

What then shall we do? (Luke 3:10)

Statement from the Bishop's Conference of Guatemala to all sisters and brothers of faith and to all Guatemalans of good will

1. Recent events call us to generosity and solidarity

1. On November 7, the earth shook once again in Guatemala. This last earthquake hit hardest in the western and southwestern areas of the country, with the department of San Marcos suffering the greatest losses. We mourn the loss of human life that plants seeds of profound suffering in the hearts of so many Guatemalan families. We also lament the destruction of housing and other buildings, which aggravates the situation of need and poverty in which so many already live. As Guatemalans, we are united in grief, but we must see these events as a call to generosity and solidarity among brothers and sisters and respond together with hope.

At the same time, another type of cataclysm in our country is also calling us to serious reflection. We refer specifically to the environment of social conflict and violence that is intensifying each day. It has taken a toll on Guatemalan families and on society in general, overwhelming us with grief.

2. As Guatemalan citizens and as Bishops of the Catholic Church in Guatemala, we want to share our concern and our point of view concerning these increasing levels of social conflict. We are witnesses to the fact that the great majority of our people are suffering from poverty and from a lack of opportunities. When they see the horizon before them, they see constant threats and they perceive that their most basic interests are being ignored or trampled upon.
3. We are witnesses to a situation in which almost the entire population lives in fear: fear of losing their lives, fear of being victims of assault or extortion, fear that their children will go down the wrong path, fear of unemployment, fear of not finding spaces to survive in the labor market, fear of going through some extreme need or illness without having the minimum resources required to handle it. All of these deep-seeded fears make people trust each other less. Often, it makes people aggressive. Given the high level of violence in the country, expressed in so many different ways, people are often willing to respond with violence or to approve of certain forms of violence that others might perpetrate.
4. The appearance of John the Baptist on the banks of the River Jordan prepares the way and sets the stage for the arrival of Jesus Christ and the message he will bring. John receives the word of God and proclaims the need for baptism and conversion for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3: 2-3). The multitudes go to him and ask him the question that we use for the title of this statement: "What then shall we do?" John's response shows that solidarity and sharing is the standard for putting our personal and social lives back on track. He doesn't reject anyone, but he asks for concrete acts of change from each person according to their professions and responsibilities.

2. Social conflict

1. The history of our country shows that not even the signing of the Peace Accords was enough to put an end to our social conflicts. Our conflict comes from an agrarian situation in which many people do not have access to land or the possibility of moving beyond the life of a peasant farmer. It is a situation of extreme social inequality that is more evident to the excluded and marginalized than ever before, because the media has made it more visible. The level of conflict is such that in certain regions of the country it is creating cultures that confer a kind of legitimacy to crimes of passion, vengeance, cycles of revenge, and killing to prove one's manliness. In other regions, this generalized situation of conflict is expressed in ways that adulterate Mayan traditions, making them vengeful and cruel and creating angry mobs that are irrational and easily manipulated.
2. In recent years, a new kind of conflict has emerged due to the fact that the state has not been able to orient private investment to the common good. As state enterprises have been privatized, the prevailing dynamic has been that of enriching the private sector and rewriting economic rules to favor corporations instead of the common good. The government has not been able to gain the public support it needs to implement its energy development policies or its education policies. It has spent its budget on patronage politics with programs that focus on handouts, instead of attacking the structural causes of poverty in Guatemala. The poorest groups, indigenous people, peasant farmers, and those without formal education are largely forgotten in the system even though they continue to represent the very base and identity of the country.

3. Proposed solutions

We believe that every entity and sector must take responsibility in our own realms to work towards resolving the generalized situation of conflict that exists in our society and to address it by reducing the causes that perpetuate conflict.

In terms of the three branches of government, we believe that:

1. **The Legislative Branch** must function with the awareness that the laws they create are to protect the common good. Partisan and sectoral interests are the greatest obstacles to the development of the nation. Ethical politics and the natural rights of human beings should be the reference points for all legislation. Without ethical foundations, parliamentary activity degenerates into short-term, short-sighted activity, more interested in obtaining immediate special interests or even personal interests than in contributing to the common good.
2. **The Judicial Branch.** Justice must be swift, effective, and impartial. It must come not only from statutory man-made law but also from natural law. The judicial branch must [be] guided only by the greater interest of ensuring that laws are followed and that law-breakers are punished.

3. **The Executive Branch** represents the unity of the nation, and it is the principal actor in the search for the common good. It should have the dual capacity to listen to the demands of the population and to propose and implement policies that favor the long-term common good. It should not be focused on the quest for reelection through patronage measures.

The state and its institutions are not the only entities with responsibilities. Civil society, in all of its diverse expressions, must also work toward the common good as the ultimate horizon and reference point towards which they direct their legitimate but particular special interests.

4. **Political parties** must recover their role as mediators between society and the state. They have three roles: listening to the demands of the population and discerning their needs; proposing policies that respond to these needs within the overarching objective of attaining the common good; and educating and convincing the population of the benefit of their proposals as they seek approval at the ballot box.
5. **Private enterprises**—from small family businesses to large transnational corporations—have the task of working for the country’s economic development by generating employment. An enterprise that is ethically based must have as its goal not only the generation of profit, but also the more important purpose and awareness of serving the common good of the surrounding population and of the country under whose laws it labors. The enterprise must also seek the human development of all those who are part of it. It must be careful about the environmental impact of its operations. Business activity and economic activity in general must be guided by the objective of the common good. That is to say, businesses should look at their investors’ interests in the context of the interest of all of their collaborators and that of the society in which they are located.
6. **Social organizations** in Guatemala have emerged in part as an alternative to political parties, which have not been able to fulfill their role as mediators between society and the state. However, as an alternative form of societal organization, they must also be the allies of political institutions in order to achieve the objectives of the common good. Their operations must always have an ethical foundation and must be within the law. Actions that involve violent confrontation and political destabilization are immoral and do not contribute to the common good.
7. **Some international NGOs** that seek to support the rights of poor groups in society are invited to have a broader vision of the conflictive situations that their support may generate if they do not promote encounters and dialogue between the government and the social groups they support. Aid funds should —above all—serve the purpose of building a just society based on reconciliation and dialogue among Guatemalans.
8. We, as the Bishops of the **Catholic Church**, know that we must also respond to the question “What then shall we do?” Our task is to announce the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a source of hope and humanization and as the basis for responsible personal ethics. Our contribution to the common good involves the task of the “new evangelization,” but it

also involves offering words of guidance from the Gospel and from the Social Doctrine of the Church in order to help light the path towards achieving that common good.

9. **Each individual Guatemalan**, acting out of his or her own culture and religion, must choose the culture of life. We must put an end to daily behaviors of violence, corruption, and the desire to find easy answers to difficult problems.

4. What shall we do in the midst of this all this conflict?

1. We must promote the Rule of Law and help everyone to understand the need to make the Rule of Law possible by respecting just laws and personal ethics in all areas. The demands of citizens from any sector of the population must be reasonable and should be evaluated in the context of the good of the entire country. If this does not happen, we will be contributing to anarchy and lawlessness and the destruction of the common good as the ultimate objective of our society.
2. It is important for government institutions to win trust by taking actions that demonstrate their interest in the common good and by showing they are truly interested in listening to the demands of impoverished populations and working towards reasonable agreements.
3. Each one of us must have the desire and firm commitment to work together to help the country move forward without regard to social class or political and economic position.
4. We must promote dialogue in order to establish the consensus necessary to achieve a development model that is more inclusive, but also more viable, so that development is something that is possible, not just something that is desired.
5. The government must help to reduce suspicions, which become rumors, that it is a militaristic, intolerant government more concerned about advancing private businesses and their projects than in advancing the common good, a government that uses force to suffocate any attempt to criticize its administration. It will be able to achieve this through the efforts it makes to strengthen democratic processes.
6. All sectors of society must promote the idea of “nationality founded on brotherhood,” and not simply defend the rights of particular people or groups.

We entrust our sorrows and our struggles to overcome social conflict to the Blessed Virgin of the Rosary, the patron saint of Guatemala, and pray that she will help to humanize us and see ourselves as human beings created in the image and likeness of God.

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