



# We are God's hands of solidarity

How Pax Christi member organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean live their Spirituality for Peace

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WE ARE GOD'S HANDS OF SOLIDARITY

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# Introduction

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In 2010, the International Secretariat of Pax Christi, a global Catholic peace network based in Brussels, launched a project to establish a spiritual, ethical and theological framework to feed the movement's reflections on active nonviolence and its implications. The project seeks to develop a Peace Spirituality and Theology as a source of inspiration for the movement members' collective journey towards a peaceful future.

Between August 2010 and April 2011, nine workshops were held in Latin America and the Caribbean. The workshops included the author as Facilitator, and the support of José A. Henríquez in the Mesoamerica region, and Claudette Werleigh, a Peace Envoy, in the Caribbean region. In the workshops, the region's Member and Affiliated Organizations, with the exception of Puerto Rico, set out on an experiential journey that went deep into often painful and always hopeful memories about their paths to defend, protect and promote human rights and peace building.

We felt the intense commitment of the member organizations and invited community leaders. We witnessed their high degree of sensitivity and their conviction that facing a context of injustice, complex violences and competing interests in natural resources, the only response is to defend life, human dignity, and the preferential option for those who suffer and whose rights have been violated.

We saw the genuine joy that the participants experience in their work in diverse contexts, such as urban com-

munities in Peru, Indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico, rural workers in Brazil, human rights defenders in Guatemala, youth advocates and legal counsel in El Salvador, peace promoters and religious leaders that accompany communities in conflict zones in Colombia, and pastoral leaders and legal advisors in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. It was a polyphony that was nourished by the rich diversity of the global peace movement and its Latin American and Caribbean expressions.

Pax Christi International seeks to use its Peace Spirituality and Theology to strengthen the work of Member Organizations (MO), communities and other partner organizations in their work of reflection, analysis of nonviolence, education for peace, and political advocacy on local, national and international levels. In this sense, the process that it has begun with Latin America and the Caribbean provides valuable input towards this purpose.

**Martha Inés Romero Medina**  
**Pax Christi International**  
**Latin America and Caribbean Coordinator**



# Methodology

The process used to explore how partners in the region experience their spirituality was a participative process that used key ideas and open-ended questions. The process enabled us to hear and grasp the complexity of the life experiences of people and communities in diverse contexts that all share the common reference point of injustice, violence and conflict.

After reflecting on events experienced or witnessed by the participants, a plenary was held to share testimonies and in some cases, the results of small group work. There were difficult moments, such as the re-creation of acts of injustice that had left an impact on their lives. Each person was asked about their actions and attitudes, thoughts and feelings upon facing the events. It was clear that there were moments when hatred, rage and impotence flourished, but those initial moments were quickly filled with feelings of compassion, solidarity and kindness.

Direct questions were asked about how people had experienced God's presence. In many cases, the testimony revealed the sense that God was absent during serious acts of injustice, "How can God allow this to be happening?" The general conclusion was that acts of violence could not be the work or desire of the Supreme Being, but rather the form in which some human beings have become accustomed to dealing with differences or exercising power and injustice violently upon other human beings. Finally, questions were asked about what actions



were taken as a response to the acts of injustice. These actions bore witness to people's courage and commitment, even at the risk of their own physical integrity and life. The testimonies were collected and are shared here with anonymity (in this text they are in italics), to encourage each person to have greater openness in sharing their inner reflections.

While it was not foreseen in the original project plans, a topic surfaced and took life during the workshops. In contexts of injustice and when partner organizations have strong commitments to supporting their communities, generally there is an overload of sacrifice and work, and this highly demanding situation for the organiza-

tions needs to be taken into account. So we shared the methodology called “Support for the Supporters” to learn about projects and share experiences about the basic attention and support that should exist in all organizations and groups. This methodology addresses self-care as an investment in mental and spiritual health, not only for communities directly affected by injustices and violence, but also for those who accompany them on their journey.

Our goal was to elicit resources to share with others about the simple yet profound ways that communities and Pax Christi’s partner organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean live a theology for peace and build a foundation for a better life in spiritual harmony with humankind and with creation.



# How Pax Christi Member Organizations live their Spirituality?

## 1. What do we identify with in our work for Peace and Justice?

The Member Organizations (MOs) in Latin America and the Caribbean work to defend human rights. They provide legal assistance to communities whose rights have been violated. They work on issues of nonviolence, education for a culture of peace, and capacity building for groups that have been marginalized by situations of injustice, inequality and exclusion.

For this reason, MOs show heightened sensitivity to life, in harmony with nature and their roots. There is a sense of identity with the most vulnerable: the poor, oppressed, excluded and marginalized. They struggle and sacrifice for the most vulnerable, and at the same time they celebrate life in every action of solidarity and in specific moments and spaces of spirituality. They recognize their response to pain, which moves them and gives them strength to adapt to the circumstances and serve those who suffer. Their leadership and the great responsibility they have to the communities are based in values such as Justice, Truth, Solidarity and Love.

During an initial exercise used for group integration, the participants responded to “I identify with...” and gave the following responses:



*“The Bees, as an important symbol for the communities”.*

*“A flower with leaves and thorns: we are here to bring joy, and are led by commitment. And we are like thorns, because while we bring joy, we also have problems when we encounter people that do not accept our work”.*

*“The butterfly, which represents the inner search for liberty, something untarnished”.*

*“The mountains. There was a young woman from Chiapas that lived in a community. She thought that if she climbed the mountain, she could touch the sky. When she was 14 years old, she climbed the mountain, and the further she climbed, the more of the mountain she saw before her. The mountain teaches us to always look further ahead”.*

*“A bridge, because our work consists of uniting people from different organizations, as a service”.*

*“A star, because when thinking about peace-building, the stars seem small, but in a way of thinking, they are the sky smiling”.*

*“A tree, because it gives life, has deep roots, provides shade, supplies fruits, and amid the many problems that we have, we grow stronger each day”.*

*“Butterfly, because it symbolizes continuing to believe in the transformation of things. The thinking that sometimes one has to be a caterpillar to have the opportunity to see the world with more space, greater perspective and liberty, and continue believing that things can be different from how they are now”.*

*“Birds, they bring a new message to the communities”.*

*“A yellow triangle, as a symbol that shows the ability to speak with people, which happens not just with words”.*

*“A flower that is also a cross, the Nahuatl symbol for the four cardinal points and in the center, a bee with its wings spread by hard work. It is the Mayan cross and the Christian cross, and the meaning of everyday language, because in it its paths cross as well as the readings and the commemoration. There is Archbishop Romero and the Virgin of Guadalupe”.*

*“A sun that is also a spiral, that signifies light, heat, if there is no light there is depression; there is joy, warmth... the spiral is significant because there is always a beginning and at the supposed end, a new fresh start appears... it has to do with the processes that we are in... it seems that they are over, but there is rebirth that brings a new process”.*

*“Hummingbird, because it has the gift of observation, brings joy, represents life. It greets you and continues on its path”.*

## **2. What do we feel when confronted with acts of injustice?**

Facing acts of injustice, feelings of pain arise, feelings that we could call “negative” in the sense that they awaken anger, hatred –against the offender or the unjust system–, indignation, fear and/or frustration. These feelings were





expressed by 90% of the workshop participants. It is normal that these feelings arise upon seeing acts of injustice, or seeing individuals' or communities' rights or integrity abused.

Other feelings expressed were:

Courage	Guilt
Despair	Repudiation
Sadness	Worry
Painful memory	Confusion
Anxiety, intimidation	Resilience

But simultaneous to the initial shock of the unjust event or as a reaction to it, there arise "positive" or "assertive" feelings of contemplation, coping abilities and the ability to overcome the initial impact. These feelings are

expressed by the partner organizations as "memory that gives life force," the capacity "to creatively generate new opportunities" and to "promote resilience and strengthen resistance." Although feelings of retaliation and violence do touch the hearts of victims and those who accompany them, a feeling of humanity comes forth that ennobles the presence and actions. "It is like a strange energy," states some participants, "we become aware," "although we feel and we suffer from the injustice, we do not act violently, we act with mercy."

The calling to service leads the member organizations to transform pain into a new force for change, resistance and building a vision for the future. From adverse situations, they are able to take a "fresh breath" to continue their work. This is how they explain it in the workshops when answering the question "what 'positive' feelings did we have after the initial impact from the unjust event?"

It is a challenge that drives us to action  
 The idea that "something had to be done"  
 The meaning of justice  
 Solidarity  
 Compassion  
 Empathy  
 Love, affection  
 The Need to provide support  
 Security  
 A strange Force that can only come from God  
 Motivation to accompany those who are having hard times

A feeling of unity  
 The motivation behind my commitment  
 The conviction that whatever I do helps to enrich my relationship with God  
 I felt joy when I saw that people are capable of organizing themselves, despite the aggression  
 Desire to work with others for change  
 The need to struggle so that the farmers would organize and get their land back as soon as possible  
 Encourage the farmers to not give up the fight

Many of these feelings reflect strong values: nonviolence, "we can't fall into more violence"; strong convictions about "the paradigms on ending cycles of violence, which require us to have strong conviction and strategic

vision"; mercy and compassion; protecting the vulnerable because "it is a matter of dignity"; and commitments to the ideals of equality and democracy. Ultimately, these feelings allow a glimpse of the **sense of interconnec-**



ted humanity, which *leads us to be, to the extent that others are able to be*, to dream collective dreams by overcoming individualism and selfishness. It reacts with generosity, despite the fear and the supposed and actual risks involved.

### 3. How do we face unjust events?

For this reflection, the group began by listing the situations experienced or witnessed by the participants that had caused them feelings of frustration, setback, abuse, hopelessness, and no sense of a future. The participants, from their local and national contexts, listed: situations of injustice, violence against youth, abuse of authority, fragile state institutions including impunity and a weak justice system, corruption, illegality having an influence on public management, narco-trafficking, foreign interests in natural resources, etc.

Given these realities, the Member Organizations perform systematic analyses of the reality, reflecting on the causes and effects of injustice, a map of people involved, the immersed power relations, etc. that affect the local or national context. The analyses are used for in-depth interpretation of the paradigms of violence and injustice that affect accompanied communities. They are also used to devise protection strategies and ways to strengthen community networks.

The MOs are attentive to the events that affect their context and society; they develop analytical capacities and knowledge of citizen rights and duties. *“There is an awareness that invites you to prepare and inform yourself to be ready to take action.”* They envelop themselves with arguments and norms to safeguard life, justice and peace in hostile situations: *“confidence comes from God, but you must accompany it with legal norms”*. The op-

tion for life, hope and faith are major motivations. In the context of the workshops, several ways of confronting injustice were analyzed:

- Appeals to laws and norms (including the International Criminal Court, Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and national courts).
- Reject some norms when there is a higher priority (for example, the preservation of life).
- Appeals to the will of the victim.
- Appeals to the will of the aggressor, because *“there has to be some sense of humanity in the depths of the aggressor’s heart, which must be appealed to”*.
- The aggressor’s actions are questioned in a creative way to try to neutralize the actions, using principles of nonviolence.
- Appeals to the international community, making the event visible, focusing on international and national advocacy, pressuring the government that sins through action or omission, and encouraging actions of solidarity from Northern civil societies.

Participants reflected on how recovery after a traumatic situation tends to start with recognition of the situation, and a transformation of feelings of indignation and revenge to feelings of compassion, empathy and solidarity. One of the most effective ways of countering injustice in the Latin American and Caribbean region is our MOs’ **accompaniment** of communities. Organizational accompaniment and the community’s family support, strength and courage allow difficult moments to be overcome and resistance to flourish through the construction of a resilient social fabric. This heals traumas and transforms paradigms of violence into paradigms of change towards peace.

Religious congregations and laypeople provide accompaniment, consisting of being present in the territory as a form of protection for communities, advocating for the



end of violence, supporting healing processes following trauma, praying and celebrating with the communities, managing humanitarian aid for them, and **walking** with them through their process. This idea of accompaniment and of journey marks an important change in what has been the Catholic Church's role from Chiapas, Mexico to João Pessoa, Brazil, or Córdoba, Colombia: being with the communities with an **active presence**, as a deterrent to new aggressions. "Violent people are afraid of what the Social Ministry can denounce," they said in the workshops. "People trust the Church or the organization," because it is a privileged network that is present in remote areas where generally not even the central government is able to be present. The network is also able to influence and advocate on national and global levels. The church's community accompaniment is its option that is chosen based on its identity and solidarity.

Unjust situations significantly affect a community's trust and sense of community. In El Salvador there is organized youth violence (the "Maras", which are very dangerous



youth gangs) that has caused problems with insecurity to grow increasingly worse. One testimony called our attention: "in one recent year, there were only four municipalities that did not have a single murder. When asked the reason, a person from the community said, 'maybe it's because here we all greet each other.'"

This sense of interconnected humanity is what moves people to action, to accompaniment, coming from the idea that "the person who is suffering is no stranger to us: he or she has our very same nature." "We cannot be neutral or indifferent... We must act!" because "as long as there is injustice, we will continue in the struggle." Accompaniment is expressed with "active listening, as a key aspect of re-dignifying a person." Accompaniment "as a therapy, so that the person and the community can express themselves, laugh, mourn. We use therapy together with recreational, vocational, community organization, and other activities." One form of providing effective and assertive accompaniment is through training activities: "to prepare people with information and training so they can respond to future new acts of injustice or violence in a more organized way that helps to protect the community."

#### 4. What has been my relationship with God when faced with acts of injustice?

This question sought out peoples' intimate feelings about their relationship with the transcendence, with that Supreme Being, facing the reality of injustice, fear and pain that people live. "There is **something** that overcomes fear, although we pay dearly for taking action."

Some people, of course, expressed that they had "arguments" with God during times of injustice. Some people said they even took some time off from exercising their

faith, because they could not believe that God would permit such acts of violence. *"It has happened to me. I've questioned why God lets these things happen if He is love."*

It is evident that some people take a few steps away to improve their perspective, their inner look, and their relationship with God: *"...a long time ago I stopped fighting with God, because I know that it's not worth it. I feel **God's silence**. Events that happen here are our responsi-*



*bility, not God's... That silence leads me to seek answers, look for what I can do, so to see things with more serenity."*

In many of the workshops, there was reflection on **what kind of image of God** the people have. They believe that in many cases, the image is a God imposed by the colonizers hundreds of years ago: a God that has a punishing relationship that only looks at the sins and that instills fear. In that relationship of struggling with God, there is an implicit vision of a God that is there to bring order, a powerful God that is on the side of the powerful. Popular expressions such as "God allowed it," "God wanted it this way," simply justify the acts of injustice as if they were "God's will." So we asked ourselves: could it be that the image that people have of God is what allows us to continue accepting so much violence, that we don't change the situation, that we resign ourselves to that reality? *"The image of God as one of death is mistaken. When we see the life of Jesus Christ with a different spirituality, one of love, we take action."*

Thus, we see a commitment from believers that consider that Jesus Christ's example is the best encouragement for action in defense of those who suffer, *"the cross that Jesus bore, we bear as well."* They affirm that God is a God of Love with phrases such as: *"God doesn't want them to hurt us," "Just as God engages me, He also cares for me," "Being with God is being in the best place to defend Human Rights,"* **"We are God's hands of solidarity,** *God's tenderness is expressed in peoples' reactions, whether they are Christian or not," "God's option is on the side of the victims."*

**God becomes a motivating force that protects and strengthens** the work of Pax Christi Member Organizations in their communities. Some illustrative explanations:

*“When I don’t have the strength to do something against injustice, I talk with God and I feel that He reveals himself in actions, I feel that I am his hands’ work, without Him, I am nothing...”*

From an indigenous cosmovision: *“I am certain about protection: in situations of injustice, I go in search of sacred sites, springs, high places where I feel the gods of my ancestors live. I talk with Him, his energy is evident. Through dreams we can also meet up with the Sacred Being, God the Father/Mother, represented in a person, woman, youth or child, a tree or corn... He is a God that guides and soothes, he gives strength to your heart, despite the pain.”*

When asked about God, in the workshops the relationship was identified as a relationship with the transcendence. It involves prayer, dialogue and narratives, but also implies silences to internalize our fears and our doubts.

*“When I talk with Him and I ask what he is saying to me with these situations, I feel suffering, but also tenderness. I look at his example, how he acted, how he resolved things and ask ‘what would He do in a similar situation, how would he resolve it?’ And I ask him for wisdom to be able to find the best situations to resolve these injustices. And I ask him to teach me to Love profoundly to be able to take more concrete actions for this situation.”*

*“I feel that I have the presence of the Supreme Being. Often I do not think of Him when I face hardships. Instead, I feel that I have his presence when I have a positive attitude for taking action, for accepting him. I know that God is not going to resolve everything all alone. He is only a guide, and we are the ones that have to take action, ‘praying is not enough.’”*

Another interesting element identified in the workshops is the perspective that there are **spaces** of relationship with God: the Church, retreat spaces, the Mountain, a Spring, the Journey:

*“My relationship with God has been a journey, a process. He resolved things for me. I have learned to go walking, to see a God the Father and Mother that walks with me, that accompanies me and is with me. It is my experience. It is as if all of a sudden my fears disappeared and all this strength came out, and I ask myself how I did it. My relationship with Him has gone from asking him questions, to feeling that he is there, that he suffers with his people, that he is a God of Trust, of Hope, that accepts my queries and my questions and helps me find the answers.”*

*“...God is good and is love, but he has given humanity two paths, the path of Life and the path of Death, the Good and the Evil, the Blessing and the Curse. He has also given humanity free will, therefore every person decides whether to kill someone or respect their life, to do good or to do evil.”*

Peace work and work in defense of the rights of the most vulnerable is based in a complex framework of values and principles that gives it meaning and moral authority:

1. The principle of nonviolence: *“We cannot fall into more violence”.*
2. Conviction and persistence: *“The paradigms of violence are cyclical – it is a constant struggle, which is why we must continue with strength and enthusiasm”.*
3. Coherence: *“Spirituality is lived in everyday life”.*
4. Faith: *“I have found in faith, in the person of Jesus, and in evangelical values the strength to take action”.*
5. The sense of interconnected humanity: *“it is seeing God’s face in the other”.*

6. Generosity: *“One does not always benefit directly from the change, but one is an agent of that change”.*
7. Mercy: *“Protect the vulnerable, it is a matter of dignity”.*
8. Commitment to a utopia, with *“an ideal of democracy with equality”.*

## 5. What do we mean by spirituality in peace and human rights work?

Pax Christi International’s member organizations in the Latin American and Caribbean region express that they live their daily lives and work feeling the presence of the transcendent Being. They are in communication and harmony with the cosmovisions present in their cultures and diverse environments. The context of pain has not pushed them away from their faith. The spirituality in their work with the communities becomes sustenance that allows them to continue the journey of struggle for a present and future with justice, and with a foundation of love for our vulnerable brothers and sisters.

When we speak of Spirituality we are talking about a life motivated by the Spirit, that intangible being that inspires and renews. In this sense, we can extract some key ideas from the richness of the reflections shared during this section:

- Spirituality is not an asset that is exclusive to Catholicism or Religions. Every human being develops –to a greater or lesser degree– his or her spirituality, whether they are agnostic or a believer.
- Although it is inherent to every human being, it is necessary to **cultivate our spirituality**, in a process of personal or collective growth; it is internalization, listening and re-assessing. How do we do it? By cultivating selfless **love**, that moves us to take action. “Love

so much as to give one’s life for another,” often with fear, but overcoming it.

- Spirituality involves the certainty that *“not everything is allowed.”* There are limits, and those limits give dignity to the person and integrity to the creation.
- Spirituality **is** in community; it is driven by and lived **in the community**, understood in a broad sense as all of us belonging to the same human family. *“It’s what gives me certainty that I am not alone, that a higher Someone protects me.”*
- Spirituality has a strong commitment to human rights: *“our commitment to human rights comes from the conviction of faith, which is the permanent source of our spirituality.”*
- There are different conceptions of Spirituality: one that could be called “intimate” and another that promotes the consistency between my principles and values and my actions. *“It is thought that spirituality is just something abstract: it is prayer and religious practices that don’t lead to a commitment to change, it is detached from reality, ethereal, abstract.”*



*With intimate spirituality, 'good people' live it, but it doesn't move anything." In this sense, for another participant, "spirituality can lead to 'being at peace with God', but also being in a null relationship with the community."*

Following the individual reflection, collective reflection in small groups, and the plenary sessions about unjust events and their thoughts and attitudes about them, and then sessions on their relationship with God, we moved to examining the topic of spirituality. We asked the participants to explain in their own words what spirituality is for them and how they think of it. Participants worked in groups to develop their own definitions, simple yet profound. In some workshops, the group was able to build a consensus around a group definition.

#### **Definition of Spirituality from participants in the Pax Christi Peru Workshop**

*"Spirituality is the lived and personal experience that is expressed in our walking together as members of the same human community. From Faith in God, his word, his son Jesus Christ's living example, present in the Eucharist and in each human being, Spirituality inspires us, drives us, encourages us, sustains us, supports us and motivates us to action in our work for peace, justice and human dignity. We are part of nature, intimately inter-related, and we are responsible for its care and protection. Violence against nature is an offense against God, its Creator."*

#### **Definition of Spirituality in El Salvador**

*"Spirituality is a sphere of connection that starts from the principle that I cannot reach fulfillment if others cannot do so. Spirituality is a journey of transcendence and, freely chosen and cultivated, motivates us to ac-*

*tion, based in love and other values. It is action that is taken with and for others (including the creation), to discern and serve, as a motor and compass."*

Other ideas from the group work on what Spirituality is for Pax Christi member organizations and their communities include:

- ✧ *"Spirituality is the lived and personal experience that is expressed in our walking together as members of the same human community, in interrelationship with nature and our environment".*
- ✧ *"It is about profound motivations, a bid for life, an utopian or unreal vision; it is a path to freedom, to transcend. It is in constant dialogue with reality and events to construct ourselves as people and collectives. It is something that gives wisdom".*
- ✧ *"It is those values and beliefs that we cannot see but that lead us to perform concrete actions that are done out of hope and which give meaning to every moment of our lives, taking risks".*
- ✧ *"Doing nothing more than praying or feeling connected to God or the cosmos is NOT spirituality. We only live spirituality when it is a force that drives us to action".*
- ✧ *"Those of us who were trained in Liberation Theology understand that sense of spirituality that leads us to a praxis and a social commitment, and that sense of a liberating Christ that accompanies others".*

Some additional elements that enriched our reflections about our common journey in the construction of peace and the struggle for the fulfillment of Human Rights:





- Our essence as believers is based in our spirituality, which requires of each one of us **credibility, coherence and trust**.
- What is important is the human being (**full humanity and sense of family**), free of fear, and not falling into the “mean world syndrome”.
- The struggle is for people: it is a matter of conscience, conviction, will and a certain “**unawareness**” in **spirituality** – it was stated in the workshops that “many times we weren’t aware of our spirituality”.
- Spirituality is intimately linked to the principle of the Golden Rule or **Ethic of Reciprocity** (present in all re-

ligions, in Catholicism in Matthew 7:12 or Luke 6:31) and is summarized as “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”.

## 6. Spirituality and peace

Jorge Julio Mejía M., S.J.<sup>1</sup>

Witnessing on a daily basis the painful spectacle of injustices and diverse violences that gravely injure the world, it would be easy for us to be inclined towards seeing human beings as violent by nature.

However, the fairest definition of who we are as human beings was given to us by Jesus when he gave us a lucid testimony of the potential humanity that we have, seen in his being, his life, and his teachings.

Jesus once said “I am truth.” But what truth can we use to define Him as Truth? It is not a truth that is known, but rather a truth that is. The authentic truth of human beings is manifest in Jesus’ way of being. That man who loves, pardons, is merciful, who is willing to forgive until seventy times seven, who went so far as to give his life for others, whose response to evil is to reply with good, and who is a healer. That being is truth. In other words, the truth about who we human beings are is revealed in the life of Jesus Christ.

We could say that all who are violent are false human beings. A person who does not have solidarity and mercy, who hates, is a false human being. In Jesus we have a profound call to be truth.

<sup>1</sup> Rector of the Society of Jesus’ Interprovincial Centre on Theological Training in Bogota.



And how can we be truth?

Jesus shows us the path of truth when he uses the parable of the tree and the branches to explain the possibilities of being truth. As branches that sprout from the trunk of the tree that is God, we are part of the tree and we allow life to flow and have the ability to bear fruits. That is, the intimate union with God is the call to truth that is our condition and destiny. And when we bear fruits, we begin to see human behavior that makes life on earth viable.

Therefore, this is the human vocation: be transparent to how God wants to be and act in and through each one of us. And God, as Saint John stated, is Love. So our vocation is to be loving, fair beings that know how to forgive and maintain solidarity. And that is what would be the truth of our human condition.

When we are truth, we will have a transformative impact on society: being light in the darkness, salt in the tasteless, and yeast in the dough.

There was a reason that Jesus makes it clear that God's great question at the beginning and at the end of times is a question about your brother. *"Where is your brother?"* He asked Cain. And at the end of time, he will ask us what we did with the excluded, the naked and the hungry brothers and sisters. From Jesus' perspective, love, solidarity, and mercy are what characterize the truth that is.

The way to achieve that truth is the spiritual work that transforms us thanks to the intimate union with God, which is "more intimate to each one of us than our most intimate thought"<sup>2</sup>. When we are in close contact with

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<sup>2</sup> Original Latin version has other two translations: "more intimate than the intimacy found in oneself", and "more present than my most inward self".

Him, we slowly allow ourselves to be transformed. To allow this, we must adopt an asceticism that makes it possible for our entire life to be transparent to this being, and transparently be an action of God in that unique and singular way that God is in every human being. This daily, constant work, done through prayer, living in community with brothers and sisters, silence, and being conscious of the times when we must be responsible and fulfill our mission, is what allows us to be docile under God's guidance. That is the process.

The condition of beings united with God and transparent in actions is what makes us true manifestations of peace because we will also be just and able to forgive. We will be strengthened to offer good when done evil, to turn the other cheek, because we resolve conflicts in a different way. We resolve conflicts with a different logic, one that touches the other's human potential and invites him or her to react according to their truth and open to dialogue, reconciliation and peace. This transformation necessarily leads to the person taking up their civic responsibilities. Because among the diverse forms of globalization, there exists one that is violence without bloodshed. That heartless system goes so far as to consider a large part of the population as worthless.

Spirituality leads to wisdom, which is not naivety or passivity. It is a wisdom that understands the complexity of social frameworks, of conflicts of interest, and rivals' acts of destruction. It has a profound foundation that nourishes hope because it strengthens faith in human beings, convincing us that *"there is another world in the belly of this world,"* as Eduardo Galeano recently said.

Human beings of peace are strong and courageous. They are homes to the divine power. They know very well that hiding one's life from violence is losing that life. But losing life as Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King and so many other peace heroes have done, is to gain life. It is strength

of soul that is unimaginable and unbreakable and that never allows itself to be sickened by hate or to thirst for vengeance. It is a non-negotiable option for life and for peace.

Spirituality chooses life. Going beyond all the violence and pain. Let your inner being resonate with this hymn by Benjamín Gonzalez Buelta.

This morning  
I straighten my back,  
I lift my face,  
I breathe in the dawn,  
I choose life.

This morning  
I welcome my punches,  
I silence my limitations,  
I dissolve my fear,  
I choose life.

This morning  
I look everyone in the eye,  
I pat someone's back,  
I give my word,  
I choose life.

This morning  
I bring peace,  
I nurture the future,  
I share joy,  
I choose life.

This morning  
I look for you in death,  
I lift you from the mud,  
I carry your fragile body,  
I choose life.

This morning,  
I hear you in the silence,  
I let you fill me,  
I follow you closely,  
I choose life.



# By way of conclusion

The workshop participants from Latin America and the Caribbean have gratefully recognized Pax Christi International's initiative to discover and re-discover the experiences that allow everyone to learn from each other about the ways to live and cultivate Spirituality. In particular, a Spirituality that gives us a distinctive capacity to express sensitivity, move to action, advocate for those that suffer violations of their rights, and build peace.

## On a general level:

*"Any peace work cannot be de-spiritualized. As human beings, we are spiritual. Accompaniment and comprehensive reparation processes for communities must be done with a full Spirituality".*

*"Spirituality of nonviolence" must include nature, the creation. Because "we are part of nature, intimately interrelated, and we are responsible for its care and protection. Violence against nature is an offense against God, its Creator".*

*"We want to strengthen our work and thanks to Pax Christi we are doing so. We have been working for 27 years in almost all of the country's departments with indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, without taking much care of ourselves".*

*"A lot of the work we do with donor agencies is limited to filling communities with content. These spaces need a new dynamic with comprehensive approaches, because the people do have a lot of needs. Pax Christi and its pro-*

*posal on Spirituality with Self-Care give people something that is useful to them in overcoming their situation".*

*"It's an important space because it facilitates awareness about what you are experiencing, helps you reflect about your spirituality and how your journey is going, and teaches how to create spaces where others can come together to share and learn".*

*"Many institutions don't talk about spirituality as a force that exists in the communities, one that is transformational. We the Pax Christi partner organizations, with the support of the International Secretariat, can help bring content to the peace building work, with Spirituality".*



## On the methodology:

*“The methodology was successful because its starting point was our own experiences with human rights violations. Although initially it fills us with strong feelings, it also impacts us and affects us; it is a logical, methodological and appropriate starting point”*

*“The story told by the facilitator at the beginning is a living history that touched us. Then, the reflection about violent situations that have impacted us, the definitions of spirituality, and then finishing with ‘who takes care of the caretakers’ is a good methodology. It’s successful because it starts with a topic that touches the heart, and ends with one that addresses our self-care, which calms and encourages us”*

*“The workshop tries to approach reality from the work that each one of us does. It encourages us to further examine our spirituality, and what we do to take care of each other, which we hadn’t thought through before”*

## About the process:

*“We should continue the process of strengthening our spirituality so we can continue accompanying peace work”*

*“In terms of continuity, I am interested in delving into some of the pedagogy, techniques or alternative therapies to strengthen communities that are stressed by violent events”*

*“We must make more efforts to bring together our common work. It is important for Pax Christi International to support the gathering of those of us who work in human rights and peace, so that we can continue to come together and strengthen our processes”*

*“Pax Christi should organize a seminar to provide the participants with the materials used in the process, including the publication, with the presence of theologians that could nourish the reflections”*

This is a collection of the rich experiences of our Member organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean. With humility, we make it available to all who are interested in the topic and the coherence between Faith and Transformative Social Action. Having reached the end of this stage, our conclusion comes from our identity as Latin American and Caribbean people, and from our identity as members of a global peace movement, as lived with Pax Christi International:

***“There are Witnesses of Hope!  
We bear Witness to the Hope!”***



## And... who supports the people who support?

### THE CRUTCHES

Bertolt Brecht

Seven years I could not walk a step.  
When I to the great physician came  
He demanded: Why the crutches?  
And I told him: I am lame.

He replied: That's not surprising.  
Be so good and try once more.  
If you're lame, it's those contraptions.  
Fall then! Crawl across the floor!

And he took my lovely crutches  
Laughing with a fiend's grimace  
Broke them both across my back and  
Threw them in the fireplace.

Well, I'm cured now: I can walk.  
Cured by nothing more than laughter.  
Sometimes, though, when I see sticks  
I walk worse for some hours after.

*"Cured by nothing more than laughter"...* Our partner organizations use a Psychosocial Approach to their work, seeking to reduce the emotional impact of unjust events that are generally marked by violence against the population. This approach works to restore the social fabric and strengthen the collective by recovering memory and

ancestral cultural practices and by using active nonviolence to build resistance to the violence.

In this work, in the everyday community work, the MOs face extreme situations, whether due to exclusion, threats or violence against the communities and those who accompany them. In this accompaniment process aimed at helping communities overcome traumas, mourn when lives are lost, and manage their fear, the members of the accompanying organizations have emotional impacts that they are not always aware of. Thus they develop high levels of stress and emotional wear in these demanding and challenging situations. A lot of this stress accumulates in the body and ends up affecting the health of the people who accompany communities, such as the work of Pax Christi International member organizations.

During the course of the workshops, the issue of this chapter arose: ***"And... who takes care of you? Who supports the people who support?"*** The question sought that the participants pause in their reflection about events that affect other people, and begin to think about themselves. This includes reflecting on their own dilemmas and the ways in which they deal with the challenges and stress levels that develop consciously or unconsciously in their work for peace and human rights.

Subsequently, we did an introduction to the methodology "Support for the Supporter" that uses **self-care** techniques to address the possible impacts that people suffer when working with communities that are victims of violence. Many participants felt that Spirituality is strength-

ened when there is a conjunction of body, mind and spirit, *“it is a way of planting you in life.”* In this sense, the “Support for the Supporter” methodology aims to reduce the emotional impact and strengthen the social fabric. It seeks to promote a regular analysis of the context to identify risk paradigms and actions that can transform the situation and protect communities, starting from emotional recovery. The methodology also seeks to promote the communities’ and accompanying organizations’ resources and full potential to activate their **resilience** and grow their ability to resist and rebuild their life projects. Solidarity and Reciprocity are central to this methodology, and Spirituality strengthens this recovery.

*“If we do not constantly recycle ourselves, if we do not delve deeper into what we do, we will fall into the void... Get into the recycler to be re-built with more strength”.*

**Bishop (Don) Raúl Vera, President of Frayba**

“Support for the Supporter” addresses the emotional impact of working with communities using alternative mechanisms such as aromatherapy, hydrotherapy, mesotherapy, visualization, relaxation, meditation and yoga. Several of these therapies were practiced in the workshops to show how the tensions produced by daily community work in contexts of injustice affect our physical, emotional and spiritual balance. Practicing the therapies demonstrated to the participants the sensation of relief and recovery that they can provide. The intention is to use therapies to create a space for recovery and self-care, but also a sense of community so that the group that accompanies the communities can constitute a family whose members support and protect each other.

Some of our partner organizations were already familiar with the “Support for the Supporter” methodology, but for others it was new. Everyone agreed that they need to put more emphasis on mental health and self-care in their work plans. Some of the testimonies collected:

- *“We need to be more aware of all that we still need to learn to be able to take care of ourselves”.*
- *“Learning more about how to take care of myself, I learned to trust and rely more on my team”.*
- *“I learned that by transforming behaviors and taking time to breathe as a team through meditation, relaxation or entertainment, we can work more efficiently to support victims as they overcome trauma and heal”.*
- *“I learned about tools and work dynamics that support self-care that I can use with the communities”.*
- *“I experienced living together and sharing experiences, team building, and taking time from our work to reflect on our emotional health”.*
- *“It would be good to have more workshops like this one, to recharge our energy for our work”.*
- *“If we take care of each other, we will be able to better take care of the others”.*

Self-care is also a topic related to **security** and **self-protection**: if we are tired and exhausted, our alert levels drop and risks can increase.

## What do we do to take care of ourselves?

Facing acts of injustice and violence, the member organizations and their communities carry out self-protection activities, emotional recovery work and they live their spirituality. First, this includes **prayer**:

*“For many communities, prayer is what strengthens the heart”.*





*“When they pulled several members of the organization from the National Palace as they protested against forced disappearances, one of the leaders shouted: ‘We are not going anywhere, we are struggling for human lives.’ I think that the blessings and the prayers of the victims’ families, those we help, are what take care of us.”*

The members of the Pax Christi partner organizations have many methods of sharing that support their mental health and balance in complex situations and demanding work. Reflecting on the topic, many institutional experiences were shared that help members recover, recharge their energy, and continue with their commitment. Some of the activities that member organizations and their communities use for self-care include:

- *“Biodanza”<sup>3</sup>.*
- *“Go jogging early in the morning to be with the trees, birds, people”.*
- *“Pray as a community; it gives us a sense of community. It is a space where we can share and simultaneously internalize”.*
- *“Listening to soft music, it supports rest, meditation, being alone”.*

- *“Community brothers and sisters. The confidence of belonging, knowing that what happens to me is important to him or her, and what happens to him or her is important to me”.*
- *“Kitchen therapy, which relaxes, allows for creation, and releases stress”.*
- *“Family - seeking out family space, sharing, playing.” “Feel like a family, give /receive, feel cared for when arriving home, a connection to your community, with brothers and sisters; energy is shared and I feel the community is concerned for me and what I’m going through”.*
- *“Alternative therapies like Zen meditation and massage”.*
- *“Go on vacation and schedule activities outside the office once a month or every other month”.*
- *“Celebrate small achievements”.*
- *“Periodically have film screenings or other pauses”.*

Our workshops on Spirituality in our work for Peace and Justice were important because they achieved an additional objective: they reinforced the idea that we must dedicate quality time to reflection and self-care. These activities help us face the difficult realities with more serenity and protect the lives and health of our group and the community we accompany. Hence, we reinforced awareness of the importance of allocating time for prayer and our inner relationship with the Supreme Being, for enjoying nature, sharing with our family or religious community, self-care for well-being, protection and accompaniment.

<sup>3</sup> Biodanza, or dance of life, is dedicating a time to heartfelt expression using the body with diverse rhythms that allow one to find one’s self through physical movement in harmony with one’s character and situation.

## JESUS DOES NOT HAVE HANDS

Eduardo Cáceres Contreras, Chile  
(Prayer shared by Pax Christi Peru)

Jesus does not have hands  
he has only our hands  
to build a world  
where justice lives.

Jesus does not have feet  
he has only our feet  
to march forward  
liberty and love.

Jesus does not have lips  
he has only our lips  
to tell the world  
the Good News to the poor.

Jesus does not have means  
he has only our actions  
to achieve that all people  
become equals.

Jesus, we are your gospel today  
the only gospel that people can see  
if our lives are transparently you  
and are the deeds and words that give Life.

Jesus, give us your moral muscle  
to develop our personal talents  
within your project of justice and peace  
and do all things well.