

Colombians on Opposing Sides of Conflict Exchange Letters to Build Trust and Work for Peace

"Welcome." "I affirm that you are loved. You were born to be happy and free. I love you, I really love you!" "I am glad that we can count on you once more as part of our society." These are some of the messages Colombian ex-guerrilla fighters received recently to give them hope that they can successfully adjust to civilian life after over half a century of war.

Residents of Columbia have written more than 2,000 love letters and hand-delivered 765 along with paper-white roses to former rebels so far. The goal is to write 6,900 notes, one for each former combatant, in the hope of changing "the discourse from a narrative of war to a collective story of peace," according to organizers of the peace initiative.

In February, two Colombian youth activists heard 2014 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Kailash Satyarthi say how sad it was that people send many messages of love to people they care about on Valentine's Day, but ignore those who may need love the most. That remark inspired Leonardo Párraga and Cristian Palacios to found *Cartas por la Reconciliación* (Letters for Reconciliation) so that young Colombians could write letters to ex-guerrillas of the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) to encourage them not to give up their dream of peacefully rejoining society.

With the conflict between government forces and the FARC that cost millions of lives lasting more than 50 years, the youth of Colombia have never known a time when their country was not at war with itself. When the Colombian congress finally ratified a peace accord last November, the hard work of integrating demobilized rebels into society began.

"My father was assassinated at the Santander massacre in Quilichao," wrote one young woman. "Crying over him is not going to bring him back, but I want to tell [his killers] that I forgive them, because it is useless to hold on to bad feelings."

"I never thought there was anyone willing to forgive me for my mistakes, but now I know that there is a society waiting for us with open arms," marveled one former rebel.

Some 40 university students from Cali were among those who personally delivered the first batch of letters to those in transitional camps.

"One of the things that makes me proud and happy is knowing that we are not alone; we are accompanied by you, the students..." said Bladimir, who joined the FARC 19 years ago.

Camila Robayo said she participated in the letter exchange to work actively for peace and reconciliation. "I had never spoken to a guerrilla before," she said. After getting a thank-you note from former combatant Leidy Vélez, stating "We must leave hate and rancor behind. All of us deserve a new opportunity," Robayo felt hopeful that many Colombians do want "to give peace a chance."

"You see a lot of toughness in those letters [from former rebel fighters], but also a lot of need for affection and friendship," says Cecilia López, a high-school teacher who says her students can learn a lot about history from the guerrillas' letters. "Those letters show another side of the conflict, the voice of other people, who are also fighting for similar goals."

Through the letter-writing campaign, political science student Manuela Jiménez Avila heard for the first time "voices who have never had a voice or a vote ... [of] those that I often considered monsters, and even came to hate" and began to realize that the voices belonged to "human beings with beautiful feelings that were distorted by the environment in which they had to live and by the conditions that created them."

The attempt to communicate with people on opposite sides of the conflict has resulted in greater understanding of the life experiences and perspectives of "the other." Avila concluded, "all human beings, including those who have killed so many and caused so much damage, have something to teach us, plus a smile and a hug to give away."

Gustavo González, commander of the Caldono-Cauca camp housing former rebels, wrote to Cali's Archbishop Darío de Jesús Monsalve that it would take more than disarmament to bring peace to Colombia. The commander cited inequality, hunger, and lack of access to education, health services and job opportunities as barriers to peace. Overcoming mistrust after decades of war is another.

Still, González said "we are betting on peace, on politics without weapons. ... we call on all the defenders of peace -- regardless of race, religion or ideology -- to rise above those who dream of a country at war. ... we know first hand that nothing is easy ... but we will succeed together."

Jesus built his ministry on reaching out to those who society had forgotten. How can we learn to love the “other” in our lives?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 10:10, 12

*Whoever winks the eye causes trouble,
but the one who rebukes boldly makes peace.
... Hatred stirs up strife,
but love covers all offenses.* (For context, read 10:9-12.)

The writer of this chapter teaches that peace comes from the courageous, hard work of bold rebuke, combined with a merciful covering of all offenses.

The bold rebuke that makes peace is not the same as rude, abusive criticism which angers and harms the recipient of the rebuke. Rather, it is akin to God's discipline for the child he loves (see Hebrews 12:5-11). A child who is disciplined has a parent who cares enough to correct him.

Questions: How would our personal and political discourse change if we sought to cover all ‘offenses’ with love? What does it look like to boldly rebuke people that we feel have done us wrong?

Luke 15:18-20

"I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. (For context, read 15:11-24.)

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus emphasizes the mercy of the father toward his son who has treated him abominably. But rather than thinking about his own hurt feelings, the father sees how far his boy has fallen and empathizes with him. He guesses that the boy had to swallow his pride and humble himself greatly in order to return home destitute and starving. So he pulls out all the stops to throw him the biggest welcome home party he could imagine.

In the news article, we read of young people who somehow put themselves in the shoes of the isolated FARC fighters and felt compassion for them, even though they did some terrible, hurtful things. The youth wrote "love letters" as a way of embracing the guerrillas to welcome them home.

Questions: How does the offering of compassion help to heal divides? How can we show compassion without feeling like we're letting the 'other' off easy?

Galatians 1:22-24

... the churches of Judea that are in Christ ... only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy." And they glorified God because of me. (For context, read 1:13-24.)

Paul made no secret of the fact that before he met Christ on the road to Damascus, he violently persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. Jesus' disciples had reason to suspect his motives when he turned up in their midst.

Paul sometimes had to struggle to be accepted, because of his past sins. Ultimately, the churches in Judea glorified God because of the miraculous change they saw in him.

Questions: How can we learn from the 'other' in our lives by first accepting them? How is it that the convert can often teach more to those who have never strayed?

Prayer for the Human Family (BCP p.815)

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*