

TERRORISM IN BURKINA FASO IS NOT A RELIGIOUS ISSUE

Cardinal Philippe OUÉDRAOGO, Fraternity of Burkina Faso

Cardinal Philippe Ouédraogo from Seoul on the Sahel: "The current conflict is not religious. It is political, economic, identity-based, and geostrategic."



Seoul, the Korean capital, hosted a meeting of the pontifical foundation Aid to the Church in Need on July 10, 11, and 12, 2025. On this occasion, Cardinal Philippe Ouédraogo, one of the main speakers, delivered a very poignant message on the security situation in Burkina Faso and the Sahel: "Let us not fall into the trap: let us reject fear, confusion, and divisive discourse. The current conflict is not religious. It is political, economic, identity-based, and geostrategic," warns the Archbishop Emeritus of

Ouagadougou, who asks: "How can we explain the fact that so many weapons are circulating in areas where access to food and drinking water is limited? Who is turning a blind eye? Who is letting it happen? Who is profiting from it?" We offer you the full text of his statement on "The Church in Burkina Faso, Witness to Hope in the Face of Persecution by Violent Islamist Extremism."

INTRODUCTION

Your Eminences, Excellencies,

Honorable Symposium Participants,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to extend to our august assembly a cordial greeting from Africa, from Burkina Faso, and particularly from the Family of God Church of Ouagadougou, of which I have been Archbishop Emeritus since December 16, 2023. Allow me to extend a special greeting to His Eminence Andrew Cardinal Yeom Soo-jung, Archbishop Emeritus of Seoul. Created Cardinals together on February 22, 2014, by Pope Francis, we have remained friends. With him, we give thanks to God for the fruitful missionary cooperation between the Archdiocese of Seoul and that of Ouagadougou.

To Reverend Father John Pak and all the organizers, I express my sincere gratitude for the kind invitation to participate in the tenth anniversary of the organization of the Church in Need in Korea. "The Church in Burkina Faso, Witness to Hope in the Face of Persecution by Violent Islamist Extremism" is the proposed topic for my presentation. Sincere thanks for your interest in the suffering of our humanity, of our common home. I am among you to bear witness as a son and pastor of a land ravaged by violent terrorism in Burkina Faso, in the Sahel of West Africa. I have come to bear the voice of a voiceless people, who suffer but struggle to remain standing in dignity and true peace.

Our presentation-testimony will evolve from several perspectives, including:

📖 The tragedy of terrorist violence in Burkina Faso

📖 The mission and witness of the Catholic Church

📖 The challenge to the global conscience.

I. The tragedy of terrorist violence in Burkina Faso

For nearly a decade, Burkina Faso has become, despite itself, the scene of multifaceted, persistent, deadly, and methodical violence. Violence has taken root and is spreading blindly among the population. The country has gradually descended into a cycle of instability marked by deadly attacks, kidnappings, destruction of state and private infrastructure, mass population displacement, not to mention successive military coups. Several regions of the country have been affected.

The figures are overwhelming. According to data from the UNHCR, OCHA, and cross-reports from national and international NGOs in 2024:

- More than 8,000 people were killed in targeted attacks, armed clashes, or the murder of innocent civilians. This does not include the missing, the wounded, and the physically and psychologically maimed.
- More than 2.2 million internally displaced persons have been recorded to date, the majority of whom are women, children, and the elderly. Entire families are living in precarious conditions in makeshift camps, without stable access to water, food, education, or basic healthcare.
- There are more than 35,000 Burkinabe refugees who have fled to neighboring countries (Togo, Ghana, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire), facing acute food insecurity.
- Nearly 6,000 schools have been closed, depriving more than a million children of their fundamental right to education. An entire generation is being sacrificed.
- Hundreds of health centers have been destroyed or closed. Health coverage is collapsing. Child malnutrition is exploding. Access to psychological care is virtually nonexistent.
- Hundreds of thousands of hectares of farmland have been abandoned. The local economic fabric is disintegrating. Markets, granaries, and roads are being controlled or mined.

This tragedy extends beyond Burkina Faso's borders. It is part of a Sahelian, even regional and global dynamic. It challenges Africa, it challenges humanity. For example, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, faced with the tragedy of terrorism, have formed the Confederation of Sahel States. What these countries are experiencing today is the consequence of global disorder, an accumulation of ignored fragilities, complicit silences, and sometimes cynical geopolitics. This is no longer a one-off crisis. It is an existential crisis. A crisis of civilization. And it demands a human, spiritual, institutional, and moral response commensurate with the tragedy experienced by the populations.

In this perspective, Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, clearly challenges us:

"The suffering of a people is not a distant affair. It is a call to rediscover the awareness that we are a global community." (Fratelli Tutti, §25).

II. Violence without religious boundaries

Faced with this tragic reality, many, from afar, seek to offer a simplistic explanation: that of a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims. However, when we look more closely, when we listen to the populations concerned, when we examine the accounts of survivors, traditional authorities, pastors, and imams, another, much more complex picture emerges.

It is true that attacks have targeted churches. It is true that priests, catechists, and Christian faithful have been killed during liturgical celebrations or because of their faith. It is true that entire Christian communities have been forced to flee, and that temples and churches have been burned, desecrated, or closed.

But it is equally true that:

- Mosques have been attacked, some during Friday prayers.
- Imams have been executed for preaching a moderate and peaceful version of Islam.
- Quranic schools have been closed or destroyed.
- Muslim-majority villages have been indiscriminately targeted.

In reality, all communities are affected. All faiths are in mourning. Religion is being exploited for power, control, and terror.

It must be said clearly: violent armed groups do not have a religion. They have an ideology. And this ideology has no other goal than to sow division, to set communities against each other, and to break the traditional solidarity that unites Burkinabè people beyond religious affiliation. They rely on ignorance, poorly healed wounds, and accumulated frustrations to pit people against each other.

Yet, Burkina Faso has a long tradition of peaceful religious coexistence. This social fabric is being targeted today precisely because it is a bulwark against extremism. By destroying places of worship, stigmatizing groups, and sowing fear, extremist groups seek to destroy not only human lives, but also a social model, a shared heritage of brotherhood.

Let us not fall into the trap: let us reject fear, confusion, and divisive rhetoric.

The current conflict is not religious. It is political, economic, identity-based, and geostrategic. It disguises itself as religion to legitimize itself, but in reality, it betrays it. And in this storm, the Church of Burkina Faso continues to proclaim loud and clear: "We are called to unity, peace, and mutual love." »

➤ This is why we must be clear-sighted, courageous, and deeply rooted in our faith so as not to fall into the trap of division. For a divided community is a weakened community:

"If a house is divided against itself, that house will not stand." (Mark 3:25)

In this spirit, the Holy Father recalled in the Abu Dhabi Declaration (2019):

"Terrorism is not due to religion or religious convictions, but to a misinterpretation of sacred texts and to unjust policies."

It is not religion that kills. It is ideologies of hate. And our responsibility is to unmask them.

III. A Serpent with Invisible Heads: Who Kills? Who Manipulates? Who Profits?

One of the deepest pains of the Burkinabe people today lies in this nagging question, repeated in villages, displacement camps, churches, mosques, and markets: "Who is killing us? And why?"

For often, attacks are carried out by hooded men armed with modern rifles, riding motorcycles or pickup trucks. They do not always claim to belong to a known group. They leave neither a clear political message nor a structured claim. Sometimes they present themselves as vigilantes. Sometimes as religious figures. Sometimes as avengers. But very often, they say nothing. They kill. And they disappear.

This lack of an assumed identity fuels a simmering fear. It weakens community trust. It creates mutual suspicion. It drives entire villages to distrust their neighbors, to suspect their own youth, to doubt the local imam, the neighborhood leader, the catechist, the shopkeeper from elsewhere.

This vagueness is skillfully maintained. It is part of a strategy of chaos. A chaos that is not spontaneous, but planned, nourished, supplied, coordinated.

Who are the real instigators of this violence? Who arms these groups? Who finances them? Who provides them with ammunition, information, and technology? Where do these sophisticated weapons come from, which do not exist on local markets? Why does the circulation of Kalashnikovs and explosive devices exceed that of relief supplies or food? Who controls the roads? Who controls the flows? Who fuels intercommunal conflicts? Who profits from this disorder?

The reality is that this conflict is not just internal. It is also fueled by transnational issues. Hidden economic interests. Cold geopolitical logic. Gold, arms, drug, and human trafficking networks—exploiting the security vacuum to prosper.

Some of the areas attacked strangely coincide with mining areas. Some of the targeted routes are strategic for transporting resources. Some displaced populations free up spaces of considerable economic value. Chaos here becomes an opportunity, a strategy of forced displacement, a way to clear the way for unacknowledged projects.

And meanwhile, the people suffer, die, disappear.

The violence striking Burkina Faso therefore has many faces, but a single purpose: to control, dominate, and exploit. The faces visible on the ground may only be the executors. Behind them are the masterminds, the donors, the strategists. They speak in other languages, sign in other offices, and exchange in other currencies.

This is why it is essential to reject simplistic interpretations. To denounce silent complicity. And to challenge the international institutions, states, multinationals, religious or economic networks that, directly or indirectly, allow this to happen, or even participate.

The enemy is not a village. It is not a religion. It is not an ethnic group. The enemy is this mechanism of dehumanization that transforms the suffering of the poor into profit for the powerful. And this mechanism must be stopped.

We have the duty to expose it, the courage to name it, and the faith to defeat it. ➤ We are therefore called to discern. To go beyond appearances. Not to be content with naming the visible perpetrators, but to reveal the invisible structures of evil. For this struggle goes beyond human faces. It touches the deep forces of disorder and domination:

"We are not wrestling against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this dark world..." (Ephesians 6:12)

IV. Burkina Faso: A Heritage of Living Together to Protect

Burkina Faso is not just a geographical entity in the heart of West Africa. It is a living memory, a crossroads of humanity, a melting pot where languages, customs, beliefs, and lineages have intertwined over the centuries. Long before independence in 1960, the peoples of this land learned to make their differences an asset, not a threat. In the Burkinabe nation, diversity has never been synonymous with fragmentation. Communities have grown together: Muslims are estimated at 60%, Catholics at 20%, followers of traditional religion at 15%, and Protestant denominations at 5%. All share the same living space, the water from the same wells, the laughter of the same children, the pain of the same trials... Living together has never been an ideological construct: it sprang from everyday life, from customs, from the wisdom of the elders.

And this is where many of the architects of chaos have gone wrong. This country rests on a foundation of unsuspected depth: kinship pacts, lineage alliances, inter-clan ties, solidarity between families of different traditions. Here, a joking cousin may belong to a different ethnic group, but he carries the same sacred respect. Here, a son-in-law is welcomed like a son, regardless of his faith. Here, alliances between families of different faiths are common, respected, and experienced as bridges of unity.

Bonds of blood, kinship, and alliance are stronger than hate speech. They are more deeply rooted than imported ideologies, more tenacious than divisive manipulations. They constitute a silent but effective bulwark against those who dream of pitting Burkinabè against one another. For what God has sown in hearts through the threads of history, no destructive hand can permanently tear away.

However, this strength is now being severely tested. Weapons, fear, and misinformation seek to crack the patient edifice of coexistence. Voices, sometimes alien to local realities, strive to sow doubt, mistrust, and fear of others. Living together is targeted, not directly, but insidiously.

And yet, the Burkinabe people are holding firm. They are holding firm thanks to citizen, interreligious, and intercultural initiatives. They are holding firm thanks to religious and traditional leaders who preach peace. They are holding firm thanks to youth associations, intellectual leaders, and Catholic and Muslim journalists who, together, lead dialogue, training, and awareness-raising initiatives. They are holding firm thanks to cross-border projects that reconnect peoples, beyond their fears.

➤ This precious cultural heritage is not an illusion. It is a historical, cultural, and spiritual reality. And it must be protected as one protects a fragile flame in the wind. It is also an evangelical call:

"As far as possible, and as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all men." (Romans 12:18)

The Second Vatican Council taught us this forcefully in the declaration *Nostra Aetate*:

"The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in religions. [...] She exhorts her children to recognize, preserve, and promote spiritual and moral goods." (§2)

This living together, rooted in history and blessed by the Gospel, is a foundation for rebuilding peace. An authentic peace, founded on human dignity, common memory, and fidelity to the message of Christ: to love, understand, dialogue, and lift up together this tottering world. V. Dialogue Frameworks, Community Bridges, Religious and Social Initiatives

In this context of multifaceted threats and social fragmentation, it is heartening, and even essential, to highlight the many efforts made by religious, social, community, and institutional actors to preserve national unity, strengthen collective resilience, and maintain channels for interreligious, intercultural, and intergenerational dialogue.

Burkina Faso does not simply endure violence. It resists it. It responds with the wisdom of its traditions, the vitality of its youth, and the commitment of its spiritual communities. Across the country, initiatives are emerging to rebuild destroyed bridges, revive trust, and build spaces for shared dialogue.

Among these initiatives, several particularly noteworthy Interreligious Peace Dialogue Frameworks are noted. These frameworks bring together representatives of all the country's major religious denominations—Islam, Catholic and Protestant Christianity, and traditional religions—in a continuous dynamic of dialogue, shared analysis of challenges, and joint proposals to strengthen social peace. These frameworks are involved in local mediation, community awareness-raising, and produce joint messages to defuse tensions.

Alongside these institutional platforms, concrete and often silent actions are carried out by local communities:

- Numerous associations work for peace and social cohesion: the Islamic League for Peace (Ouagadougou), the Fraternal Union of Believers (Dori); the Protestant Association for Interreligious Dialogue (Ouagadougou); and the Catholic Foundation Duc In Altum (Ouagadougou).
- Interreligious youth camps are organized each year by dioceses, in collaboration with Muslim leaders. These spaces promote mutual discovery, the demystification of stereotypes, and the creation of lasting bonds between young people of different faiths.
- Dialogue sessions between security forces and young community leaders have been piloted in several regions, helping to restore a climate of trust and prevent dangerous confusion.
- Sports activities, reading clubs, community theaters, and civic training are organized in neutral spaces, welcoming children, adolescents, women, and men without distinction around shared values.
- Catholic action movements, notably the JEC (Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique), scouts, choirs, and prayer groups, are not left behind. In both urban and rural areas, they organize:

- community support days,
- interfaith sanitation operations,
- awareness campaigns on peace and social cohesion,
- visits to internally displaced persons without religious or ethnic discrimination.

Catholic intellectuals, journalists, teachers, lawyers, and artists are also working to counter hate speech, popularize fundamental rights, share positive experiences of coexistence, and document stories of lived fraternity. Their interventions, often relayed by faith-based and mainstream media, contribute to shaping a resilient collective consciousness.

In certain cross-border areas—particularly in the Eastern and Sahel regions—community meetings have brought together representatives from several neighboring countries (Niger, Ghana, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire) to address common issues: management of shared resources, human security, cross-border pastoralism, and the fight against disinformation. These meetings allow for the establishment of grassroots diplomacy, the building of community alliances, and the curbing of attempts to exploit national, ethnic, or religious affiliations.

All these efforts, though sometimes discreet, contribute to keeping the flame of peace alive. They show that despite attempts at division, the Burkinabe social fabric is still vibrant, capable of regenerating itself, of showing solidarity, and of inventing new ways of living together.

They also constitute a lesson for Africa and for the world: peace is not just a word. It is a gift from God and the fruit of human efforts. And Pope Francis states unambiguously:

"There is an architecture of peace in which the various institutions of society intervene, each in its place." (Fratelli Tutti, §284)

The peacemaker is not a spectacular hero, but a patient builder, a sower of humanity.

VI. The Church, Persecuted but Faithful: Mission and Witness

In this context of violence, widespread insecurity, massive displacement, and chronic fear, the Church in Burkina Faso has not deserted. It has not renounced its evangelizing mission. She did not choose silence or flight. On the contrary, she put down roots, she adapted, she committed herself even more, at the risk of her own existence.

Yes, priests have been kidnapped and killed, catechists and faithful murdered, churches closed, chapels burned, places of prayer deserted. But the Church remains there, present, serving, alive, praying, suffering, and deeply in solidarity with the people.

In rural parishes as well as in the outskirts of large cities, Christian communities continue to gather, sometimes outdoors, sometimes discreetly, sometimes under threat. But they pray, sing, and share. They intercede for peace. At the end of each Eucharistic celebration, a prayer is said for peace.

The nuns continue to teach, to care for, and to listen. They welcome displaced women, accompany traumatized children, and prepare collective meals in makeshift schools. Their very presence is a testimony. Their calm is a strength. Their commitment is a balm for shattered communities.

Catholic action movements, the youth of the AJEC, scouts, and prayer groups organize food collections, welcome activities, and support groups for displaced people. They pray with Muslims. They reach out to non-believers. They restore a sense of solidarity at a time when everything seems to be collapsing.

The Church does not play an external role. She is within the people. She experiences their pain. She speaks their language. She knows their wounds. She shares her bread. She holds the hands of widows. She buries martyrs. She blesses children. She prepares funerals with dignity. She maintains the faith as one keeps a flame burning in the depths of darkness.

➤ In the night of chaos, the Church, Family of God of Burkina Faso, did not abandon its post. It did not flee the fire. It remains an alert, humble, and steadfast sentinel, faithful to Christ's call. Even persecuted, it remains steadfast and united: "The joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the people of today [...] are also the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the disciples of Christ." (*Gaudium et Spes*, §1).

VII. A powerful challenge to the global conscience

What is happening today in Burkina Faso does not concern Burkina Faso alone. This tragedy transcends borders. It challenges humanity. It questions the very meaning of our global brotherhood. And it obliges everyone—institutions, governments, peoples, religions, the media—to take a clear stand: will we continue to look the other way, or will we finally take our share of responsibility? International institutions were created after major wars to protect people from the excesses of violence, from the logic of annihilation, from silent genocides. The United Nations, the African Union, international courts of justice, humanitarian agencies... What are they doing today in the face of the agony of millions of people in the Sahel?

How can we explain the circulation of so many weapons in areas where access to food and drinking water is limited? How can we understand that drones, homemade mines, and high-precision automatic weapons can be transported while medicines are in short supply in hospitals? Who turns a blind eye? Who allows it? Who profits?

And the powerful states, which possess the technology, the intelligence, the satellites, the diplomatic networks, what are they saying? Where are the calls for respect for humanitarian law? Where are the clear condemnations and courageous decisions? Why are some countries eternally forgotten in global emergencies? And are the multinationals that invest in mines, that sign backroom deals, that sometimes benefit from the effects of war, ready to challenge a profit model that relies on the collapse of peoples?

And we, citizens of the world, men and women of good will, have a clear conscience? Can we sleep peacefully knowing that children are being sacrificed for invisible interests? That women live in fear every night? That entire communities are being wiped off the map?

This is not an exaggeration. It is a daily reality. A collective crime through indifference and inaction.

It is time to act, to break the silence, to go beyond diplomatic communiqués, to transform resolutions into concrete commitments. It is time to apply pressure to ensure that roads

are made safe, that displaced persons are protected, that those responsible are identified, and that the resources of the Sahel benefit the people of the Sahel.

It is high time for the global conscience to awaken, for religions to unite in a common declaration, for people to express their outrage, for institutions to respond, and for multinational corporations to convert to an ethic of responsibility.

Silence, in this context, is not neutral. It is complicit. And future generations will ask, "What were you doing when Africa was burning?" And everyone will have to answer.

Today, in the name of faith, in the name of life, in the name of human dignity, we say: enough is enough. The blood of the innocent can no longer irrigate the global economy. The silence of the powerful can no longer drown out the cries of the poor. And indifference can no longer be the answer to suffering.

This is a call. It is a challenge. It is a responsibility.

➤ It is no longer simply a matter of raising the alarm. We must awaken consciences, demand justice, and denounce the silences that kill. This is a biblical requirement, as much as it is a moral duty:

"Learn to do good, seek justice, raise up the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:17)

The challenge we are launching here does not seek controversy. It seeks the truth. And it expects answers worthy of human conscience. Conclusion: Hope as a Prophetic Act

Faced with violent extremism ravaging lives, villages, memories, and hopes, some might be tempted to conclude that all is lost, that the shadow is too great, that the night is too deep, that humanity is collapsing.

But this is not our reading. It is not our faith, our dream, or our hope.

We believe, profoundly, that history does not end there. That what seems like a defeat can become a source of rebirth. That even at the foot of the cross, a resurrection is possible. Hope, for us, is not naiveté. It is a prophetic act. It is an act of spiritual resistance. It is a stance in the face of the absurd, a radical affirmation of life in the face of the culture of death. It is not about waiting for everything to get better. It is about acting so that something beautiful may survive, even in the midst of turmoil. It means choosing fidelity to God, to humanity, to dignity, where everything seems to push us toward abandonment.

And the Church, in this context, has more than just a moral role. It has an existential, prophetic mission: to stand firm when everything collapses, to preach peace when war looms, to proclaim light when darkness deepens, to believe in humanity, even when humanity is lost.

That is why I will conclude with this certainty: Chaos will not have the last word. Lies will not triumph over truth. Hate will not vanquish love. And the blood shed by the innocent will become the seeds of a better future, if we have the courage not to forget, not to give up, to continue to dream, to love together.

May every man, every woman, every institution here present hear this call. Not as an accusation, but as a mission. Burkina Faso is bleeding, but it hopes. The Sahel trembles, but it prays. Africa suffers, but it resists.

And Pope Benedict XVI reminds us in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*:

"Christian hope is never individual. It is always also hope for others." (§35)

Thank you all for listening and for your commitment. May we dream together and work constantly for the coming of a better world.

May the prayer of Mary, Queen of Peace, whose heart is always oriented towards the will of God, consolidate and strengthen every effort towards reconciliation, justice, and peace. (Cf. Mt 5:6).

+ Cardinal Philippe OUÉDRAOGO

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BURKINA FASO