

*Written Testimony Submitted for the Record*

*On Challenges to Religious Freedom in the Americas*

*to the*

*Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
United States House of Representatives*

*Given By*

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY FOR THE RECORD  
ON CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE AMERICAS  
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I am Richard Coll, Foreign Policy Advisor, Latin America and Global Trade, for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). I would like to thank the Honorable Representative Jeff Duncan, Chairman of the Subcommittee, and the Honorable Representative Albio Sires, Ranking Member, for the opportunity to testify today on challenges to religious freedom in the Americas. The USCCB does not advocate on behalf of bishops as political leaders nor as security experts. The bishops speak as teachers and pastors who are deeply disturbed by the terrible human consequences of violence in Latin America, and the effects of violence on religious freedom and human rights in the region. Many Catholic bishops, priests, religious and lay workers have been the victims over the years of assassinations, violence, death threats and hostility, often directed at them as a consequence of their work as pastors and defenders of the rights of their people. The Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching call us to defend poor and marginalized communities and to oppose the persecution that results from a criminal response to this ministry of courageous advocates for our faith. Catholic Social Teaching has consistently called for democracy, human rights and robust civil society institutions. Together these elements help build equitable and sustainable economic development. In promoting these noble objectives, many Church leaders and workers have paid a grievous price.

Catholic Social Teaching is founded on the sanctity of the life and dignity of all persons. All are created in the image and likeness of God. Indeed, this has been a central teaching of the Catholic Church since its foundation, rooted in the Book of Genesis (1:27). In the modern era, Pope Leo XIII clearly outlined these principles in his celebrated 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. In subsequent decades, Saint Pope John XXIII, Blessed Pope Paul VI, Saint Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis have echoed, reaffirmed and built upon these

principles. The State, and its political structures, exist to serve the human person and in particular to foster the common good, those conditions needed for human flourishing. All human persons have rights that are of divine origin. Saint Pope John XXIII was the first Pope to articulate these rights systematically: “Man has the right to live. He has the right to bodily integrity and to the means necessary for the proper development of life, particularly food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest, and, finally, the necessary social services” (*Pacem in Terris*, 11). In addition, persons have cultural, religious, economic, social and political rights (*Pacem in Terris*, 12-27). Private property is an important, but relative right, that serves the common good of all members of society. (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 177). It is as a result of these core religious beliefs, when acting in solidarity to support the legitimate claims to life and dignity of all peoples in Latin America, that many Church leaders and workers become the targets of violence.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical *Laudato Si*, asserted that to function correctly, the global economy, as well as individual nations, need ethics that are people-centered. (*Laudato Si*, 156-158). To reform a particular political culture and economy so that it will be more just, stable and equitable, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has similarly called for a new framework of international law and global ethics. Both Pope Francis and the Pontifical Council argue that the primacy of the spiritual and the ethical in both political and economic spheres needs to be restored. Such an approach will nourish markets and political institutions that are at the service of the person and capable of responding to the needs of the common good. (*Towards reforming the international financial and monetary system in the context of global public authority*, 37-42).

To achieve these goals, the Church has long held the view that political action by an informed laity would be necessary. Saint Pope John XXIII, in his 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, observed that the world was heading towards ever greater unification or globalization. The development of a global economy demands the creation of a system of oversight for the universal common good of humanity in each country, while recognizing the primacy of human rights and democracy in the effectuation of such oversight. (*Pacem in Terris*, 130-145).

In Latin America, the exercise of religious freedom has been challenged by State and society throughout the region. In some countries, such as Cuba and Venezuela, the free exercise of religion has been suppressed with religious believers and leaders imprisoned and persecuted for their beliefs. In other countries, religious freedom is given wider respect but continues to be challenged by political leaders and groups who seek to drive religious believers or actors out of public life or to limit the role of religious belief in public debate. These restrictions on religious belief manifest themselves in outward persecution, intimidation and violence on one hand or on the other in the form of restrictions on participation of religious groups in political discussions, and laws which fail to extend conscience and religious exemptions for individuals.

In other countries, the laws in effect provide for strict secularization of society, and limit severely the ability of the Church to engage the government on matters of social importance. For example, Article 130 of the Mexican Constitution states:

Ministers may not associate among themselves for political purposes or preach in favor of or against any political candidate, party, or association. Neither may they oppose the laws of the country or its institutions, nor insult patriotic symbols in any form in public meetings, religious acts of the cult or religious propaganda, or religious publications.

In many countries in Latin America, the challenges to the Church and to organized religion come not only from the government, but from the operation of criminal, guerrilla and paramilitary actors engaged in violence against their fellow citizens. In Colombia, a long-standing insurgency by the FARC guerilla movement has resulted in over forty years of open warfare between government security forces, paramilitary units, narcotics traffickers and the FARC fighters. Fleeing this violence, many Colombian citizens turned to the Catholic Church for safety. In defending the right to life and dignity of its innocent and tormented people, the Church's bishops, priests, religious and lay workers have often become the victims of retaliatory violence at the hands of these criminal groups.

According to a report by Fides, the information service of the Pontifical Mission Societies, 22 pastoral care workers (19 priests, one religious sister and two lay persons) were killed worldwide in 2013, almost double the number killed the year before. For the fifth consecutive year, Latin America had the highest number of such deaths. In 2013 in the Americas, 15 priests were killed (seven in Colombia; four in Mexico; one each in Brazil, Venezuela, Panama and Haiti). By 2014, the number of priests killed in Mexico increased to nine, making that country the most dangerous nation in the world to be a Catholic priest.

Throughout its many years of engagement with communities on the ground throughout the Americas, the USCCB, through its member bishops and staff, has had the opportunity to travel throughout the region on solidarity visits with local bishops and communities. In solidarity visits to Cuba and Venezuela, as well as to Colombia, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, the USCCB delegation witnessed firsthand the remarkable spirituality and courageous actions of many Church leaders, priests, religious and lay workers. They have described threats against them or their colleagues, resulting in tragic instances of grave physical injuries or deaths at the hands of assailants. This violence was a direct result of the religious commitment such brave leaders manifested in standing with their brothers and sisters of the region, in attempting to vindicate their human and political rights, as required by their religious tradition.

In Peru, this threat of violence has extended to Archbishop Pedro Barreto, who came to the United States in 2012 to testify before another House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the death threats he had received for championing the health and environmental well-being of his flock threatened by a poorly regulated mining operations in the Archdiocese of La Oroya. Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala likewise received numerous threats on his life for his work in support of indigenous communities in that nation in their challenge to illegal and exploitative development and extractives activities. Bishop Raúl Vera of Mexico served as a witness and courageously identified the criminal elements, be they narcotics traffickers, gang

members or local government officials that murdered innocent Mexican citizens in numerous perverse slayings. In Honduras, a large number of priests and religious spoke to us about the violence they had witnessed or experienced personally as a result of defending the rights of communities to protest against injurious and dangerous mining operations. Comparable threats have been received concerning religious leaders and workers in the Central American region who have spoken in support of their afflicted people. In this way, these brave individuals mirror the profound and powerful example of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was recently beatified in a moving ceremony in El Salvador. He gave his life in 1980 defending the rights of the Salvadoran people to peace, freedom and dignity.

Pope Francis, in speaking to priests during his recent visit to Ecuador, where the Church faces challenges of addressing poverty and excessive inequality, spoke movingly in these words, “Perseverance in mission is not about going from house to house, looking for a place where we will be more comfortably welcomed. It means casting our lot with Jesus to the end.... To persevere even though we are rejected, despite the darkness and growing uncertainty and dangers – this is what we are called to do, in the knowledge that we are not alone, that God’s Holy People walks with us. ... So let us walk together, helping one another, as we humbly implore the gift of perseverance in God’s service.” His words were particularly consoling, in light of concerns raised by government policies on extractives and mining operations in environmentally fragile areas. The Holy Father reflected the Church’s efforts to be a mediator in these events despite the risks to its safety.

As Bishop Richard Pates observed in a letter, dated July 24, 2014, to Secretary of State John Kerry upon his return from Central America last year: “[w]e all can agree on the causes in question: violence, gang activity, narcotics, weapons and human trafficking, inadequate institutions of law enforcement and corruption/impunity, poverty, as well as unequal and inadequate economic development. These factors mutually reinforce one another...these links have implications for the proper allocation of funding pursuant to the Mérida Initiative: It is the conviction of the Church in the region and our Committees that expenditures should be concentrated on efforts that aim to protect human rights, strengthen civil society and expand the levels of humanitarian and development assistance. An overemphasis on military assistance can be counterproductive.... While there is a role for security assistance, we also urge that an increased proportion of budgetary expenditures attributable to U.S. international aid be allocated to support the fostering of human rights, a just and humane civil society, and broad-based economic development.”

During solidarity visits to the region, USCCB representatives have heard support for this point of view from many officials in the U.S. embassies and missions that were visited. The needs for improved education, job training, law enforcement and infrastructure were common threads in each country. The root causes of violence must be addressed with actions such as investing in education, infrastructure, rule of law and job creation. Only then will a long-term resolution of the current problems be achieved.

Ultimately the USCCB wishes to express concern for the threats to religious freedom posed by state-sponsored actions and by criminally directed violence, and to propose possible solutions. In some countries, like Cuba and Venezuela, direct bilateral negotiations with those governments, aimed at enhancing the political and civil rights of the religious faithful and of civil society at large, will be the most effective way to combat the intrusions of the State. The USCCB believes that the recent rapprochement, fostered by Pope Francis, between the United States and Cuba represents a new opportunity for engagement which advances greater respect for human rights, including religious freedom.

In many other parts of Latin America, the ultimate answer to the problems explored in this testimony is to focus on the “root causes” for the violence: poverty; excessive inequality; trafficking in drugs, weapons and humans; inadequate and/or ineffective institutions of government; and impunity, corruption and inadequate application of the rule of law. These problems lead inexorably to the resultant political, economic and social instability that manifests itself in violence, insecurity and attacks on religious freedom and human rights.

To again quote from Bishop Pates’ letter to Secretary Kerry: “My brother bishops in Central America have urged us to encourage alternatives to militarization of U.S. assistance and instead emphasize economic opportunity. The United States must recognize our own contributions to this crisis, and support more effective programs that reduce drug usage here at home. Similarly, the regulation of gun exports, coupled with criminal justice reforms that foster rehabilitation rather than retribution, need to be implemented by our states and our federal government.”

Your roles as representatives of this great nation brings with it great responsibilities. The decision of some of your colleagues to support justice for the peoples of Latin America is of crucial importance to these efforts at addressing the “root causes” of this current crisis. All must act in a way that respects the dignity of all human persons, enables the proper participation of all Latin American citizens, and reduces conflict and division. As members of this esteemed Congress, you can play a vital and life-saving role, in solidarity with the Catholic Church and the people of this region. This can be accomplished by effectuating budgetary decisions that support peaceful development, economic growth and the rule of law, and by addressing the grave problems of human, narcotics and weapons trafficking over our borders, so that lives are saved.

Thank you for providing crucial moral leadership to assist the people of Latin America in creating viable and prosperous societies. In this way, human rights and the strengthening of robust civil societies will be secured, which will lead to more just and equitable development reflecting the common patrimony of all God’s children. The USCCB stands ready to work with you and the Church in Latin America in bringing such hopeful prospects to a fruitful realization.