

On the Role of Religious Communities in the Peace Process

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Good morning to everyone. And Happy Easter to Christians and also to our Muslim friends.

I would like to begin from where I come from. I am now based in Mindanao, in Cagayan de Oro Archdiocese. But before that, I was for almost 10 years at the prelature of Ipil. And it was in 1996 when the CBCP (Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines) came out to be more involved in peace and development. As I was starting my own assignment in the previous prelature, I realized that the people there were also polarized, the Christians and the Muslims. So it was in that context that eventually, the bishops of Mindanao also helped form the bishops-*ulama* forum which is now called the Bishops-*Ulama* Conference. Since that part of 1996 up to the present, the bishops and the *ulama* have been meeting fairly regularly, almost three times a year.

I think that is one example where the question about the role of civil society stakeholders is beginning to manifest itself, particularly the role of religious leaders in Mindanao. Hopefully, it is something that can also have some kind of a positive effect. In this regard, I should mention four points.

First, I think that the role of civil society stakeholders, especially in church groups and lay communities, is to articulate values: what does our society want in terms of Mindanao, in terms of the whole country, and can we agree on a mission of bringing a culture of peace. What are some of the values, like protecting human rights, that would protect against extrajudicial killings and the like? I think this is where civil society can play a role. In our dialogue meetings among bishops and *ulama*, we have found that there are many things in the Bible and Qur'an that we all really respect, so why not work together? In other words, we are religious beings and we should put forward the peace agenda.

In addition to my participation in the bishops-*ulama* conference, I decided to join the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP). It is an effort among religious leaders to also restart the negotiation or the peace process between the NDF and the GRP panels. So again, taken in a different context, faith communities are now apt to play the middleman in the peace

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negotiations and to try to bring the two parties together. In other words, local communities go deeper into the values one wants to promote, rather than the personalities involved.

For us, here, we have to ask our local communities what values do they really want to have for their own generation in the future and regardless of who are the leaders or the spokespersons of both sides. The spokespersons in the peace process should become secondary to the values that we really want to promote.

The second aspect is about mediation. At the Bishops–*Ulama* Conference for instance, or the PEPP, we find that we are in the middle role of trying to bridge the differences between two parties in conflict with the aim of restarting peace talks. Here we find that we have to be liberal, balanced, and receptive to both sides. In a sense, we also presume good faith on both parties. So for instance, just a few months ago, the PEPP group had a chance to go to Oslo and discuss the peace talks with the NDF panel. Before that, we went to talk to the GRP panel. In the next two or three days, we had a seminar workshop to continue our own efforts as representatives of faith communities, to see how we can make our faith values a part of their peace agenda. This is the gospel value, there is a greeting of peace which should resonate with Christian communities.

The third aspect is about the process which involves dialogue. The process itself may be the solution, or it could be the beginning of a solution. It could already focus on root problems. For example, agrarian reform may be pursued and administered even beyond the peace talks. In fact, the lobby groups now are working for the extension of the comprehensive agrarian reform program despite its defects and inflation over the past 20 years.

I think one example of how problems could be addressed even in the process of the peace talks is to take concrete measures by getting the support of the *madrasa* schools, considering that the Philippine government has acknowledged that *madrasa* schools are sources of information for Muslim communities. In fact, on the other side, the Christian communities are also having support for Christian religious instruction in public schools.

Turning to the GRP–NDF talks, the focus may be made on the positive elements of bilateral agreements that have already been signed by both the NDF panel and the GRP, including the on-going discussion on the comprehensive agreement on socio-economic reforms. Even without a final peace agreement, if we can forge these preliminary agreements, then we can already build the structure for a lasting peace.

In our PEPP experience, we suggested that there be reconfiguration of the tables for the peace talks. We should not only focus on making two key panels on both sides which make all the decisions. Why not have another panel among academics or people who are knowledgeable about the

background or history of some of these conflict situations? Why not have a separate table for both Muslim and Christian women? Perhaps their voices can have significant impact when it comes to bringing about peace. So, those are possibilities.

Finally, I think the efforts of civil society stakeholders to build up a constituency is crucial because oftentimes the peace agenda has been left only to the greater players — the peace panels themselves — but the rest of the community are not even informed about what is happening. As the records reveal, the Tripoli Peace Agreement was signed even without any prior consultation, and for the next 20 years, it was more or less left just for the Philippine government to abide by some of its provisions. But I think we could build a peace constituency where everyone becomes a stakeholder. Certainly, in Mindanao, there is a sense now that we should all work for peace.

This is one effort we have embarked on with the sponsorship of the Bishops-*Ulama* Conference. Every year we have a Mindanao Week of Peace celebration in observance of peace efforts in different local communities, especially the major cities like Zamboanga, Davao, and Cagayan de Oro, including local areas like Ipil and other places. During this period, the local Christian-Muslim (*Lumad*) or indigenous peoples communities are invited to have common observances of how to bring about a culture of peace. And I think there has been a very positive kind of effort where everyone gets involved at the local level on how to bring about a culture of peace.

Let me summarize my points. First, the civil society or church groups can help articulate values, primarily a culture of peace, respect for human rights, and the value of peace dialogue.

Second, many of us now find ourselves in the middle of the peace negotiations, maintaining neutrality and balance, but also listening carefully to both sides in order to bring about some kind of convergence on common concerns.

Third, I think that the process itself is as important as the end-result, and perhaps we should not be disappointed if the process has taken such a long time. Even with a brief period remaining in the process, we could be challenged already into doing something more concrete. By undertaking little changes in our own small communities, these will build up and bring about a kind of culture of peace for the good of Mindanao and the whole country.

And finally, we can perhaps all help build a peace constituency again just to focus on, maybe, the difference between the two kinds of conflict situations. We are told that in Mindanao there is a peace constituency from both sides — the Christians and the Muslims. The bishops and the *ulama* have come together, to continue the aspirations of both our Christian and

Muslim communities for building peace. But perhaps this may not be too well experienced by the whole country in terms of the GRP and the NDF panels. It seems to be a bit more remote or isolated and perhaps there is a need for more effort to work for both sides.

Thank you.