

LESSONS LEARNED IN PEACEBUILDING IN COLOMBIA

Reflections from the Perspective of the Social Ministry / Caritas
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Mons. Hector Fabio Henao Gaviria
Director SNPS / Caritas of Colombia

Reflecting on the lessons we have learned in the Catholic Church, the Episcopal Conference and within our Social Ministry over the years is not an easy task. We have to humbly say that we are still learning and that the creativity and imagination within our community are key elements on this long road. There is much we can learn from other countries who have experiences with peace and post-conflict processes. That is the importance of this International Conference and the presence of delegates from Asia, Africa and other countries in the Americas. We thank them for their participation.

Today we can take a look at concentric focal points that help us understand the process, the lessons and the progress achieved. We begin with ourselves in the reflection and action of the Episcopate, a perspective that is eminently evangelical and profoundly pastoral. The recognition of this perspective helps us understand the range and the dimensions of proposed contributions.

I invite you to begin with a look at a point I consider central to the reflection of the Episcopate in its moral and ethical position derived from a profound faith in Jesus Christ. "Our faith in Lord Jesus Christ motivates us to reach all Colombians with a message of hope: The Merciful Father does not want his children to live as slaves with their dignity trod upon, their lives threatened and their rights ignored. Because we believe in God and, at the same time, know all the possibilities for growth and greatness within our brothers and sisters, we reject the wounding of justice, truth and life."¹ From this central point, we can visualize and understand other levels and focal points of commitment of our church to justice, truth, reparation and reconciliation.

COLOMBIA: SCHOOL FOR PEACE

"The desire for peace is deeply rooted and alive in the Colombian people and is expressed in many ways."² With these words, the Episcopate defined in 1984 what peace means to the Colombian people: it is a deeply rooted and active desire. Peace is certainly a difficult challenge, but in the daily life of community it is pursued vehemently. Peace has been a central aspiration throughout recent decades. There have been numerous peace processes, some successful and others failures. Disarmament processes have allowed many combatants to reintegrate into society, but a significant sector has rearmed. In government circles, in community proposals and in policies developed over the last few years, we find a hidden treasure of proposals and experiences around peace. In the geography of peace, there are peaks of community experiences in which many counties are centers of initiatives that spring from the creativity within the people. It is

¹ *May Hope be Reborn*. Message of the LXVII Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate, July 9, 1999.

² Message of the Permanent Committee of the Episcopate at this moment, May 3, 1984.

certain that this is a creative dynamic born of an active desire, not just a concept or some distant idea about human harmony.

Colombia is a large school, constantly learning from experiences and peace proposals that are born from the base. We have seen the flowering of movements and organizations with a clear local and regional commitment, making our country a true school of peace. Colombia is one of the few countries in the world with a national peace prize that awards community efforts through an annual recognition of persons and institutions that have contributed significantly to local and regional harmony. The lesson imparted by all these processes is that the country needs to recognize the richness of these proposals, overcome the erratic and scattered policies found on many levels and convert these proposals into real roads to peace.

The Episcopate has stated that this desire is deeply rooted in the aspirations of Colombians, and that much effort has been dedicated and enormous sacrifices made in the search for peace. There is a long list of community leaders, pastoral workers, human rights defenders, and men and women who have given their lives as they traveled together this path to peace. They have inspired, on all levels, positions taken by the Episcopate, pastoral plans, actions and commitments of the Church and have served as a rich source of inspiration. We must underscore that the Pontifical and Latin American Magisterio, as well as the lessons of other Churches on the continent, have served as points of reference and illumination that have provided a great richness.

Those who know about local and regional peace experiences, which are the fruit of great imagination, may ask: Why have we had a conflict that has lasted for decades? How do you explain the fact that no road has been found toward a definite solution? How do we maintain a perspective that sustains the hopeful actions that support us on the road to peace and block the defeatism of easy solutions?

TESTIMONIES OF HOPE IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT

We should not lose sight, therefore, that Colombia, in addition to its enormous challenges, harbors clear signs of hope which should not be ignored as we consider the lessons offered through these efforts to achieve peace.

The consistent lesson learned is to look at history through hopeful eyes. In 2005, the Episcopal Conference combined the stages of learning this lesson in a book titled, *Witnesses of Hope*. This book summarizes a great number of the lessons we learned on the road to peace and invites us to read this history in the light of Revelation and to see the signs of the time: “The idea is to recognize that historical events, in addition to presenting the meaning of humanity, also reveal divine meaning, which is to say that God is manifest in all that exists. It is He, in His wisdom and infinite love, who directs history and whose full manifestations in the person and concrete history of Jesus of Nazareth. (Hebrews 1:1)

The Episcopal Conference has recently found motivation for hope in our country: “Reflecting from within a Colombia that has shown positive steps on the road to peace, that has objective reasons for hope but is longing for peace, we Bishops join our voices in one cry: Reconciliation!, with God, with ourselves, with others and with creation.”³

³ The commitment of the Church in the FACE of challenges of the national reality. Communication of the LXXXII Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate, February 9, 2007.

“To discover the theological meaning of historical human events means we recognize that God has directed our history in the past and is also acting in current events, as painful as they may be, and is creating a future that we can view optimistically, because the God in whom we believe is a God of hope.”⁴

QUESTIONS WITHIN THE LESSONS OF PEACEBUILDING

Faced with the complexity of conflict, an initial question worth asking is how to determine the moment in which a peacebuilding effort should begin. The question is, should we wait until a cease fire is declared or the end of armed conflict to begin the work of reconstructing the social fabric and building peace? The Catholic Church in Colombia has decided to begin the task of strengthening all peacebuilding initiatives before a cease fire is declared between insurgent movements and the Colombian State. It could appear contradictory to talk about peacebuilding while armed conflict continues or even worsens. The lesson learned is that the work of peacebuilding has served as a tool for preventing the worsening of current confrontations and the development of new conflicts. Peacebuilding has an effect on future processes of reconciliation but, at the same time, has an effect on prevention. The Episcopal Conference publication titled, “Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict,” published in 1998⁵, clearly states this option: “We promise to support the efforts and initiatives begun to overcome the causes of armed conflict and to actively collaborate in the reconstruction of the social fabric, conditions needed for an authentic peace.”⁶

Along with this question, another one arises concerning pastoral intervention in such complex situations and the need to determine the position of a truly pastoral intervention. How do we offer a position that is believable, that offers guarantees and confidentiality to all parties, especially the victims, and that, at the same time, maintains the character and the identity of a pastoral mission? On this issue, the Colombian Episcopate points to autonomy as the governing principal: “We reaffirm our independence and autonomy as Pastors to the People of God to announce the Gospel and denounce all that oppose His Kingdom and His justice. We will not allow conflicting groups to force any of us – bishops, priests, men or women religious or pastoral workers – align with any one group.”⁷

The church has chosen the option of autonomy, which does not mean the same as neutrality. We choose to support affected communities, the civilian population and, especially, the victims. It is an option that provides us an independent space to accomplish the task of promoting the search for peace and to negotiate from different angles. But, most of all, this autonomy creates a position of relationship to and accompaniment of initiatives that arise from the local level, from community proposals.

LESSONS WITHIN A COMPLEX REALITY

⁴ Testimonies of Hope. LXXIX Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate, July 4-8, 2005.

⁵ Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia. Final declaration of the General Meeting of Bishops. Bogotá, March 9-13, 1998.

⁶ Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia. May 13, 1998.

⁷ Idem.

Painfully, it has to be said that Colombia is best known for its difficulties and conflicts than for its great efforts and opportunities for building peace. To get close to Colombia is to come into contact with a complex reality, of multiple conflicts and a great diversity of proposals for building peace. However, little is known about the imagination for peace that exists in Colombia. We tend to get trapped by the complexity of the conflict, and sometimes this prevents us from marveling at the amazing creativity of peace-building.

It is not unusual that reflections on peace in Colombia begin with the observation that there is an historical absence of government institutions in much of the national territory. This absence brings into question its legitimacy, highlights the complexity of the reality, opens the door to the presence of illegal powers and creates many situations that intertwine within the bigger conflict.

“We are aware of the crisis concerning peace in which our country is living. The wounds to peace are not just those that result from the armed confrontation. A global vision of the problem should also include drug trafficking, arms trafficking, corruption, impoverishment and exclusion, the paramilitary and autodefense groups and, above all, the open violation of Human Rights and the destruction of valuable natural resources.”⁸

The careful identification of the interrelationship of these situations which, at first glance, appear to be dispersed and disconnected, leads us to review the structural roots of the violence, with its components of social, economic and political exclusion. All of these roots play an important role, not just in the analysis of the complexity of the problem but in the proposal for solutions that are equally complex.

The Colombian Church is aware of the complexity of the challenges we face. The energy and time dedicated to the follow-up and study of the national reality has reached the point where we now enjoy a wide range of reflections and approaches using the methodology of seeing, acting and being as well as lessons learned. The first lesson learned is that of focusing on hope as the key. It could be said that another important lesson has been to learn to analyze and take a position on a complex conflict, with its challenges and darkness, but also recognize its light and reasons for hope. There is the temptation to look at the social environment, to reduce and simplify the understanding of the Colombian situation and its causes, to try to find short term solutions. But history has shown the importance of looking at complexity with humility and with no pretensions of providing immediate solutions, to see conflicts as opportunities and challenges for a population and to see that community processes, although slow, produce long term impacts on complex conflicts. The contradiction between the short and long term, between the urgencies and the grand ideals are mediated by local processes of peacebuilding.

The Episcopal Conference has created various offices and levels of intervention that focus its contributions on a vision of building long term peace, even in the presence of the many conflicts that the country faces.

⁸ Our Contribution to a New Colombia. Final communication of the Bishops who participated in the Seminar-Workshop on the Colombian problem. November 16, 2000.

ETHICS AND CONFLICT: A CENTRAL LESSON

“Our country appears, in many ways, like a country where lies, injustice and corruption reign.”⁹ Faced with this panorama, described in 1999, the Episcopate continued to state that “Such a situation can produce feelings of pessimism and distrust that do not help to renew the country.” This reflection, made in a document titled, “Toward a Colombian Moral Health,” reminds us of the call that the Episcopal Conference made repeatedly in response to the statement that Colombia is a country that is morally sick.

Proof that the country has a fundamental ethics problem based on indifference, lies, multiple forms of violence and societal decomposition that leads to an acceptance of injustice and corruption, has permitted the Episcopal Conference to approach the most profound questions about our reality.

Answering these questions involves reflecting on the absence of ethical decisions and convictions that give us a normative framework fully shared by all. The absence, in many regions and in a significant proportion of the population, of an ethical framework of shared convictions, combined with the intent of groups living outside the margins of the law to create their own value references or anti-values, can help us understand the difficulty of the crisis in Colombia. For decades, there existed legal institutional norms based on what is licit, that existed by custom and that were accepted by persons from all social sectors. Unfortunately, what has happened is what some call, a “culture of illegality, of illegitimacy,” that has created its own norms and that has been accepted by a large sector of the population. All of this has led to very grave social consequences and a fragmentation of power, with historic negative impact throughout the country.

The multiple causes of the Colombian conflict and its complexity have an ethics factor that cannot be ignored. The Colombian situation contains many ethical paradoxes. From that, lessons can be drawn that the country needs to imagine new forms of co-existence and solidarity and, perhaps new social pacts given the ruptures and conflicts between economic activity and ethics, between political activities and ethical responsibility to the nation, between justice and moral responsibility, between the collective and individual ethics, between the public and private, between the life of a citizen and moral consciousness. Recent events in the history of Colombia, and steps taken toward knowing the truth of atrocities committed during the conflict, show the complexity of this social and ethical crisis and the depth of the gap that has opened between daily life and ethical principles. The seriousness of this crisis of ethics is much greater than the economic damage caused by the conflict.

This ethics problem has distorted reality and the processes and attempts to achieve peace. It has not permitted the creation of points of reference that allow the establishment of honesty, truth, integrity and respect for life as the nucleus for building peace. The Episcopate identifies in its documents the many structural and contextual causes of the violence and the Colombian conflict, but it is important to remember that the crisis in morality and ethics is one of the elements it has stressed the most.

⁹ “For the Moral Health of Colombians.” Final message of the LXIV Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate. July 12, 1997.

In February of this year, the Assembly of the Episcopal Conference noted that institutions in the country “show signs of a serious crisis,” precisely because of the scandals related to unethical acts by public servants and the independence of illegal groups.

The development of this anti-culture, in terms of ethical issues, has transformed the way Colombians have historically coexisted and has replaced the values of traditional solidarity. This analysis provides many lessons. One of the challenges created by these cultural transformations is to establish a pedagogy of reconciliation that facilitates the recovery of justice, not as an exercise of anger or hate, but as one that assumes the process of recovering memory and truth and that opens roads to reparation for the damage caused, to forgiveness, and to new forms of living together with authentic values.

BUILDING A MAP FOR AN ETHICAL JOURNEY

The Episcopal Conference is proposing the advancement of a vision of peace and a long term process that involves all of Colombian society. In 2002, the *Ten Principles for a Road to Peace* was published as a type of ethics “road map” that does not provide a formula for advancing the peace process but presents themes that the Episcopate considers key for negotiation. It is not a manual that shows what and how steps will be taken but an ethics guide to larger themes. Within national conflict, such a focus can be extremely helpful. It is like a “road map” that points to the ethical north of peace processes. It is a very valuable effort because it combines the experiences of participation in various negotiations and rapprochements, especially those that were made with the FARC during the administration of President Pastrana, and draws fundamental lessons around key themes.

In its document, the Episcopal Conference declared: “There is an urgency to build a national consensus around developing an agenda that renews Colombia. Agreements that are achieved must be approved by everyone and their fulfillment should be monitored by all.” This “road map” proposes as its central theme the idea that the country requires a consensus around essential values that permit a sustainable long term peace and that an ethic of responsibility be affirmed in which each Colombian accepts responsibility for the others and for peace in the country. Pastoral practice has shown that we are all responsible for peace, that it is not a problem for specialized groups.

This ethics guide involves everyone in the search for peace. The principle of shared responsibility has led the Episcopal Conference to seek mechanisms to involve themselves and motivate others to be involved in this peace enterprise: “We are all responsible for reconstructing Colombia. Therefore, the commitment has to be everyone’s. Those who have been elected by the people to guide the destiny of the country and have been given different responsibilities of power . . . those who have been given greater economic, cultural and technical resources have a larger field of service. Even those who have tried to change conditions in the country through violence, by using arms.”¹⁰

In the center of the “road map” is the return of dignity to victims as an act of justice. But, it also points out that society should create shared agreements that would determine the manner in which crimes will be treated, the way in which perpetrators will be held accountable, the building

¹⁰ *May Hope be Reborn*. Message of the LXVII Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate. July 8, 1999.

of a forgiveness process, the response to the clamor for reparation and the development of agreements to prevent atrocities from happening again.

From this perspective, the Episcopal Conference has reiterated calls to identify the pain and the situation of the victims and the way that suffering affects all Colombians. Promise and responsibility are not only associated with the ideal of peace. They must be directly connected with those who have suffered violations of their human rights and with those who have been victims throughout the process. We must claim the necessity for everyone to recognize that pain affects all of society and that atrocities affect each and every person. This concerns, specifically, the displaced, those who suffer violence as orphans and widows, who live in conditions of extreme poverty . . .

One challenge is to determine the difference between victim and aggressor. This United Nations definition of victim serves as a starting point for discussion: victims are “those persons who individually or collectively have suffered harm, especially an attack on their physical or mental integrity, moral suffering or material loss or a serious attack on their fundamental rights through actions or omissions that infringe on current criminal laws of the State.” In 2006, the National Secretariat of Social Ministry, together with other social organizations, participated in this discussion by insisting that, until this principle was accepted, displaced persons should be included in the universe of victims. A discussion is yet to be held on the number of victims who will be recognized and the mechanisms of reparations..

The profound lesson is that until the condition of victims is assumed as a responsibility and it is accepted that atrocities have affected every individual and society in general, peace will continue to be a challenge. That is precisely the first of the principles of the walk toward peace presented in 2002: “We recognize the inviolable value of each Colombian, their person, their life, their liberty. ‘Peace can be reduced to respect for the inviolable rights of man . . . , while war is born from violation of these rights and carries with it even more serious violations of those rights’.” Making this the first principle in some way implies that all efforts for peace lie in the conviction that human dignity is profoundly affected by armed conflict and that the humanitarian task of the Church in Colombia has a central place within its commitment to peace. A substantial step forward is made in pastoral work when we refer to the structural causes of conflict. The Church’s work cannot be and has not been only relief, but a response to the root causes of the situation in which we live and the events that cause victims’ pain. It has been a very important lesson to learn not to ignore the distant roots of this conflict and the humanitarian situation so that we can work in a way that prevents the return of these causes in the future.

LESSONS FROM THE EXERCISE OF DIALOGUE AND THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH

One of the elements that has grown stronger within the Episcopate’s position is the need to assure that dialogue becomes a fundamental value within Colombian society. The rupture of dialogue among citizens is at the root of the ethics crisis in the country, from the most ordinary situations to the most complex, such as the armed conflict. “Concerning the armed conflict, we reiterate our argument: it can only be overcome through political negotiation whose fundamental core is sincere and honest dialogue by all parties in the search for a new vision for Colombia within a framework of justice and a new style of co-existence.”¹¹

¹¹ *Our Support for a New Colombia*. Final communication of Bishops who participated in the Seminar-Workshop on the Colombian problem, November 16, 2000.

The proposal is to build communication links in which different social aspirations are presented and the fundamentals of these different positions are expressed with the purpose of finding a new and shared vision within a framework of justice. The ethics crisis can be resolved through dialogue and building consensus that will help us reach new ways of living together that respond to the challenges of truth and justice without shutting ourselves off from the dimension of forgiveness.

Building consensus is a core value of ethics and produces justice. The Colombian Church, in its search for solutions to the crisis, tries to discern whether justice is found in the projects and proposals coming from within the country at this point in time. However, before we can conclude that such is the case, we must consider two ethical principles needed in order for the peace process to produce results within national life: truth and sincerity. It has been necessary to return to these two values because negotiation is not possible without setting conditions that allow for positions to be believed and that give dignity to the dialogue. Undoubtedly, there must be an emphasis on the conditions for a dialogue that may lead to peace. This is based on very strong convictions that, even in the most complex situations of the nation, the road is negotiation and that it can be achieved through dialogue. However, the qualifier is that the establishment of dialogue is subject to clearly defined conditions.

“Deception is one of the causes of all conflicts and the principal obstacle to any effort at political negotiation. We need to walk down the road of truth, to return dignity to the victims who are key actors of reconciliation and privileged owners of the grace of forgiveness which can, and should, come only from them if we want to break the circle of anger, resentment and revenge that sometimes becomes a load impossible to bear.”¹²

The experiences of the Episcopal Conference with different types of dialogue around the country have been led to a profound study of the characteristics of truth: “Truth strengthens the means for peace. Truth is not afraid of honest agreement because it has an essential reality that allows agreement without sacrificing convictions and core values. An agenda for any peace process should set dates, times and limits to evaluate the processes and progress and to verify agreements.”¹³

The Episcopate has proposed principles that are valid for conversations or dialogues with diverse actors -- in this case with armed actors, whether they are guerillas or paramilitaries. These principles have, in addition, the quality of openly responding to the urgencies of Colombian society. Even in moments in which changes have been made in strategies for finding peace, the Episcopal Conference has emphasized the need to maintain these principles: “We agree with a change in the conception of the peace process. This change should reassess and analyze the levels of confidence, the agenda and the commitment of everyone to a resolution of the conflict. There cannot be peace without access to a sincere and continuous dialogue.”¹⁴

The Episcopal Conference recognizes that we are facing an historic construction that requires creativity and, at the same time, demands the proposal of ethical principles that are valid for

¹² Communication of the LXXXII Plenary Assembly of the Episcopate. *The Commitment of the Church in the Face of the Challenges of the National Reality*. February 9, 2007.

¹³ *Messengers of Peace and Hope*. Communication of the President of the Episcopal Conference. October 3, 2001.

¹⁴ Idem.

different types of negotiation toward an end to armed conflict. Experience over the years has demonstrated the validity of this position and the importance of continuing to work in the same communities so that they, also, demand the principles of truth and sincerity. The fact that there should be principles that apply to any peace negotiation or any effort at social dialogue does not mean that they are an unreachable ideal. The application of the process shows that the absence of truth and sincerity reopens and strengthens the circle of violence. Justice needs to be applied on the basis of truth in such a way that the doors of reparation and forgiveness are opened. When new gangs or armed groups appear, it could be the result of a failure to use these two elements as well as social indifference in the face of national realities, both of which can deepen the national crisis.

The lesson learned is that the version of those who committed atrocities is fundamental and should be expressed within the framework of truth and the veracity of their deeds. Actions need to be taken to help victims and witnesses remember, such as the data bases of Teveré and Rut of the National Secretariat of Social Ministry as well as cross checking with other information so the truth process can produce results.

JUSTICE AND REPARATION, CHALLENGES FOR OUR TIMES

Analysts such as the Chilean Roberto Carretón, Representative for Latin America and the Caribbean for the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, identify four dimensions of impunity: legal, political, moral, and historical.¹⁵

A brief look at these four dimensions can be very useful in understanding the magnitude of the subject of impunity and the challenges facing the legal and judicial systems in our country on the road to building a reconciled society that is at peace.

The InterAmerican Court has defined impunity in its judicial dimension as, “the lack of the undertaking of following the combined activities; investigation, persecution, capture, trial and sentencing of those responsible for the violation of rights protected by the Convention of the Americas.”

One of the challenges to our society is related to the manner in which justice will be established and victims’ demands for reparations guaranteed. This will pave the way for true reconciliation among Colombians.

There is a political dimension of impunity that is clearly manifested in the fact that persons linked to corruption or very serious crimes against humanity remain in positions of power. Ethically, political impunity strikes and destroys, in a painful way, the sense of public confidence in and acceptance of institutions that should enjoy the highest legitimacy. Finally, political impunity sends the wrong message to society, weakening the impact of the social sanctioning of atrocities and corrupt acts. Also, there is another dimension of justice that is needed on the road to reconciliation, one that establishes transparency in institutions and their independence from illegally armed actors at the local, national and regional levels.

There is also a moral impunity that leads to the justification of atrocities committed as the result of a conviction that such acts serve a greater cause, such as the good of the country or humanity.

¹⁵ Roberto Carretón. Speech at the International Seminal on Penal Alternatives in Peace Processes

They think that “the truth in which they believe or the pain they suffer are so absolute that they justify a response which destroys even human lives.” (John Paul II)¹⁶

The last is historical impunity that tries to perpetuate throughout time the lie used to justify acts of terror and tries to create a mentality that obliterates all that has happened.

These dimensions of impunity lead us to seriously think about the need to move forward in the building of community and going beyond individual interests in order to think about national interests. Efforts made over the past few years to rethink Colombia and to construct community help us focus on the criteria for transparency and pluralism in which words, instead of violence, create opportunities. What is needed is a new culture capable of reconstructing the social fabric and guaranteeing respect for the dignity of each human within the diversity of our country and its people.

Reconciliation leads us to think about each of the areas and sectors that can contribute and with whom we can walk down this road. An important lesson in this process is that a proposal for justice and overcoming impunity cannot ignore the rights of victims and others who have suffered in this process. This requires, in the long term, a pedagogy of forgiveness, making reconciliation socially possible.

There are still many lessons and legal and ethical challenges coming out of the process used in Colombia to clarify past events, the way progress has been made toward establishing the truth, the dimensions of punishment that have been established for those who committed atrocities and of the mechanisms used to involve society and, especially, victims of the process.

BREAKING WITH THE INSENSITIVITY OF INDIFFERENCE

There is another evil that marks our history: the indifference and lack of sensitivity to those who suffer, even in the face of the truth about atrocities committed and tolerated. Frequently, it is surprising that in Colombia serious accusations are made with no repercussions. People simply resort to lies as a means for exercising power or legitimizing forms of exclusion or social violence.

Evidence of these moral and ethical phenomena is the lack of reaction to terrible atrocities committed in the past and to the many forms of covering them up. Sometimes it surprises us that Colombian society is incapable of reacting and appears totally apathetic. “If we ignore the intimate voice of our conscious, if we silence it and kill it with the ethical disorder of our lives, we become insensitive beings, lacking even the minimal conditions for social coexistence.”¹⁷

The Episcopate’s reflection on this is closely related to its proposal to bring local communities into the debate on the type of nation we want to build as a concrete way to break with the indifference and the insensitivity that society sometimes wants to impose. Various exercises have enabled us to connect communities in all regions of the country to the discussion on “the country we want.” The proposal for dialogue among different communities, with different identities, takes us out of the situation of communities who live in isolation with one homogenous identity. The principle of community becomes the capacity to dialogue and build a “common house,”

¹⁶ John Paul II. Message for the celebration of World Peace Day. January 1, 2002.

¹⁷ *For the Moral Health of Colombians*. op. cit.

based, above all, on shared commonalities that are stronger than differences but, at the same time, not ignore the existing diverse identities.

In 2002, the Episcopal Conference organized a workshop for Bishops called, “Toward the Colombia we want,” in which they dealt with themes that had been proposed by the United Nations System in Millennium Workshops. The debate expanded throughout the region until it reached many local communities and created opportunities for them to contribute to a nationally shared model or project. This experience occurred in an historic moment, because at that same time, the national government decided to discontinue the peace process with the FARC and ended a call for unity and hope that had established bridges with communities.

On this occasion, the Episcopal Conference stated: “We want to awaken the sense of belonging for all who are part of this country. Restoring peace, achieving justice and overcoming poverty and exclusion are everyone’s responsibility. Every Colombian should contribute with ideas and actions to defending the life of each person and the goods that comprise our common heritage.”¹⁸

The lesson learned is that remembering, and the commitment to memory, enables us to build a new society. , whereas, forgetting the atrocities and injustices tends to create conditions for repeating the cycles of violence. Forgiveness does not exclude remembering, and justice demands it.

VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES: LESSONS FROM WORKING WITH VICTIMS

One of the elements that stands out most among the positions of the Episcopal conference is the fact that frequent reference is made to what local communities feel, what they teach and their many strengths in the midst of the suffering and pain they have experienced.

But there are challenges that should not be ignored. The problems of violence, lies, injustice and corruption make us think, on one hand, of the way local communities previously resolved most conflicts and the values that sustained them and, on the other hand, of the troubled current situation described as follows: “We see many ambiguities and errors in the ethical and moral behavior of our communities.” It is certain that many communities and persons lack the values needed to live in peace and to recognize the truth.

Direct contact with communities from a position of autonomy in the face of violent actions, has enabled the Episcopal Conference to declare, on numerous occasions, their support for victims. This was done in the recent reaffirmation, “We will keep the promise of providing unrestricted help to victims and will accompany them in defense of their right to reparation and memory, motivated by the righteousness of forgiveness.”¹⁹ At the same time, for the good of the country, the vulnerable communities and the victims, we appeal “to the FARC to open up opportunities for negotiation and dialogue.” And, we express our “voice of encouragement for the process that is being carried out between the National Government and the ELN and invite the demobilized members of the paramilitary to bravely and transparently continue the process that has begun, in agreement with the commitment to support truth, justice and reparation.”

¹⁸ *Call for Unity and Hope*. Message of the Colombian Episcopate in the Seminar-Workshop, “The Colombia we Want.” February 21, 2002.

¹⁹ *The Commitment of the Church in the Face of the Challenges of the National Reality*. Pronouncement of the LXXXII Plenary Assembly.

The psychosocial work of the Social Ministry in different regions of Colombia, the Reconciliation Congresses, the accompaniment of victims, and walking humbly with those who suffer, especially the displaced population, among other initiatives, are part of the peacebuilding proposal, which should include the population in the processes of seeking peace and reconciliation.

The Episcopal Conference bases its declarations on the experience of Christian communities and the many expressions of life in the regions. "We hear a cry in our communities,"²⁰ is the affirmation that synthesizes the Episcopate's attitude and explains the reason for their concern.

Experiential learning, coming from within communities, has enabled us to develop a deeper pastoral assessment and a vision of the country based on direct contact with those who suffer. Listening to communities, not just occasionally but as a permanent task, helps us to see the signs of the times and God's Plan in our complex reality.

Listening to communities, not just as a passive act but as an active learning experience and as an opportunity to explore more deeply historical lessons in situations of armed conflict, enables us to put ourselves in the situation, on the path with those who suffer and, from this encounter, contribute our perspective of the Gospels and the Kingdom that Jesus promises us. It is the ability to listen like the Good Samaritan that breaks through the indifference and gets involved in the search for peace and truth. Pastoral listening is a process of living and learning that has tremendous consequences for understanding the situation and for assuming difficult commitments in the face of such phenomena as drug trafficking, corruption and other forms of violence as well as the great inequities between social sectors. Even in circumstances in which the cruel manifestations of the armed conflict have diminished, the attitude of listening with moral responsibility has enabled us to identify new political, economic or social tensions, the desire for truth, justice and reparation, and problems of getting enough to eat and extreme poverty, which can produce new expressions of conflict.

When listening to communities, one of the main problems within Colombian reality is that so many changes have occurred in local communities in recent years due to forced displacement. Identities have changed as well as conditions within communities. But the communities that have produced the most profound lessons in the search for peace are, undoubtedly, those that are known for their cultural values, territorial identity, and historical roots and shared religious experiences.

PASTORAL ACCOMPANIMENT: THE TASK AND LESSONS LEARNED

"Testimonies of Hope." states that the challenges facing local communities are enormous. "The triad of military, political and economic power created by illegal actors and armed groups produced a new form of dominance over the population and its territory. It meant the expansion, to all areas of social life, of the influence and control that previously was only with arms. This new scheme not only affected public order but also put at risk the free exercise of democracy." (68).

²⁰ Idem.

The presence and domination of illegal forces over communities motivates deep reflection. In communities historically characterized profoundly peaceful and united, violent groups have presented radical options contrary to common beliefs. Community traditions provide no easy explanation for this situation. It is necessary to understand that anti-ethical proposals have taken root and are offered as individual options. This phenomenon is associated especially with territorial disputes by armed groups to establish and control the “triad of power.” The appearance of armed groups fighting for territorial control strikes at the central cohesive factor behind political, social and cultural life and threatens the survival of such communities.

In such cases, one of the lessons learned is that of the high value of accompaniment and pastoral presence together with communities. Many Dioceses and pastoral groups have identified with the idea of accompaniment as an active commitment. Defense of a community’s territory has provided a privileged opportunity to enhance learning about pastoral accompaniment. Accompaniment can, on one hand, identify and strengthen those community projects that work against threats of violence that could tear apart the social fabric. And, on the other hand, accompaniment is an exercise in becoming closer to the community to help validate the importance and meaning of personal and community life. Territory is enormously important to rural communities. The displacement of families, or even entire communities, from their property causes a deep wound, requiring generations to heal. Pastoral accompaniment creates the necessary spaces to prevent displacement and in some cases to restore rights. Accompaniment is an exercise in returning a sense of security to those who have been hit by multiple threats. Accompaniment helps create spaces where confidence and solidarity are made explicit. There are difficult crossings in pastoral accompaniment marked by the presence of the most defenseless and by the suffering of victims, especially women and children who represent the humanitarian imperative of the situation.

Pastoral accompaniment creates links with society and with efforts at achieving peace in moments in which community life can change radically. It represents the pedagogical value of a conscious presence in the midst of conflict and the prophetic vision. In “Testimonies of Hope,” different prophetic factors meld with expressions of rejection of and the search for alternatives to extreme poverty, violence, terrorism, kidnapping, forced displacement, drug trafficking and corruption.

In communities affected by armed conflict and threats to survival and territory, it is necessary to refer to lessons provided by the different forms of leadership. Experiences in different regions of Colombia have shown that validation of leadership by the community depends on its transparency and autonomy in the face of actors who threaten the dignity and life of communities. Again, autonomy appears to be a value that provides legitimacy in the sense that it allows the expression of and protects one’s identity. The history of confrontations over territory has provided lessons about the type of communities the country needs and about the type of leaders needed-- leaders who can go beyond their personal ambitions to become promoters of peaceful coexistence and defenders of the right not to be displaced.

Such lessons go beyond the immediate defense of communities and have opened the perspective of building long-term sustainable community projects that are recognized nationally and offer valid proposals in the face of violence and territorial disputes.

LEARNING TO IDENTIFY THE FACES

The III General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate held in Puebla, Mexico, left a valuable legacy for the treatment of social problems by reminding us that behind social problems and conflicts are faces of battered humans who often are unknown and invisible. The experience of the past years has led to the need to identify their faces and to identify them by name, to talk about their situation in public pronouncements, to make them visible and to show their needs and achievements.

Colombian Social Ministry's work in the field provides the opportunity for direct face-to-face contact. The humanitarian reports from the Sierra Nevada, from Putumayo, and from other regions of the country reveal that, although we have made tremendous progress in the capacity to communicate, we continue to forget about the victims. Therefore, we need to raise our voices so the faces and names of those who suffered do not disappear. This will be a step forward on the road to the restitution of their legitimate rights that have been unjustly denied or abused. More than a statistical problem, it is the challenge of being aware of the existence of victims and taking responsibility in the face of their pain.

The peace processes that have been carried out previously in Colombia have left lessons for the Church and for society, especially in the way responsibility is assumed for the condition of victims. These lessons have profound repercussions regarding the treatment of the individuals who committed atrocities. The Church makes its denunciation with the purpose of offering possibilities for those who committed atrocities to restore their dignity and find a dignified role in society. However, they must fulfill clear ethical conditions such as making a serious commitment to tell the whole truth about events that occurred, fulfilling the obligations that justice demands, providing reparation to victims and rehabilitating themselves in front of society so they become citizens responsible for a peaceful future for the entire nation.

PRAY FOR PEACE

One of the most profound lessons of these years comes from the force and power of praying for peace, of the value of the spiritual dimension when one faces moments of conflict and, especially, when moving toward reconciliation. The spiritual force of the Colombian people has played a decisive role in the constant decision to insist that peace is possible.

The option of contributing from a spiritual experience, practice and perspective to the process taking place within the country has been critical to the commitment found at all levels of the Colombian Church.

This spirituality unites two key principles in the communion among humans: justice and peace. Let me end with a quotation from "Testimonies of Hope": "The project of peace which motivates us should be intrinsically related to the spirit of justice, in accordance with our prophetic inspiration and, also, with the spirit of love and mercy according to the evangelical inspiration we have received from the Lord." "Peace is the fruit of justice," we say, inspired by the tradition of Israel (Isaiah 32:17). We can say the same concerning love and mercy. It is impossible to build a world of peace without having this foundation. It also is necessary to say that it is impossible to build a fraternal world without having developed peaceful attitudes ourselves."²¹

²¹ *Testimonies of Peace*. 242