

AN INVESTMENT IN LIFE:



DICASTERY FOR PROMOTING
INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) in Catholic Healthcare Facilities

The Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development is leading an initiative to improve WASH conditions in healthcare facilities, with an initial focus on 150 Catholic healthcare facilities in 24 countries. On March 25, 2021, the Dicastery will gather donors and partners to support action for WASH improvements in these facilities, along with wider support for all Catholic healthcare facilities in low-resource settings across the world.

THE GLOBAL ISSUE

Access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) is the foundation of safe and effective healthcare, impacting every facet of patient care. Without clean water, functional toilets, and available handwashing stations, millions of patients, staff and families are placed at risk. Births, surgery, infections, epidemics – none of these can be safely managed at hospitals and clinics without sustainable, WASH.

Worldwide, 1 in 4 healthcare facilities (HCF) lack basic water services, 1 in 3 have no handwashing stations, and 1 in 10 lack even a toilet. These [poor conditions](#) put more than 1.8 billion people at risk and contribute to the spread of preventable infections, with [1 in 6 patients](#) contracting a new infection during their hospital stay. Tragically, mothers and newborns are especially vulnerable. More than [1 million newborn deaths](#) every year are associated with births in unclean settings. Without adequate WASH, healthcare workers are simply too ill-equipped to slow the spread of disease outbreaks and preventable infections, making safe, quality care virtually impossible.

Inadequate WASH conditions undermine not only infection prevention control and maternal and child health but initiatives to address antimicrobial resistance, health-system strengthening, and pandemic response. COVID-19, exposing just how essential handwashing and other WASH services and practices are to protect patients and healthcare workers, has illuminated as rarely before the bedrock need for safe, sustainable WASH in HCF.



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Momentum is building, as key stakeholders have recognized the depths of on this neglected crisis. Global baseline [reports](#), coupled with a [Call to Action](#) by the UN Secretary-General in 2018 and the unanimously passed [World Health Assembly Resolution](#) in 2019, have contributed to the unprecedented attention. Health systems are being re-envisioned with integrated WASH serving as a basic necessity for any HCF run by governments and religious institutions. A critical next step is substantial investment to urgently rectify these deplorable conditions – not only infrastructure but also operations, maintenance, and training.

WASH is “An Investment in Life” for healthcare facilities, necessary to achieving a range of priorities that include disease prevention, quality care, pandemic preparedness, effective health systems, and more productive communities.

THE CATHOLIC WASH IN HEALTHCARE FACILITIES INITIATIVE



The Catholic Church is the largest unified provider of essential healthcare services in the world. Care for the sick is a key element of the Gospel, of the Church’s tradition, and of the recent encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*. The Church, including its parishes and members as well as its global mission and service organizations, deliver effective healthcare to the most remote areas and the poorest, without distinction of religion, nationality, ethnicity, or any other factor of discrimination. It is critical that these HCF are equipped with the foundational elements of clean water, soap, functional toilets, and a hygienic environment.

Despite the scarcity of financial resources and the absence or limitations of national policies and standards in certain countries, Catholic congregations and parishes are working hard to maintain the functionality of WASH services. Faith and desire to serve others are critical ingredients in the professional motivation of healthcare workers in Catholic HCF. Notwithstanding their commitment to the proper functioning of WASH, those managing Catholic healthcare facilities in low-resource setting require further resources to sustainably improve and maintain WASH services.

The Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development recognizes those already actively participating in this battle to save lives and prevent sickness by helping Catholic HCF improve WASH conditions. Over the past several years, the Dicastery has issued [statements](#) that include [support](#) for this [global movement](#).

Building upon these earlier expressions of support, Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery, has urged Bishops and Congregations worldwide to help ensure **“adequate access to water, sanitation and hygiene in all Catholic health care facilities in order to safely treat patients, prevent further spread of COVID-19 and other diseases, and protect health care workers and chaplains”**. Dioceses, congregations, and Bishops’ conferences in 24 countries have responded, leading in recent months to assessments being carried out in approximately 150 HCF in low-resource settings.