

Water:

A Case for Environmental Justice

Marianist organizations join forces to educate high school students about water scarcity and its impact on the human family.

BY JAN D. DIXON

There's one thing that never fails to amaze Luis Guerra. When a rainstorm blows through south Texas, "I stop what I'm doing and just watch. When we've gone for a month or more without rain, it's a beautiful sight," says Guerra, who teaches religion and serves on the campus ministry team at Central Catholic High School, a Marianist school in San Antonio.

San Antonio has been hit hard in the last few years with hot, dry spells that have dried up creek beds, set off wildfires and significantly lowered the aquifer that nourishes the city. "You can't live here and not know about water issues," says Guerra.

But an immersion trip three years ago to visit Marianist ministries in Malawi, a country in southeastern Africa, brought Guerra face-to-face with another reality: Many people don't have access to clean water. "We watched people take water directly from Lake Malawi to use for drinking and cooking without treating it. Now that's an issue of social justice. People need clean water," he says,

noting the number of waterborne diseases that are spread through contaminated water.

Last summer Guerra, a LIFE moderator, joined others in the LIFE program to teach high school

students about water scarcity and social justice. The Marianist LIFE (Living in Faith Experience) program was created so that Catholic high school students could experience faith-awakening experiences, including programs on social justice.

"We rely on water for almost everything," says Toni Mesina, national coordinator of Marianist LIFE. "But most of us take it for granted. I wanted students to understand that they can make choices about how they use water — and stand in solidarity with people from around the world who do not have access to clean water. There's a lot at stake. How much water and what kind of water will we leave for our children and grandchildren?"

The issues surrounding global water shortages are complex. To frame a dialogue on the subject for students, Mesina sought the help of Tara Poling, an educator at the Marianist Environmental Education Center in Dayton, Ohio, and others who are passionate about the subject.

Water is life

The first time Tara Poling saw the Pacific Ocean was 15 years ago during a visit to Peru. "I wanted to dip my toes in it, so I asked one of our hosts in Lima if she could drive me to the beach. She looked at me in disbelief and said, 'That's the sewer for the city of Lima!' Raw, untreated sewage was being dumped daily into the ocean," says Poling.

It is one of many lessons Poling has learned about



global water supplies and pollution. But it is the scarcity of water that has environmentalists like Poling deeply concerned. “There are two types of water scarcity,” she says. “Physical challenges — lack of rainfall and few water resources — is one category. We see this in the southwest region of the United States, which historically has been water stressed.” She noted that climate change is exacerbating these conditions in drought-prone regions worldwide.

“The other type of water scarcity rises from political and economic conditions,” says Poling. In many parts of the developing world, even though water supplies

exist, people don’t have access to clean water because governments have failed to provide even modest tap water systems. Researchers estimate that 1.1 billion people — one-sixth of the world’s population — don’t have access to clean water often because of ineffective government planning or corruption.

The Education for Justice Project, an outreach program of the Church that specializes in programs on Catholic social teaching, estimates that in 13 years, more than

3 billion people will live in water-stressed countries.

The implications of water shortages are foreboding. “By 2015, we will have 9 billion people on this planet,” say Poling. “Worldwide, water is a food issue because a vast majority of our water is used for agriculture. Our ability to feed ourselves will succeed or fail based on our ability to manage our water supplies.”

Where does your water come from?

Almost everyone in the United States has access to clean drinking water. Beyond turning on a faucet, however, few people know where their water comes from. “We wanted to raise students’ awareness about their water shed — where their water comes from — and the future of their communities’ water supplies,” says Poling.

Water wasn’t on Tyler Johnson’s radar screen before he participated in the summer LIFE program.

“What caught my attention is that in Los Angeles, we don’t have enough water to support the population,” says Johnson, a junior at Chaminade College Preparatory, a Marianist school near Los Angeles. “We are totally dependent on water from northern California and the winter snow melts. As time goes on, it will get more difficult for people here to access water. That was an eye opener.”

Another goal of LIFE’s water program was to teach students about water conservation and simple things they can do to be good consumers of water (see “Conserve Water, Preserve the Planet” on page 7).

But the most heartfelt issue Mesina wanted students to absorb is that water is a basic human right. “No matter where you live or how much money you have, you should have the right to clean, potable water. It shouldn’t fall into the category of haves and have-nots,” she says.

A basic human need

Marianist Father Marty Solma, who spent more than 25 years serving in Marianist ministries in Africa before becoming provincial of the Province of the United States, learned about the importance of water while living in Nigeria and Kenya. “Our Marianist communities often went without water,” says Father Marty. “We often went without electricity, too. But you can live without electricity. You can’t live long without water. You need water for cooking, for hygiene, for almost everything.”

Though life in Nigeria, a country that experiences annual dry and rainy seasons, is difficult, people manage to save water for their basic needs, says Father Marty. But in the slums of Nairobi, politics and money are the driving forces. “There was often one tap in a section of a slum, and whoever controlled that tap could charge whatever they wanted for water. Because people needed the water, they were willing to pay any price,” says Father Marty.

“I remember women and children waiting in line with their five gallon cans to get water for the day. They would wait one, two, three hours — sometimes all day — to get their bucket of water.”

Now working in the United States, Father Marty is ever mindful of water. “I notice how easily water is wasted here. We’re so unconscious about how we



Luis Guerra, LIFE moderator and religion teacher at Central Catholic High School, San Antonio



Tara Poling, educator from the Marianist Environmental Education Center, and Toni Mesina, national coordinator of Marianist LIFE



Students and adult moderators from Central Catholic High School who participated in the Marianist LIFE program last summer: Joey Sandoval, Miguel Ochoa (LIFE moderator), Ricardo Garcia, Daniel Garza, Luis Guerra (LIFE moderator), Terri Morgan (LIFE moderator), Ryan Zarazua, and Ceazar Flores

use it. I can't help but think about people in the world who suffer for lack of water."

What we love

The African environmentalist Baba Dioum once said, "In the end, we will conserve only what we love.

We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."

Teaching high schools students to love water — to regard it as precious, irreplaceable and essential for all

human beings — is one way to strengthen our bonds with this holy resource. "We need to build a relationship with water," says Poling. "It's a part of creation that we interact with every day. Every member of the human family, regardless of where he or she lives, needs water to live a healthy life. Water also is essential to our sacramental lives as Catholics. We need to wrap our spiritual imaginations around it and take steps now to conserve and use water wisely." ■

Conserve Water, Preserve the Planet

Five simple things you can do

Your water footprint consists of what you eat, what you buy and what you use. To reduce water consumption and improve the environment, here are a few tips:

- 1 **Audit your household.** There are several ways to reduce water usage at home. Taking shorter showers, turning off the faucet when brushing your teeth or washing veggies and washing fewer loads of laundry are good places to start.
- 2 **Buy reusable bottles.** It is estimated that 2 million plastic bottles are dumped into the environment every five minutes — and that's just in the United States. Look for a stainless steel water bottle or other types of reusable bottles.
- 3 **Hold the beef.** Did you know that it takes 500 gallons of water to make one hamburger patty? Growing beef requires lots of water, including growing



grain to feed cattle as well as water to process the beef. You don't need to give up beef entirely, but look for less water-intensive foods such as grains and vegetables as substitutes.

- 4 **Join a conservancy organization.** Most communities have local conservancy groups dedicated to improving the environment, including water usage. Become an active community member.

- 5 **Stay informed.** For videos, books and other resources that can help you or your Marianist community become better water advocates, go to <http://meec.udayton.edu/water.asp>

For more information about water conservation and environmental justice, visit the Marianist Environmental Education Center at <http://meec.udayton.edu>.

