

How can the Church outside the Great Lakes region strengthen the capacity of the Church here to engage in peacebuilding?

By Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ

I offer these modest reflections as the Chair of the USCCB's Ad Hoc Committee on the Church in Africa. I also draw on my experience as a member and past chairman of the USCCB's Committee on International Policy and as a past board member and board chairman of Catholic Relief Services. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Burundi, the Catholic Peacebuilding Network and CRS for their hospitality and this opportunity to be with all of you here this week.

The relationship between the Church in the U.S. and Africa offers both good news and bad. In the past, the Church in the U.S. focused much of our efforts on our brothers and sisters to the south in Latin America. While much was done through CRS, the Society for the Propagation of the Faith and other efforts, Africa did not receive the attention and priority that its needs and potential warranted. This is changing significantly, and that's good news.

Growing out of the U.S. bishops' 2001 statement, *A Call to Solidarity with the Church in Africa*, the USCCB has done extensive policy and advocacy work on debt and development, aid and trade, landmines and conflict resolution and other topics of particular importance to Africans. A particular priority is the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which has struck Africa with unparalleled ferocity. Our ongoing support and advocacy for an end to violent conflict and peacebuilding efforts in your countries here in the Great Lakes region, the Sudan and elsewhere around the continent are central to the work of our Conference.

This stronger and deepening relationship has been reflected in and enriched by many visits of U.S. bishops to the Continent. Speaking personally, this is only the most recent of innumerable visits here. After this gathering, Bishop Murphy and Theo and I are going to Ethiopia, John Carr to Rwanda. We go to listen and learn and to support and stand in solidarity. This new commitment is embodied in our Ad Hoc Committee on the Church in Africa and in our new efforts to secure resources to assist with the pastoral work of the Church here. You may think of us as a rich Church and in many ways we are blessed, but this is an unprecedented initiative, given the financial and other costs of scandals that have driven three U.S. dioceses into bankruptcy. In short, Africa is no longer a neglected area, but a central ecclesial, pastoral and policy priority for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Our active participation in this important gathering is only one sign of this new momentum.

In beginning, I must share my conviction that in any partnership between the Churches here in Africa and the Church in the U.S. and elsewhere, Africans have the primary role. Ecclesiastically, the role and responsibility of the local Church and its bishops must be respected. The local Church is by definition closer to the situation and knows the needs of the people and the social situation more intimately and comprehensively.

The vitality of the local Church in Africa and the Great Lakes region is unmistakable. After my many trips to the region, I stand in awe at the faith and energy of the local Church and its leaders despite enormous obstacles.

However, there are also several reasons why the Church from outside the region, and even from outside Africa, has some distinctive and useful contributions to the mission of peacebuilding.

- 1) The distance of the Church from outside the region can offer a different vantage point and perspective. Sometimes outsiders can see things that elude those of us who are close to a situation or see them in a different way. It is the source of our "naïve" or sometimes "blunt" questions.

- 2) The experience and perspectives of the Church from outside the region can be complementary and useful if different perspectives are shared in a climate of mutual respect and candor.
- 3) The Church from outside the region can help build bridges to relationships and resources in the wider world beyond the local Church. The Church in this region, and in Africa generally, is spiritually rich, but materially poor. And at times, the people and Church of the region are at the mercy of global forces that require international allies and partners in other countries.

So, how can the Church outside the Great Lakes region strengthen the capacity of the Church here to engage in peacebuilding? I will briefly explore four concrete ways, namely: 1) solidarity; 2) teaching; 3) advocacy; and 4) relationships and resources.

I. Solidarity

Solidarity is the essence of our ties as one family of faith. Solidarity is the essential precondition for and means of establishing a productive relationship between the Church outside the region and the Churches here if we are to work together to strengthen capacity for peacebuilding. The ways and means of solidarity include regular communication and occasional well-planned and focused visits. The Church outside the region comes to know better the local Churches – their leaders, people, strengths and challenges. And the local Churches come to know better their partners in the wider Church – their perspectives, interests and resources and limitations.

Building genuine relationships of solidarity is an essential but delicate task. The local Church's experience, initiative and decision-making must be honored and respected. There are also issues of transparency, accountability and ecclesial unity. For example, there are a number of questions that should be respectfully asked and answered before an effective partnership can be established to strengthen peacebuilding.

- Has the Church's leadership in a nation or region really adopted peacemaking as a major focus and goal?
- Is there a strong and effective consensus in the national bishops' conference and, in the case of a region, among the bishops' conferences, regarding the role and program of the Church in peacebuilding?
- Has the Church at the national level decided to devote the resources and energy of its clergy, people and institutions to the peacebuilding effort?

If these questions can be answered clearly and positively, then a foundation exists for a relationship of real solidarity—a partnership that can improve the Church's peacebuilding capacity and mutually strengthen the local Church and the Church outside the region.

II. Teaching

Fundamentally, what brings us together this week is our faith in Jesus Christ and the service of His Church. At the heart of our gathering is the essential biblical links between love of God and neighbor. As Benedict XVI declared in his eloquent and powerful encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*: "Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself and in Jesus we find God." (#15) The Pope calls for a "formation of the heart" to unite the Church in loving care for all our neighbors – and explicitly warns against identifying neighbor "with the closely knit community of a single country **or people**. This limit is now abolished," Benedict declares [emphasis added]. (#15) This is precisely the teaching we all need to hear and heed – in Burundi, Rwanda, the DRC, the United States and in so many places. As teachers and leaders, we must share this truth clearly, consistently and without compromise.

Our Catholic faith and teaching is also the foundation of peacebuilding. As the U.S. Bishops wrote in *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, "Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith. We are called to be peacemakers, not by some movement of the moment, but by our Lord Jesus." (#333) It is our faith and this tradition that have brought us together in Burundi this week, not some movement of the moment or passing fad.

Our attempts this week to explore and express a theology of peace and peacebuilding are an important step. Deeper theological insights can help us to share this teaching more effectively with our people and with the wider society. This task of articulating and sharing a theology of peacebuilding and human rights falls in a special way to those of us who are bishops and exercise the episcopal role of teacher and pastor. But sharing and applying this teaching is richer, fuller and more effective when we consult with and involve the people of God in significant ways. For example, our Conference continues to gain a great deal from lay and religious consultants with whom we work as we seek to articulate and apply teaching on war and peace to new and challenging situations. Although our cultural contexts are different, there is great value in sharing our conferences' work on peace, solidarity and human rights with one another. Just as our discussions this week have been enhanced by a diversity of perspectives and experiences, so too regular sharing among bishops' conferences can help us become better teachers and pastors.

As we teach peacebuilding, we must humbly confess that we have not always lived out fully the practice of peacebuilding. We must admit that sometimes the divisions and conflicts within society find their way into ecclesial life, with sometimes terrible human, moral, pastoral; and spiritual consequences. It is not easy, but we must acknowledge and address these sad truths. These confessions can help make our teaching more credible. As the new Millennium approached, our beloved Pope John Paul II called "the Church [to] become more fully conscious of the sinfulness of her children, recalling all those times in history when they departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel..." (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, no. 33) The Church publicly offered the world a confession of truth and the acceptance of responsibility for past wrongs as essential steps on the path to reconciliation. We should go and do likewise. Without truth there is no reconciliation, and without reconciliation our world is trapped in endless cycles of revenge and retribution.

The Church teaches that peace does not consist simply in the absence of war or violence. The underlying causes of conflicts must be addressed. Peace can only be built on justice. The Church speaks of creating "an authentic culture of peace" in which "the defense and promotion of human rights is essential for the building up of a peaceful society." (*Compendium*, nos. 494, 495) We must help one another to articulate, share and apply Catholic teaching on peacebuilding and its links to justice and human rights in our own communities and together.

III. Advocacy

Another component of the Church's peacebuilding capacity is advocacy. An unusual and important element of our partnership between the African Church and the U.S. Church is our commitment to help provide an opportunity for the Church here to be heard on occasion in the halls of power far away. There is no doubt that U.S. foreign policy can have a profound impact on the prospects for peace and reconciliation in the region. For this reason it is critical that the voices of the Church's leaders in the Great Lakes region be heard where decisions are made in Washington.

Helping to offer a voice to the Churches in the region is not an easy or one-way conversation. A role of the Church in the U.S. is to serve as an advocate for peacebuilders in the Churches here with those leaders and officials in Washington who should support such

efforts through policy initiatives and resources. In addition the Church in the United States frequently adds its own voice, a voice that is made more credible by our partnership with the Church in the region. We have joined together with some modest, if real progress on issues of debt and development, trade and aid, conflict and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, among others.

IV. Relationships and Resources

An obvious building block for peacebuilding is building relationships and resources. In building bridges between the Church in Africa and partners and resources in the wider world, the Church outside the region can serve as an ally, advocate and, to a limited degree, a resource for the national Churches in the region. An example of how this kind of partnership can work well is this peacebuilding initiative here in Burundi.

As you know, this “Creating a Culture of Peace in Burundi” project is financed by USAID. Had the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and CRS not served as liaisons between the Burundian Church and AID, this important collaboration would never have been possible. Equally important were the training and strategy sessions, involving leaders from the local Church and the Church in the U.S. that were held in Maryland.

The potential of this sort of intercontinental networking is considerable. As the global makeup of the participants here suggests, the Catholic Church’s institutional presence and leadership in many countries around the world offers unparalleled opportunities for building relationships and tapping available resources.

For many years now I have been impressed by the vital institutional presence of the Church and by its potential for peacebuilding. With the Church’s social teaching as a foundation, Catholic parishes, schools, seminaries, lay ecclesial organizations and commissions can provide institutional capacity for the Church to be a leaven for peacebuilding within the wider society. Brave priests, religious and lay leaders are well positioned to advance the cause of peace with justice through teaching, training, advocacy and action.

The Church outside the region also has institutional capacity and leadership that can strengthen the Church here, as this gathering suggests. Universities, schools, seminaries and dioceses in the United States can partner with the Church’s institutions here in the region to share ideas and resources and to exchange visits. Through mutually enriching partnerships, which in a sense is modeled by this conference, the capacity of the Church for peacebuilding can be enhanced in many different places.

V. Conclusion

The broad participation in this week’s conference demonstrates the commitment of the Church in the region to engage seriously in building structures of enduring peace, justice and reconciliation. As a representative of the U.S. Church, I welcome your leadership and pledge our continuing solidarity in articulating Catholic teaching on peace, sharing resources and relationships, and advocating and acting together. In these ways, the Church in the U.S. and Africa can better fulfill the declaration of Jesus to the multitudes gathered on the Mount: “Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God.” By our work here to become better peacemakers, we can become more fully God’s children. Let us build peace together, as Jesus calls us to do. Thank you.