

MEDIATING HIGH INTENSITY CONFLICTS

One Bishop's Perspective On Mediating High Intensity Social Conflicts

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I. INTRODUCTION

In Chiapas, ecclesiastical and social challenges are at stake, challenges which can be validly extended to all Mexico, as well as to Latin America and the world. It is not easy, however, to extract all the keys and lessons that emanate from the Chiapas experience and illuminate new stages of mediation.

Beginning in January, 1994, Chiapas and Mexico burst upon the world stage in a way that was different from that which we expected: the eruption of an indigenous movement that rose up in arms, faced with the impossibility of finding responses to basic demands which had been set forth for many years through legal means.

We cannot comprehend Chiapas as isolated from national and world problems. The deeds experienced at the beginning of 1994 are a product of the neoliberal political and economic system, which has proven unworkable in practice. The advances this system boasts about have taken place at the cost of impoverishing the majority of citizens, as reflected in the countries of the so-called Third World.

Currently, there are 48 armed conflicts throughout the world. One area of political and social research which specializes in armed conflicts and the peace process has demonstrated that in all such conflicts, the religious factor— far from being part of the problem—is part of the solution. Furthermore, in the majority of these 48 conflicts, churches are undertaking a role of mediation. A good part of these ecclesiastical mediation actions are implemented by Catholic bishops and institutions.

The worrisome and alarming reality of war is spreading throughout the world, a result of political-economic models which have shown their inability to generate integral development for the peoples of the world. These concerns have lead many organizations to share in the search for alternatives which help to build peace, expressed in international and continental forums.

The following reflections on the part of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, were shared and enriched in some of these international and continental forums, in which we reflected upon the role of churches in pacification and mediation.

II. CONFLICTS AND MEDIATION

Through profound reflection upon our own experience, as well as our awareness of distinct aspects of various world conflicts, we have found certain common characteristics, to wit:

1. In some ways, world conflicts create irreversible processes which generate deep change and necessitate new situations. Therefore, there is no turning back to the previous state of affairs which accounts for the violence. Peace can only be built by confronting the causes.
2. Where conflicts have arisen, political and social representative institutions, as well as means of conflict resolution, have failed. The conflicts have revealed structural deficiencies as well as deficiencies on the part of social and political actors. Armed conflicts cannot be resolved unless social and political actors are engendered and strengthened. Stopping war is very different than building peace. Creating peace is impossible without political and social forces who work for the common good. Many times, the lack of such forces explains the explosion of armed conflicts.
3. The causes of conflict are generally related to injustice, lack of democracy and human rights violations. Therefore, when we state that it is not possible to establish peace without addressing the underlying causes of conflict, our reflections lead us to believe that peace cannot be reached in Third World conflicts unless we generate a new stage of development and a new social model.
4. In several armed conflicts, the services of churches have been required to support mediation efforts. The trustworthiness of the churches in these conflicts is due not only to the fact that they fill the vacuum left by political and social actors, or to the absence of strong parties or to the inability of the forces to commence dialog. All these elements help explain the presence of the churches, but the constant throughout the world is the churches' own specific identity in the mediation role it plays. There exists an awareness concerning the distinct character that churches have—prophetic, not political. Their trustworthiness has a lot to do with their ability to provide disinterested service. The church is not an actor which seeks to capitalize upon its capacity for mediation, nor to strengthen its own projects. The church understands that its only project is peace, and therefore can contribute to peace through its role of mediation objectively and neutrally, and with greater commitment.
6. Mediation doesn't end with achieving a political agreement between the parties or with stopping the war. The most difficult part is building peace. In this drawn-out stage of reconciliation, reconstruction and change, the role of the churches is especially fundamental. Mediation, then, doesn't cease with the dialog between the actors of the armed conflict in their attempt to halt the war, but must rather work toward creating conditions so that all civil, political and social forces are co-participants, and co-responsible for, building peace.

III. MEDIATION ON THE PART OF THE CHURCH IN SAN CRISTOBAL DE LAS CASAS, CHIAPAS, MEXICO.

1. First, we must remember that, in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas, following the guidance of the Second Vatican Council and the Conferences of the Latin American Episcopate in the last three decades, we have developed an ecclesiastical process which has given rise to greater participation by members of the church—not only clerics and others in the ministry, but in all church actions: liturgy, evangelization, service and catechizing. This participation has always taken place within the framework of service to our community of brothers and sisters.

In this context, we understand “community” as a whole, aware of events that occur in their political and social surroundings, as well as of necessities in the entire world. Understood in this way, social realities shape the ecclesiastical community’s actions. The church must respond according to its own nature, in direct relation to its founder and inspiration.

2. In our diocese, we have prioritized the community, emphasizing service to our neighbors (proclaiming the Word of God, in search of religious experiences, in search of economic alternatives, discovering new social, even political, expressions). Communal experience is the critical element, and the point of departure, for everything the members of our diocese are attempting to do. In our church in particular, we have understood mediation as a service to the community, as our own task and that which we carry out jointly.
3. Our understanding of the bishop’s pastoral labor as a service which unites, reconciles and shapes the community of the church which the bishop heads is founded in ecclesiastical tradition and current practice. Therefore, any action aimed at strengthening social structures, or at cultivating a life of brotherhood, justice and peace, is not at all contrary to the church’s work.

As explained in the preceding paragraphs, the causes of political and social conflicts which breed armed conflict are poverty and injustice. Here, we have discovered structures that make a social harmony and majority participation impossible—especially participation of the poorest. Therefore, the bishop’s true work, given the nature of his office, impels him to strive toward creating social actors and situations which lead to new situations, toward alternatives to the situations which generated armed conflict.

4. Secondly, we have seen that this dimension of ecclesiastical life hasn’t been understood by everyone, including several bishops. The opinion that mediation is incompatible with the tasks proper to a bishop incurs in the sin of reductionism. The work of peace and mediation is profoundly ecclesiastical and profoundly episcopal. In Christian thought, Jesus Christ is the Mediator par excellence. This is why his disciples have assumed the mission of making brothers out of enemies.
5. It is important to recognize the accompaniment that the Episcopal Conference of Mexico (CEM, in Spanish) has provided to the Diocese of San Cristóbal de las Casas and to its bishop. Since the Conference established the Episcopal Commission for

Peace in January, 1994, it has written three pastoral letters supporting the process for peace with justice and dignity. In this way, the support and cover the CEM has given the peace process has become part of the ecclesiastical tradition of mediation.

6. Thirdly, we affirm that all churches must take it upon themselves to assume the tasks of mediation, that the churches embrace the goal of service to society and to the world. It is not enough to support the mediation work of one Catholic bishop. Peace must be reconstructed and reconciled at the national level. It must lead to change which allows us to build peace not only in Chiapas, but also to prevent violence and establish the justice necessary in other parts of the country.

IV. CONCLUSION

The lesson is that if we don't begin now to accept the national necessity for a new stage of change—necessary not only in Chiapas but in other places where conditions exist to generate new forms of violence—and if the churches don't shoulder their role as promoters of this new stage, we are remiss in looking after one of our most vital tasks, defending life.

Therefore, taking this perspective into account, the mediation of the bishop and his particular church doesn't fall outside of this territory. On the contrary, it is in this domain, as well as that of many countries, that ecclesiastical work itself becomes broader. Profound pastoral, ecclesiastical and episcopal dimensions make it possible for the church to offer mediation services for armed conflicts which arise from conditions of poverty, lack of democracy, and non-functioning institutions of democratic representation and justice.

One of our most important conclusions is that mediation derives its content from and is founded upon ecclesiastical ministry. Mediation is not political, or foreign to ecclesiastical work for peace and unity. Rather, mediation is justified and explained by the actions of the church and its bishops, by the depth of their episcopal and pastoral ministry, which allows them to offer reliable services. The necessity of the prophetic call to conversion makes peace and mediation an opportunity and challenge to proclaim the word which will create new life for all.