

CONFRONTING A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE: A CATHOLIC FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

A Pastoral Message of the U.S. Catholic Bishops - 1994

Introduction

Our families are torn by violence. Our communities are destroyed by violence. Our faith is tested by violence. We have an obligation to respond.

Violence -- in our homes, our schools and streets, our nation and world -- is destroying the lives, dignity and hopes of millions of our sisters and brothers. Fear of violence is paralyzing and polarizing our communities. The celebration of violence in much of our media, music and even video games is poisoning our children.

Beyond the violence in our streets is the violence in our hearts. Hostility, hatred, despair and indifference are at the heart of a growing culture of violence. Verbal violence in our families, communications and talk shows contribute to this culture of violence. Pornography assaults the dignity of women and contributes to violence against them. Our social fabric is being torn apart by a culture of violence that leaves children dead on our streets and families afraid in our homes. Our society seems to be growing numb to human loss and suffering. A nation born in a commitment to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is haunted by death, imprisoned by fear and caught up in the elusive pursuit of protection rather than happiness. A world moving beyond the Cold War is caught up in bloody ethnic, tribal and political conflict.

It doesn't have to be this way. It wasn't always this way. We can turn away from violence; we can build communities of greater peace. It begins with a clear conviction: respect for life. Respect for life is not just a slogan or a program; it is a fundamental moral principle flowing from our teaching on the dignity of the human person. It is an approach to life that values people over things. Respect for life must guide the choices we make as individuals and as a society: what we do and won't do, what we value and consume, whom we admire and whose example we follow, what we support and what we oppose. Respect for human life is the starting point for confronting a culture of violence.

The Catholic community cannot ignore the moral and human costs of so much violence in our midst. These brief reflections are a call to conversion and a framework for action. They propose neither a sweeping plan nor specific programs. They recognize the impressive efforts already underway in dioceses, parishes and schools. They offer a word of support and gratitude for those already engaged in these efforts. We believe the Catholic community brings strong convictions and vital experience which can enrich the national dialogue on how best to overcome the violence that is tearing our nation apart.

We know these reflections are not enough. Words cannot stop weapons; statements will not contain hatred. Yet commitment and conversion can change us and together we can change our culture and communities. Person by person, family by family, neighborhood by neighborhood, we must take our communities back from the evil and fear that come with so much violence. We believe our faith in Jesus Christ gives us the values, vision and hope that can bring an important measure of peace to our hearts, our homes, and our streets.

A Culture of Violence

Decades ago, the Kerner Commission called violence "as American as apple pie."¹ Sadly, this provocative statement has proved prophetic. No nation on earth, except those in the midst of war, has as much violent behavior as we do -- in our homes, on our televisions, and in our streets:

- While crime statistics vary year to year, we face far higher rates of murder, assault, rape and other violent crimes than other societies. One estimate is that crime costs us \$674 billion a year. Violent crime quadrupled from 161 reported crimes per 100,000 in 1960 to 758 in 1992.²
- The most violent place in America is not in our streets, but in our homes. More than 50 percent of the women murdered in the United States are killed by their partner or ex-partner. Millions of children are victims of family violence.³
- The number of guns has also quadrupled from 54 million in 1950 to 201 million in 1990. Between 1979 and 1991, nearly 50,000 American children and teenagers were killed by guns, matching the number of Americans who died in battle in Vietnam. It is now estimated 13 American children die every day from guns. Gunshots cause one out of four deaths among American teenagers.⁴
- Our entertainment media too often exaggerate and even celebrate violence. Children see 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on television before they leave elementary school.⁵
- We must never forget that the violence of abortion has destroyed more than 30 million unborn children since 1972.⁶

Behind these numbers are individual human tragedies, lives lost, families destroyed, children without real hope.

Violence in our culture is fed by multiple forces -- the disintegration of family life, media influences, growing substance abuse, the availability of so many weapons, and the rise of gangs and increasing youth violence. No one response can address these diverse sources. Traditional liberal or conservative approaches cannot effectively confront them. We have to address simultaneously declining family life and the increasing availability of deadly weapons, the lure of gangs and the slavery of addiction, the absence of real opportunity, budget cuts adversely affecting the poor, and the loss of moral values.

While many communities are touched by crime and the fear that comes with it, violence especially ravages poor communities. Young people are particularly threatened by violence. In some communities, teens talk of "if" they grow up, instead of "when" they grow up, planning their funerals instead of their futures. Between 1985 and 1992 the annual number of youths killed by guns grew from 2,500 to 5,326.⁷

Increasingly, our society looks to violent measures to deal with some of our most difficult social problems -- millions of abortions to address problem pregnancies, advocacy of euthanasia and assisted suicide to cope with the burdens of age and illness, and increased reliance on the death penalty to deal with crime. We are tragically turning to violence in the search for quick and easy answers to complex human problems. A society which destroys its children, abandons its old and relies on vengeance fails fundamental moral tests. Violence is not the solution; it is the most clear sign of our failures. We are losing our respect for human life. How do we teach the young to curb their violence when we embrace it as the solution to social problems?

We cannot teach that killing is wrong by killing. We have reached the point in one very visible case where a jury has urged the execution of the person who murdered the physician who was destroying unborn children. This cycle of violence diminishes all of us -- especially our children. For our part, we oppose both the violence of abortion and the use of violence to oppose abortion. We are clear in our total repudiation of any effort to advocate or carry out murder in the name of the pro-life cause. Such acts cannot be justified. They deny the fundamental value of each human life, and do irreparable harm to genuine pro-life witness. Just as clearly, a nation destroying more than one and a half million unborn children every year contributes to the pervasive culture of violence in our nation. We must affirm and protect all life, especially the most vulnerable in our midst.

Likewise, we cannot ignore the underlying cultural values that help to create the environment where violence grows: a denial of right and wrong, education that ignores fundamental values, an abandonment of personal responsibility, an excessive and selfish focus on our individual desires, a diminishing sense of obligation to our children and neighbors, a misplaced priority on acquisitions, and media glorification of violence and sexual irresponsibility. In short, we often fail to value life and cherish human beings above possessions, power and pleasure.

Less obvious and less visible is the slow motion violence of discrimination and poverty, hunger and hopelessness, addiction and self-destructive behavior. The deterioration of family life and the loss of community leave too many without moral direction and personal roots. Grinding poverty and powerlessness leave too many without a stake in society and a place in our community. Economic, social and moral forces can tear apart communities and families not as quickly, but just as surely, as bullets and knives. Lives sometimes are diminished and threatened not only in the streets of our cities, but also by decisions made in the halls of government, the boardrooms of corporations and the courts of our land. An ethic of respect for life should be a central measure of all our institutions -- community,

economic, political, and legal.

This growing culture of violence reflected in some aspects of our public life and entertainment media must be confronted. But it is not just our policies and programming that must change; it is our hearts. We must condemn not only the killing, but also the abuse in our homes, the anger in our hearts and the glorification of violence in movies and music. It is time, in the words of Deuteronomy (30:19), to "Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ..." We must join with Pope John Paul II to "proclaim, with all the conviction of my faith in Christ and with an awareness of my mission, that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy... Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity."

Around the globe, we are seeing the promises of a new world lost in deadly conflict and renewed war. In Bosnia, Rwanda, Haiti, Sudan and so many other places, the world too often has watched as sisters and brothers were killed because of their religion, race, tribe or political position. The post-Cold War world has become a tumult of savage attacks on the innocent. Unprepared for this disorder and confused about what to do to resolve ancient rivalries, the international community has too often stood by indecisively as hundreds of thousands of men, women and children have been slaughtered and millions more have been maimed, raped and driven from their homes. Peacekeeping and peacemaking are the most urgent priorities for a new world.

Not all violence is deadly. It begins with anger, intolerance, impatience, unfair judgements and aggression. It is often reflected in our language, our entertainment, our driving, our competitive behavior, and the way we treat our environment. These acts and attitudes are not the same as abusive behavior or physical attacks, but they create a climate where violence prospers and peace suffers. We are also experiencing the polarization of public life and militarization of politics with increased reliance on "attack" ads, "war" rooms and intense partisan combat in place of the search for the common good and common ground.

Fundamentally, our society needs a moral revolution to replace a culture of violence with a renewed ethic of justice, responsibility and community. New policies and programs, while necessary, cannot substitute for a recovery of the old values of right and wrong, respect and responsibility, love and justice. God's wisdom, love and commandments can show us the way to live, heal and reconcile. "Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal" are more than words to be recited; they are imperatives for the common good. Our faith challenges each of us to examine how we can contribute to an ethic which cherishes life, puts people before things, and values kindness and compassion over anger and vengeance. A growing sense of national fear and failure must be replaced by a new commitment to solidarity and the common good.

Catholic Tradition, Presence and Potential

In this task, the Catholic community has much at stake and much to contribute. What we believe, where we are, and how we live out our faith can make a great difference in the struggle against violence. We see the loss of lives. We serve the victims. We feel the fear. We must confront this growing culture of violence with a commitment to life, a vision of hope and a call to action. Our assets in this challenge include:

- the example and teaching of Jesus Christ;
- the *biblical values* of respect for life, peace, justice, and community;
- *our teaching* on human life and human dignity, on right and wrong, on family and work, on justice and peace, on rights and responsibilities;
- *our tradition* of prayer, sacraments, and contemplation which can lead to a disarmament of the heart;
- *a commitment to marriage and family life*, to support responsible parenthood and to help parents in providing their children the values to live full lives;
- a *presence* in most neighborhoods -- our parishes and schools, hospitals and social services are sources of life and hope in places of violence and fear;
- an *ethical framework* which calls us to practice and promote virtue, responsibility, forgiveness, generosity, concern for others, social justice and economic fairness;
- a *capacity for advocacy* that cuts across the false choices in national debate -- jails or jobs, personal or social responsibility, better values or better policies;
- a *consistent ethic of life* which remains the surest foundation for our life together.

Across our land, parishioners and priests, men and women religious, educators and social workers, parents and community leaders are hard at work trying to offer hope in place of fear, to fight violence with programs of peace, to strengthen families and weaken gangs.

Here are a few examples of ongoing efforts in dioceses and parishes to deal with violence in their communities:

- In Los Angeles, the Church through its "Hope in Youth" initiative works with others to combat gang violence with youth opportunities and economic development.
- In Boston, the Ten Point Coalition is an ecumenical group of clergy and lay leaders working to mobilize the Christian community around issues affecting African American youth -- especially those at risk.
- The Diocese of Cleveland coordinated an interfaith, gun turn-in program that took more than 1500 weapons off the streets.
- In Chicago, youth outreach efforts include conflict management; workshops on violence, drugs and health; and positive alternatives to violence. A business training program called "Something Good for the Hood," was created by St. Sabina's parish to teach youth and young adults responsibility and work skills.
- In Saginaw, the Office of Black Catholic Concerns uses a multi-media approach, marches, TV, radio, PSA's, with gang members to help them refocus their lives and reconnect with Church and community.
- The Toledo diocese, in cooperation with the local YMCA, involves elementary schools in "conflict resolution and peer mediation" to heighten the awareness of the root causes of violence and address them.
- The dioceses of Palm Beach and Billings offered the program, *Building a Sacred Bridge of Reconciliation* which challenges traditional attitudes about women that contribute to domestic abuse. The program is sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Women.
- Catholic parishes joined in the Greater Bridgeport Interfaith Action, which successfully passed a ban on assault weapons later upheld by the courts.
- In Phoenix, the social action office has made available to parents suggestions for responsible TV viewing and ways to approach local stations regarding anti-violence themes.
- Jackson, Mississippi Catholic Charities sponsors a shelter for battered families which serves 350 women and children each year from seven rural counties providing transitional housing, legal assistance, and individual and group counseling.
- Little Friends for Peace, in the Washington, D.C. area, is an organization dedicated to teaching non-violent skills to young children through playful skill-building activities.
- The diocese of Pittsburgh has joined a community-wide program for young people at risk providing viable alternatives to gangs through educational, recreational and employment opportunities.

In parishes and schools, human service agencies, and family life and youth programs, our community of faith offers alternatives to violence, a commitment to education, and a source of hope and help in places of fear and failure. Now is the time for all of us to follow their leadership, to build on their example, to place our facilities at the service of the community. Our young people, especially, need support and challenge, discipline and opportunities to use their talents and carry out their responsibilities in a world of conflicting values and often dangerous choices.

A Framework for Action

Much is being done, but more is required. Our community is called to reorganize our priorities and recommit our resources to confront the violence in our midst. This challenge will have many dimensions including:

- the call to *pray* for peace in our hearts and our world; the ability to *listen* -- to hear the pain, anger and frustration that comes with and from violence;
- the duty to *examine* our own attitudes and actions for how they contribute to or diminish violence in our society;
- the call to help people *confront* the violence in our hearts and lives;
- the capacity to *build on existing efforts* and the strengths of our community: the work of parishes, schools, Catholic Charities and Campaign for Human Development, etc.;
- efforts to *hold major institutions accountable*, including government, the media and the criminal justice system;
- an *advocacy* strategy which moves beyond the often empty rhetoric of national debate, including:
 - confronting the violence of *abortion*;
 - curbing the easy availability of *deadly weapons*;
 - supporting community approaches to *crime prevention and law enforcement*, including community policing, neighborhood partnerships with police and greater citizen involvement;
 - pursuing swift and effective *justice* without vengeance;
 - support for efforts to attack *root causes* of crime and violence -- including poverty, substance abuse, lack of opportunity, racism, and family disintegration;
 - promoting more *personal responsibility* and broader social responsibility in our policies and programs;
 - *building bridges* and promoting solidarity across racial and economic lines;
 - pursuing *economic justice*, especially employment;

- working for legislation that *empowers parents* to choose and afford schools that reflect their values;
- overcoming the tragedy of *family violence* and confronting all forms of violence against women;
- promoting education, research, and training in *nonviolence*;
- respond to *victims* of violence, hearing their anguish and defending their dignity;
- *strengthening families* by putting the needs of children and families first in our national priorities;
- continuing to work for *global disarmament*, including curbs on arms sales, and a ban on the export of land mines.

Unless we are able to cut through divisive rhetoric and false claims which suggest that more prisons are the only answer, more brutality the cure, or more violence the solution, we will not succeed. Our criminal justice system is failing. Too often, it does not offer security to society, just penalties and rehabilitation to offenders, or respect and restitution to victims. Clearly, those who commit crimes must be swiftly apprehended, justly tried, appropriately punished, and held to proper restitution. However, correctional facilities must do more than confine criminals; they must rehabilitate persons and help rebuild lives. The vast majority of those in prison return to society. We must insure that incarceration does not simply warehouse those who commit crimes, but helps them overcome the behaviors, attitudes and actions which led to criminal activity. The answer is not simply constructing more and more prisons, but also constructing a society where every person has the opportunity to participate in economic and social life with dignity and responsibility. People must answer for their actions. Those who harm others must pay the price, but all our institutions must also be held accountable for how they promote or undermine greater responsibility and justice.

Bumper sticker solutions -- "three strikes and you're out" . . . "two years and you're off" . . . "one more child and your benefits are cut" -- are no substitute for less appealing, but more effective efforts to fight crime and strengthen families. Our nation needs to focus its energies and resources on helping communities combat crime and helping families overcome destructive moral and economic pressures, discrimination and dependency. Our policies must help people escape poverty and discrimination and leave behind lives of addiction, self-destruction and crime. We need both to hold people accountable *and* offer them concrete help and hope for a better future.

We also need to encourage a commitment to civility and respect in public life and communications -- in the news media, politics and even ecclesial dialogue. The search for the common good is not advanced by partisan gamesmanship, challenging other people's motives, or personal attacks. The focus on the sensational, the search for conflict, and the assumption of bad will are not the basis for dialogue, and hurt the search for common ground.

The culture of violence also has world-wide dimensions. As the only world super power, as the world's greatest consumer, and as the largest arms exporter, the United States has a special obligation to seek peace and promote justice through creative and responsible world leadership. We renew our commitment expressed in *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace* to work against the violence which threatens life in so many lands. Our nation must be engaged in devising new tools for preserving the peace, finding ways to prevent and police conflicts, to protect basic rights, to promote integral human development and to preserve the environment. The United States must move from leadership in supplying arms to leadership in providing resources, technology and knowledge and for replacing conflict with peaceful progress. Rather than restrain the further development of the United Nations, the United States should help improve it by developing tools for preventing conflict, mediating disputes, and rescuing vulnerable populations from internal as well as external aggression. Catholic international education, outreach, and advocacy efforts need to continue to help shape a Church and nation more clearly committed to global responsibility and the pursuit of peace in a still violent world.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is the call for all of us to examine our own lives, to identify how we can choose generosity over selfishness, and choose a real commitment to family and community over individual acquisition and ambition. In many small ways, each of us can help overcome violence by dealing with it on our block; providing for the emotional, physical and spiritual needs of our children; dealing with our own abusive behavior; or, even treating fellow motorists with courtesy. Violence is overcome day by day, choice by choice, person by person. All of us must make a contribution.

We believe our ongoing *Catholic Campaign for Children and Families* is an important voice against violence and should focus with new priority and renewed urgency on how violence of every kind undermines the lives and dignity of families and children. As we carry this campaign forward, we will work for private action and public policy which helps curb the violence in our land. Above all, the Church must be Church -- a community of faith reaching out to affirm and protect life, teaching right from wrong, educating the young, serving the hurting, healing the wounds, building community, praying and working for peace.

We Can Be More Than We Are

The Catholic community is in a position to respond to violence and the threat of violence in our society with new commitment and creativity. More of the same is not sufficient. Business as usual is not enough. Our faith and facilities can be beacons of hope and safety for those seeking refuge from violent streets and abusive homes. People can become peacemakers in their homes and communities. Parishes can organize mentoring programs for teen parents. The Church can be the first point of referral for spousal abuse. We can incorporate ways to handle family conflict in our religious education and sacramental preparation programs. We can work for public policies that confront violence, build community and promote responsibility. Finally, we can join with other churches in developing a community wide strategy for making our neighborhoods more safe, welcoming and peaceful. Here is a possible outline for action:

WORSHIP AND PREACHING: Parishes can invite parishioners to begin meetings and events with prayers for peace and an end to violence. The Sunday eucharistic celebration provides many opportunities for prayer and reflection on these themes, especially during Penitential Rite and the General Intercessions. The homily can be a powerful means of promoting the Scriptural call to peacemaking and to deepen our own relationship with Jesus, the source of true peace. The priest, adding a few words of his own as introduction, may wish to reinforce the significance of the Rite of Peace. Special Penance Services can be held, especially during Advent and Lent, to call us away from aggressive and violent behavior to that of peacemaking. We ask our preachers to consider how their preaching can be a call to peacemaking and a voice against violence in our families, neighborhoods and the broader community.

EDUCATION: Our Catholic schools are a very significant bulwark against violence. They continue to offer moral and ethical foundations, discipline and safety for millions of children. Schools can encourage dialogue between parents and youth, can teach basic values and conflict resolution, and can provide after school programs (especially between the hours of 4:00 and 7:00 pm) for neighborhood youth. Just as clearly, our parish religious education programs can provide the values and support that can help people, especially young people, choose life and reject violence. Our schools and parish religious education programs can be vital safe havens for youth at risk.

YOUNG ADULT AND ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS in parishes can provide classes and learning experiences in parenting, conflict resolution and spiritual development. Small group faith-sharing can provide opportunities for adults to share their experiences and learn from others. We can form our consciences, strengthen our commitment, and exercise our free will in ways that promote justice and resist violence.

FAMILY MINISTRY: The family is the key to the development of positive values, including peacemaking. Families need to talk about how violence affects each member, the family itself, and their neighborhood, and to discuss ways of responding in a non-violent manner. So much violent behavior has its roots in the deterioration of family life. Families that are experiencing domestic violence should search out helping organizations to assist them in overcoming this burden. Families can also use the evening dinner prayer or a prayer at other times to pray for peace within the family and community, and within each individual. Family life ministry can provide parenting education, support groups, and marriage preparation programs that encourage faithful, healthy and peaceful relationships. They also can offer media literacy resources to help parents take back control of their own television sets.

YOUTH MINISTRY plays a unique role within the parish by providing young people with a community of peers and adults who affirm, support and challenge them. Youth programs can provide a safe and healthy place where young people can gather rather than hanging out on the street corner or at the local shopping mall. While some sports programs can contribute to violent behavior, well directed athletic programs that teach sportsmanship and promote

cooperation can have a positive influence on our young people. Retreats -- such a powerful experience for teens -- can be developed around the theme of peacemaking and conflict resolution. Parishes can offer leadership training programs to develop positive life skills around Christian values. Music which plays such a significant role in the life of youth, should be used as an instrument to discuss peacemaking and non-violent behavior. Parish and school youth programs can offer real alternatives to gang membership.

OUTREACH: Working with their local Catholic Charities agencies, parishes can support and make use of shelters and hotlines for abused family members providing financial support and volunteer assistance. The remarkable response to our statement on violence against women *When I Call For Help*, has yielded many models of education and outreach. Parish groups can also organize recreational programs for at risk youth, child care and emergency pregnancy centers and mentoring programs for youth and beginning families.

ADVOCACY: Parish and diocesan representatives and other groups can meet with media representatives to bring pressure against excessive violence and pornography. Legislative networks can advocate for public policies that prevent and combat crime, restrict dangerous weapons, promote safe communities, eliminate the death penalty, and help lift people out of the "hellish cycle of poverty" and confront the violence of abortion.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: Parishes can participate in wider community efforts to combat crime and work on local housing and education issues, enact spousal abuse laws, create economic opportunities and viable alternatives to violence. Supporting the Campaign for Human Development and its funding of local self-help groups is an excellent way to help build and empower communities in their battle against violence.

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY: Through twinning relationships, through support of Catholic Relief Services Operation Rice Bowl, and through advocacy on United States international policies, parishes can work against reliance on violence to resolve conflicts and for human rights and sustainable development throughout the world.

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC CATHOLIC MINISTRIES: Continuing to provide exceptional leadership, these ministries bring together diverse groups across racial and ethnic lines to work against racism and violence and provide opportunities for young people. Dioceses can support the efforts of parishes by supporting and sharing successful anti-violence models. We can also organize diocesan-wide efforts such as visits to local media outlets, coordinated social services, convocations and training. As Church, we must continue our commitment to examine our own policies and practices to eliminate any form of abuse within our own Church community wherever it may exist. Diocesan leadership can help our local communities of faith come together to resist violence and promote practical steps to make our neighborhoods more just and more peaceful places. We can work with other religious bodies and community groups to make common cause against violence. Our struggle against violence will be an integral part of an interfaith initiative, the Common Ground for the Common Good. Working with other religious groups, we will seek to advance the common good by overcoming the violence which hurts us all.

We recognize that this reflection is less an outline of solutions and more a call to action. We believe the most effective response to this problem is one that builds on the resources of the local community. To promote and support these local efforts, the committees of our Conference who have expressed a special interest in this initiative (African American Catholics; Campaign for Human Development; Communications; Domestic Social Policy; Education; Hispanic Affairs; Laity; Marriage and Family Life; Pro-Life; Women in Society and in the Church; and Youth) will continue to work together to collect effective models and resources and make them available to parishes and dioceses.

We hope that Catholics and Catholic organizations at all levels will join us and respond to this call. Each of us can make a difference. For our part, the NCCB/USCC will in the weeks and months to come:

- gather and disseminate resources and models for parish and diocesan efforts.
- intensify our advocacy for national policies that address violence, including strengthening families, violence in the media, the availability of drugs and dangerous weapons, the violence of abortion and the use of the death penalty, and other economic and social policies that attack the root causes of violence.

We can demonstrate our common commitment in a visible way by focusing on the moral and human costs of violence between January 15 and January 22. January 15 is the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a powerful voice for nonviolence and peace. January 22 is the anniversary of the Supreme Court decision legalizing the destruction of unborn children, a terrible sign of the violence in our society. In the days between these two anniversaries, we ask Catholic dioceses, parishes, families, and organizations to join us in prayer, reflection and action to confront the culture of violence in our midst. The theme of peacemaking is especially appropriate at this time of year when Christian churches pray and gather to reflect on the challenge of unity within the Body of Christ and the human family.

Conclusion

Above all, we must come to understand that violence is unacceptable. We must learn again the lesson of Pope Paul VI, "If you want peace, work for justice." We oppose lawlessness of every kind. Society cannot tolerate an ethic which uses violence to make a point, settle grievances or get what we want. But the path to a more peaceful future is found in a rediscovery of personal responsibility, respect for human life and human dignity, and a recommitment to social justice. The best antidote to violence is hope. People with a stake in society do not destroy communities. Both individuals *and* institutions should be held accountable for how they attack or enhance the common good. It is not only the "down and out" who must be held accountable, but also the "rich and famous." Our society needs both more personal responsibility and broader social responsibility to overcome the plague of violence in our land and the lack of peace in our hearts. Finally, we must realize that peace is most fundamentally a gift from God. It is futile to suggest that we can end all violence and bring about full peace merely by our own efforts. This is why we urge the Catholic community to join all our anti-violence efforts with constant and heartfelt prayer to Almighty God through Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

We close these reflections with a word of support and appreciation for those on the front lines -- parents, pastors, parish leaders, youth workers, catechists and teachers, prison chaplains, men and women religious. At a time when heroes seem scarce, these people are real heroes and heroines, committing their lives to the service of others, standing against a tide of violence with values of peace and a commitment to justice. We commend peace officers who daily confront violence with fairness and courage and we support those who minister to them and their families. We also offer a word of encouragement to parents who daily confront the cultural messages that influence their children in a way that is so contradictory to basic values of decency, honesty, respect for life and justice.

We believe silence and indifference are not options for a community of faith in the midst of such pain, but we recognize words cannot halt violence. We hope this message has helped to outline the moral challenge, affirm the efforts already underway, share the framework we have as Catholics and call our community to both conversion and action.

The nation has been transfixed by the terrible tragedy of the five year old dropped to his death by two children in Chicago because he wouldn't steal candy. We must get beyond our fear and frustration, our indifference and ideological blinders, to hear to his Grandmother's cry at his funeral: "We hope somebody, somewhere, somehow, will

do something about the conditions which are causing our children to kill each other." We can be the "somebody." Now can be the time.

Let 1995 and the years which follow be a time when the Catholic community brings new energy and creativity to the vocation of peacemaking -- within our families, within our neighborhoods, within our country and within the world community. Let us embrace the challenge of John Paul II in his message to young people, when he calls them and all of us, to be "communicators of hope and peace." Let us hear and act with new urgency on the words of Jesus: "Blessed are the peacemakers; they shall be called children of God."

¹ Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (Washington, D.C.), 1968.

²Based on reports of the U.S. Department of Justice and Department of Commerce, 1993.

³"Violence against Women," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, June 17, 1992.

⁴The National Center for Health Statistics, unpublished data for 1991.

⁵American Psychological Association, 1992.

⁶Guttmacher Institute, "Facts in Brief - Abortion in the United States," August 1994.

⁷ The National Center for Health Statistics, unpublished data for 1991.

⁸Pope John Paul II, "Address in Killineer, Ireland," September 1979.

⁹Pope Paul VI, "Message of His Holiness Pope Paul VI for the Celebration of the [World] Day of Peace," January 1, 1972.

¹⁰*The Baltimore Sun*, October 21, 1994.

¹¹Pope John Paul II, "Message to the Youth of the World on the Occasion of the IX and X World Youth Days," in *Come Home to Christ: World Youth Day '94 Resource Manual*(Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference Publishing Services, 1994), p.8; cf. Matthew 5:9.