

The Global Impact of Bottled Water Consumption

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Every time I walk into the United Nations headquarters in New York, I learn something new. Each week, at the briefings the U.N. offers for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), like Christian Life Community, one area of global concern is explored by representatives from governments, U.N. agencies and NGOs. Even on a topic that gets lots of media coverage, there is usually much more to learn than the newscasts convey.

My education is not confined to the briefings, however. There are a great number of NGOs represented at the United Nations. Many of them are religious organizations (representing Christianity and every other faith) who, like CLC, work for peace and justice around the world. These men and women have experience and wisdom that they are eager to share with anyone who will join them to work for the coming of the reign of God.

One of these women is Suzanne Golas, CSJP. Suzanne sat down beside me at lunch one day in the U.N. cafeteria. We were discussing that morning's briefing, which had been on Antisemitism, Islamophobia and Racism. The conversation shifted eventually and Suzanne tapped my bottle of water, asking if I were aware of the global impact of bottled water consumption. I had to confess my ignorance. From my perspective, water was a healthy choice and I was reusing and then recycling the bottles I purchased. My family consumed lots of bottled water. That's what went into the kids' lunch bags, what accompanied us on long car trips and was available to grab for a baseball game or any other outing. I would always bring along a bottle of water when I taught a class or just to have on my carpooling rounds. I didn't see my option for bottled water as anything but good.

That was before Suzanne opened up a whole new perspective on bottled water for me, one that I would like to share with you. Her ministry is called *Waterspirit*. Through retreats, workshops, writings and teachings, she promotes the connection between spirituality and ecology, with an emphasis on the sacredness of water. In a recent *Waterspirit* newsletter, she discussed the issue of fresh water and the impact that Americans' consumption of bottled water has on the rest of the world. The following excerpts from her article are reprinted with her blessing, and her invitation to each of us to "spread the word!"

[P]rivate "ownership" of water or, what is called the privatization of water, is increasingly becoming one of the most serious threats to our – to Earth's – water security. Given our water crisis (One person in six in the world does not have access to clean drinking water. The U.N. predicts that by 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will not have access to sufficient drinking water.), governments and world monetary institutions are increasingly seeing the privatization of water as a solution to the problem. Put water in the hands of transnational corporations, who, in actuality, see the crisis as an economic opportunity. Fortune magazine has stated: "Water promises to be to the 21st century what oil was to the 20th century: the precious commodity that determines the wealth of nations." A handful of transnational corporations are taking over the management of public water services, usually with a dramatic increase in the price of water for local residents. In the developing world, these corporations are often profiting

from poor countries' desperate search for solutions to their water crises. In such cases, water has become a commodity to be traded and sold to those who can pay the highest price.

This is a radical departure from an understanding of water as a common good that belongs to Earth and all its life forms.

In 2001, delegates from thirty-five countries at the summit meeting, "Water for People and Nature" endorsed principles that probably "ring true" in the hearts of many, if not most people, who respect the reality that all life depends on water. These principles include the following:

- The intrinsic value of the Earth's fresh water precedes its utility and commercial value, and therefore must be respected and safeguarded by all political, commercial and social institutions.
- Earth's fresh water belongs to the Earth and all species, and therefore must not be treated as a private commodity to be bought, sold and traded for profit.
- The global fresh water supply is a shared legacy, a public trust, a fundamental human right, and therefore a collective responsibility.

Awareness is key, but there is a very practical way in which we, as CLC, can address the privatization of water, and that is in examining our consumption of bottled water.

The annual sales of bottled water are more than thirty-five billion dollars worldwide. In 2002, nearly six billion gallons of bottled water were sold in the US, an increase of nearly eleven percent over 2001. Americans paid \$7.7 billion for bottled water in 2002.

The bottled water on our supermarket shelves is the "product" of giant soft drink corporations including Nestles, Coca Cola, Pepsi, Proctor & Gamble and Danone. For example, Perrier is owned by Nestles. Aquafina is a Pepsi line. Coca Cola markets Dasani water. The competition for markets is fierce in this rapidly growing business.

Worse still for the environment is the relentless search for new water sources for this bottling industry. These transnational corporations search the planet, buy[ing] up farms, wilderness tracts and whole water systems in order to suck out what has come to be known as "blue gold." Massive pipelines and huge tankers transport water from one area of the world to another to where the profits are greatest. Aquifers, streams and lakes are being drained, seriously imperiling whole life systems in these areas, including the welfare of human beings.

The over 6 billion gallons of bottled water presently sold annually in the U.S. alone are packaged in 1.5 million

tons of plastic. Discarded plastic bottles are found in streams, on roadsides, on beaches, in woods, littering land and seascapes. Nine out of ten plastic water bottles end up as garbage or litter and ultimately clog landfills. The toxins in much of this plastic can leach into ground water.

Massive marketing campaigns would lead us to believe that bottled water is safer and healthier than tap water to drink. Not necessarily so. The bottled water industry is one of the least regulated industries in the world. In a recent study [done by] the Natural Resources Defense Council, more than 1000 bottles of water from 103 countries were tested. The test revealed that one third of the brands sampled contained levels of contamination, including traces of arsenic and E. coli. One quarter of bottled water is actually taken from the tap, and although it is further processed and purified to some degree, the bottled water, in most countries including the U.S., is subject to much less regulation than tap water, and even when contaminants are found, the bottled water can still be sold with a small disclaimer on the label.

So what are we to do? Find out the quality of your tap water. If you are concerned about it, consider using filters. Filters range from whole house units to faucet and pitcher devices that are designed to remove a variety of contaminants. It is important to remember, however, that while such filters are much more environmentally sound than bottled water, energy and materials are still needed for filter production and distribution and used up filter components usually end up in landfills where they can release toxins collected from the water back into the environment. They are a temporary solution and no substitute for proper watershed conservation and management—in other words, working to clean up and keep clean our natural water supply

... Water is integral to the web of life. It is a benefit provided by a giving Earth and naturally distributed for the good of all life. It cannot be "owned" and sold for the highest profit. Such action is a violation of any sense of water as a sacred gift. Our willingness to re-assess our use and abuse of water – for example, patronizing the bottled water industry – can be a testimony to our own belief in water as a sacred gift for the whole community of life.

Considering how recently bottled water came into our lives, it shouldn't be hard to act on our belief that resources like water are precious and deserve careful stewardship. My family discovered that we already owned a variety of reusable bottles that we now fill with water for school lunches, road trips and other scenarios that used to call for bottled water. A relatively small change like this reminds us daily that our commitment as CLC is "to bear witness to



Metro New York CLC gathers for the Stations of the Cross on 42nd Street: John Bellamente, Fr. Dan Fitzpatrick, S.J., Ann Marie Brennan and children, and Dorothy Zambito

Members of Metro-NY CLC have completed a successful series of meetings this year as part of our Leadership Seminar, under the direction of Fr. Daniel Fitzpatrick, S.J., our Regional Ecclesial Assistant. Participants look forward to extending and perhaps multiplying this enriching experience—in order to further develop effective lay leadership in CLC, as we journey toward becoming apostolic communities.

Some of us were fortunate to enjoy the company of Megan Adkins, a CLC'er from Australia, when she spent five days in our area. As always, CLC'ers from anywhere always seem to be right at home with each other, even on first meetings...a very special way of being present to each other. Thank you for stopping by, Megan.

We look forward to participating in the New York Jesuit Province Day on June 19th, to be held at the Fordham Campus. We appreciate being welcomed and included by the New York Jesuits in these very special events.

World CLC Day was celebrated in the Detroit area on March 28th. The region had its Spring meeting in Toledo with Bernie Owens, S.J., leading us in going from communities of apostles to apostolic communities. He used the theme, "The Beatitudes as the Vision of Apostolic Action/ Mission."

The Cleveland area CLCs had a meeting with liturgy to commemorate all the deceased members of CLC in the Cleveland area. Ernie Spittler, S.J., was our celebrant. A sharing among the various communities followed.

Our region's Fall meeting is scheduled for October 16th in Toledo.

NEW YORK REGION

Bottled Water continued from page 25

those human and Gospel values within Church and society which affect the dignity of the person, the welfare of the family and the integrity of creation" (GP 4).

Spread the word! That is an important way to bear witness. You can access more information on water security at the **Waterspirit** website – www.stellamarisretreatcenter.org/waterspirit, or at another great website – www.waterstewards.org.



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