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Carlos Chagas Filho, Scientist and Citizen

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*Speech made on the occasion of the ecumenical celebration in honor of Carlos Chagas Filho,
Health Sciences Centre, UFRJ, March 16, 2000.***

How happy was the idea of having this memorial! It would be hardly possible to imagine an event that might illustrate so well some of the very best qualities of he who was, as I always say, teacher, colleague and friend, Carlos Chagas Filho. An ecumenical celebration has, as its most significant meaning, the praise of togetherness, and it is in the analysis of togetherness, in the investigation of some of its rules, that one may find the characteristics that may be taken as symbols of Chagas's personality.

Togetherness means, above all, the acceptance of another. To begin with, that other one who lives within ourselves. One of Chagas's prime gifts was that of accepting his own inner contradictions, which he carried to the moment of his death. We may recall, for instance, what he said in the speech he wrote but could not voice for the last public occasion which he attended, the awarding of the FAPERJ prize, on December 21, 1999, questioning his very life up to that moment: *I do not consider myself, not even at this moment, when I receive this reward which is given me, a fully realized individual, which explains the title of my book of memoirs, An Apprentice of Science...*, or when he added: *Would it not have been better if I had occupied myself with the poor I met*

along my way, with the unquiet souls that crossed my life, with those I saw in penury at Lassance, or the ones I faced in the emergency ward at Oswaldo Cruz Hospital, now Evandro Chagas Hospital? Carlos Chagas Filho shows us, in these words, that we are forever, in the depths of our consciousness, questioning the whole trail of our lives, no matter how successful we may have been.

Togetherness means, further, the acceptance of another who lives outside us, in our fellowmen; it means respect for those who do not agree with us, even when such divergence may seem unpleasant or unsatisfactory to us; to know how to admit that the other may be more correct than we are. In the practice of science this is an inestimable virtue, a source of enrichment and humility vis-à-vis natural phenomena. How often did we not hear Chagas admit some mistake in the search of the way to revelation, and then promptly start his work all over again.

Togetherness means, besides accepting, loving all others. What harder test can there be for love than daily coexistence, from the most insignificant and trivial situations to extreme anguish or joy? Chagas, in his union with D. Anah, taught us that coexistence may be a source of a constant renovation of enchantment; that is what he meant, when he used to tell us that he had "four only daughters". What tenderness

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**English version by Barbara Heliodora

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and delicacy lies in this togetherness...

Togetherness is also to exalt the other, to look for the best in all others, and Chagas, again, distinguished himself in this field. Having spent practically all my adult life at his side, I believe that the success in the building of a scientific patrimony, which is his legacy, is due, to a significant extent, to his capacity of drawing out what is best and most beautiful that could be found in all others. He demanded that our training should be the best possible, and with that in mind he made us – yes, that is the right word – made us go abroad for graduate work, in centers selected for their high caliber of work. For this concern, also, he has been universally praised; and he created a most pleasurable working ambience, with all of us wanting ever to be around him, as on those Saturday mornings when we gathered in the Biofísica laboratory, in the old Praia Vermelha building, just for the pleasure of enjoying his conversation.

Togetherness means tolerance. And Chagas had developed his capacity for tolerance to such an extent that on several occasions he stated that he had heard complaints from some friends that he seemed to favour more those who were against him than those who argued on his side. Without ever allowing himself to judge in a hurry, he used to react to all attacks with some loving gesture.

Togetherness is to acknowledge the limitations of the human condition. It was he who revealed to us the sad existence of insoluble problems, of conflicts without any possible solution, in our relationships with others.

Togetherness, then, is to live life to the brim: to accept fully, to love fully, to exalt fully, to be fully tolerant towards all others. This is the memory I have of Chagas, and the greatest lesson he ever taught us: togetherness is a full life, and fully he lived it.

I should like to take up again the inner contradictions to which I referred above: more precisely, in what they were relevant to his activity as a scien-

tist. Openly and proudly religious, Chagas carried out his research as a typical scientist, obeying at all times the objectivity imposed by scientific knowledge. This raised once more the contradiction that was most notably observed in the final years of the 19th century, with a real “war” between science and theology. To us, at the Biofísica lab, the best suggestion seems to be that perhaps in Chagas there lived together forces equal to those of T.H. Huxley and bishop Samuel Wilberforce. We were totally mistaken as the rigid fixing of such alternatives pulling in opposite direction may also still be a misconception. Stephen Jay Gould stated in a recent work: *“For reasons that seem to transcend cultural peculiarities, and may lie deep within the architecture of the human mind, we construct our descriptive taxonomies and tell our explanatory stories as dichotomies, or contrasts between inherently distinct and logically opposite alternatives”*. He goes on to say that the understanding of the real world outside our social construct is not inevitable. I want to declare that Chagas conducted all of his life, in both science and religion, in a way similar to that. I have a personal statement to make on the subject.

Many, many times, in our conversations, he expressed his permanent concern with the cohabitation, in his mind, of the immanent and the transcendent. As was his way, he acted on that concept, as soon as opportunity obtained, in the very seat of his Church, where he enjoyed the personal trust of the Pope. He gathered scientists, cultural thinkers, theologians, various authorities, and debated the question, with open heart and mind. He faced, for it, hostilities from both sides, but he carried out his project, and managed to shorten distances, to bring extremes a little nearer, to level obstacles between religion and science. And as the scientist of today says, he showed that *“...the same Rome shines with different lights tuned to the form and direction of the particular path that people actually construct for their excursion to the eternal city of natural knowledge”*.