

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH TEXTS

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The Catholic Church has always considered water as essential for the existence of human beings, both in terms of physical survival and spiritual needs. Talking about water implies speaking about the origin and the possibility of life. In fact, civilizations are all born on the shores of important rivers; there is no possible development without water, and the access to water sources is as important today as it was at the beginning of human history. Starting from the Old Testament, throughout the New Testament and up to the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, the Church has recognized, as recently stated by His Holiness Pope Francis, that “water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems”.¹ This importance is already clearly outlined in the Book of Genesis in which is stated that “Water was there in the beginning”², and in the Exodus, when God shows his almightiness by giving the People of Israel water to drink in the desert. “So they [the People of Israel] quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink”. [...] I [God] will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.”³

Furthermore, turning to the New Testament, water represents a vital element of the first Sacrament, the baptism, which marks the watershed between the previous life and the life as a Christian. Indeed, we may affirm that, for the Catholic Church, water represents the beginning of a Christian's life.

In general terms, water is a natural resource, vital for the survival of humanity and all species on Earth. As a good of creation, water is destined for all human beings and their communities. God intended the Earth and all it contains for the use of all, so that all created things would be shared fairly by humankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.⁴

From the Catholic Church's perspective, while we are talking about water, we need to bear in mind that we are talking about a basic human right. As His Holiness Pope Francis reminds us, “All people have a right

to safe drinking water. This is a basic human right and a central issue in today's world". Without water, life is threatened. Therefore, the right to safe drinking water is a universal and inalienable right".⁵ Throughout the last decades, the Church has repeatedly highlighted the importance of access to water. This has been reaffirmed in many documents of the Holy See starting from the Social Doctrine, through different encyclical letters to the latest statements of His Holiness Pope Francis in February 2017 or representatives of the Holy See. The 2015 Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, represents a milestone in dealing with water rights and a new emphasis of the Church on the importance of the ecosystem as a gift that needs to be preserved and shared. In this Encyclical Letter, the importance of access to water is explicitly recognised: "we know that water is a scarce and indispensable resource and a fundamental right which conditions the exercise of other human rights".⁶

In parallel to the Church's position on the right of access to water, the International Community has given increased importance to this pressing issue; in fact, since 2003, water has become a top priority. Nowadays, within the United Nations system, there seems to be a common agreement that the survival of humanity and all species on Earth depends, to a great degree, on the availability of potable water and of effective sanitation systems. Such access is key to live in dignity and to promote and uphold human rights. Despite the efforts of the International Community, many new water-related issues arose, in particular the fact that access to drinking water in many regions in the world got worse. Events and processes such as desertification and climate change deteriorated precarious situations, leading to water scarcity and dryness, exacerbating the suffering of regions already affected by long-term conflicts and lack of effective development policies. All those challenges have been pointed out in the first part of the book.

Water scarcity and deprivation is experienced most dramatically by those living in poverty, and often in the poorest countries. Paradoxically, in richer countries, water is wasted and not perceived as the luxury it really is. Citizens in high-income countries very often take their privileged situations for granted, without thinking of the consequences that the waste of water has on the lives of their brothers and sisters in the rest of the world.

However, as a fundamental part of the world's ecosystem, not created by men, and essential for life, water belongs to every human being, and by its very nature it exists to be shared through different people and different generations. From this perspective derives that, for the Holy See, denying the access to water to someone is equivalent to denying his right to life. In many occasions, this has been reaffirmed in different multilateral fora by the Holy See diplomatic missions.

Another important aspect in the Social Doctrine of the Church represents the link between development and the access to water. Indeed,

effective access to water is required to ensure a real path to integral human development. As a matter of fact, the Holy See considers the Sustainable Development Goal 6 on access to Water and Sanitation and related targets as an important step towards a comprehensive international legislative framework.

Indeed, the promotion of integral human development, especially for those engaged in agriculture, requires proper management of water resources. Thus, the Catholic Church teaches that “[b]y its very nature water cannot be treated as just another commodity among many, and it must be used rationally and in solidarity with others. The distribution of water is traditionally among the responsibilities that fall to public agencies, since water is considered a public good. If water distribution is entrusted to the private sector it should still be considered a public good. The right to water, as all human rights, finds its basis in human dignity and not in any kind of quantitative assessment that considers water as a merely economic good.”⁷

In this regard, Pope John Paul II recalled that important human needs exist which escape the market logic⁸ and water is precisely one of these. It cannot be used solely as a means for profit because it is essential to the survival of the human person and thus cannot be transformed into a good reserved to the exclusive advantage of only those who can afford to pay for it.

In conclusion, and as showed in this publication, the human being needs to be at the centre of attention. Starting from this person-centred approach, every solution for access to safe water and sanitation should express a preferential love and consideration for the poor. It is for them that the water issue is crucial for life. It is mainly the poor who are deprived of the right to water, the right to health and the right to food. The human family must be served, not exploited. The primary objective of all efforts must be the well-being of those people — men, women, children, families, communities — who live in the poorest parts of the world and suffer most from any scarcity or misuse of water resources.⁹ In a family, every member is responsible for each and every other member; thus, the suffering of one becomes the suffering of all.

However, this is not enough. We need to move forward. As His Holiness Pope Francis stated, the right to water is also a duty to water, which is basic and pressing. Basic, because where there is water there is life, making it possible for societies to arise and advance. Pressing, because our common home needs to be protected. Yet it must also be realized that not all water is life-giving, but only water that is safe and of good quality. Sharing water and sharing the benefits which water brings, in a mutually agreed, equitable and sustainable way is the key to preventing conflicts over this precarious resource. Therefore, water needs to be accorded the central place it deserves in the framework of public policy.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* (28)
2. Genesis 1.2
3. Exodus, 17.1-7
4. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 69.
5. Address of Pope Francis to the Conference on the Human Right to Water, Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 23 February 2017, available at http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2017/02/24/pope_francis_addresses_vatican_conference_on_right_to_water/1294848 [Accessed 27.07.2017].
6. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*
7. Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church; 485.
8. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 40.
9. John Paul II, Message on the Occasion of the World Food Day to Jacques Diouf (Director-General of FAO), 13 October 2002.
10. Address of Pope Francis to the Conference on the Human Right to Water, *Op. Cit.*