



THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN COLOMBIA: Generating New Hope for Peace

DVD Discussion – Facilitator’s Guide

Introduction

Colombia trails only Sudan in the number of people forced from their homes (also known as “internally displaced persons”) due to an ongoing armed conflict within its borders.

It is a nation in turmoil, and yet, with so many high-profile conflicts around the world, Colombia’s troubles are often overlooked. This film, *The Catholic Church in Colombia: Generating New Hope for Peace*, produced by Caritas-Colombia and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), provides an overview of the conflict in Colombia and the Catholic Church’s response to the resulting humanitarian crisis. It seeks to raise awareness of how Colombians, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable, have suffered and how they are working with the Church to support peace and justice in their country.

The discussion questions below aim to focus reflection upon the crisis as well as to foster engagement with efforts to end it. Participants are encouraged to develop ideas about justice, to connect those ideas to what is happening in Colombia, and to consider ways to engage in thoughtful advocacy in support of efforts to establish a peaceful and just society that respects the dignity and rights of all people.

Background

For more than four decades Colombians have experienced an armed conflict between left-wing guerillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and government security forces, with civilian populations suffering the worst of the violence and human rights abuses. The current conflict is rooted in a long history of extreme inequality and political exclusion, though it has intensified dramatically in recent years due in part to the infusion of drug-related profits that many of the armed actors continue to receive.

It is increasingly recognized that the internal displacement in Colombia is intimately linked to strategies of intentional depopulation and subsequent concentration of land and resources. A description of this issue appears in the first section of the film (at minutes 13:15 through 14:30). A specific example appears early in the second section of the film that focuses on work in the Catholic Diocese of Quibdo when a farmer describes how he was removed from his land during fighting and upon his return home finds a 50,000 hectare (one hectare is approximately 2.5 acres) palm plantation owned by someone else.

A new area of concern in Colombia is the paramilitary demobilization and reintegration process. Although demobilization of armed actors is a significant advance, the recent demobilization process in Colombia occurred under a noticeably weak legal framework that did little to dismantle the paramilitary infrastructure, address impunity by those responsible for human rights violations and massacres, or effectively reintegrate armed actors, and is unlikely to provide real compensation for the victims of the conflict.

U.S. Involvement in Colombia: The U.S. assistance package to Colombia – also known as “Plan Colombia” - was originally approved in 2000 as a six-year plan primarily dedicated to military support for counter-narcotics activities. The remaining funds were to be used to support alternative development, judicial reform, and help internally displaced people. The anti-narcotics program was to create and train new battalions, providing helicopters and intelligence aid, and relying on widespread fumigation as the principal means for eradicating coca. From 2000-2007, over \$5 billion in U.S. aid has been provided with 80 per cent dedicated to police and military aid.

In 2007, the U.S. Congress realigned funding priorities for aid to Colombia, decreasing a proportion of the military aid (now approximately 65 per cent of the aid package) while increasing social aid for programs that strengthen human rights protection and address some of the underlying social concerns that fuel the ongoing conflict.

The Catholic Church’s response: The Catholic Church in Colombia, with significant assistance from the U.S. Catholic Church and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides humanitarian assistance to people forcibly displaced by the conflict in Colombia and supports local and international efforts to bring about a peaceful solution to a very violent situation. Through CRS, the Church works to strengthen Colombian families and communities by creating economic opportunities and a culture of peace in the face of the country's prolonged and complex crisis. CRS engages Catholics in the United States, raising awareness of the situation in Colombia and advocating for U.S. policies that will help bring about a just and lasting resolution to the current conflict.

CRS' *In Solidarity with Colombia* program began in June 2000, expanding and strengthening CRS' focus on humanitarian response, justice, peace education and peacebuilding, as well as activities in the United States that emphasize education and awareness-raising on issues of importance to Colombia.

Pre-Video Reflection/Discussion

Invite participants to reflect on the nature of violence and the forms it takes. Allow them to explore the effects of different kinds of violence upon individuals. Then ask them to consider violence upon communities or groups of people. These discussion questions would ideally be worked out in small groups:

- What is violence? Develop a definition and some examples.
- What are the similarities and differences between violence to an individual and violence to a community or population?
- What examples, current or historical, of this kind of group violence can you think of?
- How many different forms does (or did) violence take against the communities or groups in the above examples?
- What do violence and justice have to do with each other?
- What is the individual's and/or society's responsibility to end violence?

Post-Video Discussion:

1. Who are the different groups with a stake in the Colombian conflict and what are their goals? Include groups who are not necessarily armed or directly involved in fighting.
2. What did we hear in the video from people directly affected by the crisis?
3. What did we hear from, or about, people *indirectly* affected by it?
4. What do you think are the most important factors fueling the conflict in Colombia?
5. What issues in the Western Hemisphere or more globally, do you think are having an impact on the situation in Colombia?
6. What forms of violence do Colombians face? Relate this to the previous discussion.
7. How does the violence affect the different groups? Think not only about the indigenous and Afro-Colombian people, but also about members of FARC, the paramilitaries, urban Colombians, and others.
8. What reasons can we develop for why the poorest Colombians face the worst of the violence and injustice? Consider the role that resources (natural, political, and others) play.
9. Why is it so difficult to disarm the groups responsible for the violence—and keep them disarmed?
10. Consider this quote from the film: *“This dialog must proceed slowly, allowing the power of reason to triumph over simple brute force.”* (Most. Rev. Luis Augusto Castro, President, Colombian Episcopal Conference) What does this mean, in practical terms? Do you agree with the statement—particularly the “slowly” part? How does your faith inform your thinking about this?
11. Do we in the U.S. have a responsibility to improve the situation in Colombia? If so, why? If so, what can we do?

Small group discussion

Hand out the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) proposals to improve the situation in Colombia (next page). Invite your participants to examine them in small groups, ask them to choose a recommendation, and discuss the following:

- a) Do you support these recommendations? Yes? No? Why? Consider your answer in terms of how the recommendation addresses your earlier discussions about violence, justice, and faith.
- b) How could the recommendation be implemented? What would the U.S. government have to do? What could be done in Colombia on the national, regional and local levels?
- c) How is the Church supporting the actions called for by CRS? Use examples of some of the programs highlighted in the section of the film detailing efforts in Choco.
- d) How can the groups we are members of contribute to the creation of a just, peaceful society in Colombia?

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Handout for Small-Group Discussion

Catholic Relief Services Advocacy Efforts in Support of Peace in Colombia

In its advocacy for positive change in U.S. policy towards Colombia, CRS promotes greater awareness about the human rights and humanitarian crisis and the most important issues identified by the Colombian and U.S. Bishop Conferences.

CRS calls on the U.S. Congress and Administration to:

- **Support efforts to bolster a negotiated, political path towards peace in Colombia.** The Colombian Conference of Catholic Bishops emphasizes the importance of continuing on the path to a negotiated peace process as the only viable long-term strategy for resolving the conflict. To date the U.S. has had a limited role in international efforts to support national peace processes.
- **Decrease the disproportionate emphasis on military aid, and increase development and humanitarian aid.** The United States can make a significant positive contribution to long-term peace and stability in Colombia by shifting the focus of its foreign aid toward effective social development. Assistance to the internally displaced should be increased and its impact well documented. Aid to the internally displaced is one of the most positive elements of the U.S. aid in Colombia but remains a small proportion of the overall U.S. funding.
- **Include basic standards for the protection of human rights in all aid efforts.** Particular importance should be given to monitoring the impact of the paramilitary re-integration process, and to ensuring strict application of human rights conditions on U.S. aid.

What You Can Do Now:

Pray for a just and lasting peace in Colombia.
For prayer samples, visit:

<http://crs.org/public-policy/colombia.cfm>.

Advocate for a just and lasting peace in Colombia. Join the CRS Advocacy Network today: <http://actioncenter.crs.org/signup>.

Learn more about CRS' Colombia advocacy:
<http://www.crs.org/public-policy/colombia.cfm>.

Buy fair trade products from around the world, including Colombia, that support fair wages and uphold human dignity. Go to:

<http://crsfairtrade.org>.

- **Phase out aerial fumigation, and increase appropriate alternative development.** The Colombian Bishops have stated their clear opposition to fumigation given ongoing reports of legal food crops and livestock being destroyed, water source contamination and increases in health problems. Many farmers, who were fumigated but not given either emergency food aid or access to crop substitution programs, have either joined the ranks of the internally displaced or in some cases moved to neighboring provinces to grow illicit crops once more.