

Brief Reflections on Church Engagement for Peace in Colombia and Its Challenges

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Formal peace negotiations between the Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which began in 2012 and seem close to successful conclusion this year, have created a new set of opportunities and challenges for the Colombian church. The most significant have included:

(a) new space in which to continue to accompany and advocate for the rights of the innumerable victims of a half century of internal armed conflict--including directly at the table in Havana;

(b) time to consider as Church how best to contribute to a process of ratification of the expected agreement, and then to its implementation; and

(c) time to reflect on how best to sustain the Church's mission for reconciliation in what is today a highly polarized social and political environment at many levels.

Some of this involves relatively uncharted waters, and there is a need for ongoing analysis, reflection and action. The insights and solidarity of the international community and of Church actors from other countries are most welcome.

Before returning to opportunities and challenges below, in light of some lessons learned, it is important to recognize first the Church's longstanding commitment to justice and peace in what has been and remains a very complex, multifaceted conflict in Colombia. There have, of course, been innumerable **pastoral statements by the Colombian Episcopal Conference**, going

back decades. These have asserted that peace must be attained through negotiation, and will be sustained through greater social justice. They have sought to promote reconciliation, to awaken consciences, and to instill hope. There have also been many other kinds of Church initiatives. These include the creation of and support for **organized institutional platforms**, and work at **multiple social levels** through **pastoral accompaniment, formation, networking, advocacy and dialogue facilitation**.

Forging institutional responses

Recognizing the need for organized institutional responses to Colombia's conflict, the Episcopal Conference has given concrete form to its work for peace and justice by creating and supporting various Church bodies. Intervening at different social levels, each has brought forth new initiatives in the search for paths to peace:

- **The Episcopal Peace Commission.**

Made up of bishops who have had a special connection to peace processes regionally and nationally, this Commission meets periodically to analyze the conflict and its repercussions on society and the Church. The Commission is led by the President of the Episcopal Conference, who animates the bishops in their joint commitment to pursue an end of the armed conflict and to forge a peace that is based on Gospel principles. They are responsible for outlining courses of action, and discerning criteria and principles that facilitate the ministry of reconciliation and peace.

- **The National Conciliation Commission – (CCN)**

The CCN, convened in 1995 by Cardinal Rubiano to seek political solutions to the armed conflict, has accompanied peace efforts and worked to create and facilitate links between the national government, insurgent movements and so-called self-defense groups. An autonomous and

independent entity made up of representatives of different social sectors, it has been replicated regionally within Colombia. It has pursued a solution to conflict based on dialogue; a permanent public peace policy; the active participation of civil society; the support of the international community; and respect for human rights and international humanitarian law. A important product of the CCN's work is the *National Minimum (Standards) Agreement for Reconciliation and Peace in Colombia*. The result of an inclusive and widely participatory dialogue between representatives of Colombian society, the international community and public, private and non-governmental organizations, it proposes eight minimum conditions for peace. These include public policy that leads to negotiations; people's equal access to the right to a dignified life; extensive and integral agrarian reform; effective and transparent democracy; the recognition of regional diversity as a basis for reconstructing the country; and citizen participation in forging the country's future.

- **The National Social Ministry Secretariat (SNPS) – Caritas Colombia.**

SNPS or *Pastoral Social*, created in 1977, has aimed to unite all the initiatives of Caritas Colombia; and to promote and strengthen the process of 'evangelizing social relations', contributing to social transformation and integral human development in the light of the Gospel and the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. In 1999 the Caritas Internationalis network formed a Colombia Working Group to accompany SNPS in all of its labors in Colombia, in close connection with international Church organizations and others, in the areas of Democracy and Peacebuilding, Development and Social Justice and overcoming Humanitarian Crises.

SNPS is headed by an Episcopal Commission and a team of priests, religious, and professionals with distinct areas of expertise responsible for specific aspects of the work. It has delegations in each diocese and committees in the majority of the parishes, and has carried out numerous activities to strengthen peacebuilding capacities with and through national and diocesan teams. It

has engaged in peace education, permanent contextual analyses, participatory planning, social and political dialogues on a local and regional level, and the building of skills for advocacy and influencing public opinion. SNPS

a) Takes the Gospel's values to the spheres of reflection and citizen participation, generating a path for evangelization of political issues, and a political culture focused on the human being;

b) Promotes citizen participation as a responsibility and right;

c) Contributes to the construction of public spaces where controversies can be resolved with words rather than with arms;

d) Strengthens the conscience of each person in terms of their dignity, rights and responsibilities;

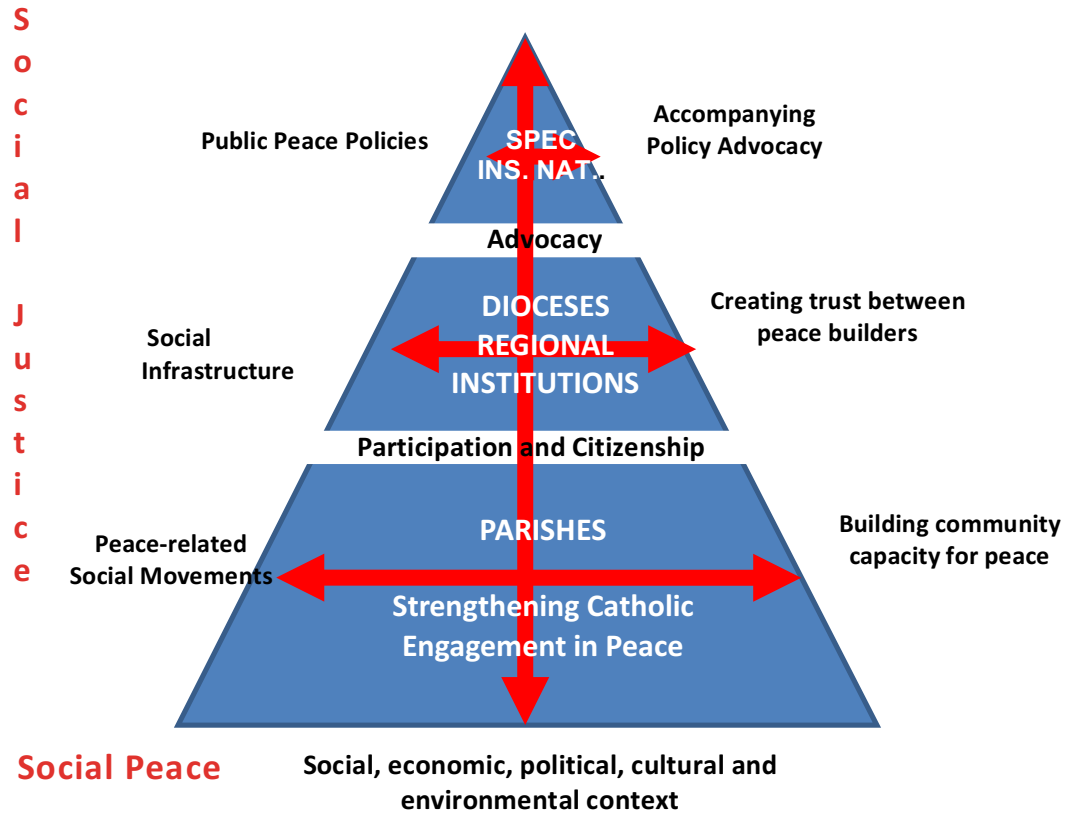
e) Encourages real democracy through transparent accountability. Citizen oversight, civil society electoral observation missions, and ethical pacts between candidates promoted by the dioceses are exercises that have permitted citizens to remain informed, contributing to the Common Good; and

f) Encourages the participation of all community members giving special relevance to the contributions of women--recognizing that in many cases they are responsible for making community processes effective, despite the fact that their role and contributions are not properly recognized.

o **The Peace and Justice Commissions of the Dioceses**

The Peace and Justice Commissions of the dioceses encourage a missionary commitment in public processes through an encounter with the Prince of Peace, life in communion, the practice and experience of faith, and dedicated commitment to building a society based on love. Diocesan commissions directly attend to the victims of the violence, strengthen local organizations working

for human dignity and peace, and seek local solutions to the humanitarian crisis.



Addressing complex social relations

The role of the Church in public peace processes requires work on every level of society, with their corresponding actors and characteristics. As the Compendium of the Church Social Teaching in Colombia affirms, *“With its social teachings, the Church would like to announce and make present the Gospel in the complex network of social relations...”*¹

Visualizing social organization as if it were a triangle has helped Church actors to understand its distinct levels: a *base* of local community leaders and leaders of grassroots organizations; a middle section of civil society organizations, NGOs, and ethnic and religious leaders, among

¹ Compendium of the Church’s Social Doctrine No. 62.

others; and an apex of the triangle representing highly visible leaders, including members of the government, military personnel and religious leaders, among others. Considering these three levels of society can help identify in what direction peacebuilding and social strategies should be aimed, either in separate or coordinated efforts. Working on one level does not exclude working on the others, and experience suggests that working on all three levels is ideal². For public processes to be truly public and lead to peace, they should involve the entire pyramid, and the Church in Colombia has sought to engage at each level.

Without going into detail in this short paper, it is worth noting that at the base, Church actors have engaged in a great deal of education and formation work for peace and reconciliation. They have worked to strengthen parish Social Ministry Committees (COPPAS). They have accompanied local communities in the provision of psychosocial support for victims; in the exercise of political advocacy, and participation in formulating and monitoring public policies; in the recovery of historical memory; in gaining recognition for legal and human rights; in addressing violence against women; and in strengthening local capacities for natural resource management.

At the middle level, Church actors have participated actively in campaigns around international human rights day and international women's day, as well as the organization of Colombia's annual Week for Peace in September. They have engaged in social research, and organized numerous national Congresses for Reconciliation with the participation of public officials, academics and local Church leaders. They have effectively participated in the public debates that led to the recent national Law of Victims and Land Restitution, and in the formulation of civil society inputs for the peace negotiators in Havana.

At the top of the pyramid, the Episcopal Conference has served as a facilitator, tutor or generator

² Caritas International. *Peacebuilding: A Caritas training manual*. 2002, page 101.

of rapprochements between conflict actors in several high level peace negotiation processes; and has regularly dialogued with political administrations at the level of the Presidency. SNPS has formed part of the government and civil society forum for peace known as the London/Cartagena Consensus. The Church has also worked with UN agencies in the National Land Restitution campaign.

Some Lessons

Over the course of its long and multi-faceted work for peace and Reconciliation in Colombia, Church leaders have learned many lessons. Among them:

- Permanent and inclusive forms of dialogue lead to ever growing Church capacity to build bridges between those who are divided
- The Bishops need regular opportunities to share individual points of view, engage in analysis, come to some consensus, and set pastoral directions in the face of conflict and violence
- We cannot adequately tackle wider conflicts if we cannot create processes that address conflict at the local or community level, and that recognize specific regional or territorial dynamics including those that involve Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations
- Forging peace requires a well-formed and active laity, and community participation at all levels, from the natural family to the international family
- Progress toward peace can indeed be made even in ongoing, seemingly intractable conflict
- It is essential to recognize victims of violence not merely as wounded, but as dignified social and political actors who can contribute significantly to rebuilding society
- An integral approach to peace and reconciliation requires human development in the face

of poverty and inequality, work in broad networks and with an array of institutions, and the promotion of changes in political culture

Some Challenges

The Church in Colombia has naturally faced many challenges in its initiatives for peace and reconciliation. Among them are questions about:

- How to combine the Church's prophetic role of denouncing injustice and violence whatever the source, with its role as a promotor of peace and reconciliation
- How to move beyond the urgent demands and activities of each project and moment, to focus on long term processes of change
- How to overcome often polarized relations at different levels of the societal "triangle"
- How to generate the most constructive spaces to link grassroots and high level peace initiatives
- How to transform conflict in rural communities where the social fabric and traditional culture have been torn apart by illicit crop production and the drug trade
- How to confront relatively new types of conflict such as organized criminal violence, and conflicts rooted in the expansion of mining and other extractive industries

Old challenges in new form

Finally, the Church faces a number of challenges both old and new in a context in which a peace accord between the government and the country's largest rebel movement now seems imminent. Around these and other challenges we welcome the insights and reflections of brother and sister peacemakers:

- What seem to be the best ways to maintain unity within the Church and among its leadership, to forcefully address together the demands of this time?
- What are the best means of laboring *as Church*, cooperating with government and other

political actors but avoiding political manipulation and perceptions of partisanship?

- What roles should be played relative to the implementation of the expected peace accord, such as the reintegration of former combatants into communities, and their political participation?
- What are the best ways to continue to accompany the victims of the conflict, including the millions who have been displaced, in recovering their dignity and gaining their rights?
- How promote an effective reconciliation process within and among a highly polarized citizenry?

This is a moment of new opportunities, and of hope for an end to internal armed conflict that began in the decade of the 1960s. It is also a moment to respond wisely and faithfully to the Gospel call to hunger and thirst for justice and to be peacemakers. May the Spirit of God guide our steps together!