

“How to bridge our divisions and bring peace to the world”.

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Good day to each and everyone! I am asked to speak on a topic entitled: “How to bridge our divisions and bring peace to the world”. I do not claim to be the expert on this and in fact, in my daily life, I struggle to live with it.

Allow me to bring to your attention the first book of the Holy Book of the Christians, particularly in **Gen. 2: 18-24**. Here we are told that God created man and woman in His image and likeness. They are not set apart in isolation but in harmony with each other - where there is an assurance of freedom (in the garden), various possibilities for food (the trees of the garden), work (the command to cultivate), and above all community (the gift of someone who is like himself) Gen 2: 18-24.

However, through the disobedience of Adam and Eve, sin entered into the world. This was exacerbated with man’s refusal to accept his condition as creature with the episode of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). In the divine plan, all people had “one language” and the same words but humanity became divided, turning its back on the Creator. But the Almighty has never turned away from us. He sent men and women to guide us to the path of righteousness so that we may live in peace, harmony, love, understanding, etc. among ourselves.

The mission to preach peace, harmony, love, understanding, etc. rests on each and everyone of us. The following are areas where we concretize the “bridging of our divisions” and attain peace:

1. In the family, parents must teach their children to be merciful and forgiving.

Last Nov. 30, 2016, I left my former assignment where I spent 33 years i.e. 19 years as priest and 14 years as Bishop of the Prelature of Isabela de Basilan, and assumed as Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Ozamis. I mention this because Basilan before 1972 was peaceful; it is a place where both Christians and Muslims lived together harmoniously. However, when Islam fundamentalists in the early 80's from Afghanistan came to Basilan teaching Muslims to hate the Christians, the relationship between Muslims and Christians became bad. Now, the bias is heightened due to painful experiences which led to killing each other. Basilan is in Mindanao where both Muslims and Christians are suspicious of each other. This must stop. It can be healed when parents of every family, whether Christian or Muslim, will tell stories to their children about how they lived in the past when there was peace, mercy, love and forgiveness in the community. We must remember that it is in the family in which a child receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness. It is in the family where a child learns what it means to love and to be loved. Parents must tell stories to their children on how to strengthen the bond of peace and harmony instead of telling stories that ignite hatred and vengeance. There is high hope we can bridge the division and attain peace if parents mirror their lives to their children about mercy, forgiveness, love, respect, harmony, understanding, cooperation and unity.

2. Another area that can bridge our division and bring peace to the world is through works of Charity or works of kindness.

Why can't kindness be our way of life? Deep within there is the instinct to help and reach out to offer a helping hand. Deep within ourselves also there is a tiny voice that tells us to wait, otherwise if there are problems you will be held accountable.

In Marawi, Lanao del Sur, Mindanao, Philippines, the Maute (ISIS affiliated) wanted to establish an Islamic State and as a result there is War in that portion of Mindanao and Martial Law was declared last May 23, 2017 until December 31, 2017. There were many casualties on the part of the Maute terrorist group and as well as on the side of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. There were also civilians who died in this war. When it happened, last May 23, 2017, there were students who were trapped because it was the enrolment period for schools. There was a Christian student who was interviewed by the media and he thanked a Muslim student who protected him and saved/ rescued him in the process. The Christian student said:

“I am grateful to God I am alive. This is because God used a Muslim student to protect me and rescued me from the Maute terrorist group. Without his helping hand, I would have been dead by now.”

Here we realize that acts of kindness or works of charity are always well appreciated.

Here’s an advice from an author **Og Mandino**:

“Beginning today, treat everyone you meet as if they were going to be dead by midnight. Extend to them all the care, kindness and understanding you can muster, and do it with no thought of any reward. Your life will never be the same again.”

Why can’t kindness be our way of life? Why postpone doing works of Charity? Acts of Kindness can bridge the division and by that we can attain world peace.

3. Dialogue

This is very important in bridging the division and bringing peace to the world. We must get the pulse or sentiments of other people. In other words, the need for dialogue. We need to listen to others and allow reason to rule in us. We must not become emotional and never allow emotions to prevail. When we talk, we have to open ourselves and set aside biases. We do not prejudge others.

Nobody feels superior instead one must feel on an equal footing with one another. A sense of superiority would be the hindrance for dialogue. Equality serves as the basis for dialogue.

Do not allow painful memories to continue to exist in our consciousness. If there is no healing of painful memories, we can never participate in dialogue.

In Basilan, most priests accept in theory the necessity for dialogue but their heart refuses to do it. This is because the beheading of captive Catholics by Abu Sayyaf continues. Just recently, last July 20, 2017, seven Catholics who were farmers were abducted and later on, because they could not give ransom, they were beheaded. The clergy of Basilan are for dialogue but their hearts refuse to do it. Dialogue is very important to bridge the division and attain peace.

4. Be forgiving and merciful

Everybody has experienced being hurt by someone. This is normal as we interact with each other. However, we must have a forgiving and merciful heart. If we cannot forgive, this leads to hatred where the person may plan for vengeance. By all means, we need to possess a forgiving and merciful heart.

In the words of Pope Francis “**A little bit of mercy makes the world less cold and more just.**”

People may think we are fools if we forgive those who do us wrong. But to forgive is divine. The heart of the gospel is about mercy and forgiveness. We can win trust and confidence if we are merciful and forgiving. This is one way to bridge our division and bring peace to the world.

5. Another aspect which may bridge the division and bring peace to the world is when we can accept others' differences.

Every person is unique. We have unique expressions of life. As long as our ways promote friendship and harmony, we must not be embarrassed to present ourselves to others. Accept other people and give them importance.

Lastly, we need to be involved and actively participate in activities of organizations that promote peace. Even if there are obstacles in doing this, we have to continue doing it. At the same time, we pray to the Almighty to give us peace.

Our activities, our efforts must be grounded in prayer. He is the “Prince of Peace” and giver of Peace! He is the God of Peace! All our efforts will be nothing if we are not grounded in the Almighty. We have to pray! If everything is done, then let us lift this up to the Almighty. Let us do our share and the Almighty will bless it.

In everything I have said, this must start within oneself. Please allow me to tell this story:

I Wanted To Change The World

Author: Unknown Monk 1100 A.D.

“When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world.

I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change my nation.

When I found I couldn't change the nation, I began to focus on my town. I couldn't change the town and as an older man, I tried to change my family.

Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, and suddenly I realize that if long ago I had changed myself, I could have made an impact on my family. My family and I could have made an impact on our town. Their impact could have changed the nation and I could indeed have changed the world.”

Brothers and sisters let us contribute something to bridge the division and attain peace. This must start within ourselves.