



Peace, Conflict and our Catholic Response

What is the issue?

Poverty creates the conditions for violence, and violence creates poverty: 73 percent of the poorest billion people in the world have lived through a violent conflict, or are embroiled in conflict now. Research has shown that the higher the poverty rate and the longer economic stagnation persists in a country the more prone it is to conflict. Poverty breeds hopelessness and frustration among people and makes them, especially the young and unemployed, more vulnerable to calls for violence. Significant inequalities, especially between ethnic, religious or regionally-identified groups, greatly increase the risk of violence.

Violent conflict deepens poverty. It destroys infrastructure, schools, hospitals, livelihoods, people's homes, their families, and their dreams—it reverses progress and development. Violence often forces people to abandon their homes and travel long distances to safety. They often suffer cruel injustices and end up living in camps with other displaced people under harsh conditions. Many people die from violence, but also from increased exposure to diseases and lack of health services and food. Women and children are particularly vulnerable in armed conflicts.

Violent conflict also drives deep rifts between groups of people, especially when the fault line is reinforced by religion or ethnicity. The experience of violent conflict creates deep feelings of mistrust, grievance, fear and hatred that dominate people's relationships long after fighting has ceased, hindering a return to long-term stability.

The arms trade has made conflict more lethal and increases the risk of war while sapping scarce resources that could instead provide vital public services, reduce poverty and promote human development.

Why Should People of Faith Care?

Peace and justice are required for human development. The Church's teaching on the common good states that social well-being and human development require the peace of a just social order. Pope Paul VI famously stated: "If you want peace, work for justice." In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed that the Church "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice." The Church also teaches that reconciliation is needed to heal relationships broken by violent conflict.

How Does Conflict Affect Real People?

Many children in the Holy Land have acutely felt the impact of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Having lost friends and family members due to the violence, and growing up in a constant state of insecurity and tension, these children often experience hopelessness and frustration.



Photo by Laura Sheahan for CRS
Raneen Qumsieh (left) and Mariam Syriani (right) live in Bethlehem in the West Bank.

Fortunately for them, Raneen and Mariam are part of a CRS program that engages students and their parents in coming up with their own solutions to issues affecting their communities. Efforts such as these are an important step toward establishing a viable Palestinian state and ultimately securing long-term peace and stability through a two-state solution.

But many children in conflict situations have no access to such opportunities. Instead, they often live in squalid, overflowing refugee camps, witness or are the victims of abuse, receive little education, and learn anger and hatred that persists for years after a conflict ends.

The Church has made clear moral statements regarding the international arms race. The Holy Father pointed out in his 2009 World Day of Peace message: "The current level of world military expenditure gives cause for concern. As I have pointed out before, it can happen that 'immense military expenditure, involving material and human resources and arms, is in fact diverted from development projects for peoples, especially the poorest who are most in need of aid'. . . What is more, an excessive increase in military expenditure risks accelerating the arms race, producing pockets of underdevelopment and desperation, so that it can paradoxically become a cause of instability, tension and conflict. As my venerable Predecessor Paul VI wisely observed, "the new name for peace is development."

The Church in many parts of the world has answered the call for peace, reconciliation and forgiveness by working for justice for oppressed people and by defending those who have suffered from violence. For example in Northern Uganda where a violent civil war has brought suffering to millions of people, the Church is working with an interfaith coalition of religious leaders to promote peace and reconciliation. The 2009 Synod for the Church in Africa with its theme, *The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, will attempt to build on these peacebuilding activities so that the Church becomes a more potent force for peace in Africa.

What Response is Needed?

The Church in the United States has a particular responsibility to help our government play a constructive and prominent role in building sustainable peace in the world. This cannot be done through a heavy dependence on military means. It requires greater diplomacy in collaboration with the international community to support peacekeeping missions such as in Darfur and to bring warring parties to the negotiating table. It calls for a greater emphasis on development assistance both to prevent the despair that can lead to violence and to enable societies to recover from violence. It also demands support for United Nations and regional peacekeeping forces to assist in preserving negotiated peace settlements.



Photo by Jim Stipe for CRS
Decades of civil war have left some Colombians like Wilson, age 10, dependent on nutrition assistance. People can't rely on farming because the violence often destroys their farms or makes it unsafe to plant food.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services urge the U.S. government to:

1. Strengthen its diplomatic corps, especially staff that can intervene in pre-conflict and long-standing conflict situations to secure peace negotiations.
2. Increase support for United Nations and regional peacekeeping forces.
3. Assist post-conflict governments in holding free and fair elections.
4. Implement long-term efforts to help fragile governments build democratic institutions, establish the rule of law, promote a free press, and encourage civil society participation.
5. Support long-term reconciliation programs in collaboration with local governments and civil society.
6. Expand long-term development and poverty reduction efforts in countries struggling to emerge from conflict and those at risk of conflict.