

The Many Dimensions of Catholic Peacebuilding

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The war-torn nation of Colombia is, paradoxically, both an ideal laboratory of peacebuilding, and a virtually unique case. An “ideal laboratory” because Colombia is a perfect storm, a “comprehensive” internal conflict.

Comprehensive, in that it stretches across time (spanning at least half a century), takes numerous forms (from drug-trade-related assassinations and governmental corruption, to leftist guerrilla kidnapping and terror, to paramilitary, right-wing murders and human rights abuses; from civil war to common crime) and envelops all sectors of Colombian society in its deadly violence while also entangling numerous transnational actors, hostile and friendly states, and the international community.

When the Catholic Peacebuilding Network held its annual conference in Bogotá last summer, I was overwhelmed, inspired and, oddly, reassured by our brief immersion in the setting: **overwhelmed** by the complexity of the conflict; **inspired** by the sophistication, energy and remarkable persistence of the Church and its peacebuilding partners at all levels; and, **reassured** that, yes, this is what things can be like in the toughest cases, and, yes, “peacebuilding” is the appropriate response. It is odd to be “reassured” by a perfect storm of a conflict, I admit, but we were reassured more by the palpable sensation that “building peace” does not mean “solving” or resolving a deep-seated, multi-layered, long-term conflict in some final or definitive way, nor does it mean bringing justice and reconciliation to an entire society—certain tasks must be left to the merciful Lord of history. Rather, to **build peace** in this sin-stained world means joining energetically in the work of coping, striving and hoping: **coping** with the endemic violence and injustice by identifying and supporting local and global actors who are already sustaining pockets of stability and nonviolence amidst the chaos, and by recruiting and enabling others to join this web of relationships; **striving**,

through the network of relationships and through its myriad practices, from education to mediation to advocacy, to effect incremental as well as systemic change; and, doing all this under the canopy of the theological virtue of **hope**, according to which one does what is good and right because it is good and right, not depending on some specific outcome, but trusting that it all somehow matters because the One who was most innocent and good among us was crucified for his efforts and was risen to new life by the Father.

While the tragic elements of Colombia's "internal conflict" render it close to the ideal case for students of protracted conflict and comprehensive peacebuilding, other characteristics make some of the lessons learned less applicable to other settings. Certainly the distinctive and influential role of the Catholic Church is not unique to Colombia; Catholic peacemakers have left their mark on dozens of conflict landscapes around the world. But the pervasiveness of Catholic actors in the society and the hegemonic cultural role of the Church, at least until recently, are remarkably pronounced. The majority of members of army, the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, the victims and the government hails from a Catholic background; the Church plays a central role in conflict transformation and mediation; the symbols and rituals of the masses are suffused with the Catholic sacramental and incarnational imagination. The Catholic role in Colombia is truly "a ubiquitous presence."

The situation of the Church in the Great Lakes region of Africa is similar, and could not be more different. The similarities begin with the central role the Church plays, both in terms of shaping culture and mediating conflict. Shaping culture means, in particular, the striving to create a culture of nonviolence, peace and justice, a society for which human dignity and human rights are sacrosanct, written both into law and in human hearts. As in Colombia, the Church in Burundi, in Rwanda, and in eastern Congo promotes justice and peace through an impressive array of local and regional institutions initiatives, and services, led by women and men, laity, religious and clergy. As elsewhere, the Church is an

alternative to the state, a guarantor—at times, the sole guarantor—of the delivery of whatever social-material relief that is available to the people, and of **presence** to the people, a compassionate and disinterested presence, marked by integrity and devotion to the common good. The Catholic hierarchy, while striving to remain apolitical and operating through civil society, apart from the government in most respects, cannot and must not escape politics, questions of governance and especially the responsibility of shaping a political culture that is at least not inimical to the culture of peace and justice that Catholics and their allies are seeking to build at the grassroots.

Breathtaking poverty, governmental corruption, eruptions of deadly violence, the anticipated tensions within the Church itself—all of these features of the Great Lakes region are familiar from Colombia and elsewhere. But the differences are more striking perhaps than the similarities. The European colonial legacy continues to haunt relations among peoples. Transnational actors play a different role, occupy a different niche. Compared to Colombia, the relative absence of the United States and other international forces changes the configuration of state and church. Most obviously: In a region bloodied in recent decades by genocide and virtual genocide, in which inter-tribal warfare has infected the Church itself, or at least those Catholics who chose tribal loyalty over Gospel values, **hope** is “hope for **Reconciliation**.” These years the Church of Hutus and Tutsis and of minority tribes and other indigenous peoples asks itself: How do we build trust, solidarity and compassion among our peoples, across national boundaries? How do we account for —how do we **fathom** and begin to interpret—the violence we have done to one another? How does the crucified One in any meaningful way *atone for* this holocaust? How do we teach in this climate? How do we reconcile our separate churches, not to mention our traumatized peoples and parishioners?

In Burundi/Congo/Rwanda, as in Colombia **inter-religious conflict** may not be entirely absent, but it is muted. By striking contrast Mindanao is one of the world’s capitals of Christian-Muslim tension, and also a potential site of a world-

captivating breakthrough in Christian-Muslim relationships. The familiar enemies of peace also reside in the southern region of the Philippines: inequality and racial discrimination; grinding poverty amid tiny but powerful islands of affluence; contests over the direction of regional, national, civic even religious identity; an indifferent or obstructionist national government; anti-terrorist policies that boomerang; extremist and separatist movements seeking to effect change through the barrel of a gun.

In this setting, as Myla Leguro and Archbishop Ledesma and others with us this week will testify, Catholics select some familiar tools from the peacebuilders toolkit, but they have had to forge or sharpen others. Muslim, Christian, indigenous is only the beginning of the formula for building relationships and alliances; each of those clunky warehouse terms contains nuance upon nuance. Maddening! Look at Myla: you must ask yourselves: why does she seem so composed? What is her secret?

Over the next few days, and in the pages of the book we are writing to memorialize our learning over these years, you will hear and read much more about the specific characteristics of the conflicts and societies of Colombia, central Africa and Mindanao, and even more about the peacebuilding practices shared by all three and the ones that are distinctive to each setting.

In my remaining time, my assignment is to offer some generalizations about Catholic peacebuilding in its many dimensions: my colleagues on this panel will begin the process of challenging, nuancing and otherwise refining these generalizations, a process that will unfold today and tomorrow, in more sessions than you can shake a stick at.

The three conflicts we have chosen to prioritize—not to the exclusion of others, but in the hope of making a few comparative statements that do not immediately melt under the heat of complexity—share fundamental features that are also

present elsewhere in the world of war. First, they are all **trans-boundary conflicts**, whatever the boundaries may be. **That is, these conflicts are simultaneously local, regional, national and global**—to different degrees, and with varying consequences, depending upon the mix of levels. **They also involve multiple cultural actors: indigenous, post-colonial, racial, ethnic, religious.** Choose a date: **1914** (the first world war). **1948** (UDHR). **1950** (air travel begins to become accessible). **1989. 2001.** Etc. The point is: the deeper the world plunges into modernity and the globalization of modernity, can we really think of any conflict as contained within stable, set national or geographic or cultural or racial boundaries? We are all one another's neighbors now, for better and often for worse.

Second, these conflicts **last a long time**, often running in waves and/or cycles, but not easily put to rest once and for all. To say that "peacebuilding" begins after the shooting ends is often to beg the question: to which round of shooting do you refer, sir? Why do these conflicts go on and on? Another conference is required to address that question but simply consider another date: 1991. No, I do not mean the fall of the Soviet Union—this was the year TIME magazine named *Ted Turner* its Man of the Year: CNN. *{Explain "The CNN Effect." From Tiananmen Square to Tibet, China is not pleased.}* Perhaps the trans-boundary nature of our conflicts and their long-running nature are both tied to our awareness of the grievances, the injustices, and also the ways in which media and techno-scientific modernity can be used repeatedly by all sides, the dictator no less than Human Rights Watch.

In any case, not only do the conflicts endure, but, third, **the people** are involved at all levels, both in the fighting and in protest against injustice and violence. **The actors in conflict have expanded, but so has the range of actors in transforming conflict.** Media had had a democratizing effect in social practices and political networking, from the World Social Forum to the possibility that your next indiscreet act will be emblazoned on YouTube this afternoon, with all the

world to see. NGOs have been around for ages but only the last generation of them have exercised mammoth influence in conflict settings. Conflicts are longer but they are also horizontal as well as vertical, with interested and influential parties as close as the next village and as far away as, well, China.

As the world has evolved, and along with it the nature of war and civil wars, **so, too, has Catholic peace-building**. Peace-building is precisely that mode of conflict transformation that strives to comprehend the *longue durée* of a conflict—its full temporal, trans-generational range—and forge strategies commensurate to the deep historical rootedness of the inhumane personal, social and political relationships fueling the deadly violence.

Peacebuilding is comprehensive in a second sense, in that it strives to address all phases of these protracted conflicts, within which pre-violence, violence, and post-violence periods are difficult to differentiate. Accordingly, violence prevention, early warning, conflict resolution, negotiated settlements, redress of grievances, human rights protection, restorative justice and the deployment of other instruments found in the peacebuilder's tool kit may occur simultaneously, or in overlapping phases. "Peacebuilding" occurs not after the shooting has stopped and the latest peace talks are rumored or underway, but in between and during systematic and recurrent episodes of deadly violence.

Moreover, the peacebuilding community, like conflict itself, has become **catholic** in the sense of all-inclusive, permeating the whole of society and societies, incorporating an astonishing broad range of actors located in diverse settings. The various peacebuilding "tools," methods and dynamics to be discussed at this conference are deployed and practiced by people living in the local communities, those most directly victimized by the violence; by national elites in the churches, government, business, education and other sectors; and, by diplomats, policymakers, scholars, international lawyers, religious leaders and other professionals operating at a geographical remove from the grassroots.

Peacebuilding, if it is to comprehend all sectors of society and engage all the relevant partners, must make use of all viable means of transforming relationships toward a sustainable peace. Msgr. Héctor Fabio underscores the comprehensive nature of the Conference of Bishops' platform for a 'National Permanent Peace Policy' for Colombia:

The basic concept is the participation of all sectors in the development and implementation of a peace policy. Building peace after decades of confrontation and millions of victims requires a participatory process and pedagogy in all spheres of society. Both the participatory process and the pedagogy that must accompany it have gradually been defined through thousands of encounters and community experiences.

In its efforts to promote citizen participation and a peace pedagogy, the Church recognizes that there are various scenarios for peace building; these are not separate compartments, however, but are closely related. There is the scenario of negotiation of the armed conflict, in which government sectors, organizations outside the law, other institutions and facilitators participate. Another scenario involves the formation and strengthening of organized civil society with a capacity for dialogue in the face of the multiple conflicts affecting society. And at least a third scenario involves building structures that guarantee social justice and peaceful coexistence from the grassroots. People involved in ministry face the challenge of establishing dialogue to transform the way in which the deepest aspects of relationships of coexistence are expressed and symbolized.

The focus of peacebuilding, then, Jerry Powers, has noted, is not just on the public policies that are a major concern of Catholic social ethics, but also on a range of other actors, relationships and practices at all levels of society that are integral to healing broken societies and building and sustaining a just peace." *At*

the heart of peacebuilding is the intentional building of relationships at every level of society dedicated to nonviolent transformation of conflict, the pursuit of social justice and the creation of cultures of sustainable peace.

If peacebuilding is small-c catholic, how is it big-C Catholic? My colleagues have warned me against over-emphasizing the theological unity or summarability (ability to summarize) of what Rosemary Haughton called “the Catholic thing”—the distinctive theological-anthropological worldview inculcated by the Catholic Church in its members. And of course this is an important caution regarding a 2,000 year old tradition with Augustinian and Thomistic schools, prophets and mystics, Jesuits and Sisters of Mercy, etc., all of which have relevance for peacemaking. Our task indeed is to tease out various strands in the great Christian tradition that have contributed and could contribute to or even shape the Church’s peacebuilding mission.

My fellow authors have also warned me against underemphasizing the distinctive, even unique gifts other Christians and non-Christians bring to the task of building peace. This, too is a wise caution, and to respond to it substantively would require a full study of the impressive range of religious and spiritual traditions and communities that welcome Catholic as their partners in the work. More realistically, we are obliged to set about the task of rethinking Catholic self-descriptions such as “we prize an anthropological and sacramental worldview” and Christian narratives of creation-fall-redemption in such a way as to make them accessible and “useful” to the practices of peacebuilding and, thereby, to our partners in peacebuilding.

All that being said, we did decide five years ago to call ourselves the **Catholic** Peacebuilding Network, and to justify that decision not only in purely practical terms—how could we possibly include anyone else, given this crowd?—but in substantive ones as well.

The claim, then, is not that “only Catholics” have, say, a sacramental imagination, or a commitment to good governance based on an ethics of

personal responsibility and moral accountability, or a fierce dedication to protecting inalienable human dignity, the sanctity of human life, and the human rights flowing from same. Such a claim, in addition to being false, would also violate the principle of catholicity, by which the Church acknowledges the presence of the Spirit in all people who live according to God's will and who therefore defend human dignity (*Lumen Gentium* -). Rather, the three-fold task is to lift up and consider the distinctive ways in which Catholics theologize about and reflect ethically upon goods and desired ends held in common by other Christians, other believers and nonbelievers; to identify and name those theological and ethical convictions, principles and priorities that are themselves of Catholic provenance, or embraced and incarnated in a recognizable and distinctive manner by Catholics seeing the world through Catholic lenses, that is, through the sacramental, analogical and incarnational imagination; and, to explore the ways in which these Catholic convictions, principles and priorities find expression in Catholic peacebuilding.

What do we gain from this exercise in unearthing and analyzing Catholic-ity in peacebuilding? Let me reveal one secret right away, day one, talk one—one not-so-hidden agenda item: the CPN—or at least me and Dan Philpott—hope to help others nudge forward the rich body of teaching known collectively as the Catholic Social Tradition to develop doctrines that clarify and bring into harmony with other doctrines, the lessons we are learning from the actual practice of faithful Catholics seeking justice and peace in Jesus' name on the ground, in conflict settings. As Dan will say and has written: isn't it about time for a papal encyclical on Reconciliation? (This during breakfast, having already read his papal encyclical for the day.)

What, then, are some basic elements of Catholic and Christian theological and ethical reflection that seem appropriate to the task of interpreting and reinforcing the agency of peacebuilders—and that may also challenge the

Church to revisit, retrieve, and update its own articulation of the great themes of the Christian tradition?

From Great Lakes Africa, we hear the cry of alienation, of families and tribes and churches set in internal conflict, the social fabric frayed beyond recognition by violence and betrayal. At the heart of peacebuilding, we say first, is *relatio*. Christians confess that God as God is in relationship, three in one, bound together by love and self-gift. In order to succeed in the practice, peacebuilders must build sustainable human relationships at every level of society—between local ethnic and religious groups, between political parties and governments, between faith-based groups and nongovernmental organizations, between local and international offices or agencies dedicated to conflict transformation, and so on. *What does Christian theological reflection on shared life grounded in God have to offer us as we theorize and practice peacebuilding?*

Likewise, the view from Mindanao is rich with implications for our theologians and ethicists. The meaning, status and order of priority of *inter-religious dialogue and collaboration* in that setting both reflects and challenges the Catholic Christian worldview—based as it is on the conviction that because God became human every person is a child of God made in God's image. Is the Church today living up to its incarnational humanism and mystical body theology? Mindanao also poses the thorny but pressing question of the status of political theologies and theologies of liberation within Catholic orthodoxy as currently presented.

In a setting as complex and seemingly hopeless as Colombia, what does a Christian theology of hope have to offer—and how is such a theology refined in the crucible of the Colombian experience? To say that Catholic peacebuilding is *sacramental* means, for us, that grace—God's own life, shared by us—informs and shapes our encounter with our neighbors in need in every concrete situation, so that the work of justice and peacemaking contains a depth dimension beyond—and undergirding—the visible and material. Through the created world we encounter the invisible realm of spirit in a transformative way. Catholics seek,

and celebrate, tangible signs, symbols and rituals well beyond the core seven sacraments and the intangibles of grace and the realm of the spirit. A sacramental imagination, that is, sees the created world as the arena of God's saving action; *Catholic anthropology*, by giving human freedom a decisive role in responding to the divine offer of redemption, calls Catholics to collaborate with God, so to speak, in healing hearts, establishing justice, making peace—and thereby ushering in the kingdom of God.

But these are textbook expressions, unrefined by reflection on praxis. Does this type of “deductive catechesis”—theology from “on high”—find resonance on the ground, in the daily interactions of Colombian Catholics? How must it be re-cast? How does a “theology of hope” respond to the concrete situation in Colombia?

In short, the question is this: Can a Catholic religious imagination shape the attitudes, goals, and judgments of peacebuilders—in each of these three settings, and in many others—who are enjoined by the tradition to approach their work with utter confidence that the building of the just and peaceable kingdom is God's work—and that God has prevailed and will prevail?

To what extent do Catholic peacebuilders fit the heady profile sketched above? I would suggest that the answer is: “to a considerable extent.” But I conclude with the following thesis:

Part One: Catholics working for peace in local communities and regions of the world—particularly in the regions of central Africa, southern Philippines and Colombia—have become quite expert in local peacebuilding, that is, in awakening local partners to, and empowering them with, the concepts, tools and practices of nonviolent conflict transformation and relationship-building that leads to the creation and continuing viability of zones of cultures of peace. What they are less successful in achieving is **peacebuilding** that engages players and societal levels beyond the local and regional.

Part two of the thesis: Catholic peacebuilders in Asia, Africa and Latin America do “less well” in making their peacebuilding truly strategic—global as well as local— for two reasons. First, potential partners in the church, in government and among the fuller range of NGOs are largely unaware of or indifferent to the efforts of the therefore relatively isolated local peacebuilders. Second, this weakness in the transnational network of peacebuilding owes in part to the lack of integration of Catholic peacebuilding concepts in Catholic as well as secular education (including theology) and in transnational civil society.

DISCUSS.