

## **Transcript Panama – 1994 – Stanley Muschett**

Stanley Muschett: Hello, everyone! We could say that the role of the Catholic Church in the return to democracy in Panama, after the military coup of 1968, and after the invasion of the United States in 1989, was a crucial role. I would like to share a little bit on this idea.

After 20-21 years of a military-controlled court for elections (EMB), which of course, were not free elections, a movement of laypeople, with the authorization of the bishops, played the role of observers of the election in May of 1989. It was not a very scientific method, because the way it worked was that those of us who participated took notes of the voting [results] and sent it through a fax to a given direction outside of the country. By the end of the election day, the results were put together and they were sent back to the Bishop conference. It was a covert operation, because those of us who participated were not authorized by the Government to do so.

I still remember that one of my former students in high school, when the polling center voting centers were closed, he noticed my presence, and he came to me and said, You know what, Professor, you better leave because this can get messy afterwards. The next morning the auxiliary Bishop Monsignor Lacunza was asked to give a message in the media, saying that the opposition had won the election by a margin of three to one, and he was able to do so as a result of what we sent via fax. The data compiled showed the opposition won the election. This was the first role, a very important role, played by the Catholic Church and lay groups.

Of course, Noriega did not accept the elections. Repression became worse, and this led to the invasion by the United States in December of 1989. As a result of the invasion, those who had won the elections in 1989 were installed in power, and they called a new election, the first free election in 1993. In the time in between, the Church created in 1990, after the invasion, the Commission for Justice and Peace. which was one recommendation of the second Vatican Council, and I was appointed the President of this Commission by the Archbishop of Panama, Monsignor McGrath.

We decided to call politicians and the media and society through an invitation to observe the coming elections, and I want to underscore once again that this was the first free election to be held since 1968. We invited them to sign what we call the Ethical Political Agreement of Santa Maria Antigua. On the one hand, we were inviting them to play beyond the electoral rules and to allow an ethical dimension to their behavior during the campaign [ie, an ethical code of conduct]. The name of the agreement was the name of the Catholic University, of which I was the president, and also the name of the first mainland diocese created by the Spanish way back in the 16th century.

This agreement considered three aspects that became very important. One, that on election day we were going to observe behavior and the process of the election. Secondly, that we were going to make exit polls. Thirdly, weekly meetings where we follow the behavior of the politicians and the campaign, and we receive complaints of anyone that was not, you know, complying with the agreement. I remember also that there was a time in which the Government, to the belief of some of the members of the

commission, did not comply with the agreement and I was requested by the full assembly of the Commission to call the attention of the Government. I had to do so, being a little bit, you know, scared that you were going to the government and say, you know you are misbehaving, and please, you have to address the agreements as we signed it.

When election day came, everything ran very smoothly, very nice, and 5,000 observers all over the country sent the results to a voting center that was put together in the Catholic University, and the count took place there. In the night, after the voting centers closed around 7:30 pm, the authorities came to give the first results and they called upon the Church to share with the nation the result of the observation process. Once again through the Auxiliary Bishop and members of the Justice and members of the Justice and Peace Commission, the Catholic Church gave the moral support to the results that the electoral authorities were sharing with the country.

This is very important to underscore. Even though this time we were allowed to play the role of observers—we counted with international observers like President Jimmy Carter and the Archbishop of San Salvador, the successor of Bishop Romero—the conditions of the elections needs to be taken into account. These were the first elections after 1968, as I already said, but also it was an election that took place after the invasion and society was deeply divided. Trust did not exist in the authorities, so this work by the Catholic Church and the laypeople, who played a big role, became the element that gave confidence that the results being proclaimed by the electoral authorities were true, because the Church was supporting through data. And since then, and this is something we need to say very, very seriously, since then there has been overall confidence in general terms on how the electoral authorities perform during the elections. Since then, the Justice and Peace Commission has played the role of observers in every election after the one that was held in 1994.

We have to be honest. Fair elections, regarding the process, are still a work that requires further efforts to be fully realized. We have free elections. We have a great margin of trust in the electoral authorities, but the behavior of the political parties is the one that still needs to improve. You still have, you know, people selling their votes. You

still have those not fulfilling the rules of the game in the full sense. But there's no longer doubt about the performance of the political authorities since 1994 more so, after the elections in which the Catholic Church played this important role way back in 1994.

What we normally read in the media is that violence and fear are no longer part of election day., Nobody goes fearing that there will be violence. Nobody attends not trusting in the electoral authorities. And you see entire families, mom, dad and children, that attend the voting centers with voting centers adapted so children may “participate” These remarks on the role of the Catholic Church and the laypeople in restoring democracy, as well as the subsequent acceptance and recognition of their effort should not ignore the trauma and the human cost of the US invasion to Panama.

The 1994 elections took place amidst widespread calls for justice from those who lost loved ones and a society deeply fractured by division. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created through the different governments. It has been gaining

support and funds to make sure that we have the account of those who died in the invasion but still there's a long way to go. I am mentioning the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because it has its weight in the overall political behavior of society. And if you cannot trust that the Government is playing, at least "neutral," then elections also will suffer. Overall, after good inroads, people feel that we haven't been able to properly close the page of the US Invasion.

One more comment. I will like to underscore that this electoral observation made by the Church was able [to succeed] because of the participation of the lay people, and the lay people in the most wide sense of the word.

There were not only people that were, you know, Catholics, and with a behavior of faith and attending sacraments. No. They were all from all avenues of life, feeling that they could be part of a process that needed to be better off. And this is very important because it brings us back to one of the problems of democracy. Unless the people really participates in the definitions of public policies, in the process of decision making, democracy will still be frail, and democracy will soon be weak.

What we at the Commission of Justice and Peace were able to achieve, and I used to say it in a very funny way, I used to say that we, is that we performed as if we were cheerleaders. And we were very successful, not in what we did in a very scientific way, with the observations and the exit polls, but in motivating people, in giving into their hands a means to enforce democracy. And since then the Commission of Justice and Peace, they are considered part of the electoral process. This is a way in which we should explore more in order to strengthen democracy and this is what we need. We

were good cheerleaders that motivated the people and they accepted the invitation. They felt part of the process and the results were, and are still, celebrated as a democratic feast, as we called it, since we did our work in 1994.

Another point is the political dimension that the Church is called to play. In our case in Panama, we were blessed to have at the time Archbishop McGrath, who supported these activities and created the Justice and Peace Commission. The Bishops since then have understood this role.

This is a little summary. I know that is very short in the sense that it doesn't portray the difficulties, the anxiety, the trauma of one election after 21 years under the military, without the liberties and with repression, and the trauma of going to vote with the lingering effects of the US invasion that put together in doubt the functioning of all the institutional agencies.

One last word that I did not mention. The 1994 elections were won by the opposition. Being the opposition, the political party created by the military. It was a significant and peaceful transition of power in a country with a tradition of not doing so. Justice and Peace was able to support the results of the elections through the process of electoral observation. Today, democracy, from an elections point of view works.

This is, in a nutshell, the process by which Panama returned to democracy after 1968, and the US Invasion, thanks to the role of the Catholic Church and the role of the lay people who acted and took the role of the observers of the elections. Thank you very much.

