

## *The Search for Peace in Burundi*

*Bujumbura, 26 July 2006*

May I begin by thanking the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Burundi, the Kroc Institute and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network for the invitation to attend and to speak at this *Archbishop Michael Courtney Memorial Conference on Catholic Peacebuilding in Africa=s Great Lakes Region*. For the Holy See, the Apostolic Nunciature in Burundi and for me personally this Conference obviously has a double poignancy.

I have been asked to talk on *The Search for Peace in Burundi* but there are many, perhaps a majority of people in this room who are much more qualified to address this subject, but as we say in English: Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!

I think St John of the Cross, the sixteenth century Carmelite mystic, wrote concerning the spiritual life that when you wish to go to a place that you do not know, then you must go by a way you do not know. So it is that the post-colonial history of Burundi has sadly been that of seeking something unknown, because since independence up to today this marvellous Country has not known true peace. Likewise, the

search for lasting peace has been a matter of cautiously feeling the way forward along a dark road, which has proved normally dangerous and, as the dedication of this Conference reminds us, often deadly.

This sad observation is however compensated for to some degree by the determination of the people and leaders of Burundi to seek and work for peace, and this has fortuitously been matched by an equally firm commitment from the international community in general and the regional powers, the African Union and the United Nations in particular, to do everything to sustain the Burundians in this quest. However, the indispensable foundation of the significant success of recent years has been the will of the Burundian people to bring an enduring and prosperous peace to this land.

It has been as if two parallel processes have been underway, and we hope that unlike parallel lines in geometrical theory, these processes will meet in time and not at infinity. The first process I have just referred to involves the grass roots, the efforts of individuals to rebuild their lives through reconciliation and co-existence with their neighbours and others. The second is a more formally political process of which the highlights have been the Arusha negotiations and Agreements of 2000, the cease-fire agreement with CNDD-FDD in 2003 and the elections and the installation of a democratically elected government and institutions last year. Both these processes need each other still, and have achieved and will continue to achieve success though their

combined efforts.

To my mind one of the greatest obstacles that Burundians have faced and to some degree still face is a correct diagnosis of the disease that has persistently afflicted this society. Without a correct diagnosis it is difficult to treat the patient and the symptoms remain persistent. A period a remission is normally destined to prove short lived and the illness returns more virulent than ever and stubbornly resistant to any cure. Simple ethnicity now seems an inadequate explanation of what has unfolded here over the years, and elements of regionalism, clanship and kinship, and vested political interest seem essential considerations also.

Burundi is rightly being hailed as an example to be emulated by other countries emerging from a prolonged period of conflict. Already the President has received a number of international prizes on behalf of the Country, and Burundi=s election to the recently constituted UN Peace Building Commission is indicative of the satisfaction of the international community with what has been achieved here. Formal solutions have indeed been found to many of the obstacles to lasting peace in Burundi, but a solution in these circumstances is rather like a proposal: its adoption allows you to move forward confidently, but you are still required to work for the long-term resolution of the situation, if your satisfaction is to be justified.

In this process I see a number of key elements as endowed with both positive and negative potential.

War has stalled the development of a once promising Nation and dire poverty afflicts almost the entire population. Poverty makes a society fragile and daily concern with personal or collective survival makes people vulnerable to manipulation. However, combatting poverty has the potential to unite a community against its real rather than its imagined enemies, and is the most worthy and urgent objective of all political endeavour.

Our conference is going to focus on the Great Lakes= Region. Here geographical and cultural proximity has led to an historical and actual inter-dependence. And it seems clear that regional integration at many levels will advance and protect the interests of the Region=s States. In the case of Burundi regional stability may be an essential condition for enduring national stability. Burundi=s ambitions to join and be an active member of the Regional political and technical institutions will foster such integration and stability, and open up new horizons for the talented population of this Country.

As elsewhere in Africa and the developing world, Burundians have a thirst for education, in order to give expression and fulfilment of their indisputed talents. On the other hand, education raises ambitions and

expectations which in the present circumstances are only satisfied with great difficulty and by a few, and which can even lead to a depletion of the national pool of talent. It is for this reasons that the creation of promising and rewarding employment must be among the greatest challenges facing this society at present.

The *forma mentis* which has arisen as a result of persistent juridical impunity has contributed in a major way to the social malaises present within Burundian society and poses a threat to future healthy development. In the fight against this the restoration of a normal climate of justice will require determination, resources and expertise. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming Commission Verité et Réconciliation will have an impact here too.

The fostering of improved relations between the citizenry and those charged and empowered with their protection and security will enhance the stability of this society. And the growing appreciation of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Armed Forces and Police will improve social cohesion and cooperation, and confidence in the rectitude of these officers.

As I have already mentioned the engagement of the international community at various levels has been crucial to the success achieved in Burundi. It is encouraging to learn that such commitment will be

maintained. We live in a world of increasing inter-relationships and inter-dependence. This is a simple fact of modern international life; it is a richness to be accepted enthusiastically and worked at so that the greatest mutual benefit may be derived from it.

A few days ago I was privileged to be invited to meet with President Pierre Nkurunziza. In the course of our conversation the Head of State insisted that among the responsibilities of the Religious Confessions in Burundi is that of gaining the minds and hearts of the people to the cause of that profound reconciliation and healing which still has to be accomplished within this society. He is convinced that this is far beyond what can be expected of politics. The Church should indeed be aspiring to catalyse Burundian society to embrace this present moment which is a great opportunity to consolidate the achievements of recent years and firmly to establish them within the soul of the Burundian People. This is a delicate, painful and daunting task, in view of which it is entirely understandable that there should be doubts, hesitations and fear. It will require great determination and firm convictions to reach the other side of such a river.

I have been encouraged by much of what I am seeing within the Church. The Peace and Reconciliation Projects being pursued within the *Union de Clergé Incardiné et l'Association des Supérieurs Religieux* are a recognition by the Church that we cannot contribute to the good of the

body politic, unless we begin from deep within ourselves and with those entrusted with the pastoral care of the Christian people. We can do much, but there is healing and reconciliation to be completed within Church first. We have to take the dirt from our own eye first before we attempt to purify others. May I take this opportunity to acknowledge the support that these projects are receiving from CRS.

On the basis of what is being worked through with the priests and religious the Bishops have embarked on that traditional form of Church renewal which is represented by a Diocesan Synod. Such a undertaking is certainly not a quick fix, but such synods hold out the hope of a process from which much benefit may be derived.

Let us pray that this Conference will contribute to strengthening the resolve of all who desire ardently to reach together and by every means available the peace which has so often eluded that grasp of humanity, and yet which remains as essential to our well-being as the air we breathe.

Now to conclude, it is with great pleasure that I wish to read the Letter I have received from His Eminence Cardinal Sodano, the Secretary of State of His Holiness, in which he transmits the Pope's Message for this Third International Conference on Peace Building.

