

Bridging Divisions, Building Peace in the World

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At present, the island where I come from – Mindanao in the Philippines – is under martial law. This is because of the protracted stand-off in Marawi City between an ISIS-inspired group of Muslim militants and government armed forces. Since May 23 of this year 2017, armed extremists have taken over the city center, holding on to several hostages and engaging in sniper shooting to keep government forces at bay. Almost the entire population of Marawi – about 230,000 – have evacuated to Iligan city, 30 kilometers away, or sought refuge in other places, including my city of Cagayan de Oro which is 120 kilometers distance from Marawi.

Even as we try to estimate the incalculable loss of lives and properties, the deeper questions need to be raised. What are the root causes behind the unrest of Muslim communities in Mindanao? How do we bridge divisions and build peace in Mindanao and the rest of the country? In a widespread consultation among Christians, Muslims and indigenous people, sponsored by the Bishops-Ulama Conference in 2010, the researchers were able to identify six key factors for peace-building in Mindanao, conveniently summarized by six S's.

1) First is **Sincerity**, which connotes transparency and good will. This is forged through personal friendships among Muslims, Christians, and indigenous people. Indeed in our Bishops-Ulama Conference, which is a gathering of religious leaders coming from what are supposedly “conflicting sides”, we have shown that friendship and openness can highlight the common values that we all share.

2) **Sensitivity** means mutual respect for different cultures and religious traditions. Inter-religious as well as intra-religious dialogue helps the participants to understand and appreciate better different cultures. In one BUC dialogue meeting, bishops and ulama exchanged copies of the Bible and the Koran. In another meeting, we reflected on the parallel accounts and unique role of Mary in the Bible and Maryam in the Koran – she being the most revered woman in both sacred scriptures. In one Mindanao Week of Peace activity, reciprocal visits of mosques and churches highlighted the mutual appreciation of places of worship by both Christian and Muslim believers.

3) Closely related to sensitivity is **Spirituality**. Both Christians and Muslims are challenged to explore further the tenets and teachings of their own faith as religions of peace. Muslims point out that Islam itself comes from the root word, “Salaam,” which means Peace. Christians on their part are invited to follow the example of Jesus Christ in active non-violence and to live out the beatitude, “Blessed are the peace-makers.” Love of God and love of neighbor are the two commandments and a “common word” among Muslims and Christians.

4) Despite the differences in culture and religion, indigenous people, Muslims and Christians live together in **Solidarity** on one island of Mindanao and one country. More and more the tri-people population of Mindanao now share the same schools and market places. There are more interactions and even marriages among the various ethnic communities. Unity in diversity is a lived experience for many ordinary residents of Mindanao. Indeed, the vast majority of Christian, Muslim and indigenous people communities have long aspired for peace in their localities.

5) **Security** is needed as a condition for lasting peace. Cessation of hostilities, control of loose firearms, and maintenance of peace and order are major components for a community's sense of security. Likewise, control of criminality, drug trafficking, etc. and respect for human rights are all part of ensuring security and freedom from fear for every citizen.

6) The final factor for peace-building is **Sustainability** – i.e., legislation that ensures the structures and mechanisms for a just and lasting peace. The draft of the Bangsamoro Basic Law is an example of how legislation can create an autonomous government for the Muslim-dominated areas of Mindanao, ultimately addressing the Muslim communities' aspirations for a wider measure of self-determination.

These then are six factors for healing divisions and building bridges among various cultural communities for the lasting peace of Mindanao – Sincerity, Sensitivity, Spirituality, Solidarity, Security and Sustainability. These values and processes may take time to develop, but as they unfold they provide the viable alternatives to a society mired in violence and terrorism. Building bridges instead of erecting walls can help bring about a more inclusive and lasting peace for Mindanao and the world.

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