



'THE CARDINAL WHO BRINGS POETRY TO THE FAITH'

QUOTES FROM CARDINAL CHARLES MAUNG BO



CHRISTIAN
SOLIDARITY
WORLDWIDE
VOICE FOR THE VOICELESS



Aid to the Church in Need

We should never be discouraged. Never give up! Life is rowing against the current. Do not give up when the changes in the country are too slow. Listen again to the words of Isaiah as you remember your own times of hopelessness. 'You shall no more be termed forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed desolate...You shall be called by a new name...You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord.'

Cardinal Bo. See p.8

INTRODUCTION

His Eminence Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon (Rangoon) since 2003, became Burma/Myanmar's first ever Cardinal in 2015, and has long been one of the most outspoken voices for human rights, religious freedom, inter-religious harmony, peace and justice in the country. Upon his appointment as Cardinal, he told the media, "I want to be a voice for the voiceless". A profile in *La Stampa* headlined 'The cardinal who brings poetry to the faith' described him as one who "speaks like a poet but his evangelical message covers the economy, society and politics". Cardinal Bo has played a key role in his country's struggle for freedom. In his Easter message in 2014, he said "The task of Christians is to move fences, to tear down walls." His country, he said, has been through "our way of the Cross for the last five decades". A nation "was crucified and left to hang on the cross of humanity. We were a Good Friday people. Easter was a distant dream". But today, he adds, "We are an Easter people. There are streaks of hope today." In his Christmas homily the same year, he said, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid to seek your rights to dignity. Do not be afraid to dream, to reimagine a new [Burma/Myanmar] where justice and righteousness flow like a river."

Ordained a priest of the Salesians of Don Bosco in 1976, he became Bishop of Lashio in 1990 and subsequently served as Bishop of Patheingyi and as Apostolic Administrator of Mandalay Archdiocese. In December 2015 he celebrated his 25th Episcopal Jubilee. His motto is 'Omnia Possum in Eo' (Philippians 4:13).

Cardinal Bo is Chairman of the Office of Human Development in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, a member of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, and since 2015 a member of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and the Pontifical Council for Culture. In January 2016 he served as the Papal Legate at the International Eucharistic Congress.

His Eminence is visiting the United Kingdom as a guest of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Missio, Aid to the Church in Need and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and in Scotland as a guest of these organisations and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland.

This booklet is a collection of some of his thoughts and inspiring words taken from his homilies, speeches and articles. It is divided into the following thematic sections:

- Priorities for the Church in Myanmar
- Evangelisation
- Democracy
- Human rights (including freedom of religion or belief and human trafficking)
- Inter-faith harmony
- Poverty
- The environment
- Education

Before turning to these themes, we have included the full text of Cardinal Bo's speech at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva on 15 March 2016.

'RIGHTS WITHOUT DISCRIMINATION: A FUTURE REALITY FOR RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND ETHNIC GROUPS IN MYANMAR?'

Address by His Eminence Cardinal Bo at the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, 15 March 2016

It is a very great privilege and pleasure to be here in the Palais des Nations, one of the two seats of the United Nations, at the Human Rights Council, alongside my friends from Myanmar Ashin Zero and Harry Myo Lin, and with the distinguished UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar, Professor Yanghee Lee. I want to thank the organisations that have sponsored this event – Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Caritas, Pax Romana, Dominicans for Justice and Peace, Franciscans International, the Congregation of our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, the World Evangelical Alliance, Jubilee Campaign and Forum Asia – for inviting me. I am myself a Salesian, so I thank the Franciscans and Dominicans for including me! I am delighted that this event draws together people of different religious traditions and none, religious and secular organisations from a variety of backgrounds working together to promote freedom of religion or belief for all.

My country, Myanmar, now stands on the threshold of hope. After over half a century of brutal oppression at the hands of a succession of military regimes, and after more than 60 years of civil war, we now have the possibility to begin to build a new Myanmar, to develop the values of democracy, to better protect and promote human rights, to work for peace. Myanmar has woken to a new dawn, with the first democratically elected government led by our Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. We have a chance – for the first time in my lifetime – of making progress towards reconciliation and freedom as a nation. There is a vibrant civil society and a freer media. We know that while evil has an expiry date, hope has no expiry date.

And yet there is a very, very long way to go; there are many, many challenges to confront; and no one should think that the election of the new government means that our struggle is over. It is just the very beginning.

The list of challenges is enormous. Poverty, education, human trafficking, drugs, protecting freedom of expression, constitutional reform, the economy, health care – these are all just some of these challenges. In Myanmar today, 60% of children never finish primary school; maternal mortality is the highest in the region; the country has the lowest doctor to patient ratio in the region. Myanmar is the second biggest producer of opium in the world.

Among the biggest challenges are the two which are at the centre of the theme for this meeting today: freedom of religion or belief, and ethnic conflict. That's why the title for this meeting – 'Rights Without Discrimination: A Future Reality for Religious Minorities and Ethnic Groups in Myanmar?' – is so timely. We desperately need to work to defend rights without discrimination, to establish equal rights for all people in Myanmar, of every ethnicity and religion.

As I wrote two years ago in an op-ed in the Washington Post, 'Myanmar is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, with a majority Burman, Buddhist population. If Myanmar is to be truly free, peaceful and prosperous, the rights of all ethnicities and religious faiths must be protected.'

Over the past four years, the rights of religious minorities have come under increasing threat. Starting with the violence in Rakhine State in 2012, spreading to an anti-Muslim campaign in Meikhtila, Oakkan and Lashio in 2013, and to Mandalay in 2014, and then moving from violence, killing and destruction to a more insidious campaign of discrimination, hate speech and restrictive legislation, this movement – which began as a group called '969' and transformed into an organisation known as 'Ma Ba Tha' – is based on an extremist, intolerant form of Buddhist nationalism that completely distorts the key teachings of Buddhism – of metta, loving kindness, and karuna, compassion – and instead preaches hatred and incites violence. I have described this movement as a neo-fascist group, or merchants of hatred, and they continue to pose a threat to our fragile nascent democracy and to the prospects of peace, prosperity and stability.

Last year, the outgoing government in Myanmar introduced a package of four new laws, known as the Protection of Race and Religion Laws, which pose a serious danger for our country. Two of these laws restrict the right to religious conversion and inter-faith marriage. Such basic rights – whom to marry and what to believe – are among the most basic human rights, and yet these new laws restrict such basic freedoms. As I said several times, these laws threaten the dream of a united Myanmar.

I am also deeply concerned about the misuse of Section 295 of Myanmar's penal code, the section relating to insulting religion. Although originally introduced in the colonial time with the intention of preventing inter-religious conflict, this law is now used to silence critics of extremist Buddhist nationalism. Htin Lin Oo, himself a Buddhist, spoke out criticising the preachers of hate, saying that their message was incompatible with the teachings of Buddhism, and he was charged with insulting Buddhism and has been jailed for two years.

A related challenge is the conflict in the ethnic states. The majority of the Kachin, Chin, Naga and Karenni peoples, and a significant proportion of the Karen, are Christians – and over the decades of armed conflict, the military has turned religion into a tool of oppression. In Chin State, for example, Christian crosses have been destroyed and Chin Christians have been forced to construct Buddhist pagodas in their place. Last year two Kachin Christian school teachers were raped and murdered. At least 66 churches in Kachin State have been destroyed since the conflict reignited in 2011.

Many have been killed in Myanmar's ethnic and religious conflicts, and hundreds of thousands have been displaced. As Benedict Rogers and I said in an article we co-authored in the Myanmar Times in 2013, 'True peace and real freedom hinge on an issue that has yet to be addressed: respect for Myanmar's ethnic and religious diversity. Unless and until a genuine peace process is established with the ethnic nationalities, involving a nationwide political dialogue about the constitutional arrangements for the country, ceasefires will remain fragile and will not result in an end to war.' Furthermore, '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.'

So how, in practical ways, can the international community, the United Nations, assist the new government in Myanmar to address these challenges? I conclude with just a few specific recommendations.

Firstly, renew the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar. The new government faces many challenges, and some constraints, and it will not be able to change everything overnight. It will need continued monitoring, observation, reporting, recommendations and advice of international experts such as the Special Rapporteur.

Secondly, encourage the new government in Myanmar to invite the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief to visit the country, to meet with different religious groups, and to assist the new government in addressing this crucial area of human rights.

Thirdly, support initiatives that promote inter-faith dialogue, both at a leadership level and a grassroots community level, and support the efforts of Buddhists who themselves are trying to counter hatred and intolerance and ensure that the true message of Buddhism, of metta and karuna, is heard. Perhaps it is time for the UN, together with the EU, the US, Canada, Australia and ASEAN, to hold an international conference in Myanmar, to bring together international experts with Myanmar civil society, political actors and religious leaders, to focus on how to protect religious freedom and promote inter-religious harmony.

Fourthly, urge the new government to take action to prevent hate speech and incitement of violence, to bring the perpetrators of hatred and violence to justice, and demonstrate moral leadership, with Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders personally and specifically speaking out against prejudice and hatred, and challenging the extreme nationalist narrative. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi already made it very clear in an interview on the BBC just after the election last November that "hatred has no place" in Myanmar. I hope you will help her and her government take practical steps to combat hate speech and incitement to violence. Perhaps the Rabat Plan of Action could be applied in Myanmar, and the authors of that document could be invited to advise the new government.

Fifthly, urge the new government not to implement the four laws on race and religion.

And finally – the situation in Rakhine State, while not by any means the only aspect of religious intolerance in Myanmar, is the most acute, most severe and most difficult to resolve. It is an intolerable situation, and one which cannot be allowed to remain unresolved. Whatever the perspectives – and there are, within my country, a variety of perspectives – about the origin of the Rohingya people, there cannot be doubt that those who have lived in Myanmar for generations have a right to be regarded as citizens, and that all of them deserve to be treated humanely and in accordance with international human rights. Seeing thousands of people living in dire, inhumane conditions in camps; seeing the segregation, the apartheid, that has been established in Sittwe; seeing thousands risk their lives at sea to escape these deplorable and unbearable conditions – this is not a basis for a stable, peaceful future for my country. I therefore urge the international community to encourage the new government to consider four practical steps to address the crisis in Rakhine. Take action to prevent hate speech; ensure humanitarian access for all those on both sides of the conflict who have been displaced, by immediately lifting all restrictions on the operations of international aid agencies and devoting more government resources to assisting IDPs and isolated villagers; reform or repeal the 1982 Citizenship Law, because the lack of full citizenship lies at the root of most of the discrimination faced by the Rohingya; and finally, establish a credible independent investigation with international experts to investigate the causes of the crisis in Rakhine State, and propose action.

There is hope today in Myanmar. My country is emerging from a long night of tears and sadness into a new dawn. After suffering crucifixion as a nation, we are beginning our resurrection. But our young democracy is fragile, and human rights continue to be abused and violated. For ethnic and religious minorities, this is particularly true, and that is why I conclude by emphasising that 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. As Martin Luther King Jr once said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” We are a rainbow nation, a nation of many different ethnicities, cultures, languages and religions. That is the beauty of Myanmar. It is something to be protected, defended, cherished and strengthened. I look to the United Nations to help my country ensure that every person in Myanmar, of whatever race or religion, has their rights protected, without discrimination.

PRIORITIES FOR THE CHURCH IN MYANMAR

"The Church is one of the few organisations in the country that is really 'national' in character," Cardinal Bo said in his Christmas message in 2015. "It is found in every tribe and every race and nationality. This privilege comes with great responsibility. With its goodwill, the Church is called upon to stand with the most marginalised, as Pope Francis calls forth persistently. The Church is here to ensure that democracy is inclusive, targeted towards the most vulnerable. We assure the rulers that the Church is your trusted partner in nation building. We know the poor. We are a poor church for the poor. Our accompaniment is vital for their dignity."

In his keynote address at the Church's conference in Myanmar on nation-building in March 2016,¹ Cardinal Bo reminded his audience of the six key priorities the Catholic Bishops Conference of Myanmar had set itself three years earlier in a national seminar titled 'Myanmar – Challenges and Opportunities for the Church'. These priorities are:

- 1. Dignity of our indigenous brothers and sisters, protecting and promoting their basic rights, their culture, their resource rights, bringing them for a celebration of culture periodically.*
- 2. Peace and reconciliation; working for peace in conflict areas, urging all the parties to address the root cause of the conflict and promote a durable solution.*
- 3. Special attention to youth, women and children through targeted programs, establishment of secretariats, commissions, capacity building programs, ensuring especially women's role and rights are enhanced and they play a proactive role in the church and its mission.*
- 4. Promote dialogue with government, inter-church groups, civil society groups, other religious groups, and active dialogue with the poor.*
- 5. Contribute towards an educated nation through education mission and a healthy nation through health mission. The Church plays a major role in many parts of the world in developing the social sector, reaching out to the poor.*
- 6. Have creative engagement with Buddhism, the major religion of the country.²*

He added:

Peace is possible. Peace is the only way. True federalism is the path ahead...It will promote the economy, help our children to get quality education, it will help in greater employment. As the Catholic Church we have been victims, bystanders in the conflicts that are going on. As a Church we need to take a proactive stand to build peace. Our approach will be 'If you want peace, work for Justice.' We need to identify the root causes of conflicts and act towards durable solutions. With great urgency the Church needs to commit itself to the mission of reconciliation in this country.

As Papal Legate at the International Eucharistic Congress in the Philippines in January 2016, Cardinal Bo issued this challenge to us all:

Eucharist is a dream and a reality because Jesus is truly present. A dream because it is the hope of the future, the eschatological meal of human equality. Today you have gathered from various backgrounds, the rich and poor, the noble and peasant, aristocrat and the servant. But when you approach the altar, the Eucharist strips you of all your social status. You are just an equal among equals. In an unequal and uncaring world, the Eucharist steadfastly remains the beacon of human equality. The Eucharist calls us to justice. No other religion elevates justice to this level. No other religion elevates the poor to this level as Mary narrates after the Word was made flesh in her: 'The mighty will be brought down and the lowly will be raised up.'³

1 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Keynote address: The Nation at Crossroads of Challenges and Opportunities', March 2016

2 Institute for Global Engagement, 'Joint statement of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar (CBCM) and The Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC)', 16 January 2013 https://globalengage.org/attachments/1319_Joint%20Statement%20CBCM-MCC%2016Jan13.pdf

3 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Message and Homily at the Opening Mass (IEC – 51st)', January 2016

EVANGELISM

In a personal message prior to the elections in Burma/Myanmar last year, titled 'A Fervent Plea for a Free and Fair Election', Cardinal Bo said:

*This is a rainbow nation of colorful tribes and great religions. Manipulating sectarian sentiments would send this country back to the Dark Ages. Let religions heal, not wound.*⁴

In his Easter message in 2015, he spoke of mercy and reconciliation:

Today in Myanmar there is hope. Easter brings hope. You have heard that in this Holy Week there was blessing. The ferocious wars waged [along] the border [have] stopped. The silence of guns. This is a significant Easter for all of us. The ceasefire agreement is signed between the government and resistance groups. The message of Easter, of hope after darkness, is seen this week.

*On the Calvary summit two virtues of Christianity were enthroned: Mercy and Reconciliation. Like two eyes that focus on the same vision, Christ bore witness through his supreme sacrifice for the Christian message of love. God's mercy and reconciliation with the world was achieved on the Cross, and Easter is the fulfilment of God's great love. God so loved the world that he gave his only son, not to condemn but to redeem (John 3:16). So let us rejoice.*⁵

In that same Easter message, he spoke of his country's resurrection:

Empty all the tombs in this country and bring angels of mercy and reconciliation in this country. Let all those who were buried alive in poverty, oppression, hatred, spiralling violence, drugs, war and displacement rise! Rise! For Christ is our resurrection and hope...Our task is unfinished. This is a wounded nation, a bleeding nation. We need to work proactively for peace. Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, said Dr Martin Luther King Jr, and our conflicts are rooted in injustice. Wherever we live we need to worship our God in spirit and in truth (John 4:23). Stand for the truth. The Easter Christ is faithful in our work of salvation. We fear no one; we love all. So we will continue to work for peace and justice in this land, bringing mercy and promoting reconciliation among communities. We are an Easter people and our Lord is a trustworthy partner in our long march of mercy and reconciliation.

In his Easter message the previous year, he spoke about the importance of following Christ in community with others, and the centrality of forgiveness:

The path shown by Jesus is the only way. That is the path of reconciliation. The core message of the Resurrection is reconciliation. The hope that swells in the heart of every citizen needs to be cemented through reconciliation. 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation' (2 Corinthians 5:19). Christians have a special duty for reconciliation, and Easter bestows on each one of us to carry on this message of reconciliation. The whole message of reconciliation is centred around the love of God and the death of Christ; Paul reminds us that 'God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:11).

Christ reminds us of our awesome responsibility: just as he has reconciled us to himself by forgiving us, we are to go and seek reconciliation with those who have sinned against us. We, following God's example, are to forgive those who have hurt, troubled, and wronged us! Just as God took the initiative to forgive us – we are to take the initiative to forgive others. God expects us to forgive them in our hearts and to let them know it by the way we show it in our lives. We are to begin treating them with love as though they had never done anything against us. Reconciliation with our neighbour is the direct result of our forgiveness. There can be no genuine reconciliation without genuine forgiveness.

Hope is a constant theme in Cardinal Bo's homilies and messages, as reflected in his Christmas message in 2013, 'Emmanuel in Myanmar: The Enduring Message of Hope':

We should never be discouraged. Never give up! Life is rowing against the current. Do not give up when you at times could not control yourself. Do not give up when you have problems in the family. Do not give up when the changes in the country [are] too slow. Listen again to the words of Isaiah as you remember your own times

⁴ Bo, Charles Maung, 'A Fervent Plea For a Fair and Free Election', 24 September 2015

⁵ Bo, Charles Maung, 'Message of His Eminence Cardinal Charles Bo on the Solemnity of Easter Sunday', 5 April 2015

of hopelessness. 'You shall no more be termed forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed desolate...You shall be called by a new name...You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord' (Isaiah 62).

Let us hope. Hope is the stream that runs through the desert of pessimism. Let us hope that Emmanuel, the God within us, is present in every one, the ruled and the rulers, the Bamars and the others. I for one strongly believe in the audacity of hope. I for one believe God's time has arrived in Myanmar. I for one strongly believe that God will not leave this land desolate...All of us can make this happen. This nation's time has arrived. The cloak of darkness that covered her beauty is removed. Like the daughters of Zion, she shall journey forth on the global stage, clothed in justice and prosperity. A people who walked in darkness have seen the light. Our nation will prosper, our nation will once again be a place of haven for all ethnic people, for all the migrants and for all the refugees. The Lord our God delights in us. God is smiling at us.⁶

Mercy is a theme he regularly focuses on, as in his reflection on the Year of Mercy in December 2015, 'Bring Mercy to a Wounded World':

Christ is the door that leads to the Father. Christ is waiting every day at the door of our hearts to bring Mercy to us: "Listen! I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." (Revelation 3:20) Welcoming Jesus through acts of mercy is the door to the world.⁷

6 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Emmanuel in Myanmar: The Enduring Message of Hope', December 2013

7 Vatican Radio, 'Card. Charles Bo 'Bring Mercy to a wounded world', 5 December 2015 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/05/card_charles_bo_%E2%80%98bring_mercy_to_a_wounded_world%E2%80%99/1192321

INTER-FAITH AND INTER-ETHNIC PEACE, RECONCILIATION AND HARMONY

Cardinal Bo has repeatedly spoken out against rising religious intolerance in Burma/Myanmar, and for inter-religious harmony, dialogue and peace. In his message on Parents' Day on 26 July 2015, he criticised the government for failing in its parental duty to the nation to prevent religious hatred and called for the establishment of a 'family spirit' for the country:

Today we in Myanmar remember that in our culture, in Buddhist culture parents are venerated like Gods. And our rulers in Myanmar traditionally were treated like parents. Our traditions enjoined on them the right and duty to promote the wellbeing of all. For fifty years in the dark days, we had no family. When democracy came, we hoped it would bring the family spirit of all. Great expectations were laid on our President and also on the leader of the opposition: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. A nation looks up to them to make this nation a true family. They were to be our parents. But after four years, Myanmar is still to be a family.

For centuries we have lived together as brothers and sisters. Various faiths lived in harmony. For five decades Myanmar was on the radar of a compassionate world, because its people were oppressed by evil men. But from 2010, even after the country opened up, Myanmar has once again been on the radar. There are people who do not want the family spirit to grow...Our brothers and sisters, from all religions and races are affected by this hatred...True love is restricted among religions through [the new] marriage act.

We pray for justice and fair play that this nation may rise up to its glorious days through unity. Let the parents of this nation make this a nation of freedom, a nation that is not seeking glory of the past, but let our parents of this nation dream of a great country [which is a] family of rainbow people. Let us affirm the dignity of diversity but build the family spirit.⁸

In his Easter message in 2015, Cardinal Bo addressed the country's decades of ethnic conflict:

The country needs reconciliation among communities. A war rages in the northern Kachin and Shan regions. In Rakhine region there is conflict between communities...The blood of the innocents cries out for reconciliation. How long can the ethnic communities cry for justice and reconciliation? Blessed are the peacemakers. May peace be to this house (Luke 10:5). Ethnic communities are crucified in this country. They are the Good Friday people...[The] Myanmar Church works for reconciliation based on human dignity.⁹

A similar theme featured in his Easter message in 2014:

Reconciliation among communities in Myanmar: St Paul reminds us that we are all part of the mystical body of Christ, each one forming the different parts of the body. (1 Corinthians 12:12-30). 'We are brothers and sisters' of this great nation. Without this attitude there can be no peace in the world, says Pope Francis. The binary configuration of this nation's history with the Bamar majority claiming all rights and challenging others to the status of nothing has wrought wars, conflict and unbearable suffering for all. The risen Christ brought a single message: 'Peace be with you,' (Luke 24:36). Pope John Paul contextualised Christ's perennial message, saying "If you want peace, work for justice." Justice is in short supply in ethnic areas. For the common good all stakeholders need to address justice issues. The God of the Old Testament and the God of the Resurrection bases his domain on justice. Return to justice and return to reconciliation in this nation of 135 communities. Diversity is dignity. Respect and reconcile.

In an article in the Myanmar Times in August 2013, the Cardinal renewed his call for respect for diversity:

True peace and real freedom, however, hinge on an issue that has yet to be addressed: respect for Myanmar's ethnic and religious diversity. Unless and until a genuine peace process is established with the ethnic nationalities, involving a nationwide political dialogue about the constitutional arrangements for the country, ceasefires will remain fragile and will not result in an end to war...A distinct but inter-related and equally urgent challenge that must be addressed is religious harmony. The past year has seen shocking violence against Muslims in Myanmar, starting in Rakhine State in June 2012 but spreading to Meiktila, Oakkan, Lashio and other towns and cities. The violence and anti-Muslim propaganda has highlighted a deep-seated issue in

⁸ Bo, Charles Maung, 'Leaders of Our Nation, Be Good Parents', 26 July 2015

⁹ Bo, Charles Maung, Message of His Eminence Cardinal Charles Bo on the Solemnity of Easter Sunday, 5 April 2015

Myanmar society: how to live with our deepest differences. 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.¹⁰

And again in his Christmas message in December 2015, just a few weeks after the elections in which Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy won a landslide, he said:

With the general election of 8th November, our nation sees the dawn of change. It is up to us to allow it to be a bright daylight. Naturally, it is impossible to get a unanimous choice in the election. Although the majority wins in the election the minority cannot be excluded in the nation building. We must overcome the competitions and differences. This year is a year of blessing to each one of you, my brothers and sisters. This is a great time to be in this country. By reconciling with one another, forgetting all the past darkness of hatred, we can make Christ's message of peace possible to all people of goodwill. So we call upon all men and women of goodwill, bring the great message of peace and prosperity to this nation.

The temptation is to rush into irrational expectations, protests and even rioting. There is a time for everything. It is wise to listen to President John F Kennedy, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.' Nation building is the task of all of us. Now that the ballot box has spoken and we have leaders who have proved to be morally upright, it is our duty to build a nation without war and want. With goodwill we can and we will do that.

In general, religion teaches to love and care for one another: [the Buddhist concepts of] karuna [compassion] and metta [loving kindness] are the foundations of religions. As we live a virtuous life we are to show love and respect to others. However, the sad reality is that there are incidents of conflict and war in the name of religion. Myanmar's future depends on the positive role of the religious leaders. All attempts to abuse religion for political purposes need to be resisted by all religions and religious leaders. The goodwill of religion is the capacity to live in harmony with different faiths and religion.

Myanmar is a nation which is comprised of different tribes. This image of our nation must be safeguarded by all means. Myanmar has to solve its identity crisis, which has dragged the country into chronic wars and displacement. After sixty years of 'independence' we are a bleeding nation. Peace has its dividends for all. We call upon all tribes and nationalities to engage in peaceful negotiations for durable peace. In goodwill we all shall explore the federal solution to our problems. However, peace cannot be built just on paper. Peace can be achieved only with our goodwill and sincere hearts.

In many of his messages on the theme of inter-religious harmony, Cardinal Bo points to the principles of the country's majority religion, Buddhism, and particularly the concepts of metta (loving kindness) and karuna (compassion):

Counting on God's mercy, all of us need to seek mercy and forgiveness through the sacrament of confession. It is the sacrament of mercy. We need to cleanse ourselves from the sin of judging others. We need to develop an attitude of understanding. As we are aware our Buddhist brothers and sisters in Myanmar have two eyes of spiritual attainment: mercy and compassion (metta and karuna). Metta Bhavana is a way of developing loving kindness towards all. We need this grace. St Paul affirms this: Not by our works but by his mercy we are saved (Titus 3:5). In this jubilee year, our attitude needs to be one of loving kindness, forgiveness to those who live with us. By renewing ourselves spiritually we are ready to reflect the God of mercy in our lives. 'Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy' (Matthew 5:7).¹¹

10 Myanmar Times, 'Myanmar's religious diversity: Dialogue trumps violence', 23 August 2013 www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/7918-myanmar-s-religious-diversity-dialogue-trumps-violence.html

11 Vatican Radio, 'Card. Charles Bo "Bring Mercy to a wounded world"', 5 December 2015 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/05/card_charles_bo_%E2%80%98bring_mercy_to_a_wounded_world%E2%80%99/1192321

Cardinal Bo has been particularly bold in speaking out against the militant Buddhist nationalist movement that preaches hatred of non-Buddhists, particularly Muslims, referring to them repeatedly as 'merchants of death' and 'hatemongers':

First of all we need to understand that the acts of evil perpetrated in the name of religion and race are committed by a handful of merchants of death. Buddhism is a great and majestic religion that teaches compassion. Those who teach hatred in the name of that religion of the prophet of compassion are the first enemies of Buddhism. We shall not allow a handful to tarnish the great religion that remains the light of Asia. These anti-Buddhists do not have a place in a new Myanmar.¹²

12 *ibid.*

DEMOCRACY

Cardinal Bo has long been an outspoken voice for democracy in Myanmar. Ahead of the elections in November 2015, he emphasised that federalism is needed if decades of civil war between the military and the ethnic nationalities are to end:

A true federal system that would enhance community based natural resource management is the only way ahead. A true federal state is the only guarantee for peace and environmental justice. A democracy that is truly devolved and decentralised will bring a prosperous and peaceful Myanmar.¹³

In his Christmas message in 2015, Cardinal Bo welcomed the election of a new government in the country:

We congratulate the NLD who won the election. At the same time we also wish and pray that you may build the nation in spite of enormous challenges that lie in wait. The people of Myanmar have invested their hopes and future in your fragile hands, knowing that the power of empty hands has 'sent away the mighty and raised the lowly'. You have shown your sagacity by proposing a government of national reconciliation. The Church joins in your goodwill and efforts to bring peace with justice.

And in his Easter message in 2016, he paid tribute to the democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and talked of a 'new dawn' for his country:

Today we see another resurrection: resurrection of hope in a frail woman, Aung San Suu Kyi. She was also raised on the tree of suffering for more than 15 years in the jail. Darkness was penetrating Myanmar for more than 50 years. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's suffering and her fortitude amidst the suffering has brought the resurrection of freedom. Today Myanmar can wake up into a dawn of hope because people like Aung San Suu Kyi are willing to be wounded but use that suffering as a redemptive suffering. A new nation is born today, and nurtures the resurrection of hope of freedom, peace, prosperity and human development.

13 AsiaNews, 'For Myanmar cardinal, elections are a "sacred pilgrimage" towards democracy and freedom', 11 April 2015 www.asianews.it/news-en/For-Myanmar-cardinal,-elections-are-a-sacred-pilgrimage-towards-democracy-and-freedom-35780.html

HUMAN RIGHTS

Cardinal Bo has always been a courageous voice for human rights, and he used his first major homily in Myanmar since becoming Cardinal to reiterate that message. At the Celebration of Our Lady of Lourdes at the Nyaung Lay Bin National Marian Centre on 28 February 2015, two weeks after receiving the red biretta, His Eminence said:

We cannot forget millions of our youth living as unsafe migrants in the nearby countries, we cannot forget the farmers who are losing their lands to companies, we cannot forget the thousands who live in the internally displaced communities. In this season of Lent we are called to feel for one another. Just like our Mother Mary stood at the cross she stands today at the gates of the IDP camps, in fellowship with the tears of those innocent girls human trafficked to nearby countries. We should not forget the millions of children who do not go to school. We should not forget the thousands of farmers who have lost their lands in the last two years to big companies.¹⁴

In his New Year message in December 2013 and a message on human trafficking in 2014, he gave the people and the Church in Myanmar a challenge, particularly highlighting human trafficking and religious intolerance:

Human trafficking is a virtual hell for millions of vulnerable people. More than a million people are trafficked every year and around 400,000 women are forced into sex slavery. The world is yet to be ashamed of the perpetuation of slavery in the modern forms: South East Asia is the most vulnerable part of the world for the poor. Countries emerging from decades of war and poverty have to sacrifice their sons and daughters on the altar of monetary greed. This region is gasping for dignity with drug lords and traffickers cynically manipulating governments and systems to their gain – in Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia. Myanmar has a depressing history of allowing her sons and daughters to be exploited by every nation on the globe. We are a nation of exodus. An exodus designed and executed by man-made disasters – of six decades of the heartless dictatorship that ensured underdevelopment. In the last two decades more than three million people have been forced into unsafe migration. Our youth fled from poverty, war, from persecution, from lack of education, from lack of any employment. Internally and externally three million of our people are away from their homes. Thousands of our girls languish in unknown corners of neighbouring countries.¹⁵

Whatever our religion, we need to refocus our minds on our common humanity and our fraternity as peoples of Myanmar...We need to rediscover the value of 'unity in diversity'. Myanmar is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, rich in ethnic and religious diversity. This diversity is something to celebrate. After the storms, when the sun comes out, we should be able to see that we are a nation of many colours. A rainbow nation. We must build a nation in which every person born on Myanmar's soil feels at home, has a stake in the country's future, is treated with equal respect and equal rights, and is accepted and cared for by their neighbours. A nation where the histories, languages, customs and religions of all are respected and celebrated. There must be no second-class people. As Pope Francis says, "In many parts of the world, there seems to be no end to grave offences against fundamental human rights, especially the right to life and the right to religious freedom." This is true in our corner of the world. Even as talks continue in Kachin State, we hear reports of attacks on villages, looting of churches, and the rape of women and girls. In other parts of our country, we hear of mosques destroyed. We hear of the tragedy of an entire people, known as Rohingyas, treated as if they were not human, consigned to dire conditions in displacement camps or forced to flee the country in boats, embarking on a precarious escape across the seas...We know that many of the Rohingya people have lived in Myanmar for generations, yet they are not accepted as citizens and are rendered stateless. This misery cannot be allowed to continue. Every person born in Myanmar should be recognised as a citizen of Myanmar.¹⁶

And he has criticised those who fail to speak out:

Silence can be criminal. Because when evil takes over and suffocates the voice of the just, one cannot remain silent. Let me remind you of the great words of the civil rights leader: The world will have to weep not for the evil deeds of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. So with Isaiah, we claim: We shall not keep silence. For the sake of the people of Myanmar, her poor, her ethnic communities, her displaced sons and

14 Bo, Charles Maung, 'The Homily of Cardinal Charles Bo at the 113th Celebration of Our Lady of Lourdes of Nyaung Lay Bin National Marian Centre', 28 February 2015

15 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Protect your Youth from Human Trafficking and all forms of Modern Slavery', September 2014

16 Bo, Charles Maung, New Year's Message, December 2013

*daughters and those unfortunate victims of human trafficking, we shall not keep silence. Myanmar stands at the crossroads of history. Crossroads as the Jews faced after exile. Like the Jews, we too are returning to a land of hope after 50 years of suffocating darkness.*¹⁷

He used an article in the Washington Post in 2014 to appeal for religious freedom and an end to ethnic conflict:

Burma [Myanmar] is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country, with a majority Burman, Buddhist population. If Burma is to be truly free, peaceful and prosperous, the rights of all ethnicities and religious faiths must be protected. A movement that has grown in volume and influence threatens this: extreme Buddhist nationalism. Over the past two years, Muslim communities across Burma have suffered horrific violence, whipped up by hate speech preached by extremist Buddhist nationalists. Thousands of Muslims have been displaced, their homes and shops looted and burned. Hundreds have been killed. The crisis is most acute in Rakhine State, where the Rohingyas, who have lived there for generations, are dehumanised and rendered stateless. A humanitarian catastrophe threatens to unfold, and deeply entrenched prejudices continue unchallenged. In the long term, the question of the Rohingyas' history, identity and status must be addressed, fairly and humanely. They require emergency assistance to meet their basic needs now. Elsewhere, other religious minorities are vulnerable to discrimination. Kachins, primarily Christians, have been forced into refugee camps.

*But there is a need for all of us — religious, civil and political leaders — to speak up to counter hate speech with good speech, as well as for the government to bring to justice those who incite discrimination and violence. After decades of oppression, no one wants to limit our newfound freedom of speech. But with freedom comes responsibility. Freedom should not be misused to inspire hatred. All the religions of Burma have a message of peace. Buddhist concepts of metta and karuna ('loving kindness' and 'compassion'), the Muslim greeting 'Salam' ('Peace') and Christian values of 'Love your neighbour' and 'Love your enemy' must be deployed in building the new Burma. Religious leaders must preach the goodness of their own religions rather than attack others. Unity in diversity is Burma's destiny, a unity in which we learn to respect the dignity of difference. The international community must help us in this, and in all our struggles. The world must not allow premature euphoria to cause it to turn a blind eye. Burma's future hangs in the balance.*¹⁸

In 2016, Cardinal Bo addressed a public meeting on the theme 'Injustice Anywhere is Injustice Everywhere':

Discrimination needs to end. Discrimination in language policies, discrimination in religious rights, discrimination in government employments, discrimination in land laws, discrimination in the armed forces, discrimination in judicial processes, discrimination in economic, cultural and social rights of the ethnic people and other discriminations need to end. Unity in Diversity is the only path ahead. Inclusive approach is the only approach for peace.

Having previously served as priest and bishop in dioceses in the ethnic conflict areas, Cardinal Bo has been particularly outspoken on the suffering of the ethnic nationalities:

*At this very moment thousands of our ethnic brothers and sisters are languishing in the IDP camps. Think of Kachins, think of Karens, think of Chins, think of Kayahs, think of Shans – how long do they suffer. A threefold attack on them has left them mortally wounded. Attacks on their identity, culture and resources have left them refugees in their own land. Foreign and local capitalists are looting their natural resources. We will be listening to ethnic activists about how resources fuel wars and destroy communities. As a Church we have a great responsibility. We are a rainbow Church - truly representing every tribe in Myanmar. Fifteen dioceses are ethnic in composition. What is the condition of our Christians? Refugees, IDPs, vulnerable to unsafe migration, human trafficking and drugs. We face existential threats as a people. I see a great urgency in protecting the ethnic brothers and sisters from threats that are already destroying their traditional lands. We shall explore advocacy for indigenous rights, especially for the implementation of customary law, we shall be exploring how the economic, social and cultural rights of our people can be protected, we can be exploring how pastoral care be extended to their youth who are vulnerable to human trafficking and drugs.*¹⁹

17 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Emmanuel in Myanmar: The Enduring Message of Hope', December 2013

18 Washington Post, 'Burma needs tolerance to reach its potential', 13 June 2014 www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/burma-needs-tolerance-to-reach-its-potential/2014/06/13/6e5d3c92-aa90-11e3-93d2-edd4be1f5d9e_story.html

19 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Keynote address: The Nation at Crossroads of Challenges and Opportunities', March 2016

POVERTY

Poverty in Myanmar is another theme which Cardinal Bo regularly highlights, often as a challenge to those in government and those inciting hatred and violence. In an 'Appeal to the People and Rulers of Myanmar for Peace and Harmony' issued in September 2015, he said:

Those who forced the parliament to enact the [protection of race and religion] laws have not allowed our representatives to attend to the most urgent needs of the people of Myanmar. Those who worry about religious conversion and sought a law to prevent that may not have noticed that poverty is the common religion of many of our people. 30 percent of our people are poor and in Rakhine and Chin states the rate is 70 percent. As a nation a real conversion is needed for 30 percent of our people who live in the oppressive religion of poverty. The nation with resources needs a road map to pull out our poor out of poverty.

And in his homily titled 'Mary's Assumption: Protector and Promoter of Human Dignity', he said:

This nation is known for her great spiritual wealth. But six decades of evil rule has brought suffocating darkness over us. There are streaks of hope last five years: release of prisoners, lifting of censorship, greater openness to economy, a sense of hope that is seen in the streets of Myanmar. For this we are grateful to our leaders. But darkness refuses to go. The land bills of 2012 threaten to take the rights of traditional farmers. An economy that helps only those who are rich sees millions of our countrymen and -women more impoverished. We seek change. Change based on justice. Change based on love and life. Change based on human dignity, which our Lady affirmed all through her life. She [Mary, Mother of God] is the protector and promoter of human dignity in this land...As in her day, those who rob from the poor will be consigned to flames of history while those who seek justice to the poor will live forever...Let the elections be a clarion call for justice. Let Jesus' dream of 'Good news to the poor, liberation to the captives' (Luke 4:16-19) become a reality in this nation.

In his Parents' Day message in 2015, he said:

Millions of our youth are outside, away from their parents. We were made poor, kept poor, and the burden of poverty broke our family to pieces. Integrity of family is being eroded by the country's poverty. Family spirit is weak. Most of the sons and daughters of Myanmar are poor...in Chin State and Rakhine, where the most displacement takes place, poverty is at 70 percent. These states are the origin of most of the migrants who seek unsafe migration. These unsafe migrations have broken families.²⁰

And in his Christmas homily in 2014 he said:

We were reduced to one of the poorest countries on earth!...Poverty and oppression sent millions to exile. Our sons and daughters become the modern day slaves in the nearby countries. We became the least developed country. We became like a blind beggar begging with the golden plate. So we need freedom from fear...Our date with destiny has arrived. Do not be afraid to claim your rights.

And in his reflection on the Year of Mercy, he highlighted the plight of the poor and the relationship between poverty and conflict:

More than ever the world stands in need of mercy to one another. The world is full of hatred and bloodshed today. In the name of religion, vengeance killing is on the rise. Wars are producing millions of refugees. Europe has thousands of refugees pleading for food and shelter. Despite all the good news about elections, Myanmar too stands in need of mercy and compassion. As I write this pastoral letter, more than 100 poor people have been buried alive in the landslides in the jade mines. After five decades of wars, displacement, poverty and migration, our country needs mercy. Mercy to those who suffered and mercy to those who caused those suffering. Our nation needs healing through mercy. Christians need to heal this nation through mercy.²¹

20 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Leaders of Our Nation, Be Good Parents', 26 July 2015

21 Vatican Radio, 'Card. Charles Bo "Bring Mercy to a wounded world"', 5 December 2015 http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/05/card_charles_bo_%E2%80%98bring_mercy_to_a_wounded_world%E2%80%99/1192321

In almost every homily and speech, Cardinal Bo inspires his audience to envision a new world:

Injustice anywhere, is injustice everywhere – said Martin Luther King Jr. We are gathered here to affirm the rights of the most vulnerable of this nation. It is not through hatred but through peaceful imagination. We are here to re-imagine a new Myanmar. A new Myanmar that will be just to everyone. First of all to the poorest Burmese. 60 percent of this country is poor and that includes many poor Burmese families. Those who ruled this nation discriminated the people on class and creed and tribe. We have come to say that that cannot go on in a new Myanmar.

ENVIRONMENT

Environmental degradation is another concern the Cardinal has highlighted, and has linked to poverty and conflict:

Poverty is spreading in Kachin State. Nearly 60 percent of the natural wealth is in the ethnic areas. Peace is possible only when the benefits of natural resources are shared with justice to all, especially the local people. In this we are guided by Laudato Si', where the Pope has connected environmental degradation with the poverty of the people. There is a clear mandate for the Catholic Church to protect and promote harmony with nature. I wish this seminar comes with an action plan on environmental awareness and a mechanism for Community-Based Natural Resource Management.²²

In August 2015, he gave a homily titled 'An Inescapable Call to Environmental Morality', and spoke about the impact of climate change on Myanmar:

Cyclone Nargis in 2008 killed more than 150,000, impacting the lives of 2.3 million people, making 800,000 people homeless...The livelihood of 37 million farmers was sent into a spiral of destruction and debt...Thousands of poor families have been put into a rollercoaster of debt and destruction. Our poor do not even know the words 'global warming' but they have been victims of climate change for the last ten years...Some of the rich countries, with a total of six percent of the population of the world, produce forty percent of greenhouse gases. But natural disasters have been attacking poor countries for the last thirty years. Ninety percent of the deaths due to natural disasters come from poor countries.

We stand at the crossroads of history. We have lost so much flora and fauna in the last fifty years. Forests and rivers continue to be destroyed. [The] Mekong River, Irrawaddy River and so many rivers in East Asia are dangerously exploited. What were sporadic attacks on our eco system has now turning into chronic illness for our planet. So our gathering here needs to impress upon all of us the urgency of purpose. Evil is marching with glee, destroying human families, destroying God's gift of nature. The dance of the devil is arrogant. Our silence will be criminal. Since the problem is moral, it needs a moral response. No one is excused from this duty: As Martin Luther King Jr warned, 'Some are guilty; all of us are responsible.'

Every day 30,000 poor children [around the world] die of starvation. These children are victims of poverty, war and mismanagement. But increasingly they are victims of environmental degradation by companies and profit-oriented industries...[The] Holy Father's message is a wakeup call to the Church in East Asia. Let our deliberations come up with practical solutions, starting with how to make our churches deeply sensitive to environmental issues; and we need to join hands with like-minded forces in the struggle towards protection of nature.

He also spoke about the impact of natural disasters in his reflection on Mary's Assumption:

In our situation now, thousands of villages are marooned. Millions need relief assistance. In the high mountains of Hakha to the tapestry of the delta, there is the sad spectacle of people, women and children wading through unending streams of water. There is a way of the Cross today in the length and breadth of Myanmar. But our prayers go to our Lady [Mary, Mother of God], who was standing at the foot of the Cross when everyone deserted her son. With the same faithfulness, our Mother stands with our suffering brothers and sisters today, calling each one of us to journey with our brothers and sisters in this darkest time of their life.

And in his Easter message in 2015, he spoke out against big business cronies 'looting' Myanmar's natural resources:

The teak, timber and jade and other treasures of the people are open to merciless looting. Do not bury our people once again in poverty. Do not open their resources to the international looters and cronies. Myanmar people seek justice and fair play. Protect the Irrawaddy River, mother of all people, from reckless exploitation for gold. This nation was buried in the tomb of oppression and exploitation for six decades. We call for a new resurrection of peace and prosperity to all people.

22 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Keynote address: The Nation at Crossroads of Challenges and Opportunities', March 2016

EDUCATION

Finally, Cardinal Bo has been a strong voice for improving education in Myanmar, and has been a fierce critic of past governments' neglect of education:

Education is a fundamental right. A deliberate policy of not educating our youngsters exposed them to modern forms of slavery in the nearby countries, to drug menace, to human trafficking. Youth is a wounded generation. True reconciliation is possible. We buried three generations of our people without a good education. I urge all concerned: 'Do not crucify our youth in the tomb of self-pity,' but offer them the hope of a bright tomorrow through quality education.²³

In March 2016, he said:

Knowledge is power. Burma was one of the highly educated nations in the East Asia. The pristine glory of Myanmar universities was the envy of many nations. But now, 60 percent of our children do not finish primary school. For the last six decades a systematic effort has been made to destroy education, forcing three generations of our youngsters to be handicapped. Millions have ended up in modern forms of slavery. The Church has played a major role in educating many nations. We were at the forefront of quality education in this country, till our schools were taken out at midnight. Sadly it was never dawn afterwards. Darkness at noon... We want to sow dreams into our youth. We want to make Catholics an educated, well informed community. We want to empower the poor with quality education. For those thousands who seek solace in the drugs and unsafe migration, we want to show, Myanmar can be a land of opportunity if quality education is imparted.²⁴

23 Bo, Charles Maung, Easter Message, March 2016

24 Bo, Charles Maung, 'Keynote address: The Nation at Crossroads of Challenges and Opportunities', March 2016