

Catholic leaders discuss church's role in Africa's conflicts

BOGOTA, Colombia – African Catholic leaders discussed the church's different roles in some of the world's most intractable and violent conflicts during a recent Catholic peace conference in Colombia.

Across Africa, where Catholics and Christians are minorities in most nations, the Catholic Church's role is different and difficult, said some of the leaders.

"In Nigeria, we are only 20 percent Catholic, so what the bishop says doesn't carry as much weight" as in countries where Catholics are a majority of the population, said Archbishop John Olorunfemi Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria.

"We have learned to speak a language that can be heard by everybody," he said. "Although we still hold our Christian position, we speak a language that can address everyone."

Archbishop Onaiyekan said Nigeria suffers from tensions between Christians and Muslims, and poverty produced by corruption.

Dialogue with the country's Muslims is central to the church's efforts, said the archbishop, who heads the Christian Association of Nigeria.

Archbishop Onaiyekan and others were speaking at the Fourth International Conference of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network in the Colombian capital of Bogota in late June. Catholic leaders and lay workers from around the world met to discuss strategies for building peace and helping the survivors of conflicts find reconciliation.

Bishop Francisco Joao Silota of Chimoio, Mozambique, said his country had worked to focus on the positive and to look ahead to the future after his country's civil war from 1977 to 1992, when an insurgency financed partly by South Africa tried to topple the country's government. The conflict killed close to a million people and forced 1.3 million people to flee before it ended with a 1992 peace treaty.

"Look at one another not as enemies, but as brothers," said the bishop, who is the vice president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar. "We should forgive one another. We know a lot of things happened. But let us look for a new Mozambique, where everyone should work for a fraternal and peaceful country."

Rwandan Bishop Frederic Rubwejanga of Kibungo, president of the Rwandan bishops' Commission for Justice and Peace, discussed how more than 50 percent of the mostly Christian country is Catholic. Rwanda was the scene of one of Africa's most deadly and infamous genocides in 1994. Some priests participated in the genocide.

Bishop Rubwejanga said that the implication of Catholic religious leaders in the killing has complicated church efforts to heal the nation, but he stressed that "it has been demonstrated that it wasn't the church as an institution, but some members may have been involved."

A key to healing the nation, said Bishop Rubwejanga, has been distinguishing between those morally responsible for the genocide and those who were used as tools to carry it out.

"Those who committed genocide were the politicians," he said, adding that "the people followed with their eyes almost closed."

Jean-Baptiste Talla, the Cameroon project manager for peace-building and justice for the U.S. bishops' international relief agency, Catholic Relief Services, has worked in nations including Rwanda, Burundi, Chad, Nigeria and the Central African Republic. Talla said that in some nations, like Rwanda, hostility is kept alive by leaders who benefit from the conflict.

In Rwanda, "everything looks cured, but the wounds run very deep," he said.

Still, Talla said he sees signs of healing. He recalled a visit to a Rwandan diocese where victims and perpetrators of the genocide met for discussions. A woman at the meeting pointed to a man in the room and told Talla, "I decided to forgive that man who killed my husband."

Later, the killer told Talla: "I decided to join this group to try to change."

"But the challenge is the politicians," Talla said. "The leaders are the ones who manipulated the divisions" between ethnic groups.

Talla said the key to moving forward and healing is not forgetting "because you cannot forget."

Instead, he recommended concentrating on the positive aspects of history - the heroes who risked their lives to help others.

"The history of a country is not a history of war," he said, "but a history of people during war who tried to defend values, who tried to help others."