

## **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2003: Introduction to the theme for the year**

### **“We have this treasure in clay jars” (2 Corinthians 4: 7)**

Migration, a complex issue, is having a growing impact on the lives of many people, countries and churches around the world. Argentina is one of the countries where there have been many waves of immigration that have affected not only the national context but also the lives of the churches. The initial project for this year's prayer for unity comes from an ecumenical group in Argentina that chose the biblical text and theme that arises out of a reflection on the fact that Argentina is a nation built by native peoples and immigrants.

Several reasons for immigration might be identified such as famine, wars, and religious persecutions. Two stories from Argentina's recent past illustrate these situations and show the need for the churches to work together to seek unity in order to respond in common witness.

1. A family fleeing from violence emigrates and finds a home in Argentina. There they find security but have to face a new culture which they do not understand, a language that is not their own, and a history with which they cannot identify. Sometimes the local population does not appreciate their presence. This family feels happiness and at the same time sadness. They leave behind fear but now they discover discrimination. In some cases they have to accept being economically exploited; this is the price that they have to pay to protect their lives and raise their children. The new country takes them in and rejects them at the same time. They have faith and they wait for the light that will guide them in the darkness.

2. A young woman comes to the big city looking for a job. She grew up in the northern countryside and leaves it for a better future. She leaves her family, her friends and now she faces a different kind of society. Her skin and her accent reveal that her origins are in the country; probably she also has native blood. For this too she has to pay a high price. She experiences the bright lights of the big city but also the sadness of loneliness. She is a foreigner in her own country. She often feels she is treated as if she has no right to enjoy the good life. She has no one in whom to confide but she still has hope that she will find her place.

Such situations led the local group to reflect on how the word of God gives us strength in difficult circumstances and even reminds us that all of God's people are pilgrims on the way to the kingdom. The Bible presents us with many examples of peoples who migrate from place to place for many of the same reasons as the populations of today. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Amos, and Joseph, Mary and Jesus are biblical examples of immigrants.

The experience of immigration reveals a world that is divided. The unity of Christians needs to be the paradigm for the unity of humankind. Christians possess a “treasure in clay jars” (2 Cor. 4:7) which is the glory of Jesus Christ the Lord, namely his victory over sin, death, persecution and hatred. This treasure is, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 4:5-6, the knowledge of God's glory that burns brightly in Jesus as he has revealed the depths of God's love and mercy for all creation, especially the poor.

The text of 2 Cor. 4:5-18 calls us to recognize that we carry a treasure that does not belong to us but which has been given to us as a gift from God to strengthen us when we are suffering and encourage us when we are sad. We carry this treasure within the fragility of our human existence so that it becomes clear that this gift has its origin in God and is not of our own making. God invites us to witness to him through our human weakness.

The body of Christ is undivided and for this reason we must overcome the divisions among Christians that are a counter-witness to this truth. We recognize that the barriers are great and that our own intellectual and physical force is not enough to heal our sins of division. The

unity of the church must be brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, so that each step toward unity is seen as God drawing us nearer to his kingdom.

We need to accept the challenge of the apostle Paul who said that “we believe so we speak” (2 Cor. 4:13). Not to speak is to hide the visible reality of Christ at work **in us, which** is the basis of the church’s action in the world. So with the strength that is given to us, we have to go toward our neighbour to share the light of Christ and to recognize that together we are in debt to God who gave the life of his Son for the salvation of humankind. These themes are illustrated in the worship service and the eight days, which are planned as follows:

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul encourages his Christian brothers and sisters with the message of hope represented in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s message, revealing God’s glory and the light that continues to shine in a world of darkness (2 Cor. 4:5-6). This is the hope born in the hearts of men and women who are aware that its source is in God and not in ourselves. It is this treasure that sustains the pilgrims and the migrants in their fragile human condition (Day 1 - 2 Cor. 4:7).

Common faith in Christ is our hope and our treasure. In our world, many men, women and children experience the weight of persecution, affliction and abandonment as they are forced to leave their homes and live on the streets, constantly separated from their familiar surroundings. Paul reflects on the experience of persecution, offering the consolation of Christian faith; since Jesus assumed our human condition that it might be lifted up, the strength of God is revealed in our weakness. Hence we are neither crushed nor driven to despair, we are not forsaken or struck down because we have faith (Day 2 - 2 Cor. 4:8).

The mystery of redemption is revealed in situations where, through God’s grace, the human spirit makes visible the image of Christ in the fragility of our bodies. In this fragility we see the death of Christ carried in the body but through God’s mercy the image of Christ is also revealed. Too often the sinfulness of discrimination reveals a culture of death, that is nothing more than a desire to eliminate difference, which is the other. The mission of the churches is to find ways to affirm together the image of Christ in the other as a source of riches, a valuable gift. The presence of Christ manifested in our bodies renews us so that we make visible the image of God, a dignity that cannot be erased. It is only when we appreciate this treasure that all bear in their human nature that we can welcome others, recognizing their resemblance to God (Day 3 – 2 Cor. 4:10).

It seems like a contradiction but as long as there is life in us, we must learn to be given over to death, to die to self that Christ might live in us. In doing so, we open our minds to the very importance of life itself - a life that has been entrusted to Christ that his life might be visible in us. All Christians are called to witness to the fact that sin no longer has power over us. This is where the churches must witness together in the world to the dignity of life, new life in Christ (Day 4 – 2 Cor. 4:11).

In the precarious conditions in which both pilgrims and immigrants find themselves, Christian churches united “in the same spirit of faith” offer their voices to foreigners and the dispossessed. It is because we confess this same faith that we are able to find words to speak out. The theme of Day 5 (2 Cor. 4:14) encourages Christians to reflect on the necessity to speak out courageously against the desperate situations of the homeless, the refugee, the immigrant, the street person, migrant populations and indeed, all who are in distress. We believe in the renewing power of God in Jesus Christ and so together we speak out with courage against all that destroys the dignity of the human person.

It is the mission of the church in society to be a sign of God’s grace. The values of this passing world are not necessarily those of the kingdom of the blessed. Jesus has entrusted to each Christian and the churches together, the mission of living out the integrity of the kingdom of God as a new force, renewing human society. The justification that we have been freely given through God’s grace obliges us to live as justified in the world (Day 6 – 2 Cor. 4:15).

In spite of many difficulties and persecutions, we must not lose heart. Saint Paul encourages us to remain strong because we not only bear the death of Christ in our body but also his life. The church is called to show forth the victory of Christ over death by being a community of courage. The perseverance of those seeking Christian unity is an important reality for the faint hearted and those tempted to give up the struggle, for it illustrates the strength of God's grace in spite of many difficulties. Jesus prayed for the unity of all those who bear his name precisely so that the world might come to believe. In spite of obstacles on the path to Christian unity, in the face of adversity the churches must act together with courage and perseverance to offer this divided world a paradigm of unity and to be a sign of the power of the death of Christ over all the forces of sin and darkness (Day 7 – 2 Cor. 4:16).

On Day 8, we reflect on how the suffering that we endure prepares us for “glory beyond all measure” (2 Cor. 4:17). This is not a utopian vision of how all human struggle will end since Paul calls us to reflect on how, if we are united by faith to the sufferings of Christ, we will be transformed by the grace of his resurrection. We bear both his suffering and resurrection in our body. This is why Paul exhorts us to look beyond what we see with mortal eyes to the eternal truth that is revealed in the glory of Christ. The unity of all those who believe in Christ is made visible when Christians truly take up their task in the world through which they are passing.

Each of the eight days proposes a prayer for the unity of all those who believe in Christ. The value of prayer for unity cannot be stressed enough since it is the place where all Christians, through the power of the Holy Spirit, humbly recognize that the unity that God wills for the church is itself a gift. Let us then pray continually that we may be ready to receive this gift and carry it in the clay jar of our human frailty.