

Lessons about the Catholic Church's role in peace processes and post-conflict reconciliation drawn from the Church's experiences in Africa, particularly the Great Lakes region

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Introduction

Let me start by this clarification and some useful facts about the Great Lakes Region of Africa:

- The Great Lakes Region of Africa I am referring to are countries that represent the former Belgian colony and protectorates, namely: Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi and Rwanda. The UN has a different definition of Great Lakes Region of Africa. It includes 11 countries.
- Violent conflicts in this region are regional in nature. Complex ethnic, geographical set up, cultural affinity and other social networks are very strong across the borders and influence the people's lives including their political, economic and social arrangements. Hence, any solution should have to integrate this regional reality.
- The three countries have a legacy of exclusion and violence as means of accessing, controlling and managing power. However, in recent past, with the assistance of the international community, the region has embarked on slow but hopeful process to democracy. UN Peacekeeping missions in DRC and Burundi have been largely instrumental in maintaining peace and opening doors for dialogues and emergence of democratic institutions. The UN Peacekeeping Mission in DRC is considered to be the current largest in the world. With the recent resumption of direct armed confrontations between the government forces and those of the rebellious general Nkunda, it is obvious that UN Mission to DRC needs even more troops, and more resources to keep the fragile peace not only in DRC but also in the region.
- Majority of population in this region are Catholics. (67% in Burundi, 55% in DRC, 48% in Rwanda). The Church has invested and developed expertise in many sectors, and more specifically in Education and health systems.
- International Catholic Relief Agencies such as CRS, CAFOD, TROCAIRE, MISEREOR, etc. have been crucial in assisting local churches to get fully involved in addressing not only emergencies but also to the root causes of the conflicts in the region.

II. Major lessons from Catholic Church peacebuilding

The Church is the hub of safety and humanitarian assistance.

In crisis times, the Church premises and amenities have served as places for immediate safety and emergency relief for victims of atrocities in the Great Lakes Region of Africa. This role has strengthened local and international credibility and trust in the Church institutions such as Caritas or the justice and peace commissions. It is upon such trust and credibility that the Church, if recognized and opportunity is given, could become strategically complementary to the States recovery and development programs, especially in the crucial domains of reconstruction and reconciliation efforts.

The Church has been an Intermediary role player par excellence

The Catholic Church has been instrumental in Peacemaking, the promotion of constructive dialogues, at all levels, among parties involved in violent conflicts in the region. This role is often played out quietly, informally (e.g. in Burundi), and sometime officially (Archbishop Monsengwo was appointed president of National Sovereign Conference in DRC in the 1990s and a priest headed the National Electoral Commission in 2005 elections). At regional level, through the structures of justice and peace commissions, the Church in the Great Lakes region, has engaged communities from neighboring dioceses in

prejudices reduction encounters, and opened up for more cooperation between Congolese, Rwandans and Burundians living side by side. Women are taking lead in this process.

Engine of democratization, institutional building and popular participation

The Church in this region is one of the key pillars on which, the nascent democratization process is rested and sustained. Through small Christian Communities, the Church in the GLR has refined its already enormous outreach capacity, making it the single most powerful community “mobilizer” in the region. The Capacity to reach out the smallest unite in the remotest corner in each country in the region is now utilized to mobilize popular participation in the ongoing democratization process in the region. For example, without the Catholic Church strong decisive contribution in the electoral process, the Democratic Republic of Congo general elections could not have been as success as they turned to be. The contribution of the church in the recent elections in Burundi and Rwanda was significant. The Church media in Burundi played a pivotal in ensuring transparency during the elections hence contribution to reduction of tensions in the country. These processes of peaceful transfer of power in these countries, makes the Catholic Church and other faith based organizations formidable actors for social peaceful change and critical instruments of the emerging democratic culture in the region. In addition, the church is strengthening the judiciary system, making it possible for the most vulnerable in the society access to a fair trial. Hundreds of paralegal members of justice and peace commissions have been trained to assist the vulnerable members of the society. Also, the church is currently playing a significant role in the promotion of respect for human rights, the rule of law and promotion of democratic principles and values through civic education programs.

UN/State peacekeeping and building accompanier: the Reconciler!

The Church in the region is better equipped than any other single actor to consolidate the current peace gains through a reconciliation process. The current political arrangement in the region has created a consensus on the management of power, but has not addressed the deep root causes of violent conflicts among which are often identity issues related to unhealed traumas, historical prejudices, etc. that create negative ethnicity. Indeed, the wars and their corollary violence have left deep psychological wounds in most of the people in the region, especially women and children. Hundreds of thousands of women were systematically violated as rape became a weapon of war, especially in Rwanda during the genocide and recently in eastern DRC. Ethnic and community tensions are still vivid in many places despite the presence of legitimate governments. The Church is engaged in: psychosocial accompaniment of victims through listening centers, devising reconciliation processes, especially at community and addressing the deep seated resentment between members of different ethnic communities.

The Church has played the role of a Capacity builder and institutional moralizer.

If in the 1990s, the Church in the Great Lakes Region, like many, was taken by surprise by intensity and magnitude of violence that engulfed the region, today the Church has increased its awareness and capacity about the role she could decisively play in peacebuilding. Using her extensive education institutions (60% of schools in DRC) and training centers church is, more and more, better equipped in analyzing and understanding the underlying causes of conflict and their dynamics; and in devising strategic responses in preventing and mitigating conflicts while sustaining peace efforts in the region. The church is therefore building the capacity of its members and the society at large to get prepared to prevent violent conflicts and sustain peaceful interactions among member states and communities. In addition, there are more refined instruments are being made available, such as the Caritas Internationalis Peacebuilding manuals, working for reconciliation, etc.

III. Challenges and recommendation

The Catholic Church in the Great Lakes Region is still grappling with the challenges of reconstructing the shattered social fabric: healing the memories, fostering reconciliation while addressing issues of demobilization, disarmament, reintegration of former combatants including child soldiers; thousands of traumatized women, especially victims of rape some of whom are now with unwanted babies/children, HIV/AIDs, curbing the culture of impunity, establishment of legitimate and

representative institutions at all levels, creating a conducive environment for the development of a strategy of inculturation that will lead to a culture of peace in the region etc. If adequate resources are allocated and due recognition as a legitimate and credible partner in the overall UN and individual States intervention structures, is given, the Church offers the best predispositions than any other civil society actor to efficiently respond to these challenges. Peacekeeping operations will greatly benefit in being comprehensive, if they are combined with constructive dialogues and reconciliation initiatives led by the Church or Church based institutions, as part and parcel of peacekeeping "package". This will guarantee the consolidation of peace efforts while creating avenues for reconciliation that is indispensable in the attainment of human security. Maybe the UN peacebuilding Commission is the first step towards this integration.

Holy See Side Event

Peacebuilding: A Role for Religion

United Nations

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