

# CLEAN AND AFFORDABLE WATER FOR ALL



MICHIGAN  
CATHOLIC  
CONFERENCE

*“Access to safe drinkable water is a basic and universal human right, since it is essential to human survival.” —Pope Francis, Laudato Si, 2015*

Growing up in Michigan, children quickly learn to appreciate the state’s natural beauty, especially when spending time near any of the Great Lakes or inland lakes. Along with describing a successful advertising effort, the slogan “Pure Michigan” reflects the admiration and peace many feel while walking the beaches, spending time kayaking or fishing, and swimming with friends and family. The maturation into adulthood for those Michigan children includes a desire to protect those memories and the resources that helped to create them.

Beyond recreational enjoyment, water is an essential resource that provides nourishment and sustains life. As such, the Catholic Church teaches that water is a human right. It also plays a fundamental role in cleaning and washing, growing and cooking food, and transporting goods to and from an area. In Michigan, it is also a constant source of entertainment and beauty, as well as a defining element of the state’s geography. Four of the five Great Lakes—Michigan, Superior, Huron, and Erie—surround Michigan’s borders. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, the Great Lakes contain just over twenty percent of the world’s surface fresh water and eighty-four percent of North America’s.

In fact, water is such a normal building block for Michiganders that often it is taken for granted, until something

goes wrong. Access to clean and affordable drinking water out of the tap is no longer a reality for many around the Great Lakes state. Recent problems in major cities have created negative health consequences, suffering, and in some cases, death. To the horror of many, both children and adults experienced elevated lead levels across the city of Flint after the city switched from the Detroit water system to the Flint River in 2014. Increasing levels of contaminants resistant to heat, water, and oil, called per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), have emerged and are causing justifiable angst among many. In fact, statewide testing from 2018 identified over sixty public drinking water systems in the state with measurable levels of PFAS, which some research has linked to cancer and other illnesses.<sup>1</sup> In Detroit, tens of thousands of residents have faced impending water shut-offs in recent years due to difficult economic realities. Poverty, lack of meaningful employment, and inadequate transportation have made water affordability challenging for low-income residents.

At the Third World Water Forum in 2003, the Vatican Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace stated that “the long-term viability of a country’s water supply infrastructure depends on leadership and vision of political leaders... and their capacity to get things done.” Leadership, vision, and action are still needed today from elected officials and communities to protect one of Michigan’s most precious resources. This **focus** details several water issues currently facing Michiganders, and the need for improved access to clean and affordable water for all. ■

1. Michigan PFAS Testing to continue at 60 water supplies; MLive, 2/25/19: <https://goo.gl/TrkeQr>

## NATIONAL WATER SAFETY LAWS

In 1948, the Federal Water Pollution Control Act became the first national law to address water pollution. The U.S. Congress passed amendments to the law in 1972, which became the Clean Water Act. The Act regulated pollutant discharges in waters and quality standards for surface waters. Later, in 1974, the Safe Drinking Water Act set drinking water quality standards and made the Environmental Protection Agency responsible for implementing water safety.

# Water Concerns in Michigan

Worldwide, an estimated 2.1 billion people lack access to safely managed drinking water services, and 4.5 billion lack safely managed sanitation services.<sup>2</sup> While it may seem that water safety is a distant worry for developed communities, recent events have shown reason for heightened concern. Greater efforts are needed to protect clean water in Michigan.



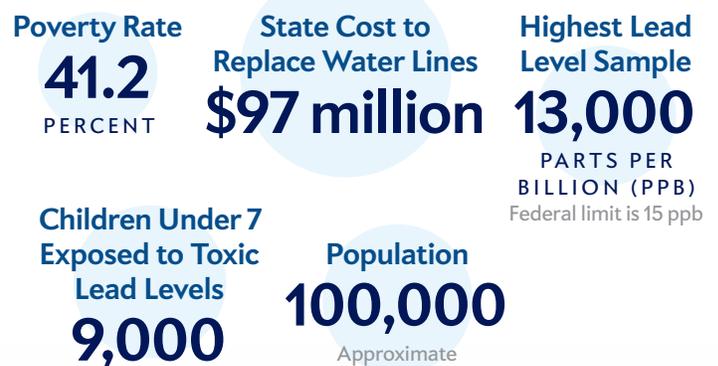
REUTERS / Jim Young - stock.adobe.com

**Lead:** In 2014, Flint residents began receiving drinking water from the Flint River after officials switched from the Detroit water system to save costs. Due to a lack of proper controls, Flint River water began corroding service pipes, allowing lead to leach into drinking and bathing water. Unknowingly, thousands of residents absorbed and consumed toxic water with no ability to realize the significance of what was happening. It has taken years to comprehend the extent of the health impact on children and adults. Millions have been spent to replace pipes. Lead is especially dangerous because it attacks the brain and nervous system. In children, lead exposure can

lead to behavior and learning problems, hyperactivity and lower IQ, slowed growth, hearing problems, anemia, and in extreme cases, seizure, coma, or death. In adults, lead exposure can lead to increased blood pressure and incidence of hypertension, damage to the kidneys, reproductive problems for men and women, and miscarriages or premature births.<sup>3</sup> There is no cure for lead exposure, but there are actions that can be taken to lessen its impact or to prevent future exposure, starting with removing the sources of contamination and completing more testing for lead in water sources.

**PFAS:** Michiganders have become more familiar recently with the contaminant PFAS, which does not break down easily in the environment or the human body and can easily transfer through the soil into groundwater. PFAS have been commonly found in waterproof, stain-resistant, or non-stick products; food packaging; commercial household products such as paints, cleaning products, or firefighting foams; and production facilities or industries such as electronics manufacturing. In 2016, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a lifetime health advisory, or warning, for the two most studied PFAS, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS), at 70 parts per trillion.<sup>4</sup> While much remains unknown, studies have demonstrated that exposure to certain PFAS may result in adverse health effects: lowering a woman's chance of becoming pregnant, changing the body's immune responses, increasing cholesterol levels, increasing the likelihood of high blood pressure during pregnancy, and increasing the chances of thyroid disease and cancer (especially kidney and testicular). The State of Michigan formed a PFAS Action Response Team (MPART) in 2017, bringing together health and environmental experts with representatives of state government. The team investigates sources and locations of PFAS contamination, informs the public about their results, and takes protective action.<sup>5</sup> ■

## FLINT BY THE NUMBERS<sup>6</sup>



2. "Water, Sanitation and Hygiene," UN Water, accessed 3/7/19: <https://goo.gl/UzxygJ> 3. "Basic Information About Lead in Drinking Water", EPA, accessed 3/7/19: <https://goo.gl/M2yUgg> 4. "Drinking Water Health Advisories for PFOA and PFOS," EPA, accessed 3/7/19: <https://goo.gl/u6r165> 5. "PFAS Response: Taking Action, Protecting Michigan," MPART, accessed 3/7/19: <https://goo.gl/5CDCv> 6. "The state of the Flint water crisis, by the numbers", Mic, accessed 3/7/19: <https://goo.gl/FFuTbk>

# Affordability

The lack of clean and affordable drinking water for many individuals living in poverty demands a greater response from policymakers and community leaders. Pope Francis has written that the poor “are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity” and are owed a “grave social debt” by the world. Low-income residents are often left behind when communities focus only on short-term consequences, politics, or finances when making decisions that affect water access.<sup>7</sup> Supplying quality water to Michigan residents requires investment, and those expenses are an important reality to consider when decisions about water are made. At the same time, water affordability must be a key discussion point for the benefit of all Michiganders, including those most forgotten by society. When addressing this priority, elected officials should consider three important factors: first, increased



*“Water affordability must be a key discussion point for the benefit of all Michiganders”*

education regarding organizations and resources that assist residents with finances; second, demand management policies or investments that encourage efficient water use; and third, attentiveness to rate affordability, including measures to discount services provided to the poor. ■

## On the Accessibility and Treatment of Water in Detroit

*“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters.” —Psalm 29:3*

“Water plays a pivotal role in our various religious communities and congregations. We mention water in our prayers. We use water in our rituals. We find water in our Scriptures, where water is more than a metaphor for God’s loving kindness, but a promise made to people living in places where water was scarce and precious. Water makes life possible. Water is essential to human flourishing and human dignity. In 2010, the General Assembly of the United Nations rightfully declared that ‘the right to safe and clean drinking water and sanitation’ is ‘a right that is essential for the full enjoyment of life and all human rights’ (UN Res. 64/292, art. 1). This fundamental human right resonates with all of our sacred teachings. As religious leaders, we live under a Divine obligation to speak on behalf of those who do not have access to water. We bear responsibility to lead by word and action in calling for policies that are just and equitable. We are called to work with those of good will for water practices that are environmentally sustainable. We are called to

Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron, Archbishop of Detroit, is a co-signer of this statement from the Detroit Religious Leaders Forum

give water to those who are thirsty. In Metropolitan Detroit, thousands face the threat of losing access to water due to financial hardships stemming from a lack of meaningful employment. Many are forced to pay rates they cannot afford, and many bear the burden of living with a sanitation system that is unreliable, unsustainable, and out of date. Finally, many cannot take advantage of the assistance programs that the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department has established to mitigate their plight. Our elected officials must therefore address the essential role water and its affordability play in the flourishing of Michigan residents and communities. We are writing to encourage equitable and creative solutions to help low-income and vulnerable persons have access to clean and safe water. We, the religious leaders of congregations throughout Metro Detroit, write with one voice to urge all citizens to support our civil officials as they search for ways to reduce the barriers to clean and safe water for all. We also pledge to continue to listen to the needs of the poor and to work for meaningful change in the provision of, and access to, clean and safe water for all. Finally, we pledge to work collaboratively whenever we can to promote the common good and build the Beloved Community.”<sup>8</sup> ■

7. “Show Mercy to Our Common Home,” Pope Francis, 9/1/16: <https://goo.gl/PTNKWq>

8. “A Call for Water Justice in Detroit,” Religious Leaders Forum—InterFaith Leadership Council of Metropolitan Detroit, 1/18/19: <https://goo.gl/TJiSPZ>

# Giving Drink to the Thirsty

The Catholic Church recognizes and promotes the dignity of every human person; she proposes policies and mechanisms that help overcome barriers that impede human rights. The right to water, according to the Social Compendium of the Catholic Church, is a “universal and inalienable right” given to all people and to creation. The Compendium, which addresses Church teaching on life in society, also writes that water should be maintained as a public good so that all may have access, especially those who live in poverty. Water “cannot be treated as just another commodity among many” and it should be used “rationally and in solidarity with others.”<sup>9</sup> Catholic teaching also emphasizes the important role of the government in water management, especially in protecting citizens from pollutants.

Catholic people and institutions, too, have helped “[preserve and share]” water “for the benefit of all in this state, embodying the Church’s call to give drink to the thirsty found in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 25.”<sup>10</sup> For example, Catholic Charities of Shiawassee and Genesee Counties quickly became one of the largest ongoing distributors of fresh water in Flint during and following the lead crisis.<sup>11</sup> St. Mary Catholic Church and Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Flint have also helped to communicate with and distribute water and filters to the immigrant community. Across Michigan, Catholics sent financial assistance to benefit residents of the city. Members of the Catholic Church have also played a creative role in addressing the city’s overabundance of empty water bottles. In 2017, the St. Luke N.E.W. Life Center partnered with a North Carolina organization to turn recycled bottles into fabric when a fashion designer provided

the organization’s seamstresses—Flint residents—with materials necessary to create the clothing.<sup>12</sup> Each of these examples recognized community needs, put solutions into action, and offered inspiration from which others can learn. ■

## FAITH IN FLINT

The Diocese of Lansing began an initiative in May 2015 called *Faith in Flint*, which drew the diocese’s attention to the city of Flint in a more deliberate way. *Faith in Flint* highlights the many Catholic entities at work within the community—including parishes, charitable organizations, and schools—and encouraged individuals around the diocese to help bring hope to the city. One way the Catholic community lived this initiative was through charity during the Flint water crisis. The ongoing commitment to Flint challenges people of faith not only to be a helping hand to residents in need, but also to be a Catholic presence to everyone they encounter. Learn more at [faithinflint.org](http://faithinflint.org).

## A Prayer for Water

“Loving God, whose son Jesus Christ called all who were thirsty to come to him, believe and drink, look in mercy on your people living in dry lands and struggling to survive without access to safe drinking water. Forgive our selfishness in life and our misuse of our natural resources. We commit ourselves to value and care for your gifts to us. May rivers of living water and practical compassion for all who suffer flow out from our hearts. Refreshed by your Spirit, and following in the way of Jesus Christ, we will continue to serve you in the people and creation entrusted to our care. Amen.” —Caritas Australia, adapted from a prayer by Reverend Canon Paul Robertson, 2004. ■

9. *Social Compendium of the Catholic Church*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 6/29/04: <https://goo.gl/RZ3eAw> 10. “The Human Right to Water,” Pope Francis, 2/24/17: <https://goo.gl/cJ4ACx> 11. “The Catholic Church Responds to Water Crisis in Flint,” *Faith Magazine*, March 2016: <https://goo.gl/JdTqkz> 12. “Flotsam to Fashion: Salvaged Water Bottles Become Raincoats, Swimsuits in Flint Fit Project,” *East Village Magazine*, 9/18/18: <https://goo.gl/oQ59yv>

### focus

Vol. 47, No. 2, May 2019

focus is published by the  
Michigan Catholic Conference  
510 South Capitol Avenue  
Lansing, Michigan 48933

For additional free copies of this

focus, please contact us at:

Phone: (800) 395-5565

Email: [kmay@micatholic.org](mailto:kmay@micatholic.org)

©2019 Michigan Catholic Conference  
Design by Blair Miller



Find **Michigan Catholic Conference**  
on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube,  
and Instagram, or visit us on  
the web at [micatholic.org](http://micatholic.org)