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Colombia Revisits the Legacy of ‘Guerrilla Priest’ Camilo Torres

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As a pending peace accord between the government and the guerrillas of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) gives Colombia a chance to finally contemplate a post-war future, public attention has also turned to a controversial figure from the past: Camilo Torres, a rebel priest who died in combat 50 years ago last month.

While the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), the guerrilla faction to which Torres belonged, uses the anniversary to hail the fallen Jesuit as an example young people should aspire to, the government of President Juan Manuel Santos is going to great lengths to neutralize that message. The controversy coincides with discussions between the government and the ELN regarding a possible peace process similar to the one involving the FARC (NotiSur, Jan. 15, 2016). In the meantime, one of Torres’ signature phrases is appearing at every turn: “The duty of every Christian is to be a revolutionary; the duty of every revolutionary is to make revolution.”

Media outlets across the world, from the BBC in London to Deutsche Welle in Germany to Xinhua in China, marked the anniversary of Torres’ death with articles and analyses exploring the supposed contradiction between the Bible and the Marxist ideology that lay behind the short life of Torres, a graduate of Belgium’s Université Catholique de Louvain, who was just 37 when he died on Feb. 15, 1966. In Colombia, the Universidad Nacional (UNC), the Catholic hierarchy, public media, the ELN and even President Santos have spoken at moments about the priest and tried to bank in some way on the resurgence of his ideas.

The UNC, where Torres was a staff member, organized a week of tributes. The Catholic Church’s Conference of Bishops said, “Camilo is much more than a guerrilla.” State television produced a well-reviewed documentary called El Rastro de Camilo (Camilo’s Trail). And President Santos ordered that the rebel priest’s remains be located “so that his family and religious congregation can give him a Christian burial.” At the same time, there seemed to be a coordinated effort, according to Javier Giraldo, a priest who is central figure in Colombia’s Jesuit order, not to talk about “the lack of social commitment shown by the Church, which was a vital part of Camilo’s analysis of why the Cuban revolution had such a powerful influence on young people and intellectuals in our society.”

The president’s call for a “Christian burial” came in response to a demand made Jan. 8 by the ELN, and served as a gesture of good will to pave the way for formal peace talks. “We call for Camilo’s remains, the location of which has been unknown since the day of his death, to be handed over so they can be honored, in the name of dignity, with a proper burial,” the ELN said. Santos, barely giving the message a chance to reverberate, ordered a search for the remains. “Camilo is a symbol for the ELN, and this is a call, an encouragement for the group to be enthusiastic about a social and political alternative, about giving up armed combat and thus contributing to the expansion of Colombian democracy,” the president told the daily El Espectador that same day.

Shortly before his death in 2014, Gen. Álvaro Valencia Tovar, who led the troops that killed Torres, admitted that he feared the priest in death more than in life. “I bought a funerary urn with my own
money and without a receipt, and buried it in the most unimaginable place on earth,” he said. “I
didn’t want the body of Camilo Torres to become a political symbol.”

Calling for radical change

Although Torres is remembered mostly in his typecast role of “the guerrilla priest,” his
accomplishments date back much further than his association with the rebels and his death shortly
thereafter, in his first battle. Most notably, he was a pioneer of Liberation Theology, the Catholic
doctrine of communion with the poor that, two years after his death, in 1968, began taking formal
shape at the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia’s second largest city.
Before that, Torres helped found the UNC’s sociology department.

Torres urged the Church hierarchy to adapt to the times and “practice what it preaches,” historian
Juan Biermann explained in an article published Jan. 18 by Deutsche Welle. “If it doesn’t adapt,
people will be drawn instead to ideologies such as communism,” the priest warned the Church.
“Camilo continues to be an uncomfortable figure for both the right and left,” Biermann said.
“Especially for the former, because he tied the social doctrine of the Church to the search for
‘effective love,’ as he called it. And even though Camilo wasn’t a Marxist, he found Marxism to be a
useful tool for his ideas.”

At a time when Liberation Theology was beginning to germinate, Torres was preaching to poor
campesinos in the Orinoquía plains region, in the east, working alongside the Instituto Colombiano
de la Reforma Agraria, an agrarian reform agency. “There he became convinced that the country
needed a radical change,” Biermann said.

That led him to found an opposition group called the Frente Unido (FU). “[The FU] had an
enormous impact on Colombia society,” said Ramón Fayad, an academic and director of the UNC’s
Centro de Pensamiento Camilo Torres, a center dedicated to the study of Torres’ ideas. “That
coincided with the beginning of the Frente Nacional, which lasted from 1958 to 1974, when the
rightist Liberal and Conservador parties made a pact to alternate power, shutting the door on
democratic alternatives,” he added.

Class consciousness

Torres split from the FU when allied parties wanted to compete electorally, which he opposed.
Many of his biographers see that split as the priest’s first step toward the guerrillas. “But it wasn’t
Liberation Theology in itself that compelled various priests to join illegal groups, rather the
circumstances that had developed in Colombia over the previous half-century,” Biermann said.

“Camilo was much more than a guerrilla,” Giraldo said in a Feb. 13 interview with the news
magazine Semana. “At first, when he returned from his studies in Louvain, he thought the problem
in Colombia was a lack of technocrats—economists who could design an alternative model. Little by
little, however, he came to the conclusion that the problem was class-based, that it came from the
appropriation of the state by a very small elite that defended its interest though violence.”

Giraldo added that Torres’ main goal was popular unity. “And that’s where the possible
contradiction comes in with regards to the ‘thou shalt not kill’ of scripture. Camilo said he wasn’t a
supporter of violence. But he was very familiar with the legal and theological tradition that comes
both from Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine, which is that of just wars. Clearly, he
imagined war as something that would last for just a short time.”
Giraldo said he believes Colombia’s problem continues to be one of class divisions. In his interview with Semana, he also talked about the idea put forth by various organizations to buy two hectares of land in Patio Cemento, where Torres died, to erect a monument. “Far-right paramilitaries have threatened the family that owns the land, and the organizations behind the plan to build the monument are being blocked,” he said.

The Associated Press (AP) also published a story on the rebel priest’s legacy. The Feb. 13 article, titled “Colombia looks to rescue the image of Camilo Torres,” suggested that the Church is using the priest’s background—he hailed from a wealthy Bogotá family—to position him as a figure that “bridges” generations, ideologies, and creeds. The article also cited a letter written last year by Cali Archbishop Darío de Jesús Monsalve, saying that the revival of the famous priest’s image is “being driven by the revolutionary message of Pope Francis.” The piece contained a telling quote, furthermore, from Torres historian Joe Broderick: “It wasn’t until the state came to see Camilo as an inoffensive figure that they decided to recover his legacy.”

Broderick’s words bring to mind comments that Colombian literary legend Gabriel García Márquez, demonstrating his knack for anticipating the future, made several months before his death in April, 2014. “What most interests me about the myth of Camilo is that it’s yet another example, and a very sad one at that, of how Latin America only believes in its heroes once they’re dead,” the Nobel Prize winner told the Cuban news agency Prensa Latina.

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