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The role of the Church in a post-conflict period

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This reflective article examines the advance in the investigation carried out into the role and importance that the church has in a conflict and post-conflict period. It considers that the church as an institution is the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the promoter of peace and justice *par excellence*, playing a part in Conflict Resolution. This reflection proposes the analysis of the theory of forgiveness as a necessary element in reconciliation.

Introduction

Colombia is a country that has been in armed conflict for more than four decades, which, according to the National Centre of Historical Memory, has left an approximate number of 220,000 dead, of whom 176,000 were civilians, 25,000 disappeared (CMH report 2013) and another 800,000 victims of wounding and mutilation, among combatants and civilians and some 5 million displaced persons. Beside this there are other dead, according to the INML, in 2012 16,033 people died as a result of fights, domestic violence, crime and conflict between gangs.¹

1. Reasons for the Conflict

One of the questions being asked in Colombia is: “What are the causes of the conflict?” According to the investigations of various writers, among the causes there are the following problems: the lack of definition of private ownership rights, social injustice, inequity or inequality, domestic violence, corruption, abuse of the rights of the unprotected, lack of access to social, economic and political rights.²

* This article is an advance in the work of investigation called: The theory of forgiveness in the process of Reconciliation, which the undersigned is developing as a student of a degree in Social Conflicts and the building of Peace at the University of Cartagena, Colombia.

In addition, natural disasters, which cause displacement and poverty³. There exist others of an endogenous nature, such as: domestic violence and ill-treatment, family break-ups, fathers leaving their children, loss of values, intolerance, bullying in schools or communities, which taken together generate conflicts⁴.

Now it is necessary to check the text of the Book of James, chapter 4:

What causes wars and conflicts among you? Do they not come from your passions that are at war in your members? ²You desire and do not have, so you kill and you covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and wage war. You have not, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁵

Similarly to the cause of conflicts, one must see that envy, greed, ill-treatment and violence come from unsatisfied ambitions. In that order in Colombia the victims have increased, have suffered torture, the deaths of parents or relatives, violations of their families or of themselves, forced displacement, with deep wounds, indelible memories.

2. The Proposal: Forgiveness as an element of Reconciliation

Melo (2001) asked the question: “Is it possible to forgive?” referring to cases like his of people killing his family; it reflects the thinking of Derrida (2001), for whom forgiveness emerges as the result of a project of reconciliation. Society renounces sanctions, to reduce the cost of violence, without even having genuinely accepted the responsibility. Nevertheless, it is necessary that everyone, both victim and victimiser, should be able to consider using this tool.

In 2001 a group of interdisciplinary professionals of the University of Harvard proposed the theory of forgiveness and reconciliation, defining it as the effective means of cleansing from hatred and desire for vengeance, considering that it gives priority to the victims over the victimisers and that being forgiving is indispensable to thinking in a culture of peace.⁶

Thomas More said that a social being is a being that forgives, which teaches us that human beings must have the capacity to forgive.

It is essential to think of forgiveness as a necessary tool in overcoming conflict, as Hannah Arendt proposes in her book *The Human Condition* (1958); she said that a way of action was needed towards forgiveness and

proposes it as an action; the construction of acting out one's own scenarios may permit a man to recreate his actions as intentional.

One must be aware that there is the temptation to reject forgiveness for both victims and victimisers; the fighter denies his violent actions, ignoring the damage, the paramilitaries will justify their action, the military justified war or abuse, because neither will one side ask for forgiveness, nor the victims be disposed to forgive. One must think of something not imposed, either by law or religion, it must be something that grows in the heart, remembering that it is better to forgive the offender, because you must love your enemy, because it is also a process in which one encounters feelings such as kindness, compassion and mercy, preventing the continuation of feelings of anger, hatred and the desire for vengeance, which end by perpetuating violence, creating sick and sad people.

Against problems like injustice and inequity there rises the voice of the Christian church which has the function of being salt and light; it is the answer to human needs; it is called to fight against injustice, against oppression and against corruption – a great enemy at all times⁷ – to promote forgiveness as a necessary element in reconciliation.

3. The Church and its role in conflict resolution

The Church can help in this process of Conflict Resolution, which, according to ROMERO (UNIR)⁸, consists in the “ability to develop processes within the framework of peace, justice, respect and acceptance, to improve long-term relations and attitudes between the conflicting parties”. Effective, sustainable solutions must be found which make it possible to satisfy the main interests and the needs of those involved.

One may consider developing a project through which the church may intervene in the stages of conflict and post-conflict, by promoting a **positive peace** which may be linked to the term **justice**, as proposed by the organisation of Christian Churches in Germany⁹, which teaches us that positive peace means the absence of violence and the creation of participative and inclusive structures that contribute to reducing violence and largely preventing the outbreak of new acts of violence.

The construction of peace means transition, gradualness, that is, it will be a long process in which a series of structural transformations is called for,

because the suggestion of Galtung (2005) is proposed as the strategy, namely the three Rs: **reconstruction**, whose aim is to heal the open wounds on the occasion of confrontation between the parties and the repair of the material damage; **reconciliation**, which attempts to undo the meta-conflict, and **resolution**, which seeks to create the necessary conditions to solve the original conflict.

Therefore the Church is called to propose transformation in society, to propose ways of reconstructing personal relations, to overcome the structural causes of conflicts, to encourage reconciliation through pardon, and the peaceful resolution of domestic, communal or district conflicts¹⁰.

4. Strategies for conflict resolution in Colombia

The projects listed below, carried out and developed for the Church in Colombia may be taken as strategies for conflict resolution:

4.1 Promotion of a culture of peace, through the doctrine of Non-violence, using the tool Participative Action Investigation – PAI. This tool was developed for the **Christian Association of Mennonites for Justice, Peace and Non-violent Action (JUST PEACE)**, which works in the districts of Cauca, Chocó Cundinamarca, Córdoba, Bolívar and Sucre. It is a source of power for the processes of the construction of a just, complete and lasting Peace, since it is itself the work of the churches and communities. They work with churches and social organisations in the promotion and construction of applied knowledge and skills for the “action and transforming impact of Justice, non-violence and peace for a life of dignity, reconciled with all creation”.¹¹

4.2 One contribution to the transformation of the conflict is the BPCT project (Building Peace from Community Transformation), which promotes peace-building processes from the community resolution of conflicts. These processes are led by evangelical Christian churches, which live out their faith and commitment to peace in armed and social conflict zones. This is carried out in four regions of the country: Caucasia (Bajo Cauca Antioqueño), Istmina y Andagoya (Chocó), Supía y Marmato (Caldas) and Soacha (Cundinamarca). The BPCT project seeks to give rise to and strengthen non-violent transformation community processes and peace building, starting with the victims’ experience and initiative, in dialogue

with the state institutions, joining with regional and national networks and platforms, which are models and support for justice, integral redress and not repetition, with sustainable plans and projects for a life of dignity¹².

In this process, the Christian churches and their focal communities have strengthened their capacity for resolving conflicts and building peace; they develop processes with full attention to the victims of armed conflict, starting with processes of truth, justice and all-round reparation and they are implementing life programmes which support a life of dignity in all its aspects and overall peace.

4.3 Systemisation of experiences, in order to help to consolidate a complete process of reconciliation. By means of developing the **Historical Memory** project, the Christian body JUSTA PAZ (JUST PEACE) documents the impact of the internal armed conflict on the evangelical Christian churches in Colombia, bringing to light the significance and difficulties of these churches in promoting human rights and peace building, and seeking to strengthen the churches' capacity as a sector of civil society, in the areas of political training, action and impact in order to promote and extend their contribution to social models of justice, peace and non-violence. Finally, since DDHH cases of violation have come to light, DIH infringements and the churches' proposals for building peace, this is contributing to the establishment of relationships and actions of solidarity and impact in public politics for peace and a life of dignity in Colombia.

4.4 JUSTA PAZ (JUST PEACE) has promoted the setting up of a National Pact for Peace, which came about on 18 November 2013, one year after dialogues were started with the Farc guerrillas; this took place in the Colegio Mayor de San Bartolomé, Bogotá, in the presence of 80 representatives from various sectors of society, including REDPRODEPAZ (National Network of Regional Programmes for Peace), Javeriana University, Peaceful Path of Women for Peace, Peace Ideas Foundation, REDEPAZ (National Network of Civic Initiatives for Peace and against War), Colombian Confederation of NGOs, Bucaramanga University.

4.5 There is another activity developed by the church, called 'Believe in reconciliation', an inter-religious meeting which took place on 26 May 2015 in Bogotá, organised by Colombia Reconciliation, where leaders of various religions worked on experiences of reconciliation, with a spiritual foundation. Leaders of Evangelical, Catholic, Anglican and Presbyterian

churches, Moslems, Jews, Buddhists and Indians attended. The aim was to facilitate and articulate spiritual processes, so that a greater social impact would exist, making possible the collective reconciliation of Colombian men and women.

In conclusion, the leaders agreed that inter-religious dialogue is important in building peace and reconciliation.

4.6 Another strategy, which is important to follow up, is that developed by CTAP (Christian Teams Acting for Peace), belonging to the Christian entity Pacemaker Teams (CPT), a body which began its work in Colombia in 2001, responding to the invitation from the Colombian Mennonite Church and accompanying threatened communities in Río Opón; it supports rural communities and human rights organisations in the Magdalena Medio region, promotes **the building of peace with justice** along with other peace-makers; they associate with non-violent groups around the world, and have influence in communities concerned with the love of God. They offer care to the population and legal services for organisations and communities, teaching them that justice should prevail before peace can stay within reach.

4.7 It is interesting to replicate the strategy adopted by the **Diakonia** ministry of the Church in Sweden, which has contributed to strengthening the capacity of local organisations, including basic organisations, *to promote agendas of peace in the regions and in the country*, in favour of armed conflict negotiation and peaceful handling of various conflicts. It works in the Chocó, Magdalena Medio, Cauca and Bogotá regions. Over the last five years, this programme has contributed protective action on more than 300 civil rights cases under severe threats; it has strengthened the political dialogue between human rights and peace-building organisations with government authorities and other State departments, to improve the political guarantees of its action. Also, it supports the Restitution of Land bodies, and has documented cases of human rights violations.

Its work is centred on peace building, defence of human rights and restoration of complete rights of victims, in relation to gender equality, the rights of Indian and Afro-Colombian people. Together with partners they work with analysis and proposals that tackle the problem of violence against women within the framework of human armed conflict.

4.8 Another strategy adopted by the church is carried out by the organisation **Sowing Peace**, which works in the Montes de María region, in Alta Montaña, Pichillín and Mampuján towns. This helps the communities through **participative political action** (PPA), identifying and creating spaces within the political structure, for greater and wider community participation. In the same way they teach them to discover their skills and tools necessary for demanding their rights within the law, which includes legal counselling and training, building up abilities in the community organisation, non-violent collective action, helping communities in their collective actions, and leadership development¹³.

This organisation's achievements include the training of more than 150 teams of local leaders in communities affected by the conflict¹⁴; it promoted the Caribbean Civil Commission for Reconciliation and Peace which coordinates and gives voice to civil society groups in the region, and links together national and regional groups, creating a space for collaboration in planning and evaluation of reparation processes in the Sucre and Bolívar departments in conjunction with local and departmental governments. As a result, in 2012 they helped the Mampuján leaders to organise a three-day peaceful march to demand redress as victims of the civil conflict. This march was part of a process that resulted in Mampuján becoming the first displaced community in Colombia to receive financial compensation. And in 2013, they organised themselves in 32 areas of Alta Montaña in Montes de María to carry out a peaceful march to pressurize the Government to listen to their requests. Subsequently, 20 more areas joined the Alta Montaña movement. Finally, Sowing Peace initiated and coordinates the Sucre Peace Committee and the Human Rights Guarantees Committee in Sucre.

4.9. To promote **forgiveness** as a necessary tool for true reconciliation, as established by the religious leaders who met in reconciliation¹⁵ in Cree, who maintain that personal compromise must be considered in order for a dialogue to be possible, based on a very narrow link between recognition and forgiveness, showing that the function of forgiveness is essential in the liberation and transformation of the pressure which exists in the victim and the offender, since this has a spiritual dimension.

4.10. Forgiveness is similarly proposed by the Foundation for Reconciliation, with the method called **Schools of Forgiveness and**

Reconciliation (ESPERE), applied in Bogotá, Soacha (where there are victims of false evidence), and in 16 departments in the country. This methodology uses group therapies, because they need spaces for recognition and support as an alternative to surmounting the traumas and despair learnt. They focus on groups of 10 to 20 people who decide to undergo a strong experience of healing from wounds – anger, hatred, rancour, revenge – caused by violence¹⁶. This is a long-term process aimed at creating new values of civil behaviour and coexistence culture, where people can be open to forgiveness and reconciliation, so they can attain individual, family and social re-creation, and the re-establishing of peace in their home, their neighbourhood, their town and the country. The ESPERE schools centre around the questions: “How are anger and fear that lead to violence produced? How can we transform hatred and rancour? How can we transform the tragic memory of the offences? How can we generate future discourse and overcome that of the past?”¹⁷

The ESPERE programme methodology tackles problems of violence, *recognising the emotional, discursive and attitudinal factors of social and structural violence, converting them into a strategy of psychosocial and political tendency aiming for each participating subject to assume their active role and change from being a victim of offence to being a co-creator of their victory*. The programme seeks to open conversational spaces for recovery of self-confidence and social confidence, and of knowing that one belongs to a network of relationships which have been fragmented by life’s assaults.¹⁸

4.11. Using experts in mediation, non-violence and promotion of the peace culture. Strategy of the National Ecumenical Network of Women for Peace (NENWP), which has been working since 2000 from an ecumenical faith perspective, with families displaced through armed conflict, located in the Chocó, Putumayo, Sucre and Córdoba regions. They adopted the **Alternatives to Violence Programme (AVP)** and **Friends Peace Teams** programme which consists of a method of learning based on life-experience workshops, which through *exercises, dynamics, reflections and games enable people to discover their ability to meet objectives, such as creating community, communicating actively, affirming themselves as people and resolving conflicts in a creative and non-violent way*; the participants take on changes in their behaviour and actions so that they become **peacemakers**. It is hoped that they assume non-violence as a personal life

style, which enables them to co-exist peacefully not only in interpersonal relationships but also in family and community life.¹⁹

The methodology uses workshops, whose objective is to present a proposal for training in non-violence, based on a completely participative dynamic from experience, and collective sharing brings about sensitisation to discover that in each human being, man and woman, there is a spiritual force which, once it has been assimilated, transforms our way of relating with other people internally generating new ways of valuing ourselves and others; listening; building a sense of community; creatively confronting the conflict and working in the community – which lead us to an important option: to adopt a non-violent life style. Between 2006 and 2014 PAV held approximately 316 workshops with 23,982 participants benefiting.²⁰

As a result of PAV's work, it has been possible to find out more about the havoc of armed conflict in Colombian peasant families, the problems faced in daily conflicts within the various spaces of co-existence such as family, religious, school, church and social environments. People have been encouraged to walk for peace, to the extent that they have listened to testimonies about changed interpersonal, family, community and professional relationships, showing transformation in the method of resolving conflicts, with ability to see others as human beings of worth.

4.12. Churches become **centres of community mediation or centres of reconciliation**, according to De la Rúa²¹, which are places where the community is taught the culture of non-violence, where conflicts are resolved peacefully. This initiative was brought about by the Foundation for Reconciliation organisation, (from the Consolata Brothers who created the **Centres of Reconciliation**) which defines them as houses located in strategic areas of cities or towns in the locality, rented temporarily, where they promote a political culture of forgiveness and reconciliation, human rights, civility and democracy. These centres support the community in deconstructing imagery and violent actions for resolving their conflicts; they transfer tools which facilitate the use of peaceful and non-violent mechanisms in overcoming conflicts²².

In the same way as the House of Reconciliation, it generates a space for listening to and interpreting the conflict in its various manifestations. For this, they propose that the participants incorporate practices of co-existence

in their daily routine so as to generate scenarios of dialogue, encounter and permanent practice in their family and community scenarios.

4.13. Offering tools to support victims of conflict. In this section, we highlight the work developed by the **Caribbean Peace** foundation, which works in Sincelejo (a department in Sucre) with young people who survived the massacres and selective assassination of their families, parents, children, siblings. Basically it is a programme consisting of psychosocial attention for displaced families and extending life options for the children, young people and their families through support and training. It works towards disconnecting them from war, conscientious objection, objection to arms, different forms of non-violence, and offers them psycho-emotional support to help them try to overcome the negative and hope-depriving impact of the war, so that many have begun to feel that peace is possible and that they do not have to participate in the war or turn to violence in order to build a way to live in dignity. The project helps them to discover their potential, so that they have generated productive ideas for their support, for their families – for example, moto-taxis (growing, cleaning and packaging yam)²³.

4.14. Generating scenarios for reconciliation for reformed terrorists, a strategy developed by the **Foundation for Reconciliation**, which works in the Villavicencio, Montería, Ibagué, Pereira and Santa Marta area, with a project offering minimum conditions of social service and redress on the part of the demobilised in the framework of the process of reintegration. It is supported by the company Coca-Cola Femsa and the High Commission for Reintegration. Its objective is to generate coordinating spaces for developing actions of redress and social service, led by demobilised people, through projects which benefit recipient communities and victims of violence.²⁴

4.15. **Peace Sanctuaries Church.** This is another special programme where the church is converted into the epicentre for transformation of conflicts. These are characterised by being a physical or territorial space of peace which is publicly advertised as such, and demands respect from any violation through force, to bring about face-to-face encounters with opponents, to facilitate debates and public discussions, moments of prayer where people can feel secure and protected; converting this space into a refuge for people pursued for their convictions or affected by violence and injustice, it is a place of protection within the faith community. The peace

sanctuary offers a message of non-violence which trains people to lead a peaceful life, to resolve conflicts and to rebuild a social web from being a people guided by God.²⁵

5. Conclusion

In this way the church fulfils its role of being the salt and light of the earth, of being a generator of peace; in Colombia it has contributed to conflict resolution, using and continuing to promote forgiveness, as an element of reconciliation, necessary to heal open wounds. The Reconciliation Houses and the Churches such as Peace Sanctuary are instruments conducive to creating spaces for reconciliation.

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