

Medellín Conference Statement, 1968

Latin American Bishops

Medellín, Colombia

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I. The Latin American Situation and Peace

1. If "development is the new name for peace,"¹ Latin American under-development with its own characteristics in the different countries is an unjust situation which promotes tensions that conspire against peace.

We can divide these tensions into three major groups, selected, in each of these, those variables which constitute a positive menace to the peace of our countries by manifesting an unjust situation.

When speaking of injustice, we refer to those realities that constitute a sinful situation; this does not mean however, that we are overlooking the fact that at times the misery in our countries can have natural causes which are difficult to overcome.

In making this analysis, we do not ignore or fail to give credit to the positive efforts made at every level to build a more just society. We do not include this here because our purpose is to call attention to those aspects which constitute a menace or negation of peace.

TENSIONS BETWEEN CLASSES AND INTERNAL COLONIALISM

2. Different forms of marginality: socio-economic, cultural, political, racial, religious, in urban as well as the rural sectors;

3. Extreme inequality among social classes: especially, though not exclusively, in those countries which are characterized by a marked bi-classism, where a few have much (culture, wealth, power, prestige) while the majority has very little. The Holy Father describes this situation when directing himself to the Colombian rural workers; "... social and economic development has not been equitable in the great continent of Latin America; and while it has favored those who helped establish it in the beginning, it has neglected the masses of native population, which are almost always left at a subsistence level and at times or mistreated and exploited harshly."2

4. Growing frustrations: The universal phenomenon of rising expectations assumes a particularly aggressive dimension in Latin America. The reason is obvious: excessive inequalities systematically prevent the satisfaction of the legitimate aspirations of the ignored sectors, and breed increasing frustrations.

The same low morale is obtained in those middle classes which, when confronting grave crises, enter into a process of disintegration and proletarianization.

5. *Forms of oppression of dominant groups and sectors:* Without excluding the eventuality of willful oppression, these forms manifest themselves most frequently in a lamentable insensitivity of the privileged sectors to the misery of the marginated sectors. Thus the words of the Pope to the leaders: "That your ears and heart be sensitive to the voices of those who ask for bread, concern, justice ..."3

It is not unusual to find that these groups, with the exception of some enlightened minorities, characterize as subversive activities all attempts to change the social system which favors the permanence of their privileges.

6. *Power unjustly exercised by certain dominant sectors:* As a natural consequence of the above-mentioned attitudes, some members of the dominant sectors occasionally resort to the use of force to repress drastically any attempt at opposition. It is easy for them to find apparent ideological justifications (anti-communism) or practical ones (keeping "order") to give their action an honest appearance.

7. *Growing awareness of the oppressed sectors:* All the above results are even more intolerable as the oppressed sectors become increasingly aware of their situation. The Holy Father referred to them when he said to the rural workers: "But to date the problem has worsened because you have become more aware of your needs and suffering, and you cannot tolerate the persistence of these conditions without applying a careful remedy."⁴

The static picture described in the above paragraphs is worsened when it is projected into the future: basic education will increase awareness and the demographic explosion will multiply problems and tensions. One must not forget the existence of movements of all types interested in taking advantage of and irritating these tensions. Therefore, if today peace seems seriously endangered, the automatic aggravation of the problems will produce explosive consequences.

INTERNATIONAL TENSIONS AND EXTERNAL NEO COLONIALISM

8. We refer here, particularly, to the implications for all countries of dependence on a center of economic power, around which they gravitate. For this reason, our nations frequently do not own their goods, or have a say in economic decisions affecting them. It is obvious that this will not fail to have political consequences given the interdependence of these two fields.

We are interested in emphasizing two aspects of this phenomenon.

9. *Economic aspect*: We only analyze those factors having greater influence on the global and relative impoverishment of our countries, and which constitute a source of internal and external tensions.

a) *Growing distortion of international commerce*: Because of the relative depreciation of the terms of exchange, the value of raw materials is increasingly less in relation to the cost of manufactured products. This means that the countries which produce raw materials--especially if they are dependent upon one major export--always remain poor, while the industrialized countries enrich themselves. This injustice, clearly denounced by *The Development of Peoples*,⁵ nullifies the eventual positive effect of external aid and constitutes a permanent menace against peace, because our countries sense that "one hand takes away what the other hand gives."⁶

b) *Rapid flight of economic and human capital*: The search for security and individual gain leads many members of the more comfortable sectors of our countries to invest their money in foreign countries. The injustice of such procedures has already been denounced categorically by the encyclical *The Development of Peoples*.⁷ To this can be added the loss of technicians and competent personnel, which is at least as serious and perhaps more so than the loss of capital, because of the high cost of training these people and because of their ability to teach others.

c) *Tax evasion and loss of gains and dividends*: Some foreign companies working in our country (also some national firms) often evade the established tax system by subterfuge. We all are also aware that at times they send their profits and dividends abroad, without contributing adequate reinvestments to the progressive development of our countries.

d) *Progressive debt*: It is not surprising to find that in the system of international credits, the true needs and capabilities of our countries are not taken into account. We thus run the risk of encumbering ourselves with debts whose payment absorbs the greater part of our profits.⁸

e) *International monopolies and international imperialism of money*: We wish to emphasize that the principal guilt for economic dependence of our countries rests with powers, inspired by uncontrolled desire for gains, which leads to economic dictatorship and the "international imperialism of money"⁹ condemned by Pope Pius XI in *The Reconstruction of the Social Order* and by Pope Paul VI in *The Development of Peoples*.

10. *Political aspect*: We here denounce the imperialism of any ideological bias that is exercised in Latin America either indirectly or through direct intervention.

TENSIONS AMONG THE COUNTRIES OF LATIN AMERICA

11. We here denounce the particular phenomenon of historico-political origin that continues to disturb cordial relations among some countries and impedes truly constructive collaboration. Nevertheless, the integration process, well understood, presents itself as a commanding necessity for Latin America. Without pretending to set norms of a truly complex, technical nature governing integration, we deem it opportune to point out its multi-dimensional character. Integration, in effect, is not solely an economic process; it has a broader dimension reflected in the way in which it embraces man in his total situation: social, political, cultural, religious, racial.

Among the factors that increase the tensions among our countries we underline:

12. *An exacerbated nationalism* in some countries: The Holy Father 10 has already denounced the unwholesomeness of this attitude, especially on a matter where the weakness of the national economies requires a union of efforts.

13. Armaments: In certain countries an arms race is under way that surpasses the limits of reason. It frequently stems from a fictitious need to respond to diverse interests rather than to a true need of the national community. In that respect, a phrase of *The Development of Peoples* is particularly pertinent: "When so many communities are hungry, when so many homes suffer misery, when so many men lived submerged in ignorance. . . any arms race becomes an intolerable scandal."¹¹

II. Doctrinal reflection

CHRISTIAN VIEW OF PEACE

14. The above mentioned Christian viewpoint on peace adds up to a negation of peace such as Christian tradition understands it.

Three factors characterize the Christian concept of peace:

a) Peace is, above all, a work of justice.¹² It presupposes and requires the establishment of a just order ¹³ in which men can fulfill themselves as men, where their dignity is respected, their legitimate aspirations satisfied, their access to truth recognized, their personal freedom guaranteed; an order where a man is not an object, but an agent of his own history. Therefore there will be attempts against peace where unjust inequalities among men and nations prevail.¹⁴

Peace in Latin America, therefore, is not the simple absence of violence and bloodshed. Oppression by the power groups may give the impression of maintaining peace and order, but in truth it is nothing but the "continuous and inevitable seed of rebellion and war."¹⁵

"Peace can only be obtained by creating a new order which carries with it a more perfect justice among men."¹⁶ It is in this sense that the integral development of a man, the path to more human conditions, becomes the symbol of peace.

b) Secondly, peace is a permanent task.¹⁷ A community becomes a reality in time and is subject to a movement that implies constant change in structures, transformation of attitudes, and conversion of hearts.

The "tranquility of order," according to the Augustinian definition of peace, is neither passivity nor conformity. It is not something that is acquired once and for all. It is the result of continuous effort and adaptation to new circumstances, to new demands and challenges of a changing history. A static and apparent peace may be obtained with the use of force; an authentic peace implies struggle, creative abilities and permanent conquest.¹⁸

Peace is not found, it is built. The Christian man is the artisan of peace.¹⁹ This task, given the above circumstances, has a special character in our continent; thus, the People of God in Latin America, following the example of Christ, must resist personal and collective injustice with unselfish courage and fearlessness.

c) Finally, peace is the fruit of love.²⁰ It is the expression of true fraternity among men, a fraternity given by Christ, Prince of Peace, in reconciling all men with the Father. Human solidarity cannot truly take effect unless it is done in Christ, who gives Peace that the world cannot give.²¹ Love it is the

soul of justice. The Christian who works for social justice should always cultivate peace and love in his heart.

Peace with God is the basic foundation of internal and social peace. Therefore, where this social peace does not exist there will we find social, political, economic and cultural inequalities, there will we find the rejection of the peace of the Lord, and a rejection of the Lord Himself.²²

THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE IN LATIN AMERICA

15. Violence constitutes one of the greatest problems in Latin America. A decision on which the future of the countries of the continent will depend should not be left to the impulses of emotion and passion. We would be failing in our pastoral duty if we were not to remind the conscience, caught in this dramatic dilemma, of the criteria derived from the Christian doctrine of evangelical love.

No one should be surprised if we forcefully reaffirm our faith in the productiveness of peace. This is our Christian ideal. "Violence is neither Christian nor evangelical."²³ The Christian man is peaceful and not ashamed of it. He is not simply a pacifist, for he can fight,²⁴ but he prefers peace to war. He knows that "violent changes in structures would be fallacious, ineffectual in themselves and not conforming to the dignity of man, which demands that the necessary changes take place from within, that is to say, through a fitting awakening of conscience, adequate preparation and effective participation of all, which the ignorance and often inhuman conditions of life make it impossible to assure at this time."²⁵

16. As the Christian believes in the productiveness of peace in order to achieve justice, he also believes that justice is a prerequisite for peace. He recognizes that in many instances Latin America finds itself faced with a

situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence, when, because of a structural deficiency of industry and agriculture, of national and international economy, of cultural and political life, "whole towns lack necessities, live in such dependence as hinders all initiative and responsibility as well as every possibility for cultural promotion and participation in social and political life,"²⁶ thus violating fundamental rights. This situation demands all-embracing, courageous, urgent and profoundly renovating transformations. We should not be surprised therefore, that the "temptation to violence" is surfacing in Latin America. One should not abuse the patience of a people that for years has borne a situation that would not be acceptable to anyone with any degree of awareness of human rights.

Facing a situation which works so seriously against the dignity of man and against peace, we address ourselves, as pastors, to all the members of the Christian community and asking them to assume their responsibility in the promotion of peace in Latin America.

17. We would like to direct our call in the first place to those who have a greater share of wealth, culture and power. We know that there are leaders in Latin America who are sensitive to the needs of the people and try to remedy them. They recognize that the privileged many times join together, and with all the means at their disposal pressure those who govern, thus obstructing necessary changes. In some instances, this pressure takes on drastic proportions which result in the destruction of life and property.

Therefore, we urge them not to take advantage of the pacifist position of the Church in order to oppose, either actively or passively, the profound transformations that are so necessary. If they jealously retain their privileges and defend them through violence they are responsible to history for provoking "explosive revolutions of despair."²⁷ The peaceful future of the countries of Latin America depends to a large extent on their attitude.

18. Also responsible for injustice are those who remain passive for fear of the sacrifice and personal risk implied by any courageous and effective action. Justice, and therefore peace, conquer by means of a dynamic action of awakening (conscientization) and organization of the popular sectors, which are capable of pressing public officials who are often impotent in their social projects without popular support.

19. We address ourselves finally to those who, in the face of injustice and illegitimate resistance to change, put their hopes in violence. With Paul VI we realize that their attitude "frequently finds its ultimate motivation in noble impulses of justice and solidarity."²⁸ Let us not speak here of empty words which do not imply a personal responsibility and which isolate from the fruitful nonviolent actions that are immediately possible.

If it is true that revolutionary insurrection can be legitimate in the case of evident and prolonged "tyranny that seriously works against the fundamental rights of man and which damages the common good of the country,"²⁹ whether it proceeds from one person or from clearly unjust structures, it is also certain that violence or "armed revolution" generally "generates new injustices, introduces new imbalances and causes new disasters; one cannot combat a real evil at the price of a greater evil."³⁰

If we consider then, the totalities of the circumstances of our countries and if we take into account the Christian preference for peace, the enormous difficulty of a civil war, the logic of violence, the atrocities it engenders, the risk of provoking foreign intervention, illegitimate as it may be, the difficulty of building a regime of justice and freedom while participating in a process of violence, we earnestly desire that the dynamism of the awakened and organized community be put to the service of justice and peace.

Finally we would like to make ours the words of our Holy Father to the newly ordained priests and deacons in Bogota, when he referred to all the suffering

and said to them: "We will be able to understand their afflictions and change them, not into hate and violence, but into the strong and peaceful energy of constructive works."³¹

III. Pastoral Conclusions

20. In the face of the tensions which conspire against peace, and even present the temptation of violence; in the face of the Christian concept of peace which has been described, we believe that the Latin American Episcopate cannot avoid assuming very concrete responsibilities; because to create a just social order, without which peace is illusory, is an eminently Christian task.

To us, the Pastors of the Church, belongs the duty to educate the Christian conscience, to inspire, stimulate and help orient all of the initiatives that contribute to the formation of man. It is also up to us to denounce everything which, opposing justice, destroys peace. In this spirit we feel it opportune to bring the following pastoral points:

21. To awaken in individuals and communities, principally through mass media, a living awareness of justice, infusing in them a dynamic sense of responsibility and solidarity.

22. To defend the rights of the poor and oppressed according to the Gospel commandment, urging our governments and the upper classes to eliminate anything which might destroy social peace: injustice, inertia, venality, insensibility.

23. To favor integration, energetically denouncing the abuses and unjust consequences of the excessive inequalities between poor and rich, weak and powerful.

24. To be certain that our preaching, liturgy and catechesis take into account the social and community dimensions of Christianity, forming men committed to world peace.

25. To achieve in our schools, seminaries and universities a healthy critical sense of the social situation and foster the vocation of service. We also consider very efficacious the diocesan and national campaigns that mobilize the faithful and social organizations, leading them to a similar reflection.

26. To invite various Christian and non-Christian communities to collaborate in this fundamental task of our times.

27. To encourage and favor the efforts of the people to create and develop their own grassroots organizations for the redress and consolidation of their rights and the search for true justice.

28. To request the perfecting of the administration of justice, whose deficiencies often cause serious ills.

29. To urge a halt and revision in many of our countries of the arms race that at times constitutes a burden excessively disproportionate to the legitimate demands of the common good, to the detriment of desperate social necessities. The struggle against misery is the true war that our nations should face.

30. To invite the bishops, the leaders of different churches and all men of goodwill of the developed nations to promote in their respective spheres of influence, especially among the political and financial leaders, a

consciousness of greater solidarity facing our underdeveloped nations, obtaining among other things, just prices for our raw materials.

31. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the solemn declaration of Human Rights, to interest universities in Latin America to undertake investigations verifying the degree of its implementation in our countries.

32. To denounce the unjust action of world powers that works against self-determination of weaker nations who must suffer the bloody consequences of war and invasion, and to ask competent international organizations for effective and decisive procedures.

33. To encourage and praise the initiatives and works of all those who in the diverse areas of action contribute to the creation of a new order which will assure peace in our midst.

NOTES

1. Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 87.

2. Paul VI, Address to the peasants, Mosquera, Colombia, August 23, 1968.

3. Paul VI, Homily of the Mass on Development Day, Bogota, August 23, 1968.

4. Paul VI, Address to the peasants, Mosquera, Colombia, August 23, 1968.

5. Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 56-61.

6. Ibid., 56.

7. Ibid., 24.

8. Ibid., 54.

9. Ibid., 26.

10. Ibid., 62.

11. Ibid., 53.

12. Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 78.

13. John XXIII, *Peace on Earth*, 167 and Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 76.

14. Paul VI, message of January 1, 1968.

15. Paul VI, message of January 1, 1968.

16. Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 76.

17. Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 78.

18. Paul VI, Christmas message, 1967.

19. Matthew 5:9.

20. Vatican II, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 78.

21. John 14:27.

22. Matthew 25:31-46.

23. Paul VI, homily of the Mass on Development Day, Bogota, August 23, 1968; see Paul VI, opening address at the 2nd General Conference of Latin American Bishops, Bogota, August 24, 1968.

24. Paul VI, message of January 1, 1968.

25. Paul VI, homily of the Mass on Development Day, Bogota, August 23, 1968.

26. Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 30.

27. Paul VI, homily of the Mass on Development Day, Bogota, August 23, 1968.

28. Paul VI, *ibid.*

29. Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 31.

30. Paul VI, *The Development of Peoples*, 31.

31. Paul VI, Address to new priests and deacons, Bogota, August 22, 1968.

