

Chapter Title: As a Colombian, as a Sociologist, as a Christian, and as a Priest, I Am a Revolutionary

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Book Title: The Colombia Reader

Book Subtitle: History, Culture, Politics

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Published by: Duke University Press. (2017)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv125jtrj.28>

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As a Colombian, as a Sociologist,
as a Christian, and as a Priest,
I Am a Revolutionary
Camilo Torres Restrepo

Camilo Torres Restrepo (1929–66) embodies the fusion of Christian radicalism and revolutionary fervor that marked the decade of the 1960s in Latin America. His life story inspired a generation of young Colombians on the political Left. Here was a well-educated, handsome, upper-class man who renounced worldly vanities and traveled a path of no return—to seminary, to the priesthood, and, in the end, to a guerrilla encampment. Along the way, Torres did graduate coursework in sociology at the Catholic University of Louvain and worked professionally at the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform and the National University of Colombia, where Torres was both a chaplain and cofounder of the faculty of sociology. It was a moment of intense activism, with students criticizing obsolete curricula and the bookish elitism of university courses they described as “lots of teaching, not much learning.” Torres did not oppose them, but he did reproach student “revolutionaries” for being unconscious of their own privileges. The texts we include below were issued in 1965, after the Colombian cardinal Luis Concha Córdoba expelled Torres from the priesthood and before Torres left Bogotá to join guerrilla commander Fabio Vásquez, one of the founders of the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (Army of National Liberation), at a jungle camp near Opón, Santander. The expelled priest died in combat only a few months later.

Message to the Christians (excerpts)

What is essential in Catholicism is love of neighbor. “He who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8). For this love to be real it must seek to be effective. If kindness, alms, the few free schools, the few housing plans, so-called charity does not feed the majority of the hungry, or clothe

the majority of the naked, or teach the majority of the uneducated, we must seek effective means for achieving the well-being of the majorities.

The privileged minorities who hold power are not going to seek them, for generally the means would demand that the minorities sacrifice their privileges. For example, to create more jobs in Colombia capital should not be withdrawn in dollar form, but should be invested in the country. However, since the Colombian peso is devaluing every day, those who have money and power will never prohibit the exportation of money, because in exporting it they escape the effects of devaluation. It is necessary, then, to take the power from the privileged minority and give it to the poor majority. This, if done quickly, is the essential element of a revolution. The Revolution can be peaceful if the minorities put up no violent resistance.

The Revolution is the means of obtaining a government that will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, teach the uneducated, perform works of charity, love their neighbors not only in a transitory and occasional way, not just a few but the majority of their neighbors. For this reason the Revolution is not only permissible but obligatory for Christians who see in it the one effective and complete way to create love for all. . . .

I have given up the duties and privileges of the clergy but I have not ceased to be a priest. I believe that I joined the Revolution out of love of my neighbor. I have stopped saying Mass in order to fulfill this love of neighbor in the temporal, economic, and social world. When my neighbor no longer holds anything against me, when the Revolution has been completed, I will return to offering Mass, God permitting.

Message to Communists

. . . I have said that, as a Colombian, as a sociologist, as a Christian, and as a priest, I am a revolutionary. I feel that the Communist Party has elements that are authentically revolutionary and because of that I cannot, either as a Colombian, or as a sociologist, or as a Christian, or as a priest, be anti-Communist. I am not anti-Communist as a Colombian because anti-Communism is oriented towards persecuting non-conformist compatriots, Communist or not, of whom the majority are the poor. I am not anti-Communist as a sociologist because in the Communist plan of fighting poverty, hunger, illiteracy, lack of housing and services for the people, effective and scientific solutions are to be found. I am not anti-Communist as a Christian because I believe that anti-Communism makes a blanket condemnation of everything Communists defend, and there are both just and unjust things in what they defend. In condemning them all we are con-

demning the just and the unjust equally, and this is anti-Christian. I am not anti-Communist as a priest because even though the Communists themselves do not know it, there are many among them who are truly Christian. If they are of good faith, they can have sanctifying grace; and if they have sanctifying grace and love their neighbor, they will be saved. My role as a priest, even though I do not exercise the external rite, is to try to lead men to God, and the most effective way to do this is to lead men to serve their neighbors according to their consciences.

I have no intention of proselytizing my Communist brothers, trying to get them to accept the dogma and to practice the cult of the Church. But this I am certainly working towards, that all men act according to their conscience, sincerely seek the truth, and love their neighbor in an effective way. The Communists must well know that I will not join their ranks, that I am not, nor will I be a Communist, either as a Colombian, or as a sociologist, or as a Christian, or as a priest. However, I am ready to fight alongside them for common goals: opposing the oligarchy and the domination of the United States, in order to take power for the popular class.

I do not want the public to identify me with the Communists, and for this reason I have always made it a point to appear in the company not only of the Communists but of all the other revolutionaries. . . .

Message to the Military

After having seen the power of forty armed and disciplined men over a crowd of four thousand in the city of Girardot, I decided to make a fervent call to the armed forces of Colombia to become aware of the historic moment in which we are living, and to decide for themselves now how they will participate in the revolutionary struggle.

On various occasions I have seen uniformed men—farmers and workers, never elements of the ruling class—fighting and persecuting farmers, workers, and students who represent the majority of Colombians. And it is with rare exception that I have found members of the oligarchy among the officials and subofficials. Anyone who considers the contrast between the Colombian majorities clamoring for revolution and the small military minorities repressing the people in order to protect a few small privileged families must ask himself what reasons induce these elements of the people to persecute their fellows.

It could not be for the economic advantages. All military personnel are poorly paid. The military are generally not permitted to study for a life outside the army. When they reach higher rank, they try to buy a corner house

to open a store to support them in their retirement. I have seen generals and colonels apply for posts as teachers of physical education in high schools and as insurance salesmen. The salary for personnel on active duty is low, but it is even lower for retired personnel. They receive no medical attention or any other economic benefits. However, we know that a third of our national budget goes to the armed forces. As is obvious, the war budget is not used to pay the Colombian military but to buy the scrap metal the United States sells us, to maintain the material elements, and to support internal repression in which Colombians kill their own brothers.

It may be that the motive behind what the military does is devotion to the fatherland [*patria*, might also be “motherland” or “homeland”], the Constitution, and the laws. But the Colombian Fatherland consists mainly of its men, and the majority of those are suffering and cut off from power. The Constitution is constantly violated in that jobs, property, freedom, and participation in power are not given to the people who ought to be, according to the Constitution, the ones to decide public policy in the country. The Constitution is violated when martial law is maintained after the causes that were the pretext for its declaration have ceased. The laws are violated when citizens are detained without a warrant for arrest, when the mail is withheld, when curfews are imposed, when the telephones are tapped, and lies and tricks are used to persecute the revolutionaries.

Perhaps it is necessary to better inform the military about the Fatherland, the Constitution, and the laws, so that they do not think that the Fatherland consists in the twenty-four families whom they actually protect, for whom they spill their blood, and from whom they receive such poor remuneration. Perhaps the principal reason that the military continues to be the armed extension of the oligarchy is the lack of opportunity in other fields of human activity which exists in Colombia. . . .

Message to Students

Students are a privileged group in any underdeveloped country. Poor nations pay a very high price for their few college and university graduates. In Colombia in particular, given the large number of private colleges and universities, the economic factor has been a determining factor in education. In a country where sixty percent are illiterate, eight percent have a bachelor's degree, and one percent are professionals, the students are one of the few groups equipped to analyze the Colombian situation in comparison to other situations and with regard to possible solutions.

Moreover, the university student—in the university where it is not a crime to hold an opinion and in the college where there is freedom of expression—has simultaneously two privileges: the power to ascend the social scale by means of academic grades, and the power to be non-conformist and rebellious without impeding this ascent. These advantages make the students a decisive element in the Latin American Revolution. During the agitational phase of the Revolution, student efforts were very effective. During the organizational phase, their efforts were secondary in Colombia. In the direct struggle, notwithstanding the honorable exceptions which have arisen in our revolutionary history, their role has not been a determining one either.

We know that agitation is important, but its true effect is lost if it is not followed by organization and the struggle for the power take-over. One of the main reasons why the involvement of the students in the Revolution is transitory and superficial is the lack of student involvement in the personal, family, and economic struggle.

The students' non-conformity tends to be emotional (sentimentalism or frustration) or purely intellectual. This also explains the fact that at the end of a university career the non-conformity disappears or at least is concealed, and the rebel students cease to be non-conformist in order to convert into bourgeois professionals who, to buy the status symbols of the middle class, have to sell their consciences in exchange for a higher salary.

These circumstances can threaten the possibility for a mature and responsible reply by the students to the historic moment that Colombia is now going through. The economic and political crisis is making itself felt most on the workers and farmers.

The student, generally isolated from these problems, could think that purely speculative or superficial revolutionary activity is enough. Their lack of awareness of the problems could make the students betray their historical vocation: that when the country needs their total involvement the students continue with words and good intentions but nothing more; that when the movement of the masses calls for daily and continuous work, the students comply with shouts, stone-throwing, and sporadic demonstrations; that when the popular class needs an effective, disciplined, and responsible presence in its ranks, the students reply with vain promises or excuses.

The revolutionary conviction of the students must carry them through to the very end. Poverty and persecution ought not to be sought out. But under the present system, they are the logical consequences of a fight against the prevailing structures. Under the present system they are the signs which attest to a revolutionary life. Their conviction must bring the

students to participate in the economic penury and social persecution of the workers and farmers. Then their involvement with the Revolution passes from theory into practice. If it is complete, it is irreversible; the professional cannot take a step backwards without a flagrant betrayal of his conscience, his people, and his historic calling. . . .