

**PEACE IN COLOMBIA TODAY
THE NATIONAL REALITY AND THE ACTION OF THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH**

1. THE NATIONAL SITUATION:

Colombia is a country of forty million people, and it is about the size of California and Texas combined. It is divided into multiple geographical and cultural regions. It has recently had a meaningful improvement in its economic growth, but with pitfalls for its future development due to the social and economic disadvantage of many of its people, and the lack of a true national solidarity to promote equality.

For fifty years, we have been in a prolonged, internal war whose initial justification was those social and economic disadvantages.

The ecclesial reality:

Colombia is a country which is 90% Catholic, and it is organized into 13 archdioceses, 51 dioceses and 10 apostolic vicariates. We have suffered the killing of two bishops, many priests, various members of religious communities, and several laymen involved in pastoral work. Both the subversive groups and the unofficial paramilitary army have been their assassins. In addition, many churches have been destroyed and many parishes have suffered attacks from guerrilla and other illegal groups.

At the present time these attacks have been reduced throughout the country with the implementation of the Democratic Security Program of President Alvaro Uribe.

2. THE VISIBLE WAR:

We have two main groups fighting against the State: FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and ELN, National Liberation Army.

At the present time, there is strong fighting against FARC

They have been declared terrorists.

They have internal divisions and have been pushed to some marginal regions.

They have many resources due to the traffic of illegal drugs.

They have kidnapped many people. Some are considered as prisoners of war.

We do not see the possibility of political dialogue at this moment.

Both subversive groups, FARC and ELN are fighting against each other.

The government accepted the dialogue with ELN but at this moment is frozen.

7 **Actions of the Church:**

We established the “Bishops Peace Commission” divided into three specialized sub commissions in order to deal with the three groups in a state of war. The purpose of these commissions is to stimulate steps toward peace.

The church gives strong emphasis to a political solution by means of dialogue. The church has organized the “Commission of National Conciliation” and the “Regional Commissions of Conciliation”.

We have Pastoral dialogues to defend the population against violent groups.

8 **3. THE HIDDEN WAR AND THE INVISIBLE VIOLENCE:**

The paramilitary groups began as a defense of the population against guerrilla. Very soon they became an illegal factor of control of the public and private institutions and finally they terrified the whole country.

The paramilitary criminal actions of the last twenty years are only now being partially brought to light. What we have lived through during this period is like a bad dream. The paramilitary’s criminal action is beyond any imagination. Nine hundred and seventy-three common graves with one thousand one-hundred and fifty-three bodies have been unearthed. We think that in this year the location of another fifteen thousand bodies of missing people will become known.

Most of the crimes were committed in rural areas and the urban population has usually ignored those tragic events or was helpless to assist.

9 **Actions of the church:**

The Church has been actively engaged with the people ...

Many messages concerning the Culture of Life

Denunciation of the various types of violence

Educational processes to improve tolerance, forgiveness, and peaceful coexistence

Public pronouncements in favor of minority groups and other victimized groups

Peace labs to help overcome common everyday violence

Impressive documentations of victim’s cases kept by the affected dioceses

10 **4. DISPLACEMENT, A NATIONAL TRAGEDY:**

The forced displacement of the population due to the war, is a great shame for Colombia. It has affected more than three million people, but it is now receiving special attention. Presently, there are several programs on their behalf from both

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the State and the Church. Others organizations are also involved in this problem. But all those programs are not sufficient.

11 **Actions of the Church:**

It was the Colombian Bishops' Conference that made this human tragedy a public issue by revealing the underlying trauma in the uprooted people. An exploratory study undertaken by the Bishops' Conference made it possible to bring to light the large number of those who had had to abandon their homes and places of residence due to the direct action of armed groups. Research has been made into the extent of economic loss of the displaced people.

12 **5. KIDNAPPED VICTIMS:**

There are three types of kidnapped victims: Those kidnapped for political reasons, for economic reasons (extortion) and for punishment.

Those kidnapped people for political reasons can be freed only by means of a special agreement between the parties. Up until now, it has been impossible to reach such an agreement because both parties are uncompromising in their positions. Some people have been liberated due to a personal action of President Chavez and a unilateral decision of the guerrilla.

13 **Actions of the Church:**

We have engaged in a dialogue among all of the conflicting groups. The church made in the past one proposal for a humanitarian agreement but it was not accepted by the Government. However, a recent proposal for another agreement was accepted, but this time the guerrilla was not so willing to accept it. We are now trying to dialogue with FARC to obtain their acceptance of the proposal. All the facilitators found the same difficulties. We have also provided various types of assistance to the families of the kidnapped people.

14 **6. THE PROCESS OF REINTEGRATION:**

Many members of the paramilitary army, beginning with their commanders, chose to stop fighting, give back their weapons, and began a process of reintegration into society by telling the truth about their crimes. Up until now they have confessed to three thousand and six hundred criminal acts with a total of five thousand victims.

In addition, members of the other illegal groups (FARC and ELN) have decided to stop fighting and accept the process of reintegration into society but at the

same time, society must make an effort to accept them. This is one of the biggest challenges for Colombia today.

15 **Actions of the Church:**

The Church has played a decisive role in the reintegrating process with its actions of motivation, through the strength of the Gospel. The presence of the Church in those critical moments when the paramilitary chiefs wanted to stop the process and return to war was decisive. We also helped support a new law called "Justice and Peace", including amendments introduced by the Constitutional Court, because this law balances the requirements of justice with those of peace.

16 **7. THE HOUR OF TRUTH:**

The confessions of the paramilitaries in the process of reintegration have revealed the existence of alliances between themselves and members of the political parties, the Congress, government officials, and other citizens. Following the confessions of six hundred paramilitary members, there are now 60 members of the parliament accused and many of them are in jail.

17 **Actions of the Church:**

We have given our cooperation to various plans to encourage the revealing of truth, especially by listening to the testimonies of the victims. The annual message of the Pope, "In the truth, the peace" was very useful for us. We have also delivered messages to the nation on the need for truth.

18 **8. THE VICTIMS:**

In the past victims had been forgotten; they were not taken into consideration. All the attention was given to the perpetrators, many of whom received amnesty. Victims today have an important place in the Justice and Peace law. A special commission has been created to work in their favor, especially in the areas of truth, justice, and reparation.

19 **Actions of the church:**

We are giving help to the victims according to their particular conditions. At times we have helped them leave the country because they are no longer safe at home. Our main goal is to call upon the victims to accept a process of reconciliation and peace.

There are also several formal programs available, which are led by Social Pastoral Action, an organization sponsored by the church. These programs have provided motivation and encouragement to the victims in order to help them decide to stop feeling like victims and instead, accept that they are survivors who should face their future with optimism, hope and strength.

20 **9. THE ACTION OF THE OFFICIAL ARMED FORCES:**

The improvement of the Colombian armed forces has been considerable. They have better intelligence, better coordination among themselves and, therefore, better operations with significant results.

The recent plan of the armed forces called "Consolidation" looks at having a social presence in those areas of the country under the control of the subversive armies. Many times in the past, when there was a social need which required a social answer, the answer given was a military one. It didn't help at all.

Actions of the Church:

We maintain that the State has the right and obligation to defend the life, the property and the honor of its citizens. Therefore, the State has the right, the exclusive right, to use its Armed Forces for this purpose. On the other hand, the church has not ceased its request for a political solution to the conflict based on dialogue, instead of a military one.

21 **10. DRUG TRAFFIC:**

The war we are suffering doesn't finish because, among other things, the drug traffic is for the guerrilla a source of unlimited economic resources. From one big organization controlled by a high profile leader, drug trafficking has changed to multiple small organizations with many chiefs who tend to maintain a low profile. The fight against drug trafficking has caused the death of many innocent people. The Government has now changed its politics for fighting this problem. It has stopped air fumigation with its health problems and environmental and domestic crop destruction. Now the use of the manual eradication of coca plants is the accepted method at least in the frontiers.

22 **Actions of the church:**

We condemn drug trafficking in as many ways as possible. We try to educate our people in order to become aware of the value system of the drug dealers who

believe in accumulating money, plenty quickly, and easily. Nothing else matters, even destroying the life of others is of no consequence to this way of thinking.

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11. THE WAY TO PEACE:

The process of peace proceeds slowly. However, there has been much improvement in the quality of life of the people. The civil society which was once absent from the process of peace, has now awakened and is creating many initiatives in favor of peace. At the same time, the Government still trusts more a war solution than a political solution through dialogue.

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Actions of the church:

Civil actions: Attention to human rights and to international humanitarian right.
Request of a permanent politics of peace
Animation of the civil society to work for peace
Pressing in favor of dialogue
Openness to international community

Pastoral actions: We propose four forms of reconciliation: Spiritual, social, political and cultural. The church is actively promoting all four.

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12. SPIRITUAL RECONCILIATION:

Thomas Merton asked himself: "Why are we not at peace with others? Because we are not at peace with ourselves. And why are we not at peace with ourselves? Because we are not at peace with God. Peace is above all a spiritual reconciliation".

We are committed to the proclamation of the Gospel of life, of brotherhood, of mercy and of pardon.

Pastoral action of "communion": is shown as being an important objective to foster spiritual reconciliation.

Sacraments are a great moment of reconciliation. When to Msgr. Alberto Giraldo, Bishop of Medellin, was asked the question: "What do you do for peace?" He answered with four words: "To confess, to confess, to confess, to confess"

The liturgy with its emphasis on peace has a privileged place. Peace is not simply a fruit that arises from below like wild mushrooms; it is also a gift of God that comes from above.

National campaigns for reconciliation and life.

Schools for forgiveness and reconciliation

The service of listening to the victims and framing their painful story within Jesus story: passion, death and resurrection.

26 **13. SOCIAL RECONCILIATION:**

The result of fifty years of war means that an entire generation doesn't know what it is like to live in peace. This reality is a strong motivation for all of us to build a country sustained by a meaningful social reconciliation.

The first element of social reconciliation is the search for justice and forgiveness. We have taken several initiatives to promote forgiveness and reconciliation within and between communities.

The second element of social reconciliation is truth. It is a formidable remedy for healing the wounds of violence. Victims, generally, do not let themselves be carried away by a thirst for revenge, but they do want the whole truth to be told. We make effort to make the truth known about painful violations of the human rights. Provide information about international humanitarian laws and the respective documented complaints.

The third element of social reconciliation is support for the victims and their families. An example is the pastoral support for displaced people at the time of their arrival or at the time of their return.

The fourth element of social reconciliation is a memory of the hard facts, a memory that favors social reconciliation because it recognizes the individual pain, the tragedy suffered, and the regrettable loss.

The fifth element of reconciliation is reducing domestic violence.

The sixth element is channeling social energies for a better future. That's why we talk already about post conflict future and their several challenges.

27 **14. POLITICAL RECONCILIATION**

Political reconciliation between the State and the citizens is the most difficult of all types of reconciliation, given its historic and social roots.

A first element is overcoming of the exclusion of those who live in poverty.

A second element, in front of the war we are living, is the search for a negotiated solution where both parties can build a common vision of peace. The church has tried to facilitate and mediate those processes in different occasions: liberations of soldiers, liberation of kidnapped people, dialogues for peace (ELN).

A third element is the formation of reconciled and reconciling communities

A fourth element for political reconciliation is the design of a social work ministry for situations of conflict with some specific criteria: presence not absence, openness to all sides, clarity of mind about sociopolitical reality, precise language instead of confused concepts, offering hope instead of despair, memory

of the painful events instead of amnesia, attitude according to the gospel instead of bellicose mentality.

15. CULTURAL RECONCILIATION

Colombia is a country of many regions and many cultures.

Therefore the first element is reconciliation between regions and cultures, specially with minority groups and victims.

A second element is the improvement of a positive perception of the former enemies.

A third element is the reconstruction of the moral consciousness of a society affected by the degradation of conflicts.¹

A fourth element is education. Peace is a way of life. Like any other way of life, peace is the result of education, or enhanced learning

A fifth element and the most important, is the promotion of a culture of life according to the gospel.

Finally, we have to emphasize the importance of the role played by the international community in our search for peace. May this event, be an invitation and a call to all the countries of good will toward us, to help us in this struggle toward reconciliation and peace, a goal that we are eagerly trying to achieve, with the grace of God.

Mons. Luis Augusto Castro Q.
Archbishop of Tunja
President of the Colombian Bishops Conference

¹ One example of degraded conflict is the Colombian case. Its degradation obeys to several logics: the logic of militarization; the logic of rents, the logic of territorialization; the logic of terror, of criminalization, the logic of political involvement. See: UNDP: El conflicto, callejón con salida, o.c. p.82 y ss.