

Reply to Responses to “Common Waters”  
Martha Moore-Keish

Since writing my initial article two months ago and sending it off for responses, I have come to think of this emerging conversation about baptism and global water crises as one contemporary response to the Westminster Larger Catechism’s call to “improve our baptism.” This 17<sup>th</sup> century language may sound archaic, but hear again (or for the first time) the urgency of the Westminster Divines’ insistence: “*The needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, . . . by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein . . .*” (Q. 167, 7.277) Dangerous talk this might seem: can we actually *improve* our baptism, which is an unmerited and complete gift from God? Doesn’t this suggest that we can add something to God’s own act of salvation in Christ? I do not think the writers of the Catechism were saying that we supplement God’s salvific act, but that we receive and respond to God’s prior act throughout the course of our lives, so that its effect deepens and grows over time. To “improve our baptism” is to take seriously the call to discipleship that comes in and through the grace-soaked sacrament.

Surely in these days, to devote serious consideration to the water issues of the world, and to ponder our own political and economic responsibilities on these matters, is one way of attending to the nature and ends of baptism, the “privileges and benefits” conferred in it, and (particularly) “our solemn vow made therein.”

I am grateful for the generous and thoughtful responses that Rachel Hart Winter, Stan Saunders, and Mark Koenig have offered to my reflections. Their own essays have deepened, extended, and at points challenged my own thinking. In what follows, I will

highlight particular insights from their work that have helped me in my own current efforts to improve my baptism.

Early in her essay, Rachel Hart Winter says, “It seems to me we need personal and communal experiences that can reframe our view of water – calling us to a greater awareness of the sacredness of water.” I wholeheartedly agree with her emphasis on the need for both individual and communal experiences to deepen our appreciation of water as gift. Winter follows up with compelling stories from her time in the Marshall Islands, and especially Alinglaplap, where the scarcity and unpredictability of the water supply taught her to value water as a gift from God, not a commodity to be taken for granted as always clean, abundant, and available. Her testimony suggests that for heightened awareness of the reality of global water issues, there is no substitute for direct personal experience of places where clean water is not readily available. As we know, it is not necessary to travel to Pacific islands to encounter such places; in certain neighborhoods in my own town of Atlanta, as well as in rural parts of Georgia, people live by polluted streams and struggle with consistent clean water supply. We who are baptized need to learn again from such situations the real value of water as necessary for life, for all.

Winter offers two specific suggestions for ways that the sacrament of baptism might raise people’s awareness of the need to care for water as part of God’s creation. First, *“stories of those who suffer due to the water crisis connected with a baptismal call to become like Christ would not fall on deaf ears to those who are participating in and witnessing to the sacrament.”* Such stories could emerge in sermons or other teaching in connection with baptism, or could be briefly shared in a charge to the baptized at the end of a worship

service. Second, “The simple invitation to imagine any baptism, our own, that of a loved one, or even the baptism of Christ *without water* might force people to ponder the future and the reality of diminishing water sources for all creation.” Inspired by her suggestions, I offer two more:

- Use and emphasize the local character of the water in the font (for instance, in the prayer over the water). This can help people to connect baptism with their very specific local context, with its own environmental, political, and economic entailments.
- Look for occasions to celebrate a baptism or reaffirmation of baptism by an actual body of water (lake, stream, fishing hole, or bay) in the area. This too can draw attention to the material reality of water, and can stimulate gratitude as well as concern for its use.

In these and other ways, liturgical leaders can draw clear connections between the waters of baptism and the threatened waters of the world, to raise awareness of water itself as gift in need of our care.

While Rachel Hart Winter focuses on her experiences in the Marshall Islands and the way they shape her appreciation for water as gift, Stan Saunders focuses broadly on the global water shortage due to climate change and the forces of empire. With greater courage than I, Stan turns his unflinching attention to the way our habits bear directly on the water crises we face. Along the way, he challenges the ease and the honesty with which we use classic baptismal language. “Can we really pass through water to new life while participating in the rapacious consumption and despoiling of the very waters that make life on this earth possible?” he asks. “Too often it seems that Christians are sprinkled in the

waters of Christian baptism, but immersed and drowning in the more powerful and culturally pervasive baptism of consumption. Are we really moving from death to life, or from life to death?" To these questions I can only say: ouch. And thank you. And for those who have ears to hear, listen.

One of the insights I appreciate most in Stan's response is his discussion of the Jewish *miqveh* as a subversive challenge to Roman technological control of water during the days of that empire. Just as control of oil and water today form the foundation of the American empire, so too the aqueduct in Roman times. I find this line especially inspiring: "The *miqveh* was an act of resistance built into the very walls of houses and the stones of the land, the means to return the water to its natural state as a free gift of God and in turn to redirect the lives of those who used it once again toward God." How might our own baptismal practice similarly challenge the commodification of water in the global economy today?

In the end, Stan asks how we today might engage with water so as to affirm its sacramental, "living" character. Rather than focusing on the sacramental event of baptism, he highlights the importance of daily remembrance of our baptism, and of "continually affirming the fact that water belongs not to humans for their use alone, but to God for the whole creation." Such focus on the regular remembrance of baptism recalls Martin Luther, who in times of trouble was known to proclaim "I am baptized!" Unlike Luther, however, Stan means such daily remembrance to turn us to water itself as gift which needs our care. In his practical reflections, Stan focuses more on the ongoing, everyday baptismal life, while Rachel focuses more on the event of baptism itself as an occasion to foreground the gift of

water. In order to enrich the conversation about baptism and global water crises, both dimensions are necessary.

Finally, the response from Mark Koenig offers a useful reflection on baptismal waters informed by his own long experience of working with the United Nations, with particular attention to the U.N.'s recent discussion of water as a basic human right. In response to my point that "*Baptism orients us to new creation, in which the barriers that separate us are washed away,*" Mark notes that women and children are especially responsible for water carrying in countries where water is not readily available, and they are therefore more vulnerable to attack and abuse in areas afflicted by war. This clear observation about the particular vulnerability of women and children in the global water crisis is a significant contribution to the conversation. In this way, Koenig illumines how addressing global water issues embodies our baptismal affirmation that the waters of baptism wash away barriers that separate us from one another, privileging some over others.

Picking up on the theme of water as gift, Koenig asks, "Is there a difference between God's gift of water and God's gift of gold or other minerals and ores?" Indeed it is a fair question, since Christians describe all creation as gift, as grace—which complicates efforts to differentiate some aspects of creation as "more gift" than others. Koenig sensibly goes on to point out that water is essential to life in a way that gold and other minerals are not, which does give it a special place in our consideration. Yet the nations of the world are divided in their treatment of water as a distinctive gift.

This leads to the particularly helpful aspect in Koenig's response: his discussion of water as a basic human right, as noted in UN documents in the past few years. Though I

think that we need to have a further conversation about the relationship of language of “right” and language of “gift,” I appreciate his effort here to connect the conversation about baptism and the global water crisis with these UN documents. Perhaps this is a place where Christians, out of our baptismal identity that so joins us to water, might lift our voices in support of efforts to protect and share the water resources of the world as common gift to all living things.

With these voices now offered, let us continue the conversation about the waters of baptism and the contested, contaminated, and scarce waters of the world into which God has sent us. In this way, may we honor Westminster’s invitation to take up afresh in our day “the needful but much neglected duty of improving our baptism.”