

Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World

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THE CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING NETWORK (CPN) IS MADE UP of two dozen institutions that include episcopal conferences, universities and institutes, development agencies, and lay organizations. It was founded in 2004 with the intention of accompanying peacebuilders in active conflict zones, specifically Colombia, Mindanao in the southern Philippines, and the Great Lakes region of Africa. For CPN, that accompaniment frequently means collaborating on specific initiatives with partners in those areas and helping them connect with one another to share ideas, experiences, and lessons. It also includes efforts to connect on-the-ground practitioners, church leaders, and scholars so that they can mutually reinforce one another's work in order to better harness the Catholic Church's distinct capacities for peacebuilding.

In June 2022, CPN held an international virtual conference to help advance those goals. The event convened a wide range of Catholic peacebuilders—Church leaders, scholars, peacebuilding specialists, and other practitioners—from around the world, with over eighty presenters from more than thirty countries, including Myanmar, Colombia, the Philippines, Syria, South Sudan, Guatemala, South Africa, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Ukraine. The title of the conference was *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*. This symposium includes four essays developed from sessions at this conference. I co-edited it with Maria Power, affiliated to the Las Casas Institute for Social Justice, Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, one of twenty-eight institutions that collaborated on the conference. The intent is to show how the theory and praxis of peacebuilding offer challenges to moral theology and theological ethics. Peacebuilding is the strategic, multilayered process of building and sustaining peace. It includes negative peace, the ending of armed conflict, but goes further and strives to establish positive peace by working across social levels and sectors to prevent violent conflict from emerging or re-emerging. In areas with ongoing conflict or legacies of violence, members of the Catholic community are actively engaged across these levels and

sectors, from local agencies working on building social cohesion or healing trauma, to episcopal conferences participating in national-level peace processes, to intermediate institutions protecting against environmental violence, and scholar-practitioners advocating for public policy. In some of these cases Catholics are vulnerable victims, in some they are trusted mediators, in some they are historically complicit with conflict or violence, and in some others they are many of these at the same time. Regardless of the circumstances, this peacebuilding praxis frequently occurs in some of the most challenging spaces in the world for putting faith into action. The ways peacebuilders are grappling with how to live out a vocation of peace within these contexts can offer valuable insights into the practice of moral theology.

Before giving more details on the essays of the symposium, I will describe the context for *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*. The “crisis” of the title includes the existential crisis of climate change. It also includes COVID-19, which exacerbated other existing crises of conflict, poverty, inequality, and polarization. While the pandemic led to unprecedented cooperation and heroic responses by many, it also exposed deficits in leadership and emboldened authoritarians, demagogues, and chauvinistic nationalists. Just as the world hoped to move beyond the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought a new crisis, threatening global peace in ways thought unimaginable when the pandemic began. Responding to these crises requires an integral approach to peace, development, and ecology because the cry of war victims, the cry of the poor, and the cry of the earth rise as one (*Laudato Si'*, no. 49).

Such an integral approach is especially necessary as the pandemic has made the gulf between zones of peace, prosperity, and environmental justice and zones of conflict, deprivation, and ecological devastation ever less bridgeable. In a post-pandemic world seeking to recover from mass starvation, unprecedented refugee flows, a proliferation of failing and failed states, and seemingly intractable conflicts, human security will have to take priority over a new nuclear arms race, excessive reliance on force, and other narrow approaches to national security. As we recover from the worst global economic downturn since the Great Depression, the focus will have to be on constraining unregulated globalization and gross inequalities in the name of integral human development of the whole person and communities. Amidst rising nationalism, extremist populist movements, and political polarization, good governance serving human dignity and the common good is desperately needed from the village council to the UN. All of the above requires that we acknowledge the basic fact that we live in a complex, interdependent world that cannot function without sustained efforts to deepen bonds

of solidarity, the glue allowing us to build more effective and just structures of cooperative security.

The praxis and theory of Catholic peacebuilding can offer much to these challenges, and this conference aimed to help Catholic peacebuilders meet the moment. It operated with three animating assumptions:

(1) *A theology of hope* matters. The sheer magnitude of the world's interconnected crises easily generates denial, indifference, despair, cynicism, and fatalism. The antidote is to combine sober realism and concrete plans of action with more effective efforts to cultivate a theology, ethics, and spirituality of hope rooted in the conviction that "the Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge" (*Laudato Si'*, no. 80). Religious imagination can contribute greatly to sustaining hope, and as John Paul Lederach has described, moral imagination is key to peacebuilding because it can empower hope by bringing new potentials to light.¹ Leaders and peacebuilders from the Catholic Church and other religious groups exercising their ability to stimulate this imagination, this capacity to envision realistic and new possibilities beyond crisis and conflict, would be a tremendous value at present.

(2) *Peacebuilding* matters. Seeing issues through a peacebuilding lens (as opposed, for example, to a purely human rights, ecological, or development one) makes a difference in what is done as well as in outcomes. Peacebuilding recognizes that prolonged, complex problems need prolonged, complex responses. Hence, peacebuilding encourages theories of change reflecting greater integration of the different dimensions of injustice and conflict, the need to prioritize crucial yet hard-to-metric results like social reconciliation and forgiveness, and commitment to gradual and long-term progress that can lead to truly sustainable peace.

(3) *Catholic* peacebuilding matters. World crises require concerted action by all of humanity and Catholic peacebuilding shares much in common with Lutheran, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, and secular peacebuilding. The Catholic community brings distinctive value to the peacebuilding enterprise. This includes spiritual and ritual resources that can support growth and transformation in individuals and communities, a robust global network of peacebuilders rooted in their communities and present in many areas other peace-concerned agencies or groups may not be able to access, and an established institutional structure allowing connection between the grassroots and the grasstops as well as horizontal networking to share experience and

¹ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

learning. The church's capacity to leverage these assets could and should be strengthened by grounding it more deeply in a theology and ethics of peace, as well as promising practices derived from decades of peacebuilding experience in diverse conflict contexts.

The reflections in the conference's opening plenary session emphasized these assumptions.² Cardinal Charles Bo of Myanmar stated, "In so many places around the world people are enduring their Golgothas and Calvaries, walking their 'Way of the Cross.' ... Whether we are carrying our cross or rising from it, we must hold on to hope. Not a false hope. Not a Hollywood hope. Not a hope of romantic happy endings that we see in the movies. But a gritty, earthy, real hope, grounded in our real source of strength—our Crucified and Risen Lord." Bo helped draw the distinction between optimism and hope, directing the idea of hope to real world possibility rather than simple positive thinking. The former demands active response, the latter allows passive expectation. "Hope," Bo continued, "is like petrol—it is fuel provided to equip you to break through the crises." Hope does matter.

For Bo, that active response of hope must attend to three areas: peacebuilding and reconciliation; justice, accountability, and truth; and humanitarian assistance. In his response to Bo, R. Scott Appleby affirmed Bo's tripartite view of a hopeful response for peace, but he noted that while the third item lends itself to metrics, the first two do not do so as easily. In regard to peace, reconciliation, accountability, and justice he asked:

In these spheres, measuring hope is a trickier business: if we are to measure progress "over time," what is the appropriate deadline to show "progress" for peacebuilders who attend to victims traumatized by violence, broken, and in need of healing? And what does "progress" look like, anyway, in such cases? The restoration of a victimized individual or community to something like pre-trauma flourishing of healthy, reciprocal relationships? And for peacebuilders who focus elsewhere—say, on processes of dialogue, reconciliation, and reparation, or on the postwar rebuilding of courts and the justice system, or on the de-mobilization of armed groups, or the provision for youth of alternatives to gangs—the question looms: What are realistic criteria for success?

Appleby leaves the question unanswered, but his point stands: sustainable solutions to the world's problems need to account for these

² The following comments from Cardinal Charles Bo and R. Scott Appleby are from their session "Hope in Times of Crisis," held on June 20, 2023, at the virtual conference *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*. The session recording can be found at youtu.be/MvUtrnVFY9Y.

kinds of hard-to-measure peacebuilding activities. Peacebuilding does matter.

Cardinal Bo offered several insights on how a Catholic approach can distinctly enliven and enhance peacebuilding. For example, he explained how recognizing the *Imago Dei* in others can cultivate hope by encouraging us to find unity in diversity as opposed to allowing diversity to separate us. Another example was his insistence that accountability and reconciliation are inseparable: “The teaching of the Church is abundantly clear: truth and reconciliation go together, and justice and peace walk hand-in-hand. You cannot have one without the other.” According to Daniel Philpott, forgiveness is an essential part of transitional justice and reconciliation processes. It is also something Catholic and other Christian leaders have emphasized in contradistinction to politically driven processes, and that can strengthen political reconciliation and shape effective practices of peacebuilding.³ Robert Schreiter has argued that the Catholic tradition has resources to shape what forgiveness and reconciliation can look like, practices that can embody and put them into action, and an ability to find consonance with secular understandings of peacebuilding and reconciliation, penetrating and augmenting the latter.⁴ The long-term commitment of the Colombian Catholic bishops is a good case for demonstrating how such conceptual potentials can be mobilized across levels of society, connected to support from the international community, and extended to the most remote areas of the country.⁵ In his plenary reflections, Scott Appleby stated:

And what will we be able to accomplish if we succeed in strengthening the Church’s sense of peacebuilding as the mission and vocation of all Catholics, not just the bishops and select laity? What is possible for us if that sense of mission and vocation shape the priorities of Catholic institutions, groups, and individuals of all kinds and at all levels—not just a small cadre of dedicated peace and justice

³ Daniel Philpott, “The Surprise of Forgiveness in Modern Catholic Social Teaching and Practice,” in *The Surprise of Reconciliation in the Catholic Tradition*, ed. J. J. Carney and Laurie Johnston (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2018), 288–311.

⁴ Robert J. Schreiter, “A Practical Theology of Healing, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 366–397.

⁵ For an overview of this involvement see Barbara Fraser, “Colombian Catholic Church Plays Key Role in Keeping Peace,” *America*, September 5, 2018, www.americamagazine.org/faith/2018/09/05/colombian-catholic-church-plays-key-role-keeping-peace. For more in-depth information, see the Catholic Peacebuilding Network’s repository of resources on the Catholic Church’s peacebuilding work in Colombia: cpn.nd.edu/research-learning/documents-library/by-location/colombia-documents/.

activists. What will it take for Catholics engaged in disparate and largely uncoordinated action scattered across the peacebuilding spectrum, to integrate work on climate and peace, relief and development, spirituality, and peace? A world in crisis awaits our answer.

That answer is needed because distinctly Catholic peacebuilding does matter. These three themes—the need for hope, the importance of peacebuilding, and the distinct value of Catholic peacebuilding—were also echoed in a special address delivered by Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, the Holy See’s Permanent Observer to the UN.⁶ Caccia underlined the need for hope by noting apathy as one of the major challenges that must be faced alongside ongoing conflict, rampant military spending, and growing risks of nuclear war. Later in his address, he focused on the need to proactively build positive peace: “As we well know, a negative peace imposed by force cannot hope to be sustainable, even if it facilitates development, as such a peace often contributes to grievances that form the basis for future conflict.” Caccia went on to describe the way the UN peacekeeping mission has evolved in recent decades to include more of a peacebuilding focus. He also noted that Catholic leaders like Pope St. John XXIII and the bishops of the Second Vatican Council recognized the potential of the UN’s peacebuilding role and the necessity of such an international institution for advancing global peace. He also reminded his audience that despite the UN’s growth in peacebuilding, Catholic groups are still frequently vital on-the-ground agents working to lay groundwork, such as the achievements of the Community of Sant’Egidio in mediating peace talks in South Sudan to complement the UN peacekeeping mission.

Other sessions of the conference helped highlight examples of Catholic peacebuilding in action in various ways. One plenary session featured a roundtable discussion about ways in which the Catholic Church brings distinct strengths to formal peace processes, and ways in which it can adapt to emerging challenges and new contexts to become an ever more effective agent of peace.⁷ It included participants from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Philippines, and Colombia, as well as a member of the Sant’Egidio Community involved in peace negotiations in South Sudan. The discussion was

⁶ The following comments from Archbishop Gabriele Caccia are from his special presentation message for the virtual conference *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*. The recording can be found at youtu.be/eAYdgtbo_rc.

⁷ “Catholic Church and Peace Processes,” conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 22, 2022, youtu.be/Cc2rLgRNF18.

moderated by Ambassador (ret.) Susan Page, the first US Ambassador to South Sudan. Other plenary sessions engaged major questions in the peacebuilding field. One examined the state of the debate on nonviolence, peacebuilding, and the ethics of war, especially in light of current conflicts such as the one in Ukraine.⁸ Another featured Sr. Alessandra Smerilli, Secretary of the Vatican's Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, along with voices from Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, and the *Laudato Si'* Movement examining ways in which the church is trying to live up to the need to weave together integral ecology, integral human development, and integral peace.⁹

Other sessions helped raise critical questions about ways in which the church might improve its peacebuilding work and address blind spots or deficiencies. One such session looked at the significance of women's leadership for durable peace.¹⁰ It included women practitioners from Catholic Relief Services-Philippines and Caritas Ukraine dialoguing with women scholars about why women's leadership is so important and how the Catholic community can better recognize and support it. Another session, in Spanish, brought together a group of South American practitioners and scholars to discuss how environmental considerations can be better included in peacebuilding work.¹¹ Another discussed the possibilities and limits of the church in addressing problems of global governance.¹² There also was a session convened by Caritas Internationalis with affiliates from Syria, Jordan, South Sudan, and Ukraine, along with David Hollenbach, SJ, to describe how the growing worldwide refugee crisis impacts and is impacted by peace and conflict.¹³ One session organized by Fordham University looked at how spirituality is key to

⁸ "Ethics of Nonviolence, Peacebuilding, and War," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 21, 2022, youtu.be/kzBFAHwZuk0.

⁹ "Climate, Development, and Peace," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 23, 2022, youtu.be/OiQ6kSwp3aw.

¹⁰ "Women's Peace Leadership," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 21, 2022, youtu.be/zdGP7hBn5oQ.

¹¹ "Construcción de la paz medioambiental," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 20, 2022, youtu.be/iEC7HK0oOcE.

¹² "The Catholic Church and Global Governance," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 21, 2022, youtu.be/QKFCHLf283k.

¹³ "Refugees, Migrants, and Peace," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 22, 2022, youtu.be/UjsQX8bMJVg.

making peace a more central dimension of Catholic tradition and church culture.¹⁴

The four essays in this symposium are developed from other sessions at the conference. First, Maka Black Elk writes about his experience as the Executive Director for Truth and Healing at the Red Cloud Indian School in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. Black Elk was part of a panel on “Truth as a Foundation for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation.”¹⁵ The panel addressed how human rights violations, crimes, and atrocities must be formally recognized before political or social reconciliation can occur and peace be established, as well as how religious leaders often play key roles in these processes. Black Elk’s essay asserts that, regarding Indigenous peoples, the Catholic Church from both theological and sociological perspectives has a fundamental challenge. It asks what it means for the Catholic Church to have been not only complicit, but an active participant, in the erasure of various Native American peoples’ cultures, languages, and spiritual traditions. He questions how that context impacts the church’s efforts today to advance evangelization and support reconciliation among Indigenous communities, including whether the treasured sacramental term of “reconciliation” can even be recovered in this context.

Second, Isabel Aguilar Umaña and Cecelia Suárez Trueba, both of Catholic Relief Services, synthesized a session they led on regional peacebuilding in Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁶ Aguilar and Suárez help coordinate Catholic Relief Services’ *Caminando hacia la Paz* (Walking Towards Peace) initiative.¹⁷ *Caminando hacia la Paz* is a regional community of practice made up of Catholic organizations working on peace and justice strategies across Latin America and the Caribbean. It includes members from Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Caribbean regional offices from Caritas Internationalis and Catholic Relief Services. The community aims to build capacity among partners and Catholic grassroots organizations by sharing peacebuilding methodologies, learning, and successful experiences and to strengthen and promote the role of the Catholic Church as a key agent of peacebuilding in the

¹⁴ “Culture First: Shaping a Culture of Peacebuilding through Spirituality,” conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 20, 2022, youtu.be/Lt5BeW1301o.

¹⁵ “Truth as a Foundation for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation,” conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 20, 2022, youtu.be/4Yyg3uwDtB8.

¹⁶ “Caminando hacia la paz: generando sinergias a nivel regional,” conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 22, 2022, youtu.be/77esKo_qgvM.

¹⁷ See www.caminandohacialapaz.com/.

region. Through its cooperative regional focus as a community of practice, *Caminando hacia la Paz* exemplifies synodality in action, and it shows how synodality can be connected to peacebuilding praxis.

The third essay, by Emmanuel Ntakirutimana, OP, is from a session that similarly examined regional peacebuilding efforts, but in the Great Lakes Region of Africa.¹⁸ Ntakirutimana specifically focuses on interreligious cooperation. According to Ntakirutimana, who works in Burundi, the African Great Lakes Region has experienced cyclical violence since countries began gaining independence in the 1960s. The repeated emergence of leaders formed in contexts of rebellion and violence has yielded continuing authoritarian rule rather than democratic societies aimed at the common good. Taking into account this long history of multidimensional vulnerability and instability, religious denominations have been looking for innovative perspectives that could generate new approaches for the strengthening of social capital and resilience. One such initiative mobilized the energies of religious leaders in the region during 2019 and 2020. It was an interfaith platform called Dignity and Peace in the Great Lakes, which brought together representatives of the Catholic Church, traditional Protestant churches, Revivalist churches, and the Islamic community from platforms already operational in the various Great Lakes countries. Especially since COVID-19, the implementation of the platform's action plan has stalled. Ntakirutimana argues that the difficulties with expediting the platform's plans as well as those of previous efforts at cooperative regional peacebuilding show that a stronger ecclesiology of peacebuilding is needed to support initiatives aimed at peace and justice, especially in countries impacted by conflict and underdevelopment.

Lastly, Eduardo Gutiérrez González contributed an essay on imagination, Catholic social thought, and peacebuilding. Gutiérrez González's essay came from a session that critically assessed Catholic social teaching and how it can be developed to better support peacebuilding and emerging challenges of violent conflict.¹⁹ In addition to Gutiérrez González, who is from Colombia, it included scholars from the United Kingdom, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Philippines. Gutiérrez González argues that both the practice of peacebuilding and Catholic social thought rely heavily on

¹⁸ "La consolidation régionale de la paix," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 23, 2022, youtu.be/Awmq2bE186g.

¹⁹ "Critical Assessment of Catholic Social Teaching through the Lens of Peacebuilding," conference session, *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World*, June 22, 2022, youtu.be/PvQDRTF8iuI.

the imagination, including the social imaginaries out of which they emerge. He claims that peacebuilding has the potential to open up the imagination of Catholic social thought and present it with opportunities to grow and adapt to situations impacted by persistent violent conflict.

These four symposium essays provide a glimpse of the ways in which Catholic peacebuilding can ask questions of Catholic moral theology and ethics. Some are practical and some theoretical, some are critical and some supplementary. The hope is that they help set the table for additional conversation between these areas of praxis and thought, and that they might spark interest in other interlocutors from *Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis*, as well as artisans of peace throughout the wider Catholic community. In myriad ways and locations, the need for peacebuilding is urgent, and the Catholic Church has powerful assets to leverage for it. The work of moral theologians and theological ethicists is vital for making peacebuilding a living part of the church's mission. **M**

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