

Challenges of Colombia

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I have been invited to say a few words on the day of your graduation, and I can speak to you only from the sentiments I carry in my soul and from the ideas and judgments I have been able to form during my years of intense searching since leaving the halls of this beloved university.

You are now going forth to an extraordinary country, which has many wonderful, intelligent people, a profound and varied culture, a rich institutional and economic history and a generous natural environment.

The humanitarian crisis

All these marvels cannot obscure the fact that you are also going forth to face a tremendous challenge. I wish to put before you the magnitude of the challenge, the demanding terrain on which you will first have to deal with it and the tasks you will be called upon to carry out. I also want to express my profound conviction that you are quite capable of responding to this challenge.

You graduate today from the University of the Andes as free men and women, and as you do, you come face to face with the immense and disconcerting humanitarian crisis of our country, Colombia. The crisis is evident in the mafia that has penetrated the government and our institutions, both in the city and in the countryside. Today, as was the case 25 years ago, we continue to be the world's greatest producer of cocaine. Along with Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, we form the trio of nations with the greatest number of internally displaced persons. In addition, our farmers have been robbed of five million hectares of land, over two thousand persons are still held by kidnappers and we are the part of the planet with the greatest density of anti-personnel mines. We also have many false positives, such as pyramids of easy money and young people murdered in cold blood then later presented to the press as killed in combat.

A crisis that cannot be left in other people's hands

Many measures have been taken to combat this reality. In recent years the government has made a serious effort to deal with the crisis, and as a result the number of murders today is only half what it was a decade ago, but the rupture of our humanity still continues. In the midst of this human disarray,

¹Words of Fr. Francisco de Roux SJ at the student graduation ceremony at the University of the Andes, Bogota, 21 March, 2009.

we are a society held captive by simplistic thinking. We are convinced that the problem has nothing to do with us, that everything has been caused by a perverse, hostile minority which attacks good people. We believe the main problem is the terrorism perpetrated by a few criminals and everything will be resolved when the war does away with terrorists. There are many among us who still claim there is just one man who can find a solution to the huge crisis confronting Colombia, only the president has the courage to take on the problems of the country on a daily basis. He has proved he can be everywhere: in Boyajá, destroyed by FARC gas cylinders; in Club Nogales, wiped out by a car bomb; on the Magdalena River, contaminated by cans of cyanide; in Puerto Wilches, drowned in the flooding; in Cali, distressed by the weeping of the widows of the councillors. He is in every place where the crisis shows its head. And millions of Colombians believe that, by keeping the president's popularity ratings above 80%, they are responsibly fulfilling their duty as citizens of Colombia. After casting their vote, they take refuge in the caverns of their personal interests, my university classes, my small business, my managerial post, my pastoral duties, my department store. And all the while we know full well that the magnitude of our crisis is such that no single man can possibly find a solution to it. We know that it is the responsibility of each and every Colombian.

A crisis recognised by the international community

Meanwhile, we are surprised that many groups of volunteers, travelling about the world and helping human beings in the places where they hurting most, put our country on their list of destinations. We are quite familiar with the itineraries of UN officials, university researchers and people from organisations such as Oxfam, Cafod and Médecins sans Frontières. Their programmes always include Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, DRC, Sudan, and Colombia. The rupture of the human fabric in this country is so disconcerting for the world's nations that, even though Colombia does not qualify for international aid because average income is above the poverty threshold, it is still the Latin American country that has received the greatest amount of direct external aid over the last decade in the form of grants. This aid has been given mainly through the US Plan Colombia and EU Laboratories of Peace.

Our crisis, which is not due to poverty, has brought to Colombia the financial resources that should be going to calm the hunger of impoverished populations in Haiti, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Ecuador. Europe and the US have neglected the poor in order to come to the aid of Colombia, for the world is experiencing fear and vicarious shame as it beholds us Colombians committing the horrors we do, we who are members of the same human race. I am not claiming we are the only ones responsible. The humanitarian crisis in Colombia is the result of both endogenous variables, which are our

responsibility, and exogenous variables, out of our control. Hovering over the whole world is a complex, perverse dynamic which at any moment can produce, in auspicious places like Colombia, a rupture in the human fabric. This crisis, had it not burst forth among us, would have happened in some other part of the world with conditions similar to ours. The external variables beyond our control are, among other things, the international demand for cocaine, the fabrication and trafficking of arms, the madness of speculative finance in stock markets and banks and the global warming being caused by human greed.

A crisis for which we are responsible

Still, to be honest, we have to admit that these exogenous variables have found fertile ground here in Colombia. By reason of our long history of exclusions and non-resolved problems, and because of our inability to consider each and every Colombian as contributing to and sharing in the fate of the country, we have provided rich soil for the explosion right here, and not anywhere else, of the humanitarian chaos which is destroying us as a people.

If there is no change in us, then the humanitarian crisis will continue. It will continue even if we re-elect the president, as many hope, it will continue even if there are ten more "Plan Colombias," even if we fumigate the whole country with glyphosate herbicide, even if we kill all the guerrillas, it will continue even if you graduates have professional degrees certifying that you have been trained in one of the best universities on the continent. It will continue because the problem is what we carry within us. It can be said of us, as we watch on television the common graves and hear the cries of the victims, what John Steinbeck, author of the *Grapes of Wrath*, crudely said of a similar people: "They are not human. If they were, they would not let happen to them what has been happening for so long."

This is a problem of ethics

Although this problem has many dimensions and demands solutions that are professional and interdisciplinary, the first thing that you as graduates need to face, from the very start, is a problem of ethics.

In mentioning ethics, I am not going to speak to you of moral principles or of religious commandments. Rather, I am going to speak to you about yourselves – about ourselves. What is at stake here is located in the personal terrain of each one of you, of each one of us. It is a question of our dignity. It is a question, in you and in us, of the dignity of all the women and men of Colombia.

Human dignity

When a Chinese student, some years ago, stood alone in front of the tanks of the communist army in Tiananmen Square, there we saw human dignity. When the workers of the Solidarity trade union rose up in strikes to bring down Soviet socialism in Poland, there we saw human dignity. When millions of persons marched in protest in Spain and brought the country to a standstill because of attacks by the ETA, there we saw human dignity. When thousands of persons assembled on Wall Street to demand that bankers not be awarded bonuses for their greediness, there we saw human dignity. When a black man ran for office and won, and when he was sworn in as president of the United States, there we saw human dignity.

Human dignity is the conscience which appears in us when we give pride of place to the immense, non-negotiable, non-surrendable, non-replaceable value that we have as persons, and when we assume the tremendous responsibility of being true to that value, in order to protect it above all else, alongside the other human beings who are our fellow citizens. We do so out of respect for ourselves and for others. We do so with determination and with character.

You all know that human dignity was the basis of the United Nations Charter of Human Rights, drawn up in 1948. The world had just emerged from a veritable apocalypse, with 60 million killed in the Second World War. In the midst of the confusion and the shame, it was necessary to establish a code of conduct that would be equally valid for all nations and all cultures. When those who were invited to draw up the code met in Paris, they were unable to agree on the basic principle that would unite them. At that point Jacques Maritain proposed the phrase that succeeded in gaining unanimous approval from the participants: "All human beings have equal dignity." That judgment provided the basis for the subsequent declarations in favour of human rights.

In this consists the greatness of each one of us. It is what liberal ethics expounds in the principle that we should "treat others with the same respect with which we want them to treat us." It is what led Kant to state that nobody can be used as a means, because every human being is an end in him or herself. It is what the Jewish tradition and the great religious traditions of the peoples affirm when they say that each woman and each man is an image of God and a privileged space for the manifestation of the transcendent mystery. Christianity gives such absolute value to every person that it places God himself at the service of human greatness: "I have not come to be served, but to serve," says Jesus. And God in Jesus appears washing the feet of his followers at the last supper. In the most serious versions of Catholic theology we do not possess dignity because Jesus saved us, on the contrary. Jesus delivered himself up to death so that we would come to understand how

valuable we are and recover consciousness of our responsibility for our own lost dignity.

Human dignity cannot be increased, nor can it be decreased. Today you are receiving your university degree, a triumph you deserve. If you have understood me well, you realise that this degree does nothing to increase your dignity, because human dignity cannot be augmented. You do not have more dignity by reason of being doctors or teachers, just as tomorrow you will not have more dignity by reason of being mayors, presidents, Nobel prize winners or managers of large firms. You will never have more dignity than that possessed by a fisherman on the Magdalena River, a person displaced from Soacha, an Indian countrywoman from Tacueyó, or an illiterate African Colombian on the Pacific Coast.

But neither can human dignity be diminished. Neither AIDS, nor economic failure, nor the errors you may one day commit can take away from you the greatness of being human beings. The parchment you receive from the University of the Andes does not grant you more dignity than others have. Rather, that parchment certifies you as persons capable of serving and putting your skills at the service of the dignity of the men and women of Colombia and the world. That is what you must do!

I urge you to carry this conviction deep in your soul, because we Colombians, oblivious to the greatness of our own people without knowing why, have acted savagely with one another. We have despised, hated and killed each another. We have reached the point of thinking that there are some human lives worth more than others, we have seen ourselves killing one another to control land, we have marginalised the Indians and African Colombians, we have given greater priority to the security of businesses than to the safety of people. We have come to think that money is more important than people, and that possessing money makes us more significant, more worthy and more deserving than others.

The human dignity that is present in each one of you does not depend on anybody or anything. You were not given dignity by the nation or the government, you did not receive it from society or from religion, it was not granted to you by the university. This dignity is something you have had from the very first moment you appeared as human beings. And it is not something that can be demeaned in any one of you without being debased also in everyone else. Since, therefore, it depends on nothing, since it exists totally in each one of you, this dignity you possess has an absolute value. For that reason, so that we can be true to our inmost being, I urge us all to return to this fundamental principle, in order to build up from there, in keeping with the value of each person, the ethics we have lost.

The task we have ahead of us

We have to begin by recognising the equal dignity of all women and men of this country, recognising it as inherent in them, independently of their education, their wealth, their family names, their race, their skills or their prestige.

And together we have to determine the manner in which we wish to live our dignity as Colombians. We cannot increase our dignity, but what we can and must do – and this is called development – is to agree among ourselves about our own, particular, Colombian way of formulating, protecting, expressing and celebrating the dignity of each and every person. And we must also agree about how we will share with other peoples of the world the variety of ways in which every people courageously and magnanimously lives the dignity they desire. This is a tremendous cultural task which you graduates have to carry forward, to the point where we Colombians create our own symbolic universe, founded on our own traditions and joined to our rivers and our mountains. This will be a universe of stories, images, music, dreams and reflections shared by all. It is you who, as professionals in culture, philosophy, the arts, architecture and design, have to carry out this task alongside our people.

And we must go further still. We must bring about the life we desire in a way that is consistent with our own dignity, and we must engage every Colombian man, woman, and child in the task. That is to say, we must transform the life we desire into a function of our well-being and maximise that function in a horizon that is just and free of exclusions, a horizon in which all Colombians feel that they can fully experience their human greatness, without fear that greatness will be diminished or threatened by the fulfilment of others. We have to bring about that life we so desire in an efficient manner, with the least possible human and environmental costs, and we must do it well, so that we are able to exchange with other peoples of the earth the things we cannot make ourselves and yet consider part of the life we desire. Bringing such a life about means good infrastructure for our small farmers and poor city dwellers, and it means new forms of energy for our industries and for all the firms, national and international, that are joined together in this collective enterprise. It is what you yourselves have to do, as engineers, health care professionals, mathematicians, biologists, mechanics and physicists.

But we must go further still, to the point of emerging together on the horizon of the public sphere, in this state of ours, this institution which we human beings have created to guarantee that everyone without exception has the conditions needed to live with dignity. This is the task of politics, and you are called to carry it out as professionals in the public sphere, as administrators of the state, as legislators and as lawyers.

Conclusion

Friends, you who share with me this great spirit of the University of the Andes, you have in your hands this country, this extraordinary piece of nature and this great capacity of Colombians, which has fallen into our humanitarian crisis.

I want to urge you to think big. I know that you young people can do it. I remember from my classical studies the story in the Aeneid about the young companions of Aeneas as they made their way toward Latium. No one could stop them because they knew they could do it. *Possunt quia posse videntur*, they were able to do it because they were convinced that they had what it took.

I want to urge you to return to the regions of Colombia from which you come, to feel pride in being from the Cauca Valley or the Paisa region, in being from the coasts or from the plains, in being from Boyaca or Pasto, in being from the coffee regions or Santander, in being from Tolima or Bogota. I want you to position yourselves firmly in this globalised world, using all the cultural strength of your regions, in the same way that your forebears lived their dignity to the full.

Your responsibility as members of the community of the University of the Andes does not end with your studies or in obtaining a degree certifying your knowledge. The very meaning of your lives is at stake in your deciding to put into practice the knowledge cited in the degrees which you receive today.

The great ethical challenge before you is to put your knowledge into practice, even to the ultimate consequences. There you have Colombia awaiting you. I am sure you have understood that your dignity is what is ultimately at stake.

We who are older are confident you have the courage, the daring, the character and the freedom needed to put your knowledge to work, to translate into deeds what you have learned in the halls of this university, so that you and all men and women of Colombia may truly live in dignity.

Many thanks

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Original Spanish
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