

**PEACE MOBILIZATION IN COLOMBIA  
AND THE ROLE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH (1978-2006)<sup>1</sup>**  
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**INTRODUCTION**

During the last 30 years, Colombia has been debating war and peace, oscillating between an emphasis on political repression used to address the armed conflict with insurgent groups and the promotion of peace processes designed to find a negotiated solution to that conflict. Nevertheless, the different governments' policies on security and peace have only managed to achieve partial peace accords with the guerrillas while the intensity of the conflict has escalated significantly. This telling context has generated an important mass mobilization in favor of peace that is one of the largest in the world and, undoubtedly, the biggest in a country with ongoing violent conflict. In this context, the Catholic Church has played a key role in the search for peace and in the promotion and support of the social mobilization against violence and in favor of peace.

This article will describe and analyze the key role played by the Church in the context of this growing mobilization. The article will be developed in two parts. The first will be a comprehensive, nationwide assessment of this phenomenon, presenting five of its principal tendencies. In the second part, the article will consider the contribution of the Catholic Church in the consolidation of the phenomenon. This will take into account not only ecclesiastic actions that promote peace but the way in which those actions contribute to the development of these tendencies. It can be confirmed that the Catholic Church has played a truly significant role in the mobilization, one that is surpassed only by the role played by peace organizations and municipal administrations but much greater than that of the majority of social actors.

The principal source of information is the Collective Action for Peace database (Datapaz) developed by CINEP, consisting of newspaper data on the peace mobilization from 1978 to the present. This facilitates more precise and systematic assessment of the real meaning and importance of the social mobilization for peace over the last 30 years. However, it must be kept in mind that given the use of newspapers as a source of information for Datapaz, there are peace events that do not appear because they are not considered newsworthy. This makes many collective actions invisible, including several of them carried out in parishes and base groups that are linked to the Church. It should not be forgotten that the data presented reflect only tendencies and that the real dynamic is much richer and more extensive than presented here.

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<sup>1</sup> This article used and updated material used by the author in his PhD thesis at the University of Bradford (2005): "To What Extent is there a Peace Movement in Colombia? An Assessment of the Country's Peace Mobilization, 1978-2003" and published in Spanish in 2006: "Movimiento de paz en Colombia – 1978-2003."

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## THE MAIN TENDENCIES OF THE COLOMBIAN PEACE MOBILIZATION

It could be claimed that peace mobilization in Colombia between 1978 and 2006, particularly in the second half of the 90s and the beginning of the new century, was a social phenomenon distinguished by five principal tendencies: it was a social movement of significant stature; of massive character; with a growing repertoire of activities that achieved national coverage; and, its activities were seldom confrontational.

### *A comparatively important mobilization*

Colombian civil society organizations have called upon a varied repertoire of forms of collective action to express their opposition to the ongoing armed conflict and to manifest their commitment to peacebuilding. *Figure 1* shows the pattern that such mobilization for peace has followed from 1978 till 2006.

*Figure 1: Collective action for peace in Colombia (1978-2006)*

From almost non-existence in the 60s, collective action for peace slowly increased through the 80s, followed by significant and rapid growth in the first half of the 90s. When mobilization peaks in 1997 more than 250 events per year are registered in the database. This level of mobilization is significant when compared with the level of social struggles in Colombia during the same period (Archila et al., 2002: 49, 75, 125 & 172). The peak number of events for peace was 255 in 1997, which is more than the highest level of protests display by workers (190),

peasant/indigenous peoples (180), urban populations (230), and students (90) over the same period of time, when studied separately.

However, at the same time peace mobilization in Colombia gains significance when contrasted with peace mobilization in other parts of the world. On one hand, it is comparable to levels recorded in the United Kingdom<sup>3</sup> (Rochon, 1988: 114), Italy, Switzerland (Giugni, 2004) and the USA<sup>4</sup> (Lofland, 1993: 248), and, on the other hand, it is clearly greater than peace mobilization recorded in countries where armed conflict is taking place (Cf. *Accord* 1 to 16, 1996 to 2005).<sup>5</sup>

### ***A massive mobilization without doubt***

Peace mobilization in Colombia is not only significant because of the high level of collective activity that it has produced, but also because of the large number of people that have been mobilized, particularly during the 90's and the beginning of the new century. Collective action for peace has prompted an aggregated participation of more than 50 million people<sup>6</sup>, a figure that represents a clear national record<sup>7</sup>, and one of the largest peace mobilizations worldwide.<sup>8</sup> It is necessary to take into account two overarching characteristics of this massive level of participation. First of all, this participation *en masse* is a phenomenon that occurs in particular in the four years from 1997 to 2000, in which at least 43.6 million people (cumulative figure) were mobilized. Secondly, the bulk of this participation consists of particular types of collective action in a handful of initiatives that can be identified. The activities that stand out are civil resistance, marches and demonstrations, and electoral participation. Let us consider specifically which initiatives are responsible for such a high level of participation.

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<sup>3</sup> In Colombia, peace mobilization in the 1990's was at a level that, on average, was half as much as the activities reported by Rochon in the British Peace Movement in the 1980's. Nevertheless, it is necessary to bear in mind not only the difference in the size of the populations in both countries but also the source of information for the statistics. In the case of Great Britain, the source is the magazine from the principal peace organization – Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), which tends to include every event, while in Colombia, the sources are news items from the ten main national and regional newspapers which tend to under-report peace activities.

<sup>4</sup> The level of activities for the peace movement in the USA in the 1980's (Giugni, 2004: 47) is approximately half of the level of events recorded in Colombia in the 1990's. The sources of both databases are newspapers, but in the case of Giugni it is only a sample of one newspaper (Sunday and Monday editions). In the data presented by Lofland (1993), there is only a slight difference in favor of the Colombian trends, but in this case the researcher is using a peace-friendly source (The Nuclear Times).

<sup>5</sup> Although there is no existing report for civilian peace activities in these countries, the *Accord* editions allow us to make an approximation of the phenomenon. In the 14 national cases of peace processes and peace activism that the magazine has analyzed since its first edition in 1996, Colombia has, by far, the highest and most sustained level of mobilization and peace activism.

<sup>6</sup> One must not forget that the participation figures presented are only indicators as they imply a serious under-reporting of information. Much of the news that comes out in the press, which is source of information for *Datapaz*, does not include data about the number of participants. In fact, only 29% of the 2,265 collective events recorded between 1978 and 2006 contain this information.

<sup>7</sup> To convey the significance of this level of participation one can look at the workers' struggles which took place between 1975 and 2000. 3,377 strikes took place in Colombia with some 23,244,054 workers participating (Cf. CINEP's Workers Protest Database).

<sup>8</sup> It is hard to find figures at this level in the literature. The research developed by Kriesi et al. (1995) on the new social movements in Western Europe between 1975 and 1989 provides a point of reference. The participation in Colombia is at least half of the level of participation in Germany and the Netherlands, certainly twice the level in Switzerland and more than three times than the level in France.

Of all the acts of civil resistance there is one on January 23, 2000, in which 18 million people participated. This act was a voluntary electricity blackout to demand peace and reject terrorist acts against the country's electricity infrastructure. The blackout, organized by the campaign, 'No More,' was carried out for two minutes nationwide. A reported 15.6 million light bulbs were switched off across the country, from which the level of population participation was estimated.<sup>9</sup> In the case of electoral participation,<sup>10</sup> 12.7 million people participated in two events: the *Children's National Mandate for Peace* on October 25, 1996, in which approximately 2.7 million children and adolescents participated, and the *Citizen's Mandate for Peace, Life and Liberty*, on October 26, 1997, which attracted the support of around 10 million people. Both events were advocating a negotiated solution of the armed conflict.

Certainly, in terms of *marches and demonstrations* there was a notable concentration in 1999 when more than 14 million people participated in demonstrations and gatherings to promote peace throughout the country. The majority of demonstrations that year were related to the 'No More' campaign which was against kidnapping and forced disappearance. Undoubtedly, the greatest national demonstration was on October 24, 1999, when approximately 12 million people demonstrated on the same day in 182 municipalities of 28 departments (states) across the country.

### ***A mobilization with a varied repertoire of forms of action***

The efforts of various social sectors led them to use an increasingly diverse repertoire of collective action as the theme of peace gained momentum during the 90's. Fifteen distinct action forms were recorded.<sup>11</sup> Some are very clear and consolidated, while others are only just visible among the complexities of the mobilization and resistance against the negative effects of the armed conflict. These different action forms can be classified in five general strategies for peace, as has been done in other parts of the world.<sup>12</sup> These strategies allow us to organize the varied initiatives in five 'areas of intervention,' depending on the way they focus and prioritize their activity in the social arena and/or political arena:

*Strategy 1 – Educating:* oriented to training and raising the awareness of distinct social sectors to promote peace and a negotiated solution of the conflict, thus promoting the development of an agenda for peace and its cultural support. The specific initiatives that contribute to this strategy include:<sup>13</sup> 'forums, congresses, and seminars,' 'educational programs and campaigns,' 'cultural and sporting events,' 'religious celebrations,' and 'peace awards and honors.' Together, these types of initiatives represent 49.8% of all collective action for peace that took place between 1978 and 2006.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. El Espectador, 24.01.2000, p. 8A.

<sup>10</sup> Specifically, in a type of public consultation, which is allowed by the Colombian constitution.

<sup>11</sup> See the Datapaz Codebook (Cf. García Durán, 2006) for a detailed description of each category.

<sup>12</sup> Despite the differences of context and objectives of peace activism, analysis of the peace movements in USA (Lofland, 1993: 23-36) and in Germany (Mushaben, 1986: 141-154) contributes towards clarifying these strategies. These strategies are 'educating', 'politicking', 'protesting' and 'organizing'. In the Colombian case, one more strategy emerges given the importance of the 'resisting' dynamic of the population in relation to the armed actors.

<sup>13</sup> The table of information also included in this group the category of 'other types of initiatives' due to the fact that, despite its diversity, it has the same focus.

*Strategy 2 – [Self-] Organizing:* oriented towards the creation of organizations and networks that promote peace work for the articulation and coordination of their efforts to foster peace. Although this corresponds to only 3.5% of all collective activity in the 29 years studied, they have been crucial in lending weight and identity to peace mobilization.

*Strategy 3 – Politicking:* through the creation and coordination of social and political consensus, these acts seek to influence the political environment in the search for peaceful alternatives. The types of collective action that contribute to this strategy are: participation in elections and referendums (particularly at the local level), processes of building social consensus, and dialogues/negotiations to find alternative solutions to the problems faced by organizations and local communities. Together, these three types of initiatives represent 10.1% of all collective action developed.

*Strategy 4 – Protesting:* this strategy seeks to mobilize people against violence and applies pressure for conditions that favor peace. The forms of collective action that support this strategy are: ‘marches and demonstrations,’ ‘strikes and shutdowns,’ and ‘occupations and blockades.’ They are closely associated with the traditional behavioral patterns of social movements and can be found in a much clearer and abundant form in the social struggles of workers, peasants and indigenous peoples, students and the urban population. Together, these types of initiatives from the fourth strategy represent 31.9% of all collective action for peace.

*Strategy 5 – Resisting:* This strategy is oriented towards expressing a more proactive position of the population in relation to the armed actors. The action forms are basically two: ‘actions of civil resistance’ and ‘declarations of peace zones,’<sup>14</sup> representing 4.7% of all collective action for peace developed.

Despite the general development of the repertoire of collective activities utilized, it is important not to forget the significance of two of them from the beginning of the period that we are studying. One the one hand are ‘forums, congresses and seminars,’ and, on the other, ‘marches and demonstrations.’ In fact, these two forms represent more than 60% of all activities. Such predominance clearly demonstrates the emphasis on demonstrative and awareness-raising activities promoted by the sectors that advocate and apply pressure to bring about peace.

#### ***A mobilization with a non-confrontational style***

There is one last general characteristic, which is the tendency of Colombian peace mobilization to be non-confrontational. In other words, it seldom uses tactics that employ the use of force and confrontation with the adversary. In Datapaz, a scale has been developed to measure the level of confrontation of collective actions for peace using the model developed by John Lofland (1993: 190/91) for the American peace movement (See *Table 1*).

As can be seen in *Figure 2*, a clear tendency exists towards low levels of contentiousness in collective action for peace in Colombia: 58.4% of activities developed show a low level of confrontation with authorities and other social actors; 38.1% an intermediate level; and, 3.5% a

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<sup>14</sup> A ‘peace zone’ can be defined as “an attempt to establish rules or norms that limit the destructive effects of violent conflict within a particular area or during a particular time period or with regard to a particular category of people” (Allen-Nan & Mitchell, c2004: 5).

high level of confrontation. Only five events, 0.2% of 2265, employ the use of violence. As a consequence, one could say that in general terms peace mobilization in Colombia is also a form of ‘polite’ protest as it was in the USA (Lofland, 1993).

*Table 1: Action forms and levels of contentiousness*

CONTENTIOUSNESS LEVELS		ACTION FORMS
HIGH	Level 10	Actions that reach any level of violence
	Level 9	Occupations & blockades
	Level 8	Actions of civil resistance
	Level 7	Strikes & shutdowns
MEDIUM	Level 6	Declarations of peace & neutrality zones
	Level 5	Marches & demonstrations
	Level 4	Elections & referendums Dialogues & negotiations
LOW	Level 3	Process of building social consensus Forums, congresses & seminars
	Level 2	Cultural & sporting events ;Organization & coordination; Religious celebrations
	Level 1	Educational programs & campaigns Peace awards & honors

It should be kept in mind that the level of ‘politeness’ of the peace mobilization is related to the importance Colombian social and peace organizations place on activities with a formative, awareness-raising and organizational character. Nevertheless, there are moments in which activities that imply greater pressure and confrontation have become more important such as during the Turbay administration (1986-87), when massacres were clearly increasing; post-1999, during the negotiations with the FARC and their subsequent failure; and in the first term of office of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2006).

*Figure 2: Levels of contentiousness in the peace mobilization (1978-2006)*

### ***A nationwide mobilization***

Mobilization for peace has not only involved mass mobilization with an increasing repertoire of activities and struggles, it also has managed to consolidate truly nationwide coverage. As can be seen in *Map 1*, collective activities for peace have taken place in 32 departments<sup>15</sup> of the country, that is, all departments with the exception of Vaupés. Furthermore, activity has been recorded in 536 municipalities,<sup>16</sup> which represent just over half of the 1,099 municipalities. Despite the increasing coverage, it should be recognized that such peace mobilization has been concentrated more in some regions of the country than others. There are a few regions with a very low concentration and others with a very high concentration, while the majority have low/intermediate concentration. There are five departments that have only seen one or two events in the last 29 years. However, these departments are located in the periphery of the country: four in the sparsely populated jungle zones of Orinoquía and Amazonía (Vichada, Guainía, Guaviare and Amazonas) and one on the island of San Andrés in the Caribbean.

I will now consider the departments that have a low concentration of municipalities with peace events (between 10 and 50) and those with an intermediate level (between 51 and 200). The departments with a low concentration, which are still significant as can be seen in *Map 3.1*, are: Arauca, Boyacá, Caldas, Caquetá, Casanare, Cundinamarca, Magdalena, Norte de Santander, Putumayo, Quindío and Risaralda. The departments with an intermediate concentration are: Atlántico, Bolívar, Cauca, Cesar, Córdoba, Chocó, Huila, La Guajira, Meta, Nariño, Sucre and

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<sup>15</sup> A department is a political administrative division of the country equivalent to states in the USA and counties in the UK.

<sup>16</sup> A municipality is a town or city with its own local government.

Tolima. In third place are the departments with a high concentration of municipalities with peace events (those with more than 200 municipalities with activities). Here we have Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Bogotá D.C. (the capital city), and Santander. As can be observed in *Map 1*, the department of Antioquia stands out with 1,023 activities in distinct municipalities. This is due, in part, to this department having the most municipalities in the country (124) but also to the intensity of the armed conflict in the region. In the department, activity is concentrated in four zones: in Medellín and the surrounding zone of Valle de Aburrá; in the regions of Urabá and the Magdalena Medio; and, in the southeast zone.

*Map 1*

Apart from Antioquia, the capital, Bogotá, is notable because of the number of peace initiatives there, 464 events (20.5% of the 2,265 peace events between 1978 and 2006). This is definitely the municipality with the highest level of peace mobilization when initiatives are considered individually. The importance of Bogotá as a place for peace activism can be explained by the fact that it is the political and geographical center of the country and, subsequently, the obvious place for collective action for peace striving to have a national character. In addition, the departments of Santander (304 events) and Valle del Cauca (506 events) have a considerable level of peace activity. Such dynamism can be linked to the intensity of the armed conflict and traditions of social mobilization that exist in these regions. Despite this, Santander was especially dynamic in the 80's and the beginning of the 90's, while Valle de Cauca and Antioquia have been much more dynamic in the 90's and the beginning of the new century.

While considering the geographical concentration of peace activity, it is necessary to be aware of the importance of some departmental capitals in peace mobilization (capitals that have hosted more than 20 peace events). At regional levels, such capitals have played the role of a focal point as Bogotá has for the whole country. Here it is necessary to mention Medellín, Bucaramanga, Cali, Neiva, Villavicencio, Pereira, Valledupar, Sincelejo, Santa Marta, Popayán, Pasto, Montería, Cartagena, Barranquilla and Ibagué. In addition to these departmental capitals, one should add some secondary cities with considerable levels of peace initiatives: Barrancabermeja, Apartadó, Turbo, Bello, Rionegro (Antioquia) and Buenaventura.

In summary, peace mobilization in Colombia has clearly been significant. It gained momentum in the 1990's, achieving total participation of more than 50 million people via a broad and not very confrontational repertoire of collective action and forms of social and political pressure. In addition, it has been a nationwide mobilization, but with higher concentration of activities in the main urban centers, especially in the capital of the country and in some areas where the armed conflict has been more intense. Now, it is time to turn to the role the Catholic Church has played in this peace mobilization.



## PEACE MOBILIZATION AND THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

It is undeniable that churches and, especially the Catholic Church, have played an important role in the significant process of peace mobilization that Colombian society has lived particularly in the past 15 years.

### *A leadership role in peace mobilization*

This leadership becomes clear when looking at who has promoted the peace mobilization. Figure 3 shows the importance of each of the major sectors of Colombian society in promoting peace ations. In first place, is the clear leadership of the civil sector, with 63%. In second place, is the significant role played by governmental and State entities, especially local and departmental governments, with 29%. In third place, is the international community, which has promoted 4% of peace activities. In last place, is the somewhat marginal role of political parties (3%) and, as to be expected, armed illegal actors (1%).<sup>17</sup>

*Figure 3: Peace mobilization organizers (distributing responsibility in joint events) (1978-2006)*

Among the cultural, symbolic and religious institutions that comprise civil society, churches are the most dynamic sector in promoting peace. Despite the participation of different Christian churches (such as Lutherans, Mennonites,<sup>18</sup> Presbyterians, and the Assemblies of God) in

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<sup>17</sup> These appear mainly to the degree in which they participate in dialogue and negotiation with different governmental and social entities in the national as well as the regional and local arenas.

<sup>18</sup> A word should be added about the Mennonites, who despite not being explicitly mentioned in Datapaz, have played a significant role in peace issues. Not only have they actively participated in the processes in which peace

organizing initiatives for peace, the major role of the Catholic Church is clear. According to Datapaz, representatives of the Catholic Church led 95.5% of the actions for peace organized by churches and have participated in 2.2% of actions of an ecumenical character. This leadership is most clearly seen when compared with the role other social and institutional actors have played. With the exception of the peace organizations and the local administrations (mayors), the Catholic Church is the actor that promoted more actions for peace from 1978 to 2006, as shown in *Figure 4*<sup>19</sup>.

*Figure 4: Mobilizing role of social and governmental organizations (1978-2006)*

The Catholic Church has not always maintained this leadership role at the same level. In the first period, between 1978 and 1985, the Catholic Church played a modest role that was definitely less prominent than the role played by politicians and political organizations, human rights organizations, workers and education institutions. In fact, during the eighties, Catholic Bishops were quite quiet on social issues and said little about the growing human rights violations during those years (González, 1990).

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organizations coordinated, such as the Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace, but they have promoted, mainly through their NGO 'Christian Center for Justice, Peace and Non-violent Action' (JUSTAPAZ), specific peace and conflict-resolution projects, such as the 'Network for Community Justice and Treatment of Conflicts', the Conscientious Objectors' Group, and the Peace and Development Programs in Montes de María and Meta.

<sup>19</sup> This graph compares the number of actions for peace by period promoted by the 12 social and institutional actors most committed to peace mobilizations.

In the following period, between 1986 and 1992, the Catholic Church took on a more active role when the peace mobilization began to consolidate and a series of initiatives and organizations were established to promote it. In that period, the Church promoted peace mobilizations at the same level as political organizations and workers, who represented the largest number of victims of the growing dirty war that the country experienced in those years. To this can be added the growing role the Church played in the peace processes as mediator and witness and the organizational work and work with base communities of many dioceses throughout the country. This created one of the important preconditions of the boom of peace organizations that would occur in the next period.

Between 1993 and 1999, the leadership of the Church in promoting peace mobilization grew, reaching second place behind peace organizations in organizing peace events. In those years of enthusiastic support for peace, it is undeniable that ecclesiastic actors played a key role in the organization of peace weeks and participated in the consolidation of some initiatives that were symbolic of that mobilization. Later, the Church distanced itself from some of these initiatives such as the National Network for Peace and against Violence (REDEPAZ) and the Permanent Assembly of Civil Society for Peace. The protagonistic role of the Church is very clear in high-conflict areas of the country such as in Magdalena Medio, Urabá, Montes de María and other areas of Atioquia and Chocó. A symbolic example of this presence in high-conflict areas has been the development of the National Pilgrimage (or Stations of the Cross) for Life, Justice and Peace. Also, ecclesiastic actors played an important role in the promotion of peace initiatives from base communities, such as the peace communities in Bajo Atrato and other civil resistance experiences. In those years, demonstrations and marches for defending life were promoted, meetings and forums to reflect on peace building were organized and the Church played an important role in mediating peace agreements between youth groups and gangs in cities such as Bogotá, Medellín and Cali.

In the final period, between 2000 and 2006, the Church continued playing an important role although it fell to fourth place among actors that promoted collective peace actions. Their position was lower than that of peace organizations and municipal and departmental administrations. The Church continued demonstrative actions such as the National Pilgrimage (or Stations of the Cross) for Life, Justice and Peace and a series of marches and demonstrations, combined with prayer days, to oppose violence and ask for peace and reconciliation. Sectors of the Church continue to organize the Week for Peace in their areas and carry out different events to reflect on conditions to promote reconciliation and peace in Colombia. One example of this is the III National Congress on Reconciliation that focused on the assessment of justice as an indispensable precondition for reconciliation in Colombia. The Church hierarchy, led by Monsignor Nel Beltrán, will be a member of the National Reconciliation Commission created by the government within the process of negotiating with the paramilitaries. The Church continues to play a mediating role in conflict situations especially with youth gangs in large cities, and with the paramilitary groups in Ralito and the ELN in Cuba.

### ***The Church has contributed to the development of a repertoire of peace actions***

The Catholic Church has contributed to enriching almost all the repertoire of collective actions for peace that have been used throughout the country by social organizations all of these years. They not only have promoted religious celebrations (such as vigils, masses, pilgrimages, and so on), but have played an important role in other types of actions such as marches and forums/seminars. *Figure 5* presents a summary of the repertoire of collective actions developed by the churches, mainly by the Catholic Church.

*Figure 5: Churches' repertoire of actions for peace (1978-2006)*

Following the tendency seen at all levels of peace mobilization, actions the Church has most supported are, on one hand, marches and demonstrations and, on the other hand, meetings, forums and seminars. That is, demonstrative actions against violence and demanding peace and actions that try to create an attitude favoring peacebuilding and reconciliation. We have mentioned as significant examples of the first type of action the National Pilgrimage (or Stations of the Cross) for Life, Justice and Peace, the many marches defending life and actions rejecting the violence perpetrated by different armed actors. Examples of the second type of actions include meetings and forums for peace and life, meetings on peace experiences, forums and seminars to discuss peace options in specific regions and participation in broad arenas of coordination and debate such as the Assembly of Civil Society for Peace.

Secondly, within the ecclesiastic activities of the Church are religious celebrations and acts and educational campaigns and activities. As to be expected, the Church is the unquestioned leader in religious celebrations supporting peace such as Eucharists, vigils, prayer days, etc., held for

this purpose. On the other hand, the Church also has played an important role in educational programs and campaigns. Outstanding among these events have been the Peace Weeks, the disarmament days and the implementation by SNPS and the Jesuit Peace Program of the Peace and Coexistence Schools in different Dioceses.

Thirdly, some Catholic bishops and priests in some regions have also played a leading role in promoting informal 'dialogues' with the armed actors, some in connection with the liberation of kidnapped persons. This mediation role has been recognized and institutionalized by the government in some of the official peace processes. These include the following: during the Gaviria administration, in Tlaxcala; during the Pastrana administration, with the participation of the president of the Bishops' Conference, Monsignor Alberto Giraldo, in the negotiating team; with the Uribe administration as moral witnesses of the process with the paramilitary groups (Cf. García-Durán, 1992, 2001, 2004); and, currently, in the preliminary talks with the ELN.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the role the Church has played in promoting organizations that support peace and processes of building social consensus. Concerning this latter point, an outstanding action is the commitment that some Dioceses have made to promote local and regional constituent assemblies as a way to strengthen democratic participation and social control at the local level. It is a clear commitment to democracy in contexts characterized by corruption and pressure by armed actors. The best known examples are in Mogotes, Mico Ahumado, eastern Antioqueño and, most recently, Montes de María.

I will add one additional comment on the level of contentiousness implied by actions promoted by the Church. In global terms, these actions tend to be slightly less confrontational than those promoted by the peace movement in general. While on a general level 58.4% of all actions are of low contentiousness, 60.7% of actions promoted by the Church are of low level. Medium contentious actions are about equal in both cases (38.1% and 37.9%, respectively) and those of high confrontational level are lower for the Church (1.5% versus 3.5% for the peace movement, in general).

### ***The Church has helped to build an organizational infrastructure for peace***

The Church has not limited itself to promoting collective actions for peace, that is, events that are located in a specific moment of time. In addition, many of the Church-related peace initiatives have been developed in a quiet way, mainly taking the form of educational and organizational processes that, given their perseverance and geographical coverage, have made an important contribution to the massive mobilization for peace and to consolidating a wide peace organizational infrastructure at the top and medium/bottom levels.

For instance, some of the most well known peace initiatives 'from below' have been the result of Church-related projects, such as some of the peace communities (like San Francisco de Asís, Nuestra Señora del Carmen and Natividad de María), and some of the local and regional constituent assemblies (like the cases of Mogotes, Mico Ahumado and Oriente Antioqueño).

In addition, the Church has promoted the formation and organization of distinct sectors of society in support of peace beginning with members of the Church itself. Examples include the Schools for Peace and Coexistence and promoting the organization of working groups for peace (round tables) in different cities and communities.

A pioneering example of an initiative at the medium level is the case of the Peace and Development Programs. A consortium formed by two church actors, the Catholic Dioceses of Barrancabermeja and CINEP, a Jesuit NGO, promoted the first one of these programs in the Magdalena Medio region. Following this first program, the Church has participated in many others such as the development and peace programs in Montes de María in eastern Antioqueño, northern Santander and Meta. The Church also has participated in the majority of working groups for peace in departments.

At the top level, one of the most well known initiatives has been the National Conciliation Commission. The Catholic Church has led this Commission, which has played an important role in the peacemaking efforts in the country. This commission was convened in 1995 by the President of the Colombian Bishops' Conference as a response to the crisis of the peace process during the Samper administration. With the participation of almost 15 leading figures from the social and political arena, the Commission has promoted a negotiated solution to the armed conflict, serving as an informal mediator between the parties. It has also promoted the active participation of sectors of civil society, the development of a permanent state peace policy,<sup>20</sup> and the generation of a peace culture (Comisión de Conciliación Nacional, 1998: 5-9). In specific contexts, the Commission has played an important but invisible role.

***The contribution of the Church has had a clear national geographic coverage***

Datapaz' results allow us to clearly conclude that the Church's action supporting peace has had a truly national coverage (see *Map 2*). Among the different levels and geographical sections of the Catholic infrastructure, in the first instance it is the Colombian Bishops' Conference that has promoted a greater commitment by Catholics to peace issues especially since 1990. In June 1994, the bishops defined their position and initiative for peace. They presented it publicly in a document called "Towards a Pastoral Approach for Peace," which would lead to several peace initiatives that were not only religious celebrations. It also developed social intervention both to support the victims, especially forcibly displaced people, and to promote a culture of peace and reconciliation.

Map 2

The Social Affairs Office of the Catholic Church (SNPS), one of the executive bodies of the Conference, has implemented some of the programs mentioned, with clear national scope, and with the economic support of mainly international Catholic agencies (the world-wide Caritas Network) in Europe and the USA. Among the different actions developed by the SNPS, it is worth mentioning the National Pilgrimage (or Stations of the Cross) for Life, Justice, and Peace, which has covered all the regions of the country, particularly those experiencing the most conflict.

<sup>20</sup> With this purpose, the Commission produced a working paper titled 'Towards the definition of a permanent national peace policy – Contributions to a debate,' published in 1998.

But the Catholic Church has also been very active at the regional and local levels. Some Bishops and Dioceses have developed leading roles in their respective, normally conflictive zones (See Map 2). This is the case for the Archdioceses of Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Villavicencio, and the Dioceses of Barrancabermeja, Apartadó, Quibdó, Sincelejo, Magangué, Sonsón/Rionegro, Socorro/San Gil, Granada and Pasto. Some of the leading bishops in this area have been Alberto Giraldo, Nel Beltrán, Leonardo Gómez Serna, Jaime Prieto, Flavio Calle, and the late Isaías Duarte Cancino, who was killed for denouncing the violence of the armed actors and drug traffickers. Some of the leading regional peace initiatives are incomprehensible without the long-term work that some of these Dioceses have developed.

Catholic religious communities have also been committed to peace. Certainly the Jesuits (Society of Jesus) have played a lead role through some of their institutions, such as the Peace Program,<sup>21</sup> CINEP, the Javeriana University, and the Jesuit Refugee Service – JRS. “The Society of Jesus was one of the first groups of civil society whose main aim was to create the appropriate conditions to reach peace” (Romero, 2001: 410/11). They have maintained this commitment to searching for alternatives for peace, as is possible to discern in their efforts to develop and lead peace initiatives over the last twenty years. Examples of this are the Magdalena Medio Peace and Development Program; the promotion of a peace culture and civic ethic considered to be conditions for building adequate peace alternatives, promoted by the Peace Programme; the comprehensive research on Colombian violence, developed by CINEP; and the leading role played by Jesuits in consolidating the organizational processes of the Assembly for Peace and the University Network for Peace.

### ***The Church has promoted peace in collaboration with others***

The last characteristic we want to point out of the Catholic Church’s contribution to peace mobilization is the way the Church has worked with other churches as well as civil society and the State. Half of the collective actions promoted by the Church have been done in association with other social actors, demonstrating the need to build a consensus and to combine efforts to promote the changes needed to consolidate a lasting peace. It is clear that the Church has worked in different areas to organize and build consensus to support peace such as the working groups for peace, different organizations such as REDEPAZ and the Civil Society Assembly for Peace, annual campaigns such as the Week of Peace and in many marches and demonstrations in different regions of the country to protest against violence and demand peace.

There is another contribution to this collective task that is worth noting. The Church has introduced the theme of reconciliation in the debate on peace that is moving forward in Colombia. Some people think that it is not enough to stop the war, even if there is a real process of demobilization of the armed actors and measures for finding truth, justice and reparation; if the country wants lasting peace, a process of reconciliation is also necessary. This is advocated mainly by religious actors, and the Catholic Church in particular has insisted on this point. For

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<sup>21</sup> The Jesuits “sold the ‘Lettuce,’ a solid gold colonial relic covered in precious stones, to the Bank of the Republic in 1985. The money obtained was used to organize a fund to finance the Peace Program, which started in 1987. During its first ten years, the program financed about 1,000 projects to strengthen civil society, in particular in areas of conflict and in marginal parts of the country” (Romero, 2001: 411).

them, peace and reconciliation are gifts from God, received through the Risen Christ,<sup>22</sup> that invite us to walk the path of rebuilding a relationship with the victimizer, which normally implies a dose of forgetting. But this can generate a tension with the demands of justice. “The best way to resolve the tension between justice and reconciliation is among the victims. To restore dignity to the victims is a key issue of justice in a society in conflict, as also is giving an opportunity to those responsible for atrocities to regain their dignity” (Henao, 2005: 8/9).

## A WAY OF CONCLUDING

Colombia has had a significant peace mobilization, especially in the 90's and the beginning of this new century. It is a mobilization that demonstrates the felt need of Colombian society to find alternatives to the armed conflict and to move forward in building a sustainable peace. The contribution of the Catholic Church to this collective effort has been significant as much for the breadth of the work accomplished as for the geographic coverage. The Church has been one of the leaders of this mobilization, contributing to the development of a repertoire of peace actions, the consolidation of an organizational infrastructure and the development of a peace discourse that does not ignore the theme of reconciliation. The Colombian Catholic Church faces the challenge of continuing this peace effort into the future in a consistent manner seeking to positively resolve the tensions and problems that arise in this collective effort.

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<sup>22</sup> Right Rev. Leonardo Gómez Serna, interview published in Sandoval, 2004: Vol. 2: 48; and Rev. Héctor Fabio Henao (2005: 3).



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