

Dear Sisters and Members of the Family of the Incarnation.

As you can see, it's Canada's turn to join you with a question about water.

We're used to hearing about water-scarce countries, particularly on the African continent, but if floods have hit Europe and Chili and the southern U.S., we don't expect to hear about water problems from the country with the largest number of lakes in the world.



Canada is the world's 2nd largest country, after Russia, in terms of surface area but with a projected population of 39,608,191 in 2025. Edmonton is located in the province of Alberta, which is about the size of France but has a population of just 4,400,000. This is truly "the land of wide open spaces", as the French singer Noël Colombier once sang...

Canada has more lakes than all the other countries in the world combined. It has around **60% of the world's lakes**. In all, there are **31,752 lakes over three square kilometers in size, and 561 lakes over 100 square kilometers**. And let's not forget the 4 great

North American lakes, which border the United States and represent the world's largest freshwater reserve (only Lake Michigan is entirely within the USA).

After this little geography lesson, there's one observation to be made, and that's, despite this, several Canadian populations still lack drinking water: how is this possible? What are the reasons for this? There are geographical, consumption and industrial reasons...

"For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God's creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the earth's waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins". For "to commit a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God". (Laudato Si' N°8)

- 1) First of all, "Not all water is good water".
- 2) A large proportion of river water flows into Hudson Bay, making it inaccessible to the country's more numerous southern populations.
- 3) Poor water management and over-consumption by more populous provinces like Quebec, where water is considered a free commodity. Consumers therefore don't have to pay water bills. This makes Quebec the biggest consumer of drinking water after the United States!
- 4) Industrial activities mainly affect the water used by indigenous communities across the country.

- ∞ **The indigenous community of Grassy Narrows in Manitoba (=Asubpeeschoseewagong in their language) saw their water contaminated when, between 1962 and 1975, a Dryden pulp and paper company dumped some 10 tons of mercury into the English-Wabigoon River. This heavy metal spread to neighbouring waterways, was absorbed by fish and accumulated in the food chain. An ecological disaster that has forced the authorities to ban commercial fishing because people's health has deteriorated. It's still there! Since then, the community has been in court with the provincial and federal governments, who have made promises but... the paper mill continues to operate!**



- ∞ **In northern Alberta, the Mikisew Cree population** is affected by a very high rate of cancer. Studies have already shown higher rates of cancer in communities located along the shores of Lake Athabasca. The lake is fed by the Athabasca River, which flows through the region where most of Canada's oil sands mines are located. Studies have revealed dangerous levels of arsenic, mercury and hydrocarbons in the region's water, as well as in the surrounding fish, sediment and wildlife.



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Photo Todd Korol - oil sands operations

Indigenous people living in indigenous communities face more health problems and have fewer resources to solve them than non-indigenous people. Infant mortality rates in indigenous communities are two to four times higher than in non-indigenous communities.

In 2016 **The Truth and Reconciliation Commission** (TRC) studied access to or the lack of drinkable water. In the Call to Action, #19 of the TRC Report, they state:

19. We call on the federal government, in consultation with Aboriginal peoples, to set measurable targets to identify and close health gaps between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, publish annual reports on progress, and assess long-term trends. These efforts should focus on indicators such as infant mortality, maternal health, suicide, mental health, substance abuse, life expectancy, birth rates, infant and child health problems, chronic diseases, incidence of illness and injury, and the availability of appropriate health services.

Therefore, the TRC recommends that the federal government take action to address the inequity in the health, and medical care available to aboriginal communities. It is important that the federal government take steps to solve the socio-economic issues that lead to increased risk of disease, such as the poor access to clean drinking water that too many aboriginal peoples suffer from, food insecurity, and lack of education that would aid in preventing disease. The federal government would need to work in consultation with aboriginal communities so that the unique challenges that indigenous peoples face could be met with informed solutions.



A law project designed to ensure that Aboriginal people have access to drinking water in their communities, and also to protect water sources on First Nations

territories, has been before a House of Commons committee for months. Aboriginal chiefs are wondering to what extent the bill will ensure that communities receive adequate funding to maintain and operate water treatment plants.



National Chief Cindy Woodhouse Nepinak, who also appeared before the committee, said that Canada and First Nations must work together to ensure that this bill, a top priority for Aboriginal people, is passed before the next federal election....



Praise be to you, Lord, for our sister Water, who is very useful and humble, precious and chaste... sang St Francis of Assisi

Let us not forget to give thanks to the Lord when we drink a glass of clean water

With affection

International Commission on Ecology - 1st March 2025