
Between Memory and Oblivion

The Protests in Colombia and Their Challenges for the Church

César Moya

This summer, on July 20, Colombia's national Independence Day, the country lived through another day of social protests. Although the memory of this day 202 years ago continues to be replicated annually—telling the story of Columbia's independence from Spain and the beginning of the decolonizing stage of national history—the majority of Colombians are not celebrating.

Throughout Colombia's history, the country has maintained social inequality and elites have continued to raise the “flag” of sustained violence on the “flagpole” of corruption. The desire expressed in the famous phrase of the national anthem—“in the furrow of sorrows the good now germinates”—seems like a utopian vision in the country that takes its name from the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus. The peace expected with the signing of the Peace Agreement seems to have been lost.¹ These and other no less important reasons make the social mobilizations and riots led by young people in the streets unstoppable.

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1 After fifty years of armed conflict, on November 24, 2016, the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) signed a Peace Agreement, which included the following points of agreement: (1) comprehensive rural reform, (2) political participation, (3) end of the conflict, (4) solution to the problem of illicit drugs, (5) victims, (6) implementation, verification, and endorsement. For more information, see Special Jurisdiction for Peace, “Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace,” November 24, 2016, accessed October 8, 2021, https://www.jep.gov.co/Marco%20Normativo/Normativa_v2/01%20ACUERDOS/Texto-Nuevo-Acuerdo-Final.pdf?csf=1&e=0fpYA0.

Colombia's ongoing struggle toward full decolonization has presented the country's churches with the challenge of constructing peace and the task of reconciliation. Unlike any recent time in the country's history, its churches—both national and international—have had to speak out before the government and society in general. They have had to take sides in favor of life.

In light of this unique time in the Colombian church's history, the purpose of this article is to answer the following two questions: (1) How is social protest related to decolonization and peacebuilding in Colombia? (2) What challenges does social protest present for the church? These questions are addressed by reviewing the role of each the following actors within this context of social protest: youth, indigenous people, the church, the National Strike Committee, and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. This material then serves as the basis for locating social protest within the perspective of epistemologies and theologies of the South² and identifying resulting challenges for communities of faith.

The Context of the Colombian Protests

Social protests express both the people's rejection of coloniality³ and their discontent with government policies that do not meet their expectations in terms of well-being in all areas. And although in the global context these protests are not a newly occurring phenomenon, it seems that in the past decade, as a whole they have increased in frequency and sense of urgency. Boaventura de Sousa Santos notes:

There is a “wave of popular demand” of a new type that we have been witnessing since 2011 throughout the world . . . popular, indigenous and peasant mobilizations and rebellions against neoliberalism and capitalism in Latin

² The expression *epistemologies of the South* references the epistemological variety of the world, conceives of the South as symbolic, and has as its purpose the restoration of the damage generated by coloniality. For more on this subject, see Boaventura de Sousa Santos and María Paula Meneses, “Introduction,” in *Epistemologies of the South: Perspectives*, eds. Boaventura de Sousa Santos and María Paula Meneses (Madrid: Akal, S.A., 2014), 7–17.

³ Coloniality is based on “the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world's population” as a pattern of power in all areas of existence and in social relationships. Thus, this coloniality of power has implications in the capitalist world in relation to the universal social classification of the world; political and geocultural articulation; the world distribution of work; gender relations; cultural or intersubjective relationships; and exploitation and domination. Colonialism, on the other hand, is a structure of domination/exploitation held by a population of another identity based in another territory. For more on this concept, see Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder y clasificación social,” in *Epistemologías del Sur (Perspectivas)*, eds. Boaventura de Sousa Santos y María Paula Meneses (Madrid: Akal, S.A., 2014), 67–107.

America . . . popular mobilizations of the Arab Spring, from the indignants of southern Europe (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy), the Chilean student movement in 2012, the Occupy movement in North American cities, the #YoSoy132 movement against electoral fraud in Mexico, and the most recent street demonstrations in Brazil against the increase in transport rates in 2013 and projected beyond.⁴

Added to the above are, among other events, the recent demonstrations in the United States as a public outcry against the death of an African American man at the hands of a policeman,⁵ the protests in Chile in 2019 that ended with the call for a new constitution,⁶ the protests in Ecuador in response to the government's economic measures in the midst of the pandemic,⁷ and the protests in Colombia last year prompted by the health crisis and the massacres in the rural areas.⁸ It is against this background that the social mobilizations have been taking place in Colombia this year. These mobilizations, which, as of the writing of this article, have continued in various regions and at varying levels of intensity for three months (since the outbreak of the national strike at the end of April 2021) are socially significant for the country.

Although injustice and violence have consistently run throughout the republican life of Colombia, serving as an indicator of popular dissent, the recent social turbulence is a reaction to the Tax Reform project imposed by the state in order to receive money to rescue the Colombian economy from the ravages

4 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Las revueltas mundiales de indignación: Su significado para la teoría y la práctica," in *Revueltas de indignación y otras conversas*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Bolivia: Stigma, 2015), 14.

5 Audra D. S. Burch et al., "La muerte de George Floyd reavivó un movimiento; ¿Qué sigue ahora?," *New York Times*, April 22, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2021/04/22/espanol/george-floyd-black-lives-matter.html>.

6 "Protestas en Chile: El gobierno anuncia que convocará un nuevo Congreso Constituyente," BBC News Mundo, November 11, 2019, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-50370470>.

7 "Crecen las protestas en Ecuador contra el paquete de ajuste del Gobierno," *Télam*, May 25, 2020, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.telam.com.ar/notas/202005/468024-crecen-las-protestas-en-ecuador-contra-el-paquete-de-ajuste-del-gobierno.html>.

8 Catalina Oquendo, "Las protestas callejeras se reactivan en Colombia tras meses de parálisis por la pandemia," *El País*, September 21, 2020, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2020-09-21/la-violencia-policia-y-las-matanzas-en-el-campopotencias-las-protestas-en-colombia.html> Las%20protestas%20callejeras%20se%20reactivan%20en%20Colombia%20tras%20meses%20de%20par%C3%A1lisis%20por%20la%20pandemia.

of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Demonstrators took to the streets against this reform, in Bogotá as well as all the capital cities of the Colombian departments.

Cali, the city of greatest importance in the west, is where the most human rights violations and murders of civilians have occurred during the protests—with the participation of the police. As Carlos Rojas, Secretary of Security for the city of Cali, reports: “In the south of the city we had a real scene of confrontation and almost an urban war where many people not only lost their lives, but we also had a significant number of injuries.”¹⁰ This situation is linked to the systematic murder of social leaders in all regions of the country; the massacres of young people and peasants; the war between drug trafficking gangs; the incursions of dissident groups of the Signatories of the Peace Agreement, formerly FARC; and the actions of the National Liberation Army (ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional).

Though these reasons would be enough to justify protests, it doesn’t stop there. According to the study carried out by the Colombian Platform for Human Rights, Democracy and Development (PCDHDD, La Plataforma Colombiana de Derechos Humanos, Democracia y Desarrollo),¹¹ poverty, inequality, hunger, unemployment, health, and the situation of women in Colombia before and after the pandemic are all factors contributing to the relationship between the dissatisfaction of citizens—regarding their economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights—and social protests in the country.

The Role of Youth

Young people have been the main protagonists of the protests in Colombia in recent months; they have been the ones taking to the streets and raising their voices for themselves and others. Their energy and enthusiasm shows that there is hope amid the chaos that seems to reign in the country. At the same time, however, because the young people are the ones putting their lives on the line, they have become the martyrs of these riots, and their fathers and mothers are mourning them.

⁹ For more about the Tax Reform, see Daniela Blandón Ramírez, “Así es la reforma tributaria propuesta por el Gobierno de Colombia,” *France 24*, April 16, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/es/programas/econom%C3%ADa/20210416-colombia-explicacion-reforma-tributaria-ivan-duque-impuesto-valor-agregado>.

¹⁰ “Colombia: Al menos 13 muertos en jornada de protestas en Cali,” *DW*, May 29, 2021, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/es/colombia-al-menos-13-muertos-en-jornada-de-protestas-en-cali/a-57713485>.

¹¹ See the data in “¿Por qué protesta la gente en Colombia?,” PCDHDD, June 28, 2021, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://ddhhcolombia.org.co/2021/06/28/informe-por-que-protesta-en-colombia/>.

The NGO Temblores¹² reports that “between April 28, 2021, and June 26, 2021, there were at least 4,687 cases of violence by the police (not including cases of disappearances).”¹³ And according to INDEPAZ,¹⁴ from April 28 to July 21 of this year most of the homicide victims from the protests have been young people. In June, Alvin Góngora reported:

In the last week, the cruelty of the State organisms has increased. Now we are finding bodies in a bend in the Cauca River, not far from Cali. Or dismembered. Lying around. Young people just out of adolescence. Álvaro Herrera, a music student at the Universidad del Valle (Cali), survived and said that he heard when the agents who were guarding and torturing him wondered aloud if it would not be more convenient for them to disappear him.¹⁵

Despite martyrdom, the majority of young people consider protests to be having positive effects. In this regard, a study by the Universidad del Rosario, El Tiempo, and Cifras y Conceptos found that “for 71% of the country’s youth, social protest generates positive results: to be able to be heard, to demonstrate the discontent of the people, to seek changes and improvements in the political, social and economic spheres, and to ensure the rights to equity, justice, equality, truth and peace.”¹⁶

Likewise, it is striking that, contrary to what the television media is portraying, young people are rejecting violence in their demonstrations in the streets. The study of the “Regional Panorama of the Third Measurement of the Great National Survey on Young People” shows that “seven out of ten young people reject violence and vandalism during the national strike, which is about a month

12 “Comunicado a la opinión pública y a la comunidad internacional por los hechos de violencia cometidos por la Fuerza Pública de Colombia en el marco de las movilizaciones del Paro Nacional,” Temblores, June 28, 2021, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://www.temblores.org/comunicados>.

13 See the data about the violence during the protests in “Comunicado a la opinión pública y a la comunidad internacional por los hechos de violencia cometidos.”

14 “Listado de las 80 víctimas de violencia homicida en el marco del paro nacional al 23 de julio,” INDEPAZ, July 23, 2021, accessed August 9, 2021, <http://www.indepaz.org.co/victimas-de-violencia-homicida-en-el-marco-del-paro-nacional/>.

15 Alvin Góngora, “Ni mártires ni chivos expiatorios: Llanto por la juventud colombiana,” *ALC comunicación*, June 23, 2021, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://alc-noticias.net/es/2021/06/23/ni-martires-ni-chivos-expiatorios-llanto-por-la-juventud-colombiana/?fbclid=IwAR1YKKsIP-zdFiPgstBqew7cSQ2X3yfHaZOEUS5VOWseAXL-ftM9cD3e44Q>.

16 Francisco Javier, “Los jóvenes en Colombia aprueban el paro, pero rechazan el vandalismo,” *Valora Analitik*, May 2, 2021, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://www.valoraanalitik.com/2021/05/27/jovenes-colombia-aprueban-paro-nacional-rechazan-vandalismo/>.

in continuation since its first demonstration on April 28, 2021.”¹⁷ Though the young people are embracing nonviolence, they are not doing so passively. Rather, they are carrying their nonviolent approach with them into demonstrations against the policies and actions of the government that threaten the lives of citizens.¹⁸

In Cali, where protests have left the most young people martyred,¹⁹ youth have organized themselves in various “lines” to resist the violent excesses of the police force:

In the “front line” are those who take the shots. They stand in front of the police tank and in front of the water jet. Then there is the “second line,” whose members are in charge of throwing stones, returning the capsules with tear gas launched by the riot police and throwing sticks. In the “third line” there is a group of people whose mission is to distract the authorities, reduce the field of vision with lasers and paint bombs. The “fourth line” collects the injured and transports milk to reduce the effects of gases and water. Finally, the “fifth line” evacuates those who fall in combat. All the lines are connected to each other.²⁰

Some have accused the young people of being summoned to action by a political party, in addition to receiving that party’s financial support. In response, the young people have stated that they are neither with the right nor with the left. They note that what happens in Cali—as in the rest of the country—is the product of a government that has not taken them into account.²¹ De Sousa Santos describes the protests this way:

Another distinctive feature is that [the protests] take place outside of every organization, be it partisan, union, guild or any social movement, which in other words means that they take place outside of all institutions or the mechanisms and spaces available to regulate political participation.²²

17 Javier, “Los jóvenes in Colombia aprueban el paro.”

18 Javier, “Los jóvenes in Colombia aprueban el paro.”

19 “Los jóvenes colombianos resisten en una protesta que ‘no es de nadie,’” Agencia EFE, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://www.efe.com/efe/america/sociedad/los-jovenes-colombianos-resisten-en-una-protesta-que-no-es-de-nadie/20000013-4543755>.

20 “Los jóvenes colombianos resisten”

21 “Los jóvenes colombianos resisten.”

22 De Sousa Santos, “Las revueltas mundiales de indignación.”

The Role of Indigenous Peoples

The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia has called on its indigenous peoples and nations of the national territory to participate in the *National Minga*²³ “to advance in the defense of life, peace, justice, autonomy and a good life for all Colombians.”²⁴ The indigenous *Minga* have carried out significant and symbolic acts of dignification such as the demolition of statues alluding to the “conquerors,” including Sebastián de Belalcázar in Cali, Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada in Bogotá, and the “discoverer” of America—Christopher Columbus—in the city of Barranquilla. The *Minga* have also actively participated in the national strike in all regions of the country,²⁵ expressing themselves mainly through roadblocks. The blockades, which led to the lack of food in the cities—especially in Cali²⁶—also stoked already-present violence and stigmatization against indigenous people.²⁷

The violent responses against indigenous people and communities in the city of Cali were led by armed civilians. According to indigenous senator

23 The word “minga” comes from the Quichua *minka* that refers to community agricultural work carried out by the indigenous people of the Andean area for the benefit of the entire community. However, the expression has taken on a broader meaning: it not only is a form of community work but also involves mechanisms of social mobilization and political action, as well as being a tool to preserve historical memory. See Oscar López Cortés, “Significados y representaciones de la *minga* para el pueblo indígena Pastos de Colombia,” *Psicoperspectivas: Individuos y Sociedad* 17, no. 3 (2018), accessed October 7, 2021, <https://www.psicoperspectivas.cl/index.php/psicoperspectivas/article/viewFile/1353/934>.

24 See “Se aviva la llama de la Minga Indígena Nacional en el marco del Paro Nacional: Por la Vida, la Paz, el Buen Vivir y la Unidad del Pueblo Colombiano,” ONIC, May 12, 2021, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.onic.org.co/comunicados-onic/4262-se-aviva-la-llama-de-la-minga-indigena-nacional-en-el-marco-del-paro-nacional-por-la-vida-la-paz-el-buen-vivir-y-la-unidad-del-pueblo-colombiano>; and the documentary by Natalia Romero Peñuela and Camila Granados Arango, “Paro Nacional 2021: ¿Por qué la Minga Indígena es fundamental en el diálogo para resolver la crisis?,” *El Espectador*, May 23, 2021, accessed August 13, 2021, <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia/paro-nacional-2021-por-que-la-minga-indigena-es-fundamental-en-el-dialogo-para-resolver-la-crisis/>.

25 “Se aviva la llama de la Minga Indígena Nacional en el marco del Paro Nacional.”

26 Santiago Torrado, “Civiles armados disparan a grupos indígenas y el caos se apodera de Cali», *El País*, May 10, 2021, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-05-10/civiles-armados-disparan-a-grupos-indigenas-y-el-caos-se-apodera-de-cali.html>.

27 “Colombia: Llamado urgente a cesar la violencia contra Pueblos Indígenas en el marco del Paro Nacional,” Amnistía Internacional, May 9, 2021, accessed August 12, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2021/05/colombia-llamado-urgente-cesar-violencia-contra-pueblos-indigenas/>.

Feliciano Valencia, “The wealthy families of Cali in conjunction with the police . . . fired indiscriminately against the indigenous guard and the community.”²⁸ And according to the Association of Indigenous Cabildos of Northern Cauca (ACIN, Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas de Norte del Cauca), these attacks, which left people injured by firearms, were carried out in the company of state forces.²⁹

But why are the indigenous people protesting? According to academics Fernando Urrea y Enrique Rodríguez, some of the reasons are related to racism toward indigenous people and the class struggle that the city of Cali has historically experienced. And Noelia Campo, an indigenous leader from Cauca, points out that the purpose of the mobilization was to support the marchers, de-escalate the conflict, and be a mediator between the “front line” and the Armed Forces; it was a humanitarian act of solidarity, complete with the cultural elements of the indigenous people—bartering of food, songs, dances, and an assembly to listen to young people. Valencia notes that although the indigenous people have similar requests to the rest of Colombians, they also have specific requests for the government: stop the killing of social leaders; implement what was agreed upon in 2019 and 2020, including agreements about mining projects in their territories; end the armed conflict in their territories; and follow through on the Peace Agreement.

The Role of the Churches

The churches played an important role in the face of the country’s crisis and the violence carried out by state forces that, after a week of protests, had resulted in injuries and fatalities.

From the Catholic standpoint, the Episcopal Conference responded by putting out a statement that rejected “violations of human rights, acts of vandalism, blockades impeding mobility and food supply, the disappearance of people, attacks against the physical integrity of any person, the damage caused to public and private property.”³⁰ They also expressed pain for the victims of the riots; denounced the abuse of force; demanded the right to protest and an end to the murders; and urged reconciliation, peace, and dialogue to overcome the situation.³¹ In addition, the Episcopal Conference, together with the United

28 Santiago Torrado, “Civiles armados disparan a grupos indígenas y el caos se apodera de Cali,” second paragraph.

29 Torrado, “Civiles armados.”

30 Diego Aguilar, “Iglesia Católica pide diálogo social para enfrenar crisis de orden público,” *W Radio*, May 5, 2021, second paragraph, accessed July 23, 2021, <https://www.wradio.com.co/noticias/actualidad/iglesia-catolica-pide-dialogo-social-para-enfrenar-crisis-de-orden-publico/20210505/nota/4132366.aspx>.

31 Aguilar, “Iglesia Católica pide diálogo social.”

Nations and upon invitation, served as a mediator between the government and the National Strike Committee.³²

International church organizations³³ also issued a statement urging the Colombian government to stop the spiral of violence against the civilian population, not to suppress the protests, and to listen to the people. In their letter, they mentioned the number of deaths and disappearances and insisted on the cessation of violence by the police and the creation of reforms to the state security apparatus that would guarantee constitutional rights. In addition, they emphasized the need for openness to dialogue, to not stigmatize the marchers—youth and indigenous people—to prosecute those who disappeared people and committed homicides in the protests, and to implement the Peace Agreement.³⁴

The importance of international solidarity is confirmed by de Sousa Santos:

We are in a decade where social struggles are going to need a lot of international solidarity. We have to know what is happening in other countries so as not to be so alone in our struggles, in our countries. Many times we think that we are alone, and we are not: there are other struggles in other countries.³⁵

The need for solidarity is true not just for the international church organizations but also for the local churches in Colombia, which have not come to a consensus regarding their pronouncements. In a May 9, 2021, meeting between President Duque and representatives of religious movements,³⁶ for example, some of the churches expressed their support for the government amid the pro-

32 Natalia Tamayo Gaviria, “La protesta social no es un problema de orden público: Monseñor Héctor F. Henao,” *El Espectador*, May 18, 2021, accessed July 24, 2021, <https://www.elespectador.com/politica/la-protesta-social-no-es-un-problema-de-orden-publico-monseñor-hector-f-henao/>.

33 The letter was signed by the respective secretaries general or representatives of the World Council of Churches, ACT Alianza, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Anglican Communion, World Methodist Council, Latin American Episcopal Council, and World Association for Christian Communication.

34 “Carta de las organizaciones internacionales de Iglesias por las actuales protestas y conflictos sociales en Colombia,” DIPAZ, May 21, 2021, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://dipazcolombia.org/carta-de-la-organizaciones-internacionales-de-iglesias-por-las-actuales-protestas-y-conflictos-sociales-en-colombia/>.

35 De Sousa Santos, “Las revueltas mundiales de indignación.”

36 The list of attendees can be found at “Duque se reúne este domingo con sectores religiosos, de salud y víctimas,” Radio Nacional de Colombia, May 9, 2021, accessed August 11, 2021, <https://www.radionacional.co/actualidad/ivan-duque-reunion-representantes-religiosos-victimas-sector-salud>.

tests and the strike.³⁷ In addition, although the statement signed by the majority of leaders of churches and other religious movements at the meeting contained seven points³⁸ regarding the necessity of dialogue for unity and overcoming violence, it also included a striking recognition of institutionalality:

We express our support for the institutional framework in the effort to advance dialogue processes that allow progress in solving the needs of the poorest, as well as the total rejection of any form of violence, wherever it comes from . . . which has indeed severely affected Colombians in recent weeks.³⁹

The issue with this type of declaration is its implication of unconditional support for government institutions. This is especially problematic during the present period of human rights violations. The statement is also inadequate in its lack of direct denunciation of the violence exercised by state apparatuses, and its lack of demand for accountability for the state's violations of human rights. This is due in part to shady political deals negotiated by evangelical parties with the current government to avoid taxes being imposed on their houses of worship.⁴⁰

Yalile Caballero, president of the Mennonite Church of Colombia, also spoke at the meeting:

The Mennonite Church of Colombia today says we do not agree with the bills they are developing, with the reform they are proposing. We know that reforms must be made, we need them, but please review, in the past, what reforms have been made that could be reversed, such as the one taken from the tax reform and the 2018 law in which financial institutions benefited. . . . Today the people are tired, today the people demonstrate because they do not want to continue this way; we represent the people as well.⁴¹

37 See “Los líderes religiosos apoyan a Duque y piden el levantamiento de los bloques en Colombia,” Europa Press, May 9, 2021, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-lideres-religiosos-apoyan-duque-piden-levantamiento-bloques-colombia-20210509221852.html>.

38 See “Declaración conjunta entre los líderes religiosos y el Gobierno Nacional, en el encuentro con el señor Presidente de la República, Dr. Iván Duque Márquez, para avanzar en una Agenda sobre lo Fundamental,” Presidencia de la República de Colombia, May 9, 2021, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://idm.presidencia.gov.co/prensa/Paginas/Declaracion-conjunta-entre-los-lideres-religiosos-el-Gobierno-Nacional-210509.aspx>.

39 “Declaración conjunta entre los líderes religiosos y el Gobierno Nacional.”

40 Ferney Yesyd Rodríguez Vargas, “Los cristianos que no condenan la violencia policial,” *Las 2 Orillas*, May 11, 2021, accessed August 9, 2021, <https://www.las2orillas.co/los-cristianos-que-no-condenan-la-violencia-policial/>.

41 Fernando San Miguel's Facebook Page, May 9, 2021, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/luisfernando.sanmiguelcardona/videos/1911188375687290/>.

Amid the crisis, the churches not in alignment with the government issued official pronouncements that have not only national but also international repercussions:

- The Mennonite church statement rejects militarization in different parts of the country to control protests, condemns the excessive use of police force, denounces human rights violations, and urges the national government to dialogue with the actors of the strike.⁴²
- The Assemblies of God church claims the right to protest, condemns the violation of human rights, invites dialogue between different actors, and urges that the excessive use of force not be applied.⁴³
- The Methodist church denounces the government's economic measures, its silence in the face of massacres and other murders of human rights defenders, its laziness in the implementation of the Peace Accords, its corruption, and its ineptitude before the crisis. The Methodist statement also affirms opposition to violence, support for protesters, and a call for dialogue.⁴⁴
- The Latin American Lutheran Synod⁴⁵ invites dialogue between the government and the sectors that have spoken out in search of solutions.
- The Colombian Baptist Denomination urges the government to dialogue and to guarantee life and peaceful demonstration. It also calls the community in general to opt for reconciliation.⁴⁶
- The peace commission of the Presbyterian Church of Colombia denounces the government's political, social, and economic reforms. The commission also condemns the institutional violence and the poor im-

42 Iglesia Cristiana Menonita de Colombia, accessed October 13, 2021, <http://www.mcclaca.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/COMITE-NACIONAL-IMCOL-PARO-NACIONAL.pdf>.

43 Iglesia Asambleas de Dios Facebook Page, May 11, 2021, accessed July 29, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/AsambleasdeDiosColombia/>.

44 Iglesia Colombiana Metodista's Facebook Page, May 5, 2021, accessed July 30, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/icmetodista/photos/pcb.1451611308519508/1451608848519754>.

45 Sínodo Luterano Latinoamericano's Facebook Page, May 5, 2021, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/SILULAT/photos/pcb.131152392397957/131152349064628/>.

46 Denominación Bautista Colombiana's Facebook Page, May 7, 2021, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/DenominacionBautista/photos/a.10150615374672372/10159384538837372/>.

plementation of the Peace Agreement but invites dialogue.⁴⁷

- Other national and international entities made similar statements on social networks.⁴⁸

These statements include biblical references that connect with the churches' various demands and hopes:

- “When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when the wicked rule, the people groan” (Prov 29:2).
- “Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings’” (Exod 3:7).
- “This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble” (Ps 34:6).
- “But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer” (Ps 66:19).
- “Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out; at the entrance of the city gates she speaks” (Prov 1:20–21).
- “If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chr 7:14).
- The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever” (Isa 32:17).
- “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out’” (Luke 19: 39–40).

In these biblical texts, the prophetic voice is perceived as opposing the government—criticizing it as perverse, oppressive, responsible for the pain of the

⁴⁷ Comisión de paz de la Iglesia Presbiteriana de Colombia’s Facebook Page, May 9, 2021, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/IglesiaPresbiterianaColombia>.

⁴⁸ Among these are statements from the Corporación Universitaria Reformada (Baranquilla), Justapaz, DiPaz, Articulación Continental de las Comunidades de Base, World Christian Student Federation, Centro Regional Ecueménico de Asesoría y Servicio, Consejo Interreligioso de Colombia, Mennonite World Conference, World Council of Churches, ACT Alliance, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Anglican Communion, World Methodist Council, Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (CELAM), and World Association for Christian Communication, as well as other international organizations like the United Nations. The Colombian Mennonite denomination (IMCOL) also released a joint statement signed by several congregations, church agencies, and individuals in Colombia, Mexico, and Germany.

people, and neglecting to practice justice. On the flip side, the texts also express the trust that the people and the church have in God; God hears the people's cry, knows their sufferings, and frees them from their anguish. These texts also place a demand on the people—that of wisdom (which is essential during protests). They also place a demand on the church—to not be silent in the face of injustice. Finally, the challenge remains for everyone—that of conversion.

Most of the biblical texts included in the churches' statements refer to the Old Testament. On the one hand, this selection of texts highlights the churches' awareness that as long as there is no justice there can be no peace. It also indicates that although the church and the people fervently yearn for peace, it seems that the ruling classes do not.⁴⁹ On the other hand, reliance on Old Testament texts makes it difficult for the churches to find texts in the New Testament that can be applied to the current critical situation in Colombia. In particular, biblical texts referring to reconciliation and forgiveness are absent.

In addition to authoring public written statements regarding the country's current situation, the churches, especially the young people, have taken to the streets with banners and chants for peace and justice. The actions of two religious leaders in particular—one in Bucaramanga and the other in Cali—have garnered significant attention.

The first of these leaders, Álvaro Prada Vargas, is an Anglican priest who intervened when members of the Anti-Riot Police Squad pursued several protesters and used excessive force against the young people. When the young people sought refuge in the Industrial University of Santander (UIS) in Bucaramanga, the police closed them in and did not let them leave for several hours, even though some of them needed medical attention. Faced with this situation, Vargas led a "humanitarian corridor" so that the young protesters could receive assistance.⁵⁰

The second leader is Luis Miguel Caviedes, a Methodist pastor. In addition to being in the "front line," he has accompanied people in legal and human rights issues together with the Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace and other collectives of lawyers. He has also assisted threatened youth and people who have been injured or captured by the police. In addition, he has provided humanitarian, psychosocial, and psychospiritual assistance.⁵¹ Because of

49 The benefits granted to the ruling classes through the war in Colombia have served as a disincentive for making peace.

50 Miguel Ángel Espinosa, "El sacerdote que logró mediar entre el Esmad y estudiantes en la UIS," *El Tiempo*, May 20, 2021, accessed August 1, 2021, <https://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/santander/paro-nacional-sacerdote-que-medio-con-el-esmad-en-bucaramanga-589768>.

51 Julieth Narváez, "Entrevista—Es necesaria la reconciliación frente a lo que está sucediendo," *La palabra*, June 10, 2021, accessed August 2, 2021, <http://lapalabra.uni->

his involvement in such matters, he has received threats and been the target of multiple assassination attempts.

The National Strike Committee

The National Strike Committee,⁵² which speaks on behalf of the labor organizations, announced reasons⁵³ for rejecting the proposed Tax Reform. “This reform,” they stated, “threatens the economic stability of workers, pensioners, the middle class and low-income people.”⁵⁴ They also observed that a reform is needed in which “those who have the most, pay the most, and that, in the end, benefits in a real and palpable way the most needy social class in the country.”⁵⁵ In the broader context, Colombia’s social struggles have been fueled by economic measures, human rights violations, and the lack of implementation of previous agreements.

On April 28, the committee called a national strike (supposedly following the biosafety protocols in place for COVID-19). The demands of the strike agenda included two reforms: (1) the “Reform to the Health System,” aimed at consolidating the privatization of health services,⁵⁶ and (2) the Labor Reform.⁵⁷

valle.edu.co/entrevista-es-necesaria-la-reconciliacion-frente-a-lo-que-esta-sucediendo/.

52 Made up of the following labor organizations: Central Unitaria de Trabajadores-CUT, Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia-CTC, Confederación General del Trabajo-CGT, Federación Colombiana de Educadores-Fecode, and Confederaciones de Pensionados CPC y CDP.

53 To read these reasons in detail, see “Las 11 razones de las centrales sindicales para oponerse a la Reforma Tributaria,” Agencia de Información Laboral-AIL, April 16, 2021, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://ail.ens.org.co/noticias/las-11-razones-de-las-centrales-sindicales-para-oponerse-a-la-reforma-tributaria/>.

54 For more information, see “Las 11 razones de las centrales sindicales.”

55 “Las 11 razones de las centrales sindicales.”

56 Jennifer Restrepo de la Pava, “Nueva reforma a la salud en Colombia, ¿Maquillaje de la Ley 100?,” *Universidad de Antioquia*, May 10, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, https://www.udea.edu.co/wps/portal/udea/web/inicio/udea-noticias/udea-noticia/lut/p/z0/fYxDsIwEEN_haUjuqOUAGPFgIQYGBBqs6BTE-CgzbVJQHw-LQyIhcXys2yDhg-K0owefKb14qnsutToulqt0kme4RZUpzNUum83T9XR_QNiA_1_oH_jadToHXYm-L9hmhaMVHqu_GUoIUfukijf34QUdOlldMIcH32rGRofWNglRsDZkEvT2Jb2gch-jNob7p8Ad3BxC0!/.

57 Carmen Menéndez, “Paro Nacional en Colombia: El Congreso retira la polémica reforma sanitaria,” *Euro News*, May 20, 2021, accessed August 6, 2021, <https://es.euronews.com/2021/05/20/paro-nacional-en-colombia-el-congreso-retira-la-polemica-reforma-sanitaria>.

Several weeks after the start of the protests, the National Strike Committee⁵⁸ met with the national government and presented the following list of demands:

Withdrawal of bill 010 on health and strengthening of a massive vaccination; basic income of at least a monthly legal minimum wage; defense of national production (agricultural, industrial, artisanal, peasant); subsidies to MiPymes [Micro-, Small- and Medium-scale Enterprises] and employment with rights and a policy that defends food sovereignty and security; free tuition and no to hybrid learning; a non-discrimination policy regarding gender, sexual and ethnic diversity; no privatizations and repeal of decree 1174; stop forced eradication of illicit crops and aerial spraying with glyphosate.⁵⁹

Due to past excesses of the police force against the protesters, the committee also asked for guarantees regarding the protest: “Stop the violence against the protesters, refrain from declaring the State of Internal Commotion, withdraw the Army and the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD) completely and that President Iván Duque unequivocally condemn the abuses by the police force.”⁶⁰ The committee also urged the government to not only not tolerate but also identify and prosecute the perpetrators of violent acts, including members of the police who violated human rights.⁶¹ However, further mistrust was generated because the president announced a plan to unblock the roads using the police⁶² and because not all the protesters felt represented by the National Strike Committee.⁶³

Despite these obstacles, the National Strike Committee achieved demands such as the withdrawal of the first Tax Reform proposal and free public higher education. The latter is considered an achievement of great magnitude within the broader history of accomplishments in Colombia. In addition, the commit-

58 Made up of “la Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), la Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC), la Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CGT), la Confederación Democrática de los Pensionados (CDP), la Confederación de Pensionados de Colombia (CPC), la Federación Colombiana de Trabajadores de la Educación (FECODE), la Cruzada Camionera, la organización Dignidad Agropecuaria, la Asociación Colombiana de Representantes Estudiantiles (ACREES) y la Unión Nacional de Estudiantes de Educación Superior (UNEES).” See Karen Sánchez, “¿Qué es, qué pide y a quiénes representa el Comité del Paro en Colombia?,” *Voz de América*, May 20, 2021, accessed August 8, 2021, <https://www.vozdeamerica.com/america-latina/que-es-que-pide-y-quienes-representa-el-comite-del-paro-en-colombia>.

59 Sánchez, “¿Qué es?”

60 Sánchez, “¿Qué es?”

61 Sánchez, “¿Qué es?”

62 Sánchez, “¿Qué es?”

63 Sánchez, “¿Qué es?”

tee recently filed ten bills before Congress to benefit the majority of Colombians affected by COVID-19 and the economic crisis.⁶⁴

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)

After several weeks of insisting to the Colombian government that they be allowed to enter the country, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) paid a visit to Colombia and confirmed what at first the government had denied—that during the protests beginning on April 28, human rights were violated. This is mentioned in the report “Observations and recommendations of the IACHR’s working visit to Colombia, held from June 8 to 10, 2021.”⁶⁵

The report refers to police abuse, gender violence, ethnic-racial discrimination, violence against journalists and medical organizations, illegal arrests, reports of disappearances, military interventions, use of military jurisdiction in the face of human rights violations by the police, violations of fundamental rights, and damage to the property of third parties, among other issues. For each of these issues, the report also includes recommendations, which the IACHR expects the government will implement.

Between Memory and Oblivion

The results of this brief study show us that the crisis in Colombia, manifested in the strike that began on April 28, 2021, reflects a tension between *memory* and *oblivion*. *Memory* is necessary not only of those in recent times who have been victims of the decisions and actions of the government and the state apparatus but also of those who have been victims since the “cry of independence” from the Spanish yoke on July 20, 1819. These victims, past and present, are demanding their rights. *Oblivion*, alternatively, is the path of the ruling classes and other sectors of society—included among them a certain sector of the church—which have not become conscious of what independence from coloniality means. As de Sousa Santos states:

Our societies are normally divided between two types of people: those who do not want to remember and those who cannot forget. . . . Those who were and are victims of suffering, genocide, oppression, violence. . . . But the

⁶⁴ For more information, see “Conozca los proyectos de ley que presentó el Comité Nacional de Paro en el Congreso,” Agencia de Información Laboral-AIL, August 9, 2021, accessed August 15, 2021, <https://ail.ens.org.co/noticias/conozca-los-proyectos-de-ley-que-presento-el-comite-nacional-de-paro-en-el-congreso/>.

⁶⁵ Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, “Observaciones y recomendaciones de la visita de trabajo de la CIDH a Colombia realizada del 8 al 10 de junio de 2021,” June 2021, accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/ObservacionesVisita_CIDH_Colombia_SPA.pdf.

other side of critical thinking is anticipation, the idea that we deserve a better society and that we should fight for it. That is why we must see the impact of these movements and these organizations and uprisings in critical thinking, as well as their impact in our own countries.⁶⁶

We must remember human rights violations, but these abuses are not what originally generated the social protests. Rather, the protests are grounded in a people's indignation in the face of the historical and ongoing coloniality that refuses to give them free passage to live a dignified life within a country that provides equal opportunities for all, respects people's rights, and complies with agreements.

Despite their outrage, however, not everyone seems to agree on the country's vision. Instead, people seem to be pulling their own way. De Sousa Santos highlights this concern.⁶⁷ People know what they don't want but not what they do want for everyone. They are aware that they can have another world, but they are unable to define it. And although they hold some aspects in common for a vision of the nation, it seems that each movement wants something different. Hence, although the protests start with a small demand, within a few days the demands often radically expand. For instance, protests in Colombia that began against the Tax Reform evolved into a great number of demands.

What *is* clear is that there are two enemies against which everyone is fighting: immense social inequality and the dictatorships of the financial markets, combined with the absence of representative democracy. These enemies are the octopuses through which coloniality navigates, and whose tentacles reach all areas of the life of our people. Therefore, it is not enough to be independent from the oppressive domination of a foreign nation; it is also necessary to make epistemological breaks with the forms of knowledge that have captivated the minds of our people. We must break from what made us increasingly individualistic, insensitive, competitive, and disrespectful of otherness to the point of believing that taking the lives of others is something natural—a belief that is reflected in the moment of electing those who govern and in how those elected leaders use their power.

Within this destructive milieu, an epistemology for peace is urgent. As Muñoz states: "A epistemological turn is needed: to think with new elements of judgment, which implies deconstructing and reconstructing our thinking; changing the epistemological (knowledge), axiological (values), anthropological (culture), and ontological (philosophy) presuppositions."⁶⁸ In other words, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary to build other forms of knowledge that

66 De Sousa Santos, "Las revueltas mundiales de indignación," 20.

67 De Sousa Santos, "Las revueltas mundiales de indignación," 20–24.

68 Agustín Angarita Lezama, *Epistemología para la paz. Ensayo* (Ibagué, Colombia: Caza de Libros, 2016), 34.

resist the dominant colonialist thought. The South must be allowed to speak after so many years of silence imposed by the thought generated in the North.⁶⁹

In a crisis like the one Colombia is experiencing in the post-agreement period, it is important not to idealize peace as a state without conflict or violence, because this expectation would bring even more frustration to the table. For this reason, we agree with the concept of *imperfect peace*,⁷⁰ which is an alternative to the traditional conceptions of peace, usually termed as negative, absence of war; or positive, total peace, without violence, perfect, utopian. In contrast, imperfect peace is a way of recognizing the diversity and complexity of human beings in all areas, which, in turn, makes conflict inevitable. Imperfect peace includes “all these experiences and instances in which conflicts have been peacefully regulated; that is, in which individuals and/or human groups have chosen to facilitate the satisfaction of the needs of others, without any cause beyond their will preventing it.”⁷¹

In this way, peace should be understood not only from diverse perspectives but also from diverse spaces where conflict is expressed. Therefore, it should be understood that what is done in Colombia by indigenous communities, young people, students, social movements, human rights commissions, churches and other religious movements, the National Strike Committee, international entities, and even the government itself, among others, contributes in one way or another to an imperfect peace. Of course, amid all this complexity there are peace initiatives, many of them made invisible by the mass media. Hence, an invitation and challenge for us is to identify those signs of peacebuilding in the midst of social upheavals. Social aid, support for victims, demands of the government, requests for international support, the formation of dialogue committees and agreements are all efforts to build peace, even if it is an imperfect peace.

Thus, social protest as part of decolonization processes is not disconnected from peacebuilding. Protest is necessary because it reveals the injustices that exist in society and the violence that these injustices generate. It also makes the victims visible, brings to mind the events that led to independence, and keeps alive the struggles to decolonize thought and build new epistemologies for peace in the South.

In the midst of social protest, churches have played an important role, although a faction of them (as noted earlier) have opted to align themselves with

69 Pablo Gentili, “Inventar otras ciencias sociales,” in *Construyendo las Epistemologías del Sur: Para un pensamiento alternativo de alternativas*, ed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2018), 14, http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/clacso/se/20181203040213/Antologia_Boaventura_Voll.pdf.

70 Francisco Adolfo Muñoz, ed., *La paz imperfecta* (Granada, España: Universidad de Granada, 2001).

71 Muñoz, ed., *La paz imperfecta*, 38.

the government. This indicates that religion and theology have been instruments of coloniality of our people. In other words, religion and theology have served to strengthen epistemologies that promote the elimination of cultural, religious, and thought diversity in an attempt to homogenize the people. So it is that social protest also challenges the church.

Among the *epistemologies of the South* are also included the *theologies of the South*. Juan Tamayo⁷² considers these theologies to be part of what has been called the *decolonizing turn*, and he views them as not only emergent but also postcolonial. He argues that with the conquest of Latin America came a paradigm shift that eliminated cultural and religious plurality while imposing Christianity—along with political domination and social order—which occurred by means of the *sword and the cross*. The shift was so complete that for four centuries an “illiberal, counterrevolutionary, patriarchal and colonial”⁷³ Catholic Christianity prevailed. Therefore, a first challenge for the church is to assume a mission without the character of conquest.

Within the theologies of the South are emerging theologies that develop with new subjects—the poor and oppressed, women, indigenous peoples, black communities, queer people, and the earth itself—that break with systems of exclusion. This results in the emergence of liberation theologies, feminist theologies, Indian theologies, Afro-descendant theologies; gay, lesbian, and queer theologies; and ecotheology, among others.

Within these emerging theologies are *postcolonial theologies*, which have tended toward the deconstruction of paradigms imposed throughout history and have attacked the entire way of life and thought of the original communities; that is to say, they are theologies that analyze the repercussions of colonialism and aspire to decolonize theological thought in relation to gender, ethnicity, class, religion, and sexual identity. In addition, they are in close relationship with social movements and questions, including, among other missiological aspects, the mandate of Matthew 28:19 to “make disciples of all nations.”⁷⁴

The church, then, as it participates in the protests, faces the existing coloniality. The church cannot forget the history of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression of our people. This means that it cannot be neutral in the face of the violence suffered by the victims, whatever the origin of that violence. Neither can it favor a *status quo* or the *establishment* under the colonial hermeneutic of unconditional obedience to state authorities. The church, however, should also be a peacebuilder, given the essence of its foundation, which is Christ.

This tension between standing with the victims and being a peacebuilder is the great challenge facing the church in contexts of conflictual protests. It is

72 Juan José Tamayo, *Teologías del Sur: El giro descolonizador* (Madrid: Trotta, 2017).

73 Tamayo, *Teologías del Sur*, 42.

74 Tamayo, *Teologías del Sur*, 66–68.

a challenge because, on the one hand, there is no peace without justice, and the victims cry out for justice. On the other hand, ethical implications of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes call for perpetrators to offer reparation, restitution, and clarification of the truth of their actions, among other obligations. In other words, the challenge for the church is to be a bridge between one and the other, in such a way as to fulfill what the Scripture says about Christ as the builder of peace: “In his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace” (Eph 2:14–15).

The actions of the church in contexts of social protest lead to an affirmation that the peace it proclaims—and seeks to build—oscillates between memory and oblivion. Jesus and the early church took this memory into account in their proclamation of the good news (Luke 4:16–21, Matt 23: 29–31, Acts 2:36, 1 Thess 2:14–15, among others). In other words, if the church does not take the side of those who suffer, it can easily forget the reasons for the people’s struggles and demands. It can also forget the way of the cross and walk in a *cheap grace*. If the church does not take the side of the victims, it becomes vulnerable to the temptation to serve the gods of power and money. Thus, this article begins with the premise that the church must build peace. To do otherwise would lead to a false peace.

Decolonizing through Social Protests: Reaching for Imperfect Peace

Two questions generated this writing about social protests in Colombia: 1) How is social protest related to decolonization and peacebuilding in Colombia? (2) What challenges does social protest present for the church?

This article affirms that social protest in Colombia and the Global South is an expression of the decolonizing struggle that the people are facing as they strive to regain their autonomy and recognition in their own aspects of culture, thought, and way of living in peace—albeit what will always be an imperfect peace. The political situation in Colombia has mobilized various sectors of civil society, especially young people, students, indigenous people, human rights defenders, social movements, unions, neighborhood organizations, and churches. The resulting demonstrations have been visible in critical moments related to governmental decisions affecting the dignity and rights of the people. The positive impact of such mobilization in Colombia can be seen in the accomplishment of the people’s health and labor reforms resulting from protests against the government’s Tax Reform proposal.

Protests of such great magnitude challenge the churches to rethink theologically and practically what it means to build peace in these contexts. Some

churches have taken ambiguous positions regarding the promotion and defense of life and the construction of peace. Others remember alongside the victims while still others are tempted to forget the history that is at the root of the people's demands. This forgetting is an accomplice to the injustices that people have experienced ever since the declaration of independence from Spain. Hence, the churches must opt for the victims, side with them, and accompany them in their search for truth and reparation. When this is not materially possible, it can be done symbolically, especially in the context of the Peace Accords after a prolonged armed conflict.

The role of communities of faith in the construction of imperfect peace should be to serve as a bridge between victims and perpetrators, without neglecting the ethical implications and risks that this entails. This bridge-building role should also include seeking international solidarity.

Facing the challenges of the recent three-month period of social protest in Colombia should also prompt the churches, their pastors, their leaders, and their members to learn how the state is organized and how it works, as well as what the duties and rights of the citizens are. In other words, churches would be well-served to acquire civic competencies that give them the tools to face moments such as those experienced in Colombia where fundamental rights written in the Political Constitution of Colombia⁷⁵ have been violated. In this way, they will leave indifference aside, recover the memory that is generating the outcry of the victims, and strengthen their work for peace with justice.

⁷⁵ These fundamental rights include the right to protest, the right to life, the right to peace, and the right to freedom of worship, among others. See the Political Constitution of Colombia of 1991, Title II: Rights, Guarantees, and Duties, Chapter I, "Fundamental Rights," <https://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Colombia/colombia91.pdf>.