

# **‘Utopia’, 15 years transforming rural peripheries in Colombia**

“Utopia is a place where novelty happens”. With these words Brother Carlos Gómez, Vicar General of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, recalls the origins of Utopia, one of the major educational endeavours of Universidad de La Salle in Bogota (Colombia), which on 22 May 2010 launched an innovative concept which offers young rural people from poor backgrounds, affected by violence and social exclusion, the opportunity to be trained as agricultural engineers.

“Utopia was founded in order to confront and try to overcome a reality in Colombia that is very painful. Boys and girls born in rural areas have little or no opportunity to realise their dreams. They have also been affected by the violence and the conflict that has hit rural communities”, states Brother Carlos, former President of Universidad de La Salle and founder of Utopia.

“Utopia is a response to this reality, through higher education”, Brother Carlos continues, “to enable these young people to realise their dream of becoming professionals: they live on campus, study on campus and then return to their home areas, because that is the promise: to help the comprehensive development of their rural territories in Colombia”.

## **A beacon of hope**

15 years later, Utopia has become the first rural campus of higher education in Colombia, a project that transforms the rural peripheries of the country, a beacon of hope and innovation for the regions, in which its more than 450 graduates exercise significant social and productive leadership, becoming rural entrepreneurs who not only contribute to the development of their territories, but also understand and defend the supreme value of life and the care of the ‘common home’.

Ms. Ángela Abella, a native of Trinidad, a town located in the department of Casanare, testifies to this. She recognises that Utopía was “a great opportunity for me to become a professional in the agricultural sector”. “Today I am happy and proud to hold the title of Agricultural Engineer”, she adds, “and I am using

my knowledge and expertise to have a positive impact on my rural area and my municipality, because I am raising awareness about clean crop production, teamwork and cooperativism through the formation of an association of agricultural and livestock producers in Yopal”.

That is why, for Ángela, the celebration of Utopía’s 15th anniversary is a reason for gratitude “for all the seeds it has sown and because it has helped us to dignify the work of farmers and rural workers”.

### **A Peace Laboratory**

From the point of view of the President of the University, Brother Niky Alexánder Murcia, “after 15 years we feel that little by little we have consolidated what we name a ‘peace laboratory’, because this project brings together young people from all over the country: Afro-Colombians, indigenous people, Andean peasants ... allowing us to form a small Colombia”.

In this sense, Brother Niky adds that one of the greatest values of the project has to do with the cultural richness of the campus and the possibility of “being able to build together from this diversity and difference, to build our own peace project. We are committed to this, and over the last 15 years, strengthening and refining the strategies and methodologies to make this happen has helped us to say today that we have a strong, living peace laboratory that can be felt every day within the Project”.

There are many hands, minds, hearts and wills that make it possible for Utopia to be a solid proposal that demonstrates the transformative power of education. This campus, located 12 kilometres from Yopal, in the Eastern Plains of Colombia, creates options of high quality comprehensive education - with qualified professors and researchers, high-tech laboratories, a library, productive practices, an agro-industrial plant and multiple options for the development of talents within the campus itself - which allows the opening up of paths of hope from science applied to practice (“learning by doing and teaching by demonstrating”), the culture of peace and Lasallian pedagogy, with the support of the administrative and teaching staff of the University, as well as the philanthropy and productive projects team who are responsible for finding the resources to provide scholarships for each of the students - the former - and for accompanying and helping to finance the projects with which the students return to their territories in the last stage of their training process, to develop a productive

enterprise which, in the future, will benefit their community – the latter.

“We have celebrated 15 years of Utopia on a day filled with emotions, dreams and challenges”, shares Brother Camilo Aguilar, Director of the campus, recalling the commemorative event on 22 May. “We deeply believe that this is God’s work, and we have expressed this by celebrating the Eucharist and by consecrating ourselves to Our Lady of Joy, a particular vocation that we have developed here, because joy is undoubtedly a characteristic feature of education in our Utopia Project”.

During the day of gratitude, memory and projection, which took part of graduates, former Directors donors, university administrators, professors, representatives of the government and business sector, and, above all, of the 228 active students studying the programmes of agricultural engineering and agricultural and livestock engineering, an academic space was also developed to discuss the challenges of peacebuilding, environmental care and business scenarios in the field, from the university context.

Brother Camilo concluded by saying that “they teach us, once again, in the spirit of the Church, to walk together, to build fraternity in the midst of diversity and to value a style of relationships that allows us to cultivate encounter, closeness, compassion, tenderness and fraternity”.















*\* Photos: Universidad de La Salle de Bogotá.*