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Cardinal Parolin at the signing of the Final Agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP

Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin attended the signing of the Final Agreement between the government of Colombia and the FARC-EP in Cartagena yesterday, a solemn act attended by more than ten Latin American heads of state and 2,500 invitees, including the former king of Spain, Juan Carlos I, and the U.S. secretary of State, John Kerry, along with 250 victims of the conflict from all over Colombia.

In the homily he pronounced during the Liturgy of the Word for the signing of the Agreement, the cardinal first conveyed Pope Francis' closeness to the dear Colombian people and authorities, recalling that the Holy Father has followed closely the efforts made during recent years in the search for harmony and reconciliation. On a number of occasions he has encouraged these efforts without taking part in the concrete solutions that have been negotiated, on which the citizens themselves will decide in a free, informed and conscientious way. "The Pope has always promoted respect for human rights and Christian values, which are at the heart of Colombian culture", said the Secretary of State. "I believe that all of us present here are aware that, in essence, we are at the conclusion of negotiations but also at the beginning of a process of change, still open, which requires the contribution and respect of all Colombians".

He went on to recall that more than 350 years ago, in the ancient port of Cartagena, which represents in a sense the very history of Colombia itself, St. Peter Claver devoted his life to the slaves brought from Africa. "We might say that, just as centuries ago slaves and merchants entered the ports sick and ill-treated, today many Colombians are uprooted and suffering, with their dignity wounded or torn from them. They have faced torment and dark clouds, without losing their hope. They need to be redeemed and loved, and they thirst for fresh water".

"The relics of St. Peter Claver rest below the altar of this church, situated close to his convent. In more than forty years, he knew how to value the dignity of the many human beings treated as commodities, submitted to every form of atrocity, captured and deported from their homelands as slaves. By being willing to meet with charity those victims of injustice, he honoured their dignity and restored hope to them".

"In the same way, today too Jesus awaits us to free us from the chains of slavery, both our own and that which others procure for us. He is eager to embrace us, to heal our wounds, to dry our tears, to give us bread and

water of life to eat and drink, to look upon us with love in the depth of our soul, to carry us in His arms towards a safe port. ... We know that the suffering of victims, offered at the foot of the Cross, are transformed into a receptacle to receive His mercy”.

Cardinal Parolin referred to the letter he had sent to express the Pope’s wish to visit these lands, in which he said that “it is necessary to take the risk of transforming, with the entire Church, every parish and every institution into a field hospital, into a safe place of refuge for those who have suffered atrocities and those who have acted on the side of violence”. “Evidently, it is from this encounter that Colombia must alleviate the pain of its many inhabitants who have been humiliated and oppressed by violence and must stop the hatred and change the direction of her history, so as to build a better future with just and solid institutions”, he emphasised. However, “the peace that Colombia yearns for goes far beyond the necessary refinement of certain structures or conventions, and finds its focus in the reconstruction of the person: indeed, the deeper causes of the conflict that has lacerated the country during recent decades may be found in the wounds of the heart”.

“Only God gives us the strength to face such problems and, above all, the capacity to identify with all those who suffer as a result. Therefore, in this country with her Catholic roots, today we are gathered in prayer. ... This liturgy is an invocation to the Lord, Who can grant what is normally impossible by human forces alone: the light for the path and for the decisions that Colombians must freely take, the fervour of that respect, listening and serene dialogue that must accompany such decisions. ... Therefore, let us ask that God grant us this heroism in solidarity that is necessary to fill, in truth and in justice, the abyss of evil produced by violence. And let us also give thanks to Him for supporting Colombians in the midst of situations of hatred and pain, and for having opening their hearts, over many years, to the steadfast hope that violence and conflict can be avoided; that a different future can be constructed, in which it is possible to co-exist without bloodshed, and in which diverse convictions can be maintained in the framework of respect for democratic rules, human dignity and the Catholic tradition of this great nation”.

“With the historical perspective that the life and times of St. Peter Claver offer us, Colombia has experienced, in her own flesh, that the pursuit of money and power and the resulting exploitation of man at the hand of man, forced deportations, violence and denial of the dignity of victims, can pose a lasting threat to humanity. At this present conjuncture, let us pray to God for the future of this beloved population, so that it may journey on the paths of truth, justice and peace”, said the prelate, who went on to make Colombians the protagonists of the Sermon on the Mount, repeating with each Beatitude, “Blessed are the Colombians”.

The cardinal concluded his homily by emphasising that religions encourage listening, understanding and recognition of the reasoning and value of the other. Faith is opposed to offence to the dignity of the person, which causes the laceration of the fabric of civil society, and is not contrary to secularism when understood as respect for the distinct spheres of competence of the civil and spiritual. Indeed, secular society needs faith, as a necessary point of reference for co-existence and respect. The Catholic Church in particular promotes serene social co-existence, in accordance with the spiritual traditions of the Colombians, without demanding that everyone profess the same religion, and offers points of reference so that people and the collective whole may find and offer light in the search for the common good”. Finally, he implored the protection and intercession of Our Lady of the Rosary of Chiquinquirá, Queen of Colombia.
