

Pilgrimage of Reconciliation: Transformative Spiritualities of Communities in Colombia

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Buenos tardes. Good afternoon. It is truly a privilege to “connect” with you. It is also very inspiring to be able to reflect with you on the challenges, hopes, complexities, limitations and possibilities of reconciliation.

As many of you might know, after years of negotiation the Colombian government and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) guerilla forces signed a Peace Agreement in 2016. While the FARC was only one of the armed groups in the country, this peace process represented the possibility to explore and deal with the history of the armed conflict in new ways. It was around this peace process that reconciliation became a central theme to reflect on.

In the proposed time today, I would like to share with you four statements about the challenges and possibilities of reconciliation in the Colombian context. These correspond to some of the learnings that I was able to gather from working with faith communities on the topic of reconciliation as part of my doctoral research.

1. Reconciliation in Colombia is not about restoring or returning to a *status quo ante*. It is rather about imagining and (re)creating a new horizon.

Colombia has been immersed in a long-term armed conflict, which has resulted in more than 8 million victims, including people killed and internally displaced. Guerilla forces, paramilitary groups, and forces of the state have been some of the key actors in this conflict.

Some say that the conflict has lasted around 60 years, since it was around the mid-1960s that different guerrilla groups, the FARC included, were officially constituted. However, if you talk to *indigenous* communities, some of them would say that the conflict has more than 500 years of history—not only 60. This since the violence and injustices of today are, in many ways, rooted in the colonial past, marked by the European colonization of the Americas. From that moment on, there has been no peace, no justice, no healing.

Whether it is decades or centuries, there are multiple generations of Colombians who have never experience just-relationships and peace. Historically, relationships have been unjust: rich and poor, center and periphery, urban and rural areas, patriarchalism and gender imbalances, racial and ethnic divides have been all areas in which injustices have existed and persisted. If we would then consider reconciliation as a restoration of a state of being before the conflict, then in the Colombian case there is no desirable state to which people, especially the victims and the marginalized, would like to return to. There is no desirable *status quo ante* to be recuperated.

This stresses the need to see reconciliation *as transformation* of unjust relationships rather than as restoration of past dynamics.

2. There is a deep *spiritual crisis* that has been at the core of the Colombian conflict. Reconciliation requires addressing this *spiritual* dimension.

Identifying the roots and origins of the conflict in Colombia has always been a contested debate. Some people would identify land concentration, deep economic inequalities, corruption, and lack of political participation/representation as key factors. Others would point at the emergence of the guerilla forces or drug trafficking as generators of the armed confrontation.

Alternatively, in his book "*La Audacia de la Paz Imperfecta*" (The Audacity of the Imperfect Peace), catholic priest Francisco de Roux stresses that a *spiritual crisis* has been at the very center of the armed conflict in Colombia. De Roux, who was eventually appointed as the chair of the *Truth Commission* in Colombia, comments:

The crisis of Colombia which has not ended with the silencing of the weapons, and which challenges us to reconcile our antagonistic divisions, is, before anything else, a spiritual crisis. It is due to a loss of sense [*sentido*] of ourselves. It is due to the incapacity to comprehend that the suffering of the victims of all parties... is part of our identity and our personal and collective responsibility.... It is a spiritual crisis, much more profound than a religious, economic, social, or political crisis [translation mine] (de Roux, 2018, pp. 78-79)¹.

To consider the existence of such spiritual crisis does not mean neglecting other factors in the conflict. Instead, it highlights the depth of the wounds (identities, empathy and moral/ethical compass have been deeply affected) that need to be healed by any attempt to truly reconcile broken relations.

For example, land concentration and forced displacement have been very important issues in the conflict. Speaking about spiritual crisis does not mean that land redistribution and (economic) reparations for the victims are not crucial. They are extremely important in any attempt to reconcile our society. What considering this spiritual dimension does is to help us see how forced displacement has also implied a spiritual rupture, by dislocating bodies from land; by breaking the connection between culture and nature, which is especially recognizable in *indigenous* and *campesino* communities. Then, the problem of land and land possession is not only an economic or juridical problem, but also a spiritual one, which has fractured peoples' identities and belongings.

3. The metaphor of "pilgrimage" can help envisioning the transformative and spiritual dimensions of reconciliation in Colombia.

In this context of spiritual crisis, reconciliation can be then seen as a transformative spiritual journey, as a *pilgrimage*. The metaphor of *pilgrimage* has become especially vivid to me

¹ De Roux, F. (2018). *La Audacia de la Paz Imperfecta*. Planeta.

thanks to the initiative of the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace that the World Council of Churches (WCC) launched in 2013².

Understood as a *spiritual transformative journey*, being in a pilgrimage is not the same as travelling or being a tourist. Being in a pilgrimage implies a commitment to be transformed, seeking healing, as one travels or moves to sacred places, and as one visits different stations along the way. Such journey will include parts when one must walk by oneself, while other segments of the journey will be walked with others.

Following this metaphor, reconciliation could be perceived as the journey, while key aspects of reconciliation such as truth-telling, memory, repentance, forgiveness, reparation, justice, could be seen as stations of the pilgrimage. While it is possible to experience a foretaste of reconciliation in each of these stations, there is still a way to go, a journey to be completed, before it is possible to live reconciliation more fully.

4. It is crucial to turn to the wisdom and experiences of local communities to nurture the needed imagination and creativity for reconciliation.

Studying the successes and limitations of different global experiences of reconciliation could be very useful to envision what it means to restore and transform deeply wounded society. Different theories and models of reconciliation could also contribute. However, there are also many lessons that can be learned from grass-root communities regarding reconciliation.

There are many examples of how people and communities have embodied nonviolence and peacebuilding in Colombia. These examples might not be well-known or perceived as “big”. And yet, they are testimonies of alternative ways of responding to violence and injustice. In a similar vein, there are many “pilgrimages of reconciliation” in which people and communities have embarked themselves—different attempts to bring together victims, offenders and the wider community into healing and transforming broken relations.

Thus, rather than seeking to “invent” reconciliation from scratch or to copy-paste a model from outside, our imagination and creativity can be nurtured also by looking for and learning from experiences of people and communities in our different contexts. They are beacons of reconciliation in their own realities.

Thank you.

² World Council of Churches. (2014). *An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*. Retrieved February 10, 2019, from <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2014/an-invitation-to-the-pilgrimage-of-justice-and-peace>