

Water is Sacred – Water is Life

by Sister Confianza del Señor

Sister Alegría and I have lived in Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, since 2006. We have experienced many of the challenges faced by poor people in undeveloped countries, including access to water.

When Sister Alegría bought the rural property that would become home to Amigas del Señor Methodist-Quaker Monastery, she noticed that the creek that runs along the eastern border was on the other side of the fence. “Don’t worry about that,” said the man who sold it to her. “Water is sacred. No one will stop you from accessing it.” *Gracias a Dios*, this has been exactly our experience during our 13 years here.

At that time, the stream water was considered good to drink, but since then, cattle ranching has spread in our area, and now all the streams and rivers are contaminated with giardia. Many locals are resistant to this microbe, but plenty of us get diarrhea and intestinal discomfort when we get infested by drinking bad water. Pasteurizing the water by heating it to 170°F kills giardia and bacteria, so when Sister Alegría and I have to drink creek water or dirty rainwater, we pasteurize it. Most of our neighbors don’t bother.

In times past, children died from intestinal maladies, but the public health department has done a lot to improve the situation. There are treatments for giardia, amoebas, and intestinal worm-like parasites available at the public health clinic, where Sister Alegría and I volunteer once a week, and one staff member’s job (among other things) is to monitor water quality. Better to not get sick in the first place!

International nonprofits like Water Missions and CARE have installed water systems in many towns and villages in Honduras, which are then maintained by local government. Sometimes these are communal wells, sometimes water piped from rivers in the mountains. Unfortunately, these sources are inconsistently potable. An adjunct facility has sometimes been added, which provides chlorinated water at a single-point location. The town of Limón (pop. 4,000) and the village of La Fortuna, a few miles inland from the Monastery (pop. 300) have purifying stations set up at the school, where anyone can go to fill containers and take the potable water to their houses. Wealthier citizens buy purified water, which has become quite an industry. There are several regional companies that provide water in Culligan-style five-gallon containers. These companies, along with Coke and Pepsi, also provide water in 500 ml plastic bags, which most of us buy to drink when we are out.

Amigas del Señor Monastery is situated on a hilltop a 10-minute hike from the stream. It would have required a very large motor to pump it water up to the house, and our monastic vow of poverty precludes such a material investment (read: thief target). Instead, we had an 800-gallon tank built to collect rainwater from the roof. It cost as much as all the other buildings put together, but it couldn’t walk away like a motor. Though our home and daily life is much like our *campesino* neighbors, none of them have such an installation. One neighbor dug a well at a natural spring. A caretaker family has 50-gallon barrels provided by the owner to catch rainwater. All of us have access to a creek, but none of us has in-home plumbing.

That tank got us through the two-month-long dry season for many years, until fire damage and age combined to make it drip profusely and empty in two to four weeks for the last couple of years. Sister Alegría and I learned early on that for the tank water to last the dry season, we needed to go to the stream to do our laundry four times a week. We also bathe while there, enjoying the refreshment under the canopy of the rain forest, which still exists in patches along streams and some hillsides.

I am grateful to live in the humid tropics where we receive hundreds of centimeters of rain each year. I once read about a Peace Corps volunteer in a dry part of Africa who had only a liter of water in which to bathe. On rare occasions, I have to limit the water that much, but I do so knowing that water will soon be available. When we bathe in a tub at the house, I often use up to a gallon of water. At the stream, there is no limit, and I plunge right in.

The rainy season on the north coast of Honduras is from November to January. Our experience is that November usually has many rainy days and at least one big storm. That's when we do our yearly cleaning of the tank. December has more sunny days, and January again has a week or two of heavy rain. We have plentiful water until March, when the dry season begins to set in.

Due to the leakage in the concrete tank, in March, 2018, we bought a 290-gallon plastic water tank and had it placed at the other end of the house to catch the rain that falls from the gutter there. This reserve has gotten us through the 2018 dry spells so that we never had to carry water up from the stream—a good thing, since Sister Alegría was physically weak much of the year, and not able to go to the stream even when I sometimes had to go to wash clothes.

2018 was a year of major climate chaos. The usual dry season in April and May was less severe. In October (which always has variable weather) we had a major storm that filled the tanks in a day and caused significant flooding in parts of the country. Then in November, it didn't rain at all. By the end of the month, we were going to the stream together to wash laundry. We were grateful for a couple of rainstorms in December that refilled the tanks.

Water is life. It sustains our bodies, nourishes crops, and allows us to wash and cook. In this little corner of the world, Sister Alegría and I have experienced divine provision when our man-made reserves haven't sufficed. Whether in the form of rain, or a stream that never runs dry, we have been blessed to always have a source for water. We recognize that outside help allows us and our neighbors access the water we need, be that collection barrels and tanks, piped-in water, wells, or purification stations.

What are the sources of your water for drinking, household use, and irrigation? In what ways do you help conserve water and protect its natural source? How do you help those who don't have access to clean water? May the Light show us the way we can live to best use and share the resources around us.

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