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**The World March in the land of "la violencia"**

# A Tale of Anderson

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## Bogotá, 17 December 2009

This evening, without hesitating, I experienced the strongest moment of my own World March.

Already that day our local peace march had been joined by thousands of Colombians supporting our cause. A human tide as far as the eye could see surged through the streets of Bogotá.

In surface area, Bogotá is Colombia's largest city, and its altitude (2.640 mètres) makes it the third highest city in the world after La Paz and Quito.

It is easy to explain such a large popular mobilisation: Colombia, with its drug-trafficking cartels, its guerrilla commandos, its death squads and hired killers who negotiate contracts in the streets of Medellín or Cali, is a nation that symbolises organised violence. It is also a country where, in everyday life, the violent settling of scores is very common. With a total homocide rate exceeding 75 per 100 000 inhabitants, it is far above the other Latin American countries, which have around 20 homicides per 100 000. Every Colombian has been touched in some way by crime and its consequences.

After travelling some ten km, the marchers arrived at a park where a free mega-concert for young people had been organised specially for the occasion. The core team slipped away for about an hour to eat in the city's botanic gardens, where I enjoyed one of the best soups I'd ever tasted! Then the organisers surprised us by taking as to a "papillorama". I thought I was in a fairytale, seeing hundreds of multicoloured butterflies (papillons) landing on us, on our shoulders, hair and hands. I held my breath and I filmed them...

Next we rejoined the crowd at the concert given by 5 Colombian groups and star singers. One of them, Pipe Bueno, prompted shrieks from the crowd - he is one of our best peace ambassadors to youth.

After 2 hours of concert, I withdrew briefly to a tent set up for marchers and artists. Suddenly, a horde of children joyfully invaded the space. They were 38 children selected from the best in the town of  Popayan, a two-hour flight away. Each one, being top of one of the 38 schools, had been given the present of a flight to this peace concert in Bogota. Most live in very modest circumstances and eat only once a day.

One of the children I met was an angel. Anderson, aged 10, came and sat beside me. I told him I had done the whole March, that I had done it for him, for children like him, so as to leave them a slightly better world (perhaps) than what we have inherited. Anderson clasped my arm, squeezed me very hard and said: "Thanks for doing that for us, because we don't want to live in violence. We want to live in a world of peace and love. We want a new world. And your name is Isabelle like the Queen of Spain! Well, for me you are my queen and I will never forget you! Colombia loves you and we want peace!". That's what he said, discreetly drying his tears. I hugged him and I wept with him. We cried together and other children came and hugged us emotionally. At that moment there were no "big people" and "little people", adults and children, marchers and non-marchers. We were ONE with the universe, in a state of total communion, on another plane, in a dimension where words don't exist. This is hard to explain... it was of the order of a mystical experience.

That moment of tenderness and gratitude, the kisses between me and those little ones, they justified my efforts, my fatigue, my moments of doubt or lassitude. Anderson and his comrades were not the only ones to give meaning to

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my steps (many already had), but they gave me the determination to spend the rest of my life promoting peace! When I asked Anderson what he wished to do in future for peace, he answered "March!". I was bowled over by the intelligence and vivacity of this young boy, by the seriousness of his words and the depth of his gaze. Pia, who directs the press agency that I work for, Pressenza, witnessed this scene and was very moved too. She said: "There you are, Isabelle, you found what you came to seek: reconciliation. Thirty years ago your father was taken hostage in Bogota and was subjected to detention and violence. This evening, through that boy's hugs and kisses, all of Colombia is asking forgiveness."

I had scarcely recovered when I went out with the children in front of the stage where we danced with infinite joy! I danced with Anderson and his comrades till I was nearly exhausted. I think I can say unreservedly that I have never contacted "God" so closely than I did in that child's embrace. An embrace which, in a moment, awakened me. Ten seconds that changed my life. God is not in the churches or the heavens but lodged in the "sacred heart" of humanity. He manifests himself in the places of our comunion with one another. That is my tale of Anderson...

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