
Peace agreement in Colombia. Msgr. Rueda: “We are called to foster this process. There can be no backtracking”

Was it real peace? The question has been on the minds of people in Colombia upon the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the former rebel group FARC in Bogota on November 24, 2016. It reverberates throughout countless debates and celebrations marking the anniversary these past days. Above all, it is echoed in the daily reports from the country's peripheries: 1,270 social leaders have been killed since the signing of the agreement, according to NGO Indepaz, 155 since the start of the year; 293 former guerrilla fighters were murdered after having laid down their weapons (44 in 2021). Entire regions are in the thrall of armed groups and drug lords. Against this backdrop, the Colombian Church pursues its commitment for peace through missions and local initiatives, notably in western Colombia over the past few weeks. The Church has also been denouncing the State's absence in these territories, including self-criticism over the fact that more could have been done in the past decades. Interviewed by SIR, thanks to the Communications Office of the Colombian Episcopal Conference (CEC), the President of the Episcopate and Primate of Colombia, Msgr. **Luis José Rueda Aparicio**, Archbishop of Bogotá, provides an insight into these issues. **Your Excellency, five years have already passed since the signing of the peace agreement. How far has it come? Has there in fact been any progress?**

Steps forward have been taken.

Firstly, the majority of former fighters have laid down their weapons, resulting in significantly less armed conflict in the regions. In addition, some of these former guerrillas have joined the political scene, an appropriate milieu to give their contribution to the Country. Yet, on the other hand, in the last five years, we have witnessed the death of many former combatants, of many social leaders, along with the resurgence of other conflicts. However, we have learned a lot and we have learned painfully.

We are now called upon to give impetus to this process, to persevere in the quest for peace. Its practical application will take time.

But there can be no backtracking. **Various parts of the country - the southwest, the Pacific, the northwest of Antioquia, Catatumbo, and other areas - have yet to experience peace. These are still conflict zones, where the State is absent, areas controlled by drug lords, paramilitaries and guerrillas. In your opinion, why is peace not forthcoming in the periphery of the country?** *These peripheries where peace has never had a chance, are in the thralls of drug lords that finance the war and ensure that areas previously controlled by FARC are now in the hands of new groups keen to seize land and drug trafficking routes, especially into foreign countries.* There are weapons, armed groups, and people involved in these criminal activities, which make victims of communities - impoverishing them, expelling them from their homes, harming them and even killing them. This is a very sad reality, but it's the result of the re-emergence or continuation of groups pre-dating the peace agreement. **How should the State deal with this?**

The State has the duty to work for a positive peace,

which we can all work towards, we can all offer our small contribution, but above all, it is a peace whose attainment entails social welfare programs, including health, education and roads. Veritable dedication is needed in many areas of the country that have been abandoned by the State, and we believe that an integral and social presence is needed there, and that it could be the answer to the

conflict. **In your opinion, why are political polarisations and clashes on the theme of peace continuing?** Colombia, I believe, is not an island. As in all of Latin America there is a problem, a tendency towards sharp political polarisation, a search for power based on a given perspective, and this also applies to our country. However, in addition, *Colombia's history is marked by unresolved conflicts. This is nothing new. What we are seeing today is a resurgence of old political parties and clashes.* Colombia has been through many civil wars, but hopefully this confrontation will not produce new conflicts. We hope that, amidst different views and ways of thinking, instead of pursuing polarisation, divisions, hatred, diversity will lead us to communion, unity, the common good, solidarity, as it should be for the progress of our country. **The work of the Truth Commission has been postponed by a year. What are your expectations in relation to this?** First of all, I must thank Father De Roux, the Truth Commission and all those who have worked on it. Secondly, our hope is to identify those paths of truth, the recognition of mistakes that we might all have made. *The Truth Commission is not about convicting but about exposing the truth as we know it, bringing to the fore the root causes of the conflict, in order for us to understand what happened and, for the future, rectify what went wrong so as to progress towards a country at peace, a country that shoulders its responsibilities, a country that knows how to live in unity and in diversity.* **What can the Church offer to this quest for peace? The Church has shed her blood on many occasions, but you have recently asked for forgiveness for the shortcomings of the Church during the decades of conflict. Can you explain the reason for this position?**

The Church firmly believes in this opportunity for dialogue, reconciliation and peace.

The Church as a whole - including its bishops, priests, deacons and the laity - has been fully committed, suffering the vicissitudes of war and armed conflict. We have had our martyrs - men and women, bishops and catechists, lay people, who have died in this heinous war, which has lasted for many years, hoping that one day it would end. At the same time, we have asked forgiveness for the omissions we may have been guilty of. And we remain convinced that the path of reconciliation in Colombia is the path of dialogue, of forgiveness, of listening to each other and of an integral commitment by all sectors of society, to which we want and can contribute to as Church. **Are you optimistic about the future? What can be expected in the coming years?** I cherish a value, one that we are called to cultivate among the baptised. That value is the virtue of hope. It is a theological virtue, which means that it is God Himself who encourages us, who walks with His people, who walks in the midst of suffering. I truly believe that the Lord walks with Colombia: he walks with all of us willing to give everything for our country.

I live in the hope of better times, of a new history, a history of peace and reconciliation in our Country.

Bruno Desidera