

## Water: A View from the Margins

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***“Send your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back”***  
**(Ecclesiastes 11:1).**

### Opening Prayer

*Jesus, you are the Source of Living Water, our Friend, and our Salvation. We pray for all those who do not have clean water to drink. Purify, protect, and multiply their sources of water that they may – without fear of harming themselves or their children – find nourishment. Amen.*

**Adapted from “Prayer of the Day: Clean Water” by the Web Editors of Sojourners.**

Our diocese is located in the arid Chaco region of northern Argentina, which is mostly covered by dry tropical forests. The majority of the 150 widely dispersed congregations are made up of indigenous hunter-gatherer peoples. The rest are campesinos, known locally as *criollos*. Sitting with some *criollos* in a community deep in the forest, I asked how many wells they had managed to drill as a result of a recent water project.

*“I have no idea,”* said one man. *“We learnt to make wells,”* he continued. *“Some taught others, and one or two went on to drill wells in other communities, for a fee. So we have no real idea how many wells have been drilled.”*

I found this encouraging, as it is not often that you come across such successful development projects in this region. My enthusiasm dampened when I learned that the water from most of the wells is either salty or biologically unfit for human consumption. There is “sweet water” in the Chaco, but this can only be accessed through the deep-bore holes of commercial drilling, which these poor families cannot possibly afford. The poor in the Chaco have to make do with whatever water they can gain access to, even if it is of marginal quality. They collect rain water and store it in discarded plastic bottles for drinking. They use the salty water from their wells for the rest of their needs, especially for their cattle and goats when there is none left in the rain-fed lagoons. As a last resort, they may buy water from people with deep wells.

In the eyes of the poor, marginal water is better than nothing. In a manner of speaking, they make do with the bread-crumbs that fall from the table, but like millions of others around the globe, they often pay with their health.

Joseph Treaster, writing in the *Harvard Review of Latin America* (Winter, 2013), put it in a nutshell: *“People suffering from water-borne diseases take up about half of all the hospital beds in the world. And each year the diseases carried in water kill nearly two million people, mostly children under five years of age.”* I doubt that people with clean, drinkable water realize what the situation is really like for those who don’t.

Tragically, the situation for these campesinos here in northern Argentina, like that of millions of poor around the world, will probably worsen. Rainfall has become erratic. Deforestation by commercial farmers leads to the salinization of ground water. These changes in land-cover have immediate consequences. They mean that rain does not collect in the lagoons that the campesinos use for their animals. And what little surface water remains is being contaminated with agrochemicals.

As I drove home along dry dusty roads, reflecting on what I had heard, two thoughts struck me. The first was the fact that a project that had failed to deliver clean water could, due to their dire circumstances, still be put to good use by these campesinos. Second, a long-term and sustainable solution to their problem is unlikely to be found in shallow wells. But, a political process aimed at ensuring the ecological integrity of the Chacos’ landscape could be the answer they need.

I wondered, as I sometimes do, whether the Church can realistically respond to this type of challenge – dire and urgent as it is. The writer of Ecclesiastes encourages us to push forward in doing what we can, but the growing complexity of the problem demands that we must ensure that the “bread” we send is appropriate to the needs.

### Questions for Reflection

Do you know where the water that you use comes from? Do you know where your waste water goes? If you were to reduce your consumption of clean water, who might benefit from your actions? What might Ecclesiastes 11:1 mean with regard to helping people who do not have access to clean drinking water?

### Recommended Resources

To learn about the “hidden water” we use every day, without realizing it, see <http://environment.nationalgeographic.com/environment/freshwater/embedded-water/>

The Water Footprint Network helps us become aware of water usage in everyday consumption, and it provides a good starting point for sharing clean fresh water in order to sustain communities across the world and all God’s creation.