
Our Sister Water's Battle (1)



I was recently asked to give a talk on this subject to the Daughters of Isabella, on the occasion of the *International Year of Fresh Water*. I would like to share with you part of that talk.

THE RACE FOR BLUE GOLD

If during the twentieth century there were several wars waged over oil, the black gold, more and more specialists predict that one of the great battlefields of our century will be a race for blue gold: fresh water. And since Canada holds 20% of (fresh and salt) water reserves and some 5.6% of renewable fresh water, we shall be more that solicited by our neighbours to the south, the east, and the west, by multinationals and by all kinds of wiles, to obtain our most precious natural resources. I would like to start this reflection of ours with St. Francis of Assisi's short prayer of thanksgiving to God: "Most High, all-powerful, good Lord, Yours are the praises, the glory, the honor, and all blessing. To You alone, Most High, do they belong, and no man is worthy to mention Your name. [...] Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, which is very useful and humble and precious and chaste."¹ Then there is this canticle to creation, in the Bible, which the Church urges us to say often: "You springs, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all for ever. Seas and rivers, bless the Lord, praise and exalt him above all for ever" (Dan. 3:77-78).

SOURCE OF LIFE

You have probably noticed on my coat of arms and those of the Diocese of Edmundston, that water holds pride of place, there: right in the middle of the shield, the living water flows, reminding us of the source of the grace of our baptism. Besides, it is first a reminder of the rivers that run through the Beauce Region of Québec and through our diocese. I remember my first visits to the schools when I first came, in 1994, how I used to ask the children to name at least five rivers in our region. You who live in the Madawaska Region would have no problem in naming ten! As you know, water is one of the essential elements of life, and we are now talking more and more about or wanting to talk more and more about the right to sufficient clean water as a true human right. There are existential and essential connections between the human being, the environment, and water. We could neither live nor survive without water. It is a source of life. Water is a source of beauty, a source of wonder, a source of renewal, both physical and spiritual. It isn't pure whim that draws us to spend time by the river or at the seashore. It was not for nothing that people set up their villages and homes along streams, by rivers, lakes, or the sea. Water has wonderful restorative properties: a good swim, a good bath, a good shower makes one feel really good; some would add, "even the community!" Water also has great therapeutic and aesthetic value: just remember the vacations you had last year, or those that are coming. I am reminded of a funny comment to me, when I was appointed bishop of Edmundston: A great lady from Québec commented: "Bishop of Edmundston? How lucky you are! Edmundston, the sea!"

BLESSINGS

In the Judaeo-Christian religion, God is present as the source of living water for the just person who seeks it. And since the Bible was written in that part of the world where water is at a premium, it is not surprising that water became a symbol of life, to the people. Because of the scarcity of water in these biblical countries, rain

and an abundance of water were viewed as a sign of God's favour and goodness. We only have to recall Pope John Paul II's visit to Canada, specifically to Trois-Rivières but repeated practically throughout his visit to the Maritimes: "Rain, rain, a gift of God!" Here I would like to digress a bit. Probably some of you have assisted at a baptism, lately. There is a prayer for blessing water which is a real catechesis on water. These are the words: "Father, you give us grace through sacramental signs, which tell us of the wonders of your unseen power. In baptism we use your gift of water, which you have made a rich symbol of the grace you give us in this sacrament. At the very dawn of creation your Spirit breathed on the waters, making them the wellspring of all holiness. The waters of the great flood you made a sign of the waters of baptism that make an end of sin and a new beginning of goodness. Through the waters of the Red Sea you led Israel out of slavery to be an image of God's holy people, set free from sin by baptism. In the waters of the Jordan your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit. Your Son willed that water and blood should flow from his side as he hung upon the cross. After his resurrection he told his disciples, 'Go out and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' Father, look now with love upon your Church and unseal for it the fountain of baptism. By the power of the Holy Spirit, give to this water the grace of your Son, so that in the sacrament of baptism all those you have been created in your likeness may be cleansed from sin and rise to a new birth of innocence by water and the Holy Spirit."²

RESPECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Water contributes to life, but it can also destroy: drowning is an example. There is no life without water, it is the sign of life itself. We are trying to discover whether there is any water, any sign of life on other planets. The Bible begins with the picture of the Spirit hovering above the water covering the earth, at the dawn of creation. And it is from the water itself that the earth emerges, as well as the reptiles and other forms of life, small and great. Water nourishes the earth which brings forth different forms of life. Even the separation of elements is a sign of life, while a mixing together of these elements brings confusion and chaos. The Great Flood is an example of this: everything is destroyed in this great watery catastrophe. Humankind is called to live in harmony with creation and to respect its integrity. Water conservation is a precious commodity for us today, but also for future generations: water brings us nourishment and it will bring nourishment and the capacity to enjoy the power, strength, and beauty of living water. Succeeding generations will be able to say as we do: "It is so refreshing to have a good drink of water!"

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1. "The Canticle of Brother Sun," in *Francis and Clare, the Complete Works*, translation and introduction by Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap. and Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M. New York/Ransey/Chicago, Paulist Press, (The Classics of Western Spirituality), © 1982, p. 38, 39.

2. Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Rite of Baptism for Children*, Ottawa, © 1989, pp. 75-76