

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE: AN ESSENTIAL TO PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT IN MINDANAO

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During the heated controversy over the Southern Philippine Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) last year 1996, that is during the months of June, July and August, Gov. Emano of Misamis Oriental proposed the establishment of autonomy for the whole Mindanao. This was later echoed in many quarters by business people, especially here in Davao City, General Santos City and Cagayan de Oro City. Even Nur Misuari himself accepted the possibility after the Muslim autonomous area has been developed. Privately, our little president for Mindanao, Presidential Assistant Paul Dominguez, really believes the entire Mindanao can develop faster when "Imperial Manila" loses its grip over this region. Emano, Misuari, Dominguez and other Mindanaoans believe Mindanao can easily become another Singapore.

I do not know much about economics and politics but I would be happy to see the entire Mindanao region become autonomous. I do believe that we have political leaders and economic managers who can make Mindanao even better than Singapore, a well-developed island within the Republic of the Philippines.

I say "even better than Singapore" because Singapore is now in crisis according to its reports. Singapore is in crisis because it lacks unity and harmony within its pluralistic society.

Lee Kuan Hew and his successors have not been able to promote deeper unity among the Malays, Chinese, and Indians who constitute the citizenry of that city-state. The people are now complaining that Singapore is like a "business emporium", a megamall where you can have everything you need for your body and nothing for your spirit. These people are believers. The Malay are either Muslims or Christians, the Chinese are either Buddhists or Confucianists, and the Indians are mainly Hindus. Lee Kuan Hew had tried to forge unity among the followers of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Confucianism by having a common national festival, a common national dance, a common national song, a common national flower, etc. He and his successors have not succeeded. In the midst of their economic prosperity and affluence, the Singaporeans are looking for more. There is a spiritual and moral crisis, it seems to me.

I do not believe this will happen to Mindanao, however peaceful and developed it becomes. I do not think that religious pluralism in Mindanao will be a problem. The religious leaders of Islam, of Christianity, of Buddhism and Confucianism, and of the indigenous religions are aware of the need for tolerance and understanding through dialogue which can promote peace, unity, harmony, and solidarity. Hence, a series of interreligious activities has taken place lately. These events have been considered as surprising and even historic because they were unprecedented.

Last year, on 29 November 1996, the historic dialogue of the Muslim Ulama League of the Philippines and the Catholic Bishops of Mindanao took place in Cebu City. Two months later, on 7 January 1997, the same Muslim religious leaders met with the protestant and Aglipayan Bishops of Mindanao who are members of the National Council of Churches in the

Philippines (or NCCP- Mindanao). This meeting was held in Cagayan de Oro City.

On 18 February 1997 here in Davao City at the Sychar Hotel, the Mindanao Catholic Bishops had their second dialogue with the Ulama League of the Philippines. The day after, February 19, Dr. Mahid Mutilan, head of the Ulama League addressed the gathering of 300 Catholic priests from all over Mindanao who were having their annual convention in Samal Island Beach Resort.

On 4 May 1997, as a Bishop from Mindanao and National Chairman of the Catholic Bishops' Commission for Interreligious dialogue, I took part in the first official and historic dialogue between the Buddhists and Christians in the Philippines. It was held in the Manila Hotel where I addressed more than 1,000 Filipino Buddhists on the topic "Inner Awareness and Enlightenment." There were 3 Buddhist Monks from Taiwan and the United States. This coming August 2, here at Victorio's Beach Seminar House, 12 bailans or shamans from 8 tribes in Mindanao will meet with me and my staff to prepare for a general assembly of shamans and christian religious leaders on 25 October 1997 here in Davao City on the subject of a Filipino spirituality of creation. The shamans will be our resource persons.

All these gatherings of Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and Lumads or Indigenous religious leaders were about how our respective religious beliefs can help promote tolerance, justice, respect, understanding, unity, and solidarity which, as everyone knows are essential elements of a lasting peace and sustainable development.

Allow me to read to you, by way of an illustration, the Joint Statement of the Muslim Ulama League and the Mindanao Catholic Bishops which came out after our dialogue here on 18 February 1997.

JOINT STATEMENT

In the service of Peace and Development in Mindanao

In this second dialogue among Catholic Bishops in Mindanao and the Ulama League of the Philippines, held in Davao City on the 18th day of February 1997, we participants wish to express the following points:

1. We have gathered together in greater numbers to re-affirm our commitment to the peace process, especially in the aftermath of the killing of Bishop Benjamin De Jesus in Jolo. We condemn his brutal killing and other events that may disrupt the peace process and endorse an independent investigation into the root causes of his death to satisfy the full demands of justice.
2. We support the ongoing peace talks between the MILF and the government and appeal to both sides, as well as other contending parties, to promote a peace process that is community-based and "seeks a principled and peaceful resolution of the armed conflict with neither blame nor surrender but with dignity for all concerned."
3. We condemn the formation of vigilante or fanatical groups on either side and re-affirm our resolve to work for the security of minority Muslims living in Christian-dominated areas, as well as minority Christians living in Muslim-dominated areas.

4. We encourage our local religious leaders- parish priests, ulama, Imams, etc.- to form multi-religious local-level structures to ensure a continuing dialogue and action towards a culture of peace.

5. Other matters we have endorsed in this dialogue are:

- a.) promoting an information drive on Islam and Christianity for mutual understanding among religious communities;
- b.) respecting the religious traditions and literature of Muslim students in Catholic schools and in general, the freedom of religious expression for all Filipino students, including the right to say prayers in public or private schools;
- c.) encouraging local government units to set up the Office of Muslim Affairs or the Office of Christian Affairs in areas where they are needed;
- d.) working for the recognition of the rights of the Filipino overseas contract workers to practice freely their religion in countries where they are employed, particularly in the Middle East;
- e.) encouraging the government and the SPCPD to speed up the rehabilitation of MNLFF ex-soldiers and development projects in the Zone of Peace and Development (ZOPAD) to concretize the peace process;
- f.) continuing the series of dialogues among ourselves, including Protestant religious leaders, and to follow up the seven areas of concern expressed earlier during the first dialogue; and

g.) setting up a joint secretariat to follow up all these concerns.

May this dialogue gathering bring to life the counsel of our sacred traditions:

"...enter into peace (totally and without exception)"...

Qur'an 2:208

"...Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God" (Matthew 5:9)

Gov. Mahid M. Mutilan
President
Ulama League of the Philippines
& Governor, Lanao del Sur
Convenor

Archbishop Fernando R. Capalla
Archbishop of Davao
Episcopal Commission for
Interreligious Dialogue
Co-convenor

This coming August 12 in Cagayan de Oro City, the Muslim Ulama, the Catholic, Protestant, and Aglipayan Bishops will hold our 4th assembly or forum where we will finalize the setting up of a Secretariat and a sub-center in all the cities and major towns in Mindanao.

All these meetings and assemblies we call "interreligious dialogue" because they focus on religious matters and concerns which actually are values of the spirit. The dialogues promote mutual understanding and enrichment. Inherent in the faith of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and the primal religions are universal values like love, respect, honesty, forgiveness, prayer, sacrifice, sense of the sacred, etc., although the formulation and interpretation of them would be different and the rituals are as varied as there are

cultures and countries. These values are proof that they originate from a common source which is the Creator and therefore prove that we have a common humanity. These values and the common aspirations for peace of heart and soul, an essential ingredient in the total development of the human spirit.

We believe, therefore, that this kind of dialogue among religious communities in Mindanao is the missing part in the peace and development process now obtaining focuses only on the social, economic, political, and cultural factors. Interreligious dialogue therefore completes the process.

In the concrete, what can we religious leaders of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and the primal religion do to help?

As can be seen from the Joint Statement, our approach will be on two levels: on the level of the political and economic leaders, and on the level of the community.

On the top level, we can approach our government leaders, politicians and economic managers, the MNLF and MILF, as well as the Abu Sayaf and the CPP-NPA-NDF leadership, in order to make known to them that true peace is not just the absence of war but is based on truth, justice, love and also respect for the environment. We thus can also make it clear that true development can only be strengthened by allowing that person to grow spiritually and morally, not just socially, economically, politically and culturally..

On the level of the community, through our parish priests, pastors, and imams, and through our schools and madrassahs, we can inculcate the same values of genuine

peace and development by promoting interreligious dialogue on their level, that is, in the province and towns, in schools and in their work area.

In summary, interreligious dialogue is essential to peace and development in Mindanao because it is a heart-to-heart sharing of religious aspirations and experiences and because this sharing has a way of purifying and strengthening the social, economic, political and cultural ideas, plans, programs of our government and society. Interreligious dialogue wants to underline the truth that power, profit, and popularity cannot instill peace of heart. Instead, interreligious dialogue wants to stress the primacy of the spirit over the matter. It wants to emphasize the people's religious belief and conviction that God's spirit can dwell in and calm the movements of one's heart and mind, towards that ineffable experience of peace and tranquility which human language is unable to describe adequately. It is for this reason that we can say with that holy man of peace, Pope John Paul II, that "the peace of the heart is the heart of peace."