

Living the Gospel: Responding to Challenge

W A T E R

What is the issue?

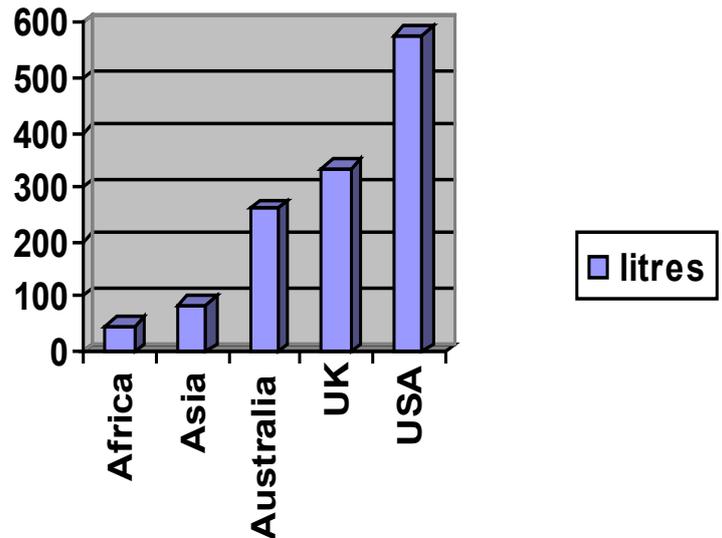
'Would it surprise you to discover that the ice in your glass of lemonade was once a snowflake? How about if the tears in your eyes, were, long ago, drops in a pool where dinosaurs came to drink? Well both are possible. Nearly all the water on Earth is the same water that has been here since our oceans formed nearly four billion years ago. Each raindrop and snowflake that falls is on an endless path from the sky to the ground (or ocean) and back to the sky again. This loop is called the hydrologic cycle or watercycle.'¹

We can't create new water. We can only use what already exists. Water covers 70% of the planet's surface, but 97% of this is salt water and only 3% is fresh water. Most of the fresh water is in frozen form leaving only 1% as surface water (rivers and lakes) and underground water (in aquifers). Yet this water sustains most of the life on Earth!

Water scarcity is not the only issue. There are also major problems with water quality. Contaminated water has devastating impact on human health globally with an estimated 13 million dying annually from waterborne bacterial illness. The world's freshwater resources are under extreme pressure!

¹ [T. Strain Trueit, *The Water Cycle*, Franklin Watts, USA, 2002, p7]

Daily per capita water consumption



Why should Christians be concerned?

Without water, we die. Water is life in the most simple of ways. The richness of the symbolism of water in the Scriptures is immense. At creation, God's spirit moves across the face of the deep, hovering over the waters. From these waters God brings forth Earth and all it contains. It is little wonder that the people of Israel, a desert dwelling people, often used water as a symbol of what is essential to spiritual life in the same way that it is basic to physical life. 'Oh, come to the water all you who are thirsty... come to me, listen, and your soul will live' (*Is 55:1-3*).

Australia is the world's driest and flattest inhabited continent with the lowest percentage of rainwater reaching our rivers as runoff, the lowest amount of water found in our rivers and the smallest surface area of permanent wetlands. Over 50% of Australia receives less than 500mm of rain annually; over 80% receives less than 600mm. The recent decade of drought has added significantly to Australia's water crisis.



In their statement on the Murray-Darling Basin, 'The Gift of Water', the Australian Bishops wrote: 'Jesus belonged to a people who knew about deserts and drought, and who loved moving, living water. They saw running water as a blessing from God and as a symbol of life. It was not taken for granted. They saw it as a precious gift. For them, a spring of living water was a beautiful image for the life God gave us (Is 12:3; 55:1; Jer 2:13...). They thought of God's presence and revelation, which they often described as the Wisdom of God, as like a life giving fountain of living water.'

On World Water Day, 2007, the Holy Father, Benedict XVI, issued a message through the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Bertone. In it he declared, 'Water, a common good of the human family, constitutes an essential element for life... Access to water is in fact one of the inalienable rights of every human being, because it is a prerequisite for the realization of the majority of the other human rights, such as the right to life, to food, to health.'

Pope Benedict highlighted the need for all people to use this precious resource wisely and urged the responsible and sustainable management of water. He said that this is a 'responsibility that must be shared and that becomes a moral and political imperative in a world that has levels of know-how and technologies that are capable of putting an end to situations of water scarcity and to their dramatic consequences...' Coining the term 'hydrological interdependence', the Pope emphasized that water knows no national boundaries and the need to recognize that all life depends on access to clean, fresh water.

'These are aspects' concluded the message, 'that not only demand responsibility of government leaders and politicians, but that challenge every individual. We are all called to renew our lifestyles with an educational effort that can reassign to this common good of humanity the value and respect that it ought to have in our society.'

Christians should be the first to treasure the gift of living water. In his Canticle, St Francis speaks of water as 'Sister Water' and celebrates it as beautiful, clear and pure and essential to our existence. The Australian Bishops have reminded us that we need a renewed spirituality of water that recognizes its centrality for all life. We need to treasure it as the life-giving gift of God and as a beautiful sign of the life of God.²

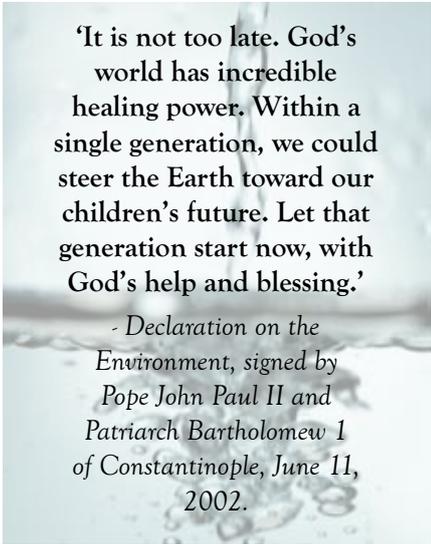
The challenge is summed up beautifully by the Bishops: 'Learning respect for the water we use will involve turning from old ways and taking up new ways. It will be part of the ecological conversion to which human beings in the 21st century are being called. Responding to this call is one of the great challenges facing the Christian community and the wider human community of the 21st century... We believe that all of us in the Christian community are called by God to discover and to live out our own form of ecological conversion.'³

² The Gift of Water, Statement on the Murray-Darling Basin.

³ Ibid.

What can you do?

- The Rule of Thumb: Measure and Monitor; Reduce; Reuse and Substitute
- Always look for water efficiency rating on appliances. The more stars the better.
- Drastically reduce water use in the home. Turn off the tap!
- Reuse water wherever possible, for example, a bucket of water captured in the shower can be poured into the washing machine.
- Take careful note of the information provided on water bills. Have a family competition to reduce use! Reward yourselves when you succeed.
- Support and applaud government initiatives towards a more sustainable water policy. Urge them to prompt action in this area.



'It is not too late. God's world has incredible healing power. Within a single generation, we could steer the Earth toward our children's future. Let that generation start now, with God's help and blessing.'

- Declaration on the Environment, signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, June 11, 2002.

For more information and ideas:

The Watermark Project, Victorian Women's Trust:
www.watermarkaustralia.org.au
Savewater! Alliance: www.savewater.com.au
Waterwatch, community water monitorina program:
www.waterwatch.org.au

Columban Mission Institute - Strathfield NSW

Anne Lanyon

annelanyon.cmi@columban.org.au

PH: (02) 9352 8021 FAX: (02) 9746 8033

Columban Mission Centre - Essendon VIC

Janette Mentha

jmentha@columban.org.au

PH: (03) 9375 9475 FAX: (03) 9379 6040