

Dying in silence, living in memory

Javier Giraldo Moreno was co-founder of the Political Violence Data Bank (Banco de Datos de Violencia Política), which began as a joint initiative of CINEP (Center for Research and Popular Education) and the Inter-congregational Commission for Justice and Peace (CIJP, widely known simply as Justicia y Paz.

He was the Executive Secretary of the Inter-congregational Commission on Justice and Peace, a human rights organization of the Conference of Religious of Colombia, founded in 1989 and shut down by the same Conference of Religious in 2002, after a grave smear campaign orchestrated by sectors of the Army against Javier and his team.

After the Inter-congregational Commission for Justice and Peace ceased to exist in 2002, Javier continued accompanying the Community of San José de Apartadó.

The Peace Community of San José de Apartadó was established on March 23, 1997.

Army troops together with paramilitary groups carried out operations in rural districts in which they murdered members of the community, many of whom were then dressed in camouflage to say they were killed in combat.

The Peace Community has suffered massacres, such as in April 1999, in which three members of our community were assassinated; in February 2020, where five members of our community were assassinated; the one in the La Unión hamlet, where families returned there were displaced in 1998, in which six members were assassinated, several of them leaders of the community. The most recent massacre was perpetrated on February 21, 2005; on that occasion they killed one of our historical leaders, Luis Eduardo Guerra, with his family, as well as Alfonso Tuberquia, a leader from La Resbalosa, with his wife and their children and a worker.

They have also suffered from economic blockades due to the paramilitary and military checkpoints, which impede access by the community to food and transportation, subjecting it to hunger and isolation, as happened during the blockades imposed in 1997, 2000, 2002, 2003, and 2004.

Taking as a pretext the massacre of February 2005, President Uribe ordered the police to enter the hamlet of San José to set up operations inside the peace space, where they have never allowed anyone to circulate bearing arms.

Javier was a pacifist by vocation. That's why he supported conscientious objection promoted by religious sectors and other persons in response to the School of the Americas in the United States, where Colombian military officers later accused of gross human rights violations received training.

How can we carry out the last wish of Javier Giraldo Moreno, who left us in writing, in a document notarized in 2002, his wishes for his own last rites and funeral?

Javier wrote:

“I also ask that I be allowed to die in silence, without biographies, without necrological artifacts, and without a homily in the austere funeral Eucharist.”

But how can one allow a man who made of the word, spoken, written, and listened to – an inexhaustible force defending the rights of the peoples, the dignity of life, to care for life, and the goods of creation – die in silence?

How can one let die one whose death we regret today, but who remains alive in each one of those he has left behind, in the lessons of community processes, and in the defense of human rights that he accompanied throughout his lifetime?

How can we leave in silence the traveler of a thousand roads, the traveler of the unpaved roads traveled down to hear the voices of the communities who were victims of state violence: in Carmen and San Vicente de Chucurí, in Dabeiba, Cacarica, Jiguamiandó, Curvaradó, San José de Apartadó, Trujillo, El Castillo, Medellín del Ariari, Puerto Esperanza, Caño Claro, Caño Sibao, Villavicencio, el Páramo de la Serna, la Primera Línea in Cali and Bogotá?

How can we allow to die in silence one who listened attentively to the studies from universities such as the Nacional, the Distrital, the Pedagógica, the UIS —Universidad Industrial de Santander (in Bucaramanga), the Javeriana and so many other universities where young persons, men and women, listened attentively to his analyses and the presentation of a Colombia that did not appear in the news or in the social networks? His reflections inspired research studies, masters’ theses, and doctoral theses.

How can we allow to die in silence one who for more than four decades helped educate and train peasant farmers, indigenous persons, Afrodescendants, and urban dwellers who, as a result of the violence, became human rights defenders?

Javier made the Inter-congregational Commission for Justice and Peace into a genuine training school for men and women who found in human rights advocacy their main tool for defending life and their communities and land rights.

And herein lies the answer.

Javier was a man of silence because he made it possible to hear the victims’ voices, the voices of the disappeared. In the silence he could perceive the silenced cries of those who were stripped of their lands. From the silence he could discover the tricks of power which, among plots, shady deals, and institutional power plays, violated the rule of law and turned the State into a perpetrator of crime.

Only a person who lived in Silence, humility, and simplicity asks to die in silence – because the silence enabled him to hear, console, understand, and grasp the social, community, political, and legal strategies that could be established to defend life and the territories, and from the silence contribute to building life plans and community projects that enabled the communities to stay in their territories, defending the right to water, to food sovereignty, the right to work and to a dignified life, the right to social protest.

Javier silenced the noise of his university degrees in philosophy, theology, and sociology, obtained in Colombia and abroad, to give way to that wisdom embodied in the voices of indigenous women, mothers searching for their disappeared children, in women community leaders, in the matriarchs and in so many women who keep hope alive so that their communities can resist.

Only a man who knew how to appreciate silence can ask us to let him die in silence, without any tributes, without any recognition, and without us extolling him.

Perhaps the best way to honor him is to continue his work: defending human rights, defending the peoples, listening to the victims, and accompanying those who keep struggling to remain in their territories and on their lands with dignity.

The traveler of a thousand roads has left us, to continue walking to encounter Camilo Torres, Fabiola Lalinda, with Héctor Guzmán and Gilma Benítez, with Álvaro Ulcué Chocué, with Teresita Ramírez, he went to meet up with Gerardo Valencia Cano, Lucero and Daniel Yamid Henao. With Nidia Erika Bautista and with thousands and thousands of those who he accompanied in their searches, those who exhumed corpses of the disappeared, who accompanied their family members in the dignified handover of remains, or in the commemorations of the Palace of Justice fiasco, the traveler who taught us to walk in defense of human rights followed his path, he followed the path that he showed us, analyzing to see and feel the communities' pain, with eyes of faith and hope amidst the violence, he following his path, the traveler now joins others who have been travelers as well.

He followed the path he felt compelled to follow inspired by the movement of priests in the Church of the Poor who today follow his steps, with the hope of getting faith-based readings of Colombia's political situation.

Javier did not need any homage. That is why, perhaps, his final wishes were not a contradiction.

Javier requested silence because he knew the value of silence. Because in silence one learns to listen. And today he asks us to listen to the moment Colombia is suffering.

He heard peoples whose voices others wanted to silence. He listened to those who had been silenced. He listened to the communities. He listened to the victims. He listened to the earth.

And from that listening he turned the word into a tool of resistance, of memory, of the defense of life.

That is why today we can respect his will, and at the same time talk about him. Not to render a homage that he did not ask for. Not to write a biography that he wanted to avoid. But to remember that his silence was never an absence.

His silence was listening.

And his listening was translated into commitment. His commitment became accompaniment. And his accompaniment became a school for the defense of life, of the peoples and territories. Perhaps that is the best way to carry out his last wish:

Let us abide by his desire that we **let him die in silence but let us not allow for his legacy to be silenced.**

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