the ecosystem and on an understanding of the hydrologic cycle and the integrity of hydrographic basins.
7. Water is a social and cultural good. It has also become an economic good. Policies relating to the economics of water should ensure efficiency and the most beneficial uses as determined by all stakeholders. They should meet the needs of poor and vulnerable people and the goal of environmental sustainability.
8. When a community water supply becomes unsafe to drink or is in some other way interrupted, water must be provided at or below cost by public authorities.
9. Water should not be traded as a commodity. The sovereign right of each country to regulate its water resources and sanitation services should be reaffirmed.
10. Each person has the right to water for a basic livelihood. Marginalized and vulnerable social sectors should be given priority in terms of access to water and appropriate water technologies for subsistence.

Water is a gift, inspiring in all of us a response of gratitude. A spirituality of gratitude takes us beyond the consideration of water as only a physical, economic, social, or cultural good to its status as a gift of the Creator, having a unique life-giving role in creation.

T. Michael McNulty, SJ
Justice and Peace Director
Conference of Major Superiors of Men

Marie Lucey, OSF
Associate Director
Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Marie Dennis
Director
Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns

Br. David Andrews, CSC
Executive Director
National Catholic Rural Life Conference

Hopi Villages, Arizona
H2OPI Mexico City
Run of Respect for Water and All Life

Rev. Ron Stief
Director, Public Life and Social Policy Office
Justice and Witness Ministries
United Church of Christ

References available at
www.ncrlc.com/WaterEssentialJusticePeace.html

We are grateful for the contributions of Sr. Suzanne Golas, CSJP, director, WATERSPIRIT in the development of this statement. We also appreciate the translation to Spanish by Magda Lanuza.