

Governance and Peace for Papua: Where is the Catholic Church?

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ABSTRACT

One of the oldest and largest transnational religious actors, the Catholic Church, had significant contributions in promoting peace around the globe. For example, the highest leader of the Church, Pope John Paul II opposed George W. Bush's war policy in Iraq. This paper aims to contextualize the issue into a different case study, especially to the extent it responds to a crisis that takes place in Indonesia's restive region, Papua. It is worth noting that Papua remains in prolonged conflict for decades between the government and armed groups who sought independence. Exploring the Church's role in that issue matters to highlight the importance of non-state religious actors in peace governance which International Relations study tends to overlook, considering its nature that is very state-centric. There are two layers of analysis within this paper. First, it explored the notion of peace according to the Catholic Church. The second part demonstrated to what extent it participates in the peace governance in Papua. This research employs a qualitative methodology with desk reviews. It suggested that the Catholic Church has played a role to promote peace in Papua, despite there is internal split within the Church to advocate the issue. Popes' visits to Indonesia and the effort to conduct Catholic international meetings were part of the peace advocacy.

Keywords: *Peace, Governance, Religious Actor, the Catholic Church, Papua.*

INTRODUCTION

Papua in the easternmost region of Indonesia undergoes an endless cycle of violence since it was integrated into Indonesia in 1969 through the Act of Free Choice. The conflict erupted as a response from armed groups who demanded independence because they claimed the act was manipulated by the Indonesian government (Musgrave, 2015). On the other hand, inequality issues in terms of social and economic become major concerns. They felt economic development projects have destroyed their nature while they are remaining less prosperous. The issue of migration of Indonesians from other part islands into Papua have created horizontal conflict on resources and land management, making indigenous Papuans marginalized in their own home. Not to mention, structural racism in many sectors signified the grievances. Furthermore, Indonesia's coercive approach has resulted in coercive responses committed by the armed groups. To win the 'heart and mind' of Papuans, the Indonesian government granted special autonomy in 2001 to give a wider opportunity for them in 'self-rule.' This policy allowed the region to earn more tax revenue and be managed on its own (MacLeod, 2011).

Data showed that violence in Papua raises serious attention. Amnesty International noted that there were 69 cases of unlawful killing by the Indonesian military from

January 2010 to February 2018. The motives were divided into two categories such as the killings with 41 cases that were because of the excessive use of force by the military to handle protests unrelated to demand for independence; and the killings with 28 cases which related to the Papuans who demanded independence (Amnesty International, 2020). Meanwhile, The Alliance for Democracy for Papua (ALDP) mentioned there were 53 cases of violence in 2022, lower than in 2021 with 63 cases. However, there might be more cases that were not reported in 2022 (VOA, 2023). In 2024, Kontras noted that from January to March 2024, there were 13 violent incidents in the region with various perpetrators (Kontras, 2024). In more detail, there were 8 incidents committed by the Indonesian military army, 3 cases by The West Papua National Liberation Army (TPNPB), 1 case by police, and 1 case is unidentified (Kontras, 2024). Different data was released by The National Commission on Human Rights which mentioned there were 113 cases related to human rights issues in the region in 2024, not only resulting in internally displaced persons but also injuries and death. Most of the victims were civilians, especially women and children (Komnas HAM). They could flee to neighbouring districts, moreover, to neighboring countries such as Papua New Guinea. In 2019, the report said ten thousand Papuans were internally displaced with limited access to health services, education, and food (The Jakarta Post, 2019).

It was worth noting that a coercive approach remains to be adopted by the Indonesian government to deal with conflict in Papua. For example, TPNPB claimed Jakarta sent 6.100 troops to the region from January to April 2025 (Tempo, 2025). In the previous year, especially in October 2024, the government also deployed 450 soldiers to southern Papua, followed by around 2.000 soldiers to support the food estate program (Benar News, 2024) which sparked rejection from indigenous people (Tempo, 2024). As there are high military numbers in Papua, it is safe to say that potential violence might occur in the near future which will backlash the true essence of peace. Considering this, it matters to look for alternative approaches to solve the issue which embraces the non-violent view. This paper focused on observing the role of the Catholic Church that has been involved in peace promotion around the globe which highlights the measure, not to mention in Papua. There are two layers of analysis within this paper. First, it explored the notion of peace according to the Catholic Church. The second part demonstrated to what extent it participates in the peace governance in Papua.

This article contributed to discussion of the significance of the role of non-state religious actors in peace governance. It matters because to challenge the dominance of International Relations studies that is very state centric which prioritizes the role of nation states as the main decision maker to be at the center of discussion (Chandler, 2001). Previous studies about the issue of peace promotion for Papua by religious actors have been discussed. For example, Benny Giay argued non-governmental organizations and the Church in Papua contributed to the awareness of Papuans on human rights issues (Giay, 2005). Then, Neles Tebay stated there were interfaith collaboration among Islam, Christianity (Catholic and Protestant Churches), Hinduism, and Buddhism in Papua to make joint statements for peace (Tebay, 2007). This study focused on the Catholic Church that took a transnational dimension promoting peace for the region. The Pope's visit to Indonesia and some Catholic international meetings in relation to the issue are interesting to discuss. This study suggested that the Catholic Church has played

a role to promote peace in Papua, despite there is internal split within the Church. Popes' visits to Indonesia and the effort to conduct Catholic international meetings were part of the peace advocacy.

METHODS

A qualitative method was used to conduct this research. Desk study was employed to collect data, especially by exploring the concept of peace according to the Catholic Church and its evolution, as well as the dynamic conflict in Papua. The data was obtained from various sources such as journals, news, and reports which contained experts' views on those topics. Some experts were religious leaders, human rights activists, and students. After the data was collected, the writer identified the findings and described the narratives to the extent the Church played roles in the promotion of peace. It is worth noting that Papua remains in prolonged conflict for decades between the government and armed groups who sought independence. Exploring the Church's role in that issue matters to highlight the importance of non-state religious actors in peace governance which International Relations study tends to overlook, considering its nature that is very state-centric. There are two layers of analysis within this paper. First, it explored the notion of peace according to the Catholic Church. The second part demonstrated to what extent it participates in the peace governance in Papua.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Notion of Peace According to the Catholic Church

The notion of peace has been internalized within the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church believed that Jesus inherited peace and claimed it is more than just an absence of armed conflict. The idea of *Pacem in Terris, Gaudium et Spes* and *Populorum Progressio* demonstrated by the Popes John XXIII and Paul VI in 1960s had a broader meaning that justice, equality, and the absence of arms race are important elements for peace (Justice + Peace Office, No Year). Then, Pope Francis mentioned "justice never comes from killing," meaning justice is contradictory to violence; and peace does not tolerate to the violence. It was argued that justice is both necessary and inseparable from peace (Pax Christi International, 2024). On the other hand, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church mentioned peace as the very basic character of God. The notion of 'creation' urged human beings to be at peace, living in harmony (Archdiocese for the Military Services, No Year). Since human beings represent 'the image of God', it is perceived that sacred life should be protected. Later on, murder is forbidden in The Ten Commandments (BBC, No Year). The notion of peace also can be traced in the old history of the Catholic Church. For example, in the era of Paul to Constantine spanned from the 33 to 300 centuries, Christians asserted 'non-violence' and perceived killing is categorized as a mortal sin (Kemmetmueller, No Year).

The peace conception within the Catholic Church also related to the ongoing series discussions among its religious leaders, as to respond to the current global political dynamics. For example, Kroc Institute of the University of Notre Dame hosted a conference in 2004 attended by participants from Africa, Asia, Europe, and America discussing Catholic peacebuilding. They shared experiences and insights of Catholics efforts from their own regions as happened in Rwanda, the Philippine, Colombia, and

other parts of the world. But most importantly, Catholic theology related to peace was also at the front of discussion among the participants (Catholic Peacebuilding Network, 2004). Other conferences took place in Rome in 2016 and 2019 to promote peace. The former conference was organized by the Vatican body namely the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace which dealt with Church's social teaching. The later conference was the Pax Christi, a coalition of Catholic organizations across the globe, aiming to spread the idea of 'Peace of Christ' (Justice + Peace Office, No Year). In the 2019 conference, San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy who attended the event argued that nonviolence should be the main church's method to tackle war and violence and to foster peace. He expected the church should mainstream the nonviolence and be a main force as a response to armed conflict (National Catholic Reporter, 2019). In relation to this, it also mattered to avoid retaliation for those who underwent violence. In 2017, Pope Francis released a statement mentioning *'when victims of violence are able to resist the temptation to retaliate, they become the most credible promoters of nonviolent peacemaking...'* (Justice + Peace Office, No Year).

It is worth noting that discussion within the Catholic Church on nonviolence mechanisms to foster peace came for reasons. Just War Theory had a strong influence on Catholic peace teaching which the church was 'permissive' on the use of force. The theory claimed, *war should be avoided at all costs, but if the correct conditions are present, then a war can be justified.* Saint Thomas Aquinas and Saint Augustine who theorized it stated, *'the commandment forbidding killing was not broken by those who have waged wars on the authority of God'* (Archdiocese for the Military Services, No Year). No wonder if scholars mentioned the Crusades movement reflected that the Catholic Church justified violence (Ideas for Peace, No Year). However, the ongoing violence around the globe that affected vulnerable people such as children and forced migration with the high gross violation of human rights has made the Catholic Church doubt the value of just war. On the other hand, the development of technology in war could no longer be considered as 'just' (Pax Christi International, 2024). Therefore, 're-evaluation' is important which some experts urged to embrace the Gospel nonviolence by strengthening the 'just peace' instead of 'just war' (Massaro, 2022.).

The call to re-evaluate reflected there was growing confidence in that matter. Pope Francis in 2017 delivered a message mentioning that *'In the most local and ordinary situations and in the international order, may nonviolence become the hallmark of our decisions, our relationships and our actions, and indeed of political life in all its forms'* (The Holy See, 2017). Pope Francis stated countering violence through violence could not solve anything but *'displaces people, causes suffering, and can lead to the death, physical and spiritual, of many people, if not of all.'* He then asserted nonviolence is more powerful than violence (Winright, 2024).

In relation to the nonviolence approach, one of the efforts of the Catholic Church was prohibiting the arms trade (Catholic News Agency, 2017). Pope Francis in 2017 mentioned "it's an absurd contradiction to speak of peace, to negotiate peace, and at the same time promote or permit the arms trade." He continued, "Is this war or that war really a war to solve problems, or is it a commercial war for selling weapons in illegal

trade, and so that the merchants of death get rich?" Pope Francis then said, "Let us pray all together that national leaders may firmly commit themselves to ending the arms trade which victimizes so many innocent people" (Catholic News Agency, 2017). In 2025 when military spending was on the rise, Pope Francis called armstrade a 'moral scandal.' The producers were labelled as "merchants of death," stating that they have intensified the armed conflict and destabilized the condition. Therefore, it mattered to invest wealth into addressing the necessity of vulnerable people. The core foundation to conduct this according to him was the 'human dignity.' He said, "when we place wealth at the service of human dignity." Pope Francis continued, "we always gain something in return: by promoting the common good, we strengthen the bonds of society in which we all participate" (U.S. Catholic, 2025).

The Catholic Church in Peace Governance in Papua

The role of the Catholic Church in peace governance is interesting to observe, especially in the eastern part of Indonesia, Papua. Multiple violence in the region between Indonesian military and armed groups who demand independence have sparked various responses from civil societies in domestic and international level, including from the Catholic Church. For example, Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost from the United States, who becomes Pope Leo XIV now, visited some cities in Papua such as Sorong, Maybrat, and Tambraw in 2003 (BBC News Indonesia, 2025). At that time, Pope Leo XIV served as an Order of Saint Augustine (OSA) Prior General. As there were many members of OSA in Papua, it became a dialogue moment between the Pope and the members, hearing their story related to the injustice and structural violence (Tempo, 2025). Bishop Timika OSA, Bernardus Bofitwos Baru, told his stories of meeting with the Pope to Tempo through an interview in May 2025. Bernardus mentioned Pope Leo XIV supported OSA members by giving moral support and hoped Pope Leo XIV can mediate between Papuans and the Indonesian government. Bernardus added, "the situation in Papua is a humanitarian issue, an ecological issue that also affects the world. Why not sit down and talk heart to heart and resolve it with love, peace, and justice" (Tempo, 2025).

On the other hand, Pope Leo XIV also had a strong contribution in the education development in Papua, reflecting that peace also has a broader sense which is not only about the absence of violence but also equality in various sectors. In an interview with BBC News Indonesia in May 2025, Pastor Floridus Angelus Nadja who met Pope Leo XIV in 2003, mentioned "he provided scholarships for young Papuans who lived in remote areas to pursue a higher education in cities. The program still runs under OSA" (BBC News Indonesia, 2025). It was worth noting that Pope Leo XIV was elected in May 2025 and many people hoped for his contribution to peace. Pope Leo XIV delivered a speech after a moment he was elected. The statements as follows.

"We should work together to find ways of making a missionary Church that is able to bridge, have dialogue, and be open to everyone. As this St. Peter's Basilica of the Vatican that opens for

all, for those who need our existence, dialogue, and love” (BBC News Indonesia, 2025).

The election of Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost as a new Pope made Catholic preachers in Papua hoping that he will bring a good impact for future peace in the region. Villanova Catholic High School Manokwari’s headmaster wanted the Pope to revisit Papua and discuss peace. The headmaster was hoping for the elimination of violence and the use of weapons. Some others hoped the Catholic Church in Papua would not be neglected by a higher Church position (UCA News, 2025). Furthermore, Pastor Stevanus said it mattered for the Pope to contextualize the holy bible into condition in Papua by promoting justice. In addition, Pastor Markus hoped there will be more solutions related to human rights violations and dialogue between Jakarta and Papua come into reality (BBC News Indonesia, 2025). It was worth noting that the idea to conduct dialogue was also proposed by the President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). He said, “Let us give priority to a peaceful approach, compassion and democracy in resolving problems, including problems of conflict and security” (Tebay, 2009). However, even though the president visited the region in 2010, Papuans were disappointed because there was not a dialogue between SBY and traditional leaders (BBC News Indonesia, 2010).

Another important moment of the Catholic Church’s effort to promote peace in Papua was when 20 bishops from the Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands travelled to Jayapura in April 2016 (The Catholic Leader, 2016). According to a report, the trip was ‘quiet’ and escorted by Indonesian military and police (ABC, 2016) which was only short notice for local human rights activists (The Catholic Leader, 2016). Don Lippert, The Bishop of Mendi in PNG's Southern Highlands, stated some of them had been in Papua to prepare the event. Even though it was a short visit, the event brought peace issues to the table. Bishop Lippert hoped there would be further discussion about the future peace and called for having solidarity with Papuans. His further statement as follows.

"What they're calling for, officially anyway, is some kind of official dialogue, and it was beyond my belief to know that there is not an official dialogue going on between Jakarta and the local Papuan people, that was a big surprise" (ABC, 2016).

The visit of the Bishops Conference of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands to Jayapura was responded to by Catholic Women of West Papua by giving a letter statement to them. Some notable issues in the letter were the refugee crisis around the border between Indonesia and its neighboring countries, the ongoing violence committed by Indonesian military and police, the legal negligence of perpetrators, and calling for support from bishops in Melanesian and Pacific countries (The Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2016). One of the statements in the letter was as follows.

“We respectfully implore you to keep standing with us, to ensure that human rights are respected in our land. So many cases of violence and injustice, of human rights abuse, have not

been resolved. The State does not address these. In fact, they are often the perpetrators or protect the perpetrators, so we feel we have nowhere to turn. Sadly, the Catholic Church in West Papua is largely silent about this and does not give voice to our cry for justice. Therefore, we ask that Bishops outside of West Papua, in Melanesia and the other Pacific Island countries, continue to speak up in support of justice and peace in West Papua” (The Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart, 2016).

Another report said the event was “a secret fact-finding mission to Papua by the Catholic Church.” It said the Catholic Church released a report namely ‘We Will Lose Everything’ and launched in Brisbane, Australia, and in other countries as Vanuatu and Fiji. However, there was potential risk about the launch. As it was mentioned by Executive Officer of the Catholic Justice & Peace Commission, Peter Arndt, “while there are risks involved in that particular launch, his colleagues in West Papua are willing to take that gamble.” Overall, the report highlighted the on-going slow-motion genocide committed by police and military against Papuans (ABC, 2016).

Pope Francis’s visit to Indonesia in September 2024 was also relevant as there were several responses from Papuans who were concerned about the endless conflict. For example, the moment has become an opportunity for Papuan students conducting protests in the embassy of Vatican in Jakarta and other demonstrations that took place in Jayapura and Timika with the tagline ‘Way of Cross’ (Benar News, 2024). The Papuan student, Jeno Dogomo, who protested in the embassy stated as follows.

“This action aims to welcome Pope Francis to Indonesia while also expressing the concerns of Catholics and indigenous people in Papua regarding the violence still occurring there,People in nine Papua regencies have been displaced. The Pope should be able to see this” (Benar News, 2024).

Before Pope Francis, Pope Paul VI visited Indonesia in 1970 and St. John Paul II in 1989 which was interesting since Indonesia has the world's largest Muslim population. A human rights activist from Amnesty International Indonesia, Usman Hamid, also responded to the Pope's visit. To Usman, it should become a moment to urge Indonesia’s government to solve human rights issues. Peace message, love, and dialogue as embraced by the Pope matter to adopt (Liputan6, 2024). Furthermore, Hamid stated:

“The pope's message of peace and dialogue is especially timely in light of the ongoing violence in Papua, Militarization and suppression of dissent have led to a humanitarian crisis with many civilian casualties and widespread displacement” (Benar News, 2024).

The papal visits have signified the importance of Indonesia for the Vatican because it has produced many priests and other religious workers (NPR, 2024). In the context of

Papua, the relation between the Vatican and Papuan Catholic Church is special because it has been in existence for hundred years in the easternmost province of Indonesia. Besides, Pope Francis chose Yanuarius Teofilus You as the first native Papuan bishop in 2022 and Bernardus Bofitwos Baru in 2025. Papuan Catholics felt they were more representative as previous religious leaders did not pay more attention to their social challenges (Catholic Outlook, 2025). It is important to note that Christians in Papua are nearly 70 percent or equal to 3 million, from the total 4.3 million population of which there are 675.000 Catholics (UCA News, 2022). Because of the historical ties to the Vatican and its concern on peace as well as the identity issues, it matters to discuss the Catholic Church's role in peace promotion for the region.

In general, the Catholic Church is fractured in responding to the conflict in Papua because some of them tend to support the Indonesian government position by defending the notion of 'integrity' but fail to be aware of the root problem such as the cycle of violence experienced by Papuans. A woman activist in Papua, Rika Korain, stated as follows.

"Papuans are kind of walking alone because of the lack of concern, including from the Catholic Church.....We don't see any shared awareness from the Catholic Church in Indonesia and universally.....the Indonesian Bishops' Conference is mostly silent and does not dare to speak up for Papua.....When I went to Catholic churches in Papua, I found how the church generally always echoes the importance of maintaining the integrity of the country, maintaining the state ideology of Pancasila, but rarely emphasizes human values, human dignity" (Asia Pacific Solidarity Network, 2024).

Even though there was an effort such as sending a letter to Indonesian bishops written by 147 native Papuan priests and missionaries asking to end the problem, they remained silent (Asia Pacific Solidarity Network, 2024). A similar effort to reach Pope Francis prior to his visit to Indonesia in 2024 also failed. For example, The Justice and Peace Commission in Jayapura has tried to send him a message but a priest responded saying there was pressure from the Catholic hierarchy to prevent it. On the other hand, there was a prohibition from hierarchy to present the Pope a book discussing Papuan Catholic history (Asia Pacific Solidarity Network, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This study found that the Catholic Church has played a role in promoting peace in Papua. Popes' visit to Indonesia and the effort to conduct Catholic international meetings were part of the peace advocacy. In 2003, Papua was visited by Cardinal Robert Francis Prevost from the United States, who is now becoming Pope Leo XIV. The visit was not only for religious purposes but also political. Pope Leo dialogued with native Papuans and listened to the story of structural violence. The conception of peace in Catholicism has a broader sense which was reflected by the support of Pope Leo in the field of education for young Papuans to fulfill the spirit of social equality.

The Catholic international meeting organized by 20 bishops from some Pacific islands countries also mattered to promote peace for Papua. The bishops travelled to Papua in 2016 and called for future dialogue between the Indonesian government and Papuans. Furthermore, the Pope Francis apostolic journey to Jakarta in 2024 has become a moment for Papuans to resonate their voices. They conducted protests as it took place in the embassy of Vatican in Jakarta and some other cities in Indonesia, expressing concern about the peace prospect in the region. However, although some Catholic Churches are critical to the ongoing violence, some others are silent. They have challenges because of Church bureaucracy that limits their voices. For example, The Justice and Peace Commission was prohibited from sending the Pope a book that told Papuan Catholic history, which might contain ‘sensitive topic’. Others such as Indonesian bishops are silent because they tend to ‘maintain national integrity.’

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