

Sacred Heart Spirituality Forum, 2013

Panel: Healthy Waters

Water as a Sacramental Commons

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My focus in this part of the panel is on Water as a Sacramental Commons¹, an image that I find especially potent because it speaks to both our spirituality and our activism on behalf of water. I'll first explore water as sacramental, then water as a "commons," and then weave them together to touch on water as a sacramental commons.

Water as Sacramental

When theologians talk about sacramentality from a Christian perspective, they make three assumptions: 1) that all created life has the potential to reveal the divine; 2) that in the event of Jesus Christ, creation took on a radically new relationship with God; 3) that sacramentality/ comes to its fullness when God's action in creation is met with human response.² All three are important when we talk about water as sacramental.

Beginning with the first, who among us has not experienced water as revealing something of the divine spirit in creation? Remember a time when you sat beside a crashing ocean, or a bubbling stream and felt it draw you into mystery, into its deeper source, into a mysterious depth. Moments like these are invitations to a contemplative relationship with water, inviting us to sense God's caring and sustaining presence to creation, and luring us to come to know the stories and the wisdom that can only be learned from water.

Water carries within itself the ancient story of life on Earth and in the cosmos! Water assisted in the birth of stars, accompanied the formation of the planets, helped form and cool the Earth so that Earth's creativity could flourish.³ Water is our link to the planet's ancient story, to its deep history, to the formation of the planetary web of life. Water invites us to listen to that story, realizing that the water we drink today, that we bathe in, and contemplate, is the same water that filled the ancient seas! The same water, no more no less! It's astounding.

Water also carries within itself a biblical story. Water has been God's agent from the beginning of creation.⁴ As God's Spirit moved over the face of the primal seas, water co-created with God, bringing forth all living beings at God's command. Water partnered with God not only in creation but in the great flood, in the Exodus sea-crossing from slavery to liberation, and in quenching the thirst of God's people as they were formed into a covenant community.

¹ I've taken this image from John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Latham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006.)

² See Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980), 731; Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 34-41; Kenan Osborne, *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 74, for a development of these three assumptions.

³ See Linda Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2010) 11.

⁴ Gibler, 13.

Water spoke to our biblical ancestors about how God is with us, providing metaphors for spiritual living: God is a wellspring, a healing river, an overflowing fountain. Psalm 42, which we pray on feast of Madeleine Sophie: “As a deer craves running water, so my soul yearns for you my God.” Or Isaiah 12, which we pray on the feast of the Sacred Heart: “With joy you will draw water from the wellsprings of the savior” – from the deep aquifers of God’s being, the ancient depths, the stored resources of God’s heart. There are so many images waiting to be tapped from the Biblical story of water.

Water carries not only stories, but a God-given wisdom, that can teach us much about God’s desires for the world and for human living. In its natural integrity, water is an integral part of ecosystems that thrive on interdependence, cooperation, relationship, mutual support. Within these ecosystems, water has a mission: to nourish, to heal, and to cleanse, enabling other creatures to flourish: to survive in times of suffering and to rejoice in times of abundance. This wisdom is violated by our culture, which presses water into servitude, forcing it to follow laws of our own making.⁵ We need to return to water as a mentor, a teacher, and a source of wisdom.

Water is, after all, our next-of-kin. We not only use/consume water, we ARE water! Some 70% of our bodies is water. Water is truly our sister. It inhabits our flesh, circulates through our veins and drenches our tissues. Water knows us. Without water, we would not exist. How much we have to learn from this amazing creature of God!

But let me turn now to a second aspect of water’s sacramentality: that in the event of Jesus Christ, the waters of the Earth took on a radically new relationship with the living God. Let me summarize briefly some very intriguing perspectives.⁶ Several theologians today, when speaking of Jesus Christ, use the term “deep incarnation” to posit that in becoming flesh, Jesus embraced not only human existence, but the whole biological world of living creatures; he became incarnate in “the very tissue of biological existence.”⁷ In Jesus, “God became an Earth creature,”⁸ identifying with the interconnected ecosystems of nature, including its precious waters, and embracing evolving creation in a radically new way.⁹

Moreover, Jesus’s suffering and death reveal that God is with all forms of life in their struggle and pain. In his death, Jesus identified fully with all creatures who are suffering, defiled, rejected, and violated.¹⁰ Can we not see here our polluted rivers and our garbage-filled oceans?

⁵ See Fred Pearce, *When the Rivers Run Dry: Water – the Defining Crisis of the Twenty-First Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

⁶ For a fuller exploration of what follows, see Mary E. McGann, “Committed to Earth’s Waters for Life: Baptism in a Time of Global Water Crisis,” in *Drenched in Grace* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, forthcoming).

⁷ Niels Henrich Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ in an Evolutionary World,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology* 3 (2001): 205. See also Gregersen, “Deep Incarnation: Why Evolutionary Continuity Matters in Christology,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 26.3 (Fall 2010): 175-77. Gregersen argues that in ancient Greek thinking, *sarx* /flesh refers not only to individual bodies but to how these bodies are part of a whole flux of material beings, always in contact with each other (176). Moreover, the concept of deep incarnation reflects the insights of evolutionary biology regarding the interconnectedness of all living things. Human beings are here understood as “interrelated with the other life-forms of our planet and interconnected with the atmosphere, the land, and the seas that sustain life.” See Denis Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 60.

⁸ Niel Darrah, *At Home in the Earth*. (Auckland: Accent Publications, 2000), 124. As quoted in Edwards, 58.

⁹ Edwards, 59, summarizing Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ,” and 62.

¹⁰ Gregersen, “The Cross of Christ”; Edwards, *Ecology at the Heart of Faith*, 58-60.

Finally, Jesus's resurrection is a pledge that from the beginning, all creation was destined in love to be enfolded in God's redemptive design, and to participate in God's future.¹¹ Jesus's resurrection is an event of the whole creation, and a promise that all creatures will be brought to fulfillment, taken into the unfathomable loving mystery of God.¹²

There's much to ponder here, as we explore this aspect of water's sacramentality, recognizing that Earth's waters have been embraced by God in Jesus's deep incarnation, held in love in his life giving death, and drawn into God's redemptive future in Jesus's resurrection, until "God is all in all."¹³

The third aspect of water's sacramentality is that God's revelatory presence in creation is always inviting our human response, calling us to love and gratitude, but also to commitment: to live in accordance with what has been revealed; to partner with God in enabling Earth's waters to truly fulfill their God-given mission and destiny of nurturing, cleansing, healing, rejuvenating, mothering, and enlivening the planetary community. Experiencing water as sacramental is not simply for our own enjoyment, but rather it comes with an ethical imperative:¹⁴ that we bring about God's ways, God's design for the world as revealed to us in the beauty, dignity, and integrity of the waters themselves.

Water as a Commons

This awareness of the ethical imperative of sacramentality moves us to look at water as a commons: as vital to the Earth commons,¹⁵ and a decisive part of the common good. A commons is a shared place, where creatures reap mutual benefit but also take mutual responsibility. To talk about water as a commons is to imply that this beautiful resource has been given to all: entrusted to us as a sacred trust, to be held in common, and to be shared in love and justice, to meet the fundamental needs of all creatures, human and non-human, while maintaining the integrity of the water itself.¹⁶ Water belongs to all. "No single species, nor any region on Earth, no economic class, no political party, [no corporation, no Fortune 500 company], can claim water as its own....In the presence of water, / all creatures...stand in need, side-by-side, dependent and grateful."¹⁷

As part of the Earth commons, water is a decisive part of the common good. In contemporary Catholic Social Teaching, the common good includes not only the human community but all God's creatures, each of whom has a dignity and purpose in the web of planetary life.¹⁸ Water not only serves the needs of other

¹¹See Mary Catherine Hilbert, "Nature's Parables and the Preaching of the Gospel," in *The Wisdom of Creation*, Edward Foley and Robert Schreier, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004) 107-118.

¹² See Edward's summary of Karl Rahner's understanding of the Resurrection and the Transformation of the Universe,

¹³ St. Paul, Ephesians 4:6.

¹⁴ See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001) 65, for comments about the interplay of sacrament and ethics. Also Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 171-203.

¹⁵ See Hart, *Sacramental Commons*, xviii.

¹⁶ See Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 282.

¹⁷ Maryknoll Office of Global Concerns, "Water and the Community of Life" (2006), 2. Available at: <http://www.maryknollogc.org/ecology/Maryknoll%20document%20final1.pdf>. Accessed May 15, 2011.

¹⁸ See U. S. Catholic Bishops' *Global Climate Change: a Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good*. (Washington, DC: USCC, 2001) 7-12. Also, The Catholic bishops of Alberta, Canada address this expanded notion of the "common good" in their 1988 pastoral letter "Celebrate Life, Care for Creation": "Today [the] traditional

creatures but has its own dignity and integrity that is gravely under threat today by a utilitarian view that pervades our culture:¹⁹ where water is treated as a commodity that can be owned, bought and sold, and as an industrial resource that can be polluted and made toxic for market profitability.²⁰

Indeed, the integrity and health of water is foundational to the common good, since all creatures depend on it for their own health and flourishing. Water's health is primary; all other creaturely health is derivative.²¹

Moreover, water's integrity is precisely as an integral part of natural ecosystems, of which we are a part. Water is not simply an isolated resource, as we so often experience it, that pours out of our faucets on demand or fills bottles that line our grocery store shelves. Rather, it is from natural ecosystems that we learn best about water's role in the common good, as habitat, as nourishment, and as resource for countless creatures. And it is here that our work of restoration and healing must take place, as we work interdependently to rebuild the Earth commons for the future of planetary life as a whole.²²

Water as a Sacramental Commons

Finally, let me weave together the two images we've been exploring to consider, very briefly, water as a sacramental commons: as a locus where the spiritual meanings of sacramental are integrated with social/ethical responsibilities that come with participation in the commons.²³

Bringing these two together, I believe, is critical for the future of water. A loss of the sacred meaning of water fuels a loss of ethical responsibility for water's health and flourishing and for water justice for all God's creatures, human and non-human.²⁴

Moreover, embracing water as a sacramental commons is a call to our evolving spirituality. Thomas Berry has said that we need to ground our spirituality in a deeply participatory experience of the Earth as the locus of divine presence. To experience water as a sacramental commons, is to claim it as a spiritual legacy, imbued with sacramental qualities that invite us to participate in the caring compassion of God's spirit, and to love and protect it as a material *and* a spiritual good for the future all of Earth's creatures.²⁵

understanding of the common good needs to be expanded to include a healthy natural environment. ... We need to speak of a global common good, going beyond all provincial and national boundaries." See "Celebrate Life," 3.

¹⁹ Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 283.

²⁰ See Hart, *Sacramental Commons*, 79-95; Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 275; Peter H. Gleick, *Bottled and Sold: The Story Behind our Obsession with Bottled Water* (Washington: Island Press, 2010).

²¹ Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 278.

²² Rasmussen, 282-283.

²³ Hart, *Sacramental Commons*, xvii-xviii; 79-95

²⁴ See Maude Barlow on water justice: *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water* (New York: The New Press, 2002); and *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007). See also Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith*, 278-284.

²⁵ See *The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good*. An International Pastoral Letter by the Catholic Bishops of the Watershed Region. Available through <http://www.columbiariver.org/>, for an excellent example of such care.

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