



Resolutions To Action

LCWR Global Concerns Committee

Volume 31, Number 2

Summer 2022

Water & Environmental Racism

Blair Nelsen, Waterspirit Executive Director

(Waterspirit is a ministry of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace in Rumson, New Jersey)

Water is life. Ecological sins committed against water are sins against life itself. Despite this, sins against water and against the lives that depend upon it are committed every day. This burden is disproportionately borne by people of color due to environmental racism. Dr. Robert Bullard, widely known as the “father of environmental justice,” defines environmental racism in his book, *Dumping in Dixie* (1990), as “any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (where intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race.” Dr. Victoria Peña-Parr, a professor at the University of New Mexico, further explains that, “Environmental racism refers to how minority group neighborhoods—populated primarily by people of color and members of low-socioeconomic backgrounds—are burdened with disproportionate numbers of hazards including toxic waste facilities, garbage dumps, and other sources of environmental pollutions and foul odors that lower the quality of life. This can lead to different diseases and cancers.”

Multiple studies have shown that, in the United States, race is the strongest factor in determining who has unequal access to safe drinking water. Pullen Fedinick of the National Resource Defense Council writes that, “[I]t isn’t surprising that communities that are already overburdened by so many other things in their environment are also overburdened by this.” Where environmental racism is in evidence, unsafe and unequal access to water is usually among the harms committed.

Perhaps the most visible recent example of water being compromised due to environmental racism is the case of Flint, Michigan. This public health crisis, which started in 2014, will continue for many years to come as the impacts of the lead that the residents of Flint (including children) were exposed to take their toll. As of 2022, the city still had not replaced all of its lead-leeching pipes. (It is lamentable that the high visibility of this crisis was still not enough to result in full remediation and restitution.) The Michigan Civil Rights Commission reported that racism played a role in the Flint water crisis. Arthur Horowitz, co-chair of that organization, said, “We

are not suggesting that those making decisions related to this crisis were racists, or meant to treat Flint any differently because it is a community of color. Rather, the response is the result of implicit bias and the history of systemic racism that was built into the foundation of Flint.” Echoing Horowitz, we must be aware of both explicit and implicit bias, as well as the differential impacts of policies upon communities that are already overburdened by overlapping forms of pollution and social injustice.

Resolutions to Action is an occasional publication of the Global Concerns Committee of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). Members of the committee are: Margaret Anderson, OP; Susan Dunning, CSJ; Susan Francois, CSJP; Christine Garcia, SSND; Fran Gorsuch, CBS; Donna Marie Gribschaw, CDP; Patty Johnson, CSJ; Melinda Pellerin, SSJ; Verónica Esparza Ramírez, OP; and Ann Scholz, SSND, staff. Please address correspondence to:

 LCWR
www.lcwr.org

LCWR
8737 Colesville Rd.
Suite 610
Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-588-4955
fax: 301-587-4575
ascholz@lcwr.org

Access to clean water is a human right. UNESCO [declared it so](#) in 2003, deeming it “a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how important water is in forming a defense against the spread of disease. Yet, water is not treated as a human right in the United States, where household access to water is dependent upon income. [Currently](#), an estimated 205.4 million people are at risk of utility disconnections, including water. [Even before the pandemic](#), an estimated 15 million people (or 1 in 20 households) had experienced a water shutoff. Knowing that income disparity is a symptom of systemic racism, we can conclude that unequal access to water utilities can also be driven by environmental racism.

SOCIAL ANALYSIS/ REFLECTION

“To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.” -- Revelation 21:6)

Environmental racism is a systemic, pervasive force that perpetuates a society wherein equal rights are unable to be enjoyed by all. Unequal access to water is a human rights violation. Pope Francis affirms this in *Laudato Si'*:

[A]ccess to safe drinkable 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. Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity. This debt can be paid partly by an increase in funding to provide clean water and sanitary services among the poor.

This is echoed by Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* (40):

Water by its very nature cannot be treated as a mere commodity among other commodities. Catholic social thought has always stressed that the defense and preservation of certain common goods such as the natural and human environments cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces, since they touch on fundamental human needs which escape market logic.

Market logic—the logic of capitalism—prioritizes short-term gain for the few at the expense of the many. The forces that pollute and privatize water are the same forces that are driving climate change, a “threat multiplier” that exponentially increases the threats to water and to frontline communities with each passing year. As Hop Hopkins of the Sierra Club [explains](#), “You can’t have climate change without sacrifice zones, and you can’t have sacrifice zones without disposable people, and you can’t have disposable people without racism.” A system built upon sacrificial people is not one wherein the dignity and sanctity of life is preserved. Systemic racism prevents us from living in a moral society.

ACTION

Frontline communities know their own needs. Following their leadership can help us break through our old molds and fashion a more just society. Frontline communities in New Jersey led the campaign to pass a landmark [environmental justice law](#) that places stricter requirements on new and renewed permits in overburdened communities. Collectively, we can push for similar legislation to be passed at the state and federal levels. We can advocate for a federal bill such as the [WATER Act](#) that would make water a human right and enact true utility justice. Since race is the greatest predictor of where industrial pollution is, [race must be named as a factor](#) when allocating federal resources for remediation. At the local level, we can [resist water privatization](#), which increases inequality through rate hikes and lack of accountability. Finally, we need to cultivate a deeper understanding of systemic racism and implicit bias across all sectors of society, including schools, government, and churches. Once we understand bias and racism’s differential impacts, we can forge a way ahead into a more moral society that is ready to hold itself accountable and make true reparations.



Environmental racism is a systemic, pervasive force that perpetuates a society wherein equal rights are unable to be enjoyed by all.