

Colombia: Dealing with the Devil

by Uschi Entenmann

For 40 years, civil war has ravaged Colombia. A Catholic priest aids the victims with a combination of faith, courage, and ingenuity.

The young man cowers on the edge of his chair, covers his face with his hands, and cries. Through the open door comes a flood of noise. Horses' hooves clatter over the cobblestones of the market square. Campesinos hawk mangos and papayas while bells drone from the church next door. The little town in the Colombian province of Antioquia seduces the visitor with images of peace. Colonial-style villas dominate the streetscape. The hand-carved bars on the windows of the facades are obscured by begonias in hanging baskets. Nothing indicates that many of the 80,000 inhabitants live in constant fear – nothing but this slender young man crying in the rectory.

Father Giovanni puts his arm around Ahimer Velazquez's shoulder. "He was coming home on his moped when they grabbed him, right off the street," he says. "They kept him for six weeks." Ahimer has been free for a week now, but he sleeps with his clothes on, ready to flee at a moment's notice. During the day he hardly leaves the house. The kidnapping destroyed the rhythm of his life as a minor official in the agriculture bureau.

"During the day they made us hide under bushes," he says. "At night they marched us through the jungle for eight or sometimes ten hours. When my shoes were gone, they gave me boots." The forced marches were bearable, but there were times he panicked – like the time the guards commanded him to dig a hole. "I was sure I was digging my own grave." Instead he buried the group's trash to hide their tracks. But the terror stayed. Not long afterwards, military helicopters circled over their camp. Then he knew he was in mortal danger. "Everybody knows that when the *guerrilleros* have the military breathing down their necks, they shoot their hostages," he says, staring at the edge of the table. He escaped with his life. But how can he return to a normal routine with his wife and two young sons in a region where kidnappers strike at will?

They asked for around a thousand dollars in ransom – six months' pay. Without Padre Giovanni, the family would have faced destitution. He made clear to the guerrilla comandante that Ahimer is a small fish – better just to throw him back. "Go home," he says, laying his hand again on Ahimer's shoulder. "They won't take you again." The sun is straight overhead as Ahimer leaves the rectory. The priest puts on a baseball cap against the sun and dives into the throng between the market stands. He towers over everyone, like a tree. Everyone says hello. Even the most taciturn *campesinos* give him a smile. He waves back through the forest of broad-brimmed hats, but only briefly. He is in a hurry. Yesterday he got a call for help from Father Jil Alberto in Dabeiba. A month ago, more than 100 refugees were standing in front of his church. He crammed them into the nuns' quarters. "You have to come and negotiate with the paramilitaries!" his colleague pleaded. "It can't go on like this much longer. Three days ago, they kidnapped two more girls."

Father Giovanni climbs into his dented delivery van and starts for Dabeiba, three hours northwest of Santafé. Even with bald tires, he makes good time over the roads rife with potholes. The landscape is desolate. Outside town, the abandoned dachas of the Medellín upper class slumber behind boarded-up windows and doors. Now and then abandoned farms appear, lost between fields and gardens gone to seed. There are few besides Father Giovanni who venture on to this stretch of road. It leads through the valley of the Rio Cuaca and can offer unwelcome surprises at every turn. The narrow pavement is flanked on one side by an abyss. From the other, falling scree bounces across the road. With every hairpin turn, it gets a little warmer. Mosquitoes flutter through the air, clothing clings to the skin, and behind the next curve a troop of men in uniforms and jump boots is waiting on the shoulder. They carry machine pistols over their shoulders and walkie-talkies around their necks. Their caps are pulled down low. The young officer in charge waves the van on without a second glance.

“Soldiers from the military,” the priest explains with a last look in the wing mirror. “They know me.” He accelerates through the next curve. “And, thank God, the other ones know me, too . . .”

The others are not far behind. They block the road a few curves farther on, a half dozen men in civilian clothes, as heavily armed and sweaty as the others. They are mercenaries, so-called paramilitaries, the private army of the large landowners and drug barons, hired to keep the leftist guerrillas in check. Anyone who wants to pass their roadblock must pay the toll. It amounts to only around three dollars, but for a *para* who earns a hundred dollars a month in regular pay, it's a worthwhile supplement.

Father Giovanni's contacts to the terror groups are risky. Twice they have held a revolver to the back of his head. “Fourteen-year-old *muchachos!*” he says, shaking his head. Who is he more afraid of, the guerrillas or the *paras*? “I'm afraid of both of them,” he says without taking long to think. “Anywhere near them, you're in danger of dying. The paramilitaries shoot anyone who has contact to the other side. A suspicion is enough, even a false one.” Yet the government tolerates them. Military and paramilitary work side by side. “The *paras* do the dirty work,” he explains. “Whenever it's a matter of conquering new territory, they are the commando forces. The military marches in behind them.”

One of their victims was the farmer Mariela Cartagena. Two weeks earlier, she had appeared in front of Father Giovanni and reported the gangs' murderous doings in her village. “She was terrified,” the priest remembers. But she was prepared to describe the crimes, as village spokesperson, to the mayor of Santafé. “If I'm going to be killed,” she said, “then at least let it be for a chance to put these guys in their place.”

The priest was not eager to let her sacrifice her life. He resolved to relate her story to his contacts at the U.N. and in government offices and human rights organizations. Only then would her complaint be allowed to reach the press. But the mayor, Angela Janeth Rivera, beat him to the punch: She forwarded Maria Cartagena's statement straight to the newspaper *El Tiempo*. They published her name the following day. A week later she was dead, shot in front of her own *finca*.

The third major power in the country is invisible. “The guerrillas hide in the mountains,” Father Giovanni explains. The frontlines between the zones controlled by the military and the *paras* are unmarked. Anybody who doesn’t know his way around will wander into their waiting arms. And then? He shakes his head. “People are kidnapped here every day,” he says. “Sometimes they’re only gone for a few days, but mostly for weeks, and sometimes for years.” Two-thirds of the kidnappings can be laid at the door of the guerrillas. The FARC alone (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia and People’s Army, Colombia’s largest guerrilla organization) has over 2,000 hostages in its power. The rest are held by paramilitaries and “normal” criminals. “The kidnappers call the families and the families call me,” says the priest. Generally they demand absurdly high ransoms that poor people cannot pay. “They sell everything they own and borrow money from relatives and neighbors to get their relatives back again.”

A desperate situation, an unhappy country. But Father Giovanni can still laugh as he parks the van after one of the many hairpin turns and climbs out. “There’s always reason to hope,” he says. He continues on foot down into the valley. Suddenly, he enters a miniature Eden. The steep slopes are terraced with beds planted with dense, luxuriant rows of every vegetable known to Colombia: onions, carrots, sugar cane, beans, coffee. The fields are lined with mango trees, papayas, guayabas, and mandarine oranges. Farmer Frank Ilario, 30, lays down his hoe and gives the priest a hug. Then they climb side by side up through the plantation. Only a few years ago, Frank Ilario had resolved to move his family into the city. Guerrillas had shot off his father’s leg. “That ruined us financially as well,” he says. “The land wasn’t enough for a family to live and die on, and there were six of us children.”

Father Giovanni was able to change his mind. First he convinced the open-minded young farmer of the value of an agriculture that forswears the monocultures of coffee and coca. In their place he should plant what he and his family need to live. Self-sufficiency equals independence. Additional strength comes when farmers organize. On this theme, the priest can work himself into a lather. “If people come together, it weakens the power of the *paras* and the guerrillas. A solitary person can be recruited, manipulated, killed. A community makes that a lot harder.” Frank learned how to survive as an autonomous farmer, how to save seed for coming years, how to prevent erosion from tropical downpours by terracing the slopes. He raises chickens and pigs that he sells at a profit, and he is developing a system to power the household with methane from manure and animal by-products. “Amazing!” he says. “My mother cooks our food with pig shit.”

Frank wanders the countryside, advocating the project on the church’s behalf. In the mountains he carries a diocesan identity card. He knows the church lends him some measure of safety against terror and random violence. “Almost every guerrilla or *para* has some spark of belief and wears a cross around his neck,” says the priest. Occasionally one of them will appear at the church to confess – generally not to Father Giovanni, who is seldom in residence, but to one of his colleagues. “Last week one of them confessed that he had slit a farmer’s throat and thrown him in the river. Two days later they fished the corpse out of the water, and we presided over the funeral.”

On the way back to the van the priest turns and points once again down into the valley. “Farther on, on the other side, was my parents’ *finca*. They were small

farmers. They slaved their whole lives for me and my five brothers and sisters.” The war drove them twice from their home. A million and a half refugees lodge in the tent camps and slums of Colombia. Every month 20,000 more arrive in the cities. Every year tens of thousands are murdered by guerrillas and paramilitaries. The rebels long ago stopped struggling for land reform, degenerating into an 80,000-man band of thieves whose cruelty can only be compared with that of the *paras*.

“I left school at 17,” the priest relates. “I wanted to become a priest. That was clear from the start.” At that age he was interested only in the spiritual aspects of Catholicism. No one spoke of social engagement. It’s difficult to pry the story from him – he doesn’t like to talk about himself. “Helping people, saving lives,” he adds, “that’s what it’s all about.” He is not secretive, but neither is he especially loquacious. He has virtually no private life, visiting his cell only to sleep. A dozen opera CDs, theological books – no poetry, no novels, but a biography of Carlos Castaño, chief of the paramilitaries.

The *paras*, once civilian militias, turned into heavily armed death squads that, like the guerrillas, are financed largely through the drug trade. They are responsible for many massacres of civilians, as well as political assassinations. Carlos Castaño proudly claims to have killed more than 200 people. “Know your enemy,” says the priest. Then he looks to the photographs on the wall. Snapshots from a papal audience eight years ago. He took his father along. One of the pictures shows the two old men reaching for each others’ hands, the farmer and the pope, his father’s face radiant with the great moment, the reward for years of drudgery to enable his son’s studies. With a scholarship from the church, he was able to study theology for three years in Rome.

“Most people in Colombia are deeply religious,” says the priest with a last glance at his souvenir photos. Then again a brief smile: “Rome is one side of the coin. Santafé is the other.” Since he took office he has busied himself with the other side, far from Catholic dogma and the pomp of St. Peter’s. The church’s work in Colombia is largely social. He calls on priests and bishops to march for peace and against terror, and they follow him. Tens of thousands joined him two years ago after guerrillas stole the entire coffee harvest of the province of Antioquia, driving its farmers into ruin. Even the provincial governor marched along – right up to the edge of the region controlled by the guerrillas. The priest shakes his head. “He went on over to negotiate with them,” he remembers. “I was too far back to stop him. By the time I got wind of it, he was gone.”

The guerrillas took the governor hostage to force the release of their brothers in arms. The government in Bogotá wasn’t interested. A year later, the military found the kidnapers’ jungle hideout. After their helicopters landed, they discovered the governor, shot dead. His murderers were nowhere to be found. “He died of pure carelessness,” says the priest as he approaches the invisible border that marks the beginning of the guerrillas’ domain. The *paras* drove them deeper into the mountains a few days ago, Father Jil Alberto had told him on the phone, otherwise the road wouldn’t have been open. “Too dangerous. It’s mostly simple thugs who join up for the regular meals. The guerrillas don’t pay a salary.”

An experienced guide like Father Giovanni is indispensable for navigating the checkerboard of competing terror groups. “Wherever they meet up, there’s war,” he

says, tacking the rattling van back and forth between potholes with his right hand and pointing at the mountain landscape with his left. "Fertile land as far as the eye can see." As he tells the story of how the guerrillas took over the area and looted the villages, which in turn called in the paramilitaries, his voice shakes with bitterness. The mercenaries blockaded the city of Dabeiba, allowing no traffic in and out for six months, until its people were close to death from starvation. "In the end they had nothing left but squash. They made everything out of them – soup, cake, sauces, marmalade." As their last hope they called on the priest, who negotiated an end to the terror with both sides. A true man of God doesn't shrink from an occasional deal with the devil.

These days he is no longer alone against the evil that is destroying his native land. The *pastoral social*, the church's welfare bureau, has taken over some of the state's duties in the conflict. Father Giovanni has recruited a miniature Peace Corps made up of priests, nuns, mayors, and delegates of the farmers. Eighty fellow priests from more than 40 parishes have joined forces with him, among them Father Jil Alberto, who welcomes him after the four-hour drive to Dabeiba. Unlike the rather retiring Father Giovanni, Father Jil is a rotund, lively man who radiates warmth. His friendliness stands in stark contrast to the horrible stories he has to tell. "My country has spent 40 years in a state of war," he says. "They take turns attacking us. Two years ago the *paras* invaded to drive the guerrillas out of the city. They shot everyone who crossed their path. Men, women, mothers with their children watching, with police watching, in the street, in cafés, in businesses, on the *plaza*!" He shakes his head. After the attacks, desperate people come flooding through his door, saying, "They took my husband, my son, my daughter, my father –"

In this ugly business, everyone pays. The guerrillas specialize in kidnapping, especially in areas where the profits from cocaine don't meet their needs. The paramilitaries prefer to demand protection money. "Even my father and my brother get an invoice every month," says Father Giovanni. "There used to be three banks here, cafés full of people until late at night, a city of 25,000 people with a bustling economy. Now it's a disaster area."

Then Father Jil Alberto tells about the two kidnapped girls, Clarita and Marisol, both in their early 20s. "Their car was stopped on the road to Urrao, southwest of Santafé. They dragged them out and took them along into the mountains. Clarita is an orphan, but Marisol's parents called me."

Father Giovanni visits the parents that evening. "Marisol is our only child," the father says as he opens the door. He is a taxi driver. One look at the apartment is enough to tell you that the family has no money. The furniture is made of scrap lumber, and paint is flaking from the walls. The mother slumps in a torn armchair. She has Parkinson's. They have managed to raise \$380 for Marisol's ransom – a king's ransom, for them. "But they want more, a lot more," the father almost sobs. "What if they kill her?" asks the mother.

Father Giovanni sits next to them. His pensive presence calms and comforts them. "I'll talk to the guerrilla commander," he says. "I'll know more soon."

The next morning begins at 5:30 with wild clucking and honking – Father Jil Alberto is feeding his geese and chickens in the backyard. It offers a breathtaking view of the

mountains. Dense forests are veined with slim waterfalls, raked with deep valleys. The city of Dabeiba lies in a region among the most beautiful in Colombia, blessed with abundant natural resources. Its gold and uranium mines have inspired the guerrillas and *paras* to evict thousands of farmers. "Whoever controls this area has power and money," says Father Jil Alberto, "and it's a hop, skip, and jump to Panama." At the border drugs leave the country and weapons enter. "Peace will take a long time to come to Dabeiba," he says as Father Giovanni talks on the phone in the next room with the guerrilla commander.

After three minutes he comes back in and reports that the commander insists the family pay more. "But I'll call again tonight." Then the two set off on a visit to the refugees. The city's calm is deceptive. Father Giovanni knows better.

"*Paras*," says Jil Alberto, pointing to three teenagers roaring by on motorbikes. "And here's another one," he adds, leaning down to greet a man with no legs sitting in a wheelchair. The ex-*para* had stepped on a guerrilla mine. "We organized the wheelchair."

The refugees, 108 of them including many children, are camped with the nuns in the roofed courtyard. Three weeks ago, a baby was born here. They came from a so-called Community of Peace, a village that had declared itself weapon-free, hoping to signal its neutrality to all parties. The ploy didn't work. Paramilitaries erected a camp a few yards from the edge of town, and with that the farmers were labeled collaborators in the eyes of the guerrillas – open season. The priests promise to remind the governor in Medellín that it is the duty of the state to ensure the safety of its citizens.

There are many indications that the governor will listen and even react. The church enjoys the population's trust. The Catholic bishops in Latin America resolved in 1968 to pursue a more active social engagement for the continent's poor. Sometimes the burden is hard for the priests to bear. We meet the young priest Father Martiniano, for example, in front of the bombed-out church where he is bargaining over glass for new windows. The bishop stationed him in Uramá, a remote region with only one telephone, an hour from his home by car. "A young guerrilla took me into the mountains last week and gave me a cardboard box full of bones," he says, "the mortal remains of a man they killed two years ago – the communication minister's brother." Father Giovanni listens and takes notes. He logs the story on a map showing how many people, where and when, have been displaced, killed, or kidnapped. The local priests inform him regularly of new incidents. "We can recognize patterns this way. Sometimes we can even guess what will happen next." For example, he was able to conclude, based on reports of a series of typical atrocities in the region around Urabá, that the guerrilla bands were coming closer, and was able to alert the police and military.

Four o'clock in the afternoon. Father Giovanni again calls the commander who ordered the kidnapping of the two girls. It's possible to reach him until six – then the sun goes down and they march on their way. No one answers. "*Uno nunca sabe*," he says mournfully. You never know what they're going to do next.

The van rumbles back to Santafé. "There are regions in worse trouble than Dabeiba," he says. "Güintar, in the west, for example, was controlled by the guerrillas for ten

years. When the paramilitaries threatened to come in, they shot the mayor, the teachers, and the judges and drove 1,500 people from their homes in only three hours. Father Giovanni looked for abandoned farms where they might find short-term shelter, then negotiated with the guerrillas. After a few weeks the families were able to return. "They promised me they'd leave them alone." He shrugs. "We'll see if they keep their word."

It's evening as he approaches Santafé. Suddenly his cell phone rings. The call is brief. "The two girls are free," he says. After only five days – the guerrillas must have believed him when he said that you can't get blood from a stone. "Ave Maria!" he says, "Thank God!" He climbs back into the driver's seat and steps on the accelerator.