

Comment

Bottling up discontent over water issues

By C.S. Morrissey
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If the Catholic Church told you that it preferred you to no longer buy your groceries from a store, saying your right to food means that food should only be owned and distributed by the government, you would think that was nuts. But the Church doesn't teach such crazy things about food. Or about water.

In response to an article of mine, my brother in Christ, Mr. Andrew Conradi, writes (B.C. Catholic, Feb. 14, 2011), "The Church clearly prefers publicly owned systems," but also writes, "Should I have mentioned the fact that the Church is in favour of private property ownership (including of water)? Is this fact not common knowledge?"

But what is the Church clearly in favour of? What does it clearly prefer? With such open contradictions, Conradi, doesn't discuss the very things that he assumes. Those troubled by his argument's omissions are dismissed, as appealing only to the "obvious." He persistently sees the water debate only as a simple choice of private versus public. But that approach casts everything in a polarizing light. In contrast, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace offers us productive clarity:

"The debate today is not whether the private sector will be involved but how and to what extent it will be present as the actual provider of water services. In any formation of private sector involvement with the state, there must exist a general parity among the

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parties allowing for informed decisions and sound agreements. A core concern in private sector involvement in the water sector is to ensure that efforts to achieve a water service that is efficient and reliable do not cause undue negative effects for the poor and low-income families."

Therefore Conradi falsely claims "the Church's doctrine is clearly against the use of water bottled commercially in plastic," (B.C. Catholic Jan, 17, 2011). His insinuation that I am making an attack on the archbishop and the Church, is unedifying. I have quoted Pope Benedict XVI's teaching in *Caritas in Veritate* at length in order to explain my thinking. And I do not presume to be the archbishops' spokesman on any issue.

When I make distinctions about exactly who said what, I seek to establish the levels of magisterial teaching on the water issue, so that I may think carefully with the mind of the Church. It is not academic nitpicking. But I am of the opinion that attentive and diligent thought on this issue is mandatory, because we cannot afford hasty or simple solutions that pit the public and private sectors against one another.

The right to access water is only going

to get more and more visible as a topic for political discussion in the years ahead. Because water scarcity is going to grow at an alarming rate in those areas with the greatest population growth, Catholics need to lead the way with a civil and fruitful discussion that defends the fullness of Catholic teaching. Recourse to familiar but worldly political paradigms is inadequate.

Conradi thinks Church teaching prefers to solve the water problem with the peculiar socialist model that he personally favours, but that is not true. The Church is far wiser and much more prudent than those activists who misunderstand and misuse the language in her magisterial documents about human rights and public goods.



The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (n.485) states only that public agencies "traditionally" distribute water, but it does not teach that this is necessary or even preferable.

Instead, it leaves room for prudence to decide locally how justice may be done to ensure the right to water. It outlines how water distribution may be justly "entrusted to the private sector."

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace affirms that privatization can "protect the public interest" if it is "set within a clear legislative framework." In other words, fostering the rule of law is much more important than fruitless ideological squabbles over public or private distribution.

C.S. Morrissey is an assistant professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. He will be speaking at Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Port Coquitlam April 2, about the moral law underpinning Church teaching on human rights. □