

## World Water Day

March 22, 1993 was designated as the first World Water Day in response to the recommendation of the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. World Water Day draws attention to the necessity of caring for and protecting freshwater so as to maintain a sustainable supply for an increasing population. This year's theme for World Water Day is "Leaving no one behind".

Reflecting on the fact that the survival of our planet, the survival of human life and indeed the survival of every species of life depends on water, it may seem unimaginable today that approximately 840,000,000 people globally would be without safe drinking water, but this is the reality as reported by the World Health Organization.<sup>1</sup> This includes Canada where there are currently 75 long-term drinking water advisories affecting more than 50 Indigenous communities across the country, according to Indigenous Services Canada.<sup>2</sup> This is in addition to the many other rural areas across Canada which regularly experience boil water orders. Ensuring that everyone has access to a supply of clean, healthy water and that equitable distribution of water is maintained is a huge challenge and responsibility.

### ***The Human Right to Water***

In 2010 the United Nations explicitly recognized the human right to water and sanitation and called upon the international community to provide financial assistance to developing countries in their struggle to provide clean water for all. It was not until 2015 that Canada finally accepted responsibility for this and signed on to the resolution. The challenge now is to make sure that our country as well as the other countries are vigilant in honouring this commitment<sup>3</sup>.

We might be tempted to leave this responsibility in the capable hands of the United Nations, environmentalists and scientists with the belief that they are the experts with the necessary knowledge and skills. However, as people of faith, or as neighbours in a global community in which we are all interrelated and interconnected, do we not need to rethink this? Pope Francis, in his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, reminds us that our vocation in life is to be protectors of God's handiwork and that this is an essential part of our faith. (LS 217) The Pope also writes that we do this through an integral ecological lens whereby we see and attend to both the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor as being one. (LS 49)

### ***Already Existing World Water Shortage***

Those of us who live on the island portion of this beautiful province surrounded by water and dotted with many ponds, lakes and rivers are aware of our intimate connection to these waters. We realize that ground water plays a vital role in the water supply and in the sustainability of ecosystems and consequently in the well-being of human life. We grieve to hear news of the loss of surface water and the increased use of ground water, and the sufferings of water in many parts of the world as a result of climate change and pollution. Were not our hearts stirred with compassion last year as we watched with our breaths held in fear for the people of Cape Town, South Africa as they came to the brink of having their water supply exhausted and their water taps turned off.<sup>4</sup> Yet Cape Town is not alone in this precarious situation. According to the latest assessment by World Aid, an international organization working for water sanitation and hygiene, 80% of India's surface water is polluted. Likewise, a 2016 survey by the Ministry of Water Resources of over 2000 underground wells tested across heavily populated areas of China

found that more than 80% were so badly contaminated as to make the water unfit for human use and consumption<sup>5</sup>

We are now all too well aware of the serious consequences of climate change in the loss of surface water and the increased use of ground water, creating a grave threat of running out of fresh water and thereby jeopardizing the future life of the planet. The challenge of an increasing population, estimated to reach 9,000,000,000 by 2050, and the estimated 60% more food required to insure food security puts another severe stress on water supply as stated by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization. This must all be achieved while conserving and enhancing the natural resource base<sup>6</sup>. All this calls us to look deep into our own hearts to uncover creative solutions and together to challenge ourselves, our communities, our governments to find more effective and long-lasting ways to protect the health and safety of water.

### ***New Consciousness of a Sacred relationship with Water being recognized***

There is much hope, however, in the fact that a new consciousness with a deeper sense of respect for the care and protection of God's creation and God's vulnerable people is growing among humanity. For as Pope Francis reminds us, we as human beings "while capable of the worst" also possess enormous capacity for goodness, creativity and generosity. In this regard Pope Francis assures us, "No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful, or our God-given ability to respond to his grace at work in our hearts." (LS 205)

We cannot allow ourselves to become helpless. Instead consumption can be reduced, rainwater can be harvested for crops, and waste water can be reused. Recognizing that water is essential for life, that water is life and that, therefore, rivers, ponds, lakes and other bodies of water are living entities and must be entitled to the respect, reverence and care that we afford a living being, that in this sacred relationship we are called to live in kinship with water and with all creation. Indigenous groups have always lived out of the reality that these bodies of water are entitled to all the rights, powers, duties and liabilities of a legal person. This recognition as a living being with full legal rights has now been granted by the government of New Zealand to the Whanganui River. The local Māori tribe in the North Island had pleaded for the recognition of this sacred river as an ancestor for 140 years. In India the Ganges River with its main tributary, the Yamuna, considered sacred by more than 1 billion Indians, has become the first non-human entity in that country to be granted the same legal rights as people. Native Americans view nature through their belief systems which hold that a river or water way does not only sustain life – it is sacred, deserving of the same respect and rights as a person in the eyes of the law. The United States does not have such laws but it is hoped that this will change. In Colorado an environmental group called Deep Green Resistance has recently filed a suit against the state requesting personhood status and rights for the Colorado River. If successful, this lawsuit could help open the possibility for other bodies of water to be entitled to "all the rights, powers, duties, and liabilities of a legal person"<sup>7</sup>.

### ***A Protector of the Life-giving Waters of Mother Earth***



From our First Nations people in Canada we have been reminded of the ancestral connection to water which brought Elder Josephine Manadamin, an Anishabaabewe grandmother, to take on a sacred walk, travelling a total of 25,000 kilometers out of concern for the health of lakes and rivers throughout Turtle Island. She is known as the "Water Walker." Elder Josephine

walked the shoreline of the five Great Lakes to draw attention to the pollution happening to the lakes. As she walked, she carried a bucket of water as a sign of the water that we carry in our bodies and that all of us came forth from the waters of our mother's womb. In the words of Elder Josephine, "The water of Mother Earth, she carries life to us, and as women we carry life through our bodies. We as women are life givers, protectors of the water, and that's why we are very inclined to give Mother Earth the respect that she needs for the water." Sadly, this great woman passed away on February 22 of this year<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Discovering Our Kinship with Water***

Inspired by the love and appreciation of this woman for water the Program Committee of the Mercy Centre for Ecology and Justice together with a few people from the community walked around some of the city waterways - Quidi Vida Lake, Kent's Pond and Long Pond - during the early summer of 2018. They, too, carried pails of water and stopped for prayer and reflection in celebration of our relationship with water.



Discovering our kinship with water shifts the direction of our hearts and minds to a greater awareness of our ancestral relationship with water and from that perspective we more readily recognize our

oneness with all of life where all is interrelated and interconnected. This awareness evokes within us feelings of wonder, awe and gratitude. May we do all in our power to ardently live up to our responsibility to be protectors of water and to ensure that in the accessibility of this life-giving gift "no one is left behind".

### **Water Ritual - "Drinking water with a new awareness"**

The following ritual offers an experience that may assist us in deepening our consciousness of our intimate connection with water as a life-giving gift.

*1. Pour water into a glass.*

*Take a sip and wait a moment to see how it feels.*

*The hydrogen component in the water in your mouth existed from the beginning of creation. It is our planet's life blood. Just as water travels Earth, the water in our bodies moves from cell to cell, carrying necessary nutrients and removing wastes. Water is essential to life*

*2. Take another sip of water.*

*Imagine waking up on a bright sunny day and turning on the tap only to find that there is no water. You learn that your town has an emergency and will be without water indefinitely. There is no bottled water, juice or liquid of any kind and you feel so thirsty. Then you learn that the emergency could last weeks or even months.*

*How will your life be affected?*

*What do you now need to do?*

*3. Take another sip. Reflect on how you take water for granted. Try to picture yourself standing in a long line under the hot sun with an empty water pail in South Africa, anxiously awaiting your turn before the last drop trickles from the tap.*

*In so many parts of the world having enough water to survive is a constant worry. In some cultures, women and children are responsible for getting the household water. In many cases obtaining water necessitates walking long distances, sometimes as much as six hours, leaving little time for girls to attend school, and for mothers to care for the family or earn money.*

*4. Take another sip of water.*

*Water brings life but it can also bring death through such diseases as typhoid fever, cholera, dysentery. As you drink this sip, be aware that it is cleaner than the water available to our so many of our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world. Be grateful for clean water.*

*5. Take another sip:*

*Near the end of the Book of Revelations, we read these words: "Let all who are thirsty come: all who want it may have the water of life, and have it free." (Jerusalem Bible, Rev 22:17)*

#### Relevant Websites

1. <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/drinking-water>
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44961490>
3. <http://www.unwater.org/>
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/feb/03/day-zero-cape-town-turns-off-taps>
5. <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003385/chinese-town-still-seething-over-water-pollution-scare>
6. <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/174172/icode/>
7. <https://theconversation.com/for-native-americans-a-river-is-more-than-a-person-it-is-also-a-sacred-place-85302>
8. <http://indigenouising.org/josephine-mandamin/>

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