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Religion can be powerful force for freedom, justice, panelists say

By Beth Griffin Catholic News Service

UNITED NATIONS (CNS) -- The same unwavering, absolute commitment to faith that can make religion a source of conflict and division can also make it a powerful force for freedom, justice and liberation, panelists said at an Oct. 7 forum at the United Nations.

They also said the Catholic Church, because of its social teaching and transnational nature, is particularly well-positioned to prevent conflicts from breaking out and to mediate those that are ongoing.

The forum on "Peace-building: A Role for Religion" drew a standing-room-only crowd of more than 100 people. It was co-sponsored by the permanent observer mission of the Holy See, the Path to Peace Foundation and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network.

Archbishop Celestino Migliore, apostolic nuncio to the United Nations, said that contrary to Karl Marx's contention that "religion is the opium of the people ... religion is the vitamin of the poor. It gives the poor a precise identity, a sense of belonging, to those who otherwise can be left behind on the road to globalization."

He said the Holy See delegation helped draft guidelines used by the U.N. Peacebuilding Commission to acknowledge the role of faith-based organizations at the forefront "in fostering dialogue, in peacemaking and in post-conflict resolution."

Panelist **Gerard Powers** said, "It is no accident that at least half the Nobel Prize winners in the past 25 years have been people whose work was inspired by their faith. What is needed is not less religion, as many policymakers suggest ... (but) more religion, more authentic religion. We must marginalize religious extremists, but we must not marginalize religion in the process."

Powers is the coordinator of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network and director of policy studies at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

He quoted former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright saying that faith-based organizations "have more resources, more skilled personnel, a longer attention span, more experience, more dedication and more success in fostering reconciliation than any government."

Powers said the positive peace-building role of religion in some of the world's most conflicted places involves working with political, military, economic and civil society actors at the international, national and local levels.

"The church is deeply rooted in local communities suffering from violence and is often the most important civil society institution in poor, conflicted countries like Sudan and Burundi," he said.

"While it is truly indigenous to areas of conflict, it also has a global reach that can ... bridge the gulf between the zones of peace and prosperity and the zones of culture and deprivation that divide our world," said **Powers**.

Powers said the Catholic Church draws on its theological and ethical framework to "create a culture of peace to overcome the culture of violence that is the predictable product of decades of war." This includes "drawing on the richness of Catholic social teaching, as well as its pastoral theology and sacramental imagination," he said.

As an example, he cited a pastor in rural Colombia for whom the sacrament of reconciliation has "a special salience when the pews are filled with right-wing paramilitaries, left-wing guerrillas, government soldiers and innocent victims of all three."

Powers lauded the effectiveness of interreligious peace-building, saying it can provide a powerful "united front against religious extremists on both sides of a conflict."

But he added that "oftentimes the best way to marginalize extremists is for those authentic voices within their own community to convince their co-religionists that extremism is antithetical to their tradition."

Maryann Cusimano Love, associate professor of international politics at The Catholic University of America in Washington, described a pervasive "conflict trap," which she said is a series of failures to build sustainable peace. "Roughly half of all countries that emerge from war," she said, "lapse back into violence within five years."

She added, "Conflict is particularly hard on the world's poor. Eighty percent of the world's 20 poorest countries have known conflict in recent years."

Cusimano Love said Catholic and other faith-based groups that are not constrained by state sovereignty have a historic opportunity to transform international and local politics through what she calls "resurrection politics."

"Resurrection politics is a politics of life and hope, taking issues thought previously dead on arrival, raising them up onto the agenda, reframing issues with values and powerful

images and thereby changing the political space to include those previously marginalized by drawing on the language and symbols of faith," she said.

As examples of issues, she cited international debt relief, the international campaign to ban land mines, global poverty relief and trafficking in human persons.

Cusimano Love said, "Faith-based groups make up for their lack of money or munitions with the power of their principles and their savvy ability to spread ideas, springboarding from their social networks."

John Katunga, senior adviser for peace-building for the East Africa region of Catholic Relief Services, described the effectiveness of the Catholic Church in the Great Lakes region of Africa, which includes Congo, Rwanda and Burundi.

CRS is the U.S. bishops' overseas relief and development agency.

Katunga said the church has been a hub of safety for people in the region, an intermediary par excellence and an engine of democratization, institution-building and popular participation.

"It is now the single most powerful community mobilizer" in the region and a "formidable actor for peaceful social change," he said.

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