

Reflections From The Periphery: God's love for the people and Nations of Asia"

by

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Introduction

In the Gospel of St Matthew, Our Lord Jesus Christ provides a clear and beautiful vision of how He wants us to live and behave towards others when He says: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25: 35-40).

In Myanmar today there are still too many people who are hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and in prison. Too many who are displaced or homeless, too many who have been trafficked or have become addicted to drugs, too many who are enslaved, too many who have been raped or tortured, too many whose land has been taken from them, too many who have been driven off their land and displaced, too many killed, too many

who face daily injustice. As a priest of the Church and a servant of Christ, it is my responsibility – literally where possible, and metaphorically or spiritually through acts of solidarity – to feed, clothe, care for and visit them. And such acts of mercy must always be accompanied by a search for justice. As Pope Francis has said, “True mercy, the mercy God gives to us and teaches us, demands justice; it demands that the poor find the way to be poor no longer.”

I am a religious leader not a politician, and as Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, “the Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State”. Nevertheless, as he goes on to argue, “at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice ... The promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply”. As the former Chief Rabbi in the United Kingdom Lord Sacks put it in his book *The Home We Build Together*: “Religion is about the exercise of conscience. Politics is about the exercise of power. When a nation seeks to accommodate more than one system of religion, it must separate faith from power ... The wise remember what they should never have forgotten, that the voice of the prophet speaks truth to power. It does not use power to impose truth.”

It is therefore in that spirit that I write, to express the deep concerns of the Church about the challenges facing the people of Myanmar today, particularly as the country prepares for the

next election in 2020. I do so without taking any particular side except that of peace, justice, reconciliation, human dignity and love. I do so inspired by the words in *Deus Caritas Est*, that God is love, that the Church is a living force “alive with the love enkindled by the Spirit of Christ” and that “anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour”. I open my heart to every person in Myanmar, all of whom are my brothers and sisters. I hold open my hands of friendship, ready to offer help to anyone who needs me and whom I am able to help. Let us work together to end violence and terror in our country, and to build a Myanmar where every man, woman, and child of every race and religion born on Myanmar soil is recognized both as our fellow citizen and as our brother and sister in humanity. I pledge to renew my efforts to that end, and I extend my hand to any of my brothers and sisters of any race or religion who will join with me.

Rights and duties

“It is from the inner wellspring of love that the values of truth, freedom and justice are born and grow,” says the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. “Human life in society is ordered, bears fruits of goodness and responds to human dignity when it is founded on truth; when it is lived in justice, that is, in the effective respect of rights and in the faithful carrying out of corresponding duties; when it is animated by selflessness, which makes the needs and requirements of others seem as one's own and intensifies the communion of spiritual values and the concern for material necessities; when it is brought about in the freedom that befits

the dignity of men and women, prompted by their rational nature to accept responsibility for their actions. These values constitute the pillars which give strength and consistency to the edifice of life and deeds: they are values that determine the quality of every social action and institution.”

For most of the past five decades, the people of Myanmar have not known freedom. Their rights, dignity and identity have been repressed. And for most of the past seven decades, the people of Myanmar have not known peace, as civil war has raged in one part of the country or another.

Seven years ago we saw what we thought was the beginning of a new dawn. As political prisoners were released, ceasefires were signed, space for civil society and the media relaxed and a dialogue between political leaders led to the first credible elections in a quarter of a century and the election of a democratic, civilian-led government in 2015.

But in recent years very dark clouds have appeared again, overshadowing the flickers of light that had begun to emerge. Continuing conflict, continuing abuses, and the spread of religious and racial hatred threaten the hopes, freedoms and dignity of people throughout the country. And so I say again what I said in my Christmas homily five years ago: “Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to seek your rights to dignity. Do not be afraid of resisting injustice. Do not be afraid to dream, to imagine a new Myanmar where justice and righteousness flow like a river”. The Church stands to serve the nation, and empowering the vulnerable is our aim.

Myanmar is a wounded nation, a bleeding nation. It still suffers from old wounds, and yet new wounds have been inflicted upon us. Until we achieve real freedom – freedom from fear – we will never be able to heal. Until gross violations of human rights cease, we will never be without fear. Until every woman in every part of the country can go about her daily life without fear of being raped or trafficked, we will never be free. Until every journalist can perform their duties without fear of arrest and imprisonment, no one is free. Until every person of every religion and ethnicity can know that they have an equal stake in the future of the country, based on equal rights and respect, our wounds will continue to fester. It is time then to seek true peace, based on real justice and genuine freedom.

But with rights come duties. With freedom comes responsibility. We all have duties to one another, our families, communities and nation. Every right is balanced by a duty. This is because we are all – every single one of us, everywhere – made in the image of God. The *Imago Dei* within each of us means that no one – not one single human being – should be condemned as ‘untouchable’, marginalised as ‘unclean’, looked down upon as ‘inferior’ or disregarded as a ‘foreigner’, an ‘immigrant’, a ‘displaced’ person or a ‘stateless’ person. Even where people are displaced, they are not misplaced. Each one of us, from conception until natural death, has an innate dignity and therefore a right to life – no exceptions at all and, as God does not make mistakes, in His unconditional love, none of us is a reject or untouchable in His eyes.”

And yet throughout the world, and around Myanmar, the *Imago Dei* is trampled upon mercilessly on a daily basis. In some societies, there is the evil of a caste system which consigns some human beings to a seemingly unalterable life at the very bottom of the economic ladder, even outside society. In others, the foreigner, the immigrant, the refugee is rejected or subjected to vile racist abuse. In still other societies, those with disabilities are often ignored or mistreated.

Jean Vanier, the founder of the remarkable *L'Arche* community, who died earlier this year, has much to teach us on this. In his book *Signs of the Times: Seven Paths of Hope for a Troubled World*, Jean Vanier writes: “When the strong and the weak live together, a compassionate love is born: mutual help passes through weakened bodies. The stronger help the old to get up and go to bed; they help those with a disability to shower, shave, to get dressed. The weaker people awaken tenderness in the hearts of the stronger; they transform them into 'real' people, capable of true compassion. The stronger reveal to the weaker their deepest human value. So each person, weak or strong, becomes someone uniquely valuable. At the heart of society's ills is a call to create more community ... A coming together of those at the top of society and those at the bottom: that is what we need today”. In a world where youth should certainly be encouraged to pursue their dreams, there is at the same time a timeless value in traditional respect for the wisdom of elders.

“Freedom is the highest sign in man of his being made in the divine image,” says the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. “Freedom is exercised in relationships between human beings. Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. The value of freedom, as an expression of the singularity of each human person, is respected when every member of society is permitted to fulfil his personal vocation; to seek the truth and profess his religious, cultural and political ideas; to express his opinions; to choose his state of life and, as far as possible, his line of work; to pursue initiatives of an economic, social or political nature. This must take place within a “strong juridical framework” within the limits imposed by the common good and public order, and, in every case, in a manner characterized by responsibility.”

Our freedoms cannot be secured, nor can they be protected, without the rule of law. But it is important to understand what the rule of law means. It does not mean that the people obey the law while the rulers commit injustice with impunity. That is rule by law. The rule of law means everyone – the powerful and the powerless – is equal before the law.

Freedom is endangered when lies are told about a people. There will always be groups who seek to exploit a generous welcome and a State has the right to resist when violence is deployed against it. But this can never become a substitute

for finding wise accommodations and creative solutions. If it is able to promote genuine integration and provide protection, to all who are genuinely entitled to live under its roof, a diverse society such as Myanmar can become a shining light to other nations.

When preachers turn messages of love into sermons of hate, freedom for all of us – not only those who are the targets of such vitriolic campaigns – is diminished. Freedom can only be protected when truth is told. In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Pope St John Paul II asserted that “truth and freedom either go together hand in hand or together they perish in misery”. The issue of human freedom, he says, is “fundamental”.

And the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*, signed earlier this year by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, reinforces this: “Freedom is a right of every person: each individual enjoys the freedom of belief, thought, expression and action. The pluralism and the diversity of religions, colour, sex, race and language are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings. This divine wisdom is the source from which the right to freedom of belief and the freedom to be different derives. Therefore, the fact that people are forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture must be rejected, as too the imposition of a cultural way of life that others do not accept; Justice based on mercy is the path to follow in order to achieve a dignified life to which every human being has a right; Dialogue, understanding and the widespread promotion of a culture of tolerance, acceptance of others and of living

together peacefully would contribute significantly to reducing many economic, social, political and environmental problems that weigh so heavily on a large part of humanity...The concept of citizenship is based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice. It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship and reject the discriminatory use of the term minorities which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. Its misuse paves the way for hostility and discord; it undoes any successes and takes away the religious and civil rights of some citizens who are thus discriminated against... It is likewise important to reinforce the bond of fundamental human rights in order to help ensure a dignified life for all.”

As Nelson Mandela said, “I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom.” Or as William Lloyd Garrison put it, “wherever there is a human being, I see God-given rights inherent in that being.”

Peace

Before his betrayal, arrest, torture and crucifixion, our Lord Jesus Christ held out his hands and said: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you ... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid” (John 14: 27).

Yet all too often our hearts are troubled, and our world seems far from peace. My own country, Myanmar, has not known real peace for many, many decades. For seventy years and more, war has been waged in one corner of this beautiful land or another. Yet in the hearts and souls of every person in Myanmar, of every race and religion, lies a yearning for peace.

“When we look at modern man, we have to face the fact...that modern man suffers from a kind of poverty of the spirit, which stands in glaring contrast to his scientific and technological abundance; We've learned to fly the air like birds, we've learned to swim the seas like fish, and yet we haven't learned to walk the Earth as brothers and sisters...” Those words of Martin Luther King Jr are so true for Myanmar today.

For the Church, peace is at the heart of our mission. But peace must always be accompanied with justice and freedom. Without justice, there can be no peace. In the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s publication *The Church and Human Rights*, we are told: “If we Christians wish to be peacemakers and to spread harmony among nations, we cannot ‘remain indifferent in the face of the many grave and often systematic violations of human rights’. ‘We cannot conceal our serious anxiety at the persistence and aggravation of situations we bitterly deplore’.” And in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* we are told: “Peace is the fruit of justice Peace is threatened when man is not given all that is due him as a human person, when his dignity is not respected and when civil life is not directed to the common good. The defence and promotion of human rights is essential for the building up of a peaceful society and the integral development of individuals, peoples and nations.” As Pope Francis has said, “We are all equal – all of us We all have the same rights. When we do not see this, society is unjust. It does not follow the rule of justice, and where there is no justice, there cannot be peace. I would like to repeat this with you: where there is no justice, there is no peace!”

Myanmar is a beautiful land of diverse ethnicities, languages, cultures and religions. If we are to achieve peace, we must learn to love the diversity of our country and seek unity within it. True peace and real freedom, after all, hinge on respect for ethnic and religious diversity. No society can be truly democratic, free and peaceful if it does not respect – and even celebrate – political, racial and religious diversity, as well as protect the basic human rights of every single person, regardless of race, religion or gender.

I love gardens. When I have any free moment, away from the demands of speeches and travel and religious and pastoral duties, I like to amble in the garden of Archbishop's House in Yangon, quietly, prayerfully, in an oasis of peace. I helped to design, plant and cultivate that garden. When I travel around the world, if I discover a garden I discover a home, a place of rest, a place of peace. A few years ago, in the midst of a busy tour of the United Kingdom, I spend two days in a tranquil, beautiful home in the countryside, with nothing required of me and with time to breathe in the scent and take in the colours of the array of flora before me. I wanted to linger there longer.

Of course, the Bible begins in a garden, Jesus' suffering is prefigured in a garden and the Bible draws to a close in a garden, when, after his Resurrection and conquest of death, Mary Magdalene mistakes Our Lord for a gardener."

I see Myanmar as a garden. In a garden, flowers of different colours, shapes, sizes and needs grow alongside each other.

Each one individually is beautiful, and the individual beauty of each particular flower is not denied or suppressed by the collective beauty and colour of the garden itself. Each one can be appreciated, and taken as a whole they can inspire. Flowers do not fight, compete, displace each other or dominate each other. Only the weeds threaten them. So in creating the garden of Myanmar, we must cherish the individual beauty of each flower, water and tend the soil which we all share with love and compassion, and prune ourselves to ensure that the beauty of our diversity flourishes and is celebrated.

That means pursuing a dialogue based on trust-building and respect. A dialogue of equals. A dialogue in which the grievances of the ethnic nationalities over many years are listened to and addressed. A dialogue which seeks a political solution that accords the ethnic nationalities autonomy and decision-making in a federal system. A dialogue which ensures that natural resources are shared and distributed to benefit the people, rather than plundered and hoarded by a small elite. A dialogue from which no one feels excluded. Only such a dialogue, such a peace process, has a chance to healing wounds, building trust and leading to a meaningful peace.

As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said in her speech welcoming Pope Francis to Myanmar in November 2017, “our nation is a rich tapestry of different peoples, languages and religions, woven on a backdrop of vast natural potential”. She promised that her government aims “to bring out the beauty of our diversity and to make it our strength, by protecting rights, fostering tolerance, ensuring security for all.”

I know from first-hand experience what this means. I was born in Monhla village, near Shwebo in Sagaing Division, near Mandalay. Monhla is a village with a mix of Catholic and Buddhist people. My father was a farmer, who died when I was just two years old. My mother was a tailor, who was loved by the entire village. She never quarrelled with neighbours. She inspired me every night when she told stories of saints and priests. I was also inspired by my parish priest, Don Luwi, who loved my parents and loved me too. He taught me the catechism when I was about five years old. I wanted to be like him.

Growing up in the Catholic Church, I became accustomed to the concept of unity in diversity. I was educated by Salesians and, inspired by the example of Don Bosco, who lived an active life caring for the young and the poor, I became a Salesian myself. But the Church is a house of many rooms, and I cherish the diversity of intellectual, spiritual and vocational callings expressed in the different religious traditions of the one Church – the Jesuits, the Dominicans, the Benedictines, the Franciscans, the Carmelites and many others. We are one Church, but with a wide range of expressions of being the Church, and the same is true of Myanmar.

I am a little unusual in that I am a minority wherever I go. Within the Church, where most Christians are from the Karen, Karenni, Chin, Kachin and other ethnic groups, I am in a minority as a Bamar. But among my racial group, the Bamar, although they are the majority in the country, I am a minority

among a Buddhist-majority population. Yet I learned to cherish this diversity.

Sometimes I have encountered difficulties. Sometimes as a Christian among the mainly Buddhist Bamar I have had trouble. Sometimes as a Bamar among the Christian community I encountered suspicion on the part of Karens, Kachins, Chins and others. I do not blame them – the history of conflict has led to these scars.

But throughout my priesthood, I have been able to live with and to love my fellow human beings throughout Myanmar regardless of race and religion. Most of my priesthood was spent in the ethnic states. As a young priest near Lashio, I learned the local language – Maru – and after a week I gave a homily in Maru. As bishop of Lashio, I founded a new congregation – the Brothers and Sisters of St Paul – with the purpose of sharing the Good News of Jesus with those who have not heard of Him. Our brothers and sisters in this community have worked in remote areas, assisting with education, health and evangelisation. Today we have over one hundred sisters and more than 30 brothers and priests, in six dioceses. Their charism is to go where there are no churches and Christians, and to go to the most abandoned and remote areas.

And then as bishop of Patheingyi, I found myself at the heart of the conflict between the military and the Karen people. I was constantly preaching homilies on reconciliation, forgiveness and unity.

When I became Archbishop of Yangon, I continued to pursue a mission to reach out to the poor and the oppressed: the lost, the last and the least. I have always sought to speak out for justice, freedom and human dignity, for everyone. Because the *Imago Dei* is so central to my understanding of the mission of the Church.

My mission has always been clear – to see people in Myanmar freed to love and serve others. To achieve this, we need to rid ourselves and the nation of evil forces: sin, addiction, injustice, discrimination and unjust military force. In order to enjoy full freedom, there must be truth in everything. I took as my motto as a priest the words “*Omnia possum in Eo*” – “I can do all things in Him” – from Philippians 4: 13. *This continues as a Bishop and as Cardinal.*

Pope Francis, in his speech in Naypyidaw in November 2017, acknowledged that: “The arduous process of peacebuilding and national reconciliation can only advance through a commitment to justice and respect for human rights ... The future of Myanmar must be peace, a peace based on respect for the dignity and rights of each member of society, respect for each ethnic group and its identity, respect for the rule of law, and respect for a democratic order that enables each individual and every group – none excluded – to offer its legitimate contribution to the common good.” He is absolutely right.

In *The Dignity of Difference*, Lord Sacks says that “in our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not

threatened, by difference.” We must learn this in Myanmar, if peace is to have a chance.

Defence

A lasting peace depends, at least in part, upon a proper understanding of the legitimate role of a nation’s armed forces. While the Church teaches clearly in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* that “a war of aggression is intrinsically immoral”, a State that has been attacked has “the right and duty to organise a defence even using the force of arms”.

In the Church’s “just war” theory, the use of force in self-defence is legitimate, provided it is proportionate and a last resort. The Church also teaches that there is also “the duty to protect and help innocent victims who are not able to defend themselves from acts of aggression”. Too often – including in Myanmar – civilians become the targets of war, resulting in their displacement and sometimes brutal massacre. As the Church teaches, “in such tragic circumstances, humanitarian aid must reach the civilian population and must never be used to influence those receiving it; the good of the human person must take precedence over the interests of the parties to the conflict.”

This specific message needs to be heard in Myanmar. There are areas of the country, particularly in Kachin, Shan and Rakhine states, where people in desperate need are cut off from assistance, where humanitarian access is denied. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the conflicts between different groups in our country, no one should be denied the

most basic of rights, the right to food, shelter, medicine and education.

If Myanmar is to secure peace, democracy and prosperity, we must work for a transition in which the military comes to understand its role as defending the country, not ruling it. Currently due to our fragile democracy we do need the assistance and protection of the military

Every nation has the right to defend itself. Its armed forces are established to uphold the Constitution and the rule of law. In such harmonious societies the armed forces are always there to safeguard freedom, to uphold liberty, and to be accountable to the Head of State, to Parliament, and to the Judiciary. Think of the extraordinary example of our great national hero, Aung San, the founder of the Myanmar army, the leader of the movement for independence of our country and the father of the democracy leader and State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Jesus says (John 15:13) : “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

Aung San laid down his life for his nation in an ultimate act of political service.

He always believed that the army he founded was there to serve the people.

As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has said, her father wanted the army to “abide by principles of justice and honour ... He never intended the army to meddle in government.” Striking

the right balance, Aung San sought a federal system for Myanmar, explaining the vision of the Panglong Agreement in a speech in the Jubilee Hall, saying: “In my opinion it will not be feasible to set up a unitary state. We must set up a Union with properly regulated provisions to safeguard the rights of the national minorities.”

We must all return to this founding vision, recalling those famous words from the Bible’s Book of Proverbs 29:18
“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

None of us, however powerful we may be, is above the law. Political, civic, religious and military leaders must lead by example never forgetting that all men and women are accountable before God, and God is a God of justice, a God who abhors injustice.

There is an interesting encounter in the New Testament between Jesus and a soldier (Matthew 8:9).

The soldier- who wants Jesus to heal his sick servant - knows what it means to exercise authority: “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it.”

Jesus knows that the soldier is a good man who understands the limitations of his authority and the accountability of each of us to a higher authority.

The Son of God responds by using His far greater authority to completely heal the servant of the soldier.

Jesus didn't repudiate the soldier or deny his request. He respected him because the soldier lived with integrity understanding the limitations of his authority.

I also meditate on the story of Lazarus and the rich man told in the Gospel of St Luke (16: 19-31). The ultimate damnation of the rich man, who refuses to give even the crumbs off his table to the poor man, is a lesson we would all do well to reflect upon.

As Pope Francis was mentioning to our General Commander during his visit to Myanmar in November 2017 that he has the noble task of strengthening the civil government and Building peace in Myanmar.

As I have mentioned recently:

“ Let justice and peace flow like Irrawaddy River. Let true political and economic federalism, bring trust among communities. Let there be transparency. When the government ensures fairness through true participatory democracy, our wounds will heal, conflicts will become history. All armies can make their guns silent. Wage a war for peace. One army is enough and that army needs to be an army of justice and peace.

No army in a civilised society can be above the law; no soldier in a humane society can be allowed to commit crimes with impunity. If soldiers are to be respected, they must take their

place in the barracks and not in the legislature, serving the country under the authority of an elected civilian government. In democratic societies political leaders rely heavily on the wisdom of their Chiefs of Staff, and such respect is vitally important, but it can only be achieved if it is well-established that the Chiefs of Staff serve under the authority of elected civilian leaders and do not threaten them. Justice and the rule of law must be enhanced. For ultimately, all men and women are accountable before God, and God is a God of justice, a God who abhors injustice.

We should work for a society where the conduct of those who serve in uniform leads to them being respected and loved, rather than feared. We should strive for a society where our soldiers have the humility and faith of the Roman centurion who came to Jesus to ask him to heal his servant. As we hear in the Gospel of St Matthew (8: 5-13), when Jesus offered to come and heal the soldier's servant, the soldier replied in words we repeat in every Holy Mass just before receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion: "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed." Jesus is so impressed by the centurion's faith that he heals the servant.

It is my joy as a pastor to lead souls to salvation, a gift that is available to absolutely everyone. No one is beyond redemption. Saul, one of the most zealous persecutors of the early Church encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus and became St Paul who, with St Peter, is the founding pillar of the Church alongside our Lord. St Peter, too, shows that no

one is beyond redemption – he denied our Lord three times before His crucifixion, yet it was on Peter, the ‘Rock’, that Jesus decided to build His Church, declaring that the gates of Hell would never prevail against it. Yet there cannot be salvation without a change of heart. This is as true for the mighty as it is for the meek. The Sacrament of Reconciliation calls us to seek forgiveness lest we too forfeit the joys of Eternal Life. When we do seek forgiveness, reconciliation is there, unconditionally, and God’s love is limitless.

Religious freedom

All human rights and freedoms are essential and intertwined. But if there is one that is foundational, it is freedom of religion or belief. As I have said before, freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as detailed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is perhaps the most precious and most basic freedom of all. Without the freedom to choose, practise, share and change your beliefs, there is no freedom. It was Tertullian who said in the year 212 that: “It is a fundamental human right that every man should worship according to his own convictions,” and it was Thomas Jefferson who said in 1819: “The constitutional freedom of religion is the most inalienable and sacred of all human rights.”

In 1965 the Church, at the Second Vatican Council, put into writing an essential teaching on defending religious freedom for all, in *Dignitatis Humanae*. It bases the defence of religious freedom – the duty of every person to search for the Truth, and the freedom to pursue the Truth according to conscience – upon the dignity of the human person. It states: “Religious

freedom, in turn, which men demand as necessary to fulfil their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society. ... The human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.”

It is no coincidence that this conciliar document had its origins in the encounter of Pope St John XXIII with the survivors of the Armenian genocide. I have always found this encounter, and St John’s personal efforts to save Jews from the Holocaust, a deeply moving example.

It is why on Holy Thursday last year, at the traditional washing of the feet ceremony on the night before we remember the Passion of our Lord, I washed the feet not only of Catholics but of Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. In a society where a hierarchy of religions, a hierarchy of status and a hierarchy of prejudice are dominant, this was a deliberately symbolic act.

Similarly, it is why I chose to turn the celebration of my episcopal Jubilee, a quarter of a century as a bishop, into an initiative to promote inter-faith relations in my home village of Monhla, four hours by rough roads from Mandalay. One particular evening we were joined by a Buddhist monk, a Muslim leader, a Hindu and a Protestant pastor and together we spoke of our vision for inter-faith harmony and religious

freedom. Together we lit a candle for peace. Those sort of gestures, symbolic acts, send a message to grassroots communities and as long as they are followed up with grassroots action and community life together, they make a difference.

For not only are we to have the right to religious freedom, but – according to *Dignitatus Humanae* – religion has a beneficial role to play in society and so “injury, therefore, is done to the human person and to the very order established by God for human life, if the free exercise of religion is denied in society ... Government ought to take account of the religious life of the people and show it favour, since the function of government is to make provision for the common good.”

In Myanmar we face growing threats to religious freedom. Preachers of hatred incite discrimination and violence in the name of a peaceful religion, unjust laws and regulations impose restrictions on religious freedom for minorities, and identity politics has mixed race, religion and politics into a dangerous cocktail of hate and intolerance.

This is true not only in Myanmar, but throughout Asia – the world’s most diverse continent, where all the world’s major religions meet, and where a majority in one country is a minority in another. Across our continent we have seen growing intolerance, which threatens the fabric that holds our societies together.

Those of us, of whatever religion or country, who believe in human dignity, human rights and religious freedom for all, must unite to defend those values for everyone, everywhere.

As Alissa Wahid, the daughter of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), former President of Indonesia, and I said in an article we co-authored in the Wall Street Journal three years ago, “We must learn to separate race, religion and politics. We must speak out for the freedom of religion or belief for all.”

Lord Sacks says in his book *To Heal a Fractured World*: “Against the fundamentalism of hate, we must create a counter-fundamentalism of love ... ‘A little light’, said the Jewish mystics, ‘drives away much darkness’. And when light is joined to light, mine to yours and yours to others, the dance of flames, each so small, yet together so intricately beautiful, begins to show that hope is not an illusion. Evil, injustice, oppression, cruelty do not have the final word.”

Let us build a Myanmar based on the fundamentalism of love and light, not hatred and darkness.

Let us build a Myanmar where hope is not an illusion, and where we can join hands, regardless of ethnicity or religion, in peace and solidarity.

Let us build a Myanmar where, in the words of *Dignitatis Humanae*, we form people who are “lovers of true freedom” for “a society which promotes religious freedom will be enlivened and enriched; one which doesn’t will decay.”

Let us renew our efforts to build a new Myanmar, putting decades of conflict and hatred and repression behind us.

Let us unite as a nation based on the values of *Metta* (loving kindness) and *Karuna* (compassion) from the Buddhist tradition, of *salam* (peace) from the Islamic tradition, and the

Christian principle of loving one's neighbour as oneself, and loving one's enemy.

Other challenges

Myanmar faces many other challenges – too many to explore in detail here. The tyranny of drugs is killing many people and demands our attention, through works of education, rehabilitation and mercy. The exploitation of our environment threatens livelihoods. Pope Francis has called on us to awake to this challenge in his encyclical *Laudato si*, and I have spoken before on an “environmental holocaust”. Who is most affected by ecological degradation? The poor. I continue to plead, specifically, for the Myitsone dam project to be stopped, as if it proceeds millions stand to lose their land and livelihood and face environmental and economic disaster.

Education is an area which needs much investment. The denial of education to young people in Myanmar has exposed them to modern forms of slavery, drugs and trafficking. Knowledge is power. Myanmar was once one of the most highly educated nations in the region, our universities the envy of others. But today, 60 percent of our children do not finish primary school. That cannot be allowed to continue.

Myanmar is not alone in these or other challenges. Around the world 27 million people live in slavery, including 8.4 million children; 700,000 people are trafficked every year; at least 12.3 million people are victims of forced labour worldwide, and human trafficking is the third largest source of income for organised crime, generating \$7 billion per year. These are worldwide challenges, but one which impact Myanmar

greatly. Over a million people from Myanmar are refugees outside their country, the fourth-largest refugee population in the world, and more than a million are internally displaced within Myanmar. Over 40 percent of the population live in poverty.

It is time for us as a nation to confront these challenges and to put an end to the abuse of human dignity, to seek peace and reconciliation, to love freedom and pursue truth, to celebrate diversity and the dignity of difference and to cherish creation.

In doing so all of us – from whatever part of society we come – face an element of risk. Speaking as a religious leader, I acknowledge that there are times when the tactics and approach may change. There may be times when I speak up publicly, and other times when I choose to do so privately. There may be times when I speak boldly, other times when nuance is required.

Pope Pius XII, for example, wrestled with this dilemma during the Holocaust and has been criticised, wrongly, ever since for the false perception of staying silent. Yet the reality is that Pius XII, according to former Israeli consul and historian Pinchas Lapide, “was instrumental in saving at least 700,000, but probably as many as 860,000 Jews from certain death at Nazi hands.” The Nazis themselves observed that Pius XII “has always been hostile to National Socialism” and was “Jew loving.”

After the Second World War Pius XII was thanked by survivors of the Holocaust and tributes included one from Israel’s first President, Chaim Weizmann and Isaac Herzog,

Chief Rabbi of Israel. Rome's Chief Rabbi, Israel Zolli, became a Catholic and took the Pope's name as a tribute to him. At the time of his death, in 1958, Golda Meir said "When fearful martyrdom came to our people in the decade of Nazi terror, the voice of the Pope was raised for the victims." The Jewish Chronicle recorded: "Confronted by the monstrous cruelties of Nazism, Fascism and Communism, he repeatedly proclaimed the virtues of humanity and compassion...many hundreds of fugitive Jews found sanctuary in the Vatican by the Nazis. Such actions will always be remembered." Albert Einstein said: "In 1940 he said: "only the Church stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign for suppressing the truth...I am forced thus to confess that what I once despised I now praise unreservedly." Pius XII focused on actions more than words, and calculated that at times it was better to act effectively rather than speak loudly. Only yesterday we marked the feast of St. Maxilian Kolbe, murdered at Auschwitz by the Nazis. He is Patron saint of political prisoners, of families, of journalists, and of the pro-life movement. He warned that "The most deadly poison of our times is indifference." Let that not be said of us.

St John Paul II, on the other hand, opted for a much more public prophetic role, speaking out continuously, courageously and unwaveringly against the repressive policies of the Communists. Even though his opponents tried to kill him, he bravely continued to speak truth to power. When he visited his native Poland for the first time as Pope in June 1979, he famously preached a homily in Warsaw's Victory Square

which ended with this prayer: “And I cry—I who am a Son of the land of Poland and who am also Pope John Paul II—I cry from all the depths of this Millennium, I cry on the vigil of Pentecost: Let your Spirit descend. Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth, the face of this land.”

His tireless and outspoken defence of freedom is widely believed to have been a major factor that led to the collapse of Communism across Eastern Europe, sparking as it did the ‘Solidarity’ movement in Poland and beyond. I today make that same prayer of St John Paul II, only in this case for Myanmar, praying: “I cry, as a Son of Myanmar: Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the earth, the face of this land.”

These are dilemmas and choices we all face, weighing up the risks and benefits of taking a particular approach. In all this our sole concern is to do good and to do no harm, to benefit and not endanger those for whom we have a responsibility, to enhance the prospects for dialogue leading to peace and not hinder them, and above all to seek the promotion of human dignity for all.

Though the approach may vary, the values and objectives should never waiver. There are risks involved but, as Pope Pius XII said, “to live without risk is to risk not living”. For as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act”.

Moreover, we are not just to speak against evil, we are to work to change the systems that allow evil to succeed. “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels

of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself,” said Bonhoeffer.

In his final encyclical *Meminisse iuvat* (“It is Helpful to Recall”), Pope Pius XII reminded us that “religion bids men live in charity, justice, and obedience to law; it condemns and outlaws vice; it incites citizens to the pursuit of virtue and thereby rules and moderates their public and private conduct. Religion teaches mankind that a better distribution of wealth should be had, not by violence or revolution, but by reasonable regulations, so that the proletarian classes which do not yet enjoy life's necessities or advantages may be raised to a more fitting status without social strife.” It is in accordance with these principles that I have written this letter.

Above all, this letter is shaped by love, infused with a desire for justice and inspired by mercy. Myanmar needs all three – love, justice and mercy – desperately. Three years ago we celebrated the Year of Mercy, during which Pope Francis reminded us that “the name of God is Mercy” and that “the Church must be a place of mercy, freely given, where everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel.”

The Church in Myanmar stands ready to be a place of mercy for all, to be a centre of reconciliation, to defend the rights of everyone everywhere of every religion and ethnicity, no exceptions, and to tear down barriers and move fences and counter hatred with love.

And as my Episcopal motto puts it – *Omnia possum in Eo* (“I can do all things in Him”).

Charles BO

Archbishop of Yangon

MYANMAR

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Feast of the Assumption of Our Blessed Mother Mary