



One way of framing Pope Francis's peace-building visit to Colombia is that he is there not to build the consensus for a controversial peace agreement, so much as to teach people how to live in peace.

That's a much harder, long-term task, especially in the wake of a decades-long conflict where deep-seated grievances fester long after the bodies have been buried and the guns fall silent.

Pope Francis, during his visit to Colombia, identified five key elements that can begin to build a different country – a country in which all Colombians can be at peace. Today we will reflect on these five elements.

#### 1. Acknowledge the wounds

Society cannot move ahead unless it accepts that the violence has scarred the whole society. Most Colombians have been affected, directly or indirectly, by the violence, even if they haven't shot a gun or taken a bullet; but more importantly, society as a whole has been wounded.

In starting by referring to Colombia as “a land watered by the blood of thousands of victims” with “wounds that are hard to heal and hurt us all” because “every violent death diminishes us as a people,” Francis was inviting a crucial acknowledgement, with an obvious corollary: We have all been affected; we must all find a way out.

#### **(2 minutes for silent reflection)**

2. Pointing to the Cross of Bojaya, Francis next invites people to see Christ in those wounds. Like that cross, Christ is both in the suffering, and is also a victim of it. God is not outside Colombia's dark night....

The wounds should not be forgotten or buried; they can and must be redeemed, in order to heal and bring new life, and break the cycle of hate. In recognizing and healing others' wounds, we live again.

#### **(2 minutes for silent reflection)**

Chant: Seek Truth, Make Peace, Reverence Life (5 times)

3. One of the sticking points in Colombia, as with any peace agreement, is the question of reparation for injustices. No reparation can ever be enough; when the price is too high, it becomes vengeance and the cycle repeats. Yet it offends natural justice to see people who perpetrate terrible crimes appear to be rewarded.

Francis reframed the whole question of justice as not a matter of restitution – if that were ever possible – but of conversion. The first step toward conversion is to accept that it is possible.

“There is also hope for those who did wrong,” Francis says. “That's what Christ came for. All is not lost.”

What justice requires, says Francis, is that “perpetrators of wrongdoing undergo moral and spiritual renewal.”

#### **(2 minutes of silent reflection)**



4. Believe in the possibility of conversion, even when it's not evident

Yet however much former guerrillas and paramilitaries confess their wrongdoings and ask forgiveness, there remains a strong suspicion that they are doing it to save their skins or to gain political advantage.

Francis frankly acknowledges this, identifying with the skepticism of millions of Colombians who voted against the accord.

The difficult fact is that people change only gradually and imperfectly. At first, they see themselves as victims of the other, refusing to acknowledge wrongdoing, but gradually their eyes can be opened by testimonies to what they had done.

Francis suggests a way of accepting that change will take time for some, using the image of a field in which there is room for weeds. "Care for the wheat," he says, "and don't lose peace because of the weeds." Even when feelings of pain and vengeance remain, keep the door open, so that people who are ready to change can.

But ultimately, don't throw away the prize of peace because not everyone is yet on board.

**(2 minutes of reflection)**

5. No justice and mercy without truth.

Finally, says Francis, truth must accompany the process at all stages. Denial is the enemy of reconciliation, because it seeks to minimize the responsibility and pain. Colombia's civil war is massively complex, enmeshing guerrillas with drug traffickers, paramilitaries with landowners, the army with corrupt politicians. Disentangling these dark webs will take years.

But above all it means recognizing what has been done to the victims. "Truth means telling families torn apart by pain what happened to their missing relatives," Francis says. "Truth means confessing what happened to minors recruited by violent people. Truth means recognizing the pain of women who are victims of violence and abuse."

But truth must lead to forgiveness, not retaliation. In the end, that is a matter for the heart and will – which is why it is a religious matter. "Now is the time to heal wounds, to build bridges, to overcome differences," says Francis. Peace is ultimately a decision that re-focusses energies into creating what Francis calls "a genuine culture of fraternal encounter."

Peace is a choice. The pope was in Colombia to say: now is the favorable time. Seize it.

**(2 minute reflection)**

Chant: Seek Truth, Make Peace, Reverence Life (5 times)

Let us ask our God to make Peace and Justice reign in Colombia and in the world as we pray together the prayer of the Colombian Bishops Conference (*see card*).

Offer a sign of Peace.