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## **The Peace Dimension of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*This essay argues that challenges to peace are one of the important long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It presents how violent conflict has been worsened by illegal armed actors using the pandemic to increase their strength, peace processes stalling or backsliding, and political strongmen exploiting the pandemic to consolidate power. In areas where these things are occurring, Catholic actors are responding with peacebuilding approaches. And the Catholic Church is particularly well-positioned to address these challenges effectively because of its distinct capacity for vertical and horizontal integration, its rooted presence in local communities, and the conceptual frameworks found in Catholic social teaching and Church teaching on integral human development. The essay claims that Catholic leaders need to leverage these strengths in order to reinforce peacebuilding work and to promote sustainable long-term pandemic recovery.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many acute crises, such as food insecurity, economic downturn, and overburdened health services. And that is on top of the millions of illnesses and deaths caused by the disease itself. The immediacy and seriousness of these problems will remain for some time, and likely have lasting, long-term ramifications for the futures of communities, nations, and the international order. But in the course of recovery, there will also need to be attention paid to long-range challenges that are being created or worsened by these immediate problems and other complex combinations of factors. One such long-range issue is peace. And it is one to which actors within the Catholic community are particularly well-positioned to respond.

In mid-April of 2020, the Holy See revealed the formation of a special COVID-19 Commission headed by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. Under Pope Francis's directive, the Commission's purpose is to "to express the Church's solicitude and care for the whole human family facing the COVID-19 pandemic, including analysis, reflection on the new socio-economic-cultural future, and the proposal of relevant approaches" (Vatican COVID-19 Commission). In many parts of the world – for example, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Philippines, or Syria – addressing the "new socio-economic-cultural future" resulting from COVID-19 will mean dealing with violence and conflict. In many of these places, local churches and Catholic NGOs are some of the most important and successful peacebuilders, and their already fragile accomplishments are at high risk of becoming collateral damage to the pandemic as priorities and resources shift toward the more immediate issues of COVID-19 relief and as some parties exploit the pandemic to increase power or political or military advantages. The Dicastery Commission needs to consider how that peacebuilding work can be stabilized and continued, since peace will be a vital component to successful pandemic response in the long run and because the urgency of the need to bring conflict transformation, reconciliation, and justice has not simply gone away because of the new challenges of COVID-19. The gospel vocation to peacebuilding has never been simple, and the global health crisis of the novel coronavirus is just the newest layer of complexity.

### **Threats to peace emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and Catholic responses**

#### *Illegal armed actors, criminal groups, and other militants increasing their strength*

In territorial regions of Colombia, illegal armed groups have exploited the pandemic to fortify their strength. In the west, a dissident group of former FARC members launched attacks to seize control of the region's drug trade, and its substantial income, while also targeting social leaders and re-integrated ex-combatants (*Semana*, 2020). And on the Colombia-Venezuela border, criminal organizations took advantage of decreased presence of national forces to toll and exploit Venezuelan refugees that were stuck in limbo by COVID-19 travel restrictions and lack of access to resources (International Crisis Group, 2020). These groups are also continuing to operate mining projects near the border in Venezuela. They are reaping more profits while putting vulnerable workers and their families at substantial risk for coronavirus transmission, with almost no recourse to health care should infections spread.

As another example, a report from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted that, despite Saudi-backed forces in Yemen declaring a ceasefire in April of 2020, Houthi forces continued hostilities and used COVID-19 as a basis for messaging to increase recruitment. The argument went, "It is better to die a martyr in heroic battles than die at home from the coronavirus." Also, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Yemen sought to profit from COVID-19. In the port city of Aden, the STC held aid contributions sent by the World Health Organization in port in a bid to force recognition of their authority and legitimacy by international groups and to bolster their status with the population by making themselves the conduit of desperately needed relief (Nagi, 2020).

In Colombia there is a large and engrained Catholic presence, while in Yemen there are only about 4000 Catholics. And so these examples present similar problems but very different contexts and possibilities for Catholic responses. In Colombia, Catholic leaders and organizations have very closely involved in trying to prevent violence against social leaders for several years. The acceleration of violence and the opportunism of armed actors are merely a new facet of that peacebuilding work that has been in place for some time. In May of 2020, the Center for Popular Research and Education / Program for Peace (CINEP/PPP) in Bogotá, a Jesuit-run research institute, held an online seminar to highlight the ways in which social leaders in territorial regions were facing increased violence during COVID-19 quarantine. As government presence lessened, national resources and attention were diverted to pandemic relief, and humanitarian aid became unable to reach communities in need, illicit armed groups stepped up attacks and threats against social leaders trying to guard and guide the country's peace process. In many cases these groups were seeking to prevent illegal crop substitution, which is part of the 2016 national peace agreement implementation, or seize new territory to increase their strength (CINEP/PPP, 2020). Efforts like this from CINEP/PPP to produce data and make the problem known have been able to actualize in programming and advocacy through Colombia's robust and ubiquitous network of Catholic institutions.

Caritas Colombiana, the Colombian branch of the Church's international Caritas network, published a report on "How to Resurrect from COVID" in September 2020. The report outlines concrete work the Colombian Church has done for COVID relief, including advocacy with the national government to provide security in areas where violence spiked during the pandemic and to also follow-up with investigations of assassinations of social leaders (Caritas Colombiana, 2020,

September, p. 8, 39). These notes in this report are in line with efforts from Colombian bishops throughout the spring of 2020, when they were outspoken about the need to tie COVID-19 mitigation to peace implementation and security for territorial communities and leaders where violence from illicit groups was rising (Episcopal Conference of Colombia, 2020, April 30 and May 2).

Furthermore, the event from CINEP/PPP concluded that the best way to protect territorial social leaders was to empower local and indigenous jurisdictions to carry out investigations, justice, and reconciliation work. This was reflected in one of Caritas Colombiana's signature efforts for supporting the implementation of the national peace agreement, its "Fortalesciendo" initiative. During 2020, one part of this initiative was to focus on strengthening the justice and peace capacities of territorial indigenous communities (Caritas Colombiana, 2020, May). Addressing violence against social leaders has been a pillar of the Colombian Church's peacebuilding since before COVID-19, and it has effectively woven together its COVID-19 response and its longstanding work for peace and the halting of violence.

The situation is very different in Yemen. There is not a Catholic network like the one in Colombia that allows for the same kind of internal advocacy work, and the armed conflict in Yemen is active whereas, despite ongoing violence, in Colombia a national peace agreement does exist. Catholic agencies, like Catholic Relief Services in the U.S. and the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development in the U.K., work with partner agencies on the ground in Yemen and have continued their work to make humanitarian aid as available as possible and do as much as they can to get it to those in need rather than having it siphoned by militants. However, it is also not insignificant the way Pope Francis has continued throughout 2020 to call for international attention on the plight of Middle Eastern countries crippled by violence and hurt even more by COVID-19 and its myriad impacts. In his Christmas message for 2020, Francis spoke to the development of coronavirus vaccines and the need to make sure they are available to the poor and vulnerable, but connected that message to calls for peace in Yemen and several other Middle Eastern and African nations (Pope Francis, 2020, December 25). This kind of international advocacy is an important function that the Holy See can carry out, especially in the context of a country like Yemen where the Church does not have as robust of a presence as it does in a country like Colombia.

#### *Stalled and backsliding peace processes and deteriorating trust*

The peace process in South Sudan has been stalled repeatedly, and the coronavirus has not helped. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), signed into effect in 2018, calls for the formation of a transitional government. That step has been pushed back multiple times because of the inability of the main sides in the agreement to resolve key details. Finally, in June 2020, one of the major obstacles was overcome as an agreement was reached on the number of states that would make up the new system. But the delay had already had major impacts. Fighting continued in several areas, and the stalled effort left the country with weaker government coordination to deal with the pandemic and other ongoing humanitarian problems (UN Human Rights Council, 2020). What's more, an additional peace negotiation mediated in January 2020 by the Community of Sant'Egidio between the government and the South Sudan Opposition Movements' Alliance (SSOMA), which includes armed groups that were not part of the R-ARCSS, was undermined by renewed violence (Richard, 2020). The more processes like these get stunted, the more chance there is for them to fail and the more

likelihood there is for people suffering the effects of violent conflict and displacement to keep doing so.

Another unique factor has been the response to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres's call on March 23, 2020 for a global humanitarian ceasefire, a call that Pope Francis was quick to amplify. As described in a May 5, 2020 article in *The Economist*, many armed groups, like the ELN in Colombia, the NPA in the Philippines, and the Saudi-backed coalition in Yemen, surprised observers with how quickly they agreed to such ceasefires (2020). But the UN Security Council dithered about passing a resolution to formally support the measure, not doing so until July 1, and the opportunity was lost (Gifkins and Docherty, 2020). Those groups that initially responded to the call ended their ceasefires, accused their opponents of showing no good will toward real peace negotiations, and found new grievances to fuel their fights. Instead of being a jump start for real peace, the ceasefire call from Guterres and Francis perversely became a source of further broken trust and additional hostility, with progress toward peace arrested.

An additional facet of this problem is refugees and internally displaced persons. Refugee settlements, like the ones mentioned above in Colombia, or ones in Uganda, or ones scattered through the Middle East for Syrians, or ones for the Rohingya, are powder kegs for infection where social distancing precautions are near impossible to practice and medical and sanitation resources are scarce. Refugee communities have also been the hardest hit by the worsening humanitarian conditions created worldwide by the pandemic, and refugees make easy scapegoats as countries become stressed by COVID-19 spread, as has happened with the Rohingya in Bangladesh and Malaysia (Anas, 2020; Ding, 2020). The longer conflicts linger and peace processes falter, the longer these communities made up of the most vulnerable of the vulnerable face even greater danger.

Catholic peacebuilders have persisted through these difficulties. For example, in Colombia, bishops and Catholic organizations have been vocal about urging persistence with the peace process throughout the COVID-19 crisis. They have highlighted how vital peace is to sustain real progress with managing the pandemic and also noted the grave risk of allowing conflict-related problems, like deforestation in the Amazon and assassination of social leaders, to be ignored and implementation programs, like those for re-integrating ex-combatants into society, to be defunded (CINEP/PPP, 2020; Colombian Bishops of the Pacific Region, 2020; Colombian bishops of the Amazon and Orinoquia regions, 2020).

Another example is in South Sudan, where despite the setbacks in the nation's peace process, the Community of Sant'Egidio has continued its mediation efforts. Those efforts bore fruit in December 2020 when talks hosted by Sant'Egidio in Rome produced a renewed agreement of principles between the government of South Sudan and the SSOMA (Sant'Egidio, 2020, December 5). That agreement, which marked significant progress but left some key issues unresolved, was followed up two weeks later by a visit to South Sudan from a delegation of Sant'Egidio to mediate further talks and solidify partnership with the South Sudan Council of Churches, an ecumenical body with active Catholic participation that is one of the leading peacebuilding organizations in the country (Sant'Egidio, 2020, December 17).

This peace work by Sant'Egidio and the South Sudan Council of Churches is also of great consequence for the over one million South Sudanese refugees currently living in Uganda. Peace in South Sudan is necessary for those people to be able to return home safely. But in the meantime, many of them have brought tribal and ethnic conflicts from their homeland with them. Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) in Uganda has incorporated peacebuilding in its work with these refugee communities by including reconciliation and social cohesion programming along with its other services (Sullivan, 2019). Throughout 2020, JRS, like many other organizations, had to prioritize COVID-19 response by introducing sanitization and hygiene projects, as well as increased food distribution. But those efforts carried on apace of ongoing peacebuilding initiatives like providing psychosocial support for victims of violence and projects for fostering social cohesion (Jesuit Refugee Services, 2020).

In Myanmar, Rohingya refugees remain in limbo as conflict remains unresolved, but are another example of how Catholic peacebuilding efforts are carrying on in tandem with pandemic response. One of the country's strongest proponents of peace and reconciliation, Cardinal Charles Bo, has repeatedly urged the country to maintain focus on peace amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Most recently, in his Christmas message for 2020, he noted optimism about progress on COVID-19 while contrasting it with a continued lack of progress on the "permanent pandemics" of war and displacement (Bo, 2020). Catholic organizations are front and center aiding Rohingya refugees and other displaced persons in Myanmar. The Jesuit Refugee Service has a presence there, as does Caritas International, which through its branch in Bangladesh, where many Rohingya refugees reside, has been instrumental in educating and supporting Rohingya communities to deal with the coronavirus in the midst of circumstances that make it extremely difficult (Chayan, 2020). These immediate services are of course vital, and more urgently so during the pandemic, but leadership like that of Cardinal Bo urging real movement on peace is also vital. Refugees the world over need extra support for managing COVID-19, but they also continue to need peace to make that burden more bearable and in order to have any real long-term improvement in their situations.

#### *Strong-man governments consolidating power*

In one of the most publicized examples of this phenomenon, it took Hungary's Viktor Orbán very little time to seize totalitarian power under the auspices of pandemic response. In the first week of April, 2020, Orbán suspended elections and gave himself legal power to rule by decree (Novak and Kinglesy, 2020). He later took advantage of the depressed economic climate to buy up an independent media outlet and seized funds earmarked for campaigns for rival political parties (Beauchamp, 2020). The country's parliament voted to end Orbán's ability to rule by decree, but much of the actual power he gained while it was in place remained. He also vetoed the European Union's pandemic recovery plan over conditions related to democratic rule of law, holding up the passage of the relief package until December of 2020.

In Belarus, authoritarian president Alexander Lukashenko has practically weaponized the coronavirus. The country saw nation-wide protests and demonstrations following presidential elections in early August of 2020. The protests were met with strict state violence and repression, with large numbers of imprisonments. A December news report described how the virus ran rampant in prisons crowded with people who were arrested during those demonstrations. The report relayed the testimony of one released detainee who contracted COVID-19 while jailed and

said prison guards openly spoke about allowing the virus to circulate among the inmates on government orders (Associated Press, 2020).

Burundi offers another example. On March 21, the spokesperson for the president of Burundi said that the country was being spared the coronavirus because “Burundi is an exception among other nations, because it is a country that has put God first” (IWACU, 2020). But according to Human Rights Watch, the country actively suppressed reporting of suspected cases and covered up actual numbers, as it did with a malaria outbreak in 2019 (2020). Observers in the country feared that killings, disappearances, illegal detentions, and other abuses and forms of violence would increase as the ruling party sought to keep reported numbers deflated. And all this occurred as the country pushed ahead with a national election on May 20, 2020, with active campaigning by the ruling party for its hand-picked candidate carrying on throughout April despite coronavirus transmission risks. The ruling party officially won, the opposition party challenged the results in court, and outgoing president Pierre Nkurunziza died, officially of a heart attack while rumors swirled he suffered from COVID-19 (Burke, 2020). And so political unrest and violence continued, COVID-19 continued to be downplayed, and the ruling party continued to demean democratic processes to solidify its power.

The Catholic Bishops of Burundi have spoken consistently against these issues. In an April 4 communiqué, they urged strong measures to prevent the spread of the disease in opposition to government reluctance, and their Easter message enjoined the country’s citizens to “vote in peace, taking care not to follow those who draw them into hatred and violence, by giving credit neither to those who want to corrupt them with poisoned gifts, nor to those who intimidate them” (2020, April 4; 2020, April 11). Given the way the government downplayed the pandemic in favor of manipulating the election and solidifying political power, these statements took on a prophetic edge and showed a commitment to peace in the midst of the immediate threats of the pandemic, as did the bishops’ effort to highlight irregularities in the election and promote election integrity (CNA, 2020).

Belarus shows a similar witness. Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz, Archbishop of Minsk-Mohilev, was openly critical of the country’s response to election protests. And on August 31, he was barred from entering the country after travel abroad because his passport had been revoked. The auxiliary bishop who filled in during Kondrusiewicz’s exile said the situation was clearly related to state persecution of the Church because the state wants Catholic leaders to help legitimize Lukashenko’s regime (Luxmoore, 2020, September 10). However, the country’s Catholic leaders remained steadfast in defending the Church’s role in criticizing state violence and seeking peaceful resolutions to political tensions (Luxmoore, 2020, December 1).

### **Integral Catholic Peacebuilding and COVID-19 response**

The Catholic Church has a track record for peace, and as the above examples show, it is continuing to work for it despite the new challenges of COVID-19. This peacebuilding role is an important one for the Church right now, and one that should be uplifted and strengthened. As COVID-19 consequences continue to unfold in wide-ranging ways, and related pressures and conditions for violence ripen, dealing with the pandemic will require complex, multivalent approaches. And Catholic peacebuilding in recent years, especially since the publication of *Laudato Si’*, has placed a premium on being complex and multivalent. Or in the parlance of the encyclical tradition,

integral. Integral Catholic peacebuilding attempts to take into account the full range of factors needed for peace vis-à-vis integral human development, such as human rights, including a strong focus on women's rights and indigenous rights, ecology, economic development, and governance. And these dimensions of integral human development become part and parcel of the work of conflict transformation, transitional justice, social reconciliation, and peace processes. In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, with its history with Ebola, health has been a focal point already. But now with COVID-19 outbreaks worldwide, health will become an even bigger part of the integral matrix. And Catholic peacemakers are practiced at this kind of balancing act.

Other factors also exist to give the Catholic community a distinctive ability to advance peacebuilding and connect it to COVID-19. The global ubiquity of the Church allows local leaders to tap into a network that can reach to major international bodies like the UN and pressure policy in powerful countries in the global north. The strength of Church networks also allows Catholic peacebuilders and aid agencies to interact and share knowledge, practices, and resources that amplify and complement work across different areas and across different locations. When a global pandemic is raging and interacting with myriad local factors and problems, these opportunities for both vertical and horizontal coordination are crucial. Furthermore, peacebuilding is largely local work, and it will become even more so as international bodies are hampered by the pandemic. Local peacebuilders among local churches will take on even greater importance than they already have. They will need to fill widening gaps and take on more responsibility for ensuring that COVID-19 recovery tracks alongside conflict sensitivity and peacemaking. And finally, the robust tradition of Catholic social teaching gives the church a moral language and a platform from which it can press for larger changes in response to social, economic, and political problems that the pandemic has laid bare. Each of these factors is examined in more detail below.

#### *Vertical and horizontal coordination*

The Catholic Church's horizontal ubiquity across geographical space, and its vertical presence across levels of power and structure make it very effective at peacebuilding. Catholic leaders are able to mobilize networks of people like few institutions can, and are able to draw on a wide array of experience, knowledge, and best practices from across the globe through organizations like Caritas International, the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, Pax Christi International, and of course the institutional Church itself and the sharing and collaboration that are possible through interconnected episcopal bodies regionally and internationally. At the same time, the Church is able to connect voices and praxis at the grassroots with policy and planning at national and international levels. The ability to move information in both directions makes the Church an important conduit for helping grassroots needs and wisdom impact policy, and for making sure grassroots action can coordinate with broader peace processes. The Catholic Church in Colombia is exemplary in this regard. Catholic leaders have accompanied negotiations that led to the country's 2016 Peace Accord, served on the National Peace Council, and led the country's official Truth Commission. And it has also been on the frontlines in communities impacted by conflict and leading programs for reconciliation and ex-combatant reintegration. The Catholic community's ability to network throughout the country's hard-to-reach territorial spaces, and to link up action at the community and national levels has been indispensable to Colombia's progress toward peace.

In the time of COVID-19, these assets become even more important. The Church's horizontal capacity allows it to help spread health information, as well as aid. And its vertical capacity helps



keep local experience connected to broad and emerging trends related to the disease as well as national and international planning. But the integral nature of Catholic peacebuilding has also given leaders in the Catholic community an ability to merge peace activities with COVID-19 response. In areas with problems of conflict of whatever variety, this merger is absolutely necessary, as a lack of conflict sensitivity in pandemic aid initiatives can easily turn those initiatives into failures, or even lead to them making situations worse (SFCG and World Vision, 2020).

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is an example of an organization that has been remarkably dexterous about incorporating COVID-19 response into its existing programming and in communicating ways to respond effectively to health emergencies and use conflict sensitivity. CRS's responses have included measures as simple as increasing sanitation and handwashing messaging in its existing programs, to developing communication campaigns to make sure communities are receiving reliable and pertinent information, to providing country officials with training on how to execute quarantine protocols (CRS, 2020, April 17). Catholic Relief Services has also developed a hub for other organizations to access. It includes guidelines, best practices, and other resources for making aid work responsive to a health emergency like COVID-19, and also how to incorporate key principles and strategies like subsidiarity, gender sensitivity, and conflict sensitivity and peacebuilding (CRS, Institute for Capacity Strengthening).

#### *Local church presence*

Ethiopia is a stark example of a frequent pattern. Catholics in the country make up less than one percent of the population, but Catholic institutions are responsible for 90 percent of social programs (Zenit 2011; Dachs 2019). The picture may be varied in different ways in other countries. In some places Catholics are not quite so small of a minority and may even be a majority, like in Uganda, or they may be disallowed to carry out any works that directly connect to evangelization, like in Pakistan. But across the globe, Catholic institutions frequently manage a large, sometimes even disproportionately large, amount of social services and humanitarian assistance.

What this means is that local churches and other Catholic NGOs often have developed aid infrastructure. And that infrastructure is invaluable at a time when resources and capacity are stretched even more thin than they ordinarily would be. In countries like India and the Philippines, to name just two examples, churches repurposed their facilities to serve as treatment centers for people impacted by COVID-19, particularly for the poor and vulnerable (Agenzia Fides, 2020; Zenit, 2020). As the economic pressures of the pandemic cause international aid to contract, and concurrently the need for resources to expand, Catholic aid networks and infrastructure that are local, established, and trusted become even more important.

In terms of peacebuilding, this local, embedded nature of Catholic leadership is usually an asset because it makes church-based peacemakers stronger stakeholders that are more invested in the protracted work of lasting peace. Response to COVID-19 needs that same sort of commitment. The novel coronavirus will not simply vanish, and economic and social impacts it has wrought will not reverse course overnight. And this includes consequences for violent conflict. Peacebuilding and pandemic relief will need to stride in tandem for several years. A lack of peace will make it harder to maintain health security, food security, and development needed to improve disease resilience, and inadequate or non-conflict sensitive relief efforts have the potential to

exacerbate conflicts or create new ones. Local churches in local communities can be anchors for such sustained long-term work, key sources of understanding specific cultural needs and nuances, and trusted interlocutors to communicate health information and mediate conflicts.

*Catholic social teaching and integral human development*

In an interview discussing the launch of the Vatican's COVID-19 Commission, Cardinal Peter Turkson said: "The Pope is convinced that we are living through an epochal change, and he is reflecting on what will follow the crisis, on the economic and social consequences of the pandemic, on what we will have to face, and above all on how the Church can offer itself as a safe point of reference to the world lost in the face of an unexpected event" (Menichetti, 2020). Calling the COVID-19 pandemic an opportunity is a crass way of stating it, but COVID-19 has exposed many problems that Catholic social teaching has been noting for years and created space for possible change. *Laudato Si'* synthesized much of this criticism with its critiques of "throwaway culture." The concept incorporates not only rampant consumerism and disregard for the environment, as the term suggests on the surface. It also indicts the broader commodification of life and the smothering of solidarity that occurs in the globalized, market-driven world. This is a prominent part of the "integral ecology" concept from *Laudato Si'*, the idea that everything is connected and that problems of economic justice, violent conflict, and environmental degradation are all intertwined as consequences of a larger cultural malady. If indeed COVID-19 has created a new paradigm, wherein there is more receptivity to changing the "throwaway culture," then Catholic social teaching and peacebuilding have a ready roadmap.

Catholic social teaching has had an emphasis on being "integral" since Pope Saint Paul VI introduced the idea in *Populorum Progressio* in 1967. Integral human development, and Pope Francis's addendum of integral ecology, have spawned a sensibility in Catholic thought and praxis that the primacy of human dignity requires safeguarding and nourishing across every dimension of the complex social world. And that the full goodness of the human person must be the true end of all economic and political activities. COVID-19 has revealed the urgency of this concept on a global scale, with the most vulnerable suffering the most and resulting problems like food shortages and unemployment only likely to worsen (Ilo, 2020). The world's "throwaway culture," which has suppressed fundamental Catholic social teaching values like solidarity, universal destination of goods, participation, care for creation, and preferential option for the poor, has been exposed by the coronavirus crisis.

Time and again leaders have stumbled to set aside politics and economics as usual to respond in a way reflective of integral human development, and often these failures have intersected with concerns about peace and conflict. In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte used the COVID-19 crisis as a cover to push through an anti-terrorism bill that observers widely criticized for being overly draconian and representing a grave threat to human rights (Gomes, 2020; *Crux*, 2020). In Nicaragua, an effort spearheaded by the Nicaraguan Catholic Church to provide emergency medical services for coronavirus treatment and prevention was shut down by a government that has sparred with Catholic leaders over their criticism of the regime's often violent crackdowns on political dissent (Agren, 2020). And perhaps the most notable example is one described above, the UN Security Council dragging its feet on making a resolution to support the Secretary General's call for a humanitarian ceasefire because of political wrangling over the role of the World Health Organization.

As a result of this connection between threats to peace and threats from the coronavirus, a response centered on integral human development must explicitly include peacebuilding. Time will tell whether the “epochal change” envisioned by Pope Francis will come to pass, but if the energy for change does indeed last then Catholic voices the world over must be ready to advocate for the model of integral human development and the centrality of peacebuilding to help make such change sustainable. This means being able to use on the ground work for peace and pandemic relief to fuel conceptual and policy-oriented practices that draw on the deep well of Catholic thought on peace and human-centered social ethics and offering concrete ways to actualize them.

### **Conclusion**

Leveraging Catholic assets for effective long-term COVID-19 response will require a concerted and focused effort from the Church’s institutional powers, and that is why the Holy See’s current forward-looking posture is encouraging. It is poised to help ensure a conflict-sensitive lens is applied to pandemic response work among Catholic agencies and bodies and to lend support to local churches struggling to keep peace in the forefront. But what is also required is attention. Violence thrives in the dark, and peace needs light. Church leaders as well as theologians, ethicists, journalists, and practitioners in the Catholic world need to make awareness of conflict and violence an integral part of their thinking, writing, and action in regard to the pandemic. The Catholic community’s response to the pandemic must truly follow the sensibility of *Laudato Si’* and strive to be integral, including by carefully scrutinizing the ways that the problems caused by the coronavirus intersect with violent conflict. Such an effort maintains a “both-and” approach and keeps necessary peacebuilding work from being sidelined as pandemic relief is prioritized. It also keeps extra layers of suffering at bay and helps to ensure that COVID-19 recovery and prevention efforts are not undermined by instability and violence. And it gives those efforts extra force toward bringing about more lasting change after the pandemic.

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