

# The Human Right To Water



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This booklet is dedicated to Marilyn and Bob Fontenelli for their example of 'giving' and for their lives that exemplify the gift of kindness to all.





*“Water should not be treated as a commodity or  
seen merely as a means to serve vested interests.”*

Indigenous Peoples' Forum, UN Headquarters, NY, May 2014

# Foreword

I am delighted to write the Foreword to this timely  
booklet for World Water Day on March 22.

As my countryman and poet John O'Donohue  
reminds us in his poem in praise of water,

Let us bless the humility of water,  
Always willing to take shape  
Of whatever otherness holds it,

The buoyancy of water,  
Stronger than the deadening,  
Downward drag of gravity,

The innocence of water,  
Flowing forth, without thought  
Of what awaits it,  
The refreshment of water,  
Dissolving the crystals of thirst...

Blessed be water – Our first mother.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Paul VI's encyclical ***Populorum Progressio*** (The Development of Peoples) 1967, was way ahead of many thinkers. The listing of a right to development as a human right was a major development and clearly located human rights within the community with the moral obligation of solidarity.

Governments in particular have an ethical responsibility to stand with the most vulnerable people in society and to be courageous in advancing policies that protect basic human rights, including the human right to water, against powerful interests.

I stand in solidarity with activists, people of faith and community leaders all across our globe in asserting that water is a human right and in calling for safe, affordable and adequate water for all people.

May all who read this booklet commit to solidarity with our 783 million brothers and sisters who live daily without this very basic God-given gift.

I commend all involved in the publication of *The Human Right To Water – The Free Beverage* and hope that it will invite each of us to challenge our personal use of water.

Margaret Casey, RSM  
Congregational Leader  
Sisters of Mercy

March 2015








# The Human Right to Water – *the Free Beverage*

Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, said very clearly that water is a “free beverage”.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, if she were around today, she would have much to contribute to UNICEF’s campaign to provide clean water and sanitation for children and to the UN 2015 Sustainable Goals!

Without a doubt, water is a women’s and girls’ issue and certainly a Mercy Issue. For all, and especially those of us who are members of the Sisters of Mercy, rights cannot remain abstract, individualized and exclusively western. We must contextualize, for example, the human right to water by the ‘real-life’ circumstances of people’s lives, both as a community and as individuals. “Water challenges go beyond questions of access. In many countries, girls are forced to drop out of school owing to a lack of sanitation facilities, and women are harassed or assaulted when carrying water or visiting a public toilet.”<sup>3</sup>

Without water we die. “We know when we are created that this will be our life,” says Gale Deyknto, as she bends to hoist a jerrycan of water weighing 80 pounds onto her back. To find water she may have to walk two hours or two days, up and down mountainsides, across deserts, risking attack by men who do not want her water but her body.

Women and girls are the water carriers, and because of that they are at risk of injury, disease and attack. Girls are beasts of burden; their brothers are students and prospective earners. Whether water is pulled up hand over hand from a “singing well” dug into the Kenyan earth or “scratched” from a Tanzanian riverbed, it is precious.





We who live in the western world take water for granted. We run it, we drink it, we use it and we abuse it. Worst of all, we buy it, thus turning a human right into a commodity!

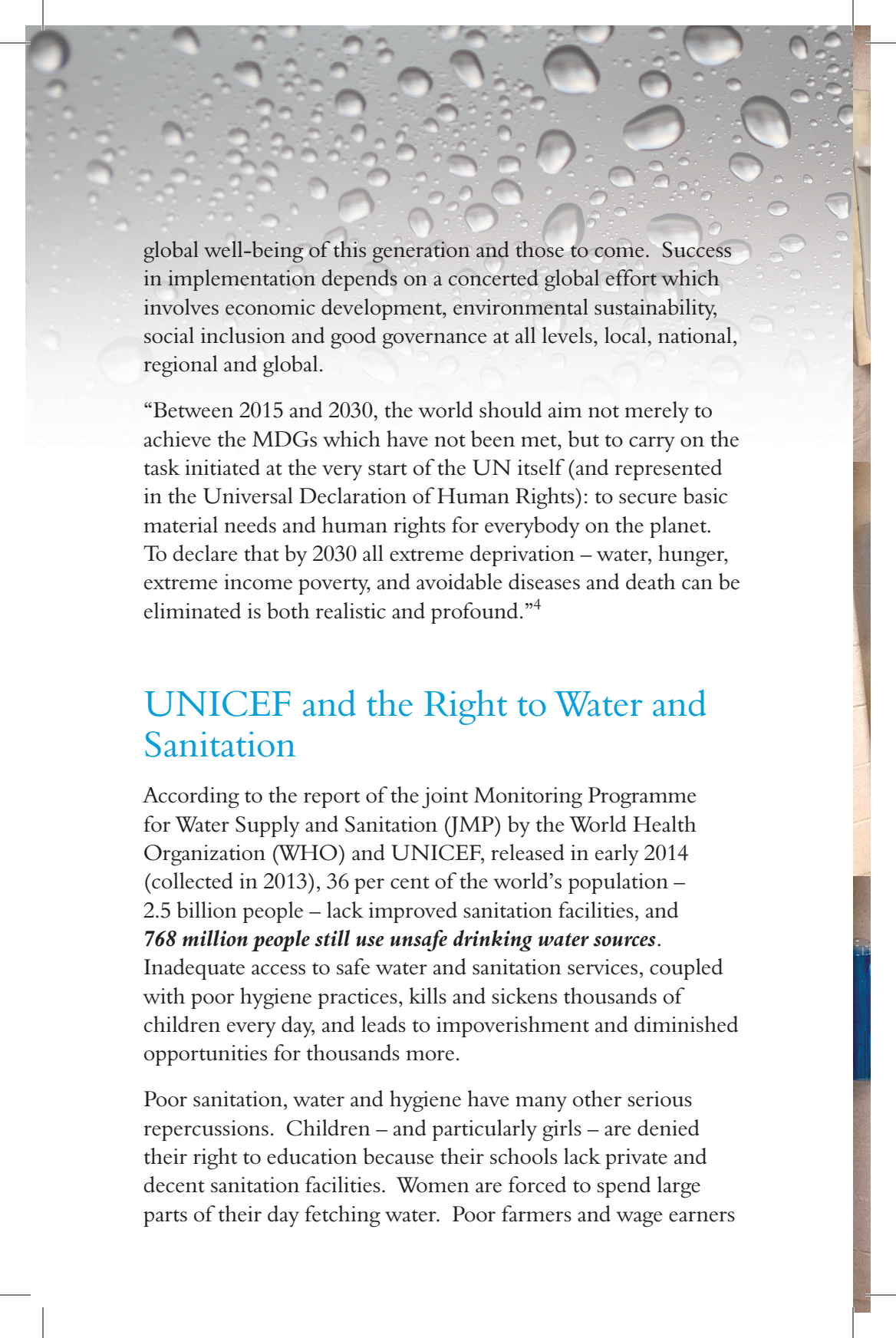
## The Human Right to Water

Many readers will be aware that we have moved from the jargon of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and might rightly wonder, “What does this all mean?”

The MDGs were targets mainly for poor countries, to which rich countries were to add their solidarity and assistance through finances and technology. The SDGs are different and are a set of challenges for all countries – not just what the rich can do for the poor, but what all countries must do together for the



*A polluted, dried-up river in the Mukuru Slums, Nairobi, Kenya*



global well-being of this generation and those to come. Success in implementation depends on a concerted global effort which involves economic development, environmental sustainability, social inclusion and good governance at all levels, local, national, regional and global.

“Between 2015 and 2030, the world should aim not merely to achieve the MDGs which have not been met, but to carry on the task initiated at the very start of the UN itself (and represented in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights): to secure basic material needs and human rights for everybody on the planet. To declare that by 2030 all extreme deprivation – water, hunger, extreme income poverty, and avoidable diseases and death can be eliminated is both realistic and profound.”<sup>4</sup>

## UNICEF and the Right to Water and Sanitation

According to the report of the joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) by the World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF, released in early 2014 (collected in 2013), 36 per cent of the world’s population – 2.5 billion people – lack improved sanitation facilities, and ***768 million people still use unsafe drinking water sources.***

Inadequate access to safe water and sanitation services, coupled with poor hygiene practices, kills and sickens thousands of children every day, and leads to impoverishment and diminished opportunities for thousands more.

Poor sanitation, water and hygiene have many other serious repercussions. Children – and particularly girls – are denied their right to education because their schools lack private and decent sanitation facilities. Women are forced to spend large parts of their day fetching water. Poor farmers and wage earners





are less productive due to illness, health systems are overwhelmed and national economies suffer. Without WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene), sustainable development is impossible.

Having access to safe drinking water and sanitation is central to living a life in dignity and upholding human rights. Yet billions of people still do not enjoy these fundamental rights.

The rights to water and sanitation require that these are available, accessible, safe, acceptable and affordable for all without discrimination. These elements are clearly interrelated. While access to water may be guaranteed in theory, in reality, if it is too expensive, people do not have access to it.

Women will not use sanitation facilities which are not maintained or are not sex-segregated. Having a tap which delivers



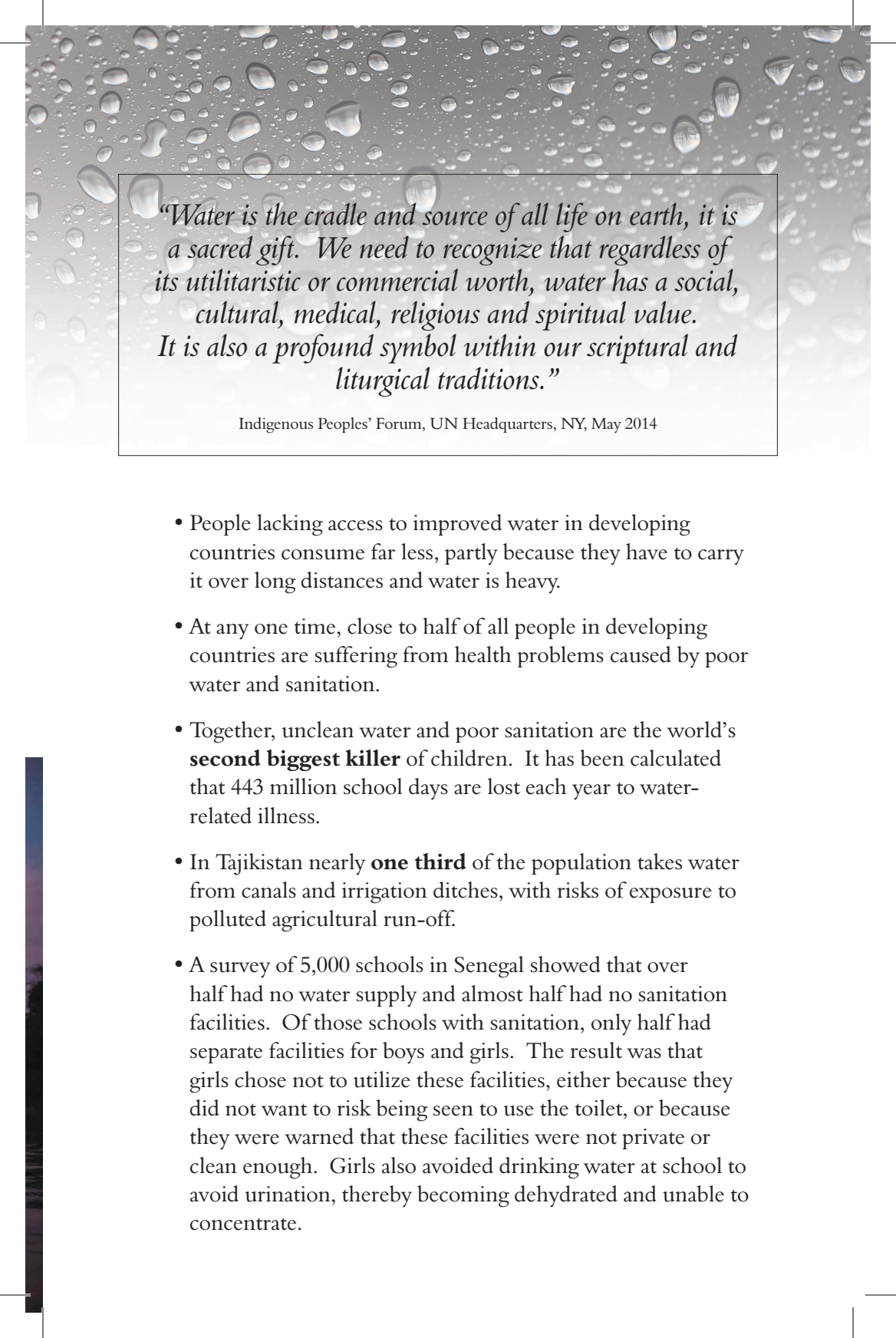
unsafe water does not improve one's access. Human rights demand a holistic understanding of access to water and sanitation. The rights to water and sanitation further require an explicit focus on the most disadvantaged and marginalized people, as well as an emphasis on participation, empowerment, accountability and transparency.

### ***Did You Know?***

- In rural Sub-Saharan Africa millions of people share their domestic water sources with animals or rely on unprotected wells that are breeding grounds for pathogens.
- The average distance that women in Africa and Asia walk to collect water is **6 kilometres**.
- Average water use ranges from **200-300 litres** a person a day in most countries in Europe to less than **10 litres** in countries such as Mozambique.



Photo: UNICEF



*“Water is the cradle and source of all life on earth, it is a sacred gift. We need to recognize that regardless of its utilitarian or commercial worth, water has a social, cultural, medical, religious and spiritual value. It is also a profound symbol within our scriptural and liturgical traditions.”*

Indigenous Peoples' Forum, UN Headquarters, NY, May 2014

- People lacking access to improved water in developing countries consume far less, partly because they have to carry it over long distances and water is heavy.
- At any one time, close to half of all people in developing countries are suffering from health problems caused by poor water and sanitation.
- Together, unclean water and poor sanitation are the world's **second biggest killer** of children. It has been calculated that 443 million school days are lost each year to water-related illness.
- In Tajikistan nearly **one third** of the population takes water from canals and irrigation ditches, with risks of exposure to polluted agricultural run-off.
- A survey of 5,000 schools in Senegal showed that over half had no water supply and almost half had no sanitation facilities. Of those schools with sanitation, only half had separate facilities for boys and girls. The result was that girls chose not to utilize these facilities, either because they did not want to risk being seen to use the toilet, or because they were warned that these facilities were not private or clean enough. Girls also avoided drinking water at school to avoid urination, thereby becoming dehydrated and unable to concentrate.



- People living in the slums of Jakarta, Manila and Nairobi pay **5 to 10 times more** for water than those living in high-income areas in those same cities and more than consumers in London or New York. In Manila, the cost of connecting to the utility represents **about three months' income** for the poorest 20 per cent of households, rising to six months' income in urban Kenya.<sup>5</sup>



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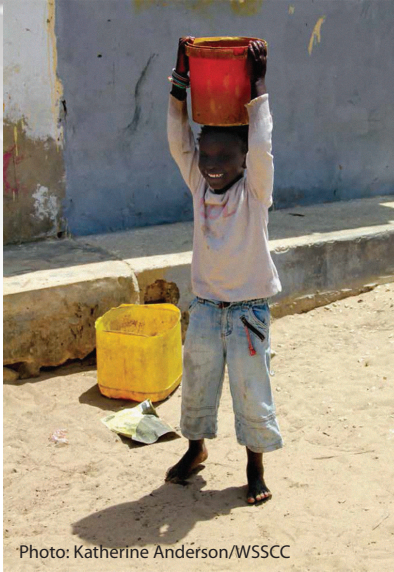
## World Water Day: March 22

Water is a Mercy issue, so what can we all do to change the above situation?

### ***Bottled Water***

Bottled water is 'healthier water' – or so marketing departments would have us believe. In reality, bottled water is just filtered tap water that is expensive, bad for the environment and diverts resources from the developing world.

A bottle of water costs approximately \$1 more than an equal amount of gasoline. That is why there is no shortage of companies that want to get into the business. In terms of price versus production costs, bottled water puts the 'big oil' industry to shame. Plastic is derived from coal and oil, both non-renewable materials. Most bottles end up in landfills, but even recycling requires the plastic to be burned, creating two toxic chemicals: dioxins and



furans, said to cause cancer and disrupt the body's hormones. The production of a single plastic bottle releases 250 grams of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

Only the world's rich can afford to switch their water consumption to bottled sources. Once distanced from public systems, these consumers have little incentive to support the provision of safe, clean water to all. We are literally pouring money into bottled water

when we could be increasing access to clean potable water for all.

### **Challenges for YOU:**

- 1. Commit to using a reusable water container and do not buy bottled water.***
- 2. Merion Mercy Academy in Philadelphia has installed water stations throughout the school. Bottled water is discouraged in the Academy. Follow their example and advocate for water stations in your school, workplace or community.***
- 3. Monitor your personal water use. Take the 2-minute shower challenge and be part of a global campaign to respect this finite resource.***
- 4. Take the UNICEF challenge and do without your cell phone for 10 minutes! Visit UNICEF Tap Project and see how it works.***
- 5. UNICEF Tap Project can provide a child with 200 days of clean drinking water for just \$5.***



6. *The use of water provides a unique occasion to distinguish our needs from our wants. It should be the primary goal to provide the basic water needs for all people, especially the poor, vulnerable and excluded, and to preserve the vitality and integrity of the ecosystems on which we all depend. All other 'wants' for water should be considered secondary. This paradigm shift should translate into a change of behaviour: – whenever we are using water, we should do so with moderation, awe, reverence, gratitude and love. Can we challenge each other and ourselves to use water in moderation?*





# Acknowledgements

This booklet came about as a result of the generosity of many people. First and foremost, I thank all those who work tirelessly on the ground, making a difference in the classrooms and makeshift classrooms across the globe. In particular, I want to acknowledge Lisa Fontenelli for her commitment to 'walk the talk' of the gospel by making so many things possible. Thanks, Lisa!

I am indebted to my co-workers at UNICEF and the United Nations for their encouragement and tireless recording of what is happening in our world.

I thank Pam and Greg Cross, Marguerite Hamilton, Barbara Buckley RSM, Pat Hartigan RSM, Ann Doherty RSM, Gerry Deeney, Cora Baker, Carol Rittner RSM, Nuala Mullin RSM, Cathy Solano RSM and Paul Ellis for their gifts and collaboration in our efforts.

The Sisters of Mercy, both in the USA and Ireland, hold a special place in my heart and I am most grateful for their support, encouragement and commitment to the work of being carriers of Mercy and comfort to millions of disadvantaged people.


I thank the photographers for permission to use their work, especially Sister Barbara Buckley at Merion Mercy Academy; the parents of Isabella Ingram and the UN Photographic Unit.

I am once again indebted to Dr. Wendy Whitworth for her editing and proofreading and to Glen Powell for his usual magic in turning words into creative design.

Thanks to all of YOU, the readers of this booklet, and I hope that together by our shared concern we can make our world a better place.

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*The proceeds from the sale of this booklet will be donated to UNICEF's WASH project.*



*“God’s mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones (Ez. 37:1-14)... Let us be renewed by God’s mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.”*

Pope Francis, Easter “Urbi et Orbi” message, March 31, 2013

## *Notes*

1. John O'Donohue, *Benedictus – A Book of Blessings*, Bantam Press, 2007, p. 91.
2. Don Mullan, *The Little Book of Catherine of Dublin*, ALBC, 2005, p. 113.
3. Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General, speaking on UN Water Day, 2014.
4. Jeffrey Sachs, Viewpoint, *The Lancet*, 9 June 2012.
5. *The Right to Water*, Fact Sheet No. 35, United Nations, OHCHR.



# The Human Right To Water *The Free Beverage*



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