

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 6, 2013 at 3:59pm

Men superiors: Answering violence with violence no solution in Syria

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NCR Today

Recognizing the "incredible challenge of the present moment in Syria," a major leadership organization of Catholic men's religious institutes urged the U.S. to set up processes of authentic accountability as an alternative to military intervention.

In a statement released Friday, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men said they saw "a great opportunity" for the U.S. to respond to the reported use of chemical weapons in Syria not with violence, but instead through diplomatic and peaceful avenues.

"Authentic accountability is primarily about increasing understanding and addressing resulting harms to relationships; encouraging more empathy for those who've suffered and taking of responsibility for harm, and ensuring restitution," the conference said.

It also warned that Syrian President Bashar Assad -- accused by the U.S. of waging the attack that killed 1,400 civilians -- or whoever is responsible "will not learn" a lesson "as a result of international military action.

"Rather than deterring behavior or bringing an end to the violence that has already cost more than 100,000 lives, U.S. military strikes threaten to widen the vicious civil war in Syria, undermine prospects to de-escalate the violence, eventually reach a just negotiated settlement, and ensure authentic accountability," the conference said.

The men religious leadership group is the latest Catholic organization to denounce possible U.S. military action in Syria. In the past two weeks, several U.S. bishops, the Jesuit superior general and head of the

head of the Franciscans all called for peace and alternatives to violence. On Saturday, Catholics and peace activists worldwide plan to participate in a day of fasting and prayer for peace in Syria, as called upon by Pope Francis. The pontiff has also taken his message to Twitter, using the hashtag #prayforpeace.

The Conference of Major Superiors of Men, which represents more than 17,000 U.S. religious priests and brothers, criticized the "military action or do nothing" frame as one that only legitimizes violence. As an alternative, the conference presented four options:

Diplomatic and legal focus: Noting President Barack Obama's declaration that a "red-line" has been crossed, the conference said the U.S. could maintain credibility by leading the world in peace talks and work to with regional actors to establish accountability. "Rather than increasing hostilities, this is what human dignity and the true "responsibilities of nations" looks like. The negotiations should include key civil society nonviolent actors and include determination of broader accountability mechanisms."

Avoid addressing violence with more violence: Drawing on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, the conference urged the U.S. to pressure nations arming Syrian rebels to reduce supplies, which could lead those aiding Syria to follow suit. "It is a false premise to simply think that by increasing such violence to "punish," "send a message," or even to gain military equity or advantage, that negotiations will likely lead to a durable democracy, much less a just peace."

Use restorative justice responses: For real change in Syria, there must be reconciliation and a mutual spirit of healing, the conference said. To achieve that, it recommends dialogue circles, of representatives from the Syrian government and resistance movement, local organizers and family members of those killed, to lay the groundwork for ceasefire negotiations. "The way to actually "send a message" about such horrific behavior is to set up processes of authentic accountability that lean toward mutual understanding, empathy for those who suffer, human needs, and developing plans for restitution, protection, and healing."

Deploy peace forces: The conference suggested deploying unarmed civilian peacekeeping forces "such as the United Nations, NGOs and even prominent religious leaders -- to parts of Syria committed to peace. "These will help shift the dynamic in a concrete way on the ground, particularly when complemented with other elements."

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The conference concluded, "Tragedy presents us with another opportunity to become people who transform conflict with courage and love. Let's engage the adventure and become such people."

Read the full statement here.

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