



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

TO COLOMBIA

(6-11 SEPTEMBER 2017)

HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

Port of Contecar (Cartagena de Indias)

Sunday, 10 September 2017

[Multimedia]

“The Dignity of the Person and Human Rights”

In this city, which has been called “heroic” for its tenacity in defending freedom two hundred years ago, I celebrate the concluding Mass of my Visit. For the past thirty-two years Cartagena de Indias is also the headquarters in Colombia for Human Rights. For here the people cherish the fact that, “thanks to the missionary team formed by the Jesuit priests Peter Claver y Corberó, Alonso de Sandoval and Brother Nicolás González, accompanied by many citizens of the city of Cartagena de Indias in the seventeenth century, the desire was born to alleviate the situation of the oppressed of that time, especially of slaves, of those who implored fair treatment and freedom” (Congress of Colombia 1985, law 95, art. 1).

Here, in the Sanctuary of Saint Peter Claver, where the progress and application of human rights in Colombia continue to be studied and monitored in a systematic way, the Word of God speaks to us today of forgiveness, correction, community and prayer.

In the fourth sermon of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus speaks to us, who have decided to support the community, to us, who value life together and dream of a project that includes everyone. The preceding text is that of the good shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to go after the one that is lost. This fact pervades the entire text we have just heard: there is no one too lost to deserve our care, our closeness and our forgiveness. From this perspective, we can see that a

fault or a sin committed by one person challenges us all, but involves, primarily, the victim of someone's sin. He or she is called to take the initiative so that whoever has caused the harm is not lost. To take the initiative: he or she who takes the initiative is always the most courageous person.

During these past few days I have heard many testimonies from those who have reached out to people who had harmed them; terrible wounds that I could see in their own bodies; irreparable losses that still bring tears. Yet they have reached out, have taken a first step on a different path to the one already travelled. For decades Colombia has yearned for peace but, as Jesus teaches, two sides approaching each other to dialogue is not enough; it has also been necessary to involve many more actors in this dialogue aimed at healing sins. The Lord tells us in the Gospel: "If your brother does not listen to you, take one or two others along with you" (*Mt 18:16*).

We have learned that these ways of making peace, of placing reason above revenge, of the delicate harmony between politics and law, cannot ignore the involvement of the people. Peace is not achieved by normative frameworks and institutional arrangements between well-intentioned political or economic groups. Jesus finds the solution to the harm inflicted through a personal encounter between the parties. It is always helpful, moreover, to incorporate into our peace processes the experience of those sectors that have often been overlooked, so that communities themselves can influence the development of collective memory. "The principal author, the historic subject of this process, is the people as a whole and their culture, and not a single class, minority, group or elite – the people as a whole and their culture –. We do not need plans drawn up by a few for the few, or an enlightened or outspoken minority which claims to speak for everyone. It is about agreeing to live together, a social and cultural pact" (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 239).

We can contribute greatly to this new step that Colombia wants to take. Jesus tells us that this path of reintegration into the community begins with a dialogue of two persons. Nothing can replace that healing encounter; no collective process excuses us from the challenge of meeting, clarifying, forgiving. Deep historic wounds necessarily require moments where justice is done, where victims are given the opportunity to know the truth, where damage is adequately repaired and clear commitments are made to avoid repeating those crimes. But that is only the beginning of the Christian response. We Christians are required to generate "from below", to generate a change in culture: to respond to the culture of death and violence with the culture of life and encounter. We have already learned this from your own beloved author whom we all benefit from: "This cultural disaster is not remedied with lead or silver, but with an education for peace, built lovingly on the rubble of an angry country where we rise early to continue killing each other... a legitimate revolution of peace which channels towards life an immense creative energy that for almost two centuries we have used to destroy us and that vindicates and exalts the predominance of the imagination" (Gabriel García Márquez, *Message About Peace*, 1998).

How much have we worked for an encounter, for peace? How much have we neglected, allowing barbarity to become enfolded in the life of our people? Jesus commands us to confront those types of behaviour, those ways of living that damage society and destroy the community. How many times have we “normalized” – experienced as normal occurrences – the logic of violence and social exclusion, without prophetically raising our hands and voices! Alongside Saint Peter Claver were thousands of Christians, many of them consecrated... but only a handful started a counter-cultural movement of encounter. Saint Peter was able to restore the dignity and hope of hundreds of thousands of black people and slaves arriving in absolutely inhuman conditions, full of dread, with all their hopes lost. He did not have prestigious academic qualifications, and he even said of himself that he was “mediocre” in terms of intelligence, but he had the genius to live the Gospel to the full, to meet those whom others considered merely as waste material. Centuries later, the footsteps of this missionary and apostle of the Society of Jesus were followed by Saint María Bernarda Bütler, who dedicated her life to serving the poor and marginalized in this same city of Cartagena.[1]

In the encounter between us we rediscover our rights, and we recreate our lives so that they re-emerge as authentically human. “The common home of all men and women must continue to rise on the foundations of a right understanding of universal fraternity and respect for the sacredness of every human life, of every man and every woman, the poor, the elderly, children, the infirm, the unborn, the unemployed, the abandoned, those considered disposable because they are only considered as part of a statistic. This common home of all men and women must also be built on the understanding of a certain sacredness of created nature” ([*Address to the United Nations, 25 September 2015*](#)).

In the Gospel, Jesus also shows us the possibility that the other may remain closed, refusing to change, persisting in evil. We cannot deny that there are people who persist in sins that damage the fabric of our coexistence and community: “I also think of the heart-breaking drama of drug abuse, which reaps profits in contempt of the moral and civil laws. This evil directly goes against human dignity and gradually tears away at the image the Creator has formed in us. I firmly condemn this trade which has killed so many and which is nourished by people who have no scruples. The lives of our brothers and sisters cannot be played with, nor their dignity instrumentalized. I appeal so that ways can be found to stop the drug-trade which only sows death everywhere, uproots so many hopes and destroys so many families. I also think of another tragedy: I think of the devastation of natural resources and ongoing pollution, and the tragedy of the exploitation of labour. I think too of illicit money trafficking and financial speculation, which often prove both predatory and harmful for entire economic and social systems, exposing millions of men and women to poverty. I think of prostitution, which every day reaps innocent victims, especially the young, robbing them of their future. I think of the abomination of human trafficking, crimes and abuses against minors, the horror of slavery still present in many parts of the world; the frequently overlooked tragedy of migrants, who are often victims of disgraceful and illegal manipulation” ([*Message for the World Day of Peace, 2014*](#), 8), and I think too of the desire to even

make some profit from that pacifist “sterile legality” which ignores the flesh of our brothers and sisters, the flesh of Christ. We must also be prepared for this, and solidly base ourselves upon principles of justice that in no way diminish charity. It is only possible to live peacefully by avoiding actions that corrupt or harm life. In this context, we remember all those who, bravely and tirelessly, have worked and even lost their lives in defending and protecting the rights and the dignity of the human person. History asks us to embrace a definitive commitment to defending human rights, here in Cartagena de Indias, the place that you have chosen as the national seat of their defence.

Finally, Jesus asks us to pray together, so that our prayer, even with its personal nuances and various emphases, becomes symphonic and arises as one single cry. I am sure that today we pray together for the rescue of those who were wrong and not for their destruction, for justice and not revenge, for healing in truth and not for oblivion. We pray to fulfil the theme of this visit: “Let us take the first step!” And may this first step be in a common direction.

To “take the first step” is, above all, to go out and meet others with Christ the Lord. And he always asks us to take a determined and sure step towards our brothers and sisters, and to renounce our claim to be forgiven without showing forgiveness, to be loved without showing love. If Colombia wants a stable and lasting peace, it must urgently take a step in this direction, which is that of the common good, of equity, of justice, of respect for human nature and its demands. Only if we help to untie the knots of violence, will we unravel the complex threads of disagreements. We are asked to take the step of meeting with our brothers and sisters, and to risk a correction that does not want to expel but to integrate. And we are asked to be charitably firm in that which is not negotiable. In short, the demand is to build peace, “speaking not with the tongue but with hands and works” (Saint Peter Claver), and to lift up our eyes to heaven together. The Lord is able to untangle that which seems impossible to us; he has promised to accompany us to the end of time and will not allow our efforts to come to nothing.

Final remarks:

At the conclusion of this celebration, I want to thank His Grace Jorge Enrique Jiménez Carvajal, Archbishop of Cartagena, for his kind words on behalf of his brother bishops and the entire people of God.

I thank President Juan Manuel Santos for his invitation to visit the country, the civil authorities, and all those who have taken part in this Eucharistic celebration, whether here or through the communications media.

I am deeply grateful for the hard work and sacrifice that have made this visit possible. Many people helped, giving freely and readily of their time and energy. These have been intense and

beautiful days; I was able to meet many people and to experience many things that have touched me deeply. You have done me much good.

Dear brothers and sisters, I would like to leave you with one last word. Let us not be content with “taking the first step”. Instead, let us continue our journey anew each day, going forth to encounter others and to encourage concord and fraternity. We cannot just stand still. In this very place, on 8 September 1654, Saint Peter Claver died, after forty years of voluntary slavery, of tireless work on behalf of the poor. He did not stand still: his first step was followed by further steps, then more and more. His example draws us out of ourselves to encounter our neighbours. Colombia, your brothers and sisters need you. Go out to meet them. Bring them the embrace of peace, free of all violence. Be “slaves of peace, forever”. SLAVES OF PEACE, FOREVER.

[1]She also had the wisdom of charity and knew how to find God in her neighbour; nor was she paralyzed by injustice and challenges, because “when conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened; they wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible. But there is also a third way, and it is the best way to deal with conflict. It is the willingness to face conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 227).
