

For ten days in late August and early September, I traveled with the Witness for Peace (WFP) delegation to Cali and Buenaventura, Colombia. WFP is a nonprofit organization dedicated to informing the public about the needs of people in various Third World Countries so that they can then in turn advocate for systemic change. The dynamic is to research, reflect, and respond. The research included preparatory readings about the Colombian situation and while there we listened to people's stories and visited their local communities. The schedule included time for group processing to reflect on what we had seen and heard and then to decide on subsequent actions.

The fifteen of us traveled to various parts of Cali where we met with community leaders in their offices, in the barrios on the mountainside circling the city, at a public university, and in a museum dedicated to people who were assassinated because of their human rights advocacy. Our trips outside of Cali included going to Buenaventura, the chief Colombian port city, and to the towns of Trujillo and El Nilo, sites of massacres.

In each place we heard stories of poverty, oppression, exploitation and yet, despite all the odds, a hope for a better world. The speakers were unanimous in their appreciation of our willingness to hear their stories and to do whatever we could to better their lot.

The role of the Church is significant. Some dioceses have offices that promote human rights and pastors allow parish facilities to be used for meetings. Many priests are active advocates even though their actions put them in jeopardy. While there, I heard stories about four priests who were assassinated because of their human rights work.

A consistent theme we heard is that the Free Trade Agreement is disastrous for the Colombian worker and farmer because it allows for the importing of subsidized foreign products that undersell local products. Concurrent with the flood of foreign goods is the privatization of many industries, one of which is the port of Buenaventura.

Buenaventura is a major port city located on the Pacific coast. After the docks were privatized in 1993, the company drastically reduced the work force and refused to collectively bargain with the workers regarding wages and safety conditions. These actions have led to arbitrary firings and greater unemployment with the resultant rise in poverty and crime. The murder rate there is 24 times that of New York City.

The take-home pay for many dockworkers is \$50 per month, which is in stark contrast to the minimum wage being about \$250 per month. If a worker is injured on the job, the company fires him. The dock owners are introducing new cranes capable of lifting larger loads. Instead of retraining the previous crane operators who have more than twenty years experience, the owners simply fire them and hire younger workers. Besides the job insecurity, the workers are without pension funds forcing them to work until they die or, if they get fired, to beg in the streets.

These working conditions also apply to the sugar cane workers around Cali. 80% of the land is owned by 2.5% of the population. They force the workers to work up to 14 hours per day in slave-like conditions for a wage that averages \$40 to \$70 per month. Like the dockworkers, there are deductions from their salary resulting in lower take-home pay.

We also visited two towns where massacres occurred: El Nilo and Trujillo. El Nilo is an indigenous community where eleven men, five women, and four children were killed by paramilitaries. **The government acknowledged responsibility and promised reparations, which have not been fulfilled.** The community is pressing the government for reparations and for the right to live according to their ancient customs and laws. For their advocacy, they have been met with repression and intimidation.

Whereas in El Nilo the prevailing mood was that of tension between the indigenous community and the government, the mood in Trujillo was of recovery from the knowledge that their loved ones were killed in horrific ways that included dismemberment while still alive. Over a period of eight years an alliance among the army, police, and paramilitary was responsible for over 350 deaths. One can only imagine the terror the people lived under everyday.

One victim was the local pastor, Fr. Tiberio Fenandez Mafla. During his tenure he organized twenty community businesses that benefited the poor and actively supported a peasant protest. His enemies quickly responded by dubbing him as a “guerilla collaborator.” Their animosity reached the breaking point when he denounced the violence against the parishioners and pointed to the offenders. Soon he “disappeared” His horribly mutilated body was discovered in the Cauca River as a warning to others about the consequences of advocating for their human rights.

In 1995, the Inter American Human Rights Court held the government responsible for the atrocities because of their inaction. The government promised reparations, but has not yet fulfilled its promises.

The survivors are constructing a memorial park at the cemetery that includes a memorial gallery, a memorial wall, a mausoleum for Fr. Mafla, special landscaping, and bas-reliefs immediately below the tombs. The loved ones design, create, and maintain the bas-reliefs as a way of honoring the special memories they have of their dead.

The day before we concluded our time together, we reviewed the places and people with whom we had visited. This provided the opportunity to recapitulate many of the stories we heard of oppression, violence, killings, exploitation, predatory lending, and environmental degradation. At first the magnitude of situation seemed overwhelming. However, what amazed us were the many examples of people who possess an inner human strength that will not allow anything or anybody to break their spirit or deprive them of their dignity and self-respect.

I think it is fair to say that we concluded our time there with a deeper understanding of what it means to be members of the global family. As immediate family members have a responsibility toward each other, the same applies to global family members. This is especially true when with the stark disparity between us and the majority of the world’s population becomes more evident.

Fr. Thomas Long