

Ambassador Hackett Remarks
Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas
“Women’s Leadership in Conflict Resolution: Faith Perspectives”
Tuesday, April 14, 2015 at 4:00pm

It is a pleasure to be back here at the Angelicum today. I want to thank Rector Adam for his hospitality in partnering with us to host this conference at their lovely campus. I’m honored to also share the podium with His Eminence Cardinal Turkson, and our three distinguished women on today’s panel –Prof. Orsuto, Prof. Kajon, and Dr. Chiara Ferrero.

Today, we are discussing an important theme – women’s role in conflict resolution. The United States recognizes the role women play in changing their communities and their countries for the better. We know that women and girls are among the most vulnerable victims of war and conflict situations. And we know all the horrible ways in which that manifests.

But women and girls are not only victims of war; they are also powerful forces for peace. Women's participation in conflict resolution can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the causes of, and alternative solutions to, conflict, and turn that understanding into community action. Further, the lack of women's participation in the peace process often means crimes against women go unaddressed and peace agreements do not ultimately reflect popular needs – making them more difficult to sustain.

Our Secretary of State, John Kerry, has said, “The fundamental truth is that no society can reach its full potential if it leaves 50 percent of its people behind.” If we are to address and meet our most pressing global challenges, we must include women as full and equal partners in our efforts. When women succeed and have the opportunity to shape their futures, the world succeeds.

The U.S. State Department gives awards each year for what we call “international women of courage.” These awards honor women around the world who have exemplified exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for conflict resolution, human rights, women’s equality, and social progress, often at great personal risk.

This year’s award winners included a Burmese woman fighting to address violence against women and promote women’s involvement in the peace process. Other recipients were a woman in the Central African Republic involved in the peace negotiations and a Syrian nonviolent activist and peace-builder forced into exile from her country. So many other women across the world serve as peacemakers bringing together warring sides to work for reconciliation. Others are nurses treating Ebola patients despite the risks. Still others are journalists exposing corruption and countering violent extremism, or activists taking a stand against violence and discrimination in the workforce, the home, and the city square. Every day these female leaders are out there advocating for universal rights and aspirations.

We are impressed year after year at the work these women, and all women, are doing worldwide in fighting for social justice, peace, and democracy. They demonstrate to us what is possible when women stand up for their rights and freedoms.

A week or so ago I send out to old friends and colleagues engaged in Peace building and Conflict resolution at CRS a request. I asked that they recount woman whom we had worked with at CRS or who worked for CRS who were engaged in conflict situations.

Let me tick off just a few of the more memorable.

Sr. Pauline Acayo of Northern Uganda, Gulu to be exact. She worked with CRS and the Archdiocese to care for the victim of Joseph Kony's LRA. The stories she recounts are chilling. She even talks about two of her own brothers who were kidnapped and underwent the torture and harrowing ordeals of Joseph Kony.

They brought up Sarah Weber, who worked for me primarily in managing Global Fund grants to fight malaria in Africa. We deployed her in June 2005 to Monrovia, where she played a key role in the implementation of an emergency post-conflict resettlement program in Liberia. She was intelligent, focused, and dedicated, and made a real difference in the difficult locations where she served. As we know, a difference in these types of areas can mean life or death. And Sarah was one of the many women at CRS making that difference time and again.

They wrote of the incredible work of Sister Marie Bernard, who, for more than two decades has devoted her life to peacebuilding in the Great Lakes Region in Africa. In 2001, she created a civil society network dedicated to training and supporting women peace leaders. It expanded into the Democratic Republic of the Congo and today includes thousands of women. She led the Church's civic education work and election monitoring for the peaceful transition of power in the DRC. She also helped to build the foundation of cross-border peace activities in the Great Lakes Region, in particular by bringing youths from Burundi, the DRC, and Rwanda to spend a week together.

Another impressive woman was Myla Leguro. Myla had a master's degree from Notre Dame University's Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies. She worked for CRS since 1991 on peace and development projects in Mindanao in the Philippines. As the Program Manager of the Peace and Reconciliation Program of CRS Philippines, Myla organized two major peacebuilding institutions: the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute in 2000 and the Grassroots Peace Learning Center in 2003. She has worked as an international trainer in Timor-Leste and Nepal and has served as a resource person in various peacebuilding conferences in Colombia, Thailand, and the United States. Myla holds the distinction of being one of the 1,000 women collectively nominated for the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize as leaders committed to building a future free of violence.

Each of these woman had a lot in common.

- They were exceptionally dedicated
- They had the ability to focus on what had to be done
- They were both humble and in a way meek
- But they were boldly determined and fearless
- And their faith and prayer were important parts of their lives

Women are, without a doubt, crucial to the process of finding and creating lasting peace during and after conflicts. I look forward to hearing what the women panelists here today will say about their faith perspective on the female role in these situations. We stand behind all women doing courageous work towards social justice and peace. And we are inspired by and grateful for their dedication.

Thank you again to the Angelicum for hosting this dialogue, and to the Russell Berrie Foundation, Rabbi Bemporad, and the John Paul II Center for Interreligious Dialogue for their support. I also want to thank Cardinal Turkson for his continued dedication to addressing these and other important issues at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. And I thank all the women, in particular the women religious, out in the field doing important work to solve global issues.