

Vatican official: Water access a right for all

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | Feb. 25, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- Reasonable access to clean water is a fundamental human right and its distribution should not be left solely to private companies seeking profit, a top Vatican official said.

Bishop Mario Toso, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, told participants at a meeting regarding the future of water supplies around the world that water is not a commercial product but rather a common good that belongs to everyone.

People have a "universal and inalienable right" to access, a right that is so fundamental that "governments cannot leave its management solely in private hands," he said.

Bishop Toso made his remarks at an international meeting near the Vatican called "Dammi da bere" (give me something to drink), promoted by the Catholic-inspired Italian environmental association Greenaccord.

Bishop Toso cited Colombia, Philippines and Ghana as examples of countries where water management "inspired exclusively by private and economic criteria" has failed to produce adequate distribution for the population and where water costs three to six times that of large cities such as New York or London.

"The great paradox is that poor people pay more than the rich for something that should be a universal right: the access to drinkable water," the bishop said. People in poor countries, he said, often suffer not for the lack of water but because "access is economically impossible."

Conflicts between peoples over their water supplies, especially in arid areas, are inevitable without fair and democratic policies regarding the sharing of water, the bishop said.

He added that many analysts warn that "in the future, following the oil wars that have characterized the past few decades, we will see new wars over water." That situation is sure to be aggravated by climate change, he said.

It is the responsibility of political authorities to mediate between private interests and public needs, keeping in mind that "the right to water is the basis for the respect of many other fundamental human rights."

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