

THE COLOMBIAN CHURCH AND PEACE BUILDING

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IDENTIFYING CONFLICTS AND WAYS OF TRANSFORMING THEM

Dialogue with society and other analytical viewpoints

In recent decades, Colombians have recognized the dynamic role played by the Catholic Church, especially the Conference of Bishops, in the quest for peace and reconciliation. There is frequent media coverage of Church documents that offer constructive proposals regarding internal conflicts, as well as critical statements about situations and structures that are contrary to peaceful coexistence among Colombians.² Members of the Church have also known the consequences of the climate of violence that has touched the lives of all sectors of the nation. A significant number of church workers have been murdered, including an archbishop, bishops, priests, men and women religious, and catechists. The Church's positions are often the subject of analysis and controversy in the media and in public debate, reflecting the importance placed on the Catholic community's positions on these issues.

The Colombian Church has reflected at various levels on its role in building peace in the country. Many sectors of the church have participated in this reflection and in the quest for responses to the multiple questions that have arisen. This questioning has also led to possibilities for listening to other stakeholders in Colombian society who make significant contributions to reflection amid the direct confrontations, acts of terror and generalized violence. The documents of the Catholic Magisterium have a long tradition of examining, at the universal level, possibilities for different sectors of the Catholic community and the country.

Since the 1980s, the Catholic Church has intensified its reflection on the situation in Colombia and the various forms of violence, enhancing its vision of the Church's role in the face of the many challenges that have emerged. One great need has been to define the role of the Conference of Bishops in approaching the enormous challenges, as well as the way in which the various sectors of the church integrate themselves into the quest for alternatives and options for transformation amid the confrontations that have wracked Colombia for centuries.³

In this quest, lessons have been learned from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, but in many ways we have found ourselves facing completely new situations. In Colombia the Church is not responding to the challenges of a military dictatorship, nor is it a country in which the parties to the conflict are differentiated into two groups, as in other cases. This has demanded a process of learning and reflection in conjunction with other analytical viewpoints and schools of thought.

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² "We generally speak of violence in Colombia in reference to subversive organizations of the left or the right, called guerrillas on the one hand and self-defense forces on the other. But the phenomenon is highly complex: we must keep in mind everything that can cause problems of social justice to erupt in violence, including crime, as well as the fact that in society there is a desire to maintain certain interests no matter what the cost." *Witnesses of Hope*. Colombian Conference of Bishops, 79th Ordinary Plenary Assembly of Bishops. Bogotá, July 4-8, 2005.

³ "Peace therefore demands firm, constant efforts to work for social justice and sustainable human development, which implies deep structural reforms and a political will that leads all sectors of society to a commitment to peace. The Social Doctrine of the Church offers basic criteria for authentic development that benefits everyone, especially those who are most in need. In the words of Pope Paul VI, 'Development is the new name for peace.'" *Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia*. Final declaration of the General Meeting of Bishops. Bogotá. March 9-13, 1998.

Dialogue with various stakeholders in Colombian society has led the Church to take a stand on the definition of the situation in the country — which has been characterized in many church documents as an “internal armed conflict” among sectors that have been in conflict for decades — and to take the position that the solution must lie in fair negotiations.

The Church’s historical hegemony in Colombia has been replaced by the reality of a more pluralistic country that demands openness and dialogue. The Church has therefore accepted the challenge to invite others to help define its role in peace building and identify the specific contributions that it can make, as well as to address issues such as “public order,” “political negotiation of the armed conflict,” “democratic security,” etc.

The recognition that Colombia is experiencing a complex conflict that requires actions and proposals in accordance with this complexity has led to an emphasis on encounters with diverse, pluralistic stakeholders to reach consensus on various proposals. The complexity addressed in these encounters stems not only from the multiplicity of armed actors, but also from the existence of factors such as drug trafficking, the many different types of conflicts that surround the major conflict, which is the armed conflict, and above all from the inequality and social exclusion that lie at the root of the entire problem.

Along with this complexity, the Church has called attention to a community and regional dynamic that gives us hope because of the wealth and richness of an enormous variety of peace-building proposals that have emerged at the grassroots. The Conference of Bishops has highlighted that “... in each Colombian there is the capacity to build something new.”⁴ This has enabled us to take up the cause of all sectors of society that are committed, in their own way, to building a new nation.

Reading “the signs of the times” enables us to recognize the events of history and to discover amid them the mystery of the presence of God and what God is asking. There lies much of the Church’s contribution to this dialogue.

As a result of these dialogues and encounters with various sectors of society, there has been a clearer definition of possibilities for intervention in the armed conflict. The roles played by the Conference of Bishops that are best known to the public have involved facilitation, moral guidance and intermediation in several cases of negotiation between the government and irregular armed groups. Because of this, many people now consider the Catholic Church to be a very important or fundamental player in the development of peace agreements with the different armed groups, both guerrillas and paramilitaries or self-defense forces.

The Catholic Church has lent its services to peace negotiations while calling for steps that would lead the country toward a permanent national peace policy: “In its work for peace, the Colombian Catholic Church has expressed the idea of a ‘National Permanent Peace Policy’ or ‘Government Peace Policy’ as a guide for peace building. Such a policy must include the following elements: 1. National consensus. The government peace policy must be the fruit of a broad national consensus that takes into account the national interest and does not depend on special interests or those of particular groups. All representative sectors of the nation must therefore participate in its design. ...”⁵

The basic concept is the participation of all sectors in the development and implementation of a peace policy. Building peace after decades of confrontation and millions of victims requires a participatory process and pedagogy in all spheres of society. Both the participatory process and the

⁴ Colombian Conference of Bishops. “Call to Unity and Hope.” February 21, 2002.

⁵ Decalogue for a Government Peace Policy. Colombian Conference of Bishops. *Revista Documentación de Pastoral Social*, No 194, p. 118.

pedagogy that must accompany it have gradually been defined through thousands of encounters and community experiences.

In its efforts to promote citizen participation and a peace pedagogy, the Church recognizes that there are various scenarios for peace building; these are not separate compartments, however, but are closely related. There is the scenario of negotiation of the armed conflict, in which government sectors, organizations outside the law, other institutions and facilitators participate. Another scenario involves the formation and strengthening of organized civil society with a capacity for dialogue in the face of the multiple conflicts affecting society. And at least a third scenario involves building structures that guarantee social justice and peaceful coexistence from the grassroots. People involved in ministry face the challenge of establishing dialogue to transform the way in which the deepest aspects of relationships of coexistence are expressed and symbolized.

Nation building: constructing the public sphere

Along with this work by the Conference of Bishops, and closely linked to it, is an ongoing, nationwide task that has made it possible to move ahead with prospects and commitments related to the building of a country that can live in reconciliation and with social justice. “Toward the Colombia That We Want”⁶ was the theme of a workshop held by the bishops of Colombia several years ago to propose a model for the type of country that the Church envisions. The workshop included a detailed analysis of economics and poverty, the justice system, security — key areas of national life. The commitment to social justice has carried such weight that the Conference of Bishops has offered various programs throughout the country to help overcome the inequality that characterizes relationships in Colombia. Inequality and extreme poverty are two of the great challenges that the bishops have identified in the area of peace building.

At the end of the workshop, the bishops of the region concluded: “Peace is the fruit of justice; it is an ongoing construction related to development. Peace is a process; it is not merely the absence of war. It is more than the absence of war and more than peace accords.”

Commenting on the exercise of envisioning a new Colombia, Bishop Jaime Prieto of Barrancabermeja noted: “I believe it is important to ask what kind of government we want, and for what kind of society. We must also ask ourselves what kind of Church we want, and for what kind of society.”⁷

Reflection on building a new Colombia has led to discussion of the need to contribute to the construction of the public sphere as “the place where different views are expressed and debated, and where differences are accepted,” a place of pluralism and discussion that encourages tolerance and recognizes the role of dialogue in the development of a new model for society.

This role in building a sense of citizenship and a new country has placed the Conference of Bishops in ongoing dialogue with civil society organizations and the political community. Ecumenical encounters with leaders of other churches and religious denominations to discuss this shared nation-building process have produced great learnings. Over time, the range of ecumenical actions and campaigns has broadened.

One thing that can aid in understanding the Catholic Church’s role in peace building is its participation in debate and the development of consensus on a plan for international cooperation with Colombia. The so-called London-Cartagena process has brought sectors of civil society

⁶ “Toward the Colombia That We Want.” Millennium Workshops. *Revista Documentación de Pastoral Social*, March 2002.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 24.

together and created conditions for dialogue with the international community and the Colombian government about priorities and action areas for international cooperation. This stable scenario of dialogue about the country's problems and the role of the international community in the quest for peace may have one of the greatest impacts because of the scope of the issues being discussed, such as human rights in Colombia. Among the social sectors that have participated actively in this process is the National Social Ministry.⁸

Another very important scenario has involved dialogue with grassroots organizations committed to peace building in Colombia. The Conference of Bishops has participated actively in these opportunities through the National Conciliation Commission and the National Social Ministry Secretariat. The National Conciliation Commission was formed on August 4, 1995, and seeks to contribute to a negotiated political solution to the armed conflict, proposing and developing ways of bring the parties together and promoting the development of a permanent national peace policy.

The quest to build a nation characterized by just and equitable relations and the simultaneous building of bridges with the groups involved in the conflict are two main areas of action that must go hand in hand with a commitment to displaced people and victims of the armed conflict, all from the perspective of the Church's mission of commitment to the Gospel and proclamation of the life that comes from the Resurrected Christ.⁹

"The climate that makes it possible to carry out the great task of building a world in peace is one of concern for justice, in the prophetic sense. The basis for this great task, from the Church's Gospel perspective, is what we have called the ideal of a civilization of love and a culture of mercy."¹⁰

Humanitarian role

In 1996 there were no documents that warned about the problem of internal forced displacement in Colombia. At that time, the Conference of Bishops decided to launch a national and regional study to call public and government attention to the serious situation of the victims of the Colombian conflict. Since then, the problem of forced displacement has been monitored and analyzed by United Nations agencies and organizations of Colombian society. There is now a law that provides a framework for government assistance to the victims of this scourge and a Constitutional Court resolution ordering that the urgent needs of this population be addressed immediately. These are some of the results of the action that the Church began at that time. Marking the tenth anniversary of that first study, the Conference of Bishops, through the National Social Ministry Secretariat, issued a new follow-up document and updated its initial recommendations.¹¹

The National Social Ministry Secretariat's work has included a special research program on displacement and the situation of victims of the conflict, which provides input for recommendations

⁸ "We affirm that we need the international community's cooperation to find new paths, to take advantage of its experience, to implement solutions to the problems of drug trafficking and poverty, and to promote human rights and ecology." *Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia*. Final declaration of the General Meeting of Bishops. Bogotá, March 9-13, 1998.

⁹ We are concerned about the constant violation of the integrity of the person, reflected in forced disappearance, torture, and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment by those who prefer to use arms, instead of reason and dialogue, to impose their interests." *There will be Peace in Our Homeland When We Discover That We Are a Single Human Family*. Message of the 69th Ordinary Plenary Assembly. Bogotá, July 7, 2000.

¹⁰ Witnesses of Hope. 79th Ordinary Plenary Assembly of Colombian Bishops. Bogotá, July 4-8, 2005; 219.

¹¹ "Insisting on useful processes of dialogue and negotiation as the only possible option for moving toward a resolution of the internal armed conflict. Guaranteeing the protection of human rights and respect for international humanitarian law. Combating paramilitary groups whose presence in large areas of the country causes the massive displacement of the population. ..." *Challenges for Nation Building. The Country in the Face of Displacement, Armed Conflict and Humanitarian Crisis, 1995-2005*. Colombian Conference of Bishops. National Social Ministry Secretariat, Consulting Group on Human Rights and Displacement, CODHES. Bogotá, 2006, page 165.

to the national government and the international community and which guides Church efforts to prevent human rights violations and protect victims, as well as its long-term work for the restoration of victims' rights.

The studies have resulted in learnings about the focus of Church programs. Studies of forced displacement drew attention to the need to provide greater assistance to two groups of victims: members of ethnic minorities and families headed by women, especially when the woman has taken on this responsibility as a result of forced displacement.

Meanwhile, the research has shown the need for all levels of the Church to work to ensure that the parties to the conflict recognize, respect and abide by the humanitarian principles enshrined in international law on internal conflicts.

All of this has led the Church to clearly choose to work side by side with those who suffer and with the victims of the conflict. There are various aspects to working beside those who suffer: one is research, including the development of databases on forced displacement (RUT) and the recovery of historical memory (TEVERE). Another level involves advocacy plans for drawing greater national and international attention to the victims. One of these was the launch of an international campaign with the Caritas network focusing on the humanitarian crisis in Colombia. Work is also being done with other community and grassroots organizations and networks of victims to lobby for the drafting and implementation of a law on forced displacement. Another level involves raising awareness among Colombians through internal campaigns like the one for the Day of the Migrant. These are direct actions on the ground to prevent forced displacement through early warning systems and the accompaniment of displaced communities.

The Church's work in assisting victims is the result of a preferential option for the most vulnerable sectors and those that have suffered from armed actions.

Assistance to the displaced population has been aimed at the restoration of their rights and is part of a broader effort by the Conference of Bishops and Social Ministry to promote the defense of the human rights of all Colombians.¹² There are very close ties with non-governmental human rights organizations in Colombia and international organizations for joint action to promote and defend the dignity of every Colombian man and woman. A recent study by the University of the Andes and the National Social Ministry Secretariat highlights the urgency of the need to restore the rights of the displaced population. According to the study, there are 2,459,000 internally displaced people in Colombia, or 554,207 households, which means that the phenomenon has affected 6 percent of the Colombian population.¹³

One document that reflects the commitment to humanitarian work and that has been extremely important in taking steps to address the regional situation is the "Report on the Human Rights Situation and International Humanitarian Law in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta" published by the National Social Ministry Secretariat and the Human Rights Ombudsman's Office in December 2003. The report drew on the analysis done by the Humanitarian Observation Commission, which consists of the Social Ministry, the Ombudsman's Office and United Nations agencies that were invited to participate as observers.

The humanitarian report recommended: "Recognizing the grave humanitarian crisis affecting the communities living in the region of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, which has been caused by

¹² "We commit ourselves to contributing to the peaceful solution of the armed conflict by constantly denouncing all forms of human rights violations, whatever their source." *Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia*. Final declaration of the meeting of bishops. Bogotá, March 9-13, 1998.

¹³ *Toward a Proactive Policy for the Displaced Population*. University of the Andes and Conference of Bishops of Colombia, National Social Ministry Secretariat, Bogotá, 2006.

the constant violation of human rights and international humanitarian law by armed organizations operating outside the law. As a result, there is an urgent need to implement a comprehensive emergency plan aimed at protecting fundamental rights; guaranteeing respect for economic, social and cultural rights; and re-establishing the real and effective presence of the state, taking into account the right of indigenous communities to consultation and decision making by consensus.”¹⁴

Pastoral dialogues

The Church’s role in facilitating peace processes has been strongly supported by its accompaniment of victims and its work with them in all regions of the country.

The backdrop for these interventions has been the development of ways of approaching people, building trust and establishing dialogue. Among these are “pastoral dialogues” — ways of listening to the parties involved in the conflict so as to build bridges of communication and open up possibilities for encounter. Pastoral dialogue is a mechanism that has been fiercely debated in Colombia; at times it has been the subject of juridical and legal debate, while at others its relevance has been questioned. In many cases, there have been efforts to control or limit this form of intervention.

Pastoral dialogue is an ecclesial exercise that results from reflection and discernment about what the current moment demands of the local Church. The bishop and members of the Church community analyze the circumstances, reading them in light of the Gospel. Finally, as the leader of the Church, the bishop defines the best type of pastoral dialogue. This exercise is well known in the field of armed conflict, but in Colombia it is frequently used as a methodology for intervention in other scenarios and conflicts.

Pastoral dialogue can be oriented toward humanitarian situations, such as the liberation of kidnapping victims, cases in which people have been threatened, or cases in which communities are pressured in an effort to displace them. But pastoral dialogue can go further, toward a search for ways of ending confrontations.

Pastoral dialogue is understood as the possibility of exploring paths creatively and with great pastoral imagination, discovering possibilities and strengths in the parties involved, but without abandoning the prophetic voice that denounces the evil of violence and proclaims the need to find different ways to reach the desired goals.

One important element is that the Church’s intervention has sought to establish the legitimacy of dialogue as a means of resolving confrontations and conflicts in the country. Re-establishing the value of dialogue is a difficult, demanding task when there have been decades of armed confrontations and a multiplicity of conflicts.

Pastoral dialogues and their relevance have been debated at various times, and their results have been both questioned and defended. The consensus is that they are part of the Church’s pastoral work and that their goal is to solve the conflict affecting the country.

Another important element is that the role played in each process of negotiation or bringing people together for peace is considered in advance by the Conference of Bishops, so as to reach consensus on the steps to be taken. Because various processes are under way to bring the parties together, the Conference of Bishops recently decided to form a “Peace Commission” made up of the bishops

¹⁴ “Situation of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta.” National Social Ministry Secretariat and Ombudsman’s Office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*). December 2003. Recommendations, p. 96.

who are participating in these processes. It is significant that a body such as the Conference of Bishops engages in joint reflection and action when facing a range of possibilities. The dynamics and possibilities of the approaches taken with each armed group are obviously very diverse, and there is a need for a mechanism for reviewing the lessons learned and progressing toward long-term goals.

Ministry for peace and reconciliation

What peace-building strategy has the Colombian Church implemented throughout these years? The answer lies in a series of agreements and principles expressed in documents about what can generically be called “peace and reconciliation ministry.”¹⁵ These documents respond to the need for a Church response to the challenges of contributing to a peace process. These documents develop the principle that peace and reconciliation are central in building a society that will ensure the human fulfillment of all of its members, while peace is central to living out the Christian message. The documents therefore speak of levels of commitment, values, principles, guidelines for action and the role of each person.¹⁶

Having a set of decisions, declarations and Colombian Church documents on these issues has been of great practical assistance to parishes and church groups in defining their commitment to peace as an integral part of the Church’s work. It has also ensured that actions by the Conference of Bishops in negotiations with armed groups have had an impact on long-term community processes leading toward reconciliation.

In the well-known negotiations that have occurred, including the case of the M-19, the church has always been present through the Conference of Bishops. This process of being present in negotiations has been long and has resulted in learnings within the Church. As the Church has found itself involved in new processes for bringing groups together and negotiating with armed groups, there has been an increasingly urgent need to expand the range of interventions and respond in ways that touch the lives of communities and involve them in peace building.

Reflection on these roles and possibilities has remained active over the years and has led to important lessons about ways of intervening from the perspective of the country’s “moral reserve,” strongly backed by the credibility of the Church’s commitment to seek solutions. Each specific conflict has required an ethical reflection that offers alternatives in terms of justice, while demanding that those intervening between the parties to the conflict have the necessary moral credibility. This has placed great demands on the Colombian Church, which must constantly ask itself what message it must convey to make peace possible.

Along with these learnings there has been very deep reflection on ways of integrating all of the Church’s possibilities to allow for a more enriching and complete intervention in the face of war and violence.

Creating spaces for encounter, listening, consolation, reconciliation

Integrating the voices of various sectors affected by the situation of conflict and feeling the pain caused by atrocities has led the Church to the task of “creating spaces” for reflection and action through its dioceses and local organizations.

¹⁵ “Toward a Peace Ministry.” Colombian Conference of Bishops. Working paper, May 2, 1994.

“Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia.” Final declaration of the General Meeting of Bishops, Bogotá, March 9-13, 1998.

¹⁶ “Ten Principles for the Journey toward Peace.” Final message of the 72nd Extraordinary Plenary Assembly of Colombian Bishops. Bogotá, March 8, 2002.

“Creating spaces” is a task that the church has identified when it has been faced with armed conflict and, especially, with the victims of aggression and human rights violations. It is a close and very human response that opens doors for people who have no way of dealing with their suffering and expressing their sorrow, as well as for those who cannot get a hearing for their proposals for peace and reconciliation. By “spaces” we mean not only physical places or moments, but also environments in which relationships that allow people to live with human dignity can be created and re-created. The perception is that this vital space is very limited in regions in which the confrontation tends to involve all inhabitants.

The idea of creating pastoral spaces is aimed at helping to put into practice the great principles that lie at the root of human coexistence, creating conditions that enable people can to live fully and with dignity amid extremely adverse social circumstances. This means being able to speak out and listen to others, being able to express feelings and suffering, as well as hopes and dreams. It means being able to dream with others a future in peace. Finally, it means creating possibilities for committed, active, transforming hope.

Pastoral spaces enable victims to recognize themselves as such, to live their sorrow and in many cases to mourn the dead whom they could not bury. At a conference on the humanitarian situation in Sierra de la Macarena in January 2006, one peasant farmer from the municipality of Vista Hermosa said: “We are persecuted because we live in a guerrilla zone. We are accused of helping them. Some of us who didn’t agree with the armed groups have been fingered. My life is in danger. I sent my children to study in another district. I was going to bring them home this year, but because of the situation I won’t. People disappear because they are leaders, because they sell their goods to others, because they bring in motors from outside, because they are ‘strong-armed’ when they relate to other armed groups.”¹⁷

It is precisely these spaces of life and hope that have characterized the Church’s presence in sectors in which the state is not present and where pastoral work is accompanied by various community services providing education, health care, recreation, etc.

Around the “spaces” revolves the question of what must be done to ensure that each person feels that the relationships he or she establishes are safe and fraternal. We can find thousands of examples. One is the Witness, Truth and Reconciliation (*Testimonio, Verdad y Reconciliación* or TEVERE) program, which is a methodology for recovering the historical memory, welcoming the victims, healing the aggression that has been suffered and opening up new possibilities. The healing process must begin now, in social and community terms, even though the conflict has not yet ended. Those who serve as catalysts for this program at the grassroots are people from the affected communities who have participated in a formation and reflection process that has been implemented nationally by the National Social Ministry Secretariat.

At the service of the historical memory

One of the complexities of the problem in Colombia, from the Church’s standpoint, is that actions must be implemented to recover and keep alive the memory of the past even while the confrontation is continuing and, in some cases, worsening. There is a constant need for more in-depth examination of the challenge posed by this work.

The recovery of memory can have many effects in the future, because it will allow movement toward forgiveness, once memory has been “purified,” and will allow the creation of the conditions necessary for making reparations to victims within the reconciliation process. Some of the great

¹⁷ TEVERE Bulletin No. 6. Humanitarian Situation in Sierra de la Macarena, Municipality of Vista Hermosa. National Social Ministry Secretariat. Bogotá, January 2006.

challenges involve returning lands that have been seized from populations that were displaced; in many cases, the lands are still in the hands of the perpetrators.

As part of the process of contributing to the recovery of memory, a long-range support mechanism has been created to help address the situation of thousands of people who have suffered the significant loss of everything they own because of displacement. The National Social Ministry Secretariat has followed this process with particular interest, as it involves millions of hectares of productive land belonging to a people who currently suffer chronic poverty because they have been stripped of all their possibilities and resources.

It must be noted, therefore, that the Church has played a broader role than many people realize. It has played these roles in working groups and negotiating processes, and because of its regional and local presence it has been able to respond to many social problems. There is a great diversity of local responses and social actions that make the Church a vital presence in both evangelization and nation building.

Through parishes, ecclesial movements and grassroots organizations, Catholic communities have felt the need to take a stand and integrate the proposals made by the Conference of Bishops, responding to a local context that is very demanding because of the many parties involved. In many cases, parishes and grassroots organizations have encountered various expressions of conflict and armed groups that force the Conference of Bishops, dioceses and church bodies to take new positions.¹⁸

In Colombia, peace building has become a way of approaching the local level, of giving a human face to the quest for alternatives.

The communities that ask how they can better integrate into the dynamic of the quest for peace are the ones that have suffered for years from confrontations, forced displacement, murder and the destruction of their environment.

Accompanying those who suffer

What has enabled them to express their opinions and raise their voices is the fact that they are “accompanied” in all their circumstances. Along the rivers of the Pacific region, in the rain forest of southern Colombia, in the mountains on the borders there are many pastoral organizations that are in constant contact with peasant farmers, Afro-Colombian communities, indigenous people and settlers. The idea of accompaniment has been one of “walking with,” of placing oneself in the situation of those who have directly suffered the atrocities and who, amid so much suffering, have established their autonomy and created alternatives for themselves and their children.

Accompaniment demands an active presence that listens and helps communities explore possibilities in greater depth. Accompaniment means listening and reflecting together. In many cases, accompaniment has led to a deeper understanding of situations that the armed groups do not want mentioned: the thousands of murders that communities have been forbidden to talk about or even to mourn. Accompaniment has also involved the collective establishment of dialogue, taking advantage of pastoral space to pray and to remember the people who have been disappeared or killed and who were not buried at the time because the armed groups prohibited it.

¹⁸ “We commit ourselves to the creation and strengthening of parish, diocesan and regional Life, Justice and Peace Commissions to facilitate dialogue, promote working groups on peace, engage in humanitarian work with the civilian population affected by the conflict, and reach local and regional humanitarian agreements.” *Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia*. Final declaration of the General Meeting of Bishops. Bogotá, March 9-13, 1998.

Reconciliation requires a new kind of communication. Community accompaniment makes it possible to establish this new kind of communication, which recognizes the value of historical truth, which is able to distinguish among the different types of truth in a peace process, and which finally gives a name to and calls by name that which could not be named.

In accompaniment, questions arise that must be addressed through community discernment and dialogue. These questions involve the identification and definition of the victims and perpetrators, when there are often cases in which the victims, over time, have become involved in actions that turn them into perpetrators and many perpetrators also claim to be victims. In the long-term process, communities seek opportunities for reflection and clarification of these complex situations.

Encounter in a country of regions

While community dialogue and accompaniment is under way, progress is also being made in encounters and reflection within the Church.¹⁹

Dialogue within the Church is multiple in several senses: in regional diversity, in the multiplicity of Church proposals and plans in the social sphere, and in the various options emerging in the regions. It is dialogue in which many voices from the academic world, other religious denominations, the world and civil society in general have been heard. There are various ideas about how to address Colombia's regional complexity; even the armed groups have had their own ideas about regionalization and their own regional plans. The question has been: Why not envision of a new form of regionalization based on peace and reconciliation?

It is very significant that this process has shown more clearly that Colombia is a country of regions, and that the quest for solutions and alternatives to its problems is born of a capacity to integrate its regional diversity and richness. There are various models that respond to the question about the characteristics that a region of peace should have. Among these responses are the Development and Peace programs that have given rise to peace laboratories with an inclusive model for participatory planning and development plans involving people at the grassroots.

When the Conference of Bishops has examined the causes of the conflict affecting the country, it has often questioned the model of development that has been followed for decades, which has resulted in the exclusion of sectors of society and the concentration of wealth and power. Consequently, the proposal for building a lasting peace has created the need to support regional and local proposals for development that are inclusive and characterized by solidarity.

Regions and local communities have been privileged spaces for proposing solidarity as the path to peace.

One concrete step in peace building has emerged in the integration of the regional and the local, in the discussion of possibilities for peace in Colombia. Several years ago, the Social Ministry began a process of reflection to identify the regions that the country must accept and include. This has involved discussions of regional history, identities and the impact that the armed conflict and new Colombian conflicts have had on the region. It has been very interesting to see, based on work with displaced populations, how the regional dynamic has changed and been transformed in recent years. We have also seen the need to continue building a vision for the regionalization of the country.

¹⁹ "Based on the historical reality that we share with our brothers and sisters, we understand the need for all of us to become a Colombia that is more united and in greater solidarity." *Let Hope be Reborn*. Message of the 68th Ordinary Plenary Assembly of the Colombian Bishops. Bogotá, July 9, 1999.

The issue of regions and their participation in the processes under way in Colombia remains key for the Church in building citizenship for peace.

Many of the actions begun in the area of peace building have been conceived as an expression of a regional problem, as well as an opportunity to draw together the many regional expressions and community efforts to create a climate that will allow people to live in peace.

Journeying amid hope and cries for justice

In 1996, after a series of reflections about how to respond to the suffering of communities dispersed throughout the country because of attacks on villages and especially because of the humanitarian crisis in the department of Antioquia and the region of Urabá, the National Social Ministry Secretariat began a great march for peace in Colombia: the National Way of the Cross for Life, Justice and Peace.

For seven years, the Way of the Cross journeyed through the country with a huge cross that represented the people's pain and their longing for resurrection and life. It was basically a regional activity that made it possible to identify problems and raise the cry of those who suffered from multiple atrocities and who had not been acknowledged by Colombian society.

Along the way, regional commitments were made to the defense of human rights, the construction of a just and negotiated peace, and reconciliation as the long-term way to peace, including reparation for the victims who became visible and were present throughout the Way of the Cross.

More than an isolated action or event, the Way of the Cross was envisioned as a broad process that enabled people to mobilize in support of a negotiated solution to the conflict and in solidarity with all those who have suffered and who have been made invisible by the perpetrators and by society. In this way, the communal commitment took on a permanent, renewing dynamic that united communities, social organizations participating in the Way of the Cross at the national level and the efforts of the entire Colombian Church.

Along with the Way of the Cross, two processes emerged that had a major regional impact. One was the Schools for Peace and Coexistence. These schools were originally called Mobile Human Rights Schools, but because of the danger that association with human rights studies represented for many people, the decision was made to call them Schools for Peace and Coexistence without changing their focus or emphasis. The promoters of the schools — the Society of Jesus and the National Social Ministry Secretariat — have learned many lessons from this process. One important lesson was related to the complex regional situation that allows or impedes efforts to address human rights issues. It seemed that the mere term “human rights” had a dangerous connotation for those who had violated them and became part of that which could not be named.

As the School for Peace and Coexistence has progressed, it has paved the way for communal possibilities for reflection and in-depth exploration of each community's potential for defending human dignity and building peace. It is a process rooted at the personal level, in the contribution that each human being can make to peace and dignity, including efforts at the community and local levels.

Formation and action require in-depth peace-building processes. The Church responded to this need with a Reconciliation Mission that journeyed through the same regions where the Way of the Cross had taken place, gathering together the hopes and plans that arose in the wake of the pilgrimage for Life, Justice and Peace.

Communities

“A pipe bomb fired at a group of members of the Self-Defense Forces missed its target and landed in the middle of the altar in the chapel, killing 199 people who had taken refuge there.”²⁰ This testimony recounts the events of May 2, 2002, in Bojayá, in the department of Chocó, one of the largest community massacres in the confrontations between armed groups.²¹

Throughout these decades of conflict, fear and defenselessness have marked the lives of many communities in Colombia. In many cases, bombings, threats and wounds have engraved themselves on the people’s memory. Meanwhile, however, plans have emerged that have enabled the people to rebuild new relationships and take on the urgent task of proposing ways to protect their dignity and ensure their survival.

Priests and church workers in the areas most battered by the violence often speak of “the communities.” The term can be used to refer to those who live nearby and face common problems, but “communities” especially refers to those who have a common vision of the future that involves their ability to build something new, to make a contribution and to forge new paths together.

The communities are the ones that try to resist the violence and that, throughout the years, have engaged in a complex process of analysis and preparation of in-depth proposals and plans, both as part of the Peace Ministry and in regional peace building.

“Communities of resistance” have taken multiple forms and have often been encouraged by the local diocese. The Church has tried to ensure that there are many communities throughout the country that distance themselves from the armed groups and plan a future in which each person’s dignity and the communities’ ability to contribute to peace and reconciliation among Colombians are recognized.²² Through dialogue and a close relationship with the communities of resistance, the Church has encouraged discussion of the best way to define a communal decision to actively maintain a distance from the irregular armed groups while envisioning alternatives and drawing up proposals to safeguard the lives of community members, so they can remain on their land and become part of the quest for peace at the regional and national levels.

Various responses have emerged amid the tension created by maintaining a distance without losing the possibility of opening up paths to peace. In many cases, these communities have chosen to abide by principles of “autonomy and independence” that are mentioned in documents by the Conference of Bishops, such as “Peace Ministry in the Current Situation of Armed Conflict in Colombia.”

Throughout these years, many questions have been raised for the dioceses, religious communities and church workers who have accompanied at-risk communities in both the countryside and city. Some involve the Church’s options amid the conflicts and directly affect or limit its role in seeking solutions. Should it remain neutral? Choose options? How can it combine the prophetic role of denouncing violence, whatever the source, with that of being a builder of peace and reconciliation?

²⁰ Magazine of the Ombudsman’s Office (*Defensoría del Pueblo*).

²¹ “In the community of Bellavista, in Vigía, we have no food, no shelter, nothing. We haven’t been able to bury the dead because it’s impossible, and most of the bodies are decomposing.” Letter from Father Ramos, the priest in the region.

²² “We commit ourselves to supporting and defending zones, communities and territories of peace that enable civil society to remain outside the conflict, protected from the horrors of the war.” *There will Be Peace in Our Homeland When We Discover That We Are a Single Human Family*. Message of the 69th Ordinary Plenary Assembly of Colombian Bishops. Bogotá, July 7, 2000.

In the effort to foster reflection both at the local level and within the Conference of Bishops, steps have been taken that have demanded dialogue and an understanding of the views of the situation that stem from social analysis.²³

To gather together the communities' experiences, the National Social Ministry Secretariat has convened Congresses of Reconciliation. The third such gathering was held in 2005 to discuss how justice should be understood in processes of negotiation with armed groups.

The Congresses of Reconciliation bring together significant experiences of peace and reconciliation at the local, regional and national levels. There is a great accumulation of viewpoints and practical visions that have been discussed with victims and that include proposals for dialogue among citizens and peace building efforts in the public sphere. Besides their thematic areas and formal presentations, these meetings provide a privileged opportunity for reciprocal learning from the communities' experiences. The Congress is an acknowledgement of the work being done in the country at various levels to seek reconciliation. The people, men and women, are present in these efforts.

The Third Congress was a rich encounter that reflected efforts to pave the way for consistently applying the principles of truth, justice and reparation, as well as major international principles. It also provided the opportunity to debate the position of church workers regarding the juridical framework needed for peace to become reality in the entire country, with broad participation by the victims throughout the process.

International support

The initiatives developed by the Colombian Church have received widespread support from international organizations at various levels. This support has gotten a boost from the Caritas Internationalis network's campaign, which holds that "Peace in Colombia is Possible." This campaign is mobilizing thousands of people around the world through Caritas organizations in each country.

The campaign's message has synthesized the Colombian Church's proposal into two concepts: peace will be attained through negotiations, and it will be made lasting through social justice.

Situations of serious conflict always require international solidarity that is made visible through visits, encounters and direct relationships with the affected communities. The Caritas network's campaign has enabled parliamentary groups and personalities from Europe and the United States to visit the regions that have been afflicted by serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

This form of solidarity, expressed through peace diplomacy and direct contact between various sectors of the Colombian population and Church and political figures from other countries, shows that peace building is a global issue.

In conclusion, it is important to underscore the enormous challenge of doing pastoral work amid a complex conflict with multiple facets. The lessons learned by the Colombian Church shed light as we reflect on the demands of the long journey leading toward the goal of a world that lives in peace with social justice.

²³ "The challenges we face today demand that we reaffirm our Christian and ecclesial identity. We seek to do this with an attitude of openness, humbly and sincerely, to courageously undertake all that the Lord asks us to do. We want to have the attitude that John Paul II recommended for the entire church at the start of the third millennium: an attitude of conversion." *Witnesses of Hope*. Colombian Conference of Bishops, 79th Plenary Assembly, No. 108.