

**100 years of sowing seeds of reconciliation and peace amongst the Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples and in the heart of the *Chocoanos*.**

**The Claretians, Light of the Atrato River: A good deal, for the Atrato**

The Claretian missionaries in the Atrato River opened the door to see the face of God in the black and indigenous people. The Claretian mission was led by Fr. Alcides Fernandez cmf. He took the Gospel of peace and reconciliation to the north of Choco, he brought the mission by air, land, and sea. Fr. Alcides carried this message in a light aircraft that served as a humanitarian ambulance; it was used to carry food and medicine, and even served as public transportation in the Darien mountains of Choco. His missionary work helped to build villages, children's homes, schools, colleges, and cooperatives. He also trained many lay people in Shared Mission, at the service of the black and indigenous people in the municipalities of Unguia and Acandi. Today his memory is an example of dignity and justice.

Fr. Gonzalo María de la Torre cmf, headed the mission of the Medio Atrato in the 70's with a team of Claretians. Continuing with the mission with the indigenous people, the Indigenous Ministry was created and run together with young indigenous people of different languages and tribes, who were students in Quibdó, with whom the first indigenous organization of the department of Choco, named OREWA (Embera Wuaunan regional organization), was created. The fundamental objectives of OREWA were autonomy, possession of the territory, conservation and development of their own culture: In this way, they sought to make visible the reality of these peoples and their social resistance in the country throughout history. With the indigenous (native) peoples hidden and concealed in many cases, the creation of indigenous settlements in the territories where they live was promoted, thus we were able to preserve and maintain their way of life.

The Claretians, in "Shared Mission" with a team of lay Claretians, developed their missionary work along the Atrato River, evangelizing the black people and the indigenous peoples. They took the word of God to "dialogue" with these peoples, based on the analysis of the context of the Atrato River and its tributaries.

The mission of Medio Atrato was based on the creation of the Basic Christian Communities (BCC). The actions undertaken were many; they began with the formation of leaders and continued with the creation of children's homes, attended by the mothers of the community, protection and formation of the children; cabinetmaking, threshing

machines, mills; the community houses and the ethnic territorial organization, where the first “Asociación Campesina Integral del Medio Atrato” - ACIA (Integral Peasant Association of Medio Atrato) was born (1985). This Association led the peasants in 1990, in their struggle for the modification of the national constitution of the country - the constitutional modification recognizes the rights of the Colombian black people. It was the beginning of a struggle that achieved, in 1993, the approval of Law 70, which defines Colombia as a multi-ethnic and pluricultural country; the same Law 70 made possible the creation of the Community Councils. The ACIA requested, from the Colombian State, the collective ownership of 800,000 thousand hectares of land for 124 black communities; with more than 45,000 inhabitants, it is the largest community council of the Integral Peasant Association of the Medio Atrato, "COCOMACIA".

In Bajo Atrato the Claretians experience another resistance. Emilio Gámez cmf, with a team of lay Claretians in Shared Mission, advance in the registration of the lands that belong to the black community in the Domingodó river basin. The registration implied the recognition of the possession of the following territories: Chocao community, 18,026.100 hectares; La Madre, 8,231.4530, hectares, Apartadó, Buena Vista. 19,153.840 hectares. The same registration process was followed in the riverine communities of Jiguamiandó, Curvaradó, Salaquí, La Larga, Tumaradó, Truandó, Pedeguita Macilla, Cacarica and the villages of the Atrato River. When the process of the registration of the territories for the black and indigenous communities, and the organization of the communities was in full swing, the armed conflict began. The war stained the land with the blood of Afro-Colombians and indigenous people. The members of these communities, innocent in every sense of the word, were forced to be displaced from their ancestral lands; thousands of people from the countryside were displaced to the cities.

In the midst of this situation of resistance, land recovery and armed conflict, the Claret Rural School was created. The function of this educational center was, on the one hand, the promotion of literacy and, on the other hand, the prevention of forced recruitment to swell the ranks of the contenders. The Claret Rural School was designed with a central office and branches in the villages of the tributaries of the Atrato River, made possible by the transportation of the teachers in canoes. The lay teachers moved all month long, from river to river, taking knowledge to the students, blacks and indigenous people, in the four branches of the Claret Rural School.

The mission of the Claretians in the Atrato River with the people was protection and resistance, accompaniment of the displaced communities and their return to their

territory in the middle of the war. It was a proclamation of the Gospel, committed to justice and dignity of these black and indigenous peoples, in the land of their birth.

The creation of the Claretian University (UNICLARETIANA) in Quibdó was a milestone in the whole process of empowerment, defense of the rights and training of the peoples of Atrato, but its creation would not have been possible without significant previous projects. Among them we can highlight: the Bible Center in Quibdó; the Cultural Center "MAMA U", which grouped the different cultural expressions such as ancestral dance, traditional "Chirimia" music, theaters, the Alabao hymn; the School of Leadership in Human Rights; the cultural festivals of ancestral customs of the Afro-Colombian people; the formation of lay people in Shared Mission. The university (UNICLARETIANA) has become a true center for peacebuilding and reconciliation based on the Gospel and Human Rights.