



# Statement on Central America

**Edición Bilingüe**

**November 19, 1987**  
**United States Catholic Conference**

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on  
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General Secretary  
NCCB/USCC

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## *I. Introduction*

We meet at a time of unprecedented hope for peace in Central America. We celebrate the wisdom and courage of those who made at least more probable what was deemed almost impossible brief months ago. Meeting in Guatemala on the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration, El Salvador's patronal feast, the five presidents of Central America committed their governments to a process of peace and reconciliation for each of their countries and for the region. We pray they will succeed, with divine guidance, in bringing it to a successful end.

We are fully sensitive to the delicacy of these present weeks in which the schedule for compliance moves forward. We wish our words here to be seen both as a further expression of our strong support for the unfolding peace process as well as the expression of our continual effort to reflect critically on the moral issues at stake. We have addressed matters of our country's relations with Central America for over a decade. We have joined with our Central American brothers in the episcopate in urging the adoption of sincere dialogue and negotiation among contending parties. And with them we have insisted, as we continue to insist, that true peace can come about only when the fundamental causes of the conflicts, especially the historic denials of social justice, are sincerely faced.

Peace, as the cessation of hostilities, may truly be at hand, for which all must give fervent thanks. But genuine peace, a gift from God and the fruit of justice, will continue to elude us until men and women of good will, here and throughout the

hemisphere, resolve to construct together the civilization of love to which we are called.

"Central America has lately become a focus of attention and concern for the entire world." So wrote the bishops of Central America and Panama three years ago in their major document on the regional crisis, *Our Salvation Is Christ*. Central America has clearly been a focus of great attention and concern here in the United States, as we ourselves noted in our *Statement on Central America* in 1981, and it is of very special concern for us in the Church.

Over the years we have prayed and preached and worked in varied ways for peace and justice in that troubled region. We have expressed our solidarity with our brother bishops and their local churches whose pilgrimage is marked with great suffering. We have spoken out publicly, numerous times, seeking to direct the policies of our country into ever more constructive ways.

All of these and more—our prayer, our expressions of ecclesial solidarity, our efforts to influence public policy—are distinct and proper elements of our pastoral mission today. As the Holy Father noted last spring in Santiago:

The Church, as is clearly stated in the Second Vatican Council, "is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 76). But it is also true that, as an imperative of the mission it received from Jesus Christ, the Church must cast the light of the Gospel on all temporal situations, including political activity, so that society will increasingly manifest those moral and ethical values that reveal the transcendental character of the person and the need to protect his inalienable rights.

This year marks a decade of sustained attention

by our episcopal conference to the issues of Central America. In this period we can note certain welcome developments in one or another country—advances in a democratic polity, election of civilian presidents, diminution of some of the most heinous human rights violations. Overall, however, the decade has witnessed a deterioration in the social, political, and economic life of the region. It is this situation of crisis and the role of our own government in affecting it to which we direct our attention here.

It is our impression that the crises that today afflict Central America, indeed Latin America in general, are inadequately grasped by policymakers and citizens alike; that the policy focus has been distorted by an almost exclusive attention to one country; and that the broad public discussion that should inform our policy has become falsely constricted. It is in an effort to help stimulate fresh, and one hopes deeper, thinking about our government's policy toward the region that these reflections are offered.

## II. Central America Today

Over the course of this decade the standard and quality of life of the great majority of Central Americans has declined. Untold suffering and misery have increased dramatically and the region has been brought to the very brink of devastation.

In part, this is true for much of the hemisphere where the 1980s have been termed a *lost decade* for the economies of most Latin American countries. Unemployment and underemployment have soared; inflation in some countries has reached previously unimagined heights; almost every country is saddled with heavy external debt, the total indebtedness of Latin America now approaching \$400 billion. It is this tragedy that the Holy Father addressed when he met with the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean last April, noting that the crisis experienced by the region as a whole was the most serious of the past half century. It is this "perspective of pain" that moved him to issue in Chile

. . . an appeal to the public authorities, to private enterprise, to whatever persons or institutions in the entire region within sound of my voice and, naturally, to the developed nations, summoning them to meet this formidable moral challenge which was described a year ago in the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* in the following terms: "The aim of this in-depth reflection is to work out and set in motion ambitious programs aimed at the socio-economic liberation of millions of men and women caught in an intolerable situation of economic, social and political oppression" (81).

## Central America's Specific Problems

The current crises of Latin America, especially the economic crises of growth, of inflation, unemployment, and debt, are fully reflected in the small and poor countries that make up the Central American isthmus. But these countries have also experienced their own special suffering in recent years.

Poverty, injustice, and violence; excessive militarism and rampant corruption; a deterioration of family life and of cultural values; widespread religious and ideological confusion; and bitter internal wars that in the decade have taken over 150 thousand lives, displaced nearly two million more, and caused hundreds of millions of dollars of damage—these are some of the core realities of much of today's Central America.

In the recent public debates in our country over U.S. policy toward the region, these realities seem to be relegated to positions of secondary importance, when they are not ignored altogether. A near exclusive focus of attention on Nicaragua and a policy debate reduced to the question of U.S. support for an armed opposition reflect, in our view, a skewed and inadequate approach.

## Voices from Central America

A more complete view can be found in the joint messages of the Central American episcopates issued at their regular biennial assemblies. At both their 1986 and 1984 assemblies, speaking as bishops

and pastors, they identified the same five problem areas of greatest concern to their local churches. We would do well to consider them.

At the top, unsurprisingly, is the problem of armed violence—the violation of human rights, the existing armed conflicts, and the danger of their expansion. Next is the related issue of militarism, of the exaggerated role assumed by the armed forces in most of those societies, due in part to generous subsidies provided by outside powers. Third is the matter of rampant corruption, both public and private. Fourth, what may seem an unlikely public policy issue but which is of great concern to the bishops of Central America, the manipulation of Catholic faith and of popular religiosity by three distinct groups: the aggressively proselytizing fundamentalist sects, many with financial ties to the U.S.; the politically more radical Catholic sectors identified as the *popular church*; and the intransigent conservative sectors who try to put the gospel at the service of their own interests. And fifth, the attacks on the institutions of marriage and the family from several quarters but including, according to the bishops, campaigns financed by foreign governments imposing values hostile to the existing culture.

We consider it worth restating what our brother bishops of Central America have to say about the fundamental issue which most directly relates to the policy of our own government, that of the problem of violence, of war and of peace:

Armed violence has come to several of our Republics, and with it the danger of turning into a regional conflict. This violence continues to bear down on

our countries, causing forced displacement of people within each country, the painful drama of refugees, widows and orphans whose numbers grow constantly, the abandonment of farms, the increasing unemployment, hunger and illness, the lack of doctors and medicines.

And though the causes of conflicts were internal, two outside forces have come into play; the ideological, generally marxist, on the part of the revolutionary groups, and the other, that of national security which generally issues in repression by the military and the intervention of superpowers seeking to maintain spheres of influence; in their quest for a perilous balance of power, they feed the arms race, foment militarization and place the peace of the region at permanent risk.

We can do no less than condemn the war and the consequent sending of arms to Central America and we issue a fervent invitation to the dialogue for peace.

In this connection, we offer our encouragement to our sister Church of El Salvador which has struggled to bring about a dialogue and has been accepted as mediator by both sides. We support as well those efforts of other nations to seek effective ways of ending armed intervention in our countries, the removal of outside forces from the region, and the freedom for Central Americans peacefully to settle their differences. At the same time we implore the great powers to resolve their differences in peace and not continue the useless shedding of blood in our region. (*Message from the XXI Plenary Meeting of SEDAC, Tegucigalpa, November 29, 1984.*)

In these few lines the bishops of Central America and Panama have encapsulated much of the real problem of Central America and its only acceptable solution; namely, that the devastation of war affects disproportionately the most vulnerable, the poorest, and sets back already weakened economies; that while the conflicts have indigenous roots in

the long standing patterns of injustice, superpower interference has added the geopolitical dimension, threatening the expansion into a still wider war; that the answer lies in effective dialogue among the contending parties, facilitated by sister nations of Latin America, with the superpowers resolving to deal with one another outside the Central American arena.

### III. Central America and U.S. Policy

With this panoramic view in mind, let us look briefly at each of the countries, examining features that relate to aspects of U.S. policy.

*El Salvador*, once the center of attention, has all but disappeared from the policy discussion. The costly war, now in its eighth year, may have left our newspapers but not the lives of the people of El Salvador. People are still being killed—in armed confrontations, in aerial bombardments, from land mines. Both sets of combatants commit serious violations of commonly accepted human rights. Killings and disappearances by so-called death squads still continue, although not, to be sure, at the appalling levels of a few years ago. The criminal justice system barely functions; there is no single known instance of military personnel being criminally punished for human rights abuses against Salvadoran citizens. The earthquake of October 1986 caused such destruction, leaving 300 thousand people homeless, that it was comparable, in the words of Archbishop Rivera, to a second war.

Refugees and displaced persons are still prominent aspects of the Salvadoran reality. Many of the *internal refugees*, people who had fled to church-run centers as far back as 1980, have been helped to relocate, but people continue to flock to the city from conflict areas, and many continue to seek refuge in the United States. Whatever their individual and personal motivations, most of these people have escaped from truly desperate circumstances, from a country torn by war and devastated by natural disaster, and should be allowed—once having made the difficult journey here—to remain at least



until conditions in El Salvador genuinely improve. A civilian presidency is the beginning, not the end, of necessary reforms and improvements.

Many refugees as well continue to live in camps in Honduras and should be enabled, but not forced against their will, to return when their safe passage and security in their homeland can be assured. We urge the UN High Commission for Refugees to continue its role in providing for and protecting these persons.

The recently enacted Immigration Reform and Control Act has caused great concern among many in El Salvador, including the nation's bishops, who fear that it may result in the forced repatriation of large numbers of Salvadorans. There are reports that some Salvadorans are already returning, partly because employers have fired or refused to hire undocumented Salvadorans in the sometimes mistaken fear of incurring sanctions. The return of many thousands would have repercussions far beyond the obvious economic ones, almost certainly increasing the civil strife and violence that have for too long wracked that tiny country.

The dialogue for peace between the government and the opposition, which the Church and especially Archbishop Rivera Damas have tirelessly pursued had, until lately, largely broken down. The new Central American Peace Process, the most hopeful development in years, calls for internal dialogue in El Salvador and may succeed in reviving the necessary talks. We continue to urge our government to provide every possible encouragement to this process.

Finally, the question of military aid to El Salvador. This was the central issue before us in 1981

as we discussed and voted on our *Statement on Central America*. We concluded then, as Archbishop Romero had pleaded just before his assassination, that the United States should not provide arms to the then military-civilian junta. We acknowledge changes since that time, including the election of a civilian president. And while we also acknowledge the right in principle of a sovereign state to seek abroad the means for its own defense, we cannot accept that outside powers, essentially our country and the Soviet Union, vie with one another in adding fuel to the flames of an already burning house. In the sense in which it applies to both powers, we join with the Central American bishops when they say, as cited above, "We can do no less than condemn the war and the consequent sending of arms to Central America."

We have further concerns about our military aid to El Salvador, which fairly represents a still larger problem. Over the last five years El Salvador has received substantial military aid, starting with the 1980 allocation that Archbishop Romero opposed of less than \$6 million, through the high point in 1984 of over \$200 million to the present levels of over \$100 million.

At some point, one must ask what these expenditures have resulted in. The government has not fallen nor has the insurgency been defeated; that is clear. But have we in fact, while intending to support the emergence of civilian and democratic rule, created a situation which makes it more difficult for the civilian sectors to exercise the necessary control over the military? And is this not of a piece with the problem noted over recent years of ever higher percentages of our bilateral aid being

consigned to military and strategic, rather than to development purposes? When, as in this present year, two-thirds of all bilateral aid is so committed, while in 1973 it was but a quarter, we must strongly question the military emphasis of our foreign aid program.

Nicaragua is the one country of the region not receiving economic or military assistance from the United States government; it has become increasingly dependent on such aid from the Soviet Union and its allies, an issue of growing concern to the democracies of the region. The war of attrition waged by irregular forces of Nicaraguan dissidents (the *contras*), funded largely by entities, both public and private, of this country, has been the dominant fact of Nicaragua's life today and the overriding policy issue. Tensions between the United States and Nicaragua were aggravated by the breakdown in bilateral relations between the two countries.

Significant human rights violations have been reliably attributed to both sides. Contra attacks against noncombatants, forced recruitment and kidnappings, and extensive use of land mines have been widely noted. So have Sandinista abusive treatment of prisoners and detainees, the excessive restrictions on trade union activities, on freedom of expression and other civil liberties, and the reported violation of due process associated with the special tribunals. Nicaragua's record in this regard is not, according to the principal international human rights monitors, the worst in the region, but it is sufficiently bad to concern all who favor the growth of democratic institutions.

One area of special concern to us as bishops has been the deeply disturbing conflict that has devel-

oped between the government and the leaders of the Catholic Church, with the government on several occasions marshalling the exceptional powers of the state to deprive the Church of personnel, property, and the free exercise of ministry. The expulsion of a bishop, the expatriation of a key aide to the archbishop, the closing of the bishops' radio station and the archdiocesan newspaper, all in the last two years, as well as the prior expulsion of several foreign clergy and religious have been matters of deep concern, whose resolution we have repeatedly urged. We welcome the steps already taken to redress these concerns within the framework of the peace process, specifically the reopening of Radio Católica and permission for three of the clerics to return. We urge that the remaining obstacles be swiftly addressed. We stand with the Church in Nicaragua in the defense of their right to preach the gospel without harassment or interference.

The war has been the central issue and the unfortunate, almost exclusive, focus of the policy debate in this country. There is no issue of U.S. hemispheric policy that has so sharply and bitterly divided the American people as has the policy of our government to arm and train that part of the Nicaraguan opposition generally referred to as the *contras*.

Some of our fellow citizens, indeed some of our faithful, seem genuinely convinced that so evil is the Sandinista regime, or so inevitable an eventual Soviet-Cuban aggression through Managua, that they countenance few restrictions on what the U.S. may do to prevent such an outcome.

We have long argued that a significant U.S.-

Nicaragua problem exists but only a political solution can finally be successful in Nicaragua as in Central America generally; there is no politically or morally acceptable military solution. Further intensification of the military conflict must be avoided and the tide turned decisively in a new direction.

We have argued that direct military aid to forces seeking the overthrow of a government with which we are not at war and with which we maintain diplomatic relations is at least legally doubtful and morally wrong. U.S. mining of Nicaraguan harbors, training and supplying of irregular forces, and otherwise aggressing against another sovereign nation seem clearly to violate treaty obligations under the UN and OAS charters and the Rio Treaty and to violate as well the principles of customary international law. The finding by the International Court of Justice that our government was guilty of nine different violations of international law is at least persuasive. But it is not ours to argue the law, nor is our objective to present policy based on the legal issues.

We do believe the policy of support for the contras to be flawed morally, however sincere the intentions of the persons who have crafted and implemented it. Our Catholic teaching demands that several stringent criteria be met before one can discard the overriding "presumption in favor of peace and against war" (*The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Reponse*, 83).

Some would argue that the condition of sufficient cause was well met. As troubled as we have been by aspects of today's Nicaragua, it seems to us far from clear that Sandinista abuses could merit such lethal response. Still less do the criteria of

likelihood of success, proportionality, and even proper authority seem to have been met. Without formally judging any of these criteria, we do hold that the criterion of last resort has truly been disregarded, and it is on this matter that we consider the U.S. contra policy to be most seriously in error.

As the Central American Peace Process is beginning to demonstrate, there *are* alternatives to a war policy; there *are* available structures—the Central American governments themselves, newly united by the peace accord signed in Guatemala last August, the now-forming regional parliament, the Contadora Group—all committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflicts and the protection of basic rights and freedoms. It is these profoundly hopeful efforts to construct peace with justice that we are called to encourage and support. The peaceful means, far from having been exhausted, have just begun to be explored.

*Guatemala* inaugurated its first civilian president in 20 years in January 1986 and some important changes have clearly taken place. For two decades of military rule, Guatemala had endured the most sustained and pervasive political violence in the Americas. Estimates of the numbers killed in just the past decade vary but all agree the victims, many of them Indians, numbered in the tens of thousands. The now familiar term *disappearance* first entered the human rights vocabulary because of Guatemala, and for years arbitrary arrest, torture, disappearance, and political killings were everyday occurrences.

Although military violence against civilians in the countryside has been sharply reduced, it never-

theless still continues. The so-called model villages and the conscripted civil patrols, both highly controversial programs of former governments, continue in many areas effectively preventing the desired repatriation of thousands of refugees from nearby Mexico. A *self-amnesty* law promulgated by the previous government just days before President Cerezo's inauguration, eliminating any possible punishment from crimes committed during previous terms of office, is a source of deep discord among many Guatemalans. According to the major human rights organizations, the rule of law has yet to be established in Guatemala and the overall human rights situation, while improved, remains very bad, particularly for the indigenous populations.

Still, there have been noteworthy advances. There appears to be no state-sponsored violence; the kidnappings and killings are believed to be the work of individual members of the security forces, not responsive to civil authority as before. There is a freely elected congress; the president has succeeded in dissolving the much feared Technical Investigation Department (DIT); he has sponsored the important regional initiative of a Central American parliament and has pursued a policy toward Nicaragua known as *active neutrality*. He has also apparently sought to keep U.S. assistance to the Guatemalan military at minimal levels.

Guatemala, as the traditionally most prominent nation of Central America, may well be able to play a key role in the regional quest for peace. We trust that our government will do all possible to encourage President Cerezo's independent role, including his active neutrality policy, and will make aid to the Guatemalan military contingent on gen-

uine accountability and elimination of human rights abuses.

*Honduras*, the second poorest country in the hemisphere, has been triply burdened by the wars waged in the three countries on its borders. It has become the host of thousands of Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, and Guatemalan refugees. It has become the staging area for the principal contra forces attacking Nicaragua. And it has become the site of very large and repeated U.S. military exercises. Although it acquired an elected civilian government earlier in this decade than its neighbors, Honduras has ironically undergone greater militarization in these years than during the time of military rule.

Honduran citizens, some say as many as 16 thousand, have been displaced from areas of contra activities. There have been numerous reports of Hondurans abused by contras and victimized by Nicaraguan cross-border attacks; the presence of large numbers of U.S. troops creates a particular set of problems. Whatever the truth of these reports, it seems abundantly clear that Honduras has become a pawn in conflicts not of its own making and deserves to be freed at least of the excessive attentions of our military. We do not see a justification for expending so much capital and effort in developing temporary military installations and conducting repeated and costly military exercises when the Honduran people so clearly need a different kind of assistance.

*Costa Rica* has been spared many of the social and political upheavals that plague the region, although its grave economic crises and the large influx of undocumented aliens from neighboring countries pose daunting challenges. Fortunately,

Costa Rica has long maintained a democratic and socially responsive form of government and is justly famous for having abolished its armed forces in 1949. The growing militarization of the region that the Central American bishops so lament should in no way be allowed to erode Costa Rica's exemplary nonmilitaristic tradition.

The country's most recent source of pride, the awarding of the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize to President Oscar Arias Sanchez, both acknowledges this tradition of peacemaking and symbolizes the universal acclaim for the Arias-led Central America Peace Process. With the bishops of Central America, we join in fervent gratitude for this magnificent initiative of President Arias and the other four presidents of Central America and pledge our prayers and fullest support for the success of the Esquipulas II accords.

*Panama*, often viewed as marginal to Central America, shares many of its problems. Recent internal conflicts there have highlighted the excessive military control and intervention in the civil area of government. We commend the recent and repeated calls of the Panamanian bishops for full and effective protection of civil rights and the democratic process, and for the socioeconomic promotion of those large sectors of the poor who remain outside the nation's progress.

We urge that our government devise one consistent policy toward Panama, fully respectful of Panama's national sovereignty and the 1977 Torrijos-Carter treaties, while stressing respect for and promotion of human and social rights and the democratic process as essential for national and regional peace.

## *IV. Summary Recommendations*

We conclude by summarizing some of the concerns we have expressed over the years and again in this statement, which we commend to the community of the Church and to all our fellow citizens. We pray that a renewed, more informed, public discussion may develop around these issues that so affect the future well-being of the hemisphere.

### *Central America in Context*

1. Central America is but a part, a small but integral part, of Latin America. We urge our government to expand its policy vision beyond the immediate crises of Central America to the whole of the hemisphere. The problems and needs and dangers facing the rest of Latin America are far greater than those confronting the isthmus and, if left unattended, will overwhelm and cancel out any progress made in the Central American area.

### *Priority of Economic Justice*

2. The most urgent policy issues facing Latin America today are economic. U.S. policy, both public and private, should give highest priority to addressing the problems of Latin America's staggering external debt, fragile economies, and concentration of productive agricultural land. The return to democracy in the major countries of South America, as well as the advances of democratic rule in Central America, are put at greatest risk by the hemispheric crisis of growth and the external debt problem.

## *The Superpowers and the Region*

3. The issues of geopolitics which have so dominated the U.S. public discourse on Central America in recent years should be taken up directly with the principal sources of U.S. concern, the Soviet Union and Cuba. While U.S.-Soviet competition is a concern to parties in the region, the task of preventing the introduction of Soviet bases or strategic weapons or combat forces into our border region should be dealt with as any other major issue threatening world peace, by direct negotiation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. We should not use Central American lives as pawns in a superpower struggle.

### *The Peace Process*

4. Of the interlocking scourges of poverty, injustice, and violence that beset Central America today, the violence of war may, ironically, be the easiest to contain. Its end is, in any case, a precondition for dealing with the others. We make our own the repeated urgings of the bishops of Central America that governments and insurgents alike pursue with vigor the dialogue and reconciliation process called for by the Central American peace accord.

Today the essential framework for negotiations is the Esquipulas II Peace Process initiated by President Arias. It is not a perfect instrument, it involves risk, and it cannot satisfy every legitimate concern at once; but it is the most reasonable and hopeful plan yet devised and must be given every chance.

We pray that the active participation of bishops in each of the national reconciliation commissions will help assure a reconciling peace based on truth.

### *The Necessary U.S. Support for the Peace Process*

5. Our own government which has historically exercised exceptional influence in the region is in a particularly favored position today to further the incipient peace process. We urge U.S. policy to match in deed what has been repeatedly stated in principle; namely that the United States is truly committed to a peaceful resolution of the conflicts through the political processes of the dialogue and negotiations.

### *The Supportive Role of Other American States*

6. The Central American bishops have often decried the unhelpful involvement of powers external to Latin America and have praised the peacemaking efforts of neighboring countries, essentially the four states that border Central America, the Contadora Group of Mexico, Panama, Colombia, and Venezuela, together with the *new democracies* of South America, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay. The new Central America peace accord, itself "encouraged by the visionary and permanent will of the Contadora and Support Group," also calls upon those Latin republics to assist in verifying compliance with the process.

These countries are as concerned as we are for

the peaceful resolution of Central American conflicts and are well suited to assure its success. It is vital that our government maintain explicit support for and cooperate with the provisions of the Arias peace plan, and encourage the contributions of these other American states.

### *Refugees*

7. The flight of so many hundreds of thousands of Central Americans from their homelands over this decade, including the desperate efforts of unprecedented numbers to seek refuge in this country, is the clearest sign of the human tragedy that besets the region. We have urged that their plight be given the high attention it deserves and that the needs of these persons be generously responded to by all the countries of the region and by our own.

Specifically, we urge our parishes, religious communities, and social service agencies to increase their already commendable assistance to all refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons in need. We are conscious in a special way at this time of those who may not fulfill the legal requirements of the present legislation on legalization. We urge our government to interpret the conditions for granting political asylum as broadly and generously as possible, and we strongly urge that even those Central Americans who are not able to make a *prima facie* claim to refugee status under the law be allowed, on humanitarian grounds, to remain here temporarily under the conditions of what is known as extended voluntary departure status.

### *Our Need for Reconciliation*

8. Finally, just as we recognize the need for internal reconciliation within the sharply divided societies of Central America, if peace and progress are to be achieved, so we must acknowledge that our own social fabric has been damaged in recent years precisely over the Central American issues. Our society, indeed our Catholic community, has been divided, we believe unnecessarily so, in these last years because of divergent views about Central America, and we acknowledge our need for reconciliation.

We urge the leaders of both our national parties to use the period leading up to the 1988 elections to construct a national consensus around the real challenges facing us in the hemisphere, not allowing deeper polarization to develop over issues of less central importance. We urge our fellow Catholics, whatever their political views, to consider how they might best bring moral perspectives to bear on the human anguish of today's Central America. We encourage their efforts to support the poor of Central America with humanitarian aid and development funds.

## V. Conclusion

We offer these reflections as bishops, seeking to view these issues of public policy from the perspective of our faith and the social teachings of the Church. We offer them as citizens, conscious of our responsibility to contribute according to our abilities to the formulation of ever more just and humane policies.

We renew our long standing call for the pursuit of negotiation, peace, and reconciliation at a time of great opportunity and danger for the region. There are signs of significant progress in the extraordinary efforts of the nations of Central America to fashion a regional peace accord and begin to carry it out. We especially applaud the efforts of Cardinal Obando y Bravo, Archbishop Rivera Damas, and the other bishops of the region to mediate and advance the process of negotiations. But these efforts need to be actively supported, built upon, and enlarged. They need the strong and persistent support of the United States. We ask our government to do everything possible to support regional efforts to turn from war to negotiations, from violations of human rights to respect for human freedom. Let us turn our energies and resources in the region from supplying weapons of war to building instruments of peace, from armed conflict to constructive negotiations on how peace might be established and freedom and democracy might be strengthened. Let us also together work to overcome the economic injustices which are still at the heart of so much conflict in this troubled region.

This year marks the twentieth anniversary of the great development encyclical of Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*. In commenting on that letter of his predecessor, Pope John Paul devoted this year's World Day of Peace message to the themes of development and solidarity, the keys for peace, and highlighted several of the same principles we have raised in our statement.

"The spirit of solidarity," John Paul insists, "is a spirit that is open to dialogue," one fruit of which can be regional agreements "to promote the common good and encourage bilateral negotiations . . ." Nations must be free to grow and develop as equal partners. "Seeking economic, military, or political superiority at the expense of the rights of other nations places in jeopardy any prospects for true development or true peace." Among the great problems facing us today, the pope mentions the developing world's external debt and the crucial problem of disarmament, noting the serious threats to world peace presented by "current East-West tensions and North-South inequalities." "All states have responsibility for world peace and this peace cannot be ensured until a security based on arms is gradually replaced with a security based on the solidarity of the human family."

We believe that peace is possible, that peace in Central America can and must be built up through dialogue and the processes of political, rather than military activities, and that it must be sustained by the solidarity of the other nations, including the needed economic assistance that the wealthier countries can provide.

We ask God's blessings on the suffering people



of Central America, especially those most affected by the years of crisis, the refugees, the wounded, the bereaved. In this year of Mary, we ask Our Lady of the Americas to watch over all who suffer for, and who work for, peace in Central America.



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