On March 24, 2016, the Archbishop of San Salvador, José Luís Escobar Alas, wrote a pastoral letter entitled, “I see Violence and Discord in the City”. Despite its profound relevance, it has not received much notice in most of the local media, which are overly politicized and have little interest in tapping into the structural problems of our suffering country.

In the midst of the harsh violence we are experiencing, the Pastoral comes from a clear vision of the situation and culture that leads to that situation, as well as from a serious analysis of the structural problems of El Salvador that lead to violence.

It makes a historical summary of the Bible’s approach to violence as a whole, especially centered on the figure of Jesus, who, from his love and commitment, brings us true peace. Lastly, it proposes a series of actions that can help us get out of this morass in which we find ourselves.

For those who wish to have an analysis and a reflection on violence from a Christian standpoint, the Pastoral offers a magnificent summary, as well as a path for the development of peace.

Among the causes of violence it names, the Pastoral places social exclusion in the first place, which it also calls “a synonym of extreme inequality” among us. Along with Pope Francis, the Archbishop invites us to say “no to an economy of exclusion and inequity” for one simple reason: “This economy kills.”

We currently find ourselves with repeated scandals that reveal the misuse of money while others remain in poverty. The evasion of the richest companies in tax havens has been unveiled with the leak of the Panama Papers.

The alliances of politicians with capital suspected of belonging to organized crime are a disgrace. Minimum wages impoverish some and benefit others. Social exclusion, united as it is to inequality, is without a doubt an important structural cause of the existing violence. Attached and closely linked to exclusion is the idolatry of money.

The Archbishop is clear when he says that in “a country as Christian and as poor as ours there cannot be an economy of waste that forgets that the most important thing is to provide the basic needs for our poorest brothers and sisters.” He opts for an “economy of solidarity” that contrasts with the series of tax evasion supporters that have recently appeared defending the outflow of capital through convenient companies in tax havens.

A recent study by the Economic Commission for Latin America reports that the richest 10% of Latin America and the Caribbean own 71% of the wealth and are taxed only 5.4% of their income. Meanwhile, the poor, particularly in El Salvador, despite their inadequate income, must pay a 13% VAT (value added tax). It is evident that part of this idolatry is the fact that the rich have privileges when it comes to paying income taxes and manage to get away with either hiding their money abroad or paying less than they should. Unfortunately, none of these may be considered an economy of solidarity.

Closed, self-referential, individualism that does without others, especially the ones living in poverty and who are marginalized, is another cause of violence that is pointed out by the Pastoral. Going back to the message of the Latin American Bishops in Aparecida, the Pastoral tells us that “the affirmation of individual and subjective rights, without a
similar effort to guarantee social, cultural and solidarity rights, can only result in the detriment of dignity, especially of the poor and vulnerable.”

In our country, it is clear that individual rights, largely disconnected from social and solidarity rights, end up benefitting the rich and thus creating a terrible inequality. Our judicial system weakly pursues violations against individual rights, but at least it is doing something. However, seldom does it lift a finger when it comes to violations against social rights. Violations which are protected by current legislation, contradict the constitutional statements in defense of social rights and social justice.

Perhaps the inability to defend social rights rests at the base of the fourth cause of violence proposed by our archbishop: impunity. In this regard, the Pastoral unquestionably states: “El Salvador cannot continue to safeguard a judicial system that fosters impunity. This must end if it really expects to heal the wounds from the past.” Regarding the present, our pastor demands an end to impunity, but this includes regarding the past.

He demands “carrying our historical trials” not so much to condemn the dead or their descendants, but “to vindicate the victims and make their aggressors be known, so that others do not feel encouraged to commit the same injustices.”

Considering the various actions against violence, the Pastoral reminds us that the “fight against violence is also a synonym of the fight against its primary causes” and lists them again. And from there, in his final exhortation, the Archbishop goes through a series of social groups or professionals to whom he directly appoints the task of building peace.

To the politicians and ruling class he states, “Look after the common good and welfare of the great majorities.” They should “design policies that create a state of social well-being that deters people from turning to violence.” To the economically powerful, he insists that they promote a “solidarity-based economy.” They should “create more job opportunities” and “food, health, education, leisure, pension system, among other needs be met with quality through a salary that is in accordance with the current demand.”

And so he continues through a list of different professions and stations in life, all of this without forgetting our roots. He apologizes to our indigenous peoples for the “excluding treatment” to which they have been repeatedly subjected, despite what they teach us about love for the earth and the environment and “the relations of solidarity-based coexistence very specific to their culture.”

It is necessary to read this Pastoral letter, and above all, to see it as a cry of hope deeply linked to Monseñor Romero’s teachings. It is required reading in our current times and in the midst of the suffering of so many, victims of the many different types of violence.

To read the complete Pastoral letter click here: “I see Violence and Discord in the City.”