

STATEMENT BY THE BISHOPS OF COLOMBIA ON THE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT WITH THE UNITED STATES

The media have been informing our country about the negotiation of a Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Colombia.

Faithful to its mission, the Conference of Bishops feels called to offer some reflections from an ethical and human perspective for the enlightenment of the negotiators.

The priority point of reference for a Free Trade Agreement must be the human being, not mere economic expediency.

Economic integration processes must benefit the poorest people and communities, such as peasant farmers, small-scale merchants and producers, and marginalized communities and regions of the country.

We therefore state the following:

1. INTEGRATION OF PEOPLES

Seeking integration among peoples, for the greater well-being of citizens and as a response to the longing of all people to become a single human family, is very positive. A closer relationship among peoples leads to greater cultural integration. It opens doors for the growth of production and wealth, breaks down barriers, helps develop science and technology, and creates better living conditions.

2. GLOBALIZATION

We must remember the words of Pope John Paul II:

“The ethical implications can be positive or negative. There is an economic globalization which brings some positive consequences, such as efficiency and increased production and which, with the development of economic links between the different countries, can help to bring greater unity among peoples and make possible a better service to the human family. However, if globalization is ruled merely by the laws of the market applied to suit the powerful, the consequences cannot but be negative. These are, for example, the absolutizing of the economy, unemployment, the reduction and deterioration of public services, the destruction of the environment and natural resources, the growing distance between rich and poor, unfair competition which puts the poor nations in a situation of ever increasing inferiority. While acknowledging the positive values which come with globalization, the Church considers with concern the negative aspects which follow in its wake” (*Ecclesia in America*, 20).

3. RISKS AND DIFFICULTIES

Integration processes can be fraught with danger when they are based solely on an economic approach that is framed by the laws of the market and an open or disguised attempt to establish a neoliberal economic order. The consequence of this type of integration is an increase in differences between rich and poor, unemployment and unfair competition. The nation's sovereignty and integrity could be seriously affected by such an agreement.

We are aware of both the complexity of current negotiations aimed at the signing of a free trade agreement with the United States and its future implications for national life. The Free Trade Agreement is not a simple matter and goes far beyond commercial exchange between countries. It is an agreement that goes beyond trade issues and that is being worked out between countries that have great inequalities in their development, capacities and possibilities. For this reason, we insist that it is necessary to establish rules that ensure equitable negotiations.

For the Church, the main criterion is the common good, which must be paramount in the quest for solutions to the needs of our country, and which must overcome inequality and the great differences between rich and poor sectors.

4. FOOD SECURITY, AGRICULTURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Because of the extreme poverty in which millions of our fellow citizens live, it is vitally important to take into consideration food security and the preservation of the culture and customs of individuals and peoples.

Colombia is an agricultural country with a long history of food production. Our peasant farmers are important to national life, and their situation must be taken into account in international agreements.

One concern is that there is no consideration of a reduction of the barriers affecting our products in the U.S. market, such as subsidies and phytosanitation regulations, which have contributed to a national agricultural crisis.

"Economic policies tied to free trade agreements, if not studied and applied in a framework that is broader than the merely economic, could have harmful effects on the agricultural production that ensures food security" (*The Land: a Gift from God*, 7).

It is important to establish a balance between trade and environmental protection, so that environmental protection agendas do not become a disguised form of discrimination of Colombian products.

5. HEALTH AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Colombia's biodiversity is part of "the Earth, God's gift to all." It is important to nullify, in all countries, any procedures already under way to patent living organisms, such as those that have involved certain varieties of corn, *yagé* and other cases that have been reported.

The health of the neediest sectors is one of the greatest concerns in discussions of free trade agreements. Nearly 20 million Colombians lack sufficient access to medicines, either because they do not belong to a social security system or because they cannot afford to purchase medicines. We believe it is important to maintain the industrial property legislation on drug manufacturing that is in effect, so as to continue the production of generic drugs and prohibit patents on secondary uses of medicines. Ensuring the production and supply of domestically produced medications of high quality at a low price is a national priority. Health cannot be a matter for negotiation.

There are particularly vulnerable sectors of the population that are affected by serious illnesses and deserve special protection from the state and society. As a response to these sectors, the industrial property system should include a system for mandatory licensing of medicines protected by patent legislation, which respects intellectual property rights while allowing the licensing at socially acceptable prices of drugs that have a high impact on keeping people alive, such as those for diabetes, HIV/AIDS and terminal illnesses.

6. THE CULTURAL SPHERE

Our people have a cultural heritage with many values, expressions and symbols that must be protected in any international relationship. We believe that the education sector is especially important.

Certain population groups meriting special attention could require:

- a) The protection of national culture, such as a system for mandatory licensing of state radio stations.
- b) Free access to state-run public programs.
- c) Permission for access to protected works in public libraries.
- d) Access to culture in educational establishments, under the terms of Law 23, passed in 1982.
- e) Maintaining the private copy within the system of copyright protection.

7. THE LABOR SPHERE

Our hope is that Colombians' working conditions enable them to live with dignity, and that any international treaty addresses the problems of unemployment and underemployment that are causing anxiety for so many families. The challenge is

to increase social programs that address the needs of those who are poorest, especially the creation of good-quality employment.

The production of greater wealth, which is a result of Free Trade Agreements, must go hand in hand with the better distribution of wealth. It could lead to greater inequalities in society. More than 11 million Colombians live in extreme poverty and demand opportunities, training and decent working conditions. For that reason, attention to working conditions and an increase in possibilities for decent work are central, basic criteria.

We hope that our reflections help foster a form of integration in which all peoples of our continent can feel that they play a part not only in market relations, but in building a socially just world.

The Church continues to commit itself and devote its efforts to helping to build a nation of solidarity and peace.

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