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EarthBeat
A man cools off from the heat under an umbrella as he drinks water while visitors wait for the

A man cools off from the heat under an umbrella as he drinks water while visitors wait for the start of Pope Francis' Angelus prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican July 9, 2023. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

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Water must be safeguarded and managed in a "wise, careful and sustainable way, so that everyone can enjoy it," Pope Francis said.

"The arbitrary management of water resources, their distortion and pollution, are particularly damaging to the poor and are a shameful affront to which we cannot remain indifferent," he said.

"Access to safe drinking water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival and, as such, is a condition for the exercise of other human rights," he said, citing his encyclical "*Laudato Si*', On Care for Our Common Home."

The pope made his comments in a written message marking the Oct. 16 celebration of World Food Day, a commemoration sponsored by the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO, to highlight the global fight against hunger. His message was read aloud at a ceremony at the FAO headquarters in Rome by Msgr. Fernando Chica Arellano, permanent representative of the Holy See to the U.N. food and agriculture agencies in Rome.

The theme of the 2023 celebration was: "Water is life, water is food. Leave no one behind." The day's focus was on recognizing water is a precious and finite resource that is needed to survive, grow food and support livelihoods.

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The U.N. Development Program estimates: about half a billion people face water scarcity year-round; approximately 4.2 billion people lack sanitation; 2.2 billion people lack safe drinking water; and 700 million people could be displaced due to scarcity of water by 2030.

In his written message, Francis said, "Huge financial resources and innovative technologies that could be used to make water a source of life and progress for all are being diverted to arms production and trade."

More investment is needed "in infrastructure, in sewage networks, in sanitation and wastewater treatment systems, particularly in the most remote and depressed rural areas" as well as in "educational and cultural models that raise society's awareness of the need to respect and preserve this primary asset," he wrote.

Water must never be treated as a commodity to be traded or speculated on, he added.

In agriculture, the pope wrote, effective programs are needed "to prevent losses in agricultural irrigation pipes; to use organic and inorganic pesticides and fertilizers that do not pollute water; and to encourage measures to safeguard the availability of water resources to prevent acute shortages from becoming a cause of conflict between communities, peoples and nations."

"The Church never tires of sowing those values that will build a civilization that finds in love, mutual respect and reciprocal help a compass to guide its steps, turning above all to those brothers and sisters who suffer most, such as the hungry and the

thirsty," Francis wrote.