



## ***Committee on International Justice and Peace***

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**Bishop Oscar Cantú**

**A Conference by the United States Agency for International Development on  
the following theme:  
The Role of Faith-based and Community Actors in the Northern Triangle of  
Central America**

**At the Catholic University of America**

**November 16, 2017**

Thank you for this invitation. As Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I have had the privilege of traveling around the world, witnessing first-hand the life-changing impacts of the Church's educational, health, social service, and peacebuilding institutions, as well as her partnerships with governments, NGOS, and civil society. From the Congo to Colombia, from India to Iraq, from East Timor to Cuba, the Gospel mandate of charity is burning bright in our darkened world, inflamed by the torch of undaunted hope.

Like every other aspect of her being, the Catholic Church's humanitarian mission flows from the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a spiritual force of love that pervades our understanding of the ever-changing temporal realities of our world. St. John Paul II taught that, "The theological dimension is needed both for interpreting and solving present day problems in human society." Through her social doctrine, the Church applies a multidisciplinary approach informed by faith in analyzing the complex problems facing our world. From the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, we gather the courage to make tangible the Biblical call to care for the widow and the orphan, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, ransom the captive, and revive the spirits of the downtrodden.

This social mission of the Catholic Church is undertaken in many countries and regions around the world. Wherever the Church is present, she becomes enculturated in a dynamic way out of respect for the local culture, customs and history of the local peoples she serves. This is particularly true in the Northern Triangle of Central America. There the Church acts as bridge builder and peacemaker, as well as defender of the lives and dignity of the most vulnerable.

Addressing the challenges we face in the Northern Triangle is daunting, but today we are privileged to do so in the company of people who care, a fruitful collaboration born of solidarity. This conference, convened here at the Catholic University of America with the United States

Agency for International Development, USAID, is a testament to the years of joint efforts and united resolve between the Church and the U.S. Government. USAID is entrusted with the generosity of the American people to support less fortunate countries and societies in building a better future for themselves, and thus a better world for us all. This is a sacred trust, and as Church, we are honored to be in partnership with you and all people of good will.

With ongoing violence and instability in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, many people, especially youth, feel they have no choice but to flee. As faith-based actors working on community development and human rights, our work is more important than ever. Youth see few opportunities as they are confronted by ‘join-or-die’ gang ultimatums targeting them in impoverished gang-controlled neighborhoods. There are few employment opportunities and not infrequently failed harvests caused by environmental degradation and the impacts of climate change. Together these realities contribute to the many push factors that we see causing displacement and migration north. We saw this come to a head in 2014, when an unprecedented 68,000 unaccompanied children from Mexico and Central America presented themselves to Border Patrol at the United States’ southern border.

This humanitarian, and for many of the youth, refugee crisis, is further exacerbated by the risks of human trafficking and gender based violence. The purveyors of sexual and labor exploitation take advantage of youth and families who turn to smugglers and traffickers in desperation, as irregular migrants seek alternative routes to avoid detection and reach safe haven.

Development is key to addressing the root causes that force so many youth and families to brave the perilous journey to the United States. For development to be successful it is critical to address the totality of issues facing the region – corruption, impunity, violence, and poverty – with a comprehensive response. As we look for ways to interrupt violence, increase citizen safety, and provide alternatives to unsafe migration, let us look to help these countries to ensure their people have human security and viable and dignified livelihoods at home. When development brings about opportunity, especially for the young, hope shines through all of society. As the Scalabrinian Sisters often repeat in their work with young people, “Donde hay niños, hay esperanza.” In English, “Where there are children, there is hope.”

The region’s human trafficking problem is severe. During the first year of his pontificate, in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis echoed the words of the Book of Genesis after Cain had murdered his brother, Abel, in relation to the sin of modern slavery:

“How I wish that all of us would hear God’s cry: “Where is your brother?” (Gen 4:9). Where is your brother or sister who is enslaved? Where is the brother and sister whom you are killing each day in clandestine warehouses, in rings of prostitution, in children used for begging, in exploiting undocumented labor? Let us not look the other way. There is greater complicity than we think. The issue involves everyone!” (EG #211).

This is a call for both prayerful reflection and concerted action; it fundamentally challenges us to move away from an aloof, self-righteous indignation, and forces us to discern exactly how each and every one of us can contribute to either the enslavement or the freedom of our brothers and sisters. Here and abroad, through the Santa Marta Group (a Catholic anti-trafficking coalition between religious sisters and law enforcement) and the countless local efforts in countries around the world, the Catholic Church has partnered with governments to help eradicate this scourge.

Here again we see that a key to fighting the scourge of human trafficking is development assistance. Development assistance builds up the people, families, communities, economies and societies of vulnerable countries and strikes at the heart of conditions that make human trafficking easier and more profitable for the enslavers. Development, and the educational and vocational opportunities that it generates, empowers individuals, especially youth, helping them be less vulnerable to traffickers and to make better life choices. The breakdown of economic infrastructure, the prevalence of narcotics trafficking and the systemic violence surrounding it, among other factors, are “root causes,” or predisposing factors that make people more susceptible to falling into trafficking schemes—and this is what we must act on, and act soon.

The region is plagued by an epidemic of violence. “I see violence and strife in the city,” said Archbishop Jose Luis Escobar Alas of San Salvador, in a recent pastoral letter, quoting Psalm 55, to describe a situation that is all too real in that country. Transnational criminal organizations continue to exercise their despotic rule over entire communities and areas, extending their influence well into the governing structures of countries in the region.

These drug cartels traffic not only in narcotics, but in human beings. Against the extreme brutality of transnational criminal groups, a comprehensive hemispheric human security strategy must be multifaceted, including drug and human trafficking enforcement and interdiction efforts. But the strategy must also include long-term societal change, and this is where, as you know, development is, again, so crucial. There will always be criminals seeking to exploit their brothers and sisters. But as these societies emerge from their cycles of despair and lack of opportunity, especially for the young, the criminal groups will have less control over their destinies. Pope Francis, again, hit the mark, when he said:

Until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence... When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programmes or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility. (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #59).

Addressing the violence that causes security-driven displacement is to address a major root cause of forced migration. The human security of our country, and indeed of the entire Western Hemisphere, demands a long-term investment in development in the Northern Triangle.

The Catholic Church has clearly expressed concern for victims of sexual and gender-based violence—an evil of horrifying magnitude in the Northern Triangle. This type of violence, which seeks to degrade the very identity of its victims, has been a major driving force of emigration from the region, especially among youth. Criminal groups use this type of violence to consolidate their reign of terror in besieged communities, often employing horrifying methods of mutilation and torture. As a Mother, the Catholic Church condemns all acts of gender based violence.

The bishops of the United States, in their statement against domestic violence, wrote, “Religion can be either a resource or a roadblock for battered women. As a resource, it can encourage women to resist mistreatment.” The Catholic Church and indeed the whole religious community must be a resource for women. To resist this extreme manifestation of patriarchy, the Church can best be that resource by being true to her teachings. All human beings were created by God, men and women all share in that God-given dignity. And in the life of Jesus Christ, we also recognize the awesome dignity of women as a cornerstone of our faith, for the Word of God made-flesh took His human nature from the womb of Mary.

Catholic Relief Services, CRS, the international relief and development agency of the U.S. Catholic community, works in 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, and has implemented development and humanitarian programs in the Northern Triangle of Central America for decades. Led by local Caritas partners and other civil society actors, CRS works to address the root causes of poverty, forced displacement, and violence. USAID partners with CRS in Latin America, as it does around the world.

As a faith community, it is our responsibility not only to shine a light on human trafficking and gender-based violence, but also to look critically at the underlying issues in our communities that increase vulnerabilities. While we must support institutions, including faith-based actors, to protect victims and prosecute perpetrators, we need to invest robustly in activities and programs that prevent trafficking and violence. In the long-term, the only real way to address the crisis at hand and to protect the human dignity of those affected is to provide opportunity and human security for youth and families by investing in them and their communities.

CRS-supported programs like Youth Pathways in El Salvador and Honduras have reached 7,000 young people across the region, transitioning 80% of participants back to school, to a new job, or to start an entrepreneurial venture. Funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Youth Pathways uses three different approaches to engage children and youth with different needs. First, it provides extracurricular activities for children attending school, linking their education to future business and higher education opportunities. Second, modeled after YouthBuild USA, the program targets at-risk youth in high violence areas who are not formally employed nor enrolled in the school system, commonly known as NINIS (that is, Not Employed Not In School). The program offers comprehensive training and support in seven areas, including: education, community service, life skills, entrepreneurship and savings and loans groups, vocational technical training, and leadership. This form of intervention enables young people to develop

skills to better deal with the social violence surrounding them and the labor restrictions forcing some to migrate. Lastly, the program targets families and communities to access and benefit from comprehensive protection services including psychosocial care for particularly vulnerable families.

CRS is also rolling out similar activities in Guatemala and Nicaragua in rural areas to provide opportunities to youth where there is a lack of livelihood options. In Guatemala, in partnership with USAID, CRS is helping over 200 communities foster their own development. Over five years, Communities Leading Development will work with diverse populations living in some of the Western Highland's most marginalized communities—including programs with women, indigenous people, youth and people with disabilities—to strengthen local organizations, develop robust community development plans and implement projects that respond to needs prioritized by the communities themselves. The leadership and knowledge of CRS' local partner agencies and the U.S. government makes programs like these possible – especially our local Caritas partners, the U.S. Department of State, and USAID. The Church is proud of the collaborative efforts these initiatives illustrate, but recognizes there is more to be done.

I also want to recognize the work of the American Catholic Church's own U.S.-based Migration and Refugee Services and partnerships with Catholic Charities USA and the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. These agencies accompany Central Americans and other refugees and migrants who seek safety and new lives in the United States. Seeing and celebrating all these multiple partnerships and collaborative efforts helps us to understand and appreciate the breadth and depth of the challenges and to respond holistically as a global faith community as we share the life journeys of all God's people at all stages, and in all lands.

One hundred-and-twenty-six years ago, when Pope Leo XIII issued his landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the first truly social encyclical dealing with the most pressing societal concerns of the day, he boldly assured all men and women of good will that “in regard to the Church, her cooperation will never be found lacking.” I echo those prophetic words, and call upon all here, in their respective fields and responsibilities, to join our shared efforts to create more just societies in the countries of the Northern Triangle.

Thank you.