

Reimagining Catholic Peacebuilding Through Pope Francis’s “Culture of Encounter”: The Case of Nigeria’s Niger Delta Region

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Abstract: The document *Pacem in Terris* (PT) represents a pivotal moment in the history of Catholic social teaching, both at the level of the universal church and local churches. PT asserts that the church has a moral duty to contribute to global peace, to be founded on the principles of truth, justice, charity, and freedom, in imitation of Christ the Prince of Peace. This article argues that Pope Francis’s “culture of encounter” (CoE) significantly advances this moral obligation, which it conceives as constitutive of the church’s evangelizing mission, to contribute to sustainable just peace through social dialogue and active nonviolence incorporating well-coordinated peace advocacy while reimagining the conceptualization of conflict and peacebuilding processes. The article uses a literature review to examine two key questions: firstly, how Francis conceptualizes conflict in light of the CoE; and secondly, the practical implications of the CoE for rethinking Catholic peacebuilding strategies, especially in Nigeria’s Niger Delta region. In conclusion, the article demonstrates how Pope Francis’s papacy integrates teaching and praxis in the church’s promotion of global peace. The “culture of encounter,” a hallmark of Francis’s papacy, calls for reinvigorated ecclesial self-identity and prophetic witness, essential for the church’s active contribution to global conflict transformation and sustainable social peace.

TODAY, ABOUT A QUARTER OF HUMAN BEINGS LIVE IN PLACES plagued with the phenomenon of (violent) conflict, leaving over 84 million persons displaced globally.¹ For example, we have the Russian war in Ukraine, gun violence in the US, armed conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan, DRC, Mali, Haiti, Peru, Nigeria, etc. Some of these (violent) conflicts are linked to political power tussles, extremist religious ideologies, natural resource control, or a combination of many factors.

¹ UN Secretary-General António Guterres, “Remarks to Peacebuilding Commission on Sustainable Peacebuilding,” (March 30, 2022), ww2.press.un.org/en/2022/sgsm21216.doc.htm#:~:text=As%20we%20%20meet%20today%2C%20one,vio%20and%20human%20rights%20violations.

Nigeria's Niger Delta violent conflict is an example of a natural resource-based conflict, and it shall be discussed in detail as a case study in the last part of this article.

This multifocal reality of violence makes plain the fact that the promotion of peace is a global challenge that requires the collaboration of secular governments and religions. As a religious body, the Catholic Church engages in global peacebuilding through its institutions and teachings grounded in faith-inspired ideals and imaginations.² Examples of such teachings from the universal church and particular churches would include John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (PT), the African bishops' pastoral letter *Christ Our Peace* (2001), and the US bishops' pastoral letter *The Challenge of Peace* (1983, CP). These documents promote global peacebuilding as a moral duty binding for the church. Currently, Pope Francis's "culture of encounter" (CoE) carries forward this moral duty and, as I aim to show, reimagines it, thus taking the role of the Catholic Church in peacebuilding to the next level.

This article addresses the following three questions. First, how does Pope Francis conceive of conflict in light of the CoE? Second, what are the practical implications of the CoE for the Catholic Church's peacebuilding role? And third, how might these implications help us rethink the Nigerian Church's peacebuilding strategies in the Niger Delta region? To answer these questions, this article is divided into four sections. The first provides a contextual analysis of the Niger Delta violent conflict. The second section explores how Catholic social teaching conceived the church's peacebuilding role before Pope Francis. The third section conceptualizes the CoE and investigates how it reimagines the church's global peacebuilding role. The final section considers the implications of the CoE for rethinking the Nigerian Catholic Church's peacebuilding strategies in transforming the natural resource-based violent conflict in Nigeria's Niger Delta region.

MAPPING THE NIGER DELTA VIOLENT CONFLICT

The Niger Delta region is situated in the southern part of Nigeria at the mouth of the river Niger, from where it derives its name, covering land and waterways inclusive of about seventy-five thousand square kilometers. Politically, the region comprises nine oil-producing states—Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo, and Rivers—that account for over forty-five million people

² See Maryann C. Love, *Global Issues: Beyond Sovereignty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 141–182.

with different spoken languages and cultural heritage.³ The peoples' means of livelihood and commercial activities are defined by the riverine and swampy as well as the mangrove forest terrain of the region, making it favorable for subsistent economies derived from fishing, farming, trading, food processing, and manufacturing. With the discovery of crude oil in commercial quantity in 1956, the Niger Delta region became the economic mainstay of Nigeria, with oil revenue accounting for over 60 and 80 percent of the nation's income and foreign exchange earnings respectively.⁴

However, the Niger Delta has been afflicted by violent conflict since the early 2000s, with the Nigerian government, multinational oil companies (MNCs), and Niger Delta militants as the principal conflict actors. Certain remote historical and political factors have been identified as causes of the violent conflict, such as the slave trade, colonialism, and unjust legislation.⁵ The Niger Delta became the largest outpost for the slave trade in West Africa due to the coastal nature of the region. The region has scarcely healed from the dehumanizing ordeal and trauma of the slave trade before the advent of British colonial rule.⁶ With the consolidation of its consular rule in the 1850s, the British exploited the Niger Delta people and their resources.⁷ For example, the colonial government enacted the Mineral Oil Act of 1914 which granted licenses and concessions for crude oil exploration and exploitation to British companies only.⁸ The

³ Due to the politics of oil and the revenue derivation policy associated with it, the Niger Delta region has been politically defined as comprising nine oil-producing states. This definition contrasts with the geographical cum cartographical as well as historical definition that recognizes Delta, Bayelsa, and Rivers as the three core states of the Niger Delta region (see Henry A. Daupamwei, "A Concise View of Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: An Interpretation of a Nigeria Historian," *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary and Multidisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 10 [2016]: 56–63).

⁴ See Sabella O. Abidde, *Nigeria's Niger Delta: Militancy, Amnesty, and the Postamnesty Environment* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 40. See also Ben Naanen, "When Extractive Governance Fails: Oil Theft as Resistance in Nigeria," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 6 (2019): 703; Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, "Introduction: Petro-violence in the Niger Delta—The Complex Politics of an Insurgency," in Cyril Obi and Siri Aas Rustad, eds., *Oil and Insurgency in the Niger Delta: Managing the Complex Politics of Petro-violence* (London: Zed, 2011), 3.

⁵ See Kekong Bisong, *Restorative Justice in Conflict Management* (Enugu: Snaap, 2008), 91–117.

⁶ Bisong, *Restorative Justice*, 91.

⁷ Tekena H. Tamuno, *Oil Wars in the Niger Delta 1849–2009* (Ibadan: Stirling-Horden, 2011), 19. See also Michael Odama, "Population Density and 'Slave Raiding': The Case of the Niger Delta of Nigeria," *Journal of African History* 10 (2005): 160.

⁸ John K. Wangbu, "Environmental and Social Cost of Oil in Nigeria: Niger Delta Agitation for Justice *vis-à-vis* Principles of Catholic Social Teaching," in John K. Wangbu, ed., *Niger Delta: Rich Region, Poor People* (Enugu: Snaap, 2005), 5.

colonialists brought together different kingdoms of the Niger Delta coast to create the Niger Coast Protectorate (NCP), but also merged the NCP with other kingdoms and ethnic groups that hitherto were not part of the Niger Delta coast to form the Southern Protectorate. The effect of this merger was worsened by the “unholy and unsolicited alliance” of 1914, in which the Southern and Northern Protectorates were amalgamated into one political entity called Nigeria, thereby marginalizing the region and obscuring its traditional autonomy and religious worldviews as well as cultural identity.⁹

Apart from the traumatizing effect of the slave trade and the negative impact of colonialism, the Niger Delta has also been a victim of unjust and unfavorable legal frameworks and policies.¹⁰ Such laws include the reduction in revenue-sharing formula from 50 to 3 percent, but later raised to 13 percent in 1999; the 1978 Land Use Act (consolidated by the 2021 Petroleum Industry Act) which enabled the federal and state governments to claim ownership of land and resources in the Niger Delta; and discriminatory policies in Nigeria’s political institutions. Particularly, the Land Use Act has been described as a gross injustice to the Niger Delta because it dislodged the Land Tenure System (LTS) that operated in the Niger Delta region and made all royalties, taxes, and rents paid to the state. The LTS was based on customary laws, which allowed families and communities to own land, while crude oil ownership was vested in the state. Most importantly, under the LTS arrangement, MNCs needed to obtain mining licenses from the state and permission from host communities before gaining access to the land for oil exploration and exploitation. The host communities received annual rent from the MNCs for permission and compensation for any damage to farm crops and plantation, property, or the land itself in the course of extractive activities.¹¹

⁹ Jonah I. Elaigwu, “Ethnicity and the Federal Option in Africa,” *Nigerian Journal of Federalism* 1, no. 1 (1994): 69. Bisong argues that “the fundamental cause of the present Niger Delta crisis was laid in the colonial period within the context of the inability of the then government to address the issue of minorities. Minority in this perspective refers to an ethnic group who by virtue of their population are singled out from others and regard themselves as an object of collective discrimination. Therefore, a minority is bound to face exclusion from the political and economic life of the larger society. In this notion, the minority is in constant opposition with the dominant ethnic group” (Bisong, *Restorative Justice in Conflict Management*, 99; see also Louis Wirth, *The Problem of Minority Groups*, reprint [New York: Irvington, 1993]).

¹⁰ Bisong, *Restorative Justice*, 104–105.

¹¹ See Kaniye S. A. Ebeku, “Oil and the Niger Delta People: The Injustice of the Land Use Act,” *Verfassung und Recht in Übersee / Law and Politics in Africa, Asia, and Latin America* 35, no. 2 (2002): 201–231.

Additionally, proximate causes of the violent conflict have been identified. These include pollution and environmental degradation resulting from decades of oil exploration, which negatively impacts human health; the alienation and deprivation of the Niger Deltans from their resources, means of livelihood, and environment; unfair neglect by the government and MNCs; and socioeconomic and political marginalization and exclusion, leading to multidimensional poverty. These factors collectively contributed to the formation of the Niger Delta militant group and its subsequent demands for self-determination and control over the region's resources.¹² While the Niger Delta struggle commenced with peaceful intentions, aimed at transforming the region's adverse environmental, socio-economic, and political circumstances, its trajectory soon shifted towards violence. This transformation can be traced back to the Nigerian government's undiplomatic response and approach to the crisis at the heart of the movement.¹³

The Nigerian government has taken certain actions in response to the violent conflict and its subsequent impact on the nation's economy. These actions included some measures reflecting a militaristic initial approach employed to suppress the activities of the Niger Delta militants, preventing them from protesting and making demands. Instead of resolving the underlying issues in the region, this military response exacerbated the situation, causing significant distress and further conflict, as evidenced by reports of terror, rape, torture, and death, and the forcible displacement of many individuals whose villages were destroyed.¹⁴ A typical example was the Ogoni crisis with Shell and the federal government, which led to the

¹² See Olalekan Bello, "The Dynamics of Nigeria's Oil and Gas Industry's Regulation: Revealing/Storying Neglected Voices and Excluded Lives of Environmental Encounters and Affects," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Westminster, 2021); Emmanuel C. Onwuka, "Oil Extraction, Environmental Degradation and Poverty in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria: A Viewpoint," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 62, no. 6 (2006): 655–662; Eghosa E. Osaghae, Augustine Ikelegbe, Omobolaji O. Olarinmoye, and Stephen L. Okhomina eds., *Youth Militias, Self Determination, and Resource Control Struggle in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria* (Dakar: CODESRIA, 2011); Zainab Mai-Bornu, "Oil, Conflict, and the Dynamics of Resource Struggle in the Niger Delta: A Comparison of the Ogoni and Ijaw Movements," *The Extractive Industries and Society* 6, no. 4 (2019): 1282–1291, [w2.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214790X19300863](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214790X19300863).

¹³ See Fidelis A. E. Paki, "The Impact of Militarization of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Journal of Environmental Science and Resources Management* 11, no. 3 (2019): 1–18, [w2.cenresinjournal.com/2020/06/09/the-impact-of-militarization-of-the-niger-delta-region-of-nigeria/](https://www.cenresinjournal.com/2020/06/09/the-impact-of-militarization-of-the-niger-delta-region-of-nigeria/).

¹⁴ Emmanuel Osigwe, "Justice and Reconciliation in the Niger Delta of Nigeria: Exploring Insights from Catholic Social Thought," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 28 (2016): 60.

execution of human and environmental rights activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others by the Nigerian military government in 1995. The second response was the establishment of intervention agencies and commissions, such as the Oil Mineral Producing Areas Development Commission (OMPADEC, 1992), the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC, 2000), the Ministry of Niger Delta Affairs (MNDA, 2008), and the Presidential Amnesty Programme (PAP, 2009). These commissions were established to address the underlying causes of the conflict, as well as to facilitate the development of human and infrastructure resources within the region. Although the PAP helped reduce the intensity of the violence because it invested in deradicalization and capital development of youth, these commissions have been unsuccessful in resolving the violent conflict in the region, which still experiences intermittent and sporadic physical violence. This failure has been attributed to their top-down approach, corruption, lack of strategic peacebuilding dialogue process, and lack of commitment on the part of the MNCs and Nigerian government.¹⁵ Lastly, the government responded to the conflict by increasing the revenue derivation policy from 3 to 13 percent in 1999.¹⁶ Despite the increase in revenue, Niger Deltans continued to suffer and the prospect of peace in the region remained elusive. This was due to a combination of factors, including a lack of expediency in the implementation process and the ultimate misappropriation of funds by corrupt politicians.¹⁷ Additionally, militants in the Niger Delta have called for the reversal of the derivation policy, requesting a 50 percent revenue share, previously attainable when Nigeria's economy primarily relied on agricultural products from various regions of the country before the discovery of oil. The government's response to the conflict was unsuccessful because it could not alter the above-discussed fundamental unjust ecological, social, economic, and political structures, as well as the legal policies pertaining to land ownership

¹⁵ See John K. Wangbu, *The Niger Delta Paradox: Impoverished in the Midst of Abundance* (Ibadan: Safari, 2018), 79–83.

¹⁶ In the years following the country's independence (in 1960), the 1963 Republican Constitution maintained the status quo to the extent that the "1964 Binn Commission" continued to recommend a 50 percent allocation to the region where the revenue was generated. However, the distribution of revenues experienced fluctuations due to the government's reduction of the allocation to 5 percent in 1981 and 1.5 percent in 1984. Subsequently, the revenue was increased to 3 percent in 1992 and has remained at 13 percent since 1999. Bisong asserts that alterations to the derivative formula are predominantly influenced by individuals from the majority region, who have historically received 50 percent of the region's production prior to the discovery of oil in the Niger Delta (see Bisong, *Restorative Justice*, 104–105).

¹⁷ Osigwe, "Justice and Reconciliation," 59–60.

and revenue sharing, which are the root causes of violence in the region.

Conscious of its moral duty to work for justice and promote social peace, and guided by the principles of CST, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has not been indifferent to the Niger Delta violent conflict. Through the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), the church has responded to the violence by engaging in peacebuilding strategies such as issuing pastoral communiqués and charitable activities. In 2003, the church issued a communiqué at the end of its plenary meeting, condemning “the use of violence as a means to achieve any end, no matter how legitimate or noble.”¹⁸ It called all parties involved to dialogue, insisting that the government “set up a commission to identify the causes of the perennial violence, as well as those responsible and proffer an enduring solution to the crisis.”¹⁹ The church requested the Nigerian government and MNCs to “compensate and rehabilitate those who have suffered losses” as well as develop infrastructures (e.g., refineries, health care, education, housing, roads, etc.) in the region “in order to alleviate the suffering of the poor masses.”²⁰ In 2006, at the end of its plenary, the church issued another communiqué in which it stated that the Niger Delta violent conflict resulting “principally from the long-standing social injustice against that region which contributes immensely to our national economy is regrettable.”²¹ As such, the church called on the government to “exercise utmost prudence in responding to the intermittent violence there.”²² The church has also carried out charitable activities in the region, such as almsgiving, capacity building in agro-business and climate-smart agriculture, and provision of medical services.²³ Despite

¹⁸ CBCN, Communiqué “Hope for a Better Nigeria,” Owerri, September 1–6, 2003, in Chris Anyanwu and Otunba J. Fadugba-Pinheiro, eds., *Our Concern for Nigeria: Catholic Bishops Speak: Communiqués Issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference on the State of the Church and Nigerian Nation from 1963 to 2015* (Abuja: Directorate of Social Communications, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2016): 210.

¹⁹ CBCN, Communiqué “Hope for a Better Nigeria,” 210.

²⁰ CBCN, Communiqué “Hope for a Better Nigeria,” 210–211.

²¹ CBCN, Communiqué “Keeping Hope Alive,” Abuja, February 6–11, 2006, in Anyanwu and Fadugba-Pinheiro, eds., *Our Concern for Nigeria*, 234.

²² CBCN, Communiqué “Keeping Hope Alive,” 234.

²³ See Agenzia Fides, “The Church in Nigeria Collects Offerings for the Victims of Violence in the Niger Delta” (May 29, 2009), w2.fides.org/en/news/24345-africa_nigeria_the_church_in_nigeria_collects_offerings_for_the_victims_of_violence_in_the_niger_delta_it_is_not_time_to_apportion_blames_but_to_assist_our_brothers_and_sisters_in_need; Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN), “Youth in Farming Business” (2015–2016), w2.caritasnigeria.org/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=listcats&cat_id=86&Itemid=1081; CCFN, “Emergency Response” (June 2018), w2.caritasnigeria.org/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=viewlink&link_id=52&Itemid=1082; CCFN, “Support for Vaccine Justice in Nigeria Using Faith-Based Leaders”

the successes recorded by the church's strategies of issuing communiqués and engaging in charitable actions, it could not transform the Niger Delta violent conflict due to some pitfalls in its strategies, discussed later in this article. Hence, there is a need to rethink the church's peacebuilding strategies in light of Francis's culture of encounter peacebuilding model.

CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING BEFORE POPE FRANCIS

In order to gain insight into the culture of encounter and its peacebuilding model, it is essential to examine Catholic peacebuilding before Francis's pontificate. The idea of peacebuilding in Catholic social teaching flows from the biblical vision of positive peace, classified into three dimensions, namely eschatological (fulfillment of creation), spiritual (interior peace), and political (proper ordering of and right relations in society) peace.²⁴ Although the primary vocation of the church might be to bring about spiritual and eschatological peace, the Catholic Church has not been indifferent to contributing to political peace through its social teaching because it believes that the three dimensions of peace are interconnected.²⁵ Most especially in the modern period, beginning with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) of Leo XIII, the church has taken its duty to contribute to political peace more seriously. Since then, the church at the universal and local levels has continued to progress amid challenges in this global peacebuilding agenda.

The year 1963 represents a watershed moment in the development of official Catholic social teaching, especially on peace and war, as it was the year John XXIII issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) addressed, for the first time in the history of papal encyclicals, to all Catholics and people of good will to emphasize our collective responsibility towards building global peace. PT claims that peace is an objective desire of every human being: "For who is there who does not feel the craving to be rid of the threat of war, and to see peace preserved and made daily more secure?"²⁶ It argues that global peace "can never be established, never guaranteed, except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order" (PT, no. 1). The

(January–December 2022), w2.caritasnigeria.org/index.php?option=com_mtree&task=viewlink&link_id=86&Itemid=271.

²⁴ Kenneth R. Himes, "Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching," in Robert J. Schreiter, Scott R. Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers, eds., *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010): 268–269.

²⁵ Himes, "Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching," 269.

²⁶ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 115, w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html (PT hereafter).

church bears the responsibility to facilitate the formation of individual consciences through an “integral education” that equips them with the capacity to construct a peace founded upon the principles of truth, justice, charity, and freedom (PT, nos. 153 and 167).

PT conceives peacebuilding as “both [a] divine and human task,” which “marks the beginning of a new understanding of Christians’ vocation to promote peace.”²⁷ This new understanding is grounded in the person of Christ who is both the “Author of Peace” and “Prince of Peace” (PT, nos. 117 and 166) and in the promotion and protection of equality of human rights, knowing that “without respect for human rights, peace cannot be reliably sustained.”²⁸ What underlies equality of rights and duties, be it economic, religious, political, moral, or cultural, is the principle of human dignity (PT, nos. 20, 35, 104, and 122). Also, PT understands peace not as mere tranquility in society or the absence of war but as a constant effort to maintain harmony in human relationships based on respect for human rights and mutual trust.²⁹

That peacebuilding requires constant effort is an indication that building sustainable and dynamic social peace is a process. Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes* (GS hereafter) attests that “peace is never attained once and for all, but must be built up ceaselessly” in society through sincere collaborative efforts of all global citizens and institutions.³⁰ As a universal institution, in obedience to the truth of the Gospel of Christ, GS invites all Christians and people of good will “to do in love what the truth requires, and to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about” (GS, no. 78).

Taking this invitation both in PT and GS seriously, different local Catholic churches at the continental, regional, and national levels have reflected on the peacebuilding mission of the church based on their context and particularities. At the continental level, for example, the African bishops published a pastoral letter, entitled “Christ Our Peace,” in 2001. This document was the final outcome of the Plenary Assembly of SECAM in 2000, and reflected on the Church’s peacebuilding mission. The document states that in Africa and the world at large, violence and wars are mostly the result of an unjust political, social, and economic system that creates inequality, and the

²⁷ Laurie Johnston, “*Pacem in Terris* and Catholic Peacebuilding,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 11, no. 1 (2014): 94.

²⁸ Johnston, “*Pacem in Terris*,” 96.

²⁹ Johnston, “*Pacem in Terris*,” 96.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et Spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” no. 78), w2.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (GS hereafter).

church must speak against and work to transform such a system.³¹ It argues that “the Church as a family of God” must be “at the service of the peace that Christ offers humanity,” and the church carries out this service “particularly through catechesis and through various diplomatic initiatives for peace.”³² The church’s peace catechesis and initiatives must place a premium on the necessity of conversion and dialogue to advance the causes of justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation; to promote appropriate human relationships with God and one another; and foster recognition and respect for human dignity and human rights.³³

The need for conversion and dialogue to promote the values of justice and reconciliation necessary for sustainable and dynamic peacebuilding was especially highlighted during the Second African Synod of Bishops on “The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace” in 2009. The Synod fathers argued that “the Church in Africa, both as a family of God and as individual faithful has the duty to be instruments of peace and reconciliation, after the heart of Christ, who is our peace and reconciliation.”³⁴ They maintained that breaking the vicious cycle of violence does not admit unforgiveness, revenge, or counterattack but requires forgiveness grounded in the admission of wrongdoing, reparation, justice, and solidarity capable of promoting “peace that goes to the roots of the conflict.”³⁵ The Synod fathers called on all the dioceses in Africa as “artisans of peace and reconciliation” to prioritize the peacebuilding agenda by establishing the Justice and Peace Commission and instilling in its members and institutions the values of justice, forgiveness, reconciliation, transparency, accountability, and common good to mitigate poverty and promote peace.³⁶

At the national level, the Nigerian Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral communiqué on “Peace Through Justice and Love” in 1989.³⁷

³¹ Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM hereafter), Pastoral Letter “Christ Our Peace [Eph 2:14]: The Church-as-Family of God, Place and Sacrament of Pardon, Reconciliation, and Peace in Africa” (Kumasi: Catholic Press, 2001), nos. 26–32.

³² SECAM, “Christ Our Peace,” no. 61.

³³ SECAM, “Christ Our Peace,” nos. 57–60 and 65–67.

³⁴ Second African Synod of Bishops, “Message to the People of God of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops,” (October 23, 2009), no. 8, w2.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091023_message-synod_en.html.

³⁵ Second African Synod of Bishops, “Message to the People of God,” nos. 8–9.

³⁶ Second African Synod of Bishops, “Message to the People of God,” nos. 18–27.

³⁷ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN hereafter), “Peace Through Justice and Love” (1989), in Anyanwu and Fadugba-Pinheiro, eds., *Our Concern for Nigeria*, 65–71.

The bishops stated that it is a “God-given mission to work relentlessly and in faith” for the promotion of peace within the church and society built on justice, truth, love, and universal brotherhood.³⁸ For them, “true religion has to do with God who is one, true, just, and loving. It cannot lead to disunity, deceit, injustice, and hatred.”³⁹ As such, the church as a religious body has to “fight against injustice and evil, wherever it is found, and to promote [common] goodness and justice” vital to building sustainable peace in society.⁴⁰ However, the bishops acknowledged that peacebuilding is challenging, but they argued that the church must arm itself with the weapons of dialogue, Christian solidarity, and collaboration with other religious and secular groups to challenge unjust structures at the social, economic, and political levels to promote social peace.⁴¹

Despite these contributions of the church at various levels, achieving global peacebuilding in our contemporary time remains a challenge that calls for much more ecclesial commitment. Pope Francis appears to take seriously this challenge, inviting the church to reimagine its peacebuilding project through the practice of a culture of encounter.

POPE FRANCIS AND THE REIMAGINATION OF CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING

The ongoing pontificate of Pope Francis has shown itself to be carrying forward and reimagining the Catholic global peacebuilding project. However, a proper analysis of the extent of this Catholic peacebuilding reimagination requires an understanding of the notion of “culture of encounter” (CoE), which has become a defining mark and dominant idea of Francis’s pontificate as it runs through almost all his writings, addresses, homilies, etc. I shall focus primarily on *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG),⁴² *Laudato Si’* (LS),⁴³ and *Fratelli Tutti* (FT)⁴⁴ to examine how Pope Francis conceives of this notion and uses it to carry forward and reimagine the church’s global peacebuilding agenda.

³⁸ CBCN, “Peace Through Justice and Love,” 65.

³⁹ CBCN, “Peace Through Justice and Love,” 66.

⁴⁰ CBCN, “Peace Through Justice and Love,” 66.

⁴¹ CBCN, “Peace Through Justice and Love,” 67–70.

⁴² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

⁴³ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/en_cyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

The Culture of Encounter and Ecclesial Conversion

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis uses the concept of “encounter” apropos of the person of Jesus, arguing that our encounter with Jesus leads us to encounter others in their infinite dignity and “desire, seek, and protect the good of [these] others” (EG, nos. 1–3 and 178). Such an encounter with Jesus and otherness is understood primarily as “an event . . . which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (EG, no. 7). The strong desire to seek the good of others flows from “God’s love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship” with others (EG, no. 8). “For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others” (EG, no. 8) and thus seek their good?

In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis extends the notion of encounter from an encounter with God and a “generous encounter between persons” (LS, no. 47) to include encounter with the natural world, noting that the effects of people’s encounter with God “become evident in their relationship with the world around them” (LS, no. 217). Why? Because a genuine encounter includes, among other things, being in fraternal “contact with nature” since “encountering God does not mean fleeing from this world or turning our back on nature” (LS, nos. 223 and 235). Rather, a genuine encounter with God calls for “an integral ecology” that “shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace” (LS, no. 10). For Pope Francis, the practice of integral ecology is possible if human beings are willing to undergo or experience “an ecological conversion” (LS, no. 217).

Like LS, *Fratelli Tutti* expands the circle of encounter. Addressed to “all people of goodwill” (FT, no. 6) it is thus more inclusive. Pope Francis writes: “To speak of a culture of encounter means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, and planning a project that includes everyone” in such a manner that it “becomes an aspiration and a style of life” (FT, no. 216). With the practice of the CoE, our society becomes “capable of transcending our differences and divisions” to build a “society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching, and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations” (FT, no. 215).

The culture of encounter can take place at interpersonal/group and social/societal levels to create “a new vision of fraternity and social friendship” (FT, no. 6). At the interpersonal/group level, the goal is conversion that includes “ecological conversion” (LS, no. 217) and ecclesial and missionary conversion to transform the church’s evangelizing mission, which has implications for the church’s self-identity and prophetic witnessing (EG, nos. 25–26). At the social level,

the goal is to “contribute to the promotion of justice and peace within communities and among nations on the global level” by creating “more sound institutions, more just regulations, more supportive structures.”⁴⁵ The goal is to contribute to a “genuine and lasting peace” (FT, no. 217) via a process that empowers people to embrace differences and work for “a reconciled diversity” as well as recognize the value of every person and non-human creation (EG, no. 230). This process is founded on the values of human dignity, justice, love, and solidarity and uses social dialogue—“approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another and to find common ground” (FT, no. 198)—as a mechanism of peacebuilding.

To this end, Pope Francis outlines his now-familiar four principles important for re-envisioning the processes of peacebuilding and the common good in society (EG, nos. 217–237). The first principle—“time is greater than space”—inculcates the virtue of patience able to overcome challenges in peacebuilding (EG, no. 223). This initial tenet recognizes the exasperation experienced by those engaged in the peacebuilding process, particularly the perceived loss of time due to the complex nature of the process.⁴⁶ The second principle—“unity prevails over conflict”—points to the reality of and human attitudes toward conflict: those who ignore or conceal conflict, those who embrace it wrongly and become its prisoners, and those who confront it head-on. The pope considers the latter category of people as peacebuilders because they make it “possible to build communion amid disagreement” and “go beyond the surface of the conflict . . . to see others in their deepest dignity” (EG, nos. 227–228). This principle calls for the virtue of courage and the willingness to confront differences since conflicts ought not to “be the occasion for fear, but rather the occasion for moral greatness.”⁴⁷ The third principle—“realities are more important than ideas”—invites all to anchor peace proposals on practical and feasible realities and reject abstractions (EG, no. 231). For Francis, words or ideas bereft of actions become idealism that leads nowhere and simply changes nothing but deteriorates the status quo (EG, no. 232). With this principle, Francis seems to chastise otherworldly Christians (detached from real human experience) and contrast the logic of intellectualism with the fruitfulness of the logic of practice, such as promoting justice and

⁴⁵ David Hollenbach, “Religious Nationalism, a Global Ethic, and the Culture of Encounter,” *Theological Studies* 83, no. 3 (2022): 376.

⁴⁶ Bernard V. Brady, *Essential Catholic Social Thought*, 2nd edition (New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 293.

⁴⁷ Brady, *Essential Catholic Social Thought*, 294.

works of mercy.⁴⁸ Lastly, the final principle—“the whole is greater than the part”—calls for the constant broadening of horizons in our thinking and actions for the benefit of all (EG, nos. 234–235). As such, the principle does not admit a single perspective that fails to see the larger picture because the different parts of reality are needed to keep the good of their particularity. Nevertheless, the whole is equally essential for the pursuit of the common good. Pope Francis beautifully describes the convergence of the different parts of reality without losing sight of the distinctive character of each part with the image of the “polyhedron” (EG, no. 236).

With these principles, Pope Francis indicates that peacebuilding as a process is challenging but achievable if we face one another, not as enemies but as brothers and sisters endowed with dignity, and the tensions that result from unhealthy relationships with courage, patience, mercy, justice, and solidarity rather than being indifferent to social conflicts, excluding or discarding others. Thus, the CoE prioritizes and reimagines Catholic peacebuilding but denounces the culture of throw-away (EG, no. 53), global indifference (EG, no. 54), and exclusion (EG, nos. 53 and 59), which rejects God, ethics, and solidarity.⁴⁹

Under the papacy of Pope Francis, global peacebuilding is no longer merely an appendix to Catholic moral duties but constitutive of the evangelizing mission of a church that “goes forth” to encounter other cultures (EG, no. 20).⁵⁰ His culture of encounter calls for ecclesial and missionary conversion. This has implications for the church and its evangelizing mission, such as peacebuilding. According to Catherine Clifford, there are three goals or implications to ecclesial conversion.⁵¹ First, ecclesial conversion calls for “a return to the kerygmatic proclamation of faith” and witness; second, it aims at grounding this renewed kerygmatic proclamation and prophetic

⁴⁸ Brady, *Essential Catholic Social Thought*, 294–295.

⁴⁹ Pope Francis, “Address to the New Non-Resident Ambassadors to the Holy See: Kyrgyzstan, Antigua and Barbuda, Luxembourg, and Botswana” (May 16, 2013), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130516_nuovi-ambasciatori.html; Alexandru Taşnadi, Justin E. Alexandru, Gheorghe Ustinescu, and Petru C. Bradu, “Consumerism and Exclusion in a Throw-Away Culture,” *Theoretical and Applied Economics* 25, no. 3 (2018): 101–112.

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, *Praedicate Evangelium* (March 19, 2022), Art. 165, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html.

⁵¹ Catherine E. Clifford, “Pope Francis’s Call for the Conversion of the Church in Our Time,” in Stephen van Erp and Karim Schelkens, eds., *Conversion and Church: The Challenge of Ecclesial Renewal: Essays in Honour of H. P. J. Witte* (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 147–177.

witnessing spiritually; and third, it envisions the conversion of the church's institutions and structures to reflect its new self-identity and render its Gospel proclamation and witnessing more effective to the world.⁵² A new ecclesial self-identity means that the church becomes a merciful church (EG, nos. 193–194), inclusive by being “poor and for the poor” (EG, no. 198), reaching out to those on the fringes of society (EG, nos. 20–24), and more dialogical and pastoral in its activities rather than hyper-judicial.⁵³ Mercy is conceived not just as the identity of the church but also as the foundation and end of its mission.⁵⁴ One concrete example of how the church could express this logic of mercy is by prioritizing a nonviolent approach in its mission of transforming social violence and building sustainable just peace.⁵⁵ Such expression of self-identity and mission, grounded in mercy, has implications. It calls the church to be prophetic in its witness to the world. A prophetic church engages in social witness by being dialogically discerning in its activities, participating and engaging in sacred and social issues for the integral good of God's creation, and embodying in its structures and institutions the very values and principles it advocates, such as mercy, human dignity, human rights, justice, equality, inclusiveness, and peace.⁵⁶

Both a renewed self-identity and prophetic witness are vital to the church's social mission. As such, the CoE refocuses the church's social mission as peacebuilding for “a better world”; this must go beyond mere “charitable and educational activities” (FT, no. 276) to concrete group actions grounded in mercy but actively “effectuated in the struggle for justice” at both interpersonal and structural levels, interrogating the socioeconomic, political, and ecological structures.⁵⁷ This mission requires ethical imagination and principles drawn from the Gospel and human sciences. For instance, understanding the socioeconomic and political realities of those in conflict and the causes underlying the conflict is the first valuable step that must be taken when engaging in a peacebuilding project. Also, recourse to

⁵² Clifford, “Pope Francis's Call,” 147–148.

⁵³ Pope Francis, “Address at the Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops” (October 17, 2015), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

⁵⁴ Leo Guardado, “Nonviolence: The Witness of a Church of Mercy,” *Expositions* 13, no. 2 (2019): 57.

⁵⁵ Guardado, “Nonviolence,” 62.

⁵⁶ Kristin E. Heyer, *Prophetic and Public: The Social Witness of US Catholicism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2006), 188–199.

⁵⁷ Martin Ejiowhor, “Pope Francis's Culture of Encounter as a Paradigm Shift in the Magisterium's Reception of Justice in the World,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 18, no. 2 (2021): 208.

militarization and coercive pressure or cajolery via unreasonable sanctions has never been fruitful and can hardly build sustainable peace. It is diametrically opposed to ecclesial peacebuilding which aims to “build lasting, sustainable, inclusive peace, both to prevent violence and, once violence has broken out, to restore a more robust peace” by engaging in a genuine, bottom-up, inclusive, and participatory dialogue process among conflict actors.⁵⁸

For example, the Colombian Catholic Church established the National Conciliation Commission (CCN) to facilitate conflict transformation and peacebuilding dialogue processes between the Colombian government and various armed groups, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defence Forces (AUC), to resolve the decades-long resource-based armed conflict in Colombia. The church adopted a community-based pastoral dialogue approach that involved empathic listening, accompaniment, forgiveness, and reconciliation. These peace dialogue efforts led to the 2016 Colombian peace agreement.⁵⁹ Also, the Sant’ Egidio Community, a Rome-based religious NGO group, facilitated a peacebuilding dialogue process to resolve the post-colonial Mozambican civil war between the FRELIMO (the ruling party) and RENAMO (anti-government militant group), leading to the signing of the General Peace Agreement in 1992.⁶⁰

The examples of the Colombian Catholic Church and Sant’ Egidio’s use of dialogue as a peacebuilding mechanism in Colombia and Mozambique, respectively, confirm Pope Francis’s emphasis on social dialogue as the best “weapon” the church possesses for global peacebuilding. Moreover, peacebuilding is a process and not a one-time event or exercise. To facilitate such a peacebuilding dialogue process, Francis challenges the church to undergo its own conversion to become credible to those it facilitates in dialogue processes: be patient enough to overcome the frustration associated with such a project; be courageous to interrogate socioeconomic, political, and ecological injustices underlying any conflict and capable of hindering meaningful peacebuilding efforts; broaden horizons of imagination and actions and be dynamic enough to engage an integrative

⁵⁸ Maryann C. Love, “Just Peace and Just War,” *Expositions* 12, no. 1 (2018): 61.

⁵⁹ See John Paul Lederach, “The Long Journey Back to Humanity: Catholic Peacebuilding with Armed Actors,” in Schreiter, Appleby, and Powers, eds., *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, 23–55.

⁶⁰ Andrea Bartoli, Aldo Civico, and Leone Gianturco, “Mozambique–Renamo,” in Bruce W. Dayton and Louis Kriesberg, eds., *Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding: Moving from Violence to Sustainable Peace* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 140–155.

peacebuilding approach that involves both formal and cultural dialogue where necessary; and ensure it adopts a peacebuilding approach that is practicable and resonates with realities and experiences of conflict actors and those directly affected by the conflict. The church must promote the conversion dimension of social dialogue, for there could be a resurgence of conflict where such attitudinal conversion is lacking among the dialogue partners. Finally, the CoE challenges the church to ensure that the dialogue process is inclusive and participatory, free from gender biases and age discrimination. The church's goal is to build sustainable peace on the foundation of truth, respect for human dignity and human rights, care for the environment, justice, and mercy (the willingness to give and receive forgiveness).

The Culture of Encounter Reimagines Catholic Peacebuilding

Given this ecclesial conversion, the question then becomes: how does Pope Francis's CoE carry forward and reimagine the church's global peacebuilding agenda inaugurated in PT? In what follows, I shall attempt to answer this question.

Pope Francis carries forward John XXIII's call for global peace in PT, considering that he refers to PT's peace vision in his documents. In LS, for example, Francis refers to how PT, addressed not only to Catholics but to all people of good will, "rejected war but offered a proposal for peace" (LS, no. 3). He goes on to state that in a similar manner his message for integral ecology, which entails peaceful and harmonious relationships among creation, is being addressed to "every human person living on this planet" (LS, no. 3). In FT, Francis reiterates PT's call for peace, based on the fact that "it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice" (PT, no. 127), insisting that "arguments for peace are stronger than any calculation of particular interests and confidence in the use of weaponry" (FT, no. 206). Francis strongly believes that PT invites "renewed progress in . . . the development of peacebuilding initiatives" so that people can coexist as brothers and sisters and flourish together as John XXIII earnestly hoped for in PT.⁶¹

Although it rejects violence in all shades, the CoE peacebuilding model appears to have a positive conception of conflict in contrast to what has been, such as in PT. This model of peacebuilding conceives social conflict as calling attention to a positive way of reconciling underlying contradictory human needs, values, and interests in human

⁶¹ Pope Francis, "Message to Mark the Conference on *Pacem in Terris* Organized by the Academy of Social Sciences" (September 12, 2023), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2023/documents/20230912-messaggio-60annipaceminterris.html.

relationships. In his address to the Eucharistic Youth Movement in 2015, Pope Francis argues that “when there is life, there is tension and there is conflict” and that social conflict “can also do us good, for they make us understand differences, and make us understand that if we do not find a way to resolve this conflict, there will be a situation of war.”⁶² Here, Pope Francis calls not only the youth but the entire church to embrace and transform social conflict. He believes that “only what is embraced is transformed” and calls on the church to embrace the reality of social conflicts and commit much effort to transform them, knowing that “the miracle of the culture of encounter” is experienced when bridges are built and peace is attained.⁶³ This clarion call resonates with Francis’s second peacebuilding principle (“unity prevails over conflict”) which, as mentioned earlier, calls for the “willingness to face conflict head-on, to resolve it, and to make it a link in the chain of a new process,” thereby making it “possible to build communion amid disagreement” (EG, nos. 227–228). Thus, in the CoE peacebuilding model, conflict could be strategic and constructive, especially when it is a temporary but “necessary disruption that enables deeper inter-party unity and cooperation in the future.”⁶⁴ An example of such constructive conflict is active nonviolence, which adopts strategies such as civil resistance and nonviolent mass protest that are momentarily disruptive but aim at transforming direct, structural, and cultural violence to foster positive peace.

Francis’s CoE peacebuilding model seems to prioritize and advocate a just peace approach without completely dismissing the just war tradition, a dominant approach in Catholic peacebuilding, on the grounds of “the injustice of war” (FT, no. 256).⁶⁵ Just peace is defined as “the mutually constitutive and interactive commitment to and

⁶² Pope Francis, “Address to the Eucharistic Youth Movement” (August 7, 2015), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/august/documents/papa-francesco_20150807_meg.html.

⁶³ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (March 25, 2019), nos. 120 and 169, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html.

⁶⁴ Véronique Dudouet, “Nonviolent Resistance in Power Asymmetries,” in B. Austin, M. Fischer, and H. J. Giessmann, eds., *Advancing Conflict Transformation* (Opladen: Barbara Budrich, 2011), 256.

⁶⁵ Pope Francis strongly questions the concept of just war, and he seems to invite us to do so. He says: “To the explicit rejection of my predecessors, the events of the first two decades of this century compel me to add, unambiguously, that there is no occasion in which a war can be considered just. There is never a place for the barbarism of war, especially not when contention acquires one of its most unjust faces: that of so-called ‘preventive wars’” (“War Must End or World Risks Nuclear Catastrophe,” *Vatican News*, October 16, 2022, w2.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-10/pope-francis-book-10th-anniversary-pontificate.html).

pursuit of social cohesion and equity, in both orientation or aim and action.”⁶⁶ The ethics of just peace, according to Lisa Cahill, “stresses nonviolent conflict transformation, strategies of nonviolent resistance, the frequently disingenuous and excessive nature of even ‘just’ uses of violence, and the ongoing processes required to attain just and sustainable peace.”⁶⁷ For Cahill, just peace can offer the church an alternative approach to just war theory and strict pacifism, considering that both latter approaches present us with a kind of “moral dilemma.”⁶⁸ Cahill observes that both just war tradition and pacifism present us with moral dilemmas. She argues that, even if some instances of war appear to have a just cause, the action of killing another violates human dignity. For example, there is a growing scientific recognition of perpetrator-induced trauma and a process of dehumanization of victims by their killers, a process that obstructs their capacity to show empathy.⁶⁹ Similarly, strict pacifism renounces totally the use of force to stop an unjust aggressor from killing the innocent, thereby potentially placing the pacifist in “a position of complicity with grievous evils perpetrated against the innocent.”⁷⁰ Cahill notes that although this moral dilemma “may be impossible to resolve satisfactorily,” just peace presents an alternative approach of “protecting the innocent and creating peace with justice without resorting to killing.”⁷¹

This reasoning on just peace resonates with Pope Francis. He states: “No war is just. The only just thing is peace.”⁷² In his message to participants of the 2016 Rome conference on “Nonviolence and Just Peace,” he notes that “the basic premise is that the ultimate and most deeply worthy goal of human beings and of the human community is the abolition of war.”⁷³ Further, he chose “Nonviolence: A Style of

⁶⁶ Love, “Just Peace and Just War,” 60–61.

⁶⁷ Lisa S. Cahill, “Just War, Pacifism, Just Peace, and Peacebuilding,” *Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2019): 171.

⁶⁸ Lisa S. Cahill, “The Changing Vision of ‘Just Peace’ in Catholic Social Tradition,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 2 (2018): 106.

⁶⁹ See Erin McGlothlin, “Perpetrator Trauma,” in *Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, ed. Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (New York: Routledge, 2020), 100–110; Jack Pemmment, “Dissecting Empathy: How Do Killers Experience Other People?,” *Psychology Today* (September 19, 2013), w2.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/blame-the-amygdala/201309/dissecting-empathy.

⁷⁰ Cahill, “The Changing Vision of ‘Just Peace,’” 106.

⁷¹ Cahill, “The Changing Vision of ‘Just Peace,’” 107.

⁷² Pope Francis and Dominique Wolton, *The Path to Change: Thoughts on Politics and Society* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2018), 27.

⁷³ Pope Francis, “Message to Card. Peter K. A. Turkson on the Occasion of ‘Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Nonviolence’” (April 11–13, 2016), w2.vatican.va/content/francesco

Politics for Peace” as the theme for his 2017 World Day of Peace Message. In the message, Francis writes: “Especially in situations of conflict, let us respect this, our ‘deepest dignity,’ and make active nonviolence our way of life.”⁷⁴ He argues that building peace “through active nonviolence is the natural and necessary complement to the Church’s continuing efforts to limit the use of force by the application of moral norms.”⁷⁵ This link between living in accord with dignity and active nonviolence is critical for re-imagined Catholic peacebuilding, and it seems to validate the argument about a possible shift from a just war tradition to a just peace approach.

Pope Francis seems to suggest that the Church will succeed more in its global peacebuilding role by prioritizing a just peace approach as “an effective way to transform conditions of violence and lead to just and sustainable peace.”⁷⁶ The Just War principles (e.g., proportionality and discrimination) are good but appear more theoretical and idealistic. Experience has shown that, even with the best intention to uphold these principles during war, the killing and human suffering associated with war are hardly prevented, thereby justifying the saying that “realities are more important than ideas.” In this case, the just peace approach considers real experiences of human and non-human creation and ethical realities in peacebuilding. It becomes the church’s responsibility, as Eli McCarthy has argued, “to keep a just peace ethic front and center,” because such an ethic enables the church to promote not only the inner disposition to “protect all life but even more so illuminate the sacred dignity of all persons and creation.”⁷⁷ According to McCarthy, a “virtue-based just peace ethic” would make possible such a disposition and offer “norms which operate in three distinct, yet overlapping spheres” (*jus in conflictione*, *jus ex bello*, and *jus ad pacem*), with key virtues such as mercy, compassion, courage, justice, solidarity, empathy, hospitality, and active nonviolence, etc., to develop the “character necessary for the practices of a just peace ethic.”⁷⁸ For McCarthy, a virtue-based just peace ethic enables the church “to transform conflict by addressing the personal, relational, structural, and cultural dimensions,” and such an

/en/messages/pont-messages/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160406_messaggio-non-violenza-pace-giusta.html.

⁷⁴ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace” (Message for World Day of Peace, January 1, 2017), no. 1, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html.

⁷⁵ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” nos. 4 and 6.

⁷⁶ Lisa S. Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2019), vii.

⁷⁷ Eli S. McCarthy, “A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 7, no. 2 (2018): 100.

⁷⁸ McCarthy, “A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic,” 95.

ethic “is more likely to actually prevent, limit, and move us toward outlawing war.”⁷⁹ Based on Pope Francis’s reference to the Sermon on the Mount as a “manual” for peacebuilding strategy,⁸⁰ McCarthy argues that the Pope strives towards a just peace ethic consistent with Jesus’s teaching on nonviolent peacebuilding and he also challenges religious leaders to embrace such an ethic as disciples of Christ.⁸¹ Francis himself argues that “to be true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching about nonviolence” and, as such, he pledges the “assistance of the Church in every effort to build peace through active and creative nonviolence.”⁸²

Pope Francis claims that an active and creative nonviolent peacebuilding approach can foster societal peace built on the values of justice, human dignity, human rights, and concern for the poor just as in PT and other continental and national peace documents discussed (EG, nos. 218–219). However, he envisions societal peace as a process under the framework of the CoE. That peacebuilding is a process neither means “returning to a time prior to conflicts,” since “pain and conflict transform us,” nor using “empty diplomacy, dissimulation, double-speak, hidden agendas, and good manners that mask reality” (FT, no. 226). It rather means that “every ‘peace process requires enduring commitment [and] . . . is a patient effort to seek truth and justice, to honor the memory of victims and to open the way, step by step, to a shared hope stronger than the desire for vengeance” (FT, no. 226). Such a process might appear to be time-wasting and frustrating but it is worth it, considering that time will always be greater than mere space. With these principles, Pope Francis indicates that constant commitment, active patience, truth, justice, and historical memory are vital to peacebuilding within the framework of the CoE.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a re-imagination of the notion of justice in the CoE peacebuilding paradigm. For Pope Francis, justice must be rooted in mercy, since the gospel of mercy inspires and guides the church to hear and respond to the cry for justice and its demands (EG, no. 188). Moreover, Pope Francis considers mercy as the “foundation of true justice” and the wellspring of peace.⁸³ From the perspective of peacebuilding, such justice seeks to repair broken relationships and harms caused by violent human actions, heal the victims, perpetrators, and community, transform the structures that

⁷⁹ McCarthy, “A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic,” 100–101.

⁸⁰ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” no. 6.

⁸¹ McCarthy, “A Virtue-Based Just Peace Ethic,” 93–94.

⁸² Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” nos. 3 and 6.

⁸³ Pope Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (April 11, 2015), nos. 21 and 2, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html.

perpetuate violence, and build sustainable peace. Hence, this justice is restorative. Francis argues that the notion of justice in peacebuilding processes “must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear *both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor*” (LS, no. 49, emphasis original), and ecological justice should be participatory and intergenerational (LS, no. 159). Thus, peacebuilding is “an ongoing process in which every new generation must take part” to achieve through a “multifaceted culture of encounter” (EG, no. 220). And where this is not the case, the church must raise its prophetic voice to forestall the spawning of new violence or conflicts in society (EG, no. 218).

Furthermore, there is an acknowledgment of the value of truth in the CoE peacebuilding paradigm just as in PT and CP respectively, but Francis reimagines truth by linking it to forgiveness and reconciliation as in the SECAM peace document. In the seventh chapter of *Fratelli Tutti* on the “Paths of Renewed Encounter,” Pope Francis discusses “The Art and Architecture of Peace.” He notes that “there is a need for paths of peace to heal open wounds” to renew human encounters in the world (FT, no. 225) and that such a renewed encounter requires the value of truth. Here, truth is fundamentally inseparable from the demands of justice and mercy, because the three values are not only essential but complement each other in any peacebuilding architecture (FT, no. 227). However, Pope Francis underscores the need to fulfill the demands of truth in a (violent) conflict situation, arguing that unveiling the truth in peacebuilding processes should aim at forgiveness and possible reconciliation rather than revenge (FT, no. 227). The act of revenge leads to a vicious cycle of violence and does not make for peacebuilding and renewed encounter (FT, no. 227), while the act of forgiveness and reconciliation presupposes the healing of “open wounds” (FT, no. 225). Laura Currie interprets the “open wound” to mean “a wounded memory that is in need of healing: that past or buried wounds and injustices have not, in fact, been resolved over time, as many would believe, and that this is a root cause of division contributing to today’s social and political unrest.”⁸⁴ For her, only when this historical memory has been healed can society move forward along the paths of forgiveness and reconciliation for renewed encounter and peacebuilding.⁸⁵

For Pope Francis, “Reconciliation cannot simply entail a re-writing of history for the purpose of shifting blame.”⁸⁶ It rather calls for

⁸⁴ Laura Currie, “Healing Memory: A Bonaventurian Response to Pope Francis’s *Fratelli Tutti*,” *Religions* 13, no. 819 (2022): 1.

⁸⁵ Currie, “Healing Memory,” 2.

⁸⁶ Currie, “Healing Memory,” 1.

“rapprochement between groups who took different sides at some troubled period of history” and “for a renewed encounter” in order “to recognize, protect, and concretely restore the dignity, so often overlooked or ignored, of our brothers and sisters, so that they can see themselves as the principal protagonists of the destiny of their nation” (FT, no. 233). One might posit that collaborative efforts to tackle the underlying causes of conflict (e.g., socioeconomic, political, and cultural) can facilitate a path towards mutual understanding and trust, both of which are pivotal in peacebuilding endeavors.

Pope Francis’s CoE emphasizes social dialogue as a tool for peacebuilding processes. In his 2017 World Day of Peace message, he reaffirms PT’s call to build peace on values of love, justice, truth, and freedom, and he passionately invites the church to participate in global “peacebuilding through active nonviolence” using dialogue as a tool.⁸⁷ Dialogue is a method of peacebuilding that has proven to be effective.⁸⁸ However, following American Mennonite and peace expert John Paul Lederach, such a dialogue process must ensure the inclusion and participation of every segment of society, able to build mutual trust, interrogate issues of justice at interpersonal and structural levels, and engender conversion and social transformation.⁸⁹ Hence it is social in nature. Here social dialogue uses the “elicitive method,” in that it draws on local or cultural peacebuilding dialogue resources and allows dialogue parties to own the process and dialogue actions aimed at transforming conflicts and building sustainable peace.⁹⁰ As a peacebuilding mechanism or tool, social dialogue is necessary for assisting conflict actors to overcome bitter feelings and negative prejudices and biases against one another, considering that “it is no easy task to overcome the bitter legacy of injustices, hostility, and mistrust left by [a] conflict” (FT, no. 243).

Patient social dialogue and some form of negotiations underpinned by values of truth, justice, and mercy are capable of fostering reconciliation and building sustainable peace. Bringing these values to bear in social dialogue for peacebuilding forestalls peacebuilders from merely proclaiming “blanket reconciliation” which, at best, tends to gloss over the wounds and pain of those unjustly and cruelly treated, or to “cover injustices in a cloak of oblivion” simply because they happened in the past (FT, no. 246). Pope Francis decries the tendency to brush aside the past: “Nowadays it is easy to be tempted to turn the

⁸⁷ Pope Francis, “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” nos. 5 and 6.

⁸⁸ Cahill, “The Changing Vision of ‘Just Peace,’” 107–108.

⁸⁹ John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (New York: Good Books, 2003), 21–22.

⁹⁰ John Paul Lederach, *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 55.

page, to say that all these things happened long ago, and we should look to the future. For God's sake, no! We can never move forward without remembering the past; we do not progress without an honest and unclouded memory" (FT, no. 249). So, building social peace requires social dialogue that uncovers past injustices, "rejects exclusion or manipulation," listens to all parties, and remains open to the truth and the pursuit of the good of human and non-human creation.⁹¹

As a tool for building sustainable social peace, social dialogue within Pope Francis's CoE envisions a holistic conception of peacebuilding. For Francis, building social peace—the "stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice" (LS, no. 157)—is linked to inner personal peace which, in turn, "is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good" (LS, no. 225). Social peace is a "journey of ecological conversion" that must be understood integrally to stop "our hostility towards others, our lack of respect for our common home, or abusive exploitation of natural resources."⁹² This is beautifully captured with Pope Francis's catchy phrase "integral ecology" (LS, nos. 137 and 225). Therefore, we understand social peace as one of the goals of the CoE, and such peace is built through a just peace approach. Social peace aims to maintain a healthy and balanced encounter (relationship) with God, oneself, others, and non-human creation, in keeping with God's established order.

This established order is creation itself, which Pope Francis refers to as "the order of love" (LS, no. 77), meaning that the whole of creation is ordered by God's love to be relational and interconnected. Building just peace on earth requires that humans observe diligently this order of interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all creation, respecting the "value proper to each creature" (LS, no. 16) since "every creature has its own value and significance" (LS, no. 76). Pope Francis goes beyond the acknowledgment of this divine order to offer CST the model of "integral ecology" as a moral framework for realizing the divinely established order of interconnectedness of all creation capable of fostering societal just peace. Integral ecology "represents an expanded moral vision" of building just peace not based on a technocratic paradigm but on a paradigm that links peacebuilding

⁹¹ Pope Francis, "Peace as a Journey of Hope: Dialogue, Reconciliation, and Ecological Conversion" (Message for World Day of Peace, January 1, 2020), no. 2, w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20191208_messaggio-53giornatamondiale-pace2020.html.

⁹² Pope Francis, "Peace as a Journey," no. 4.

to issues of justice (at the social, economic, and political levels), ecological or environmental concerns, sustainable development, etc.⁹³

Based on the framework of the CoE, holistic Catholic peacebuilding would be an integral ecology model that recognizes the intrinsic value of all creation (human and non-human) rather than treating them “as parts that can be utilized and profited from, consumed or used to varying degrees, and then disposed of.”⁹⁴ This peacebuilding model “suggests the need for a new consideration of the idea of just peace, one that explicitly involves ecological sustainability and restorative justice for the planet.”⁹⁵ The guiding principles for this new consideration are respect for human and non-human creation and restoration of relationships between human beings and God, among human beings, and between human beings and creation.⁹⁶ Experience has shown that social conflict and violence have ensued in most places where proper attention was not given to this new consideration.⁹⁷ A typical case is Nigeria’s Niger Delta violent conflict. Hence, we return to the question of how Pope Francis’s CoE peacebuilding framework can assist the Nigerian Catholic Church in building sustainable peace in the Niger Delta region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RETHINKING THE NIGERIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH’S PEACEBUILDING STRATEGIES

Although a few successes have been recorded, the Nigerian Catholic Church’s peacebuilding strategies have not been able to transform and build lasting peace in the Niger Delta region. As mentioned earlier, the region still suffers intermittent physical violence, and the socioeconomic and political structures that precipitated the violence in the first place have yet to be transformed. In light of the CoE peacebuilding model, the Nigerian Catholic Church can contribute to the transformation of these unjust structures and thus end the structural and physical violence in the region by going beyond the strategies of merely issuing statements and engaging in charitable activities, and beginning to actually build a sustainable and dynamic social peace in the region. Although the church’s strategies have

⁹³ Anna F. Scheid and Daniel P. Scheid, “Integral Ecology, Just Peace, and Mining,” in Caesar A. Montevecchio and Gerard F. Powers, eds., *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining: Integral Peace, Development, and Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 120.

⁹⁴ Scheid and Scheid, “Integral Ecology,” 130.

⁹⁵ Scheid and Scheid, “Integral Ecology,” 122.

⁹⁶ Scheid and Scheid, “Integral Ecology,” 124–126.

⁹⁷ Jessica L. Imanaka, Greg Prussia, and Samantha Alexis, “*Laudato Si’* and Integral Ecology: A Reconceptualization of Sustainability,” *Journal of Management for Global Sustainability* 5, no. 1 (2017): 39–61.

identified injustice as the root cause of the violence and have called for remediation of justice in the region as well as conversion and dialogue by conflict actors, there has been a lack of active involvement and participation on the part of the church towards realizing this call. There has been no peace advocacy program or collaboration with local and international peace advocacy groups, no dialogue or interface with the Nigerian government and MNCs to discuss issues of structural injustice raised in the communiqués regarding the violence, no deployment of media to publicize these issues and thus internationalize the violence, and no emphasis on local/cultural peace resources in peacebuilding processes in the region. The absence of these elements in the church's peacebuilding intervention strategies in the Niger Delta reveals an obvious pitfall that necessitates a rethinking of the strategies in light of the CoE peacebuilding model. Hence, the following suggestions.

First, the church has to become credible and trustworthy in a society like Nigeria where there is a growing suspicion and accusation of the church's hierarchy aligning with the political elite that cares not so much about the unjust and poor condition of the Niger Deltans and their environment. This credibility can come through renewed self-identity and prophetic witness, whereby the church's structures embody certain values such as mercy, compassion, poverty, humility, truth, impartiality, justice, freedom, and dialogical discernment. The church's documents on the Niger Delta conflict need to be more critical and transparently clear on its stance regarding burning issues in the region, such as the protection of and respect for human life and dignity, human rights, and creation, by tasking the government and MNCs to provide basic and social amenities and safeguard the environment. Also, the church has to exhibit courageous patience in the pursuit of peacebuilding and the common good in the region. With all this, the church can explicitly renounce the accusation of alignment and gain the trust of the Niger Delta people and the conflict actors.

Second, with its earned credibility and trust, the Nigerian Church can collaborate with other religious bodies if necessary to initiate and facilitate a peacebuilding dialogue process among the conflict actors. It is not enough for the church, both as individuals and institution, to call the conflicting parties to toe the path of dialogue.⁹⁸ The church must be involved in actualizing the call. In facilitating such a dialogue

⁹⁸ CBCN, Communiqué "We Must Pull Back from the Brink of Collapse" (Orlu: February 23, 2021), no. 8, w2.nigeriacatholicnetwork.com/cbcn-communicue-february-2021/; Jude Atemanke, "Nigerian Archbishop Advocates for Dialogue, Says 'Peace is Never Achieved on Battlefield,'" *Association for Catholic Information in Africa* (May 16, 2022), w2.aciafrica.org/news/5854/nigerian-archbishop-advocates-for-dialogue-says-peace-is-never-achieved-on-battlefield.

process, the church can draw insights from the CoE peacebuilding model and the Colombian community-based pastoral dialogue approach, which involves empathic listening and accompaniment of the various militant groups to foster forgiveness, justice, reconciliation, and peace. The church can also ask its organs, such as the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) and Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN) to initiate and facilitate the peacebuilding dialogue.

For example, CCFN, in collaboration with the State Peace Commission in Kaduna and Plateau (both are states in Nigeria), facilitated a peacebuilding dialogue process (from February 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022) with state representatives from academia, religious groups, community leaders, youth groups, women groups, government, artists, CSOs, and the media. The process began with the mapping of the violent conflict by listening to the stories of the different parties involved in the conflict (e.g., Plateau: selected leaders on the ground—male elders, women, youths, politicians, and academics—adjudged to have good reputations both from the Fulanis and the Plateau people) to underscore what is at stake. Although the states are not completely free from violent conflict, the dialogue process has restored relative peace and led to increased intercultural and interreligious tolerance in both states. The dialogue process also initiated mid-term and long-term initiatives, such as interreligious activities (women peace dialogue forum, youth peace dialogue forum, interreligious radio peace programs in local languages, etc.) that promote intercultural and religious pluralism, scholarship grants to students in the field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding, sponsoring artists to entertain community and state peace matches and gatherings, training of media personnel and journalists, sponsoring interreligious conferences and public cultural events, etc.⁹⁹

Another example is the *Zaman Tare* (Living Together), a peace dialogue process gradually transforming a violent conflict and building sustainable peace in Nigeria's Kaduna and Plateau states. The peacebuilding dialogue process, funded by the European Union, was facilitated by the Nigerian Catholic Church through CCFN and coordinated by the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD). In addition to Borno State (the birth state of Boko Haram), Plateau and Kaduna states have been a hotbed of intractable violent conflicts, which some scholars have identified as either ethno-religious, political, resource-based, inter-communal, herder-farmer, or identity conflict, with thousands of human lives lost.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ CCFN, "Final Report on *Zaman Tare* (Living Together): Intercultural Dialogue and Culture Project" (Abuja: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2023).

¹⁰⁰ See Solomon Anjide and Obinna C. Amaechi, "The Intractability of Violent Conflict in Nigeria: A Study of Plateau State," *GOUNI Journal of Management and*

The church can, like the above examples in which it initiated and facilitated peacebuilding dialogue in states of Nigeria's northern region, extend such a dialogue process to the Niger Delta region. However, it has to take into consideration the specificity of the region and the violent conflict itself while drawing on insights from peacebuilding principles as framed in the CoE peacebuilding model. To do so will entail that the peacebuilding dialogue process must be open to truth and willing to engage the unjust social, economic, political, and ecological realities that underlie the violent conflict in the region. With such openness, the process might transcend mere ideas to facilitate dialogue aimed at resolving these practical realities through concerted efforts toward promoting justice, mercy, forgiveness, attitudinal conversion, and peaceful reconciliation among the parties. Also, facilitating a dialogue process to transform the complexities of the root causes of the Niger Delta violent conflict and build lasting peace would certainly take much time and require the virtue of patience on the part of the church. It would also require "multiple social levels and a wide time horizon that involves healing the past as well as envisioning the future, and an 'elicitive' method that taps local cultures for their peacebuilding codes."¹⁰¹ In facilitating the peacebuilding dialogue process, the church must represent the needs¹⁰² of the conflict parties while bearing in mind the sufferings of the people of the Niger Delta.¹⁰³ As such, I recommend the following steps for the dialogue process:

- Framing the conflict by listening to the stories of all the conflict parties to properly identify the nature, socioeconomic, political, and environmental root causes, and dynamics of the conflict. This aims to make room for different ways of understanding the conflict and thus appreciate the people's diverse possibilities and contributions towards transforming the conflict and building

Social Sciences 10, no. 1 (2022): 215–228; Shittu Aro, "Analysis of the Nature of Violence in Kaduna, Nigeria," *Applied Research Journal of Science and Technology* 3, no. 1 (2022):1–15.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Philpott, "Introduction: Searching for Strategy in an Age of Peacebuilding," in Daniel Philpott and Gerard F. Powers, eds., *Strategies of Peace: Transforming Conflict in a Violent World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

¹⁰² The practice of identifying the element of needs of conflict actors by dialogue facilitators is crucial for an effective peacebuilding dialogue process, hence the need to train facilitators in nonviolent communication that espouses and valorizes this element alongside other elements such as centering, observations, feelings, and requests (see "What is Nonviolent Communication?," w2.cnvc.org/learn/what-is-nvc#!p/471389513).

¹⁰³ David Kwon, "Jus Post Bellum and Catholic Social Thought: Just Political Participation as Civil Society Peacebuilding," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 2 (2023): 424.

sustainable peace. While this analysis is going on, the church can identify with the struggles, cries, and pains of the victims of the conflict through pastoral accompaniment and charity.

- Seeking new opportunities by being morally imaginative to envision new and creative ways, such as conscience formation, peacebuilding education, and advocacy, to make all the parties accountable and responsible; ensuring that their extractive activities do not violate human dignity, human rights, and environmental rights, thereby making way for sustainable peacebuilding. Here, I suggest organizing peacebuilding seminars and symposia for all parties in a safe space.
- Ensuring that the dialogue process taps and mobilizes available local peacebuilding resources that take into account the socio-cultural and spiritual worldviews of the Nigerian/Niger Delta context.
- Adopting a participatory and inclusive dialogical process that is bottom-up in approach, thereby ensuring that agency is given to the people, knowing that “everyone has a fundamental role to play in a single great creative project” of peacebuilding and reconciliation.¹⁰⁴ This bottom-up approach will equip the different conflicting actors to “take ownership of their lives and to assume responsibility through their daily commitments to bringing about” a peaceful and environmentally flourishing Niger Delta region.¹⁰⁵

A third element is advocacy and internationalization. Peacebuilding advocacy focuses more on changing unjust structures that trigger violent conflicts and on human rights violations within a violent conflict setting. The Niger Delta violent conflict has underlying unjust socioeconomic, political, and environmental structures as root causes and cases of human dignity and human rights violations. Hence, there is a need for the Nigerian Church to engage in peacebuilding advocacy. Furthermore, the violent conflict involves the Nigerian state and MNCs on one side and the people of the Niger Delta on the other, suggesting the presence of underlying power differentials. In such a context, advocacy initiatives (e.g., nonviolent marches or protests, mass petitions, public declarations, boycotts, civil resistance, etc.)¹⁰⁶ could enhance the effectiveness of the peace-building

¹⁰⁴ Pope Francis, “Interreligious Meeting with Youth in Maputo, Mozambique,” *L’Osservatore Romano* (6 September 2019): 7.

¹⁰⁵ Francis, “Interreligious Meeting.”

¹⁰⁶ See Veronique Dudouet, “Powering to Peace: Integrated Civil Resistance and Peacebuilding Strategies,” *International Center on Nonviolent Conflict Special*

dialogue process. Such advocacy initiatives might require that the church's agencies, such as the Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria (CCFN), Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC), etc., collaborate with other local faith-based peace advocacy groups and secular Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to organize nonviolent peace initiatives (e.g., a peace march). Similarly, the church through CCFN and JDPC, can collaborate with the Traditional Rulers Council (TRC) in all the states of the Niger Delta region to demand good governance and fiscal accountability and zero corruption from all stakeholders. That way, corruption, one of the reasons for the intractability of the violent conflict in the region, will be nipped in the bud. The overarching goal of engaging in advocacy initiatives/programs is to draw the attention of conflict actors to the deleterious effects of the violent conflict and mobilize the Niger Delta population to nonviolently resist unjust structures and extractive policies and practices by the Nigerian government and MNCs respectively.

Moreover, because the violent conflict involves the Nigerian state and MNCs there is a need for the church to engage local and international CSOs, as well as the help of international Catholic and non-Catholic peace advocacy groups. For example, the church can engage the services of Sant' Egidio which negotiated peacebuilding dialogue in Mozambique, and Catholic Relief Services which advocates for peace in sub-Saharan Africa and other regions of the world torn apart by resource-based violent conflicts. Internationalization of the Niger Delta violent conflict via engagement of international advocacy groups is necessary considering that the violent conflict somehow affects the rest of the world because of the reality of interconnectedness. Collaborating with international advocacy groups appears beneficial because such organizations might help to exert legitimate pressure on international forces (e.g., crude oil syndicates, arms dealers, etc.) whose merchandise benefits immensely from the violent conflict. It will also exert legitimate pressure on both the Nigerian government and MNCs to change unjust structures that marginalize and exclude the people of the region, as well as foster change in extractive laws and policies that impoverish the people and damage their environment.

Finally, the church can also engage the Nigerian government in the areas of policymaking and implementation, especially policies relating to oil and gas activity. It could realize this by permitting JDPC, in collaboration with local and international civil groups, to oversee a platform for reflections on good governance and ethical mining of natural resources. JDPC will, in turn, advise the church on

policies and laws related to the extraction and management of natural resources. With that, the church can engage the government in policymaking and implementation in the field of oil and gas extraction. This strategy worked for the bishops' Conference of the Democratic Republic of Congo (CENCO). CENCO created the Episcopal Commission for Natural Resources (CERN) which, in turn, advised the bishops on all conflicts related to the exploitation of natural resources in DRC. Armed with the advice of CERN, the church in DRC was able to engage and influence the DRC government in policymaking.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION

Building social peace has become a constitutive dimension of the church's evangelizing mission, with its conception and ways of achieving global peace reimagined under Francis's papacy that has the culture of encounter as a defining mark. The culture of encounter calls for ecclesial and missionary as well as ecological conversion; as such, the CoE engenders the process of renewed ecclesial self-identity and prophetic witnessing. With this new self-identity and prophetic witness, the CoE refocuses the church's social mission, such as conflict transformation and peacebuilding via four ethical principles capable of enhancing virtues for political life such as responsible citizenship, participation, truth, mercy, the common good, and justice. These virtues take on board the protection of human dignity and human rights without neglecting genuine concern for the poor and form the basis on which social peace is built in any society using a just peace approach. As a result, Pope Francis has relentlessly promoted these virtues for peacebuilding through his writings and symbolic actions from the beginning of his pontificate. This indicates that Pope Francis's global peacebuilding agenda, as evidenced by his call for the promotion of a culture of encounter, pleads for a more practical and exemplary demonstration of the art of peacebuilding that takes an active nonviolent approach seriously.

Francis has pursued the global peace agenda of the church not just through words but also deeds. Although Francis has no major document that exclusively deals with the theme of peacebuilding, some of the pope's encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, addresses, messages, and homilies refer to peacebuilding. Pope Francis has engaged in international apostolic and diplomatic visits intentionally aimed at promoting global peace, such as the visit to the cities of

¹⁰⁷ See Rigobert Minani, "The Mining Industry, Conflict, and the Church's Commitment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," in *Catholic Peacebuilding and Mining*, 45–53.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan (2019), the Central African Republic (2015), Egypt (2017), Cuba (2015), Colombia (2017), United Arab Emirates (2019), South Sudan and DRC (2023), etc. Apart from these visits, Pope Francis has also demonstrated peacebuilding gestures such as hosting a day of prayer for Mahmoud Abbas (Palestinian president) and Shimon Peres (then Israeli president) at the Vatican in 2014, signing the joint document on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together” with Ahmad Al-Tayyeb (Grand Imam of Al-Azhar) on February 4, 2019, organizing a retreat for Muslim and Christian political leaders of South Sudan at the Vatican in 2019, etc. At the heart of these peacebuilding initiatives and gestures is, for Thomas Massaro, the notion of the CoE that defines Francis’s papacy.¹⁰⁸

Pope Francis believes that the synergy of the church and people of goodwill can create “a special place of encounter . . . where believers and non-believers are able to engage in dialogue about fundamental issues” such as global peacebuilding (EG, no. 257). That is what the culture of encounter aims at: the coming together of all people from diverse social, religious, academic, and other fields of life to work for a peaceful society where human and non-human creation will flourish. For him, a complete conception of peacebuilding pursues a peaceful relationship with our maker, one another, and non-human creation, “since everything is interrelated” (LS, no. 120). To construct such a peacebuilding architecture, we need to engage in social dialogue open to the truth while vigorously but non-violently seeking to protect human dignity and human rights, promote social, economic, political, and ecological justice, and preferential care for the poor, the unjustly excluded, and those pushed to fringes of society. Francis summarizes his CoE peacebuilding model with what he calls “integral ecology,” and he invites all to experience ecological conversion.

Through the practice of the CoE within and outside of itself, the Catholic Church might experience a conversion for renewed self-identity and prophetic witness and become more effective in its social mission, such as promoting global peacebuilding using social dialogue as a tool and active nonviolence as an approach. This applies to particular churches such as the Nigerian Catholic Church, for it can also experience similar conversion by practicing a culture of encounter. With renewed self-identity and prophetic witness as fruits of conversion, the Nigerian Catholic Church can rethink its peacebuilding strategies in the Niger Delta region in light of the CoE peacebuilding model. The church could become more credible and trustworthy before the conflict actors to facilitate the peacebuilding

¹⁰⁸ Thomas Massaro, “The Peace Advocacy of Pope Francis: Jesuit Perspectives,” *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 8 (2021): 536–543.

social dialogue process in the region. Such a dialogue process would creatively frame the conflict and seek new opportunities for collaboration; tap into and incorporate local peacebuilding resources; and adopt an inclusive, participatory, and bottom-up approach. Furthermore, the church needs to engage in peace advocacy programs and collaborate with local and international advocacy groups, adopt proper use of media communication, and engage in state-church collaboration in extractive policymaking. That way, it can contribute to transforming the natural resource-based conflict and building sustainable peace in the region for the flourishing of the Niger Deltans and their environment, the Nigerian state, and the MNCs operating in the region. **M**

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