

Walking Towards Peace: Generating Synergies at a Regional Level¹

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Walking Towards Peace is a community of practice made up of faith-based organizations that work for justice and peace in Latin America and the Caribbean.² It began in 2020 and constitutes a space of encounter allowing for the creation of synergies with the intention of connecting and constructively encouraging the different peacebuilding efforts of the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is made up of grassroots faith-based organizations with ample peacebuilding experience developed in diverse territories and with different specific emphases and directions. Its aim is to create a collective space of unity and cooperation with the intention of strengthening the actions taken by the Latin American and Caribbean Church to build just societies based on solidarity.

Although the entities forming this community have been working on peacebuilding for several years—sometimes even decades—it is clear that this initiative aligns with Pope Francis’s recent and heartfelt call for the church to practice and echo synodality in its life and ministry. According to the church’s General Secretariat for the Synod on Synodality, synodality “is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to

¹ This text is based on a presentation given by Walking Towards Peace on June 22, 2022, during the *Catholic Peacebuilding in Time of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World* virtual conference organized by the Catholic Peacebuilding Network and its collaborators. Unless cited otherwise, quotations in this essay come from this conference presentation, video of which can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=77esKo_qgvM&t=157s. The presentation was originally in Spanish; its text has been translated by Marystella Ramirez Guerra.

² The organizations that make up Walking Towards Peace are: Cáritas El Salvador; Cáritas Honduras; Pastoral Social Cáritas Colombiana; Caritas of the Diocese of Jinotega; the Latin American and Caribbean Secretariat of Caritas (SELACC); Centro de Integración y Acción Social—Jesuitas por la Paz, in México; the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala; Fundación Internacional del Buen Pastor; Comunidad Óscar Arnulfo Romero (COAR), in El Salvador; Fundación Instituto para la Construcción de la Paz (FICONPAZ) of the Archdiocese of Bogotá; and Catholic Relief Services, through the Latin American and Caribbean Peacebuilding Platform. For more on Walking Towards Peace,” see www.caminandohacialapaz.com/.

her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.”³ The Synod on Synodality also has a particular focus on witnessing the Gospel in places on the periphery, such as those in Latin America and the Caribbean impacted by ongoing violence and conflict, which threaten human dignity and hinder the ability to achieve integral human development. In these circumstances, peacebuilding clearly emerges as part of that “*modus vivendi et operandi*”; without it, the church would be incapable of effectively ministering and evangelizing. To be church in this part of the world means being a peacebuilding community. Accordingly, through its cooperative regional focus as a community of practice, Walking Towards Peace exemplifies synodality in action, and it shows how synodality can be connected to peacebuilding praxis.

THE PATH OF WALKING TOWARDS PEACE

Walking Towards Peace emerged shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic introduced a considerable practical challenge for a new regional cooperative network. Being unable to meet in person, we had to start meeting virtually, which encouraged a closeness that, though incomplete, made decision-making easier. Through the effective use of information technologies and communication it was possible to build a team identity and consensus in reference to plans and strategies.

Walking Towards Peace provides a forum to exchange experiences and knowledge and forge an embodied synodality. It prioritizes three strategies: identify and describe regional actions toward strategic peacebuilding; show how the church is an effective agent of peacebuilding at the grassroots and regional levels; and connect experiences of and share learning from specific peacebuilding initiatives.

The first priority of identifying actions concerned with strategic peacebuilding means describing activities that deal with topics including care for victims, preventing violence (especially amongst the most vulnerable: young people, children, women, human rights and environmental defenders), transforming conflict, and generally promoting social transformation from the perspective of a just peace. Though the region, with the exception of Colombia, does not have open conflict, Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced in the last decades a high level of violence and inequality, social evils that go hand in hand. Many countries have histories of war and still struggle to establish positive peace and reconciliation. Other regional

³ Synod 2021–2024, “About,” www.synod.va/en/what-is-the-synod-21-24/about.html.

dynamics, like migration and poverty, create conditions for violence and insecurity. For these reasons, different tasks in the field of peacebuilding continue to be essential in the countries of the region. This is especially true in those areas that experience high levels of armed violence connected to organized crime or include violence against women and girls, the LGBTIQA+ community, or indigenous communities.

The second priority concerns showing the work the church is doing at the grassroots level in each country and at the regional level. This provides evidence of the church as a key agent in strategic peacebuilding, promoting conflict transformation, and attending to the victims of violence. According to Isabel Aguilar Umaña of Catholic Relief Services, the Catholic Church is, for more than one reason, in a privileged position when it comes to peacebuilding and building a safe environment in which democracy and respect for human rights can develop. One of the reasons highlighted is the ubiquitous character of church agents and organizations. This refers on the one hand to the presence of both in all the regions of each country, even the most remote areas, and on the other, to the fact that people connected to the church operate at all levels: as directors, in intermediate management, and at the grassroots. This gives them the ability to have influence horizontally and vertically, allowing them to connect different stakeholders and build bridges.⁴ Another reason is the legitimacy the church possesses as an institution. This legitimacy is of extreme importance in a region where the credibility of other institutions has been eroded.⁵ It allows the church to build confidence between conflicting parties and helps cultivate a desire for building healthy democracies respectful of the rule of law and human rights.

Fr. Francisco Hernandez, regional coordinator for the Latin American and Caribbean Secretariat for Caritas International (SELACC), upholds these ideas. He underlines that Walking Towards

⁴ John Paul Lederach has explained this “ubiquitous presence” of the Catholic Church as one of its most distinct peacebuilding assets. See John Paul Lederach, “The Long Journey Back to Humanity: Catholic Peacebuilding with Armed Actors,” in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 50–51.

⁵ The case of the Catholic Church in Colombia is demonstrative. For example, the Catholic Church’s moral credibility has allowed it to serve multiple functions in the formation and implementation of the national peace agreement signed in 2016. This included a Jesuit priest, Francisco de Roux, being named the director of the National Truth Commission. It is also evident in the Catholic Church’s role in peace talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), which did not sign the 2016 peace agreement. On the church’s role with the ELN, see Daniel Stewart, “The Catholic Church in Colombia Confirms its ‘Permanent’ Presence in Peace Talks with ELN,” News360, December 12, 2022, www.news360.es/uk/2022/12/12/the-catholic-church-in-colombia-confirms-its-permanent-presence-in-peace-talks-with-eln/.

Peace, along with the platform for peacebuilding, human rights, and reconciliation promoted by the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' Council, should seek to become more involved with democracy.⁶ This is particularly in line with the Gospel and the concept of the dignity of each person, which is at the root of the Church's social action. According to Fr. Hernandez, "This understanding helps us to become involved in the social thinking of the Church, in its magisterium, particularly these days, in which Pope Francis challenges us to see new ways to address the extremely unequal and excluding dominating social structures."

The third priority, connecting experiences, means creating a multi-level community that provides the space in which grassroots actors can share their successes and learnings and connect with each other at the regional level, thus feeding into the synergy of action for peace. For Fr. Hernandez, this ability to contribute to regional peacebuilding is one of Walking Towards Peace's most important strengths:

It is important that we realize that working in communion, in the style of synodality, gives us great advantages when working for peace and for the protection of human rights. It helps to share experience and to listen to the different communities, to the people, in order to discern together and discern with them what objective lines of action can be taken so as to transform reality. To make this a successful effort, it is important that we know how to identify what is the essential call that God is inviting us to in the middle of this reality. This leads us to where we need to be, from the capacity to discern together, to see together, where the Holy Spirit is calling us to enter into history and transform it.

Another important aspect brought up by Fr. Hernandez is that from the regional dimension and synodal approach, a diverse set of methodologies can be learnt, and we can see that there is more than one way to do things. "There are diverse methodologies, diverse ways of doing things and I think that it is worth collecting these different ways of designing and looking of the different actors in the region. They provide different ways of looking at tools, at indicators, and

⁶ Historically, the Catholic Church in Latin America and the Caribbean, as in other parts of the world, was not always allied with democracy. Catholic support for democracy grew slowly after World War II and the Second Vatican Council. On this broad trend, see Kenneth R. Himes, *Christianity and the Political Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 216–228. On the church's role in the democratization of South America specifically, see Luis Felipe Mantilla, "Mobilizing Religion for Democracy: Explaining Catholic Church Support for Democratization in South America," *Politics and Religion* 3, no. 3 (2010): 553–579, doi.org/10.1017/S1755048310000179.

especially using them from the perspective of the fabric and reality of the society in which they live.”

Fr. Rafael Castillo, Director of Pastoral Social-Cáritas Colombiana, thinks it is important to build peace in territories distant from urban centers based on deliberative democracy, in order to then take what happens in these regions to other spaces where it is also necessary to build consensus and agreement. This makes it possible to create an integral and legitimate strategy involving all sectors that have suffered violence and exclusion of different types and allows those strategies to be defined by the contexts in which the people live. The actions of faith organizations like the ones that make up Walking Towards Peace can contribute to the transmission of regional experiences in ways faithful to their processes, thoughts, and feelings.

According to Fr. Castillo, the first question to be asked when thinking of regional peacebuilding from the grassroots is whether when “walking together” we are in fact walking towards the same thing. He asks whether the process of regional peacebuilding is building a practical and connecting consensus in which all participants can see themselves reflected. The second question we should be asking is: What type of vehicle should the process be using? This question enquires about the right process for connecting regional experiences. From here stems the third question. If we have determined that we are all moving toward the same destination and have decided which vehicle to use, then we need to ask what we will be doing along the way. “What are the strategic lines of action that need to accompany a peace process growing out of the regions?”

For Fr. Castillo, the Catholic Church has the ability to carry out an important role in answering these questions, especially at the grassroots level in each region. It constitutes an important base upon which to consolidate relationships indispensable for sustainable peacebuilding. The Catholic Church in its role of building peace from the grassroots, tied to each region and with knowledge of what matters in each region, has to make an effort to build connections between the different sectors of civil society, such as grassroots organizations, businesses, and local government, in order to carry forward the message of what is found on the ground and experienced by the victims of conflict. This opens up the possibility of a sustainable peace. Fr. Castillo invites all to build peace from the ground up:

That everyone see the worth and beauty of the small things in life, that we recognize the efforts, however small, of the men and women at the periphery. They leave us a lesson: that it is best to use renewable natural resources. That the usefulness of something needs to be placed above its monetary value. Democratic participation in all sectors of

life needs to be promoted; there must be in our peacebuilding process a recognition of the deep value that our inter-cultural reality has.

A similar call comes from the Centro de Integración y Acción Social—Jesuitas por la Paz (CIAS), based in Mexico and promoting good practice in the rebuilding of the social fabric. They propose a good-living pedagogy, suggesting models of intervention in and from the different regions where they work. In this framework, the community plays the main role because it seeks to build peace locally, encouraging agency in local actors. CIAS aims to prevent organizations or institutions from intervening in the process, allowing for the community to take the lead in all decisions connected to the creation of strategy and action planning for peacebuilding. In CIAS experience, to encourage community leaders to be a point of reference in their communities so that their members adopt healthy intervention practices is key. Healthy intervention practices free of hate, resentment, or polarization encourage peacebuilding.

The good-living pedagogy promoted by CIAS comprises 6 fundamental steps: 1) make the state aware and sensitive to the social fabric; 2) raise awareness of the existential disconnections and community traumas that are a result of the violence experienced by the communities in the regions; 3) understand this reality, analyzing and assuming responsibility for it, and using the resources available to transform the negative situation into a positive one; 4) develop capabilities for peacebuilding, thus generating desirable outcomes; 5) reconnect and aid in situating and co-designing a common project; and finally, 6) institutionalize the processes in an existent structure so that good living conditions can be established.

Nery Rodenas, Executive Director of the Human Rights Office of the Archdiocese of Guatemala (ODHAG), puts forward an important reason to justify the collegial efforts represented in *Walking Towards Peace*: the possibility of gathering the very diverse expertise required to respond to the different needs, demands, and challenges that the social, political, and institutional realities pose to peacebuilders. In Rodenas's vision, *Walking Towards Peace* brings together organizations having accumulated knowledge that is diverse and can be put at the service of peacebuilding in many different contexts. Rodenas points out that the sharing of experiences through *Walking Towards Peace* enables mutual learning about how to effectively navigate similar or common problems faced across the different regions.

For example, some organizations in *Walking Towards Peace* possess specialized expertise, such as in working with children. The FICONPAZ program in Colombia, run by the Archdiocese of Bogotá, has proven success with the methodology "Sowers of Peace," which

has accompanied and encouraged communities of “sowers” working for the protection of vulnerable youth, establishing in them the principles and values of a culture of peace. FICONPAZ later gave support to organizations in Mexico, Honduras, and Haiti to implement “Sowers of Peace” in their countries. Another example in the area of youth ministry is Cáritas Honduras, with the methodology “Youth, Artisans of Peace,” which attends to different forms of violence, such as violence against women and girls.

With ODHAG, there is significant experience in the area of historical memory recovery. The topic of historical memory, though not always mentioned in peacebuilders’ agendas, is key to a sustainable peace as it helps heal past wounds and prevent new conflicts. According to Rodenas, different societies in Latin America have lived through internal armed conflicts during which a number of abuses against the dignity of persons were perpetrated:

Many people were hurt, many were persecuted, murdered, or made to disappear, and unfortunately, there has been a process of forgetting rather than remembering what happened with regard to the historical processes of war experienced. It is, however, important to continue with this type of process in which we go out to the communities with other languages that speak to the culture of the people there. This opens up the possibility of getting to know the truth, which is an important step for each person’s development and for the social transformation of our countries.

Speaking on the anniversary of the assassination of Juan José Gerardi, killed after leading Guatemala’s Recovery of Historical Memory project, Rodolfo Cardinal Quezada Toruño, Metropolitan Archbishop of Guatemala, said: “As the Church, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are willing to forgive, but we want to know who to forgive and what to forgive.”⁷ What he emphasizes is the need for truth, of coming to terms with what has happened through historical memory and of being able to follow afterwards with a judicial process and know that the process was completed justly. It is, therefore, important to continue to recover historical memory to achieve the type of social transformation needed in our societies. A recognition of the past is necessary to understand the present and build a new future. Consensus about the desired future is needed to enable the different agents involved in the conflict to make decisions about how to build viable peace strategies.

⁷“Guatemala conmemora los diez años del asesinato del obispo Gerardi,” *Zenit*, April 22, 2008, es.zenit.org/2008/04/22/guatemala-conmemora-los-diez-anos-del-asesinato-del-obispo-gerardi/.

ODHAG can contribute its expertise in this area and help other members of the Walking Towards Peace community of practice find viable ways to work toward this goal. One of the actions it promotes to recover historical memory is the building of museums. In the organization's experience:

The young need visual and auditory aids to comprehend what happened during the armed conflict and to assimilate this type of situation, to prevent it from happening again. That is why it is important to touch that wound, so that, for example, the younger generations will become involved with our efforts, so that they understand the judicial processes, why it is necessary to have psychosocial healing, why we are exhuming bodies.

Many other current realities in Latin America and the Caribbean are linked to forms of oppression and violence, such as immigration which happens under extremely precarious conditions. For Walking Towards Peace, realities such as those lived by Central American immigrants, and others such as Venezuelans and Haitians, are extremely worrying and demand efforts that begin from the peacebuilding point of view. A peacebuilding approach helps organizations both address the immediate crisis and consolidate mid-to long-term actions, processes, institutions, and public policies guaranteeing the respect of the dignity of the immigrant population.

These three priorities of identifying and describing peacebuilding actions, showcasing the church's peacebuilding capacity, and networking peacebuilding experience and learning allow Walking Towards Peace to craft a multi-layered platform to express synodality and animate community. It gives the Church in Central America and the Caribbean, from grassroots faithful to episcopal leaders, a way to express their vocations as peacebuilders and work together in solidarity as a true communion of the People of God.

CAPACITY BUILDING

These three animating priorities are most concretely expressed in Walking Towards Peace's commitment to strengthen the capacities of the member organizations and other stakeholders by using experiences and methodologies already tested in the field. These methodologies have been catalogued in an online toolbox, which offers the possibility of renewing or updating information more easily.⁸ For example, in the beginning of 2021 fifteen methodologies were published. Currently the site contains nineteen, with four more being drafted. As Cecelia Suárez Trueba of Catholic Relief Services points out, "This way, other

⁸ See www.caminandohacialapaz.com/.

organizations will have access to the methodologies and an exchange of experiences will emerge amongst the different teams working for peace in the region. We have organized methodology fairs at which we have shared these tools in order to encourage the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean to work on these topics.”

The toolbox organizes all the methodologies with similar parameters: an introduction including information on intended participants and contexts, as well as when and where the methodology has been used; details on the program and process; a description of impacts; and relevant implementation resources and materials. As an example, there is “Artes Creativas.”⁹ The methodology was first developed in 2018 by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in Ecuador to build social cohesion and reduce xenophobia when the country experienced a wave of migrants from Colombia and Venezuela. It was later implemented in El Salvador and Guatemala. The toolbox site notes that the program is appropriate for youth between the ages of 16 to 29 and is intended for use in educational settings or centres with community-based youth groups. The site also provides a detailed walkthrough of the process, including recommendations for facilitator profiles, total number of hours needed and recommended number of sessions to cover those hours, CRS-published guidebooks and resource videos, and information to contact CRS for facilitator training. Other entries in the toolbox follow the same format but offer methodologies to serve different goals and contexts. This toolbox forms the backbone of the community of practice. It is the primary vehicle by which the organizations in the initiative can support their region’s synodal concern for peacebuilding by sharing best practices and supporting one another in their ongoing work for peace.

CONCLUSION

Walking Towards Peace considers itself a space worth cultivating and building up to allow the church to provide an integral and synodal response to the current problems of violence and conflict in Latin America and the Caribbean, such as those caused by drug trafficking, conflicts over natural resources, and immigration, amongst others. Walking Towards Peace is encouraged by the possibility of generating significant impact. The platform believes it can effectively concretize the desire to generate synergies from and for the church to lead the process of social transformation, peacebuilding, and justice. This would truly address the critical historical moment the region is experiencing. The organizations of Walking Towards Peace share the belief that this current moment in the region is characterized by an

⁹ See www.caminandohacialapaz.com/artescreativas.

alarming setback in democratic processes and an intensification of multiple conflict foci. There is increasing polarization and violence threatening human lives and the life of the planet.

The organizations that make up Walking Towards Peace share values of peace and collect experiences and practices that can be used for peacebuilding. We feel encouraged to live in truth and free to work from our different perspectives and regional concerns. We want to continue in this synodal process to build fraternal relationships and even ones of affection to inspire tenderness and promote relationships that give importance to equal care for everyone and the environment. Strengthening affective ties with people and the environment is essential to building permanent and sustainable peace. Finally, it is important to move beyond gestures of solidarity and build a practical sense of community that will aid us in building a just and humane society allowing everyone to live in peace. Empowering the People of God in this way to meet the challenges of the moment and transform their world is a vital expression of synodality and witnessing the good news of peace and dignity to the most vulnerable. **M**

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Cecilia Suárez Trueba is Catholic Relief Services' Head of Office for Mexico and the coordinator of the regional peacebuilding platform. She has worked in partnership with different faith-based organizations and pastoral teams to promote and implement peacebuilding and social cohesion and justice strategies in countries and communities with high levels of violence. She facilitates networks and alliances to promote capacity building strategies among CRS partners and allies. She has worked in migration, emergencies, community development, and disaster risk reduction programs in vulnerable communities.