

## **The Many Dimensions of Catholic Peacebuilding: Mindanao Experience**

### **1. Introduction**

#### **Greetings of Peace!**

I would like to start by sharing an honest admission of a personal dilemma over addressing the question of what is “catholic peacebuilding”? It is a personal dilemma which has created a healthy tension in me as catholic peacebuilder working within the unique context of Mindanao.

This is perhaps the starting point of understanding the grounding of the many Catholic peacebuilders in Mindanao who are engaged in peacebuilding efforts from the grassroots level to the top level.

What is unique in our contribution towards peacebuilding in our area? What is distinct in terms of Catholic theology, spirituality and ethics in the many expressions and manifestations of peacebuilding in Mindanao.

I have come to realize that the answer to these sets of questions can be uniquely found in our collective experience as Catholic community in walking together with Muslims and indigenous people in seeking and pursuing peace in our shared homeland: Mindanao.

I have come to realize that the commitment of the Catholic peacebuilders in Mindanao is grounded on the belief that to genuinely live as a community of the faithful in Mindanao is to engage in the work for peace and justice.

I have come to realize that to concretize our faith in this milieu is to embrace Muslims and Indigenous people as our neighbor, as our brothers and sisters.

I have come to realize that expression as catholic peacebuilders in Mindanao is to be wide-ranging, broad, wide-reaching, all-embracing, and extensive in our work for peace. But with humility it is also understanding that we don't have the monopoly of these qualities for we also equally recognize the same expressions in the peace work of our Muslim and indigenous counterparts.

I have come to realize that as engaged catholics envisioning to become co-creators of building a just and peaceful society in Mindanao is to recognize Muslims and indigenous people as co-equals and co-creators. That part of concretizing the vision is the process of forging a shared future woven by the dreams and aspirations of the tri-people in Mindanao

#### **Dialogue as a Way of Life**

Mindanao is unique to other parts of the Philippines for it nestles a rich cultural diversity of peoples. It is home to 13 million Christians, 3.6 million Muslims, and 1.5 million indigenous people.

It is not only rich culturally but also rich in terms of natural resources. Despite the abundance however, Mindanao has been devastated by armed conflicts since the 1970s. The armed conflicts are grounded on issues of political, economic, social, and cultural marginalization of the Bangsamoro and indigenous population. Compounding issues on corruption, worsening poverty, poor governance, and unequal access to resources are part of the complex conflict situation. Since the outbreak of the armed conflict in the 1970's about 120,000 have died and millions have been displaced.

Communities devastated and affected by armed conflict have found ways to move from being victims to active participants in processes of rebuilding, healing, and reconciliation. Peacebuilding efforts in peace education, interreligious dialogue, peace advocacy, local peace processes engage Muslims, Christians, and indigenous peoples. These efforts have led divided communities to healing, reconciliation and eventually becoming active participants in finding solutions to the long-running armed conflict in Mindanao.

Dialogue of life and action becomes alive in these efforts with the church catalyzing engagement of Catholic communities through mobilization of their resources in responding to emergency needs of mostly displaced Muslim and indigenous communities. In the recent all-out-wars in Mindanao 1997,2000, 2003, Catholic church compounds and schools have become temporary sanctuaries and safe shelters of Muslim families fleeing from armed conflict in their villages. During the height of the war in 2003 in Pikit, a co-worker tells of a moving story of Pikit parishioners who lined themselves at the base of a big truck transporting displaced Muslim families. The parishioners offered their arms to catch Muslim children who had difficulty coming down from the truck. The offering of the arms is a symbolic offering of the parishioners to share their place of worship with Muslims. The story of the people of Pikit did not end with Christians offering support to Muslim families displaced by war. Peace champions from both faith communities with support of the indigenous population in the area - then forged bonds to work together in the process of rebuilding their communities and eventually the declaration of their areas as spaces for peace.

In Mindanao, the dynamics of the conflict have resulted to religious and identity tensions thus affecting relationships among Muslims, Christians and Indigenous peoples. Tensions in the relationships often become triggers to the conflict but relationships have also been effective entry points towards addressing issues of the conflict.

Bual, is a village in Central part of Mindanao inhabited by Muslims and Christians. In 1996, 200 Muslim houses were razed to the ground by three suspects because of land conflict. The incident further divided the community with relationships already fragile with the effect of the 1970's conflict. Jointly undertaking a process of community rebuilding – CRS collaborated with a Muslim NGO grounded on a community-based peace education process. The history of good relations – with Muslim families welcoming Christian settlers in the area – became the starting point of reaching out to each other – of redefining the relationships from enemies to neighbors. Local Muslim political leaders worked with Christian leaders of the basic Christian community in the village to start the process of healing and reconciliation. Two years after the violent incident in their community, Bual residents participated in a community celebration dubbed as

peace and reconciliation day. The community journey towards becoming a zone of peace is lived day by day as community-level conflicts arise. In a number of situations of misunderstanding – tensions/violence were de-escalated with Christian leaders ready to offer their lives and stand on the side of the Muslims to dispel and discourage attacks from their own group. Muslim political leaders have also made sacrifices to share political power with their Christian counterparts to balance representation in local governance.

Pikit and Bual are but glimpses of the many transformative processes that are ongoing and are taking place in Mindanao. These stories indicate that often healing and reconciliation are fruits of the collective effort of Muslim, Christian, and indigenous peacebuilders.

The process of linking arms and walking together to seek and pursue peace is not an easy path to take (it still a road less traveled). It is a process that has challenged participants to confront prejudices, biases and suspicions. It is a process that brings back painful memories of violence most often at the hands of the “other”. It is a process that forces one to face-up to his/her responsibility of the problem (as authors or participants to the violence and conflict). It is a process that exposes vulnerabilities and also entails risks. It asks of one to take a step and engage in a process that cannot be wholly predicted or controlled. The price of peace is to offer one’s life.

Mindanaon peacebuilders affirm their collective commitment for peace embracing the demands this journey of walking together and this commitment is strongly grounded on faith. It is the gentle prodding of faith that peacemakers are able to take the first step – and it is faith that sustains and faith that generates hope amidst the difficulties of peacebuilding work.

For Catholic peacebuilders – dialogue becomes a central part of the expression of faith in the diverse context of Mindanao. Dialogue provides the grounding for acknowledging the importance of engaging and encountering Muslims and Indigenous people in the process of building peace in Mindanao. It is a potent process and approach vis-à-vis the reality of violence and conflict because of differences in identity.

Dialogue as an expression of the mission of the church in Mindanao has been concretely lived out in Catholic church action since the 1970’s. The late Bishop Bienvenido Tuftud, Bishop of the Prelature of Marawi, remains as one of the beckons of interreligious dialogue not only among Christians but also Muslims. Bishop Tuftud led the Prelature of Marawi (just after the height of armed conflict in the 1970’s ) to offer a reconciling presence among Muslims through dialogue of life and faith. Bishop Tuftud taught us that Dialogue is not a choice but an integral part of our Christian life and is a fundamental character of Christian life. This process of engagement emphasizes the importance of the vision of dialogue, importance of immersion, prayer and contemplation.

The inspiring work of those who have come before us and have paved the way (often with their own lives) have catalyzed a dynamic network of dialogue and peace champions among Muslims, Christians, and indigenous people. More than 30 years when this work was started we already have dialogue and peacebuilding efforts from the grassroots level up to the top level in various forms and expressions –

- informal and formal dialogue with religious leaders expanding the engagement with other critical peace actors in Mindanao as well as in other parts of the Philippines
- presence of established education/formation programs on IRD (with some courses having ran for as long as 20 years such as the Silsilah Dialogue movement summer courses to the 2 year-old Panaw Alim initiative of a Catholic priest in the Northern part of Mindanao which optimizes the IRD formation to gather together religious leaders with local political leaders ; to community level culture of peace/ird orientations in the different areas
- establishment of interreligious dialogue in a number of Dioceses in Mindanao which has helped in formation of interreligious dialogue groups
- dialogue of presence – has evolved towards dialogue of life and action with a number of joint and collaborative undertakings among Muslims, Christians, and indigenous people to address community level issues (the efforts would include initiatives in community rebuilding, sustaining livelihoods, conflict resolution mechanisms, strengthening local governance)

Reflecting upon our efforts in grassroots peacebuilding and interreligious dialogue as a Catholic organization working closely with church-based organizations – have allowed us to distill the process of dialogue which consists of three steps:

Step 1            Building Internal Capacity: Understanding Dialogue  
Understanding Peace, Knowing why I am the way I am based on my religion and ethnic identity

*To be exclusive is to be inclusive*

Step 2            Go and encounter the other on common issues/ concerns and marvel at the differences and appreciate the similarities on how you respond to the issues

Go and encounter the other: *Dialogue on commonalities and dialogue on differences*

Step 3            Open the avenue for others to come into the encounter and continue the appreciation of differences and similarities – identifying common concerns, finding solutions and building communities together

The steps have guided us but as in any other peacebuilding process this key steps do not work in a linear manner.

Bishop Tutud underscores the importance of the vision of dialogue and we are actually being challenged in this aspect especially that to a certain extent the future of Mindanao and the process of resolving the roots of the conflict are being decided in formal peace process/negotiations between revolutionary/rebel groups and government (Moro and communist).

How do we take phase 3 of the dialogical process to expand the substance and content of our dialogue with Muslims and indigenous peoples in terms of:

- Dialogue in conflict analysis
- Dialogue of narratives/perspectives of the conflict
- Dialogue of common action- in view of the bigger task of addressing root causes of the conflict in Mindanao
- Dialogue in terms of political settlement (like how are we going to dialogue with Muslims in view of their struggle for self-determination; and with the indigenous people in view of their struggle for self-governance in their ancestral domains; what are the sacrifices that we need to make as Christians to be able to share power)
- Dialogue with the powerful in our context (government, military, business) etc.
- Dialogue in terms of the alternative future, dialogue of building the future

I believe that we are being challenged by the current realities in Mindanao to use the grounding and gains in terms of improved relationships (achieved through years of engaging Muslims and indigenous people) to move towards structural transformation and eventually achievement of just peace in Mindanao.

Reflecting on the demands and needs among Christians in Mindanao – in view of the current discourse on the aspirations of the Muslims in Mindanao for their self-determination and the IPs for affirmation of their rights to their ancestral domains – informal discussions and reflections have taken place among grassroots Catholic peacebuilders. One of the strategic steps that we are already undertaking is to increase more intra-dialogue activities within the Christian/Catholic community to provide the impetus and grounding for solidarity and support to the historical demands of Muslims and IPs. This is not an easy task. But we continue to hope.

Last March 30 to April 2, 28 Muslim, Christian, and indigenous peacebuilders involved in interreligious dialogue work in Mindanao gathered together to engage in a reflective learning process to celebrate accomplishments, distill lessons, assess challenges, as well as re-envision their direction within the next 10 years.

The community of peacebuilders likened their involvement in dialogue as a journey. A journey that has enriched them as Mindanaons - but is fraught with uncertainty. They are not uncertain of when they will arrive at their envisioned destination and uncertain of what they will encounter along the way. But they have owned this as a mission – a mission that will be sustained because of God’s guidance and blessing.

Thank you very much

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