

# Thirsting for Water in the Year of Mercy

by David Gibson

Countless sad stories can be told about the great numbers of people in large parts of the contemporary world who thirst anxiously for safe water to drink.

In other parts of the world where a decent supply of drinking water is taken almost for granted, it can be hard to fathom these stories. Is there still a need for the corporal work of mercy that calls for giving drink to the thirsty? Really?

The truth about the thirst for water in the twenty-first century strikes a sensitive nerve in the Christian community, where tradition honors water as a powerful sign of goodness and life.

It always is remembered among Christians that Jesus asked the woman at the well in Samaria to give him a drink and proceeded to tell her that whoever “drinks the water I shall give will never thirst” again (Jn 4:7; 14).

Water is a life-giving force. The water of baptism stands as a dynamic sign for Christians that Christ is a giver of life. Through baptism, his people are joined to his body in life-giving ways meant to influence the entire course both of their physical and spiritual existence in this world.

But the water of baptism is more than a sign of new life for baptized individuals. It confers a mandate on them to become life-givers themselves.

The simple fact is that no one lives, grows, or thrives without water. So the profound thirst today for healthful water to drink is a confounding reality.

It delivers the message that even in these times of stunning advancements in technology, communications, education, and medicine, the corporal works of mercy cannot be set aside.

No, the thirst for water is not obsolete or even rare today, Pope Francis attests in *Laudato Si'*, his 2015 encyclical on the environment. Giving care to the planet and to the poor requires that close attention be paid to the state of the world's drinking water, he suggests (in nos. 27-31).

A response of some kind to the contemporary thirst for water is, moreover, not out of reach for those like me who, in our daily comings and goings, tend never to be approached by someone requesting a glass or bottle of water.

I admit that grandchildren of mine often declare their great thirst in dramatic terms. What they really want is a soda or, more rarely, a bottle of juice. Their thirst is not the kind born of wrenching poverty.

But the encyclical turns our attention to the thirst of people living in profound poverty. “Our world has a grave social debt toward the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity,” the pope writes.

It is a debt, he adds, that “can be paid partly by an increase in funding to provide clean water and sanitary services among the poor.”

The pope notes that “water poverty especially affects Africa where large sectors of the population have no access to safe drinking water or experience droughts which impede agricultural production.”

“Unsafe water” leads on a continual basis to “deaths and the spread of water-related diseases,” he points out. “Dysentery and cholera, linked to inadequate hygiene and water supplies, are a significant cause of suffering and of infant mortality.”

# Mercy in Motion

He calls attention to the pollution of underground water reserves caused “by certain mining, farming and industrial activities, especially in countries lacking adequate regulation or controls.”

The encyclical regards “access to safe, drinkable water” as a “basic and universal human right.” Pope Francis affirms that water is “essential to human survival,” which means it also “is a condition for the exercise of other human rights.”

But life’s sad reality for people who lack access to safe water means that many also lack the chance to enjoy the benefits of other human rights—pursuing an education, for example, or looking with hope to the future. Too often the present, desperate moment consumes them.

So thirst is a form of slavery that confines and diminishes human persons. The cry of thirsty people is a cry for life. It starts as a cry for survival.

When people lack water or can gain access only to tainted water, they grow weak. Sickness overtakes them, and many will die.

The Church’s current Year of Mercy is, then, an opportunity to become aware of all that blocks human access to water and of all the ways individuals, communities, international organizations, and governments might respond to the facts on human thirst.

Water in the Christian vision is a sign of new life. The hope of the Year of Mercy, then, is that in relieving people of their thirst for water, they will be freed to thirst for a new, more rewarding way of life.

In Judeo-Christian history, one goal of a jubilee year is to proclaim liberty to captives. Bearing that in mind, I conclude with a probing question: What does giving drink to the thirsty imply in this Year of Mercy?

*Gibson served on Catholic News Service’s editorial staff for 37 years.*

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