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Thirsting for clean water

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

We turn on our faucets and out comes water -- clean, refreshing, plentiful, life-sustaining water. But we rarely give it a thought. We just tend to take for granted that it will always be there. We even forget to thank God, the wellspring of life.

But for 768 million fellow human beings, clean, plentiful water is a distant dream, the United Nations says. For them, the water they drink, cook with and bathe in is polluted, often disease-ridden, and must be carried long distances in many cases.

According to figures released by the United Nations Children's Fund in 2013, lack of access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is a leading cause of death from diarrhea in children under 5, amounting to approximately 1,400 children dying each day.

Those of us who have nice bathrooms simply flush the toilet and that's that. But according to the U.N., approximately 2.5 billion people do not have access to toilets or even latrines.

Saturday is World Water Day, a time dedicated by the United Nations to learn about the extreme importance of protecting this priceless gift from God and to motivate us to work for that day when every single person has access to adequate safe water and sanitation.

According to Catholic Relief Services, in the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo, communities often use rivers as a drinking fountain, swimming pool, laundry facility, and public toilet. Yet every day, women fill old fuel cans with the contaminated water and take it back to their families. But with the help of kindhearted donors, families in an eastern Congo village are healthier because they are now able to sanitize the water they collect.

You can contribute to water programs like the Congo village project by sending a check to Catholic Relief Services, P.O. Box 17090, Baltimore, MD 21203-7090, or you can donate online at crs.org/donate.

Also, please email and call your representative (Capitol switchboard: 202-224-3121) and urge him or her to co-sponsor the "Senator Paul Simon Water for the World Act 2013" (H.R. 2901).

According to CRS, this legislation is designed to ensure that many of the world's poorest and most vulnerable human beings receive the clean water they need in a sustainable, equitable and conflict-free way.

Since there is no similar bill in the Senate, it would be helpful to contact your two U.S. senators and ask them to introduce a companion bill to H.R. 2901.

While the United States is by some standards the richest nation on earth, many of its residents lack easily accessible clean water and sanitation.

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I once worked at a parish in western Maryland, part of Appalachia, where I became familiar with people who lived in shacks with no indoor plumbing. They would have to haul water from mountain springs. Some folks did not even have outhouses.

To provide help in your area, consider connecting with Habitat for Humanity.

A little reminder: During Lent, we are called to improve our prayer life, fasting and almsgiving.

If we pray, fast, give, and work to ensure that everyone has access to adequate safe water and sanitation, when we stand before the Lord Jesus, we will rejoice in hearing him say to us, "I was thirsty and you gave me drink. ... Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist. He is available to speak at diocesan or parish gatherings about Catholic social teaching. His keynote address, "Advancing the Kingdom of God in the 21st Century," has been well received by diocesan gatherings from Salt Lake City to Baltimore. Tony can be reached at tmag@zoominternet.net.]

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