



WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY 2015

“Jesus said to her: *‘Give me a drink.’*” (John 4:7)

INTRODUCTION:

Who drinks of this water...

The encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman invites us to try water from a different well and also to offer a little water of our own. In diversity, we enrich each other. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is a privileged moment for prayer, encounter and dialogue. It is an opportunity to recognize the richness and value present in the other, and to ask God for the gift of unity.

The biblical gesture of offering water to a guest (Mt 10:42) as a way of welcoming and sharing is something that is repeated in all regions of Brazil. Refreshing glasses of water, chimarrão¹, coffee and tererê² are trademarks of acceptance, dialogue and coexistence.

The proposed study and meditation on this text during the Week of Prayer is to help people and communities to realize the dialogical dimension of the project of Jesus, which we call the Kingdom of God.

The text reaffirms the importance of a person's knowing and understanding first her or his own identity so that the identity of the other is not seen as a threat. If we do not feel threatened, we will be able to experience the complementarity of the other. The

image emerging from the words “give me a drink” is an image speaking of complementarity: to drink the water of someone else's well is the first step towards experiencing another's way of being. This leads to the acceptance of diversity and is an effort to overcome monocultural conceptions that have caused so much damage to society and churches.

In the text of John 4, Jesus is a foreigner who arrives tired and thirsty. He needs help and asks for water. The woman is in her own land; the well belongs to her people, to her tradition. She owns the bucket and she is the one with access to the water. But she is also thirsty herself. They meet – and that encounter offers an unexpected opportunity for both of them. Jesus does not cease to be Jewish because he drank the water offered by the Samaritan woman. The Samaritan remains who she is, while embracing Jesus' way. When we recognize that we do have reciprocal needs, complementarity takes place in our lives in a more enriching way.

“Give me a drink” presupposes that both Jesus and the Samaritan woman ask for what they need from each other. “Give me a drink” compels us to recognize that persons, communities, cultures, religions and ethnicities

need each other. Diversity needs to be recognized and presented as our common heritage, with regard to humanity and the whole of creation.

“Give me a drink” compels us to change our attitude, to commit ourselves to seek unity in the midst of our diversity through our openness to a variety of forms of spirituality and religious expressions.

The ecclesial and religious context of Brazil

Brazil is traditionally known as a country where a certain “cordiality” characterizes relations between social classes and ethnic groups. However, a critical look at its contemporary reality shows a rather different picture. Brazil is in a time of growing Christian fundamentalism and intolerance, made manifest in high levels of violence, especially against minorities. This intolerance was hidden for a long time. It became more explicit and revealed a different Brazil when, on October 12, 1995, during the feast of Our Lady Aparecida, the patron of the country, one of the bishops of a Neopentecostal church kicked a statue of Our Lady Aparecida during a nationally broadcast TV show.

Ever since, there have been other instances of Christian-based religious intolerance. The logic that undergirds this kind of behaviour is competition for the religious market. Increasingly, in Brazil, Christian denominations adopt a competitive attitude towards one another.

This situation of religious competition has affected the life of traditional Christian confessions, which have experienced reduction or stagnation in the number of their membership. This has encouraged the idea that a strong and dynamic church is a church that has a high number of members. As a result, there is a tendency among significant sectors of traditional churches to distance themselves from the search for the visible unity of the Christian church.

According to the 2010 official Census, 86.8% of Brazilians declare that they are Christians. Paradoxically, this country with a remarkable Christian majority has very high rates of violence. Belonging to a Christian church does not necessarily translate into non-violent

attitudes of respect for human dignity. This statement can be illustrated with the following data:

Violence against women: Between 2000 and 2010, 43,700 women were murdered in Brazil. Of these women, forty-one percent suffered this violence in their own homes.

Violence against indigenous people: Violence against the indigenous population is related to large hydroelectric developments and the expansion of agribusiness. These two projects express the model of development prevailing in the country today. These developments take place without conducting consultations with indigenous peoples, as envisaged in Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT)'s report denounces the murder of 500 indigenous people between 2003 and 2011.

In describing our context here in Brazil, we have attempted to provide an honest

description of our country. We have identified intolerance as an issue of concern. As we look beyond Brazil to the rest of the world, we also observe intolerance. As Christians, it is vital that we all reflect upon how we should respond to such attitudes and the injustice that flows from them.

Overcoming intolerance in its various forms should be dealt with in a positive way: understanding *diversity as something desired by God* and *dialogue as a permanent path*, like a lifestyle choice, a witness.

¹Chimarrão is a traditional infused drink in the South of Brazil; it is prepared from steeping dried leaves of yerba mate in boiling water. Drinking together with friends or family is the common practice.

²The principle is similar to Chimarrão, but instead of boiling water, tereré uses cold water.