

**Response to Prof. Phan's Presentation  
by Fr. Eliseo R. Mercado, Jr., OMI**

I am happy to respond to Prof. Phan's presentation on interreligious dialogue...for variety of reasons. I would like to begin my remarks with a quotation from the acceptance speech made by a martyred Peace Laureate, Dr. Martin Luther King, when he was conferred the Nobel Peace Award in 1964. He said:

“I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have  
three meals a day for their bodies,  
education and culture for their minds, and  
dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.

I believe that what self-centered men have torn down,  
other-centered can build up.  
I still believe that one-day mankind will bow before the altars of God  
and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed,  
and non violent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the Lord.  
And the lion and the lamb shall lie down together  
and every man shall sit under his own vine and fig tree  
and none shall be afraid.

I still believe that we shall overcome....”

In Southern Philippines and in many parts of the world like Sudan, Moluccas, Southern Thailand, etc., we are too familiar with what self-centered men and women have torn down. Their works, thirst for power and greed continue to divide our people between the have's and the have's not, the powerful and the powerless, and between the privileged and the deprived. They manipulate for their own personal interests and ambition the natural social fault lines like ethnicity and religions and cloak them with the guise of tribal and religious values and beliefs. They hand over to us from one generation to another the myth that this land is exclusively theirs, other claimants are the enemies, and a good Moro is a dead Moro. Yes, for quite sometime now, evil men and women continue to dominate over the land finding ourselves prisoners of spiraling culture of violence and a culture of separatism.

Is there a way out for us ... caught in this tragic human drama? Do we not find ourselves often locked in a room with no exit? Has education shown the way, broken the barriers that separate us and has made us bigger or larger than the parochialism or provincialism of our origin and culture?

In these troubled times, especially post September 11, 2002, more than ever, we urgently need people who will find the “path” to move forward... The tragic reality is the fact that even highly educated and professionals, sadly including men and women of faiths are no longer exempted from the prevailing bigotry and biases that continue to exercise tyranny over our spirit.

Tragic legacies... there are aplenty! The lingering resentments & injustices are deep in the psyche of relationship. With few exceptions, there was no mutual openness between faiths, but only survival within supercession, conquest, colonialism and cultural domination. There is only

the steady accumulation of the instinct by which both faiths developed a sort of exclusivism of culture & identity around their inner focus of faith & rite drawing all things into a calculated otherness and exclusivism from which we now struggle so hardly to escape.

All those legacies are familiar enough and part of our problem. Is it simply escaping from their tyranny over our spirits? Is there a way out for us... caught in this tragic human drama? Do we not find ourselves often locked in a room with no exit? Has our faith shown the way to break down the barriers that separate us? True faith in God is to steadily school ourselves to resist and reject our habit of preferring suspicion to trust, to reject the instinct to prefer familiar confrontation to new relationship of partners and common "stakeholdership".

Why? Because despite these legacies of enmity and otherness, we have to wake up to the reality that we inhabit the same small planet, we breathe the same air, and cultivate the same land we considered our own, and we are co-workers in the same work places and more, there are fascinating areas of common spiritual territory within our simple religious ancestry. For better or for worse, our lives, liberation and development are bound to each other.

### **The Call to Dialogue...**

Today we hear the urgent call for greater involvement and participation in dialogue. The call to dialogue, in different languages and tongues, is being launched and heard from the mountains to the plains, from big cities and small alike, from the Vatican to Cairo, from the smallest 'pesantren' and madrasah (Islamic School) in an Indonesian or Southern Philippines village to a small basic ecclesial community or BEC. People of different faiths and ethnicities are struggling to grapple with our diversities and embrace the challenges and demands of dialogue.

Why has the issue of dialogue become a paramount issue in an era of globalization? Few years back, people believed, especially the prophets of modernization and secularization, that religion and ethnicity would be the first casualties of globalization. It did not happen. Instead, the world was shocked and continued to be shocked by the increasing religious and ethnic intolerance. The ethnic war in Rwanda and Burundi with its accompanying tragedy of "genocides" is a classic example in Africa. The partition of former Yugoslavia and the ensuing ethnic and religious war, again, with the ugly face of "ethnic cleansing" has shocked the world in this so-called era of globalization. The same thing can be said in East Timor, Indonesia and Southern Philippines. Yes, the world is experiencing the malady of religious and ethnic intolerance and killing.

Then the terrorists' attacks both in New York and Washington happened and the world is no longer the same again. Terrorism has acquired a new face and notoriety. Rightly or wrongly, "Fundamentalism" in religion, ideology and ethnicity and political policies that perpetuate injustices and inequity, perceived or real, are seen as the seedbeds of "terrorism" that have held the world hostage since September 11, 2001. No doubt, the surge of fundamentalism and the present paranoia over terrorism contribute to the urgency of religious and cultural dialogue. The manifestations of fundamentalism have not only shown intolerance, but also have made dialogue very difficult. For one, the narrow, inflexible and exclusive worldview of fundamentalism admits no compromise or dialogue.

The truth is the fact that we are peoples of many and diverse faiths, cultures and political ideologies. Though many and different, the relationships need not be hostile or indifferent. The diversities invite us to make a shift in our paradigm from hostility to partnership; from

indifference to involvement; from being closed to being opened to one another, and from being exclusive to inclusive in our outlook. Our diversities need NOT LEAD to that famous slogan of “CLASH of civilizations. What we need today is DIALOGUE between and among our diverse cultures and civilizations.

We have to believe and hold that our life and future are bound up with each other. Our path is need not be characterized by war but of dialogue. We are together in the journey through life. For better or worse, we are neighbors and as neighbors, we can be partners in building not only of a better world but more so of a friendlier community where you and I, and our children can live as brothers and sisters.

There are three basic steps that will help us walk this new path of dialogue.

- First is the recognition that our life, future and destiny are bound up with each other. No, we cannot espouse a politics of separatism, culture of exclusivism, nor act as sole proprietors of the land.
- Second is to be open, that is, Eph’pheta/Iftah, to each other - learning not only from each other but more so to live and work as partners in shaping our common lives and destiny in peace, justice and care of the earth. Yes, we must not be afraid or hesitate to accept, to trust and to work with each other as partners.
- Third is our commitment and involvement in the promotion and guarantee of the rights and dignity of every person regardless of faith, gender, culture and color within our society/community.

The basis of this commitment is our belief that all peoples even though they belong to different religions, nations, etc. all form ONE human family, created by the ONE and same God, living in the same world/community, and destined for a common end.

Again in a more recent time, Pope John Paul II presents to the world his dream and hope for Christianity and Islam as we journey together into the new millennium in his Addresses in Syria (John Paul II the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, 6 May 2001).

“It is my ardent hope that Muslim and Christian religious leaders and teachers will present our two great religious communities as **COMMUNITIES IN RESPECTFUL DIALOGUE, NEVER MORE AS COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT**”. It is crucial for the young to be taught the ways of respect and understanding, so that they will not be led to misuse religion itself to promote or justify hatred and violence. Violence destroys the image of the Creator in his creatures, and should never be considered as the fruit of religious conviction.”

“Better mutual understanding will surely lead to a more objective and comprehensive knowledge of each other’s religious beliefs at the practical level, to a new way of presenting our two religions **NOT IN OPPOSITION**, as it happened too often in the past, **BUT IN PARTNERSHIP FOR THE GOOD OF THE HUMAN FAMILY.**”

“May the hearts of Christians and Muslims turn to one another with feelings of brotherhood and friendship, so that the Almighty may bless us with the peace which heaven alone can give. To the One, Merciful God be praise and Glory forever. Amen.”

I appeal once more to all the peoples involved and to their political leaders, **to recognize that confrontation has failed and will always fail. Only a just peace can bring the conditions needed for the economic, cultural and social development to which the people of the region have a right.**" And you my dear GRADUATES, I charge you to be bearers and instruments of the good news of **PEACE**. Yes, "**Blessed are the Peacemakers, they shall be called sons and daughters of God.**"

I will conclude my response to Prof. Pham by taking cognizance of the now famous Muslim Letter to all the Christian leaders at the end of Ramadan in 2007.

This Letter is a first Muslim initiated step in dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Often Christians have taken the first act regarding dialogue, and they have so done well. It is important that this first steps continue in this direction with increased clarity, even showing differences and the need for correction. As the Letter is addressed to various leaders of the Christian world, we can hope that there will be a reply to this letter, which is the result of an immense effort by the Muslim part.

The title of the letter is taken from the Qur'an: "A Common Word between Us and You" (Sura of the family of Imran, 3:64). This is what Mohammed says to the Christians in the Koran: when he sees that he cannot reach agreement with them, then he says: Come let us agree on at least one common ground: that we shall worship none but God (the oneness of God) "and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside God."

But this Letter is certainly also addressed to Muslims, even if not explicitly. What weight will it bring to bear in the Muslim world, considering that priests continue to be kidnapped, apostates persecuted, Christians oppressed? Up until now there has been no comment from the Islamic side. But I think that with time this document could create an opening and a greater convergence.

Above all, it is to be hoped that the next step will focus on the more delicate issues of religious freedom, the absolute value of human rights, the relationship between religion and society, the use of violence, etc., in short current issues that worry both the Muslim world (and I would say above all Muslim people) as well as the West.

Fr. Eliseo R. Mercado, Jr., OMI  
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South Bend, Indiana