

EPILOGUE

LIVING THE FAITH IN TIMES OF VIOLENCE

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Years of political violence in Peru, with the painful memory of the barbarity unleashed and the death and destruction it left behind, raised intense questions for the faithful. The memory of what Christians experienced obliges us to not only reflect on the time period studied in this research, but also to raise the challenges that emerged from this experience for believers today facing the future. We ask ourselves: How do we announce God's love in the midst of such profound disregard for human life? What does it mean to declare His presence in a country devastated by the destruction of so many lives, the majority of whom were innocent victims?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (*Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación, CVR*) final report marked a milestone in Peruvian history. To remember what happened among us demands courage and the will to find the truth in order to search for changes as a guarantee that the same things will not happen again. To file the report away would be tragic and would mean losing the unique opportunity it presents to us. Indifferent public opinion and the resistance of state authorities are troubling.

In this context, the presentation of this research, which captures the message of Christians, pastors, and pastoral agents, is of major importance. We salute the effort local churches have invested in communicating their memories. They are valuable testimonies of God's presence and action among us.

Let us remember a central truth of the faith: the God of the Bible is the one who has become a person within the contingencies of human history. There is no other God but the one that lives among us, Emmanuel, [who would] otherwise be an idol made to measure from the temptation to escape from the same history. This God shares the gift of his kingdom of life, justice and peace in the midst of the dark night of violence. God's freely-given love remains the foundation of hope in contexts trapped by terror, the expression of sin. We Peruvians have traversed violent, bloody paths. When reflecting on challenges posed by our own history, Gustavo Gutiérrez acutely transmits the believer's cry that first emerged from the horrors of the Shoah to Peruvian lands: Is it possible to believe since Ayacucho?¹

The central fact that stands out from these accounts is that the church in Peru recognized political violence as anti-evangelical and confronted it from the beginning. It was not reduced to silence; it assumed a brave and prophetic position by denouncing the destruction of human life and the violations of its rights. Both by its own conviction in fidelity to its identity, but also to civil society's expectation that it play an active role as a dynamic and opposing actor to the progression of violence and contribute

¹ "How do we do theology **during** Ayacucho? How do we speak of the God of life when there are massive and cruel assassinations in the 'corner of the dead'?" (Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *Hablar de Dios desde el sufrimiento del inocente. Una reflexión sobre el libro de Job*, Lima, CEP-IBC, 1986, p. 223).

its own leadership to peace building. Christian communities took on new and unexpected challenges, as had been their accustomed practice since the Second Vatican Council opened the ecclesiastical process and the church's renovation in Latin America with the Medellín Conference. The core of its evangelical work has been to scrutinize the signs of the times and the preferential option for the poor.² This is a church that learned to love its people. As Monsignor Jesús Calderón well remembers, it is not possible to be a pastor without "having affection for the peasants."

The recollections of Christians from five local churches – the Southern Andes, Huancayo, San Juan de Lurigancho in Lima, Huacho and Pucallpa – and the rich experience of the members of the Pastoral Commission of Human Dignity (*Comisión Pastoral de Dignidad Humana, CPDH*) incarnate spirituality, a way of following Jesus. The subjects of this memory are church actors and innocent victims of violence. It tells the stories of today's *disciples*, the people who have tried to follow God by choosing to be poor in spirit (Mt 5:3), and the men and women who have decided to put their trust in God.

The conviction that the resurrected Lord is present throughout history is that which motivates the *defense of life*. The church increasingly recognizes the theological character of life. Therefore, evangelization is expressed through concrete actions that aim to effectively curtail violence and build peace. Among them, the creation of Human Rights Commissions and the Vicariates of Solidarity should be noted. The culture of peasants' rights in society, which include conscience, education and institutions, is fundamental. The church makes an effort to defend the people against authorities of official institutions, appealing to the defense of the rule of law. The CEAS fulfilled an important role by bringing complaints to international forums that safeguard human rights treaties of which Peru is a signatory.

Local churches massively mobilized to express solidarity with victims of violence in Ayacucho, Huancavelica and Apurímac, in Huancayo and the Hualлага zone. These mobilizations allowed Ayacucho to arrive in Lima. The massive mobilization of the San Juan de Lurigancho communities convened to bless the city of Lima and pray for its residents' protection from the hill of San Cristóbal was eloquent. New channels of solidarity were discovered through cultural acts, symbols, music and dance. Praising life constitutes a formative element of Christian communities, radically challenging the predominance of terror, and is the antithesis of death.

The Eucharist as a center of Christian life acquired new meaning during those years. Celebrating the memory of Jesus' resurrection in a context marked by the destruction of so many innocent victims was and is a remembrance of the last triumph of life that prevails and defeats death. A large part of the church actors' experience was to feel silenced, dumbfounded before the brutality and persistence of the violence. The question, where is God? (Sal 42) became the most prolonged spiritual experience of our time. However, it is in this reality of abandonment and devastation where Christians examine their experience with faith in greater detail, rebuilding their confidence in God who is a source of hope that

² Medellín, Justicia 1.3; Puebla, 1141, 1142.

allows them to fight for life. The testimony of Jesus, crucified for his fidelity to the Kingdom and resurrected, is the resilience of Christian life and the spirituality shared in these pages.

The pastors of these local churches deserve special mention. The insertion of the church in the middle of the people, as the bishops from the Southern Andes were saying, "We are the church, we are the people," implies that the church itself was a victim of violent attacks and violations. Persecution is neither gratuitous nor by chance, it is for the sake of God's righteousness. The evangelical metaphor of the good shepherd who is distinguished for knowing and protecting the life of those under his care acquires special significance. The evangelical mandate of giving your life for your friends can be experienced in a more concrete, immediate and daily sense.

To remember is to recall our brothers who have given life by spilling their own blood. They are our predecessors in faith, as Hebrews 11 reminds us. Martyrdom, the Lord's gift since the most ancient tradition of apostolic times, has become present in the contemporary life of the church in Latin America. The church that was persecuted in Peru is that which identified and made its own the life of the smallest brothers (Mt, 25). To give one's life in defense of the faith is to give one's life in defense of a brother, to become close to another. A prominent theme throughout the testimonies is the will of the church to remain present alongside its people in times of danger. "I promise to stay faithful to my work as a pastor," stated Monsignor Koenigsknecht after an attack against the Institute of Rural Education (*Instituto de Educación Rural*, IER) in Juli. The fact that four pastors from the church in the Southern Andes tragically died on their way contains a symbolic strength of evangelical depth. Pastoral fidelity is anchored in the decision to remain alongside the people. A church that does not move when confronted by danger gains authority.

The conclusion of this research is the recognition that we are before an authentic experience of God. The church learned in its own way what it means to be a pastor in difficult times by sharing the people's suffering. To enter into this history of suffering and death as a friend of the victims and defender of life at risk allows us to enter into the paschal ministry of a people crucified who also resist and do not allow the forces of evil to defeat it. It is a period of time (*kairós*) that took place among us and that is not left relegated to a space in the past. Salvific presence unifies history; that of yesterday is also today and tomorrow.

This testimony has great relevance today in the most radical sense and invites an interpretation of national life that does not allow believers to relegate the questions that emerged during the years of violence to obscurity. The theological significance continues to be valid; it is related to the work of nation building. The church can and should contribute, from the depths of its own vocation, to the reconstruction of a country extremely fragmented that demands a true process of reconciliation.