

Comment

The right to water, an 'essential element'

Human connectivity can be enabled by "a network of economic institutions," Pope Benedict writes

By C.S. Morrissey
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Authentic Church teaching on access to food and water as universal human rights is unfortunately not well understood. As The B.C. Catholic readership knows, I have reservations about current campaigns against bottled water. While I share the concern for the poor that animates my critics, I object to the imprudent aspects of their political agenda, which they incorrectly see as part of Church teaching.

For example, the crusade against bottled water unwittingly encourages tribal thinking. Those who remove bottled water are congratulated as being part of the "in crowd." Those who consume it, or simply tolerate its presence, are shunned and shamed.

No doubt any socially ungracious aspects of such a campaign are unintended by its organizers. But human concupiscence, a consequence of original sin, runs deep. The temptation to slip into such uncharitable patterns of behaviour is more powerful, I think, than all those who want to educate the young in such "social justice" may wish to admit.

Ironically, the organized attack on bottled water appeals most strongly to the sort of shallow consumerist mindset that easily ostracizes others. Are we ashamed if we wear the wrong jeans, the wrong sneakers, or in any way fail to act "cool" enough? Overzealous "social justice" campaigns rely on

similarly regressive shaming patterns of thought. Through their divisive tactics they generate unintended social injustices. So why not promote right reason instead?

Andrew Conradi's false conclusion that "the Church's doctrine is clearly against the use of water bottled commercially in plastic" (The B.C. Catholic, Jan. 17) is drawn from an incomplete citation of Church documents. He selectively quotes his sources, creating a false impression that the Church teaches that water cannot be privately owned. He also commits simple factual errors by misattributing his sources.

Mr. Conradi attributes remarks from "Water: An Essential Element for Life" to Archbishop (now Cardinal) Martino personally, but in fact it is a "Note prepared by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace as a contribution of the Holy See to the Third World Water Forum" in Kyoto, Japan, in March 2003. Moreover, Mr. Conradi falsely attributes to Archbishop Martino two sentences that are in fact from a letter written by our own Archbishop Miller!

With similar carelessness, Mr. Conradi hastily concludes that the Church opposes private ownership of water. But in the Pontifical Council document that Mr. Conradi selectively quotes ("Water: An Essential Element for Life"), it is only the abuse of the free market that is condemned. It clearly endorses, however, the market's proper role:

"At times individual enterprises attained almost monopoly powers over public goods. A prerequisite for effective privatization is that it be set within a clear legislative framework which allows government to ensure that private interventions do in actual fact protect the public interest."

In other words, the Church wisely recognizes that the right to water can be safeguarded by a program of effective privatization that remains on guard against potential injustices.

By omitting reference to such passages, Mr. Conradi misrepresents Church teaching and falsely frames the bottled water debate. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, however, contributed to the Kyoto Forum, on behalf of the Holy Father, the following conclusion (in section IV on "Water: An Economic Good," right after the passage I just quoted above):

"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 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."

Yes, "access to water" is a universal right "of all human beings," as Pope Benedict XVI teaches in *Caritas in Veritate* #27. But short-sighted "social justice" campaigns that demonize corporations and deny their legitimate role (in helping to ensure universal access to water) do an injustice to Church teaching. As the Pope says:

"The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed within a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries. This can be done by *investing* in rural infrastructures, irrigation systems, transport, organization of *markets*, and in the development and dissemination of agricultural *technology* that can make the best use of the human, natural, and socio-economic resources that are more readily available at the local level, while guaranteeing their sustainability over the long term as well" (*Caritas in Veritate* #27, emphasis mine).

Such is the fullness of the Pope's authentic message. What we need, the Holy Father teaches, are not divisive boycotts, but authentic human connectivity enabled by "a network of economic institutions":

"Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional. What is missing, in other words, is a *network of economic institutions* capable of

guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs, and also capable of addressing the primary needs and necessities ensuing from genuine food crises, whether due to natural causes or *political irresponsibility*, nationally and internationally" (*Caritas in Veritate* #27, emphasis mine).

So, I do not begrudge anyone their efforts to avoid unnecessary fads, to recycle, to exercise responsible stewardship, or to promote the luxury of tap water. My objection arises only when such efforts degenerate into a hectoring moral rigorism that threatens to compound social injustices, not heal them.

More important than resisting consumerist fads, says the Pope, is the tenor with which we do so: "In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but the decisive issue is the *overall moral tenor of society*" (*Caritas in Veritate* #51).

C.S. Morrissey is an assistant professor of philosophy at Redeemer Pacific College. He will deliver the public lecture: "Whither the Free Market? Water and Food as Universal Rights" at 7 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 3, in room 125 of the Robert N. Thompson Building, during the annual Faith and Science Week. □