

Catholic Sentinel

Holy Names Sisters say water is a human right, public good

MARYLHURST — Holy Names Sister Sue Woodruff remembers a childhood experience that she can never duplicate today: standing along Celilo Falls on the Columbia River and watching her uncles fish for Chinook.

"I was there when my grandma and her daughters, including my mother, preserved the fish for the rest of the year," she said. "It was wonderful. Mostly it was the sound of the water crashing and rushing over and through the rocks that marked a visit to the falls."

But in 1957 the falls were submerged by the construction of The Dalles Dam. The falls literally don't exist. Now when she visits that same site, she hears silence – and sees a dam that harvests not salmon but hydropower.

Concerns about the precarious global water situation and the sacredness of water led Sister Sue, along with Sisters Carole Strawn and Mary Medved of Portland, to serve on an 11-member international committee of Holy Names Sisters that spent months researching water issues.

The result: recently, the 1,200 Sisters of the Holy Names and their 600 associates around the world, including 168 Sisters and nearly 100 associates in Oregon, overwhelmingly approved a corporate stand on water. The stand declares that "water is a human right and a public good," and the stand is the basis of education projects and actions being undertaken by the Sisters. For instance, the **Holy Names Heritage Center** near Marylhurst University is developing educational programs related to water.

The corporate stand affirms that water is a sacred gift that connects all life; access to clean water is a basic human right; freshwater's value to the common good trumps its possible commercial value; and freshwater is a shared legacy, a public trust, and a collective responsibility. Sisters and Associates will encourage actions and policies that promote the corporate stand, and oppose those that don't.

The corporate stand on water comes four years after the Sisters approved a stand against human trafficking.

“We maintain that just as women and children are not for sale, water is not for sale,” the congregation said in a booklet that was prepared to educate Sisters and Associates about the water issue.

During the months of research and reflection that preceded the vote on the corporate stand on water, Sisters and Associates compiled facts about water as a human right and a public good:

- Every 20 seconds a child dies from a preventable disease associated with lack of clean water, the World Health Organization reported in March 2008.

That is more than 1.5 million children a year.

- Almost 50 percent of the developing world’s population – 2.5 billion people – lack improved sanitation facilities, and more than 884 million people use unsafe sources of drinking water, according to UNICEF.

- In Haiti, Holy Names Sister Lise Brosseau said, “We learned that a family of six consumes from 10 to 15 ‘boquittes’ of water (7-gallon containers) every day...one ‘boquitte’ weighs 30 pounds.”

Thousands of women and their children hand-carry the buckets of water back home from water supplies that might be more than a mile away.

“Even the smallest children of 5 or 6 carry their one-gallon bucket of water on their heads while accompanying a big sister or a mother in this daily chore,” she said.

- The plot of the new James Bond movie, in which a multinational corporation steals water from a Bolivian aquifer, isn’t so far-fetched: Water has become the “blue gold” of the 21st century and is touted by the World Bank as a potential trillion-dollar industry, says Maude Barlow, who is a senior advisor on water issues for the United Nations and the national chairperson of The Council of Canadians.

Barlow’s research has documented the corporate abuse of aquifers in Bolivia, which impacts the rural poor.

- Water-related education projects involving Holy Names Sisters already have been taking place in board rooms and at shareholder meetings, says the Northwest Coalition for Responsible Investment in Seattle, which is co-sponsored by the Sisters.

- Scripture and Catholic social teaching provide points for theological reflection about water as a public good.

Resources, including scriptural references and prayers, are in the booklet "Educational Materials for the SNJM Corporate Stand," available for downloading at www.snjmusontario.org.

Sisters challenge public

The Sisters of the Holy Names urge the public to join them in their pledge to use water as a human right and a public good. Here are things that individuals or groups can do to protect water resources:

- Drive less: air pollution from car exhaust eventually becomes water pollution.
- Use as little bottled water as possible.
- Conserve water: fix leaky faucets or taps, limit lawn watering and take short showers.
- Take the "one-ton challenge" to reduce your carbon footprint. The challenge may be downloaded from www.snjmusontario.org/download_waterdocuments.html.
- Recycle— and buy recycled, environmentally friendly products.
- Learn and study with others how to defend "water for all" as a human right. The Sisters' free booklet, "Educational Material for the SNJM Corporate Stand: Water is a Human Right and Public Good" may be downloaded from www.snjmusontario.org/download_waterdocuments.html. Other free resources are available that same page.
- The Columbia River Pastoral Project launched by 12 Catholic bishops of the Northwest and Canada culminated in a pastoral letter issued by the bishops in February 2001. The letter, "The Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good," is available to download in English and Spanish: <http://www.seattlearch.org/Outreach/WSCC/ColumbiaRvrProj.htm>.