

Feature

Shouting from the heart

I watched the Pope navigate a political minefield in Burma. What I saw was a man bravely preaching Christ's message, with deeds as much as words

BENEDICT ROGERS

As we approach the birth of our Lord once again, we would do well to reflect on the multiple dimensions to His character, all of which are needed in the world today.

Our Lord is the baby born in the manger, coming as Emmanuel – “God with us” – to be with His people. He is the perfect dissident, who challenged the world’s rules and paid the ultimate price, liberating and saving us by so doing. He is our Advocate in heaven, pleading our cause but unafraid to tell it like it is too – turning over the tables in the temple in righteous anger. And he is the Prince of Peace.

It is through the lens of these multiple dimensions to Jesus Christ that we should view events and tragedies in the world and the response of the Church. At times the Church should act with the innocence of newborn infants and doves, albeit with the wisdom of serpents too. At other times the Church should speak out boldly and sacrificially against injustice, as dissidents and advocates, pleading a case, defending the vulnerable and, when appropriate, turning over tables in fury. At other times, the Church is the peacemaker, mediating between different communities to bring reconciliation and healing.

All of these roles are accompanied by danger. At a minimum they are met by some with cynicism and charges of naïveté. In extremity, they may lead to martyrdom – as with Fr Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero or my friend Shahbaz Bhatti. Sometimes they result in promotion and success, accompanied by new challenges – as with St John Paul II, Dorothy Day, East Timor’s Nobel laureate Bishop Carlos Belo, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and William Wilberforce. We would do well to study all of these saints and martyrs, from Catholic and Protestant traditions, past and present, this Advent season as we reflect on a troubled and turbulent world.

Sometimes different individuals, or different parts of the Church, play these different roles, in tandem or in conflict with each other. Sometimes the context dictates which role is most appropriate at a given moment. At times, though, one individual can combine all these elements. That is what Pope Francis did on his recent visit to Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh.

Francis came to Burma and Bangladesh



Pope Francis in Burma: ‘Do not be afraid to ask questions that make people think’

– two countries riven with poverty, conflict, religious intolerance and enormous injustice – as an advocate and defender of the victims of inhumanity. He stood very clearly with the marginalised. Yet he did so with the gentleness of

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the baby in the manger and with the message of reconciliation inspired by the Prince of Peace.

As I stood among hundreds of smiling Burmese from different ethnic groups on the street in Rangoon to see the Holy Father drive past, waving, on his way into the city from the airport, and as I stood among more than 150,000 people at the

Mass at a racecourse two days later, I shared the joy of Burma’s Catholics at this historic occasion.

No pope has ever visited Burma before. Francis’s visit came after a series of historic moments for the local Church – a celebration of its 500 years, its first beatification and the appointment of its first cardinal. And for me, this was not just of historic interest but also of personal significance, because I became a Catholic in Burma, inspired and received into the Church by Cardinal Charles Bo, in St Mary’s Cathedral, on Palm Sunday 2013. So to see Pope Francis in the country of my spiritual rebirth was a deep joy.

And yet the context of his visit was heartbreaking. The crisis unleashed in Rakhine state has been described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”, with signs of genocide.

In other parts of the country, particularly in Kachin and Shan states, crimes against humanity continue. The hopes of peace and democratisation in this fragile country, still dominated by the military, appear to be fading.

So often joy and grief walk hand in hand, as they do in the Christmas story. The birth of the Christ Child was followed immediately by the slaughter of innocents. The infant was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. God who came to walk among us was born into scandal as the child of a virgin and as a refugee. The light that shines in the darkness could not be overcome. In the figure of the Pope, a flicker of that light was shone in a dark place.

The theme for the papal visit, festooned on banners and T-shirts, was “Love and Peace”, and that was his consistent message. In his speech to government officials, diplomats and civil society Francis emphasised justice and human rights. In his first homily he spoke of healing. In his speech to bishops his message was reconciliation and the Church’s prophetic role in defending human dignity. His address to a gathering of Buddhist monks emphasised mutual respect and religious freedom. And in his final Mass, he told Burma’s youth: “Do not be afraid to make a ruckus, to ask questions that make people think ... I want you to shout! But not with your voices ... with your lives, with your hearts.”

Francis was criticised for not making a ruckus about Burma’s current crisis: the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, a severely persecuted Muslim minority. On the advice of the local Church, he did not refer to them by name, nor did he speak publicly about their plight, despite having done so in Rome on several occasions. Other persecuted ethnic groups, such as the Kachin, who are also suffering at the hands of Burma’s military, failed to get a mention too.

But no one who read the Pope’s speeches or observed his body language could have failed to miss the implicit message. He still shouted, but not with his voice. And since he chose not to name the Rohingyas, it was right that he did not name any group, but instead focused on human rights for everyone. He spoke with the voice of Christ the peacemaker.

It was in Bangladesh that the Pope recovered his voice, holding the hands of Rohingya refugees (right) and telling them: “The presence of God today is also called ‘Rohingya’.” He asked for forgiveness for the “indifference of the world” to their plight, and admitted later that he wept as he heard their testimonies of horrific violations. Some are asking, rightly, why the Pope didn’t go



Incarnation

From the remotest, coldest dawn, from a yellow eye,
sharp as the eagle’s, that sees each tiny one of us
scuttling in the black shadow of a protective wing,
You fall to Earth – blind. Those first nights
the short distance between her breast and face
is as far as You can see. She is Your first sight
of the world as man – the one pure sign
we have; all else is blackness. She only knows
Your Christ-eyes latching onto hers as fiercely
as Your gums clamp down for milk. The future scrabbles,
gnaws bloodthirstily like rats through the barn’s corners
and its eaves. But she is transfixed by Your skin
and insistence on her as the only visible, only beautiful thing –
the present moment; this is the first lesson of prayer.

Sally Read

to the refugee camps, an hour’s flight from Dhaka. “I would have liked to go,” Pope Francis answered. He spoke with the voice of Christ the advocate.

Many argue that Francis should have used “the R-word” in Burma. And in an ideal world he would have. But as the Pope explained, the reality is that, had he done so, doors would have been slammed in his face. He wanted his message – of peace, justice and human rights – to “arrive”, to be heard. Had he used the word, the Church in Burma might have become a target for angry ultra-nationalist Buddhists. He chose to exhibit Christ the gentle infant, and Christ the victim, rather than Christ the angry dissident turning over tables in the temple.

Pope Francis and the Holy See may be playing a long game, perhaps offering their good offices to mediate in Burma and to promote peace and inter-religious dialogue. Had he gone on the offensive, that bridge would have been burned before it was built.

It is clear that behind closed doors, Pope Francis was more forthcoming. He said that in private conversations he did “go beyond” his public remarks, to address specific human rights concerns. In his meeting with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the Burmese army, he “didn’t negotiate the truth”.

Significantly, Pope Francis also emphasised that he has “two types of meetings” – those where he goes to meet people, and those in which he receives them. The general requested the meeting. “And I received him. I never close the door.” He made it clear to the general that the army’s conduct – described by most commentators as crimes against humanity – “isn’t viable”. In these private meetings, Christ the peacemaker and Christ the advocate came together.

In an interview after the Pope’s departure, Cardinal Bo said that the fruits of his trip “are still to be seen”. At the very least his visit showcased Burma’s tiny 800,000-strong Church as a diverse and joyful community, engaged in addressing the challenges faced by the country’s 50 million people. If Francis’s message of love and peace influences the behaviour of those who heard it, and his more open advocacy outside the country for its most persecuted peoples awakens the world’s conscience, then his visit will have confounded his critics and proven a historic success.

If the Church can play a role in peace and reconciliation in Burma, then the trip will have been worthwhile. Time will tell. What is clear, however, is that Francis exhibited the light of Christ in all its multi-dimensional layers, in one of the darkest corners of the world. Let’s pray that that light grows and overcomes the darkness.

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