

Rachel Hart Winter  
Director, St. Catherine of Sienna Center  
Dominican University  
River Forest, Illinois

"Water for Alinglaplap; Visions of Water from Alinglaplap"

Be praised my God for Sister Water, who is useful, humble, precious and pure.<sup>1</sup>

Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink.<sup>2</sup>

Water touches every aspect of our lives. Roughly seventy percent of both our bodies and the surface of our planet are comprised of water. We begin our lives in the womb surrounded by water and our lives come to an end when we lack water. It is the life-blood of our ecosystem that supports the survival of both humans and non-humans alike. Numerous religions use water as a symbol of the sacred pointing to cleansing, freedom and new life. As populations grow and water sources run dry, access to water has become a pressing ethical issue that requires immediate attention from scholars and activists of every stripe. Martha Moore-Keish presents a compelling picture of the state of water in our world. Her questions of how our baptisms might impact our interpretation of the water crisis are what I address here. As Christians, we should prioritize our care and concern for protecting the waters of our earth. It seems to me that we need personal and communal experiences that can reframe our view of water, calling us to a greater awareness of the sacredness of water.

In 1224 Francis of Assisi described water as “useful, humble, precious and pure.” In the

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Doyle, “The Canticle of Brother Sun and the Value of Creation” in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader*, ed. by Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF. (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

year 2015, the state of water has taken a radically different turn: many people struggle to find pure, clean water; others with easy access do not appreciate the true value of water and often use it in wasteful ways. Samuel Coleridge wrote in 1797 that “water, water” was “everywhere” but there was not “a drop to drink,” prophetic words for our situation today. Water certainly exists in abundance; however, drops of water that are clean and safe for drinking are becoming more difficult to find for one billion humans, most of whom live in the developing world.

Many of us we might recall a photo from our own baptism, or perhaps a more recent memory of attending the baptism of a loved one. The water used is pristine and clean, often evoking the image of a new, clean life. Sadly this pristine clean water that fills our fonts is not the norm around our globe. Take a moment to imagine a baptism where the water was muddy, filled with insect larvae, certainly not fit for drinking and hardly fit for bathing. The reality of unclean water for one third of our global population offers an excellent entry point for Christian ethics.

Christian ethics, although a humble force in advocating for the protection of water, offers a power that lies in its ability to root action in religious and moral convictions. As people of faith, we can address this human rights and ecological tragedy not only in our churches but also through our rights as citizens to vote and organize for change. Only in this way will societies begin to value water for its intrinsic worth.

Water, used in baptism, is an element of our natural world that invites us to the sacred. Larry Rasmussen captures this well:

While I am not certain what counts as sacred for the reader, if water doesn't qualify, little else should. Though we may ordinarily pay it little mind, largely because we confront it as a commodity, something deep within us senses its mystery and its spell. Many have become everyday mystics in the course of quiet hours beside crystal waters that seem to flow

from the throne of God...something inside us is pulled into poetry, religion and fear by water, it seems.<sup>3</sup>

## **Personal Experience**

On a hot August day I arrived in the Marshall Islands. The average temperature was eighty degrees, there was minimal shade, and the electricity was inconsistent, making fans unreliable. Water seemed like the best option to stay cool and hydrated. Upon turning on the tap in my new home, orange and brown water trickled out. This was not drinkable water, although many Islanders were forced to drink it. As volunteers, we lived in a home with an expensive and highly sophisticated water filtration system. This was the first of many moments when I recognized the vast difference between my privileged lifestyle and that of the Islanders. This experience has remained with me, propelling both my academic and professional journey.

As a Jesuit volunteer in the Marshall Islands, I was often offered water filled with insect larvae and small bugs from friends. The anger and frustration of these experiences has stayed with me. Sadly, I have experienced moments like this not only in the Marshall Islands, but also in Kenya, Ecuador, and elsewhere. Why do the economically poor have to drink water like this? Why did almost half of my students in the Marshall Islands miss class each week due to water-borne illnesses? This lack of access to clean water for millions of people is a grave injustice, and it is our baptismal call that might help frame our response.

The biblical authors, inspired to write the accounts of creation, floods, and droughts, understood the powerful and awe-inspiring nature of water and viewed it as part of God's earth, not something that should be controlled or re-directed by human technology without grave consequences. The creation stories in Genesis affirm this view of water as that which sustains,

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<sup>3</sup> Larry L. Rasmussen, *Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 276.

destroys, and blesses life. These texts honor the power of water and remind the human community of its interdependence with the cosmic whole of creation. Relating to water in this way requires a paradigm shift from a focus on seeing water as commodity and resource for human use to an acknowledgment of the real value of water based on the interdependence of all of the parts of God's creation.

The natural force and power of water has the potential to evoke a particular humility before water. Alinglaplap, one of the small islands in the Marshall Islands where I spent time, was completely cut off from the larger islands where necessary supplies could be purchased at stores. The islanders lived on a diet of fish and local foods. Accessible only by boat and a small plane making weekly trips, Alinglaplap had no running water, which forced the islanders to collect their water in large cement receptacles called catchments. While getting water from the catchment one day, I realized that the water level was very low and shared with a Marshallese friend my concern. I asked what we would do if the supply of rain water ran out. She said to me in the local language, "Don't worry, God will provide." Of course, I did worry, as someone who has lived in an environment where I have never faced a water shortage or its corresponding consequences. The Marshallese, on the other hand, have lived through several water shortages, experienced the effects of dehydration frequently, and knew well the sickness encountered from drinking contaminated water. Sadly, this is their water reality. During my stay on Alinglaplap we were lucky to have enough rain to keep our water supply constant. The Marshallese people relate to and recognize water as a gift from God.

The people of Alinglaplap have a similar relationship to nature as the peoples of the biblical stories. Though thousands of years apart, both cultures lived with a particular awareness

of nature, and the weather patterns such as rainy and dry seasons.<sup>4</sup> Water in Alinglaplap is not bought, sold, or even stored for profit. Water is recognized as an element of nature that has life-sustaining values, yet is not always easily available. Water is never wasted. Water is honored for the relationship the Islanders have with it, and without it. I suggest here that the worldview of a community of such people is of utmost importance. The people of the Marshall Islands and the Ancient Israelites lived in a contextual relationship with water that was shaped by their location which impacted their worldview.<sup>5</sup> Those of us who live in places with seemingly abundant water can and should learn from people like the Marshallese who are aware of their delicate relationship with water.

## **Baptism**

One of the most prominent uses of water is found in the Christian rite of baptism. It is fascinating to read this rite in light of the water crisis, especially given the snapshot Martha Moore-Keish provided. Might baptism be a place where we come to recognize and reverence the paradoxical power of water to both destroy and to bring new life which the biblical authors portrayed? The Catholic rite notes that the water used in baptism should be “pure and clean.”<sup>6</sup> Immediately I think of the Marshall Islands and many other parts of the world where the water

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<sup>4</sup> Theodore Heibert, *The Yahwist Landscape* (New York: Oxford Press, 1996), 55. Heibert discusses the agricultural needs and dependence on rain for the biblical community.

<sup>5</sup> See Madipoane Masenya, “An Ecobosadi Reading of Psalm 127. 3-5,” in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, ed. Norman Habel (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2011), 109-122. Masenya makes a similar move to argue that her community in South Africa holds a worldview with commonalities to that which was operative for the Israelites.

<sup>6</sup> Kevin W. Irwin, “The Sacramentality of Creation and the Role of Creation in Liturgy and Sacraments” in *And God Saw That It Was Good”: Catholic Theology and the Environment*, ed. Drew Christiansen, S.J. and Walter Grazer (Washington, D.C: United States Catholic Conference, Inc.: 1996), 120.

running from the taps is not clean, but rather filled with mud or bugs or chemicals that certainly render it impure. The rite emphasizes the significance of water, noting that it “is God’s creation” and is instrumental in the “unfolding of the paschal mystery.”<sup>7</sup> In the celebration of this rite I see an immense opportunity for education and increasing awareness about the water crisis. Baptism is a valuable moment in which the theology of water might be linked to our ethical imperative to care for it as part of God’s creation. The reference to a baptismal cleansing where God is praised for the water to “cleanse and give new life” could have profound implications for how we understand the necessity of this resource for both physical and spiritual nourishment.<sup>8</sup>

Given the centrality of water in the baptismal ritual, we have an opportunity for people of faith to connect the global water crisis with a particular sacrament. We can connect the concrete--water--with the sacred--the sacrament. I suggest re-framing parts of the ritual to foreground the water crisis and create an urgent call for action for all members of the community. In this reframed ritual, people are invited to engage the reality of water today with the two-thousand year old tradition of baptism. Stories of those who suffer due to the water crisis connected with a baptismal call to become like Christ would not fall on deaf ears to those who are participating in and witnessing to the sacrament. The simple invitation to imagine any baptism (our own, that of a loved one, or even the baptism of Christ) without water might force people to ponder the future and the reality of diminishing water sources for all creation.

Baptism makes explicit use of water and creates a place to demand more concern for this resource through teaching, prayer, and creating avenues for action. As Martha Moore-Keish mentions, there are numerous organizations working to protect water, from both humanitarian

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 120-121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 122.

and environmental perspectives. Adding our voices as Christians who can address the ethical needs for access to clean water for both humanity and nature will serve to strengthen the good work already initiated. We all can learn from places and cultures that conserve water, recognize the great power of water, and respect God's sacred creation by caring for water. We can begin to use our baptism to become part of a community to work in earnest to care for our community—working to raise awareness about climate change, the rising ocean level, the severe weather that claims more lives each year. There are 2 billion Christians around the globe. Imagine if we harnessed the moment where each one of those people is baptized to create an ethical command for protecting our waters. What if each time we renewed our baptismal vows we did so with a new ethical awareness for what we must do to protect God's waters? How might we better respond to Martha Moore-Keish's question to connect the sacrament with our concrete world? Can we join our voices, as students, scholars, activists, and people of faith to the Marshallese and to the thirsty around the globe so that we all might find ways to enjoy clean water not only for health and sanitation, but also for rituals, sacraments, and sacred experiences? Marshallese poet, Kathy Jetnil Kijiner, says it best when it comes to the struggles the Islanders face with water in her poem "Tell Them":

tell them about the water  
how we have seen it rising  
flooding across our cemeteries  
gushing over the sea walls  
and crashing against our homes  
tell them what it's like  
to see the entire ocean\_\_level\_\_with the land