

“Creating a Climate of Reconciliation in Columbia: Theological Contributions”

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I did not come to Columbia to teach about theology. I came to learn from the experiences of the church in Columbia, with the hope that it would make me a better theologian. I certainly cannot bring any “answers” from outside your context. But what I have seen and heard in Columbia has given me more insight into our common Christian faith, and more understanding of its theological expressions. The Columbian experience also forces me to realize that it is not enough for theologians to hold up the consoling and beautiful contributions of Christian faith. We must also confront the dark side of human experience and the difficult questions that suffering and evil pose for the credibility of faith. Columbia had been suffering the effects of conflict for over forty years, and even today, the people the church serves continue to be victims of violence and poverty. But the church in Columbia also renews my confidence that it is possible to confront suffering and conflict honestly and still maintain hope for the future. I trust my reflections can become part of our dialogue about theology and peacebuilding. I invite your reactions and criticisms.

There are at least three theological claims that have become questions in Columbia and in other places of suffering and struggle: Creation, Jesus Christ, and Church. Creation, Christ and Church are central to our faith. But what do they mean today, especially in Columbia? I am going to show what these claims have meant

traditionally, how they have become problematic today, and how they can be reclaimed for the present and future of reconciliation and peacebuilding.

Creation. We affirm the goodness of God and all that God our Creator has made. “God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them....” (Gen 1:27). Made in the image of God, humans are meant to live in harmony with one another and the rest of creation. The second creation story in Genesis 2 tells us that humans are “one flesh,” as is said of the first man and woman (Gen 2: 24). Since these two were the only two human beings in existence at the time, I think we can apply the phrase “one flesh” to human beings in general: each is created to be “one flesh” with his or her fellow human beings. This does not apply to sexual union only, but to all forms of human relationship and society. If this is true, then justice, peace and the common good are inseparable. We are created and called to a common life in justice and peace. Justice and peace are our deepest human nature, our nature as “one flesh” with one another.

Some of us saw a concrete example of peacebuilding based on a theology and politics of creation in Ciudad Bolivar. We met with representatives of Ficonpaz, who told us about their work with nonviolence groups, and with youth. Ficonpaz promotes the truth that violence contradicts our true human nature. Human nature demands respect for human rights. Peace can only be built on justice, on the common good, and on human dignity. A peaceful, just, and dignified life for all in community is demanded by our human nature as created by God.

Unfortunately, human experience calls this idea of a human nature created for harmonious co-existence into question. Some would even say the ideal of human society as a good and harmonious creation of God—an idea shared by Jews, Christians and

Muslims—is naïve and ridiculous! It is hard to deny that peace and harmony often seem far away from “human nature.” Evidence against the truth of our doctrine of creation can be found throughout history and all around the world, not just in Columbia. Violence and corruption seem just as universal as cooperation and justice. In fact, human beings are often attracted to domination and violence; they are skillful at lies. They commit violence and abuse toward their closest family members, toward neighbors, and toward fellow human beings. This has happened for the whole history of the world, just as it is happening now—in Columbia, in Sudan, in Iraq, in Burma, and in countless other places.

Does this mean that the biblical story of creation is just a pious fairy tale? As Christians (or Jews or Muslims) we must say NO. We share confidence in creation, yet we also have story of the Fall. The story of the fall of the first man and woman (Genesis 3) explains the origin of the attraction to evil in the human heart. Lies and violence may be common, even universal. But they represent our fallen nature, not our true nature. They are sinful and unacceptable to God. The doctrine of the fall is not only a doctrine about blame and guilt; more importantly, it is a call to responsibility and to work for change! This way of violence, however tempting, is not the way things are supposed to be.

We cannot “prove” the doctrine of a good creation scientifically, logically, or abstractly. But we can know and testify to its truth in practical action for peace. It is in action that restores true human nature that we glimpse the possibility of a different world—a redeemed world, and a “new creation.” Ficonpaz and many other activities of the Church in Columbia, especially groups formed in local civil society, are wonderful witnesses to the truth of the doctrine of creation. The truth of creation and the hope of

restoring its harmony are discovered in practices such as those of Ficonpaz, of Cabo a Cabo and of the Hormiguitas de la Paz in Soacha, and in the Mesa Local de Jovenes in Ciudad Bolivar. When the group I was with met with the young people of the “Mesa de Jovenes,” they spoke of humanity, human rights, and peace. They voiced a strong “!Nunca mas!” to violence! Their spirit, joy, and hope come from solidarity, and from personal and political practices that make a difference in the world of violence. We cannot just depend on “Creation” and “human harmony” as beliefs that are taught to us in Scripture. Like these young people, we must prove these beliefs are true by actions that reveal the normalization of violence as a lie. Joining in solidarity to build peace and justice gives knowledge of the good of which humans are capable. It gives birth to hope for the future of human communities.

Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the indispensable center of Christian faith, and the theologies of his identity and meaning are rich and diverse. Here I will treat only two aspects of Christian faith in Jesus Christ: his preaching of the Kingdom of God, and his death and resurrection.

Frequently Jesus Christ is portrayed as a spiritual Lord who bestows eternal life on those who believe in him. But this traditional understanding is not sufficient for a theology of reconciliation and peacebuilding. We must also ask, What is the social and political meaning of Jesus? Who is Jesus for the victims, Jesus who is against violence, Jesus who brings peace and reconciliation to people suffering in history? Listening to people working for peace within the Church in Columbia, I have heard more references to human dignity and human rights than to Jesus Christ. There are two essays on Jesus Christ in the book of papers for this conference, Creando un clima de reconciliacion:

scenarios para la verdad, la justicia y la paz (by Mons Luis Augusto Castro Quiroga and Olga Consuelo Velez Caro). Yet I have not heard much reference to Jesus Christ in Catholic civil society groups, or in conference papers.

One good reason for preferring a vocabulary of human dignity or creation to talk about Jesus Christ is that “human dignity” can bring together people of different religious faiths or no faith to work for peace together. This is valid. But there is also the more troubling possibility that we are not sure how to talk about Jesus Christ, violence and suffering—how to make Jesus Christ concretely relevant to the struggles of the poor and the victims of violence. Obviously, Jesus Christ opposes violence. But what can he do or has he done to heal the violence of this world? Jesus Christ dies on a Cross. How can this offer hope that other victims of violence can be spared their suffering?

First of all, the center of Jesus’ ministry and preaching is the coming of the Kingdom of God. Mons. Ruben Salazar Gomez referred to the nature of the Kingdom of God when he said that in Christ there is nothing that divides human beings—neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, for we are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). Many of Jesus’ teachings conveyed this point, including the parable of judgment in Matthew 25, the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10, and the double Love Commandment found in all four gospels. In theology, the ministry of the Kingdom of God is illustrated by the “option for the poor” of liberation theology and of John Paul II. The ministry of the Kingdom and the option for the poor are present in the determination of the Columbian bishops and other church workers to see the conflict in Columbia through the eyes of victims, and to empower the victims to change their situation.

The Kingdom of God is not merely an “idea” or even a “belief.” It is a way of life. The Kingdom of God is not a utopia—it is a relation to a different reality that creates new possibilities. It is both “present now” and “not yet present” until the end of time. The Kingdom of God is a good model for the way we are called to find a way of trust, truth, and reconciliation in the middle of violence, weakness, failure, fear, risk and betrayal. Mons. Hector Fabio Henao has asked us to turn to the creativity, imagination and spirituality of the Columbian people. This call was echoed in the remarks of Marie Dennis. Columbia is a “school of peace.” This is where the Kingdom of God is found. Creative, innovative, local approaches to peace embody the inbreaking Kingdom of God in a world of trouble. No one must be discouraged if their efforts are incomplete, fragmentary, contradicted. Within practices of the Kingdom of God, peacebuilders overcome divisions, and find the love of Christ and hope for the future.

Jesus did not only preach the inclusive Kingdom of God—he died on a Cross. The Cross is central to the Christian imagination and symbolism. We see it frequently in places of worship, on Christian literature, as a symbol of episcopal office, and even as jewelry. But what does it mean? How do we really understand it? At a human, historical level, Christ was killed by the Romans because he threatened social control—a very appropriate example for Columbia today!

Yet theologically and spiritually, Christians have long asked the question posed by the Gospel of Luke: “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things?” (24:26). Why did Christ have to die to save us? Could the violent death of an innocent man be the will of God? Does God the Father demand an innocent victim before he will

forgive our sins? Does this death even create a model of divine violence, and implicitly condone violence by human beings?

It is important to remember that nowhere in the New Testament is forgiveness dependent on punishment, as we see clearly in the parable of the Prodigal Son. One common reinterpretation of the Cross in contemporary theology is as God's solidarity with the victims, God's own "accompaniment" with those who suffer (Jon Sobrino, Christ the Liberator). This is a very powerful image, but it raises questions too. One question is, What about the guilty? If God is not in solidarity with the guilty, then how can the guilty be forgiven, be converted, and change? Another question is, How does God's solidarity in our suffering save us from that suffering?

The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann offers some valuable insights here (The Way of Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ for Today's World). Moltmann was drafted into Hitler's army as a teenager. He was not aware of what Hitler had done to the Jews until he was in a prisoner of war camp. The shame and despair of guilt almost overcame the young Moltmann. Finally he found hope in the cross. Moltmann realized that, on the cross, Jesus is not only a victim among the victims, he is a guilty one among the perpetrators. Though he has no sins of his own, Jesus on the cross joins all of us, wherever we suffer most. Christ as God's Son was "sent in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:5), and was even made by God "to be sin" so that we could become "the righteousness of God." "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners God died for us" (Rom 5:8). "Sinners" does not refer only to killers or direct perpetrators of crimes. It includes the middle classes and elites here in Columbia and abroad, as well

as the U.S. and other global actors, who are indifferent or even benefit from the misery in Columbia!

In Moltmann's view, Christ on the Cross is not God punishing humanity through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. The Cross is God entering into the fullness of human suffering, sorrow, desperation and despair. By sharing it, he transforms it. This is why it is important that Jesus Christ is both human and divine. As human he is like us "in all things but sin" (Chalcedon), including persecution, guilt, and forsakenness. As divine, he transforms us into something completely different. This is an effect of the incarnation—Christ's union of humanity and divinity. If we are guilty, he expiates our sin and atones for our guilt so that we as sinners have the freedom to repent and to change. He also raises up suffering victims to new life and hope. This is why we must never speak of Cross without Resurrection. The Cross is not just about suffering and death, and certainly not about punishment. The Cross already bears within it the promise of God's sustaining presence and the beginning of new life.

Church. Who or what is the Church? What is its mission? What does that mean in Columbia today? The mission of the Church is captured in 2 Cor 5:19: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation." Traditionally, Catholics have learned that the Church is a place of prayer and liturgy. "The Church" usually is thought to mean the "official" Church and its official representatives and teachers.

The Church in Columbia challenges and changes that conception. Here in Columbia, the Church includes clergy and laity, men and women, young and old. Especially impressive are the gifts of women and the growing recognition of women as

catalysts for peace. The Church is also active across all levels and sectors of society. The Church also partners for social change with local and national governments, with civil society, with international organizations, and with other religious traditions. It even enters into dialogue with perpetrators of violence and factions in the conflict.

The Church in Columbia is dynamic, active, interactive and political, without ever losing its spiritual basis or its orientation toward the Kingdom of God and salvation in Christ. On the basis of the preferential option for the poor and the victims, the Church prioritizes the need to rebuild community life now. The Church in Columbia is willing to follow Christ to the Cross in its efforts to unite victims and sinners in a new community of peace and justice. According to Robert Schreiter (Ministry of Reconciliation, 94-5), communities of reconciliation are communities of safety, of memory, and of hope. Such communities act in a transformative way, toward resurrection life. The Church never gives up hope that its efforts can make a real difference for the people of Columbia.

Many challenges confront the Church in Columbia. These challenges are extremely complicated. There is ongoing violence and threats of violence that endanger the people of Ciudad Bolivar, of Soacha, of Medellin. There are the victims of violence, whose trauma needs healing, whose losses demand reparations, and whose families need security. To build a meaningful life, they also need socioeconomic development with justice. There are perpetrators, who bear different levels of guilt, and raise problems of impunity, reparations, and reintegration. In addition to the consequences of past crimes, there is the even more important need for conversion away from present violence and the creation of a new national narrative and identity of mutual accountability and human rights.

The Church is addressing these challenges in several ways and on different levels. The first task undertaken by the Columbian Church is to create a culture of nonviolence, starting with youth, families, and local communities. Here I must mention the reality of domestic violence, a topic familiar to women working or living in local communities, especially communities under stress, such as conditions of displacement and migration. Violence from illegally armed groups is always a threat and a possibility for many of these people. But domestic violence and sex abuse are daily realities, part of the everyday world of danger and suffering to which the poorest of the poor—women and children—are subjected. The Catholic bishops and pastoral workers must address this prevalent problem in a very explicit and vehement way, if they are sincere about looking at life through the true reality of the victims.

Creating a culture of nonviolence also requires work for justice and reconciliation at the local level, where community members who have been or are allied with different groups must learn to live together in peace. A difficult problem is how to set priorities among justice, peace, and reconciliation. Another is how to attain security and reconstitute a community when some who have committed violence have not publicly repented, and where violence is still a danger. According to Robert Schreiter, the most important part of reconciliation is restoring the humanity of the victim—making sure he or she is recognized as a person with dignity and rights who is protected from further danger (Ministry of Reconciliation, 14-15). This requires creative approaches in the difficult circumstances of many communities in Columbia. We have seen how the church and its organizations at the grassroots level are using innovative liturgies,

ceremonies of commemoration, and processes of group support and of dialogue to build humane communities.

Perhaps we can think of the goal of such processes as “restorative justice.” The victims can never go back to the way life was “before.” And punishment of perpetrators is not an end in itself. It is important to overcome the ethos of impunity primarily to ensure respect for the equal dignity of all, and to assure victims and potential victims that violence is not acceptable. Moreover, those who are guilty of violence will not have self-respect or feel worthy of inclusion until some compensation has been made. Justice will be restored in communities when all are able to come together with a new sense of shared identity and purpose, to move forward with a sense of safety and of new possibilities for a better future.

A second and related mission of the Church is to improve the concrete living conditions and quality of life among poor and displaced persons. Again if we look at the ordinary reality of the victims, we must ask, Why are local conditions of existence often so deplorable, for example in Soacha and Ciudad Bolivar? Land ownership, utilities, sanitation, education, employment, and security are all lacking in such places. Reparations for the victims is a long-term goal for which the Church is a strong advocate. Yet extensive reparations that depend on seizing assets of perpetrators or enacting new taxes may be difficult to negotiate and obtain, they will require further changes in the law, and they may not come for many years. Can the Church and its representatives speak out now to demand immediate improvement of basic conditions of life in deprived communities? Women and local groups, such as Cabo a Cabo in Soacha, are already working for more and better options, services, and opportunities for poor communities.

Economic opportunity is key. According to Pope Paul VI, “development is the new name for peace” (Populorum progressio). Development of security, economic enterprise, and political empowerment are fundamental conditions of peace for the victims that could be acted upon in the short term.

A third mode of engagement by the Church is negotiation at the national level, with representatives of both the government and of factions in conflict. Priorities are reparations and nonimpunity, as expressed by general social consensus and the law. A major impediment to success is, of course, the “power fragmentation” in Columbia mentioned by Hector Fabio. It is doubtful that even the president of Columbia or the national government now has the power to end conflict decisively and bring justice for all. The adversaries of the government have a stake in maintaining their power and territories. They also have access to virtually limitless funds supplied by the drug trade, even re-arming demobilized paramilitaries who lack alternative employment. Despite these factors, the Church insists that there must be a public conversation on matters such as land reform, taxes and donations to fund reparations, and strategies for making reparations to communities when it is not feasible to make reparations to individual victims from specific perpetrators.

Another needed aspect of the presence of the Church in Columbian society as a whole is evangelization of the middle class and elites, both nationally and globally. Justice for victims will be impossible if indifference is widespread. Responsibility to and for the victims is the duty of the whole Church, not just of those immediately involved in the affected communities. I know from experience in the U.S. that it is not easy to bring the needs of the poor to the attention of the privileged. Those who are comfortable are

typically complacent. This includes bishops, priests, religious, and pastoral workers, as well as those to whom they minister. So we all have much work to do to change attitudes, and make reconciliation with justice a priority of the whole Church.

A major challenge in making the claims of faith and theology operative at the concrete level is that it is often not possible to realize values such as atonement, forgiveness, conversion, justice, restitution, and restoration all at once and at the same time. As I stated before, our efforts to restore the created harmony of life, to live in the fullness of God's Kingdom, and to be a genuine community of resurrection and reconciliation, are always fragmentary and partial. They often lead to the Cross. Our guiding vision must be one of love, and our commitment must be nourished by a hope that grows out of solidarity and shared action.