Catholic Peacebuilding: Moving Beyond Just War vs. Pacifism

Gerard Powers
Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies,
University of Notre Dame

I spent last week in the southern Philippines, a Tropical Paradise, one of the world's most Catholic countries, one of the United States' strongest allies, and one of the "fronts" of the "war on terror." Like Iraq and Afghanistan, the Philippines and specifically its southern islands, the largest of which is Mindanao, face terrorist attacks by Abu Sayef, an extremist group with ties to Al Qaeda, as well as a long-running insurgency by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a Muslim group fighting for self-determination after centuries of Christianization of their lands by Spanish and U.S. colonial governments. Also like Afghanistan and Iraq, U.S. troops are helping fight the terrorists and the insurgents, though only indirectly as "advisors" to the Philippine military. Unlike Afghanistan and Iraq, not a few of the fighters in Abu Sayef attended the Clarettian university in Mindanao, and not a few of the Moro insurgents attended Notre Dame University there.

I'll spare you the slide show from my trip to Paradise -- and I won't spend a lot of time on that complicated conflict tonight. But let me say a few words about the Church's response to these long-running wars in the southern Philippines. First, the Church has condemned terrorist acts by Abu Sayef and the MILF, while also criticizing the government's human rights abuses. Second, the Church has recognized the right and duty of the Filipino government to use limited military force against the terrorists and the insurgents. Third, the Church has been in the forefront of what I will call peacebuilding efforts -- trying to overcome the deep historical divide between Christians, Muslims and the indigenous peoples, called the Lumad, through inter-religious dialogue, efforts to address the economic, social and political marginalization of the Muslims and Lumads, and by a range of efforts designed to cultivate a culture of peace in a region that has known little but war for generations.

The situation in the Philippines is emblematic of a subtle but important development in Catholic thinking and pastoral practice related to war and peace -- a new focus on peacebuilding. New attention to the importance of peacebuilding for the Church and for U.S. policy will not resolve the long-standing debate between the just war tradition and pacifism, or principled nonviolence. It can, however, provide a basis for common ground that can make this traditional debate less central to the Church's approach to matters of war and peace.

By "peacebuilding" I mean the broad range of non-violent activities involved in preventing conflicts from erupting into violence, managing and trying to resolve violent conflicts once they erupt, and promoting reconstruction and reconciliation after violent conflicts have ended. In the Philippines, for example, Catholic peacebuilding runs the gamut from peace education in Catholic schools, formal Catholic-Muslim dialogues at the local and regional levels, and the creation of zones of peace (or local cease-fires) to efforts to promote economic and social development for the marginalized Muslim and Lumad communities and the decisive role the Catholic Church played in the People Power movements that brought down two corrupt and repressive governments in the last two decades.

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In their 1983 peace pastoral, The Challenge of Peace, the U.S. bishops called for further work on the development of a theology of peace. While some good work has been done over the past 25
years, only recently have there been more concerted efforts to
begin to develop a conceptually coherent, theologically accurate,
spiritually enlightening and practically effective approach to Catholic
peacebuilding that can begin to match the sophistication of
Catholic thinking on the ethics of war and peace.

The Catholic Peacebuilding Network (CPN) is one of these
initiatives. Under the leadership of Notre Dame’s Joan B. Kro
Institute for International Peace Studies and Catholic Relief
Services, the CPN brings together three groups of peacebuilders
within the Catholic community: (1) scholars from the University
of Notre Dame, Georgetown, Boston College, the Catholic
University of America, Catholic Theological Union in Chicago
and other Catholic institutions of higher education, (2) specialists
from Catholic Relief Services, the Sant’Egidio Community,
Maryknoll, Pax Christi International, and other international
Catholic organizations working in the poorest, most conflicted
areas of the world, and (3) Catholic clerics and lay leaders from
Colombia, Burundi, Rwanda, the Philippines, Sudan, Ugan
da, and other countries where the Church is playing a leading role in
peacebuilding at all levels of society. This networking is designed
to deepen solidarity among those working for peace within the
Catholic community, stimulate a more systematic mapping and
analysis of “best practices” in Catholic peacebuilding, and help
the Church to improve its peacebuilding capacity in areas where
training and resources are scarce.¹

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In this talk, I would like to make the case for the importance of
this and other efforts in three parts. First, I will argue that, while
we have a lot to learn from the pacifist tradition about finding
peaceful alternatives to war, a theology, ethics and praxis of
peacebuilding is not a replacement for the just war tradition but
is a necessary complement to it. Second, I will suggest that an
effective ethics and praxis of Catholic peacebuilding requires an
integration of Catholic ideals, Catholic institutions, and Catholic
people. Finally, I will examine some specific challenges and
opportunities that arise in Catholic peacebuilding.

A. Peacebuilding is not an alternative to the just
war tradition but a necessary complement to it

Pacifists have long recognized that their credibility depended in
part on showing that non-violent peacbuilding was an effective
alternative to war. The traditional “peace churches” — eg. the
Quakers, the Mennonites, and the Brethren — have long been
leaders in this area and Catholics have much to learn from their
expertise in mediation and their insights into the dynamics of what
specialist in the field have come to call conflict transformation.
One of the ads at half-time of a recent Notre Dame football game
highlighted the work of John Paul II. In 1993, a Mennonite on the
Kroc Institute’s faculty who has spent a lot of time in recent years
training Catholic bishops in Colombia, Burundi, the Philippines
and elsewhere on peacebuilding strategies.

Some believe that the Catholic Church will become an effective
peacebuilder and an effective advocate for peacebuilding only
when it takes a page out of the “peace church” hymnal, discards
the just war tradition and embraces pacifism. I would like to
make a very different argument. A theology, ethics and praxis
of non-violent peacebuilding should learn from the tradition of
non-violence but an ethic of peacebuilding is not an alternative
to the just war tradition but a necessary complement to it. The
new emphasis on peacebuilding is a logical consequence of the
Church’s increasingly strict, or restrictive, interpretation of when,
why and how military force is justified.

The experience of total war in the 20th Century, the threat of a
nuclear holocaust, and the fact that civilians have increasingly
been the main victims of war have led the Church to be very
skeptical about the ability of modern war to meet just war criteria.
Skepticism, however, does not mean rejection. While prominent
voices in the Catholic peace movement and even within the Vatican
have suggested that, like the Church’s traditional teaching on the
death penalty, the just war tradition has become obsolete, neo-
conservative critics, like George Weigel, are mistaken when they
call the bishops “functional pacifists.” Since the U.S. bishops came
out against the Vietnam War in 1971, they have found most military
interventions by the U.S. government to be morally problematic.
One major exception has been humanitarian intervention.

In the face of a proliferation of genocides and humanitarian
catastrophes from Somalia and Sudan to Bosnia and Rwanda —
and, I might add, the recent massacre of the Fighting Irish at the
hands of the USC Trojans! — the Church had a clear answer to
Cain’s question: “Yes, we are our brother’s keeper.” Unlike most
foreign policy elites who argued that it was not in the U.S. interest
to get involved in these conflicts involving “ancient hatreds,” Pope
John Paul II said in 1993 that the international community had
not only a right but a duty to intervene “where the survival of
populations and entire ethnic groups is seriously compromised.”²

In recognizing this right and duty of humanitarian intervention,
the U.S. bishops warned that humanitarian intervention must
remain an “exceptional means” to protect the innocent and must
not “open the door to new forms of imperialism or endless wars of
altruism.”³

A strict interpretation of just war that permits some forms of multi-
lateral humanitarian intervention is premised on the assumption
that humanitarian intervention must be tied to efforts to address
the root causes of these internal conflicts, to prevent them from
breaking out, to settle them promptly and peacefully when they
erupt, and to help rebuild and heal these broken societies. In short, the bishops’ just war analysis of humanitarian intervention has to be tied to an ethic and strategy of peacebuilding.

An ethic of peacebuilding might complement a strict interpretation of just war in cases calling for humanitarian intervention, but what about conflicts, like Bosnia, Northern Ireland and the Holy Land, where religious identity is a key factor in the conflict? Isn’t embrace of an ethic of principled non-violence and rejection of the just war tradition a key way the Church can break the link between religion and violence?

That approach misunderstands the problem of religion and conflict. The problem of holy war lies principally with extremist forms of Islam, personified by Osama bin Laden, and with extremist forms of religious nationalism. Perhaps paradoxically, delegitimizing religiously-motivated violence is often done most effectively, not by pacifists, but by those religious traditions which hold to some version of a restrictive (as opposed to a permissive) interpretation of just war. The Christian tradition has a long and less-than-proud record of holy war. It was the refinement and narrowing of the just war tradition, not the embrace of pacifism, which ultimately delegitimized holy war within mainstream Christianity. In the Northern Ireland conflict, one of the most important contributions of the Catholic and mainline Protestant leaders was to condemn IRA and Loyalist paramilitary violence as a violation of just war principles.

Religious leaders must continue to say what they have said many times in recent years, that “violence in the name of religion is violence against religion.” But they must also recognize that the toughest challenge in places like Bosnia and Northern Ireland is not religious violence but religious nationalism. The link between religion and nationalism may seem less terrifying but it is arguably a much greater source of injustice and violence than religious militants preaching holy war. The Church has played a particularly helpful peacebuilding role when it has been able to embrace inclusivist forms of civic nationalism and legitimate expressions of patriotism while condemning chauvinist and exclusivist forms of religious nationalism.

My colleague Dan Phlpott argues that peacebuilding in the face of religious terrorism is not mainly a matter of condemning the violence, as important as that is. More important is the need to encourage responsible voices within Islam to delegitimize the particular form of political theology, notably Islamic Revivalism, which promotes terrorism as a means to creating Islamic states that offer alternatives to corrupt, undemocratic and thoroughly secularized regimes in the Middle East.  

Peacebuilding is a complex task that complements the just war tradition. A peacebuilding ethic is about finding non-violent alternatives to conflict, but it does not require embracing pacifism, or principled non-violence.

B. Effective peacebuilding requires an integration of Catholic ideals, Catholic institutions, and Catholic people

If conflicts are complex phenomena that require complex responses, the Church can best play an effective role when all its peacebuilding resources are put to work in a complex, integrated way. Scott Appleby calls this the “saturation model.” The saturation model means integrating the “soft power” of the Church’s theological and ethical framework (eg, Catholic social teaching), the power of the Catholic Church as a relatively unique transnational institution, and the power of individuals, or “people power.” If we are to become more of a “peace’ Church and harness this enormous power for good, peacebuilding must move from the margins to the center of the life and identity of the Church.

Few religious traditions have what Catholic social teaching offers in terms of a vision, and a comprehensive set of values and virtues that provide a foundation for a peacebuilding ethic. I have recently been in Mindanao and Colombia, two conflict areas where the Church plays a very important role in society. In both places, the Church sees its greatest challenge to be the creation of a culture of peace after decades of conflict. In helping to build that culture, the Church is drawing on the richness of Catholic social teaching, as well as its pastoral theology and sacramental imagination. The challenge is to further develop these resources so that they can serve not just individuals but also communities torn apart by war. What, for example, does the Eucharist mean in Rwanda, where members of the same parish were both perpetrators and victims of genocide — and in some cases, both? How does a pastor in rural Colombia talk to his parishioners about the sacrament of reconciliation when the pews are filled with paramilitaries who have committed war crimes, as well as parishioners who were victimized by them?

Northern Ireland is not anypical. During the two decades of conflict, the four main churches developed a clear and mostly constructive approach to the complex political and religious dynamics of the conflict. But, after the Good Friday Agreement, they were somewhat at a loss in dealing with post-conflict issues, such as amnesty for paramilitaries and long-term pastoral strategies for healing and reconciliation.

Catholic social teaching and Catholic theology have little social relevance unless they are inculcated in the life of Catholic institutions and individuals. The Catholic Church is a unique transnational institution. Its center, the Vatican, is both a religious body and a state, which allows it to play a role in diplomacy and mediating
conflicts that is not always available to other religious bodies.
The Church is deeply rooted in local communities suffering from violence and is often the most important civil society institution in poor, conflicted countries like Sudan and Burundi. While it is truly indigenous to areas of conflict, it also has a global reach that can surpass that of governments, international institutions, and multi-national companies. How many other institutions in the world are deeply rooted in and therefore can bridge the gulf between the zones of peace and prosperity and the zones of conflict and deprivation in today's world?

Finally, the Church has people power that is the envy of political action groups and is feared by even the most repressive regimes. Through its churches, schools, charitable agencies and other organizations, it has the ability to reach, educate, and mobilize for action large numbers of people. The most dramatic examples of religious “people power” – the Catholic Church’s role in Solidarity in Poland and Cardinal Sin’s role in mobilizing the masses to bring down the Marcos regime in the Philippines – are, in many ways, exceptional cases. More typical are the social justice advocacy campaigns, such as those around landmines and debt relief, which relied heavily on the ability of religious institutions and faith-based non-governmental organizations to reach millions of people through their institutions.

People power is also about individuals. It should be no surprise that, over the past two decades, almost half the Nobel Peace Prize laureates have been religious leaders or lay people whose work was inspired by their faith.

As impressive as these resources of the Church are, they can be a force for peacebuilding only when a theology and ethic of peacebuilding animates the daily work of Catholic institutions and the daily lives of ordinary Catholics. Effective peacebuilding also depends upon vertical integration of different levels of the Church and horizontal integration of Church actors in different parts of the world.

C. Specific challenges and opportunities involved in Catholic peacebuilding

Let me briefly examine some concrete issues that arise in Catholic peacebuilding.

1. The complex dynamics of inter-religious peacebuilding

The Second Vatican Council’s new openness to ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and collaboration has provided a strong basis for the Church to reach out to those of other religions in pursuit of peace and understanding, especially when religious identity is a dimension of conflict.

In Pikit, a small village in central Mindanao, the Catholic and Muslim communities are deeply divided after decades of conflict, yet Christian and Muslim leaders have formed a Disaster Response Team that has allowed them to help the tens of thousands of people who have been displaced by each outbreak of violence. This inter-religious collaboration to meet humanitarian needs of the victims of war has led, through a lengthy and difficult process of dialogue, to the establishment of Pikit and other nearby communities as “Spaces for Peace.” Spaces for Peace are essentially local ceasefires that permit a community to rebuild what was destroyed during the fighting – their homes and businesses, and especially the fractured relationship between the Christian and Muslim communities. Despite the lack of progress in the formal peace process at the national level, Christian and Muslim leaders in communities like Pikit have successfully insisted that their local political and military leaders and the leaders of the local rebel groups give them the peace that has been absent for so long in their communities.

In northern Uganda, where the Lord’s Resistance Army has terrorized the local population, the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative has, since 1998, helped bring international attention to this obscure conflict and move forward the peace process. Catholic Archbishop John Baptis Odama of Gulu and his Muslim, Orthodox and Anglican counterparts have even gone into the bush, at great risk to themselves, to meet with the ruthless leaders of the LRA and encourage them to lay down their arms and submit to traditional Acholi tribal practices of accountability and reconciliation. These Acholi religious leaders have become key facilitators of a formal peace process that offers real hope for an end to one of the world’s most brutal conflicts.

Effective inter-religious peacebuilding often involves these kinds of efforts to find common ground on conflicted issues and move toward common action. In Pikit, inter-religious collaboration provides an important symbolic and substantive rebuttal to religious and political extremists who manipulate religion to justify violence and division. In Northern Uganda, inter-religious collaboration helps provide the broad-based moral leadership that can help move political and military leaders to action.

This joint action is not, however, always the preferred model of inter-religious dialogue. Sometimes, the most important fruit of dialogue is not what is done together but what the coming together allows one to do within one’s own community. Especially when religion is a dimension of a conflict, the aim of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue is not necessarily to seek agreement on the issues that have led to violence or on deeper questions of theology and ethics. Rather, the aim might be to improve understanding of the other side’s perspective, which in turn enables participants to go back and work within their own community to help it better understand and respect the legitimate needs, hopes and fears of the other side. As an instrument of peacebuilding, then, complementary action, not collaborative action, is sometimes what is most needed and most effective.

For fifteen years, Catholic and Presbyterian leaders in the United States and Northern Ireland were involved in a very fruitful transatlantic ecumenical initiative. This ecumenical collaboration reached a point of mutual trust where the U.S. bishops would send their draft statements on Northern Ireland, not only to the Catholic Bishops in Northern Ireland, which was standard practice, but also to Presbyterian leaders in the United States and Northern Ireland. The point of this rather laborious review process was not to give Presbyterian leaders a veto over Catholic bishops’ statements, but to ensure that the statements did not inadvertently misinterpret
the situation, ignore legitimate concerns of the largest Protestant community in Northern Ireland, or inadvertently further inflame the sectarian divide.

In Mindanao, the Bishops-Ulama Forum was established in 1996 to support a peace agreement that had just been signed. After a decade of dialogue, the Catholic and Muslim leaders have succeeded in maintaining their united support for the peace process without even attempting to find common ground on the neurotic issues of self-determination, human rights and governance that are central to that process. Where they have sought common ground is not on issues directly related to the conflict, but on more general issues, such as their similar theological visions of peace. An important fruit of this on-going dialogue is that it has given the religious leaders a deeper appreciation of the need to do more work within their own communities to dispel stereotypes of the other community and to encourage greater openness and inter-religious understanding.

2. The Church and peace processes
In many conflicts, the Church plays a critical mediating role in peace processes, a role which raises difficult issues of ecclesiology and difficult dilemmas surrounding the relationship between peace and justice.

There are a host of recent examples of the Church playing a remarkable mediating role in resolving conflicts. Most well known is Poland, where the Church provided safe space for Solidarity to organize and used its good offices to help negotiate the peaceful transition from communism to democracy. Like the Acholi religious leaders in Northern Uganda, the Catholic Church in Colombia has long played a formal role in the peace process between the government and rebel groups, and is also a key player in an informal peace process involving the wider civil society. In Northern Ireland, Fr. Alec Reid served as an interlocutor between the IRA and the Irish and British governments and is credited with helping bring about the IRA ceasefire that paved the way for the Good Friday Agreement. And there is the well-known example of Sant’Egidio, the lay Catholic community from Italy, which helped negotiate an end to the civil war in Mozambique in 1992 and is involved in similar efforts around the world.

These inspiring actions by Church entities raise two important issues. First, how should the Church think about its role in peace processes which are normally the province of diplomats and politicians? In Poland, the bishops were clear that they were playing a substitute political role, given that they were the only institution in Poland that could do so under the communist regime. In Colombia, the bishops have declined invitations to play a “political” role by being mediators of the formal peace process, but, instead, have described their participation in the process as accompaniment and moral witness. Just as the Polish Church’s independence and influence enabled it to provide a safe space for Solidarity, the Colombian bishops’ leading role in society allows them to provide a neutral space for and give moral credibility to the peace process.

A second issue raised by the Church’s role in peace processes is how that relates to its role in promoting human rights and post-conflict reconciliation. In Colombia, the Church believes the peace process can lead to political reconciliation if perpetrators of violence are held accountable for their crimes and victims receive some form of reparations. The Church’s role in accompanying peace processes and accompanying victims of war can, however, create tensions between its efforts to end conflict and also ensure accountability. The fact that many in the Church in Colombia are calling for war crimes trials and opposing amnesty while the Acholi religious leaders in Uganda are opposing war crimes trials and insisting on amnesty suggests the need to do more ethical reflection on these kinds of dilemmas where the search for peace and the search for justice seem at odds.

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3. Developing a jus post bellum
Humanitarian intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia, Haiti, Kosovo, and East Timor, as well as the U.S. occupation of Iraq, have raised questions about the obligations and roles of outside intervenors in failed states and the need for the development of a jus post bellum, ethical criteria to govern post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation.

It is essential, for example, to distinguish between the ethics of intervention in Iraq – an issue addressed by the just war tradition’s jus ad bellum (resort to war) and jus in bello (conduct of war) criteria, respectively – and the ethics of exit – an issue not addressed by the just war tradition. I would argue that the U.S. intervention did not meet just war norms, but, with its occupation of Iraq, the United States incurred new, heavy moral obligations to assist the Iraqi people in building a just and stable political, economic and social order. That is a very difficult thing to do – which is one reason the US should never have intervened in the first place. But since it did, an ethic of obligation requires that the United States be deeply engaged in Iraq for the long haul. Others have a different understanding of the extent of this obligation and how it relates to an ethic of efficacy, which requires that we consider whether the United States has a reasonable prospect of meeting its obligations to Iraqis. Much more reflection needs to be done on this difficult issue.

Moral criteria are also needed to address other daunting problems of post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation. For example,
how can one address the ethics of secession and self-determination and their relationship to ethnic and national identity, which often are at the heart of these conflicts and remain unresolved after the fighting stops? How does one's answer to these issues fit with the right of displaced people to return to their homes? Can notions of personal forgiveness and inter-personal reconciliation be adapted for the development of a political ethic of forgiveness and reconciliation? These are just some of the questions that a jis post bellum would have to address.1

**Conclusion**

In her recent book, Madeleine Albright acknowledges that, as U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations and as Secretary of State, she mistakenly held the conventional view of specialists in international affairs: religion is largely irrelevant because it is a dysfunctional, mostly waning force in world affairs.2 This first element of what could be called the secular realist paradigm has, as Albright now admits, been overtaken by events. But the second assumption of the paradigm remains widely held: religion might not be "waning," but, as the religious-ethnic-nationalist wars of the 1990s and 9/11 demonstrate, it remains mostly a cause of conflict and division. The obvious solution, according to this view, is to take religion out of the public square (and the foreign ministry) and marginalize and privatize it.

The problem with this conventional wisdom is that it overestimates the negative role of religion in encouraging conflict and it underestimates the positive role that religion plays in promoting freedom, justice and peace. The rebuttal to the secular realists is twofold: to show how the Church's teaching on the ethics of war and peace clearly rejects contemporary manifestations of holy war, and, more important, to show that the Church is a positive force for peacebuilding in conflict situations around the world.

Religion is not a monolithic entity. As my colleague Scott Appleby likes to point out, the same religious militancy that can be a source of conflict can also be a source of nonviolent work for justice.3 A collage of images of the Church in Bosnia-Hercegovina, for example, would have to include the two Franciscan priests who were close advisers to Mate Boban, the Croat neo-fascist who led the ethnic cleansing of Serbs and Muslims. That collage would also have to include Bishop Franjo Komarica, who some called the "Archbishop Romero of Bosnia" because he successfully encouraged Croats in Banja Luka to follow a strategy of non-violence in the face of some of the worst ethnic cleansing of that war.

The challenge of Catholic peacebuilding is to ensure that we marginalize religious extremists like the Franciscan advisors to Mate Boban, but not marginalize people like Bishop Komarica. It is precisely places like Bosnia, where religious extremists are alive and all-too-well, that we need peacebuilders from within one's own tradition who are witnessing to peace, justice and reconciliation. The best way to counter extremist religion is not with less religion but with more authentic religion.

Peacebuilding is the new direction in which Catholic reflection on war and peace is moving. Since the U.S. bishops' seminal pastoral letter focused attention on the ethics of nuclear weapons, the ethics of war and peace debate moved to the ethics of humanitarian intervention and the ethics of sanctions in the 1990s, and the ethics of preventive war in the beginning of the new century. These important issues involved variations on themes addressed by the traditional debate about just war and pacifism. The newer and more difficult challenge is for both adherents of just war and pacifism to enlarge the conversation by reflecting on an area where they should be able to find common ground — peacebuilding. The current challenge is to reflect more deeply and systematically on the theological and ethical insights that can be drawn from and can inform the Church's mostly unheralded work of peacebuilding around the world. It is through further development of a theology, ethics and practice of peacebuilding, not further debate on just war versus pacifism, that the Catholic community will be able to achieve its full potential in becoming a "peace Church."