

A School of Peace
Brief Closing Remarks
By Archbishop John ONAIYEKAN, Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria

Catholic Peacebuilding Network Conference
Bogota - Colombia, June 24th-29th 2007

1. Appreciation and Thanks:

First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, (CPN) for making me again part of this valuable learning experience. I still harbour fond memories of the last year's conference in Burundi, in the Great Lakes of Central Africa. For this second opportunity, I thank CPN and all our benefactors who have made the funds available to run this project.

But money is not enough. I must therefore thank our Colombian friends, brothers and sisters for their warm reception and generosity, both here in Bogota and in Medellin. It is clear that a lot of efforts have gone into preparing all aspects of the Conference. I hope you will be glad to know that we greatly appreciate those efforts – and above all that your efforts have been rewarded by the huge success which the Conference has turned out to be.

2. A Precious Learning Experience.

In the past few days, I have learnt a lot. Until I came here, all I knew about Colombia was only what the Mass media, CNN, BBC, VOA, etc dish out to the world, which has been quite little, and mostly very unbalanced. We only hear about the drug cartels and their ruthless and criminal activities. We hear practically nothing about the many good things being done here, day in day out. This is the tragedy of the tyranny of the powerful world news networks. Not only do they decide what we should know, but worse still, they have a special for bad news. My country Nigeria is also a victim of this phenomenon. They talk about us only when we are anything atrocious, like the occasional isolated clash between Muslim and Christian communities, or the lurid stories about the corruption of our rulers. No one bothers to let the world know that most of the time, we are coping with our difficulties and resolving our problems. Now I know a little bit better about Colombia. In particular, I know a bit about the complexity of the socio-political situation, the great challenges of ending long years of armed conflicts, the problem of displaced people, the plague of deep socio-economic inequalities, etc. But I have also seen the natural beauty of the national landscape, and the clear signs of a nation in economic boom. We often hear Latin America in general, and Colombia in particular being referred to as "Third World". Coming from Africa, one can hardly talk of "Third World" here in the same sense as we experience it in our own countries.

As an African, I am particularly struck to learn of the significant presence of Afrocolombians – estimated at almost 10 million, which is about a quarter of the population of Colombia. Until I came here, I did not know that I had some long-lost cousins here in Colombia. We hardly meet them at home in Africa, or even in Europe or Rome. We are familiar with blacks from other countries like USA, Brazil, Cuba and the Caribbeans, but not with Colombian blacks.

3. The Church in Colombia: A School of Peace

In particular, we have been well educated on the great work that the Church is doing in building peace and in general integral human development. I now understand why the CPN brought us here – after Mindenao in the Philippines and Burundi in the Great Lakes regions of Central Africa. If the CPN congress is meant to be a learning experience, then Colombia is a wonderful "school of peace" – as Mgr Fabio himself said.

I am impressed by the deep commitment of the Church at all levels.

- The leadership of the bishops, transparent and coherent, guided by clear evangelical principles, united in faith and in love for their people. Of course this is what one expects of the hierarchy in any country. But it does not always happens that way. There have been cases where bishops have been unable to take any positive initiative in dramatic situations of crisis because of lack of unity and a common mind. One should therefore congratulate the bishops of Colombia.

- The clear unity of the bishops has generated a tremendous loyal commitment of other members of Christ's faithful: clergy, religious and laity, working together under the guidance of the bishops, in fruitful communion as Church\family of God, and in solidarity with the people, especially with the poorest and the weakest.

- We are impressed by the elaborate programme of action of the Church at all levels – from high level peace negotiations and advocacy bringing government and different combatants

together, down to the grass roots projects of human development, touching the lives of people wherever they are.

- Even the children are not left out, as they learn to be sowers of peace, *sembradores de la paz*, not only among their peer group and fellow children, but also reaching out to the adults as well.

4. We Can Always Do Something

All that we have outlined above shows the efficacy of acts of love under the worst of circumstances. The strong lesson is that we can always do good, no matter the situation.

I am therefore going back home better informed and very much enriched. I have learnt a lot about what the Church can do, with courage, commitment and love. Columbia is a predominantly Catholic nation, with the vast majority of the citizens under the pastoral leadership of the bishops of Colombia. This no doubt places a peculiar burden of responsibility on them but also tremendous moral authority and power to do a lot of good. In my country Nigeria, things are not the same. Catholics comprise only about 20-25 % of the population. It means that my voice, as the Archbishop of Abuja, the nations Federal Capital, cannot carry the same weight as that of the Archbishop of Bogota in Colombia. Nevertheless, having seen what is happening here, I am challenges to do the best I can to take initiatives for peace building in the areas of conflict in my country. I am thinking in particular about the occasional social conflicts with a religious colouring, between Christians and Muslims, as we seek to live together in peace, with our equal numerical strength, despite our differences.

5. Some Challenges Ahead:

As I am returning home, I shall keep you the Church and the people of Colombia in my prayers – knowing that you still have great challenges ahead of you. By way of conclusion, let me mention just a few:

- a) The process of peace building must continue, based on truth, justice and reparation, the ultimate objective of which in my opinion is reconciliation, which must necessarily entail pardon and forgiveness. You must continue to find prudent and creative ways of reconciling justice with pardon, on both individual and society levels.
- b) You have made the search for the truth a major dimension of your peace building efforts. The truth, the whole truth, should be consistently pursued. There is the truth of the victor and of the vanquished. There is the truth of the legal and illegal combatants, all of whom carry arms that kill and maim. There is the truth of the victims and of the perpetrators of hurts and injuries. There is the truth of the government and the truth of those who disagree with government. It is when all these “truths” are brought together that justice can begin to emerge and peace find its way into the minds of people, and into society at large.
- c) As I return home, I keep particularly in mind fond memories of my new found cousins – the Afrocolombians of the Choco region and other parts of Colombia. The Church in Africa is growing, even in the midst of our socio-political problems. I shall suggest to my brother bishops of Africa to study ways of reaching out to our cousins in diaspora across the Atlantic – for mutual encouragement. The Church leadership in Colombia may wish to seriously consider this proposal, in the spirit what Pope John Paul II mentioned in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*. I remember that during the assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa, the bishop of Cartagena was among the synodal fathers. In his intervention, he recalled the important role played by the port of Cartagena in the movement of African slaves across the continent. He drew the attention of the synod to the presence of the descendants of these Africans in his diocese and appealed to African bishops to show Episcopal solidarity. I do not know what became of that appeal. I suggest that the appeal should neither be given up nor neglected.

May the Lord bless us all, and give success to the work of our hands. Amen.