



# Embrace the Spirit

The Caribbean Initiative

## *Justice in the Colombian Context: Our Hope*

By: César García

### Group Prayer

God reigns forever;

**God has established a throne for judgment.**

God will judge the world in righteousness;

**God will govern the peoples with justice.**

God is a refuge for the oppressed,

**a stronghold in times of trouble.**

Those who know your name will trust in you,

**for you, God, have never forsaken those who seek you.**

Sing praises to God, enthroned in Zion;

**proclaim among the nations what God has done.** (Psalm 9:7-11, NIV)



### Introduction: A Story about Restorative Justice

Rodrigo de Mendoza, a violent slave-trader, mercenary, and murderer, decided to change his life and join the Catholic monastic order of the Jesuits. Yet his burden for the sins committed was too dark. His conscience indicated that he deserved to pay for so much suffering. No punishment would be enough to return the lives of so many human beings who he had hurt. In the search to pay his debts, Rodrigo decided to take his heavy Spanish conquistador armor and go in search of the tribe where months ago he had assassinated and captured men to sell them as slaves.

After climbing many mountains and crossing dangerous waterfalls with his load on his back, Rodrigo was faced with members of the community where he had caused so much damage. Exhausted by his heavy load, Rodrigo sat down to wait for the natives to do justice and take revenge for so much blood spilled. What else could they possibly want? Then an Indian, upon seeing this Spanish conquistador, ran and put a knife to the neck of

Rodrigo. The outcome was imminent. However, the Indian moved the knife in another direction to cut the rope that held the heavy load of Rodrigo - his armor. The rope was cut, and Rodrigo was free of the weight; free from his past, free from his wickedness and the pain of those to whom he caused so much damage. Rodrigo cried. He cried tears of gratitude and happiness for an undeserved pardon, a pardon that could only be granted by those whom he had victimized.

The scene described above is part of the movie "The Mission"<sup>1</sup>. This masterful production tells the story of a Latin American indigenous community facing the injustice caused by oppressors from other lands. Four hundred years after the events narrated in the film, the realities of injustice and oppression in Latin American countries like Colombia have not changed substantially.

Colombia has one of the highest levels of income inequality in Latin America and the world.<sup>2</sup> According to World Bank statistics, over the past 30 years the gap between wealthy and poor has widened further. In 1984, 4% of the owners owned 31% of the land, and now that same 4% of the owners own 70% of the land.<sup>3</sup> According to the UN, Colombia is one of the countries with the largest internal displacement of people.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, the number of internally displaced persons or refugees exceeded 5.9 million, about 12% of Colombia's total population.<sup>5</sup>



Social inequality and injustice in the distribution of wealth plus the lack of opportunities<sup>6</sup> motivated the beginning of revolutionary armies based on Marxist ideas several decades ago. Confronted by economic injustice, these troops have sought – for over 60 years – a structural change in Colombia. Their armed and violent revolution has resulted in countless massacres, kidnappings, and displacements. In their quest for distributive justice, they used methods that ultimately produced greater injustice. As the theologian Miroslav Volf mentions, the search for justice that does not take into account the other – even the oppressor – cannot be justice.<sup>7</sup> The revolution in Colombia resulted in the rich classes of the country responding to the violent onslaught with more violence and repression, thus increasing a spiral of pain that until recently seemed irreversible. Illegal private armies (paramilitaries) were organized to deal with the threats of the revolutionary guerrillas. New massacres and disappearances were being carried out by far-right armies. The civilian population has been caught in the crossfire, and in many cases forced to flee from their own land, which has resulted in the high number of displaced persons mentioned above.

<sup>1</sup> Warner Bros. (1986). Goldcrest y Kingsmere.

<sup>2</sup> Banco Mundial. 2010. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/colombia>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibíd.*

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/4/570cf4706/unhcr-include-refugees-displaced-colombia-peace-talks.html>.

<sup>5</sup> CODHES. (2014). El Desplazamiento Forzado y la Imperiosa Necesidad de la Paz: Informe Desplazamiento 2013. [en línea], disponible en file:///C:/Users/Justapaz/Desktop/CODHESInforma82.pdf., recuperado 3 de marzo de 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Sen, Amartya. (2009). *The Idea of Justice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. p. 253. 7. Volf, Miroslav. (1996). *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. p. 220.

<sup>7</sup> Volf, Miroslav. (1996). *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press. p. 220.

How does the Colombian society react to this reality? Here we can mention at least three general attitudes in our context.

### **Resentment and bitterness**

The pain produced by so much injustice and violence is not easy to heal. Those who have suffered the lack of opportunities and the social inequality want to see a distributive justice that honors their rights. Those who have suffered the loss of their loved ones because of violent causes yearn for the impunity that governs Colombia to cease and for its perpetrators receive what they deserve, a retributive justice. Much of this discourse and demand are made in terms that denote resentment and bitterness. It requires - with sometimes violent speech - that others pay for what they have done.

### **Loss of hope**

Marxist utopias seem to lose their strength in a postmodern world where meta-stories are cast aside in search of personal fulfillment. Many no longer believe in the possibility of a just society where each person can develop their potential by having access to the same health, education, and employment opportunities as any other. It seems easier to be carried away by a savage capitalism that rewards the strongest with primarily material progress and prosperity.

### **Escapism**

For many years the loss of memory has been part of the Colombian culture. “*Colombia so derrumba y nosotros de rumba*” (“*Colombia collapses, and we entertain ourselves with rumba*”), is a famous saying that explains this reality. Music, sports, novels, beauty, and festivals are how Colombian people try to avoid the cruel realities of violence and war.<sup>8</sup> The memory of murders and massacres are too heavy a burden on this society.

Loss of consciousness is an expression of the tyranny of the present. The Colombian people have no hope for their future since for many decades there has been no solution to the armed conflict. It is not known when and where the next victim will fall. As a consequence, we seek to enjoy the present because there is no certainty as to whether or not there will be a future.

However, there is another type of society that makes its way in Colombia. It is a community that rises up against the generalized values mentioned above. It is a culture that believes in and seeks to practice distributive justice among its members, people who have decided voluntarily to share their goods with those most in need. It is a community that does not believe in retributive justice because it has experienced in itself another type of justice: compassion. It is a community that follows Jesus because it understood that, in the words of Peter Goodwin, "The teaching and ministry of Jesus shows how justice shines in all dimensions of human life - individual, social and cosmic."<sup>9</sup> It is a community that has found in its experience with the Master new strength and hope to overcome pain and violence by responding with forgiveness and love.

In following Jesus, this community – the church – has found some principles that illuminate its walk and search for justice in contexts of violence and oppression such as the Colombian context.

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<sup>8</sup> Palacios, Marco. (2006). *Between Legitimacy and Violence: A History of Colombia 1875-2002*. London: Duke University Press. p. 239.

<sup>9</sup> Goodwin Heltzel, Peter. (2009). "The Holy Spirit of Justice," in: Brian McLaren, Elisa Padilla, and Ashley Bunting Seeber, *The Justice Project*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books. p. 44

## Biblical Reflection

### *Jesus-style justice opts for the neediest*

"Dear sirs, seek God; Respect God; Serve God with all your strength; Do justice to the widows, the orphans, the strangers, the sad and oppressed; Wash your hands of blood; Govern their territories with wisdom and peace."<sup>10</sup> This quote from Menno Simons reminds us that the idea of asking secular leaders to rule justly is not a strange concept for Mennonites. From its beginnings, the Anabaptist movement has had a close relationship with people in contexts of suffering and oppression, people who cry out for justice and equity. This is evidenced, for example, in the Twelve Articles of the German Peasants' War in 1525.<sup>11</sup> As Goldewijk states, "The need to unite the execution of power among humans to standards related to human dignity is as old as society itself."<sup>12</sup> In Colombia, the search for justice in the manner of Jesus means walking with those who are victims of inequality and unequal distribution of wealth.



### *Justice in the style of Jesus transforms lives*

Among the many stories of how Jesus applied justice, it is interesting to see the case of the woman caught in adultery narrated in the Gospel of John (Chapter 8). There is a clear contrast between the moral justice of retribution and the justice of Jesus, which is of a restorative order.<sup>13</sup>

While the Pharisees sought to inflict pain and punish by giving what the offender deserves, Jesus tried to correct the harm and bring reconciliation by providing what the offender needs. He was more concerned about healing the wound that had been caused than the strict observance of the law that so obsessed the Pharisees. As a result of the above, the woman found forgiveness and the possibility of a new beginning. Life instead of death was what the offender who came to Jesus found.

It is this type of justice that can bring a new beginning for Colombian society. As long as it continues to demand payment for every harm, as long as strict compliance with the law is demanded, reconciliation will never be possible.

### *Jesus-like justice includes mercy, love, and compassion*

The life of Christ shows us that justice is not giving the other what it deserves. It has nothing to do with rewarding or punishing. Justice is giving to others what they need: love, compassion, and mercy. "Justice and mercy are not opposing terms. On the contrary, it is only through merciful actions that justice is carried out in

<sup>10</sup> Wenger, J. C. (1956). *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*: c.14961561. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press. p. 529.

<sup>11</sup> Driver, John. (1997). *La Fe en la Periferia de la Historia: Una Historia del Pueblo Cristiano Desde la Perspectiva de los Movimientos de Restauración y Reforma Radical*. Colección historia abierta. Ciudad de Guatemala: Ediciones SEMILLA. p. 162-63.

<sup>12</sup> Goldewijk, Berma Klein and de Gaay Fortman Bastiaan. (1999). *Where Needs Meet Rights: Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in a New Perspective*. Geneva: WCC. Publications. p. 3

<sup>13</sup> <sup>13</sup> Zehr, Howard. (1995). *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, A Christian peace shelf selection. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press. p. 126-57.

people affected by the tragedy of criminal conduct. Justice encompasses mercy, and kindness shows justice,"<sup>14</sup> says Christopher Marshall.

In modern terms, we would say that compassion applied regarding justice is equivalent to what is now known as restorative justice.<sup>15</sup>

Marshall concludes: "Restorative justice can be cataloged, from the perspective of the Gospel, as compassionate justice."

Restorative justice or compassion is the kind of justice that can transform the Colombian context. It is the kind of justice that brings hope and opens up new options for the future. May God enlighten the Colombian church to remain a living testimony to this type of justice! May God continue to lead this new society to reflect to the world the character of Christ! That is our hope!

## Questions for Reflection

1. How do you feel about Rodrigo's decision to carry his heavy armor as a way of dealing with his conscience?
2. Are we carrying "heavy loads" as a community? Why?
3. What can we do to "cut down the ropes" and to "free" our society of the burden of guilt?
4. In your life have you encountered situations of injustice that led to resentment or bitterness, loss of hope, or escapism? Do you see others responding to injustice in these ways?
5. After reflecting on this study, how would you describe Jesus' righteousness? How does this differ from retributive justice?
6. Where could the church be contributing to restorative justice in your community?

## About the Author

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall, Christopher D. (2012). *Compassionate Justice: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue with Two Gospel Parables on Law, Crime, and Restorative Justice*, Theopolitical visions. Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, Ebook, Loc. p. 8205.

<sup>15</sup> 15. *Ibíd.* p. 8270.