

COMMENTARY on the text: *The Long Journey Back to Humanity:*
A Catholic Theology of Dialogue with Armed Actors
Mgr. Héctor Fabio Henao

Many thanks to Juan Pablo for his excellent text and for his support to the Colombian Church in its search for peace. We thank him especially for his closeness to our local communities and his dialog with them. Looking at the pyramid, I can see important elements coming from those who have suffered the effects of the conflict and face the huge challenge of rebuilding their lives and communities.

I want to discuss what Juan Pablo has called the restoration of the family, and to discuss it in the light of Pastoral Social's experience of work at the grass roots

As has been noted, peace building with communities in a situation of armed conflict involves serious challenges to the restoration of the family and the reconstruction of its way of life.

Perhaps the best example of this challenge is the displaced communities. The people most affected by displacement are generally poor rural communities, and Afro-Colombian or indigenous communities whose rights have traditionally been ignored or violated, and who have not received sufficient support and protection from the state to preserve their cultural distinctiveness. Thus the communities who suffer the most tragic effects of the armed conflict are those who have traditionally been excluded and for whom displacement is just the latest in a history of abuses.

To understand better what is meant by 'restoring the family', we can try to look at phases in pastoral work with those whom we know today as the displaced.

During the armed conflict, before displacement takes place, pastoral accompaniment starts with the symbolic universe the communities have constructed, with their myths, the stories and history, that have enabled them to take possession of their territory, define periods of community history, celebrate life, preserve the collective memory, accept death, resolve their conflicts and deal with their losses. This whole symbolic universe forms part of a spiritual tradition and can be used in pastoral work to support the construction of a collective identity, of the community 'we' through which they find their place in the world through shared references. Pastoral work is anchored in the strengthening of communities' history and way of life to ensure their stability and the bonds that unite families and individuals.

In the harshest phases, where they face confrontations, threats, attacks, communities suffer many losses: land, possessions, houses, links with neighbours, and above all there is deep damage to this symbolic universe constructed through the generations that provided solidarity, ties to a community, a territory, a history. One of the greatest threats is the disruption of the ties of neighborliness and family, social bonds, to the point of producing a crisis in all the references that create meaning. Violence is a fundamental threat to community life. Here pastoral work takes on the challenge of gaining a new perspective, working with the new identities that begin to emerge, marked by tragedy, uncertainty and in many cases hate and guilt. Pastoral work now means patient accompanying of people in their mourning and in their reinterpretation of

their own lives and that of their community, as well as protection and work to prevent forced displacement. Being present in the midst of suffering and threats to ensure the community's survival is part of this challenge.

In many cases displacement is inevitable, the community's only choice. At this point this population, previously unknown and invisible to the State and the rest of the world, emerges into public consciousness with the label of 'victims' and 'displaced people'. They acquire visibility and a new identity, which they accept because it gives them access to the possibility of compensation and reparation and, finally, to recovering the rights stolen from them by violence. In many cases these are communities historically excluded, now pulled out of anonymity by tragedy: they have to cling to the identity of 'displaced person' or 'victim' as their only chance of recognition.

Pastoral work faces the challenge of the wholesale violation of all rights, the loss of territory and references, and the challenges of community narratives marked by tragedy, replacing the collective narratives of solidarity that gave the community meaning for generations.

The word now takes on a more important role in pastoral work. There are many tasks to do with legal support, humanitarian aid, income-generating projects, support in the struggle to win back rights. Within this work the word starts to take on a new significance and force in pastoral support.

We know that in any process of reparation or restitution, over and above the questions about lost land, destroyed crops, destroyed houses, over and above these questions, there will be a scream – often unheard in the silence imposed by the armed actors – of a much more fundamental question: **'What will happen to our dead?'**

The communities feel themselves suspended between two deaths, a death in the past and one in the future. The challenge for pastoral work is to interpret and write down these losses. Work on forgiveness becomes very important here: pastoral and psychosocial support is essential to make forgiveness possible.

Alongside the plea for possessions and economic rights, to know the truth of what happened, for justice one day, for material and moral reparation, the question about the dead cannot be silenced, a plea for what cannot be recovered. Only as this question and its answers are worked through, will forgiveness and reconciliation be possible.

These new challenges and new depths created for pastoral work stand alongside the commitment to truth, justice and reparation. They are questions about the impossible. Pastoral work here faces the challenge of the integrality of work for restoration and restitution.

Pastoral work is called to establish a territory for life, a space within which it is possible to live and feel a human being among human beings, not to feel either a victim or a displaced person, but a human being with all one's rights restored.