

Comment

Facing the crusade against bottled water

Confusing economic ideology and the Church's social witness

By C.S. Morrissey

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Are you doing something wrong if you drink bottled water? Never mind that compared to tap water (which is not free, because taxes pay for it), you are probably over-paying for bottled water. That's a reward paid by you to a clever idea about convenience. (Bottled water reminds me of the guy who got rich from inventing Post-it notes. Why didn't I think of that?)

The bottle can be recycled, and we pay punitive extra fees at purchase time that keep us conscious of how our consumption may be affecting the environment. Why should bottled water be singled out for moral opprobrium?

Nowadays it seems people will give you a dirty look if they see you take a sip, as though you had just lit up a cigarette. But is it fair to reserve such special indignation for bottled-water drinkers?

It is worth taking a step back to ask why an overt political activism about water is currently being sanctioned in our churches. Presumably because it is being couched in religious language: if you remove all bottled water from your home, car, workplace, or school, then (so you are told) you are "giving Jesus water to drink."

But if an inflexible left-wing ideology is using the rhetorical flourishes of a religious crusade, then that should give us pause. The explicit intent behind the current campaign is to punish "multinational corporations" who own land with water, and who bottle that water to sell it. But why must people of faith and good will be recruited for this divisive agenda of moral rigorism?

Let me put the question starkly. Do we become sinners, or lapsed Catholics, or opponents of peace and justice, simply because we drink bottled water? The answer is



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Why is overt political activism over bottled water being sanctioned in our churches? asks C.S. Morrissey. We are not sinners or opponents of peace and justice if we drink bottled water, he writes.

a resounding no.

Political action is a matter for prudential judgment. In my opinion bottled-water crusaders are promoting an unreasonable ideological war against allegedly evil "multinational corporations." So here's a reasonable suggestion: perhaps a different political approach is required, if we are truly to achieve the good of getting clean drinking water to those who need it.

I'm no great expert in biblical theology, but it seems to me that if Jesus's request to the woman at Jacob's well (Jn. 4:5-15) has any political implication, it would be that Jesus respects private property. He

is in Samaria. He asks a Samaritan woman permission to drink from the Samaritan well. True, the well is public Samaritan property, but it is for their private use, and not for sharing with Jews.

Still, He has no problems with this "privatization." In a stunning move, Jesus is willing to drink from her private cup. That is, he does not endorse the prevalent ideological opinion of his Jewish contemporaries that to drink from a Samaritan's private cup is to engage in an unclean act.

In the same way, we should not endorse the bottled-water crusaders' misguided notion that to drink water from a corporate bottle

makes us despicable and ritually impure.

"Water, while given to the earth by God for free, does not come out of the springs and get delivered and distributed to everyone for free," observes theologian Robert Stackpole of Redeemer Pacific College. "The most efficient and consumer-cost-reduced way to do that for many places in the world is through the free market."

Stackpole adds that the key theological point that always remains is that "bottling and selling water does not preclude charitable provision of water (whether by public or private agencies) to areas that cannot afford it, as with food, clothing, shelter, and other basic human needs."

Thus Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for a charitable provision of her own private water; he didn't demand it on the basis of justice, on the basis of right.

Jordan J. Ballor, a research fellow at the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, and author of *Ecumenical Babel: Confusing Economic Ideology and the Church's Social Witness*, writes that political activism "should be focusing on ways to increase material prosperity in developing countries, giving them the financial resources necessary to buy amenities like bottled water if they like."

In other words, genuine "social justice" will focus on what Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, called "a society of free work, of enterprise and of participation."

Of course that is more difficult to do than indulging in a feel-good fantasy of moral superiority: as if by becoming zealots who banish bottled water in our society we then somehow magically make it available to those in need elsewhere.

Ballor argues that a more prudential and less ideological approach would make business part of the solution, rather than crudely demonize it as the problem. Instead of the dubious crusade against bottled water, Ballor (in his blog post "Even Big Bird Knows Better") recommends "the voluntary and charitable initiative of individuals and non-government organizations, including the Church. Some of these possibilities include technological innovations, community-managed water projects, and further research into reducing and recycling water in agricultural activities."

"It's the case in fact that in areas where the need for consumable water is greatest that the water is being diverted not for export and bottling to the U.S., but in the irrigation and watering of crops. The real culprit behind the problem of access to water in developing nations isn't the practice of bottling water, but rather the reality of farming practices in basic agrarian economies," writes Ballor.

Clearly this complex issue requires more than a symbolic gesture and more than a one-size-fits-all solution. While well-intentioned, the bottled-water crusade lacks political prudence. It will do more harm than good, by undermining property rights and habits of good governance in the places that need them the most for integral human development.

As St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us, "it is lawful for man to possess property. Moreover this is necessary to human life" because of human nature.

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