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# The Colombian Catholic Church's Quest for Legitimacy in the Colombian Armed Conflict

Piergiuseppe Parisi,\* and Adelaida Maria Ibarra Padilla\*

## Abstract

Since the 1960s, Colombia has been the theatre of multiple armed conflicts that, one way or another, have involved all sectors of society. Colombian religious actors, including the Catholic Church, in particular, have historically played an ambivalent role in the conflict. While some Catholic clerics have ideologically supported, aided and abetted, or even joined state and non-state armed actors especially during the first decades of the conflict, since the 1980s the Colombian Catholic Church has progressively been assuming a posture in favour of peace either through action or discourse. Most recently, these praxes have culminated in the participation of the Catholic Church in most of the high-level negotiations between the Colombian state and non-state armed groups (NSAGs). The scholarship exploring the Church's influential role in these peacebuilding and mediation efforts in Colombia has begun to burgeon only in the past twenty-five years. However, this literature has left largely unaddressed questions around the influence that the Catholic Church has had on the parties to the conflict. Such questions may help explain how the Church, as an institution, was able to garner the legitimacy necessary to become a key mediator between the state and NSAGs. Building on the data gathered and the framework elaborated as part of the Generating Respect Project (GRP), this article explores how the Church's legitimacy was constructed from the bottom, by both leveraging affinities with armed groups' ideologies and the impact of local initiatives aimed at protecting the civilian population in the midst of the armed conflict.

## Practitioner Points

- Humanitarian organizations who wish to forge alliances with religious leaders in Colombia—but also elsewhere—should consider the processes by which legitimacy is constructed at both the national and local level.
- In Colombia, the religious leaders' legitimacy is the result of a sustained presence in the local realities and the adoption of a posture of neutrality in relation to the conflict actors and associated with the protection of the civilian population.
- There is a need for compiling and disseminating best practices and experiences of peacebuilding and mediation developed at the local level in order to design a systematic approach to the involvement of religious actors in national peace efforts.

**Key words:** Catholic Church; Colombian armed conflict; legitimacy; mediation; peace negotiations

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## 1. Introduction

For six decades, Colombia has been the theatre of multiple and dynamic non-international armed conflicts (NIACs) which involve the state and several non-state armed groups (NSAGs).<sup>1</sup> Active NSAGs include insurgents, such as the partially demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*—Ejército del Pueblo FARC-EP), and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*,—ELN), as well as self-defence groups and paramilitary organizations, such as the demobilized United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC) and the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia*, AGC) (ICRC 2024). Furthermore, several criminal groups (sometimes referred to as *bandas criminales*) such as the *Shottas* or *Los Espartanos* operate in both urban and rural parts of the country (Indepaz 2024). Since the 1980s, the State has sought to negotiate durable peace agreements with some of these groups, with varying degrees of success (Ríos Sierra 2023). Nonetheless, unresolved land and wealth inequalities, the interests generated by one of the largest illegal drug industries in the world, and the alliances between political elites and some armed actors are at the roots of the conflict's endurance (Comisión de la Verdad 2022: 575–80; Gutiérrez Sanín 2020). Moreover, following a peace process that culminated with the 2016 Peace Agreement between the government and the FARC, the insurgent group demobilized, but some of its members rejected the Agreement and splintered into several smaller, less ideological armed groups—nowadays operating under the command of the Central General Staff (*Estado Mayor Central*, EMC)—which resumed the hostilities (Johnson et al. 2023; Johnson 2023; Gutiérrez Danton 2020).

Religion and religious actors have played an important part in the Colombian armed conflict. In addition to the accompaniment provided to the peace negotiations between the government and the two main guerrilla groups of the country, the Catholic Church has been involved in most peace negotiations since the 1980s (Flórez Suárez 2018). Several monastic orders, dioceses, and individual clerics are engaged in peacebuilding activities, protective accompaniment, and mediation in and around marginalized or geographically remote communities (Lamberty 2014a, b). The Military Bishopric provides religious and spiritual accompaniment to the Military Forces of Colombia (Bedoya Sánchez 2022). Furthermore, some clerics joined, or even provided ideological leadership for guerrilla groups, in particular the ELN (Celis 2016: 73–74).

At the end of the first negotiation round between the Colombian government and the ELN in December 2022, the High Commissioner for Peace announced that the Episcopal Conference of Colombia would permanently accompany all future negotiation rounds.<sup>2</sup> The involvement of the Catholic Church in the negotiations between the Colombian government and the different NSAGs present in the country is not novel. The Catholic Church played a significant role in the peace negotiations between the government and the FARC, which culminated in the 2016 Peace Agreement. This agreement led to the establishment of a Truth Commission, presided over by Jesuit priest Francisco de Roux. Additionally, a National Conciliation Commission was created in 1995 at the initiative of Monsignor Rubiano, comprising bishops and priests as key members.

Against this backdrop, we ask how the Catholic Church was able to garner such legitimacy as to become a key actor in the peace processes that have punctuated the recent history of Colombia. The article largely focuses on the Catholic Church—even though we occasionally refer to other churches, creeds, and spiritualities—and it is structured into four main sections. First, we contextualize the relationship between the Church and the

<sup>1</sup> According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, there are currently eight active NIACs in the country (ICRC 2024).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.altocomisionadoparalopez.gov.co/prensa/culmina-exitosamente-el-primer-ciclo-de-los-dialogos-de-paz> (referenced 5 December 2024).

state to show that, while several religions coexist in Colombia, the Catholic Church has historically occupied a privileged position in the socio-political architecture of the country. We tangentially map different manifestations of religion in Colombia and offer some insights into the relationship between institutionalized religions and traditional forms of spirituality, most notably indigenous spiritualities. This shows how the image of religion is not uniform across the country. Second, we provide an overview of the existing studies that explore the role of the Catholic Church in the Colombian armed conflict. We show that, while over the last twenty-five years the literature that explores the mediation and peace-building activities developed by the Church has increased exponentially, little has been done to measure its influence on the conflict dynamic, and even less so on the factors that may explain such influence. We also briefly introduce the theoretical framework that guided our data collection and analysis. Third, we explore the ideological relationship between the Church and armed groups in Colombia. We dissect the role of local Catholic actors, whether belonging to the diocesan Church or religious orders, by identifying the most significant local initiatives to protect the civilian population and facilitate humanitarian assistance. We also highlight the language used by religious actors. Fourth, we briefly survey how these local experiences were taken as a model for a more systematic involvement of the Catholic Church in country-wide peace efforts. Throughout the article, we also highlight the contradictions emerging from the involvement of the Catholic Church in these issues, especially their conservative position on gender, family, and reproductive rights, as well as their ambiguous relationship with indigenous peoples.

While our focus in this article is on how grassroots Catholic actors (*iglesias de base*) have progressively carved a space as privileged interlocutors of the NSAGs operating locally, it should be recognised - as we cursorily illustrate below - that the Catholic Church as a *global* actor played a pivotal role in determining a shift in the position of the Colombian Catholic Church vis-a-vis the negotiations with such groups. However, the fieldwork that informed this piece - conducted predominantly across the Pacific coast of Colombia - suggests that interventions by local actors were fundamental in building legitimacy.

## 2. A note on methodology

The article draws on both primary and secondary data. In particular, we conducted a review of the literature (in both English and Spanish) on the role of religious actors—in particular the Catholic Church—in the Colombian armed conflict. We also reviewed official statements released by state and ecclesiastical authorities, NSAGs, as well as news reports. Furthermore, Parisi conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 research participants in Colombia, including clerics, theologians, government officials, current and former members of NSAGs, community and social leaders, and humanitarian practitioners between January and February 2022. Finally, we integrate insights from a one-day workshop held at the University of Cauca in Popayán, which gathered experts on the role of the Catholic Church in the Colombian armed conflict from academia, civil society, Catholic institutions, and humanitarian organizations.

Given the risks they may incur due to their participation in this research and the sensitive nature of the information they shared, all research participants were offered anonymity, unless they expressly waived it. Hence, throughout this article, research participants are identified with a generic reference to their occupation. No other direct or indirect identifier is mentioned. Research participants who expressly waived anonymity are identified according to their wishes. Finally, both primary and secondary data were analysed thematically.

### 2.1 The Catholic Church in Colombia: context and main actors

The Catholic Church has been integral to Colombia's history, operating under the Spanish colonial system of patronage, which allowed the King of Spain to appoint

bishops, managing dioceses and overseeing ecclesiastical revenues in exchange for spreading Christianity. This system extended to colonial authorities, uniting the Church and State. After independence, the new republic inherited the functions that the Crown had performed in this field. Republican patronage ended in 1853 with the separation of powers (Ortiz 2013). Throughout the 19th century, the two main political parties in Colombia, the Conservatives, with whom large sections of the Colombian Catholic Church traditionally identified, and the Liberals, debated the position of the Catholic hierarchy and clergy in the political and social life of the country (Flórez Suárez et al 2019: 292–93). The position of the Catholic Church in the political sphere constituted one of the most divisive themes between Liberals and Conservatives. For the Liberal leadership, in particular, the Church represented an obstacle to material and intellectual progress. They sought to undermine its power through secularisation between 1824 and 1885. However, the Constitution of 1886 marked the recognition of Catholicism as the official religion of the country, founding the very construction of the nation-state on Catholicism (Ortiz 2013). The Church's opposition to modernity and the ideals developed during the Enlightenment fuelled social and political polarization that paved the way for the outburst of the 'Violence' (*La Violencia*) in the 1950s (Ortiz 2013).<sup>3</sup> Between 1958 and 1974, the Liberal and Conservative parties sought to put an end to the Violence by forming the National Front, a political agreement for the alternation of power between the two main political parties that excluded all other political movements from participating in the political life of the country. It is in this context that the Catholic Church and the Colombian state signed the Concordat of 1973. The creation of the National Front and the signing of the Concordat opened up spaces for the Catholic Church to forge alliances with both major Colombian political parties (Forero 2011).

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) marked a radical shift for the Latin American Church, which began a reflexive process of reappropriation of its missionary vocation (Rodríguez Cuadros 2020: 84; Second Vatican Council 1975) by embracing the value of social justice. By contrast, the Colombian Catholic Church adopted a countervailing position by opposing these changes (González 2005; Forero 2011; Ospina Arias et al. 2020: 14). In response to the Council's attempt to historicize the Church by embracing an inclusive notion of religious freedom, the Catholic clergy in Colombia continued to support the interests of the powerful and the status quo. The response to the Colombian Church's entrenchment in conservative values came from the bottom. Radical priests and missionaries from the bases sought to generate transformative ruptures within the Church, with some going so far as to express sympathies for armed action as a way to generate change (Plata and Vega 2015; Cardozo 2014: 141).

The second half of the 1980s marked a shift in the institutional position of the Colombian Catholic Church. Both the Betancur government's opening to initiating dialogues with NSAGs and Pope John Paul II's visit to Colombia, during which he highlighted the importance of seeking peace in the country, led the Episcopal Conference of Colombia to identify a path that would allow the Church to find its voice on matters relating to the conflict and commit to peace-building (Flórez López 2020: 47–48). It is during the 1980s that bishops across the country began to participate actively as mediators between the government and NSAGs, and between NSAGs and the civilian population, all the while maintaining conservative positions in particular around gender, family, and reproductive rights (Plata Quezada and Vega Rincón 2015).

The Constitution of 1991 introduced significant changes in the country's political system. It embraced the separation between the state and religion, though the Catholic Church retained a privileged status in Colombia (Camacho 2008). Continuing on the trajectory

3 'La Violencia' is a term used to describe both the civil war that began with the assassination of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the leader of the Liberal Party, in 1948 and that was characterized by the confrontation between the Conservative and Liberal parties, as well as the violence that has characterized the modern and contemporary socio-political history of Colombia (see, for example, Bailey 1967).

elaborated in the previous decade, the period that followed the adoption of the new Constitution—which continues nowadays—has been marked by an increasing protagonism of the Colombian Catholic Church in the identification of a roadmap to peace (Flórez López 2020: 48–52).

The ambivalent relationship between the Catholic Church and the Colombian state and political forces outlined in this brief historical overview partly explains why certain sectors of Colombian society and some insurgent groups maintain a certain mistrust towards the Church as an institution.<sup>4</sup> It further explains how the action of local Catholic actors—later emboldened by Pope John Paul II's positioning on the need for peace in the country—became so crucial in building up the idea of a Church committed to social justice, human rights, humanitarianism, and peace. It may even be said that, historically, the Colombian Church—as an institution—maintained a political affinity (Cismas et al. 2023: 22) with reactionary politics. This, on the one hand, caused a rift between them and ideological NSAGs such as the FARC, committed to transforming, through armed struggle, the existing socio-economic model in Colombia. On the other hand, it caused a rift within the Church itself, which can be defined across two interconnected axes: the political, that is the affinity of certain religious actors with a socio-economic-political project typical of a social(ist) state; and the geographical, that is the sensitivities developed by local religious actors to the suffering of communities caught in the midst of the armed conflict, which often remained invisible to the top echelons of the Church.

Within Catholicism itself, we need to distinguish the diocesan clergy from the religious institutes. The diocesan clergy is geographically tied to the diocese. Each diocese has a bishop, to whose authority all priests who are part of that diocese must respond. By contrast, religious institutes, orders, missions, or congregations do not necessarily respond to the authority of the bishop, even though the fact that they operate within a diocese means that the bishop will be responsible for overseeing their spiritual services. This distinction is not unimportant as there seem to be different levels of engagement of religious actors belonging to one or the other category with the everyday consequences of the armed conflict. One research participant stated that

those who are most involved in this [social work with the civilian population], with a few exceptions, are mostly missionaries. You are going to see Claretians, Carmelites, Comboni Missionaries, Jesuits who are there, who are involved, but because of the very life system within the Church. I say 'with the exception' because there are dioceses, like Quibdó, which for years has been developing a very interesting job. And there are diocesan priests who are also involved in these social and organizational issues, but this is because there is already a tradition there and there is support from the diocese.<sup>5</sup>

While the Catholic Church had the most prominent role in the formation of the Colombian state and continues to be the dominant institutional religious actor across the country, it coexists with several churches, creeds, and spiritualities. The Constitution of 1991 introduced the separation between the State and the Church, and recognized Colombia as a democratic, participatory, and pluralistic social state based on the rule of law. Article 7 of the Constitution recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Colombian Nation. Moreover, Article 19 recognizes freedom of religion. Against this normative backdrop, other churches and spiritualities coexist in the country. Much less centralized than the Catholic Church and often emerging at the local, community level, these religions and spiritualities can be used as useful comparators to appraise the role of actors belonging to

4 Interview with signatory of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, Popayán, 11 February 2022.

5 Interview with Jesuit friar, Bogotá, 16 February 2022.

the Catholic Church in the conflict. They also add a further layer of complexity to the analysis by sometimes competing with institutionalized religious actors. In this sense, they can contribute to both strengthening and weakening the legitimacy of other actors, including the Catholic Church, at the local level.

Indigenous spiritualities, for example, often inform how ancestral peoples respond to NSAGs' actions within their territories and against their members, but they also illustrate how religious leadership can be distributed differently among individuals. Despite the existence of elders and knowers, who act as custodians of such spirituality, spiritual leadership within indigenous communities is diffuse and it is exercised to different extents and with different levels of authority by all members of the community. In the Cauca Department, for example, the Nasa indigenous guard, a group of indigenous men, women, and children, is entrusted with exercising territorial control within indigenous territories. Spirituality within the indigenous guard represents not only the 'social glue' that fosters a sense of identity and belonging, but also a language that is used, for example, when speaking with NSAGs (Parisi and Diaz-Benitez 2025 forthcoming).<sup>6</sup> The position adopted by indigenous peoples in the midst of the armed conflict has traditionally been one of neutrality:

We too are neutral. When we must speak, we do it because it is a right. It is the people that feel this pain and we must get there. An example, as I mentioned before, if they capture an indigenous person, we need to sit to reclaim our right to have them handed over to us, and that's when we say that they have to respect our right to life, and we have suffered. Not only with armed groups, but also government actors.<sup>7</sup>

The relationship between indigenous spiritualities and other religions, in particular Catholicism, has proven historically problematic. Indigenous communities have sometimes established a positive relationship with the Catholic Church, which encompasses, for example, the provision by the Church of religious services. In some cases, indigenous communities have also participated in humanitarian missions jointly with the Church.<sup>8</sup> However, often religious actors are perceived as problematic. Indigenous research participants from the Awá people in Nariño reported that evangelical churches have been a cause for division within the indigenous community and have contributed to weakening indigenous spirituality and culture.<sup>9</sup> In the Chocó Department, research participants highlighted that

in our jurisdiction the evangelical pastor ... has not been a positive element, neither for conscientization, nor for social mobility, nor for raising awareness among the population, much less so for human rights training ... Rather, it has been a factor of disunity, of fragmentation of the community processes.<sup>10</sup>

The Misak indigenous people, in the Cauca Department, do not generally trust non-indigenous religions due to the stigmatization they suffered at the hands of European clerics during the colonial period.<sup>11</sup> Some Misak also feel that religious orders such as the *Lauritas*,

6 See the Ritualising Protection Project website (referenced 7 June 2023).

7 Translation into English from the original in Spanish: 'Nosotros somos neutrales también. Pues cuando nos toca hablar lo hacemos porque es un derecho. Es el pueblo que siente ese dolor y a nosotros nos toca llegar allá. Un ejemplo, como lo mencioné hace rato, nos agarran un indígena, pues tenemos que sentarnos a reclamar el derecho a que nos lo entreguen y ahí es donde decimos que nos respeten el derecho a la vida y nos ha tocado. No sólo con actores armados, sino con actores del gobierno también' (interview with representatives of the Awá people, Tumaco, 31 January 2022).

8 Interview with the team of the *Pastoral Social Chocó*, Quibdó, 14 February 2022; interview with representatives of the Awá people, Tumaco, 31 January 2022.

9 Interview with representatives of the Awá people, Tumaco, 31 January 2022.

10 Interview with the team of the *Pastoral Social Chocó*, Quibdó, 14 February 2022.

11 Interview with Barbara Muelas Hurtado, Misak indigenous leader, Silvia, 4 February 2022.

while accompanying indigenous communities in their rights claims and facilitating access to humanitarian assistance, are not always respectful of their spirituality and culture.<sup>12</sup>

The resulting national picture is fragmented and complex. Religious actors, whether belonging to the Catholic Church, other churches, or religious orders, and spiritual leaders face armed conflict on a daily basis, and, as such, they have become important societal actors that take an active part in the life of the country, whether at the national or at the local level.

## 2.2 The Catholic Church and the Colombian armed conflict

Despite the significant role that the Catholic Church has played throughout the history of Colombia and, in particular, in relation to the armed conflict, it is perhaps surprising that only in the past twenty-five years have academic studies begun to appraise its role as mediator and peacebuilder or, conversely, as a driver of violence. Systematically reviewing this literature goes beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth pointing the reader to a few recent key studies that have taken stock of the existing scholarship. A recent study by [Plata and Torres \(2024\)](#) reviewed 150 publications identifying four main foci that characterize the literature on the relationship between the Catholic Church and armed violence in Colombia: first, the Church's role as mediator between the state, society, and NSAGs; second, the Church's promotion of resistance to armed violence and a culture of peace; third, the role of religion, and more generally spirituality, as resilience mechanisms vis-a-vis the harm and suffering caused by the armed conflict; fourth, the Church's role as a war agent. It should be noted that many of these studies have proceeded from, or have been conducted in collaboration with, the Church itself or closely affiliated organizations or scholars. So, for example, the Yeshúa research team at *Unicatólica* is a key analyst of the role of the Catholic Church in the Colombian armed conflict. Between 2018 and 2019, the team published two studies that appraised the contributions of the Catholic Church to the different peace processes in Colombia ([Flórez Suárez 2018](#); [Flórez Suárez et al. 2019](#)). A publication by the same research team assessed the ambivalent role played by the Colombian episcopate during the armed conflict both as a war agent or instigator and as a peace broker ([Ospina Arias et al. 2020](#)). An important study by Jesuit missionary and former CINEP (Center for Research and Popular Education—*Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular*) researcher, Rodríguez Cuadros, analysed the role of local churches in the construction of peace in four dioceses, shifting the focus on peacebuilding dynamics spearheaded by religious actors at the local level ([Rodríguez Cuadros 2020](#)). Furthermore, we should not forget the important contributions of the [National Centre for Historical Memory \(2018\)](#) and the Colombian Truth Commission ([Naranjo Mesa 2020](#)), in constructing a narrative of the role played by both the Catholic Church as an institution and grassroots faith communities in the armed conflict and peacebuilding.

A large part of the literature takes a historical or sociological approach to studying how the Catholic Church fits into the conflict dynamics and, as noted, the focus has been primarily on qualifying the actions of religion and religious actors in terms of contributions to peacebuilding and resistance or, conversely, as a driver or facilitator of violence. In other words, the focus has been on the religious actors' agency. Comparatively fewer studies have considered the relational dimension of these processes, with some notable exceptions such as Congote Ochoa's study of the intersections between the values of Catholicism and political violence in Colombia (2006) and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Celis's study of the intersections between Liberation Theology and human rights defending in Colombia (2016). Yet questions of legitimacy such as that which underpins our research necessarily require understanding actors in their reciprocal relationships. Legitimacy, in the political sphere, has been

12 Scholars and Misak activists who participated at a conference in Popayán on 13 March 2023 reported examples of missionaries forbidding indigenous persons to use their language.

defined by Max Weber as ‘the basis of every system of authority, and correspondingly of every kind of willingness to obey ... a belief by virtue of which persons exercising authority are lent prestige’ (Weber 1964: 382). This authority, in our research, refers to the acts of mediating with and influencing NSAGs. Our point of departure is the Generating Respect Project (GRP) framework, as part of which this research was conducted. The GRP maps several endogenous and contextual factors to explain the influence that religious actors are able to exert on armed actors (Cismas et al. 2023: 22–43), many of which speak to a notion of legitimacy that is socially constructed (Suchman 1995: 574; Johnson et al. 2006). Indeed, the ‘high moral and ethical stature’ enjoyed by the Catholic Church nowadays in the country, especially in relation to issues relating to the armed conflict, is the product of a process of progressive emancipation of the Church itself from its old self anchored to reactionary politics. Driven by local religious actors, this (bottom-up) process was emboldened—as we have set out above—by a clear directive of Pope John Paul II, which led to a shift in the official position of the Catholic establishment. In the remainder of this article, we seek to shed light on how this perception (Cismas et al. 2023: 39) of the Catholic Church was generated through action—in particular, through the direct engagement of conflict actors—and discourse—in particular, through the embrace of a pedagogy of peace (Flórez López 2020: 48–49). While our focus is primarily on the construction of such perception, we also consider factors, mapped by the GRP, that—we argue—not only explain influence but have also contributed to generating the image that the Catholic Church has attained in Colombia nowadays.

### 2.3 The Catholic Church and armed actors in Colombia: a multifaceted relationship

Understanding the relationship between the Catholic Church and (state and non-state) armed actors in terms of organizational structure, affinity, and political objectives is key to explaining the former’s influential role in the Colombian armed conflict (Cismas et al. 2023: 22–28). As explained below, only the relationship between the Church—as an institution—and state armed forces can be described in terms of embeddedness of the religious actor within the military structures. By contrast, while some priests and missionaries have joined the ranks of NSAGs, the Church has historically and institutionally remained external to NSAGs. The influence that the diocesan clergy and religious orders have been able to exert on them can largely be explained in light of persuasion processes based on political affinity and, in the case of the ELN, perhaps religious ideological alignment (Cismas et al. 2023: 23). Let us take these in turn.

The relationship between the Catholic Church and the state armed forces is institutionally formalized through the Military Vicariate, established in 1949 by the Holy See and later renamed Military Bishopric in 1986 pursuant to the Constitution *Spirituali Militum Curae* adopted by Pope John Paul II. The mission of the Military Bishopric is to provide the armed forces—including the police—with spiritual accompaniment (Obispado Castrense de Colombia 2022).<sup>13</sup>

The Medellín Conference Documents (1968) outline the role of the Catholic Church in relation to the armed forces in the following terms: ‘With regard to the armed forces, the Church must impress upon them that, in addition to their normal specific functions, they have the mission to safeguard the citizens’ political freedoms instead of putting obstacles in their way’ (CELAM 1968: 20, translated by the authors).<sup>14</sup> While the reference to ‘citizens’ political freedoms’ seems to echo the language of civil and political rights and therefore

13 The constitutionality of the powers conferred upon the Military Bishopric is contested in light of the secular character of the Colombian Political Constitution of 1991 (see, for example, Cuadros Carrascal 2019).

14 ‘Con relación a las fuerzas armadas, la Iglesia deberá inculcarles que, además de sus funciones normales específicas, ellas tienen la misión de garantizar las libertades políticas de los ciudadanos en lugar de ponerles obstáculos’.

signal a commitment of the institution to these rights, a former military chaplain explained that, in the 1990s

respect for human rights was a matter that if one, as a chaplain, spoke about [they] would be [considered] subversive because [human rights] were just taking shape and the military training was a training for war ... Hence, this conceptualisation, the conceptualiation of the doctrine of the Church according to the Second Vatican [Council], about the military personnel as peacemakers did not resonate during a time of war, and one as a chaplain felt questioned.<sup>15</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Military Bishopric maintained a conservative posture on human rights despite the emergence, in the same historical period, of grassroots religious initiatives committed to peace and the preservation of human life across the country. We should not forget that, on the one hand, the Colombian Church had adopted a countervailing position to the progressive stance taken by Latin American Catholicism in response to the Second Vatican Council. On the other hand, the 1990s saw one of the most intense phases of the Colombian armed conflict, which may explain the predominance of a securitarian posture within the military hierarchies.

Nowadays, the Military Bishopric organizes human rights and international humanitarian law training for the armed forces, including the police (Forero 2011).<sup>16</sup> This, however, does not mean that internal contradictions have subsided. The Military Bishopric's position in relation to the policing of the national strikes of 2019, 2020, and 2021 in Colombia clearly condoned the human rights violations committed by the police, in particular the Mobile Anti-Disturbance Squadron (*Escuadrón Móvil Antidisturbios*, ESMAD), against the protesters (Bedoya Sánchez 2022: 17–19).

Between the 1960s and the 1970s, following the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and the Conference of Medellín (CELAM 1968), there emerged a new religious, social, and political movement which brought together members of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches, known as the Liberation Theology (Cardozo 2014). In simplistic terms, Liberation Theology was concerned with the socio-economic inequalities widespread across Latin America, and it sought to generate liberatory praxes for the oppressed (Echeverry 2007). The affinity between proponents of Liberation Theology and the ELN, one of Colombia's main guerrilla groups, was not just ideological but also embodied in figures like Camilo Torres Restrepo. A Roman Catholic priest and a precursor of Liberation Theology in Colombia, Torres joined the ELN in 1966. He was later followed by other religious figures, including Manuel Pérez, Antonio Jiménez Comín, Domingo Laín, Diego Cristóbal Uribe, and José María Becerra. In addition to prominent public Catholic figures, innumerable priests and priestesses<sup>17</sup> became affiliated or otherwise involved with the ELN. Some aspiring priests, committed to Liberation Theology, even regarded being ordained and joining the ranks of the guerrilla group as alternative paths to fighting for social justice.<sup>18</sup>

15 Interview with former military chaplain, Bogotá, 17 February 2022, translated by the authors from the original transcript in Spanish: 'el respeto por los derechos humanos era una cuestión que si uno lo hablaba como capellán era subversivo porque apenas se estaban gestando y porque la formación del militar era una formación para la guerra ... Entonces esa misma formación y la misma formación de la doctrina de la Iglesia en el sentido del Vaticano Segundo, sobre el militar como artífice de paz, eso como que no sonaba, eso como que no casaba en una época de guerra, y uno como capellán se veía cuestionado'.

16 Interview with former military chaplain, Bogotá, 17 February 2022; for an example of training, see <https://obispadocastrensecolombia.org/2023/04/20/seminario-integral-de-derechos-humanos-en-la-escuela-de-policia-simon-bolivar/> (referenced 5 December 2024).

17 We use the term 'priestess' in an a-technical acceptance to indicate female religious persons who joined different religious orders or exercised informal religious functions.

18 Interview with Juan Carlos Cuellar, peace advocate (*gestor de paz*) on behalf of the ELN delegation, Cali, 3 February 2022.

Looser and certainly more isolated ties existed between the Church of Colombia and the other prominent guerrilla group, the FARC, as well as the paramilitary groups. There are multiple reports of priests who joined with paramilitary groups or facilitated their illegal activities, including by ordering the assassination of civilians.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, there are accounts of priests and seminarists who joined the ranks of the FARC.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, the Colombian Catholic Church cannot be treated as a monolithic body. The institutional ties between the Church and the Colombian armed forces, as well as the emergence of the Liberation Theology in Latin America and its resonance with the ideology underpinning the ELN, illustrate partisan and conflicting dynamics within the same institution. Nonetheless, as we illustrate below, starting from the 1990s, local Catholic actors have strived to maintain a neutral posture in relation to the parties of the conflict.

## 2.4 The Church's commitment to the civilian population

The neutrality adopted by the Colombian Catholic Church from the 1980s has been characterized by a humanitarian and missional commitment to the civilian population, in a way not dissimilar from the neutrality of the International Committee of the Red Cross (Haroff-Tavel 1989; Flórez López 2020: 51). It should be recognized that this posture was the result of primarily bottom-up initiatives embedded in local realities that, bolstered by Pope John Paul II's nudge to the Catholic establishment in the country, progressively attracted the attention—and sanction—of the Church as an institution. In this section, we explore some of these initiatives developed at the local level to protect the civilian population and de-escalate violence. We highlight the position taken by the Church in each of these initiatives. We argue that it is this baggage of experiences, developed in the territories, that consolidated an idea of the Church able to act as mediator in the midst of the armed conflict.

### 2.4.1 Pastoral care.

We use the term 'pastoral care' to loosely translate the concept of *pastoral de la liberación*, which describes the Catholic Church's practice-informed, bottom-up transformative approach that appeared in the 1990s (Rodríguez Cuadros 2020: 173). At this moment in the history of Colombia, religious actors—among many other social actors—faced an intensification of the armed conflict and the drug-trafficking-related violence especially in the periphery. Bishops witnessed how priests and members of religious orders in their dioceses engaged in human rights defending and accompanied victims of the armed conflict. Accompaniment was holistic in that it encompassed not only the provision of spiritual but also education and healthcare services. The commonality of experiences across dioceses prompted the emergence of informal networks across the country and the forging of strong alliances, within the same dioceses, between the diocesan clergy and the religious orders.

An actor that spearheaded these transformations and took the centre stage in the organizational processes at the local level was the *Pastoral Social*. This term indicates both a pastoral approach inspired by the Social Doctrine of the Church (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004) and the local institutionalized networks of religious actors that implement this approach. In the remainder of this article, we shall refer to the *Pastoral Social* in its second acceptation. Both the literature and the fieldwork conducted as part of the GRP illustrate the commitment of the *Pastoral Social* to human rights and peace. Local experiences are innumerable, and they include, for example, the dioceses of Barrancabermeja (Rodríguez Cuadros 2020: 221–22; Plata and Figueroa Salamanca 2017), Magangué (Comas Drago 2005: 50–71), Popayan,<sup>21</sup> and Quibdó<sup>22</sup>. Most importantly, the *Pastoral Social* was at the centre of prominent

<sup>19</sup> For example, see <https://www.elespectador.com/judicial/oscar-ortiz-el-sacerdote-paramilitar-de-medellin-article-610631/>, or <https://www.eltiempo.com/justicia/investigacion/quien-era-el-sacerdote-gonzalo-palacio-acusado-de-ser-de-los-12-apostoles-540558> (referenced 5 December 2024).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with former FARC combatant and signatory to the Peace Agreement, 11 February 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Luz Mary López, coordinator of the *Pastoral Social Cauca*, Popayan, 11 February 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with *Pastoral Social Chocó*, Quibdó, 14 February 2022.

local experiences of peaceful resistance to armed violence (Plata and Figueroa Salamanca 2017). In the Chocó Department, the *Pastoral Social* is one of the few actors—in addition to the International Committee of the Red Cross and, in a limited number of cases, the local ombudsman (*defensoría del pueblo*)—that is able to negotiate the release of individuals kidnapped by NSAGs, recuperate the bodies of the victims of the armed conflict, but also to organize and deliver international humanitarian law workshops addressed to the civilian population and elaborate protection and self-protection strategies for the communities<sup>23</sup>.

This pastoral approach feeds the image of a local Church that is capable of filling in the gaps left by the state in the provision of basic services (Cismas et al. 2023: 41).<sup>24</sup> To an extent, this may be more acceptable to local NSAGs who contend the control over the territory with the state, and, under certain circumstances, may even reduce the risk for communities who are not perceived to be dealing with the state. Plata and Figueroa Salamanca (2017: 162) explain the ability of the Church to assume this role as a combination of different factors:

Now, the resolute attitude of many priests, lay people and bishops in the face of the aggression by armed groups was possible thanks to the symbolic power that the Catholic Church as an institution exerts on all the conflict actors: on the aggressors and the aggressed, on the victims and the victimisers. Thus, the pastoral dialogues were possible because guerrillas, paramilitaries and the military all assumed a position of certain respect for the Church, considered by both as a sacred institution. Certainly, five centuries of quasi-hegemonic presence of Catholicism in Colombia have left a significant mark, and the processes of secularization seen in other contexts have not been registered in the same way in Colombia.<sup>25</sup>

#### 2.4.2 From pastoral to humanitarian dialogue.

Since the end of the 1960s, local religious organizations, mainly belonging to the Catholic Church, have been engaged, at the local level, in a permanent dialogue with local communities, as well as state and non-state armed groups present in the territories (Rodríguez Cuadro 2020: 235). These channels of communication are often referred to by religious actors as pastoral dialogues, and they are common practice across many departments in Colombia. In 1994, Monsignor Pedro Rubiano, then Chair of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia, described pastoral dialogues in the following way:

a political dialogue is what the Government manages, a pastoral one is what we do and will continue to do. We both pursue the good for the country; that they would not continue destroying natural resources or contaminating rivers. And we cannot accept any methods whatsoever that would leave children and elderly people scarred for life. We must all commit in order for this to end and to ensure peace.<sup>26</sup>

23 Interview with Pastoral Social Chocó, Quibdó, 14 February 2022.

24 Interview with peasant leader, Department of Nariño, 2 February 2022.

25 Translation into English by the authors from the original text in Spanish: 'Ahora, la actitud resuelta de muchos sacerdotes, laicos y obispos en torno a la agresión de los grupos armados fue posible gracias al poder simbólico que la Iglesia Católica como institución posee en todos los actores del conflicto: en agresores y agredidos, en víctimas y en victimarios. Así, los diálogos pastorales fueron posibles porque, tanto guerrilleros, como paramilitares y militares asumían una posición de cierto respeto por la Iglesia, considerada por unos y otros como una institución sagrada. Ciertamente, cinco siglos de presencia cuasi hegemónica del catolicismo en Colombia han dejado una huella significativa y los procesos de secularización vistos en otros contextos no se han registrado de la misma manera en Colombia'.

26 Translated by the authors from the original in Spanish: 'un diálogo político es el que maneja el Gobierno, uno pastoral es el que nosotros hacemos y vamos a seguir haciendo. Los dos buscamos el bien del país; que no sigan destruyendo los recursos naturales ni contaminando los ríos. Y de ninguna manera podemos aceptar métodos que dejan lisiados de por vida a los niños y ancianos. Todos tenemos que comprometernos para que eso termine y haya paz' in 'Las claves para los diálogos pastorales en zonas de conflicto' (11 August 2017) *Buena Voz Noticias* <http://blog.pucp.edu.pe/blog/buenavoz/2017/08/11/las-claves-para-los-dialogos-pastorales-en-zonas-de-conflicto/> (referenced 5 May 2023).

A research participant in a study on how local faith-based communities engage in peace-building further defined pastoral dialogues as ‘approaching illegal armed groups to establish a dialogue with the aim to ensure respect for communities on humanitarian issues’ (Rodríguez Cuadro 2020: 234). Darío Echeverri, former President of the National Conciliation Commission attached to the Episcopal Conference of Colombia, stated that engaging in pastoral dialogue meant ‘speaking as a sign of the presence of Christ to defend the rights of the communities; preventing the armed groups from making the community and us part of the conflict; avoiding irreparable harms in the territory’.<sup>27</sup>

Traditionally, pastoral dialogues were generally led by local bishops accompanied by other priests and, sometimes, community leaders and representatives of civil society organizations (Rodríguez Cuadro 2020: 234). They would often seek to speak to NSAGs for specific purposes relating to the alleviation of the nefarious consequences of the armed conflict on the civilian population. This engagement tool, in its origins spontaneous, has progressively been institutionalized by the Catholic Church. For example, in 2017, the National Conciliation Commission co-published a study that firmly anchored pastoral dialogues to the Social Doctrine of the Church, human rights, and international humanitarian law, and that provides some guidelines for actors involved in these dialogues (Echeverri González et al. 2017). The document illustrates a clear sensitivity to the dynamics of the conflict—for example, it provides guidance on how to engage members of NSAGs depending on their hierarchical position—and it takes an uncompromisingly neutral position, whereby neutrality is defined in terms of non-negotiability of the life and rights of the communities (Echeverri González et al. 2017: 15).

We documented examples of pastoral dialogues also in the Departments of Norte de Santander<sup>28</sup> and Nariño.<sup>29</sup> The Bishop of Tumaco (Nariño) himself was involved in questioning the actions of the military or NSAGs, including paramilitary groups, in relation to specific violent episodes.<sup>30</sup> Research participants emphasized that the success of these dialogues can be explained on the basis of three key factors. First, bishops and priests leading pastoral dialogues rarely act in their personal capacity; rather, they represent the Church and its social mission. Second, such interventions are not extractive; rather, they are one of the articulations of the Church’s permanent commitment with the local realities which manifests through the bishops’ and priests’ presence in the territory over a lengthy period of time. For example, one research participant, reflecting on their previous tenure as a priest in a church in Tumaco, emphasized the value of ‘being embedded in the landscape’ and being known to both civilians and NSAGs locally. Having been moved to a different diocese, they now take a stroll across the church neighbourhood every morning and greet everyone on their path. Third, research participants underlined that the success of pastoral dialogues is also often dependent on the NSAG member’s sense of belonging to the local reality and religion. For example, the Bishop of Tumaco contrasted the responsiveness of NSAGs to pastoral dialogues in Tumaco—where local communities constitute the recruitment base of these actors—with the difficulties encountered in Tibú (Norte de Santander) in identifying a credible and reliable interlocutor among the local armed groups—which are much less rooted in the local reality.

The Catholic Church has also partnered with local communities, ombudsman offices as well as other state institutions, for example, in the Departments of Nariño<sup>31</sup> and Valle

27 Translated by the authors from the original in Spanish: ‘hablar como signo de la presencia de Cristo para defender los derechos de las comunidades; evitar que los armados involucren a la comunidad y nos involucren a nosotros, haciéndonos parte del conflicto; y evitar daños irreparables en el territorio’, in ‘Las claves para los diálogos pastorales en zonas de conflicto’ (11 August 2017) *Buena Voz Noticias* <http://blog.pucp.edu.pe/blog/buenavoz/2017/08/11/las-claves-para-los-dialogos-pastorales-en-zonas-de-conflicto/> (referenced 5 May 2023).

28 Interview with Luz Mary López, coordinator of the *Pastoral Social Cauca*, Popayan, 11 February 2022.

29 Interview with Orlando Olave, Bishop of the Dioceses of Tumaco, Tumaco, 2 February 2022.

30 Interview with Orlando Olave, Bishop of the Dioceses of Tumaco, Tumaco, 2 February 2022.

31 Interview with Luis Alfredo Jaramillo, Ombudsman of Tumaco, Tumaco, 1 February 2022.

del Cauca,<sup>32</sup> in conducting humanitarian dialogues. One research participant in Quibdó (Chocó) described humanitarian dialogues in the following terms:

ethnic grassroots organizations identified the presence of one or the other armed actor in their territory. And so, in the exercise of their self-governance, autonomy ... they established a dialogue with the actors and mediated to recover young people who had been recruited or simply to tell them, come, live, coexist, but do not affect us so much. Once this situation was overcome.<sup>33</sup>

Dialogues of the sort have been led by indigenous, Afro-descendent, and peasant organizations across the country (Hernández Delgado 2009). Strategic alliances with the Church, as well as with other social actors, have not only enhanced the effectiveness of these initiatives, but also ensured their financial viability (Hernández Delgado 2009: 126–27).

The rationale for engaging in this partnership is transparently tied to human rights. In the Department of Valle del Cauca, the director of the *Pastoral Social* stated: ‘we want to approach all actors to guarantee human rights, the right to food and health rights, to inaugurate these tables proposed by the Governor with all actors, in order to build peace from Cali for the whole country’.<sup>34</sup>

These practices unequivocally show that the Church has been a key and privileged actor in keeping the channels of communication with NSAGs open (Cismas et al. 2023: 28). As we show below, this has been not only a deliberate strategy but a necessity for those Catholic actors that live in areas where NSAGs are regularly active.

### 2.4.3 Protective presence.

The term protective presence is borrowed from the literature on unarmed civilian protection (Oldenhuis et al. 2021: 151; Mahony 2006). In humanitarian circles, it refers to the simple fact of ‘being there’ as a way of providing vulnerable populations with protection. In Colombia, there are countless examples of religious orders and priests belonging to the diocesan clergy as well as other Christian churches providing this type of protection. One research participant, a female missionary belonging to the order of the Missionaries of Mother Laura (*Misioneras de la Madre Laura* also known as sisters *Lauritas*), who works in the area of Buenaventura (Valle del Cauca) recounted an episode that exemplifies the significance of the accompaniment provided by the missionaries. While travelling by speedboat, a civilian party accompanied by the research participant and other sisters was stopped by a FARC armed patrol. The armed men wanted to abduct one of the civilians on the speedboat. The missionary refused to leave without the civilian who was going to be abducted. She described the encounter:

‘get on the boat you all, he stays’.

So, I tell him ‘Let’s see, why would he stay? He is a member of the directive of Acadesan.

He comes with me; we are going to a meeting’.

‘No, you get on the boat, and he stays’.

So, everyone lunged at the boat despairing. ‘Come’ I tell the motorist to not leave me, to wait for me. ‘Come young man, let’s talk. Whose orders are these?’

32 Gobernación del Valle del Cauca, ‘Se inicia trabajo conjunto con la Iglesia Católica para adelantar diálogos que permitan abrir corredores humanitarios’ (4 May 2021), <https://www.valledelcauca.gov.co/publicaciones/70652/se-inicia-trabajo-conjunto-con-la-iglesia-catolica-para-adelantar-dialogos-que-permitan-abrir-corredores-humanitarios/> (referenced 15 May 2023).

33 Interview with humanitarian worker, Quibdó, 13 February 2022.

34 Interview with humanitarian worker, Quibdó, 13 February 2022, translated by the authors from the original in Spanish: ‘queremos acercarnos para garantizar los Derechos Humanos, los derechos alimentarios y de salud a todos los actores, poder abrir estas mesas que presenta la señora Gobernadora con todos, para que así construyamos desde Cali la paz del país’.

'No, no, no! Get on the boat, I do not need you'.

'I cannot go without him. I am not going to leave ... Young man, let's speak with your superior ...'

'Leave, I don't need you'.

'But I can't leave him.

'Leave, I do not need you!'

'I am not leaving! Who gave the order? Why do you want to take him away? You know he belongs to the directive, so let's sit, let's talk ...'

'Do you want to stay? Well, then stay and I will leave you on the riverbank, but I am going to take him away'.

'Do whatever you want, but I am not going to leave'. In the end, for the poor man things must have gotten complicated. The Holy Spirit we say, those of us who have faith ... He said: 'All right, you can go, but you must answer to me!' ...

And I told him 'Wait a minute, I am not going to answer you at all; I have already told you who we are, where we are going, and you do know us. And no, I am not going to answer here. Let's go, Jairo', and so we left.<sup>35</sup>

The religious actors' choice to provide protection by mere presence is underpinned by a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of communities (Rodríguez Cuadro 2020: 232–33). According to the Bishop of Tumaco, the permanent presence of the Catholic Church in the territories has also contributed to generating an aura of legitimacy and credibility to the Catholic Church, which nowadays is allowed, and often called upon, to mediate with NSAGs.<sup>36</sup> It also contrasts with extractive attitudes often associated with some international—but also national—non-governmental and governmental organizations, whose fleeting presence in the territories may be determined by external factors including donors' priorities.

#### 2.4.4 Accompaniment to the victims of the armed conflict.

Religious actors in Colombia have also provided victims of the armed conflict with humanitarian relief, as well as accompaniment to vindicate their human rights (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018: 13), in what is commonly known as legal accompaniment, that is 'the presence at courts and prisons or the accompaniment of survivors to report human rights abuses' (Oldenhuis et al. 2021: 159). Emblematic is the case of the massacre of Bojayá. On 2 May 2002, in the midst of an armed confrontation with the AUC, the FARC fired a cylinder bomb that landed on the church of Bellavista, where hundreds of civilians were taking shelter. The ensuing explosion killed approximately 80 civilians (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). Father Antún Ramos, the priest who was in charge of the church of Bellavista, and the *Agustinas* missionaries living by the church that was shelled assisted in the immediate aftermath of the massacre. They evacuated the remaining civilians, identified the dead, and provided immediate attention to the wounded

35 Interview with sister missionary of the Mother Laura, Popayán, 11 February 2022, translated by the authors from the original in Spanish: 'que móntense todos a la lancha, que él se queda y yo le digo joven, venga ¿por qué se queda? Él es de la directiva de Acadesan. Él viene conmigo, nosotros vamos a una reunión. No, ustedes se montan él se queda y todo el mundo corrió a tirarse a la lancha desesperado. Venga acá y yo le digo al motorista no me deje, espéreme. Venga joven, hablemos. ¿Esto es orden de quién? No, no, no! Que se monte, que a usted no la necesito. Yo no me puedo ir yo sin él. No me voy ... Joven conversemos, hablemos con su jefe ... Que se vaya que a usted no la necesito. Pero yo no lo puedo dejar. Que se vaya que a usted no la necesito. Yo no me voy a ir. Pero ¿quién dio la orden? ¿Por qué se lo van a llevar? Ustedes saben que él es de la directiva. Si es algo de la directiva, entonces sentémonos, conversemos ... Se quiere quedar, se queda y a usted lo deja en una orilla y a él me lo llevo. Pues haga lo que quiera, pero yo aquí no me voy. A la final. El pobre hombre yo creo que se azaró. El Espíritu Santo decimos los que tenemos la fe católica ... él dijo: "Listo, se van, pero usted me responde" ... Y le dije pero no, un momentito, yo no lo voy a responder por nada yo ya le estoy diciendo quiénes somos, para dónde vamos, y usted nos conoce. Y yo no respondo aquí por nada, vámonos Jairo y nos fuimos'.

36 Interview with Orlando Olave, Bishop of the Dioceses of Tumaco, Tumaco, 2 February 2022.

(Rodríguez Cuadros 2020: 284). Later on, religious orders played a key role in documenting the circumstances of the shelling for the purpose of generating a memory of the event, which eventually resulted in the publication of a report by the National Centre of Historical Memory (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010).

The accompaniment provided by religious actors has also involved monitoring, providing early warnings, and uncovering responsibilities. One research participant belonging to the *Lauritas* missionaries recalled that, in 2021, indigenous and afro-Colombian communities in Tumaco were accompanied by the Catholic Church and several female religious orders in a monitoring and fact-finding mission (*caravana*) across the Department of Nariño. The mission documented armed clashes and several cases of harassment, as well as clear evidence of the alliance between the Colombian army and paramilitary groups.<sup>37</sup>

As part of the accompaniment provided to victims, priests and missionaries working locally have been active in denouncing the violations of international human rights or humanitarian law perpetrated against the civilian population, whether by state or non-state actors. The neutrality of the Church in these instances, intended as the commitment to the rights of the civilian population, further cemented the reputation of the Church as a reliable mediator. One research participant commented as follows:

Here we denounce any outrage against the civilian population, against the people, and they [the armed actors] have questioned us very strongly. But that has also been our guarantee to move in the territory, because we are neither here nor there. We are no one's, we don't have a colour, and as they have clearly seen it ... they respect us ... Today we have the respect of the armed actor, whether legal or illegal. Despite all the discomfort we cause them, despite everything we do, they respect us ... Currently, the Catholic Church enjoys respect and recognition before the legal or illegal armed actor ... We go wherever we have to go. They do not tell us 'You will not get in'. They allow us to enter.<sup>38</sup>

Sustained presence in the territories, which underpins activities such as protective presence and accompaniment, has allowed Catholic actors to gain vast knowledge about the local contexts and develop sensitivities that are key to eliciting credibility and the trust of communities and, to an extent, NSAGs operating locally (Cismas et al. 2023: 29). Such trust, especially among NSAGs, is further consolidated by maintaining a position of neutrality and independence (Cismas et al. 2023: 39).

#### 2.4.4 Risks.

In 2005, an editorial in the *Semana* newspaper reported that the Vatican considered Colombia to be one of the most dangerous countries in the world for priests and missionaries.<sup>39</sup> Religious actors have been both direct and collateral victims of the armed conflict. They have suffered stigmatization, harassment, attacks, and many of them have been killed because of the work that they conduct.

One research participant usefully summarized the risks faced by religious actors as well as the context within which these are experienced:

<sup>37</sup> Interview with sister missionary of the Mother Laura, Popayán, 11 February 2022.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with members of religious organization, Quibdó, 14 February 2023, translated into English from the original in Spanish: 'Aquí denunciemos todo atropello contra la población civil, contra el pueblo y nos han cuestionado muy, muy fuerte. Pero también eso ha sido nuestra garantía para movernos en el territorio, porque nosotros no estamos ni allá ni acá. No somos de ninguno, no tenemos color y eso como lo han visto claro nos han ... Nos respetan ... hoy tenemos respeto al interior del actor armado, sea legal o sea ilegal. Con toda la incomodidad que le generamos. Con todo lo que hacemos, nos respetan ... En estos momentos la Iglesia Católica ante el actor armado legal o ilegal goza de un respeto y de un reconocimiento ... Nosotros vamos al lugar donde hay que ir. No nos dicen "usted, no entra". Nos permiten ingresar'.

<sup>39</sup> 'Violento Martirio' (19 March 2005) *Semana* <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/violento-martirio/71517-3/> (referenced 17 May 2023).

We have martyrs, but we have been the target of legal suits. The former director of the *Pastoral Social* here, Father Albeiro Palma Solís, when the Bojayá massacre revealed things that were completely against the law ... not at the hands of the illegal armed actor, but of those who are supposed to guarantee rights. And he denounced this ... At that time, General Mario Montoya was in charge and he [Father Albeiro] denounced everything that happened during the guerrilla takeover. This led to a lawsuit by the State against Father Albeiro, as well as constraints and a threat. At this moment, for example, they set up a military intelligence office in front [of our offices]. That's why we are meeting here ... not only here in the Chocó, but in Colombia more generally there have been several killings ... remember the killing of the Bishop of Arauca, the killing of a religious woman.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, episodes such as the massacre of Bojayá illustrate how religious institutions and personnel are often the collateral victims of armed violence in the country. This commonality of experience between local communities and religious actors further consolidates the image of a church embedded in the territories, especially in the most remote areas of the country and, ultimately, a church that is willing to share in the pain and suffering of the communities.<sup>41</sup>

According to the US Department of State, up until 2016 when the FARC and the Colombian Government reached a peace agreement, the victimization of religious actors could be attributed predominantly to the FARC, the ELN, and paramilitary groups (US Department of State 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016).

This sharing in the pain and suffering of the civilian population suggests that we cannot underplay the importance of emotional factors on the ability of religious actors to generate trust and to influence the parties to the armed conflict. 'Being embedded in the landscape',<sup>42</sup> then, does not simply mean being able to show local sensitivity and belonging to the local reality, but also, and perhaps especially, the feeling of empathy and sharing in the humanity of—and the human catastrophes that armed violence has brought upon—the civilian population.

## 2.5 The Church and peace processes

In the 1990s, the Catholic Church also started to progressively assume a protagonist role in the negotiations between the state and NSAGs. Rodríguez Cuadros (2020: 410–12) argues that the experiences developed in the territories led to the recognition of a movement within the episcopate with a markedly social vocation. In 1995, Monsignor Pedro Rubiano Sáenz, then President of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia, founded the National Conciliation Commission (*Comisión de Conciliación Nacional*) with the expressed aim to 'accompany the country's peace efforts and to build trust among different key actors'.<sup>43</sup> The Commission has focused on 'identifying a negotiated political solution to the Colombian conflict; raising awareness about the respect and promotion of human rights, the importance to apply International Humanitarian Law, and the need to design a Permanent

40 Interview with members of religious organization, Quibdó, 14 February 2023, translation by the authors from the original in Spanish: 'Tenemos los mártires, pero también hemos tenido demandas. El anterior director de la Pastoral Social de aquí, el padre Albeiro Palma Solís, cuando la masacre de Bojayá se evidenciaron cosas totalmente contrarias a la ley ... no por parte del actor armado ilegal, sino por quien es garante de derecho. Y él lo denunció. Él denunció eso. Estaba el general Mario Montoya y él denunció todo lo que aconteció en el marco de esa toma guerrillera. Y eso le generó una demanda del Estado en contra del padre Albeiro y todo un estreñimiento y una amenaza. En estos momentos, nosotros por ejemplo, aquí al frente nos instalaron la Oficina de Inteligencia Militar. Por eso la reunión la tenemos acá ... no solamente aquí en el Chocó, en Colombia han habido varios asesinatos ... recordar el asesinato del obispo de Arauca, el asesinato de una religiosa'.

41 Interview with Orlando Olave, Bishop of the Dioceses of Tumaco, Tumaco, 2 February 2022; interview with Comboni missionary, Bogotá, 17 February 2022.

42 Interview with Comboni missionary, Bogotá, 17 February 2022.

43 See the National Conciliation Commission's website [https://dev.comisiondeconciliacion.co/?page\\_id=25](https://dev.comisiondeconciliacion.co/?page_id=25) (referenced 6 June 2023).

National State Peace Policy<sup>44</sup>. The Commission comprises both religious and lay members. The embrace of an explicit rights language can also be observed in many public statements of the Episcopal Conference of Colombia. One among many is the statement issued, on 18 August 2020, by the Episcopal Conference condemning the killing of several young people in the Departments of Nariño and Valle del Cauca, as well as the spiral of violence that had gripped the country. The statement explicitly references civil and political rights, in particular the right to life, and socio-economic rights, the state duty to protect, and it calls upon NSAGs to cease violence. Most interestingly, the statement invokes the Pope's call to peace and de-escalation and calls upon the entire Catholic community to participate in the efforts towards peace and reconciliation.<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with its professed vocation, the Catholic Church participated as a guarantor of the disarmament of several NSAGs throughout the 1990s as part of the demobilization process of such groups (Joya 2015). For example, in July 2003, representatives of the Catholic Church accompanied the negotiation between the Colombian government and the AUC, which led to the Santa Fe de Ralito Agreement, for the demobilization and disarmament of the paramilitary group. Other churches were involved too in similar positions. For example, in 1991, the President of the Confederation of Evangelical Churches acted as a national observer of the disarmament process of the Quintín Lame Armed Movement (*Movimiento Armado Quintín Lame*), whose *raison d'être* had been to defend the rights of indigenous communities belonging to the Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca (*Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca*) (Joya 2015: 32).

### 3. Conclusion

To date, the Catholic Church occupies a privileged position as conflict mediator. Its official involvement in the negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN is hard proof that, as an institution, the Colombian Church has been able to elicit the trust of both parties. As the analysis conducted throughout the article demonstrates, this trust has been built over the years, especially since the 1990s, with the emergence of a sector of the Church committed to peace and the fundamental rights of the communities. One of the defining characteristics of the Colombian context is that the Catholic Church has played an intermediary role with most of the armed actors operating in the country, albeit with variations.

Several factors have contributed to cementing the legitimacy of the Church in Colombia. As we have shown, their identification cannot be divorced from a historical contextualization of how the Church has come to occupy key spaces in the political and socio-economic life of the country. The emergence of a grassroots movement of priests, bishops, and missionaries, in the 1990s, that espoused an idea of the Church as an institution preoccupied with the socio-economic conditions of often remote communities engendered an image of the local clergy and religious orders immersed in the local environment. The protective presence and accompaniment provided by missionaries to local communities, as well as their willingness to share in the risks faced by the civilian population cemented the conviction that this commitment was not feigned but genuine and part of the vocation of local religious actors. At the same time, while there are cases of priests and missionaries who joined insurgent or even paramilitary groups, most local religious actors maintained a position of neutrality in the territories. Committed to defending the communities' right to life, these actors were often able to engage NSAGs in order to secure the evacuation of civilians from combat areas or to obtain the liberation of hostages. The affinity of some religious actors with the socio-economic struggle of insurgent groups such as the FARC

44 [https://dev.comisiondeconciliacion.co/?page\\_id=25](https://dev.comisiondeconciliacion.co/?page_id=25) (referenced 6 June 2023).

45 See Conferencia Episcopal de Colombia, Comunicado No. 52 (18 August 2020), <https://x.com/episcopado/docol/status/1295716975201660928/photo/2> (referenced 6 June 2023).

may contribute to explaining how they managed to elicit the respect of local platoons or commanders.<sup>46</sup> We cannot forget, at the same time, that Colombia's population is largely religious, with a majority of Catholics. This is true of multiple sectors and sections of society. It is not the case that the Colombian state armed forces are supported by an influential Military Bishopric, but examples of devoted combatants can also be found among insurgent and paramilitary groups.

Forging alliances with national human rights institutions and groups, such as the ombudsman (*defensoría del pueblo*) further contributed to strengthening the legitimacy of religious—especially Catholic—actors as companions of humanitarian processes, such as the recovery of hostages or the delivering of humanitarian assistance to civilian populations caught in the armed conflict. Through their 'pastoral care', Catholic priests and missionaries have been reaching remote communities and comprehensively mapping their needs even before the arrival of state agencies. Such alliances were thus often looked for by state agents themselves.

Finally, the experiences and practices developed across different local realities, taken together, contributed to legitimizing the emergence of a group of bishops committed to social justice, human rights, and peace, who managed to partly reorient the Catholic Church as an institution. This bottom-up reformation led to the appointment of prominent religious figures, whether belonging to the diocesan Church or to religious congregations, to important government posts. An illustrative example is the appointment of Jesuit missionary, Francisco De Roux, to the post of president of the Colombian Truth Commission. Even more significantly, the recent announcement that the Catholic Church will accompany the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the ELN is a testament to the legitimacy garnered by the Catholic Church in Colombia.

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## Conflict of Interest

Parisi is a regular reviewer for the *Journal of Human Rights Practice*.

## Ethics Approval

This study was ethically approved by the Economics, Law, Management, Politics, and Sociology Ethics Committee of the University of York (March 2021).

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Edward Segura, signatory of the Peace Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC, Popayán, 11 February 2022.

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