

PEACE IN THE MIDST OF VIOLENCE – Francisco de Roux sj

Jesus says: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." And this is the same Jesus telling his disciples: "Peace be with you. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Happy the peacemakers: they shall be called sons of God." This is the same Jesus that inspired Saint Francis of Assisi in his prayer: "Make of me an instrument of your peace."

Maybe we can find a meaning in this paradox if we listen to Jesus during his last supper: "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me before you... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you too...and indeed the hour is coming when anyone who kills you, will think he is doing a holy duty for God... Peace, I bequeath to you, my own peace I give to you, a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you..."

There is indeed a dramatic dimension in the peace of Jesus. The disciple is invited not to be afraid, because Jesus is alive, because the resurrection is the deepest and profound outcome of the crucifixion. Don't be afraid. But the disciple knows that he himself, as his master, is "destined for the fall and for the rising of many...destined to be a sign that is rejected".

Following the peace of Jesus, as many of you have done, we have been a sign of contradiction in Colombia. Because our commitment with the peace of Jesus.

We faced radical opposition when we were working in the Magdalena Region for fourteen years, with the poor ones, the excluded and the victims. Several times we were considered suspicious, dangerous, and unacceptable whether for the paramilitaries, the military, the guerrilla or the local governments.

The guerrilla captured us and had decided to execute us during a trial, and we received many death threats from the paramilitary. As so many others, we understood that Jesus' peace goes together with unavoidable opposition and violence.

Our purpose was to accompany the regional communities in a program of development and peace in the middle of the conflict, in a territory as big as Belgium. But the paramilitaries assassinated twenty four persons of our team, and the guerrillas killed three of our companions.

I remember the day we found Alma Rosa Jaramillo, a courageous woman of our team, an audacious lawyer, who had come to support the displaced small farmers. First she was kidnapped by the National Liberation Army ELN, and I spent seven days discussing with the guerrillas to get her released. Then she was captured by

the paramilitaries. When we managed to recover Alma Rosa, she was lying in the mud, dead; they had cut off her arms and legs, with a chainsaw.

Nevertheless, we kept looking for peace in the Magdalena Medio. Talking with the guerrillas, the paramilitaries and the army. Trying to demonstrate that there was a way to work together, if we took the risk of opening ourselves up to human dignity, present in each and every one of us. The kind of dignity Romero was peacefully fighting for, the dignity we don't get from the government neither from the guerrillas, nor from money, nor from the churches. The kind of dignity we all just carry inside because we are human beings, sharing life and existence in this universe. The dignity we as Christians see as the manifestation of God's mystery, the gift of His absolute love in each and every person, in each and every creature, in the world.

And there, in the Magdalena Medio, when we were surrounded by violent groups, we discovered that there is no safety in weapons. That the only true and sustainable protection comes through trusting people. And that to win trust we have to go through a long process of dialogue and mutual acceptance, and unpredicted individual and social changes, in the midst of uncertainties.

I am certain that because of the generosity of my companions, women and men, and due to the way they devoted themselves to protect life and dignity in extreme difficulties, the Magdalena Medio process became a reference, in the construction of structural peace, all the way threatened by terrible violence; and the process has been replicated, so that we have nowadays twenty four programs of development and peace in different regions of Colombia.

That was my experience with peace and violence in the Magdalena Medio region.

Today, we write another chapter in my country. Colombia is about to sign a peace agreement between the State and the FARC guerrilla. It is hopefully the end of fifty years of terror and victimization. Half a century of war that caused seven million victims - women, children, teenagers, men – to be displaced from the countryside.

Urban and especially rural communities are desperate and exhausted by the war. Two years ago we organised a meeting with about thirty thousand people coming from conflict zones in the whole of the country. Small farmers, campesinos, native people, afrocolombians. They were the families whose youngsters had joined the guerrilla groups, the paramilitary groups and the army. And all these people stood there asking and claiming: "Stop the war, stop the war now, and stop the war from all sides!"

But peace means division, at least in my country today. Because of political interests: our president campaigned for his election with the slogan "I am the peace and my political opponents are the war". And this slogan split up the country. The former last president, Alvaro Uribe, is leader of the opposition, and he seems not willing to accept a peace agreement if he himself is not the author of it. And there are also economic interests in the prolongation of the war. The military, the cocaine barons, and an important group of the ruling class, see their economic power threatened with the end of the armed confrontation.

We know what Jesus meant when he said: "I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household." I have the sad foreboding that, when in a few weeks we will conclude a peace agreement and a bilateral ceasefire in Habana, Cuba, there will be celebrations in the Vatican and in many countries that have supported our peace negotiations. But that in Colombia we will see fighting in the streets, "men against their fathers, daughters against their mothers", because the war has ended in our territory.

The reason we have this sad and absurd situation is because of our deep spiritual crisis. For fifty years we have destroyed our human value, with the thousands of kidnappings and massacres, antipersonnel mines, extrajudicial killings, disappearances of people and displacements. And we have guerrillas and paramilitaries, politicians and militaries, trapped by the war, by hatred, by vengeance and mortal retaliations.

And now, hopefully soon to be liberated from the war, we have to stand up for a social and political non-violent struggle for structural changes. I think it will take us at least twenty year of nonviolent process, of social struggle, in a participative society without war to get the structural changes we envision.

Please hold all of us in your prayers and help us be a stand for the kind of peace that is based on justice, truth and love.
