

## MARIAN APPROACH TO CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING IN THE HIMALAYA

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### Abstract

Peacebuilding, a vital component of Catholic social teaching, articulates a comprehensive approach to build justice, peace, and reconciliation by transcending religious and cultural boundaries and focusing on human dignity and the common good. While Catholic peacebuilding has been successfully implemented in regions that are predominately Christian, its approach can be challenged by the cultural and political reality of the Himalaya. This article posits the Virgin Mary as a model and inspiration for Catholic interfaith peacebuilding efforts in the mountains of South Asia. The article first explains what is meant by Marian peacebuilding and its relevance to a Himalayan context, then explores how Mary is an appropriate model for interfaith engagement, liberation against unjust structures that are the root causes of conflict, and the protection of human dignity. The discussion concludes with an attempt to offer a Mariological contribution that connects Catholic peacebuilding thought with Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist perspectives.

**Keywords:** Himalaya; Interfaith; Liberation Theology; Mariology; Peacebuilding

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Catholic peacebuilding attempts to engage at the local, national, and international levels to protect human dignity and address the root causes of conflict in pursuit of a sustainable and just peace. The political and cultural realities of the Himalaya,<sup>1</sup> however, can complexify this approach. Catholic peacebuilders traditionally rely on a Christological approach that has proved successful in places with a Christian majority. Nonetheless, in a region dominated by Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists, the Virgin Mary's message and model as peacebuilder, protector, comforter, and liberator may be more suitable for interfaith cooperation.

This paper will argue that the Virgin Mary, as a model and inspiration for Catholic peacebuilders, can contribute to protecting the marginalized and vulnerable of the Himalaya during periods of conflict and instability. This analysis will consider representations of Mary in feminist Mariology and South Asian liberation theology as a paradigm for Catholic peacebuilding in the Himalaya. Following a brief contextual description of Himalayan challenges and Catholic peacebuilding, I will articulate a concept of Marian peacebuilding with its relevance and potential challenges for the Himalaya. The paper will then address interfaith engagement, liberation from unjust structures, and the protection of the dignity of the most vulnerable.

## **Context**

The Himalaya provide numerous cultural, political, and economic challenges for Catholic peacebuilding. The various stages of politically motivated conflict, including simmering insurgencies, active counterinsurgency operations, terrorism, and post-conflict transformation make the region a useful case study for peacebuilding. Mountainous regions promote violence and facilitate insurgent activity, as high-altitude areas are home to more than eighty percent of the world's armed conflict.<sup>2</sup> Geographic separation and cultural biases contribute to the political and economic marginalization of mountain peoples, which can lead to a belief that violence is the only feasible option for gaining a voice. Political sensitivities and constructed narratives can hinder peacebuilders' intentions to engage at national and international levels. For example,

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<sup>1</sup>The Himalayas separate the plains of the Indian subcontinent from the Tibetan plateau. This paper will consider the western half of the range, from northern Pakistan, through Kashmir and northern India, to Nepal, and the portions of Tibet adjacent to these areas.

<sup>2</sup>Judith Matloff, *No Friends but the Mountains: Dispatches from the World's Violent Highlands*, New York: Basic Books, 2017, 7.

struggles in Kashmir and Tibet are rooted in a desire for autonomy but portrayed as sovereignty issues at the national and international level,<sup>3</sup> leaving Catholic peacebuilding organizations with no recourse to engage beyond grassroots programs. Furthermore, Himalayan scholar Megan Sijapati notes that as home to a variety of religious traditions, “religion has long been a powerful social, political, and cultural force in the Himalayan region.”<sup>4</sup> While Christianity’s minority status can be a challenge for Catholic peacebuilders, the plurality and importance of religion indicate the importance of interfaith cooperation.

Peacebuilding, a vital component of Catholic social teaching, articulates a comprehensive approach to reduce violence toward a sustainable peace focused on human dignity and the common good. Peacebuilders work toward building and restoring conditions of peace by addressing structural injustice and encouraging reconciliation. Raimon Panikkar describes peaceful coexistence as one form of political strategy, preferable to war, which is used for maintaining the status quo.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, this approach fails to consider the terms of the status quo, giving preference to those in power. Thus, Catholic institutions, such as Caritas Internationales and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network,<sup>6</sup> seek to address unjust structures which are the root causes of conflict, strategically engage at all levels of society, protect and defend human dignity of the most vulnerable, identify indigenous non-violent approaches, and pursue practical and spiritual conflict resolution.

As with any global ethic, Catholic peacebuilding must be adaptable to political, geographical, and cultural specificity. Therefore, a starting point for the Himalayan context is to identify Caritas’ focus in India, Pakistan, and Nepal. Peacebuilding is a core program for Caritas India, focusing on cooperation and coherence among actors with an aim to resolve conflicts by building societies, institutions,

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<sup>3</sup>Further detail on the autonomy struggles for Tibet and Kashmir are articulated, respectively, in Carole McGranahan, *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War*, London: Duke University Press, 2010; and Mona Bhan, et al., *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Megan Sijapati, “Modern Religiosities, Religious Modernities,” in *Religion and Modernity in the Himalaya*, ed. Megan Sijapati and Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz, New York: Routledge, 2016, 3.

<sup>5</sup>Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, New York: Paulist Press, 1999, xix.

<sup>6</sup>The Catholic Peacebuilding Network is an international organization of Catholic universities, Bishop’s conferences, and institutions engaged in global peacebuilding efforts. Information on publications, instructional material, and peacebuilding criteria can be found at <https://cpn.nd.edu>.

policies, and relationships that are better able to sustain peace and justice.<sup>7</sup> Caritas Pakistan engages in dialogue, cultural exchange, and raising awareness, with a focus on youth, communities, and interfaith cooperation.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Caritas Nepal focuses peacebuilding efforts on social justice issues oriented toward youth programs.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, none of these regional organizations attempts (at least publicly) to engage beyond the grassroots level.

### **Marian Peacebuilding**

A Marian approach to peacebuilding<sup>10</sup> should allow for her message and example to be a model that can inspire Catholic peacebuilders, while also providing an image of comfort and protection that is recognizable across religious boundaries. Mary can be a source of hope, strength, and comfort during times of crisis and persecution, especially for the marginalized and vulnerable. For regions troubled by violence, this feminine vision of unconditional love, peace, and forgiveness holds unique power and a palpable presence that is proximate and immediate.<sup>11</sup> The words of the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55) challenge the power imbalances that can lead to conflict and inspire liberation from systemic injustice. Mary was not a person who lived a secluded life but was enmeshed in the troubled area of the politics of her time.<sup>12</sup> Her example can unite peacebuilders with all aspects of society to pursue a just peace.

Christianity, despite its troubling colonial past and scant presence in the region, can contribute to a just peace in the Himalaya. Despite the enduring tensions between the religious and political significance of Mary, she has relevance for political and social struggles with her “critique of the ecclesial, political, and cultural forces” that cause and perpetuate oppression.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as this paper will discuss in later sections, Mary’s relatability to the Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu

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<sup>7</sup>Caritas India, “Peacebuilding,” <https://www.caritasindia.org/peacebuilding>.

<sup>8</sup>Caritas Pakistan, “Peace and Social Harmony,” <https://caritas.org.pk/what-we-do/peace-and-social-harmony/>.

<sup>9</sup>Caritas Nepal, “Social Support,” <https://www.caritasnepal.org/social-support/>.

<sup>10</sup>A practical example of this approach can be found with the Le Menach Foundation’s Mary Initiative that incorporates Mary into interfaith peacebuilding between Christians and Muslims. See [https://www.lernenachfd.org/Groups/175360/Le\\_Menach\\_Foundation/The\\_Mary\\_Initiative/The\\_Mary\\_Initiative.aspx](https://www.lernenachfd.org/Groups/175360/Le_Menach_Foundation/The_Mary_Initiative/The_Mary_Initiative.aspx).

<sup>11</sup>Linda Hall, *Mary, Mother and Warrior: The Virgin in Spain and the Americas*, Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004, 1.

<sup>12</sup>Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text*, ed. Helen Stanton, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997, 95.

<sup>13</sup>Nichole Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021, 19.

traditions can facilitate an interfaith approach to peace. Most importantly, the Magnificat's message of raising the lowly and bringing down the mighty is relevant to the peacebuilding strategy of empowering and protecting the marginalized and vulnerable. Interfaith devotion to the Virgin Mary in South Asia, in her role as a peacemaker and protector, place her in a unique position to be a model for Catholic peacebuilding in the Himalaya.

Catholic peacebuilding scholar Lisa Sowle Cahill encourages religious peacebuilders to use Christian images and narratives that will promote social healing.<sup>14</sup> While this is likely helpful for persuading other Christians to engage in peacebuilding, it is not clear that it will contribute to success in non-Christian areas. Other than the states of Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram, the Christian population in most of the Himalaya is extremely small, although Catholicism remains a visible presence and influence through its schools, hospitals, and work with the poor. Nevertheless, Catholic institutions engage in social justice activity because of their commitment to Jesus' message in the Gospels, not because the poor and oppressed are Christian. Thus, it is not necessary for the images and narratives that inspire Catholic peacebuilders to be the foundation of interreligious cooperation.

One challenge for Catholic peacebuilding in the Himalaya is the emphasis that Cahill, and other peacebuilding scholars, place on Christology as a theological foundation. While a Christ-centred approach is conducive to Christian-dominated regions, such as Liberia, the Philippines, or Latin America, where Catholic peacebuilders have had success, the Himalaya require a nuanced perspective. Although Christology must be a starting point for a Christian approach, there can be a danger in how this is communicated to counterparts from other faith traditions. Felix Wilfred argues against the practice of incorporating a Christian conception of God in South Asian interreligious dialogue for the sake of making progress on practical social issues.<sup>15</sup> Although Catholic peacebuilding must fundamentally embody Jesus' politics, recognizing the Holy Spirit is at work among all peoples can help reorient the emphasis of interfaith cooperation.

For the mountains of South Asia, peacebuilders should consider Panikkar's argument against Christocentrism as a basis for Hindu-

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<sup>14</sup>Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology, and Christian Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 302.

<sup>15</sup>Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology: Critical Concerns in Challenging Times*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2010, 292-299.

Christian dialogue.<sup>16</sup> Reconsidering the language used in interfaith dialogue can facilitate cooperation. Although this can be debated theoretically, as a case can be made that Christ does unite other religions,<sup>17</sup> the practical application in the Himalaya is better served by avoiding a Christ-centred message. Rita George-Tvrtkovic, in a comparison of Christians, Muslims, and Mary, argues that Christ unites Christians but divides religions, while with Mary the opposite is true.<sup>18</sup> For example, Muslims view Jesus as a prophet but reject that he is the son of God, whereas Mary does not function as an identity boundary. Thus, Marian images can be employed to overcome potential challenges of Christocentricity in interfaith peacebuilding.

To render Mary as the centre of the effort does not detract from the importance of Christ, as a valid Mariology must be derived from Christology. Joseph Cheah acknowledges three approaches to Mariology but argues that the most valuable for an Asian context is one that establishes connections between Mariology, Christology, ecclesiology, and anthropology.<sup>19</sup> Christ must remain the basis for developing a Christian ethical approach to peacebuilding or for shaping the values and beliefs that will be applied. Nonetheless, a practical application in interfaith cooperation may be enhanced by using Mary as the visible symbol for dialogue.

Mary's contribution may appear somewhat contradictory yet offers a deep concern for those impacted by war and injustice. Despite instances of sharing in Marian veneration with Catholics, Hindus and Muslims have a different understanding of Mary. Protestant denominations can be suspicious or dismissive of Catholic veneration, thus creating ecumenical challenges. Peacebuilders must also be cognizant of the historical misuse of the Virgin Mary in colonial military conquests and church patriarchy. Although it was likely more problematic for Spanish colonialization in Latin America

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<sup>16</sup>Panikkar, *Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 140.

<sup>17</sup>See Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000, 12.

<sup>18</sup>Rita George-Tvrtkovic, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary: A History*, New York: Paulist Press, 2018, 154.

<sup>19</sup>Cheah highlights three different methods for Mariology: an anthropological approach which is favoured by Asian and feminist theologians, is useful for advancing some social issues but can be theologically challenged; the second is a Christotypical approach which is found in most traditional theology but is often unhelpful and rejected by many feminist or global theologians; and a Mariology based on Christology which is most effective for Asian interfaith cooperation. See Joseph Cheah, "Asian Women's Theology in Christological Context," *Marian Studies* 46, 9 (1995) 73.

than on the Indian subcontinent, careful attention must be given to the ambiguity between Mary of the Magnificat and her misappropriation by European military conquests. Furthermore, Tissa Balasuriya notes that traditional Mariology's focus on only the humility, servitude, and virginity of the mother of God has "domesticated Mary so that she is known as the comforter of the disturbed, rather than as a disturber of the comfortable."<sup>20</sup> The remainder of this paper will attempt to illustrate how to overcome these challenges through the application of a Mariological peacebuilding strategy.

### **Interfaith Engagement**

Interfaith cooperation is an essential component of Catholic peacebuilding, especially in regions of religious plurality. Almost every part of the Himalaya contains a mix of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, but also Christians and indigenous faith traditions. Furthermore, the plurality is complicated by the fluidity and, at times, indistinguishable boundaries between religious traditions.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, the blending of traditions through shared sacred sites, pilgrimage, and petitions to shrines and saints of other traditions enhances the possibility of collaboration between faiths. Cahill rightly argues that a Christian response can link the power of the gospel to cross-cultural and interreligious cooperation to change the global realities of human inequality, poverty, and violence.<sup>22</sup> Pursuing a sustainable just peace requires engaging across different countries, religions, cultures, and ideologies. Interreligious dialogue and cooperation offer an opportunity to emphasize the shared moral virtues between traditions. Catholic peacebuilding, structured by and seeking justice, captures this principle of crossing boundaries.

The plurality, fluidity, and importance of religious practice in the Himalaya can be a benefit to considering how faith practice might contribute to mitigating the possibility of war and encouraging reconciliation. The mountainous landscape is an important part of the identity and religious practice of the population. The physical features of the land influence local understandings of the religious self, the divine, and the community.<sup>23</sup> Despite the hegemonic influence of Hinduism and Islam, depending on the location, there is no shortage of "heterodox cults and nonconformist social

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<sup>20</sup>Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 58.

<sup>21</sup>Sijapati, "Modern Religiosities, Religious Modernities," 4.

<sup>22</sup>Cahill, *Global Justice, Christology, and Christian Ethics*, 1.

<sup>23</sup>Sijapati, "Modern Religiosities, Religious Modernities," 12.

practices.”<sup>24</sup> The gods and rituals of folk and orthodox traditions are addressed with different, yet overlapping and complementary concerns in local religious practices. Thus, the most promising contribution for Mary to interfaith relations is dialogical and devotional, rather than doctrinal.<sup>25</sup>

Mary is a useful image for Catholic peacebuilders engaged in interfaith cooperation in the Himalaya. For the Muslim population, the Qur’an explicitly states that Jesus’ mother was chosen by God over all women in the world (Q 3:42), with Chapter 19 specifically dedicated to Mary. Additionally, Hindus and Christians have a common religio-cultural heritage that is made visible in shared religious sites,<sup>26</sup> where Mary is relatable to Hindu goddesses. Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian devotees converge at Marian shrines throughout South Asia. These include Mariamabad in Pakistan, Vailankanni and Gundala in India, and Madhu and Tewatte in Sri Lanka. These shrines have become bridges to unite South Asians across religious boundaries in unexpected ways.<sup>27</sup> As a useful source for interfaith peacebuilding, the shared religious sites, interactions, and dialogues occur with popular piety and rituals at the grassroots level among adherents of a common culture and language.<sup>28</sup> Mary can be seen across religious boundaries as a source of power to overcome challenging situations.

While there are multiple examples of shared sacred sites among Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in South Asia, the notable Marian shrines mentioned above are all located well south of the Himalaya. This raises the question of whether Mary is a valid interfaith symbol for the mountainous areas in the northern edge of the subcontinent. Twentieth-century Catholic missionaries in Pakistan, India, and Nepal highlighted for former American Archbishop Fulton Sheen that some Asian Muslims and Hindus also have a devotion to Mary. Specifically, they describe how “at the edge of Nepal, three hundred Catholics joined by three thousand Hindus and Muslims, as four elephants carried the statue (of our Lady) to the little Church for

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<sup>24</sup>Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019, 27.

<sup>25</sup>George-Trvtkovic, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary*, 155.

<sup>26</sup>James Ponniah, “Popular Religious Traditions and Shared Religious Spaces,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations*, ed. Chad Bauman and Michelle Voss Roberts, London: Routledge, 2021, 220.

<sup>27</sup>George-Trvtkovic, *Christians, Muslims, and Mary*, 153.

<sup>28</sup>Ponniah, “Popular Religious Traditions and Shared Religious Spaces,” 223.



Rosary and Benediction.”<sup>29</sup> Sacred shrines, which can provide sanctuary for worshippers amid the struggles of conflict and instability, are prevalent in the Himalaya. The fluidity of religious boundaries in the region, along with Sheen’s observations, indicate that Mary can certainly contribute to Himalayan interfaith peacebuilding.

Bridgebuilding is a key task for peacebuilders in promoting interfaith cooperation. The bridges must not only cross religious boundaries, but also help with reconciliation and resilience for persons and communities damaged by conflict. Mary, as the one who gave birth to Christ and is a source of shared veneration, contributes to reconciliation and community relationships. In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis summarizes how Mary can be a model for the Church in peacebuilding. He states that in imitation of Mary, “we want to be a Church that serves, in order to accompany life, to sustain hope, to be the sign of unity [...] to build bridges, to break down walls, to sow seeds of reconciliation.”<sup>30</sup>

Catholic peacebuilding begins by attending to the root causes of violent conflict, including unjust relationships and structures, in addition to addressing its effects and symptoms. Reconciliation and restorative justice in an ongoing process of community-building are necessary for a just peace. This process seeks indigenous non-violent approaches to transform conflict toward reconciliation and sustained resilience. At the foot of the cross, Mary symbolizes these goals when “we see Mary in grief, yet strong enough to resist violence, to remain standing.”<sup>31</sup> Peacebuilding movements actively and creatively seek ways to build justice, peace, and reconciliation by transcending religious and cultural boundaries. Mary’s genuine concern for just and solidarity with all of humanity, as illustrated in the Magnificat and her encounters with the poor and oppressed, will be the focus for the remainder of this paper.

### **Liberation: Addressing Unjust Structures**

Peacebuilding responds to the root causes of violent conflict, which include unjust relationships and structures. Despite appearing

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<sup>29</sup>Fulton Sheen, *The World’s First Love: Mary, Mother of God*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1952, 193.

<sup>30</sup>Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), § 276, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)).

<sup>31</sup>Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 95.

metaphorically large in the popular imagination of most South Asian societies, the Himalaya remain marginalized in most other respects.<sup>32</sup> They are isolated geographically, politically, and culturally from the dominant centres of power on the subcontinent yet exploited for their natural resources and geopolitical importance. Thus, incorporating liberation theology and acknowledging Marian solidarity are useful elements in working toward peace. Mary cares with maternal affection and pain for the wounded, as Francis states in *Laudato Si'*, “just as her pierced heart mourned the death of Jesus, so now she grieves for the suffering of the crucified poor and the creatures of this world laid waste by human power.”<sup>33</sup> Peacebuilders should capitalize on Mary’s motherly care and liberating message of raising the lowly in the Magnificat.

Peacebuilding starts with deconstructing oppressive systems of injustice in society and communities. Unjust structures in the Himalaya include constructed narratives against those seeking autonomy, human rights violations by militarized colonialism, ecological degradation of natural resources, and other challenges under the guise of progress and development. Despite enduring tensions between the religious and political significance of Mary, she has relevance for political and social struggles with her critique of the political and cultural forces that cause and perpetuate oppression.<sup>34</sup> A sustainable just peace starts with a sincere concern for all members of the community, the building of trust, and transformation of communal relationships. Mary, regarded as the mother of humanity, can be a source for this societal conversion. Tissa Balasuriya argues that Mary illustrates “a genuine mother’s concern” that provides and cares for all children, “she would grieve if some of her children exploited others, she would want peace among her children, regretting efforts by some to destroy others.”<sup>35</sup> Mary, as mother of the world, inspires a solidarity and trust that counters injustice.

Dialogue with the Virgin Mary invokes the memory of her stand for justice, solidarity with the oppressed, belonging, and unconditional love. While Mary’s example and motherly presence offer inspiration and guidance for Catholic peacebuilders, prayer can

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<sup>32</sup>Singh, *Himalayan Histories*, 27.

<sup>33</sup>Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), § 241, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_encyclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_encyclica-laudato-si.html)).

<sup>34</sup>Nichole Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021, 19.

<sup>35</sup>Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 165.

be an essential element in efforts to achieve peace. Saint Oscar Romero, the El Salvadoran bishop who was martyred for fighting oppressive systems of injustice, encourages confidence in the intercession of our mother, the Blessed Virgin of Peace, so that she may “obtain for us from the divine Savior of the world an abundance of grace and good will for the transformation of our people.”<sup>36</sup> Mary’s motherly concern and intercession are invaluable sources for the pursuit of a just peace, in solidarity with communities challenged by national, cultural, or religious boundaries.

While the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12) and Mary’s Magnificat inspire a Christian attitude of a preferential option for the poor and resisting unjust oppression, liberation theology is a shared concept across Himalayan faith traditions. Raimon Panikkar argues that both Buddhism and Christianity stand for human liberation, where one can disentangle from the wheel of *samsara* to transcend the present human condition to be freed.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, some religious and social principles of Hinduism provide divine support and justification to the doctrine of inequality in the social, cultural, economic, and religious spheres. Michael Amaladoss notes that social movements and interpretations of the Hindu tradition have arisen from colonial and economic challenges over the past century.<sup>38</sup> For Muslims, while there is also a responsibility to the poor, political responsible leadership that accounts for the common good is a basic requirement of liberation and a sustainable peace.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, a shared doctrinally consistent understanding of Mary or acceptance of the Christian gospel is not necessary for incorporating liberation into Himalayan peacebuilding.

Catholic peacebuilding embraces the principles of solidarity and social justice, giving preference to a nonviolent approach, while acknowledging the existence of war and armed conflict. Peacebuilders give voice to the experiences of the poor and marginalized, who are most impacted by violent conflict, by inviting solidarity with a larger human community. Mary’s example enables justice and respect for all of humanity, which is created, loved, and saved by God.<sup>40</sup> Mary exhibits solidarity with the marginalized and

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<sup>36</sup>Oscar Romero, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985, 159.

<sup>37</sup>Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, 121.

<sup>38</sup>Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997, 58.

<sup>39</sup>Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom*, 109.

<sup>40</sup>Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989, 11.

oppressed, actively and freely responding to God's call in the liberating message of the Magnificat. Her image and encounters are forms of solidarity which challenge power differentials that hinder the pursuit of justice amid conflict.<sup>41</sup> The memory of Mary near the cross should inspire nonviolent action that challenges the prevalent abuse of political power in the Himalaya. Her presence, intercession, and inspiration give voice to vulnerable victims of armed conflict, ultimately providing hope for a sustainable and just peace.

### **Protecting the Dignity of the Vulnerable**

Protecting the dignity of the most vulnerable requires participation from all societal stakeholders, including combatants and political entities responsible for injustice.<sup>42</sup> A spiritual attitude in which Mary is the model can be a source of social healing. Mary's message of justice and liberation is relevant for the victims of injustice as well as those who are oppressors. Marian spirituality "can be an inspiration for the profound conversion that is required in the midst of war and threats of war, of large-scale death and destruction caused by human selfishness and unconcern for others."<sup>43</sup> A spiritual approach may contribute to a unified effort to address common social concerns together, as neighbours, rather than separately. Justice is an interfaith task which considers "whose justice and what kind of peace is envisioned."<sup>44</sup> Unjust systems of oppression, which are exacerbated by armed conflict, continuously threaten the marginalized and vulnerable, requiring protection, healing, and comfort from Mary's inspiration, as our universal mother.

In the case of conflict and its victims, Mary protects and defends her offspring, especially the most vulnerable, against a system of violence. While her encounters in Lourdes, Fatima, Guadalupe and elsewhere were not related to war victims, the message and its recipients were a model and source of strength for the disempowered. Her empowerment of Bernadette, Lucy, Juan Diego, or the lame boy in Vailankanni provide an important counterpoint to the association of power with only patriarchal elites or masculinity. When the vulnerable are "near her, they are obviously safe,

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<sup>41</sup>Flores, *The Aesthetics of Solidarity*, 42-43.

<sup>42</sup>Maryann Cusimano Love, "What Kind of Peace Do We Seek?" in *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis*, ed. Robert Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard Powers, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010, 56.

<sup>43</sup>Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 19.

<sup>44</sup>Bob Robinson, "Contemporary Hindu-Christian Dialogue," in *The Routledge Handbook of Hindu-Christian Relations*, ed. Chad Bauman and Michelle Voss Roberts, London: Routledge, 2021, 447.

protected, free of the threats and dangers of everyday life.”<sup>45</sup> This image expresses the frailty of the human condition amid a search for security, while also symbolically expressing Mary’s strength. While Mary’s role as a mother is important to these examples, it should not imply that motherhood is a necessity for relating to or relying on Mary’s intercession. Her example is relevant to all those who suffer from the violence of armed conflict.

It is clear in the Magnificat how Mary’s view of God will not let her resign to a situation where the powerful oppress the lowly. She rejects the necessity of long-term suffering and sacrificing of the marginalized for a stable and secure society. Traditional Catholic Mariology has tended to focus on Mary’s virginity and humble submission to a patriarchal authority figure in God. A fruitful Marian approach must go beyond a traditional, one-dimensional view of Mary and instead seek to reconceive her as a force of life in the face of death. Considering that Mary’s power in relation to the grief associated with the violent loss of her child, Elizabeth Johnson notes that Mary’s “particular, unappeasable pain also places her memory more broadly in solidarity with mothers of children dead by state violence everywhere,” for it remains horrifically the case that the life given from women’s bodies continues to be stolen by brutality, war, and terrorism.<sup>46</sup> For the mothers of armed conflict victims in the Himalaya, Mary’s love and protection can be an invaluable source of comfort.

A practical example of Mary’s protection and comfort amid Himalayan conflict is evident in the case of a Tibetan Buddhist nun.<sup>47</sup> The Catholic Church supported the relocation of Tibetan monastics to European monasteries following a Chinese military offensive against the Himalayan community. While speaking at the Vatican in 1993 of her experience of being imprisoned, tortured, and raped in a Tibetan prison, the nun spoke of walking in the prison courtyard and picking up a small card from the ground. The image on the paper brought her peace and consolation. It was an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, although at the time, she had never heard of Jesus, Mary, or Guadalupe. She continued to carry the image, however, as it helped her to find peace. This example illustrates Mary’s role of comfort, protection, and strength for conflict victims, even to non-Christians.

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<sup>45</sup>Gebara and Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor*, 142.

<sup>46</sup>Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, New York: Continuum, 2003, 296.

<sup>47</sup>This story was relayed to the author by Fr. Martin Laird, O.S.A. at Villanova University in May 2021.

Catholic peacebuilders can capitalize on this by recognizing the power of Mary's image and trusting in her intercession for interfaith peacebuilding in the Himalaya.

### **Conclusion**

There are clear reasons for a Marian approach to interfaith peacebuilding in the Himalaya and other parts of South Asia. The traditional model of engaging with a Christ-centred message at all levels of society has been successful in Christian dominated regions of the world but is challenged by the political sensitivities and religious plurality of the Himalaya. Alternatively, shared veneration of Mary by Hindus, Muslims, and Christians makes her a conducive symbol for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Her model and message complement the peacebuilding principles of nonviolence, solidarity, and bridging cultures. Marginalized conflict victims can relate to Mary as a grieving mother, refugee, and a poor woman. The message of liberation in the Magnificat is relevant to the marginalized to overcome systems of injustice and oppression. Mary challenges systems of patriarchy that are common to the Himalaya and most of the world. Critics of contemporary peace processes often note the exclusion of women; thus, when looking for ways to include women at the table and make their voice heard, it seems logical to utilize a woman who is already present—Mary. Finally, her motherly comfort and protection for all of God's people, regardless of religious affiliation, illustrate her relevance to Catholic peacebuilders and organizations.

Mary's role as a peacemaker, bridgebuilder, liberator, protector, and comforter are beneficial for addressing the various direct and indirect threats of armed conflict, while also contributing to a sustainable just peace. The potential advantages of incorporating the Virgin Mary into Catholic peacebuilding must acknowledge the possible dangers and contradictions. Historically, the association of Mary with European colonialization and misapplication of Mary to justify war complicate her presence in preserving human dignity. Additionally, the patriarchal interpretation of Mary's humility and servitude toward male figures creates a dilemma for Mary as a role model for the most vulnerable. Feminist and liberation Mariology provide a counterpoint to problematic ecclesial and cultural portrayals, while an emphasis on Mary as a peacemaker, protector, and liberator provides strength and compassion for vulnerable and marginalized victims of conflict.