



*Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia*



German Commission for Justice and Peace

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Bogota, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2017

*At the conclusion of the workshop entitled "Memory, Truth and Justice – Dealing with the burden of the past. Learning in the light of the Colombian experiences", which took place in Colombia from 20-24 March 2017, the participants – representing fifteen different countries – offer the following reflection on their experiences and learning:*

Coming from different parts of the world that have experienced violent conflict in recent decades, and where the work of reconciliation is still on-going, we were privileged to be invited by the Colombian Bishops' Conference to hold this workshop at a critical moment in the history of Colombia. Our primary objective is to show our solidarity with the people of Colombia, sharing from our own struggles and reflecting on what we can learn from how people here are responding to the current challenges.

Conscious of the complexity of the many urgent issues facing Colombia, in the short time available to us we sought to gain a broad range of insights by dividing into small groups which visited different actors in various parts of the country, including: Medellín, Cali, Cucuta, Quibdó, and Soacha, as well as Bogotá. Our mission was to experience the human reality of conflict in Colombia, connecting with the hearts and minds of those affected, while exploring together how we can hope to bring forward the crucial work of peace and reconciliation while overcoming the burden of a past marked by violence.

A just and honest approach to peace and reconciliation requires that the needs of the victims of the conflict are placed firmly at the centre of the process. With this in mind, we began our workshop with encounters with victims and survivors. Our hearts were filled with pain on hearing of the suffering of those who carry physical, mental and emotional wounds caused by multiple forms of violence and many different perpetrators, and whose hearts have been forever scarred by the loss of loved ones: murdered, massacred or disappeared. To these, our brothers and sisters who have suffered so much, we express our unconditional solidarity. Their courage and resilience, and their willingness to continue to work for a better future for their children, and for all the future generations of Colombia, inspires us and gives us hope.

Thinking of those we met, we echo the hope expressed by Pope Francis for Colombia during his visit to Cuba in 2015: "May the blood shed by thousands of innocent people during long decades of armed conflict, united to that of the Lord Jesus Christ crucified, sustain all the efforts being made...to achieve definitive reconciliation". We saw how the Christian faith served as a light to the victims in the darkness of their pain. That same spiritual energy needs to inspire all those engaged in the work of peace and the task of shaping a new vision for the future.

The willingness of combatants on all sides of the conflict to put down their weapons and commit to exclusively peaceful means of conflict resolution will be decisive for the future of this peace process. We appreciate the willingness of some of those who have been involved on different sides in the conflict to share their experiences with us. Meeting with retired military in the ACORE association we heard their idea of peace and listened with careful attention to their criticisms of the current peace



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agreement, nevertheless we were deeply concerned by their interpretation of the peace process and the lack of confidence they showed towards it. We acknowledge the tragic loss of life suffered by the armed forces of Colombia in the decades of this conflict, and the impact on the many families affected. We acknowledge the pivotal role that the current leadership of the Colombian military and police has played, and continues to play in the peace process, anxious to carve out a path for a new and peaceful future and prevent further loss of life.

In *La Picota* prison we met with members of FARC and a small group from ELN. We listened as they explained their decision to take up arms and their determination to continue their struggle by political means alone. We heard of their reservations about the implementation of the peace agreement and the possible risks they face. To all those ready to lay down their arms, we offer our support for the journey towards peaceful means and we appeal to the Colombian Government to facilitate their reintegration by implementing what has been agreed. As these groups withdraw Government needs to ensure that it enforces the rule of law, not to leave a vacuum that will be filled by the drug trade. To the ELN and all those who have not yet taken this step, we plead with you to turn away from the futile path of violence, which can only lead to pain and suffering. Regrettably, a scheduled meeting with members of the AUC was not allowed to take place.

Violence destroys the social fabric of the nation and its political institutions. The social doctrine of the Catholic Church tells us that peace is much more than the absence of war. Looking at Colombian society today we can see that peace is about much more than disarmament. The signing of a peace agreement is a critical step, but the strength of the process lies in the commitment to implementation and social transformation. With this as our focus, we spent a day with civil society organisations working on issues of peace, justice, truth and memory. We have met people who are working tirelessly to achieve a political solution to the problems facing Colombia, courageously ignoring the risks in a context where thousands of community leaders have been murdered. True peace can only be achieved through the active inclusion of the most vulnerable groups in Colombia, including the indigenous populations, the Afro-Colombian community, the *campesinos* and those living in areas where the conflict remains very much alive today. We emphasise the responsibility of the Government to ensure their safety and establish social justice. We encourage human rights advocates in Colombia not to lose heart at a time when their work is so vital for the future. Attacks on community leaders are unacceptable and need to stop. The people we spoke to made a particular appeal for intervention from the international community to protect their rights and safety and prevent further loss of life.

We were accompanied throughout this process by representatives of the Catholic Church in Colombia, who have made reconciliation their mission and justice and peace their daily task. The Church has been working from all angles to transform a culture of violence with the message of the Gospel: supporting the victims and challenging the perpetrators, always with a consistent focus on the dignity of the human person. We have seen important examples of leadership from the Church – local parish communities welcoming and supporting victims and clergy engaging with those involved in violence



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in an effort to open their eyes to the suffering of the victims and encourage them to see their enemies as fellow human beings, worthy of dignity and respect. We have heard from many different sectors of society that now is really the moment when the Church needs to show leadership to rebuild trust by challenging corruption and the many forms of violence and criminality that are destroying communities. We encourage all members of the Catholic Church and other spiritual leaders in Colombia to respond with energy and commitment to the Christian call to be instruments of God's peace.

In conclusion, as Colombia awaits with anticipation to the visit of Pope Francis in September of this year, hopeful that he will find a society committed to the path of reconciliation, we recall the appeal he made to Colombia in 2015 while the negotiations were still on-going: "Please, we do not have the right to allow ourselves yet another failure on this path of peace and reconciliation". During these days in Colombia we have seen a society that is ready for peace. We have encountered welcoming and generous people who deserve a better future for themselves and for the generations to come. Despite the fact that the majority of those we met have never known peace in their land in all their lives, we see hopeful signs that a vision for peace and reconciliation is beginning to take shape, based, above all, on the recognition that the challenges facing Colombian society can only be resolved by peaceful means and that these devastating cycles of violence have to end.

From this experience we have identified some key principles which are important for Colombia at the present time, but equally applicable to other areas of conflict:

- The needs of the victims need to be at the heart of the peace process. They cannot be left behind or stigmatised. Reparation for the injustice they have suffered needs to be a priority to allow the society to move forward together.
- A commitment by all actors to withdraw permanently the threat of violence is an essential first step to build trust in the peace process.
- A peace agreement is an important achievement, but it will only be successful to the extent that it is implemented in a spirit of truth, justice and transparency.
- The full implementation of a comprehensive plan for peace, extending beyond disarmament and demobilisation, is necessary to ensure that one form of violence is not simply replaced by another.
- The task of elaborating a shared vision for the future is difficult and complex, but it begins with the recognition of our common humanity and interdependence.
- The safeguarding of the natural environment, for the good of the whole society, is an essential foundation for peace.
- Social cohesion needs to be a primary objective at all levels of government with a commitment to the promotion of inclusion by addressing inequality and barriers to participation for marginalised groups, supported by investment in the necessary infrastructure and social services.



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- A sustainable peace requires a robust ethical framework which ensures that truth is respected, government is transparent, commitments are honoured and the most vulnerable are protected.
- Questions of truth, justice and historical memory are both important and contentious. There will be different views on what is achievable, desirable and legitimate. These issues have the potential to advance the process of reconciliation, but also to destabilise it. The guiding principle for these processes needs to be the goal of social transformation to ensure the mistakes of the past will not be repeated.
- The international community has a particular responsibility to accompany processes of conflict resolution, using its influence to support participation and protect the vulnerable, and staying with the process beyond the initial stages, monitoring and supporting implementation.

Today, meeting on the anniversary of the death of Blessed Monsignor Oscar Romero, who died working for Justice and Peace, we pray for his intercession for peace and reconciliation of Colombian and the safety and security of its people.

*The participants wish to express our sincere thanks to our hosts for this workshop, the Colombian Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Comisión de Conciliación Nacional of Colombia, as well as the partner organisations, the German Commission for Justice and Peace and AGEH (the German Catholic Association for Development Cooperation). We express our heartfelt thanks to the different groups and organisations who gave their time to meet with us and shared experiences that were often difficult and painful. Finally, we are most grateful for the work of the organising staff, translators and all those who supported and assisted us during our time in Colombia.*

### **Additional Information**

1. The workshop entitled "Memory, Truth and Justice – Dealing with the burden of the past. Learning in the light of the Colombian experiences" took place from 20-24 March 2017. Participants were based in the Guest House of the Colombian Catholic Bishops' Conference, Bogotá, but travelled to different parts of the country during the course of the workshop.
2. Participants came from 15 different countries: Colombia, Germany, Ireland, Burundi, Timor Leste, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Bosnia Herzegovina, Guatemala, Liberia, South Sudan, Spain, Ukraine, Vietnam and Zimbabwe.
3. The workshop was jointly organised by the Colombian Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Comisión de Conciliación Nacional of Colombia, the German Commission for Justice and Peace and AGEH (the German Catholic Association for Development Cooperation).