

Inter religious initiatives for Peace in Myanmar -

National Conference - 26,27 April 2017

Key Note Address : ***His Eminence Charles Cardinal Bo.***, Archbishop of Yangon

Peace, Shalom, Shanthi,

I am greatly honored to be among the lovers of peace, to be part of this sacred pilgrimage of all religions towards the Holy mountain of Peace. This is a great moment for the history of Myanmar, the people of Myanmar. This great nation has looked for this moment: all of us, coming from diverse backgrounds, various religions could come together to listen to one another, to explore the possibilities of promoting greater peace and prosperity to the present and future generation. This initiative is belated but this is an opportune time.

We have come not to count the wounds of the past, we have come to count the blessings of peace. We have come not to recall the nightmares of bygone eras, but to pursue the promise of peace for us and future generations. As Lord Buddha said “No matter how hard the past, you can always start again.” We wish to forget the wounds of the past and move ahead towards peace. Myanmar is in a sacred journey of comprehensive peace, justice to the weak and prosperity to all.

In this sacred journey, my dear brothers and sisters, we have come to celebrate our unity in diversity. We have come here to disprove some of the modern cynics who accuse religions as the cause of conflict. We are here to affirm that religions are path to inner and outer peace. Myanmar is a very religious and spiritual nation. It is the land of great natural religions, it is the land of Theravada Buddhism, the land of Vipassana, the land of so many other religions. It is a rainbow nation. The people of Myanmar have regularly listen to the religious discourses. The life and the witness of the religious leaders make lasting impact in the lives of our people.

In the recorded history of human beings for the last 2000 years, there was never total peace in the world. Even as we gather today millions are affected by war in the middle East. Our struggle as human beings is to live in peace. But conflict rages on. Brother against brother. The blood of Abel killed by his own brother Cain in the opening pages of the Bible is true in many parts of the world. Man seemed to have evolved with hatred as his primordial nature. Power, money and control contribute towards bleeding of nations. War killed more than 130 million in the 20th century. We do not know how many are killed or how many will be killed in the power games of the nations.

Great religions addressed this problem. Lord Buddha's great Marga towards Compassion and mercy is a great contribution towards bringing peace. Buddhism teaches compassion not only for the living beings, but even for living things like trees. In this country there are nearly 500,000 monks who can propagate the great message of Buddha in making compassion as the common religion of Myanmar. *There are 70,000 Buddhist nuns. Other religions like our Catholic Church has more than 2500 nuns, 700 priests.* Every day, those of us who take up fully time religious life have a great opportunity to spread the message of simplicity, service and sharing.

This conference brings together such religious leaders to engage in a dialogue for peace - and explore how religions can promote peace in this country, how religions can help other stakeholders to understand one another. We are not gathered as politicians, we are not gathered as state or non state armed groups. We are religious people, seeking the good of all.

My task is to open the doors of reflection for the next two days with the message : *My dear Myanmar People : **Peace is the way, Peace is the only Way. Let us heal one another, not wound one another.*** I am sure other speakers will fortify our quest for peace through their insights for peace in their religions. Everyone will have a chance to share their views.

I come from the Catholic Christian tradition. Peace for us is born of justice is matured in love. Pope Benedict assured that "Love - caritas - will always prove necessity, even in the most just society.... In addition to justice man needs, and will always need, love." Building peace, promoting peace is part of our faith traditions. The birth of Christ was announced with " Peace to all men" and when Jesus rose from the dead he had only one strong message to his followers : Peace! Blessed are the peace makers' said Jesus. With the great Francis of Assisi every Christian in Myanmar prays today : "Make me an instrument of peace - Where there is hatred let me bring love" Mahatma Gandhi the great apostle of Non Violence drew his inspiration from Christ's sermon on the Mount. As Christians we seek peace in this land. I invite all of you to pray with Francis of Assisi : 'Make me an instrument of Peace! Where there is hatred let me bring Love'.

1. The past is a wounded past, but religions can heal a nation for a future of hope

Our Land is a blessed land. It is a golden land. Shew Myanmar. Gold, jade, minerals above the ground and below the ground. God and nature have given us enough to make all of us rich and prosperous. We are the envy of many nations for the great beauty and vast natural resources. More than anything this nation is blessed with a glorious spiritual tradition and a people known world over for their grace and hospitality.

Despite all these blessings we have a wounded history : The hard fought freedom, won through great sacrifices had a shocking beginning. The founders of this nation were killed by hatred. The conflicts that started sixty years ago continue to pester parts of Myanmar. Shopping list of death is depressing : In every part of this country, hatred buried our youth in unknown graves. Thousands are refugees, thousands are internally displaced. Our conflicts and war turned what was once rich country into one of the poorest in the region. We have sent thousands of our youth into modern forms of slavery. The menace of drug is becoming a silent genocide. Should we continue to wound one another through hatred? Can we as a people heal one another? Can we impress on those who peddle hate speech to become ambassadors of peace? Can religions help to see each one of us not as a Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu but brothers and Sisters of this great nation? Can this nation provide peace and hope to all?

Our coming together is an attempt at democratizing peace making in this country. I do not think people to people there is great hatred. This was proved during major disasters. During the great Nargis disasters, Buddhist monks were saving all the villages, Christian groups were distributing aids to all the villages. Compassion was and is the common religion of Myanmar. We want to involve ordinary people, we want to bring the voice of our people to peace conferences. Our leaders are trying through Panglong Peace Conferences to bring the leaders. We welcome that. This our coming together is to impress upon those in power, those who make decisions that religions in this country desire peace and wish to work with the state and non state actors to bring durable peace. Let the voice of the people be heard in all the peace conferences.

I wish to talk on some of the stumbling blocks in our peace pilgrimage : It was John F Kennedy who once said “ Those who do not learn from the blunders of history are condemned to repeat it”. This country has been waiting for peace for last sixty years. It is imperative to accept and remove some of the big road blocks in peace :

2. Major hurdles towards peace :

1. *Abuse of culture and religion for hatred:* No culture or religion is violent. All preach peace and harmony. But there are times religion and culture can be abused by unscrupulous elements to en kindle hatred among people. All of us gathered here need to resist hate speech in any religion against any people. Hatred has no place in religion.

2. *Denial of dignity of diversity :* Nations that celebrated diversity as strength have prospered. US, Europe and many countries in the world have recognizable the dignity of diversity. Unity in diversity is the strength of the nation. Perceived preference for one culture

and race and religion will surely bring discontent and violent response. We are 7 major tribes and 135 sub tribes. What a colorful nation and should we not celebrate our vibrant colors?

3. Resource Curse : Many authors feel the conflict in Myanmar is perpetuated by resource war. Our country has gold, jade, teak, oil and so many minerals. Lack of transparency and greed of certain individuals and crony companies have ensured conflict rages in many parts of our country. The nation needs to move towards economic federalism. General Aung San, was ready to discuss this in the first Panglong Conference. Resources of Myanmar belong to the people of Myanmar.

4. Unequal Benefit of Modern Economy: Modern economy is benefiting a few – frustrating thousands. Even after democracy dawned on this country, the hold of companies on the resources has not loosened. Land grabbing, land concessions to the rich, business as usual for the cronies etc are making the poor and the deprived highly wounded and discriminated.

5. Armed response – violence – war: For last sixty years, all stakeholders in the conflict have chosen armed response as a dominant method. Though many groups chose a cease fire path, some groups continue to nurture doubts in the peace process. Greater violence has not led to any resolution, but greater agony and displacement to the poor.

3. Role of Religion - what can religions do in this country for peace

- Religions – their humanizing efforts - brotherhood of humanity: “An eye for an Eye makes the whole world blind” said Gandhi. Hatred is an animal instinct waiting to flare in the human nature. Short sighted leaders have manipulated religions for provoking hatred. Religions exist to humanize men and women, not to teach vengeance. As the philosopher of religion Karen Armstrong warned religions cannot be used for creating ‘streams of blood’. Religions commit themselves to build brotherhood and sisterhood of all.
- All religions preach inner and external Peace – Buddhism, Islam, Hindu and Christian : Lord Buddha always preached “ the outer peace comes through inner peace” and through various meditations taught the faithful to control violent urges that often swells in human nature. Buddhism strongly advocates peace. Metta (Mercy) and Karuna (Compassion) are the two eyes of Buddhism. Even violent thoughts are against Buddhism. For Christians Christ’s word are clear : blessed are the peace makers. Peace making is the work of every believer. Islam beautifully instructs its follower : If someone does something that hurts you make a promise to yourself and Allah that you will never do the same hurt to anyone else. Hinduism worships ‘Shanthi’ peace as one of the divine

attributes. All religions are for peace. All our people believe in religions, all the armed groups, all the ethnic groups, all the army, all the government people are strong believers. How do we explain our conflicts for sixty years? Has religions failed our people?

- *Religions and their role with the grass roots peace making.* Since the people of Myanmar are so religious and follow the guidelines of their religious leaders, every religious leader has a moral obligation to nurture peace at the grass root level. Frequent gathering of people of all religions would usher in people to people dialogue and greater understanding. Lack of this people to people dialogue has made all the other peace talks a futile exercise. Peace and harmony at the grass roots level will help all the future Panglong Conferences. Religious people have a role in dialogue and peace making.
- *Full time religious people in this country are more than the army and the armed groups - Let us form an army for peace :* *The Myanmar Army is around 500,000. Buddhist monks are more than 500,000. nuns are more than 70,000. Christian pastors are thousands. Catholic church has more than 700 priests and 2300 nuns. Together we exceed the number of all those who believe in armed solution. We, the peace army, need to show through our word and deed that this nation can return to peace through dialogue and mutual understanding. Time for violent solutions are over. Time for peace for all.*

Road Map from this Conference :

Since this is the first conference, we want to acknowledge that this is a long journey and we are here to draw the road map for that long journey. Next two days we shall be listening to various speakers and all of us will have a chance to discuss issues in the groups. Since it is inter religious initiative for peace, we shall listen to various religious perspectives on peace in Myanmar. There are other stakeholders and we will be glad to listen to their view points.

I see the following tasks

1. *Conference will identify role of religions in peace making:* So far all peace talks and conferences have excluded the religious leaders. Most of the religious leaders have left peace making to other stakeholders. The moral influence of religion on the people of Myanmar is a great asset that should be used for bringing greater understanding among the communities. I do hope a clarity emerges on this after two days.

2. Participation on future peace moves at the national level – third Panglong Conference Religious people need to play a constructive role in the national level peace conferences. Religious leaders were excluded in the last conference. We need to be included and as religious people we need to bring the religious perspectives on peace.
3. Inter Religious Peace initiatives at various levels: We believe this national conference is a starting point for a long journey. This journey does not end with this conference. It is understood all of us will go back to work out local initiatives for peace, bringing all people
4. Combined statement on Peace in the land I do hope this conference will end with a document - not for document sake but a road map for further action once we return to our places.
5. Working towards removing the road blocks for peace: Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi and other great leaders were not afraid of addressing the root causes of conflict. That sagacity is urgently needed in this country. This country needs to acknowledge that every human being born in this land needs to be treated with great dignity. All perceptions of any discrimination need to be addressed with courage. Issues on identity, culture and resources are to be addressed in a transparent manner.
6. Resources – transparency Myanmar is one of the richest nations on the earth where the poorest of the earth live. So much wealth in this country goes to enrich a few. Myanmar's future depends its capacity for transparency in the use of resources. Most of the conflicts do have a resource sharing issues.

Conclusion

Invest in Hope, invest in Peace - Peace is Possible, Peace is the only way

Yet with all the challenges, I am very hopeful. Just look back last ten years. There is a dawn of democracy. When the middle east is soaked in blood and spiral of violence, Myanmar showed to the world that a peaceful transition of power is possible. Myanmar has showed that people once enemies can sit together in the parliament and bring surprising results. It is within the power of the leaders and people of Myanmar to face the challenges together. We have seen Vietnam after decades of war, chose a path of peace and is fast becoming an economic power house, reaping the peace dividends for its people. Cambodia has made peace with its dark past and turning into an another country of hope.

Myanmar would rise again to its great glory - its date with destiny has arrived. No one can deny its place in the world stage. Peace dividend will benefit all. A country with 40 percent youth cannot squander its wealth in wars that no body wins.

Peace is the only solution. That is our dream. Let us make it a reality.

I wish to end with the great quote from Martin Luther King Jr paraphrasing his immortal words :

I have a dream this morning that the peace to Myanmar will become a reality in this day.

And with this faith we will go out and carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of conflict.

With this faith, we will go out and transform dark bitter yesterdays into bright peaceful tomorrows.

With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new day when all of religious people, bamas and ethnic people, Buddhists and Christians , Muslims, Hindus and others , will be able to join hands and sing with showers of hope :

PEACE AT LAST ! PEACE AT LAST,

Thank God Almighty, we have seen peace in our land at last!