

Sept 25, 2014 - National Convention Davao

Theme:

**HOW THE BAGSAMORO AGREEMENT CAN BECOME AN OCCASION FOR
CATHOLIC EDUCATION TO SHARE ITS MISSION OF LOVE IN HARMONY,
SOLIDARITY AND PEACE**

Fr. Sebastiano D'Ambra, PIME

1) Introduction

I am grateful for this invitation that gives me the opportunity to share some challenges that Catholic educators in the Philippines have to face today. This is a special time of history. It coincides with the alarming news of Christians who are persecuted in many parts of the world. The news becomes more alarming if we consider that groups linked to international organizations with specific religious colors are already present in our midst, including the ISIS, the new group which is emerging in Iraq and Syria. Who pays and support them and what is their purpose? These and other questions add more problems to the already difficult situation of the peace process in Mindanao and the Bangasamoro agreement.

The siege in Zamboanga of September 9, 2013 is a clear demonstration of the tensions that we are living in the country, especially in Mindanao. It was a painful experience for us. Ten thousands houses were burned and destroyed, hundreds of people were killed and more than one hundred fifty thousands have been forced to leave their houses. Thousands of them are still the IDPs people living in temporary shelters. In this situation, prejudices and often hatred among Muslims and Christians are becoming more visible. All these painful stories have been, for me, who started the Silsilah Dialogue Movement in Zamboanga thirty years ago a sad event, a kind of defeat in my mission of

dialogue and peace. The only consolation in all these sad stories of Zamboanga for me and other Christian and Muslim leaders close to Silsilah is that during the first days of the siege /war in Zamboanga we have been able to stop the plan of some to use the occasion to declare “religious war” adding more pains to the painful situation.

If you visit us in Harmony Village in Zamboanga you can see a new Christian prayer house with a cross made with two pieces of burned wood taken from the ground zero of Zamboanga and a sentence: “GOD LOVES... AND FORGIVES”

This is a special time when the mission of forgiveness has to be emphasized more. In the letter of the CBCP in preparation for the coming of Pope Francis in January next year in the Philippines the message of “MERCY” is also emphasized. Forgiveness, mercy, love, solidarity and harmony must be for us the deeper meaning of dialogue and interfaith dialogue to promote.

The Zamboanga siege is not an isolated story. It is a lesson to learn and to be taken seriously. The country is divided and a peace agreement it is not enough to unite people. Our mission, especially the mission of Catholic educators like you, goes beyond an agreement to study and to present to the students. At the same time there are good “memories” in the midst of so much division that often you can not see, but you feel. It is real, especially in Mindanao. And what is dangerous is that often leaders cover it with beautiful promises and statements that create a form of society which moves in denial of the reality.

At the same time there are also beautiful stories of people, Muslims and Christians, indigenous people and others who share friendship and solidarity. I can tell you many of these stories even during the siege in Zamboanga. Silsilah has collected a few of these stories in a booklet entitled : “The September to Remember”. Simple and touching stories to remind all our mission of Padayon (move on).

People are tired of war! Many in Zamboanga and other places in Mindanao are more open to live together and accept the plurality of cultures and religions, provided that they are respect in their freedom and the rights. But how will this

need for peace be sustained if our people are not ready to forgive and to start a new page of reconciliation. The situation still remains unstable, especially because some Muslim groups and leaders are not ready to work together. There are still cultural gaps that can not be covered with an agreement and with compromises. The Christians, for their part, are more ready to accept the Bangsamoro if they are not deprived of their basic rights and of the basic freedom of religion and are not treated as second class citizens, like in some areas of Mindanao. At the same time the Muslim too have the same feeling in some Christian areas of the Philippines. There is still a lot of ignorance and fear on the part of the Christians in their relation with the Muslims and on the part of the Muslim in their relation to the Christians. On their part Muslims often are in a dilemma between their desire to reach out to Christians and be friend with them and the strong opposition of some religious leaders with more “radical” orientation who systematically discourage Muslims to be close to the Christians. A typical example is the change of attitude of the Muslims related to the celebration of Christmas.

If we include in the issue of the Bangsamoro Agreement the situation becomes more complicated, especially because we see the emergence of different cultural elements inside the Muslim groups that strengthen the “prejudices” already present among Christians and Muslims.

We need peace, we love peace and we are here to give our contribution of peace as Catholic educators. You have the urgent mission to educate the new generation of this country starting from the basic mission of love and reconciliation reaffirming the FAITH, THE HOPE AND THE CHARITY that has to guide the Catholic educators, putting these virtues in context:

- FAITH – in the context of secularism and radicalism, two opposite emerging realities. To these realities we can add the challenge of the Bangsamoro territories where the Catholics are called to reaffirm their faith with determination. The presence of Islam in our midst and some disturbing news of radicalism in our midst are occasions to challenge Catholic educators to help in making the faith of those who are part of their network of influence an experience closer to life and a witnessing

presence in society and not only an exclusive activity among a close circle of friends and relatives.

- HOPE – Catholic educators have the primary mission to promote hope in this society, even it is difficult and there are alarming signs of radicalism that test our faith and our hope in our mission in the world. We do not have to be disturbed by the slogan that other religions are growing faster than ours, provided that we are able to move with love and compassion and give hope to all.
- CHARITY - the charity of the Catholics, in general of the Christians, is admired also by Muslims who see how we are in solidarity. They see that we also help them and see our generosity as a sincere sign of love.

2) The future Peace in Mindanao and my experience of Dialogue and Peace

When I think about a sustainable peace in Mindanao I have in mind the many problems that still need to be answered, especially some cultural differences and the increasing radicalism that use religions to justify violence. We can not ignore also the attitude of some leaders ready to do all, even to use violence, to remain in power. In this situation the leaders of the Bangsamoro need a lot of wisdom, sincerity, sensitivity and courage to promote the common good of society.

The situation is indeed difficult and delicate, but nothing is impossible to God/Allah even in our conflict in Mindanao, in spite of the fact that it is becoming more complicated and the agreement needs to pass from different stages, especially the stage of overcoming prejudices, fears and lack of trust and the plebiscite and the reactions on the results of the plebiscite. We have to accept that an agreement can not answer all aspirations, but can be improved along the way, if we respect each other and work together for the common good. But how do we convince all about this difficult process? For sure, the educators have an important mission to do...

We are in a critical time in the history of Mindanao. There are internal and external factors that make this time more difficult. In my experience in Mindanao, from 1977 up to now, I have been guided by the belief that something, some way, some times will happen in the right direction. We have

to move with courage. It takes courage to be Christians today and the Catholic educators have the special mission to guide thousands of youth, dreaming a society formed by people of different cultures and religions.

Sometimes I see the “revival of Islam” as a blessing for the Christians because in a very unusual way it disturbs and challenges us to revisit the centrality of God in the world and helps us to go out from our “comfort zone” and understand that the future peace can not be for one group or religion alone, but must be for all of us: Christians, Muslims, Indigenous people, Chinese and others who are in our midst.

In general Islamic groups think that “Secularism” and abuses related to this new trend of society are done by the Christian society because the most relevant signs of secularism come from countries with a Christians background. This is not true, but this is the impression and the perception, especially among Muslims who try to find reasons to justify the “revival of Islam” and violence as a answer based on their Islamic faith. The so called “revival of Islam” which advocates violence disturbs also the Muslim “moderates” and they feel uneasy that there are Muslim groups who advocate violence in the “name of Islam”.

The word “Islamists” is circulated today in a negative way. There are also those who see all this escalation of violence linked with Islam as a form of strategy coming from some sectors who implement geo-politic strategic plans. Some also accept the theory that all this is orchestrated to destroy Islam.

Friends of Catholic schools and universities this is time to act with courage and determination. All of us have to move without fear knowing the Lord will guide us. In this line of reflection I always remember the courage of those who are ready to give their lives for their faith, but also those who are guided by ideologies which use also violence and revolution. They believe in their ideology and are ready to die for what they believe.

From my experience I can say that I have been inspired by many who live their faith, but also by MNLF rebels who use violence and risk their lives. Why? Among the many experiences of my life in Mindanao since 1977 I was invited, at the beginning of my mission in Siocon, Zamboanga del Norte, to help as negotiator to a group of MNLF. In my desire to bring peace in that area I met

many rebels in the forest and other places . I was with them on many occasions. Many of the rebels became my friends and they have shared to me about their life as an older brother and father. Listening their stories of courage I always reflect: why can they make so many sacrifices on the path of violence, while we often are tired and afraid to continue our mission of the path of dialogue and peace?

This reflection came back often in my mind and heart from the time I was forced to go to Italy after my experience as negotiator of the MNLF in the area of Zamboanga del Norte, my first mission. In fact I was forced to leave and to return to Italy because some sectors of the government were not happy to see me close to the rebels in my mission of peace and they tried on many occasions to kill me. On February 9, 1981 they killed one of my staff, a dear Filipino friend who was near to me. I was the target and he was the victim. Forced to go back to Italy, I brought with me the faces of my people and their friendship. There I remembered, in a special way my Muslim friends and some MNLF commanders who saved my life on many occasions.

Living in a Muslim community on my first mission, I deepened my mission and my spirituality. With them I rediscovered that, indeed, all is in the hands of God and this experience deepened my understanding of dialogue. This was my turning point, a kind of conversion to dialogue with the Muslims.

I still remember a little Muslim girl that on one occasion knowing that I was praying in the room, said to me: “ Also the Christians pray?” Poor girl! The image of the Christians for her was the one of the Christian soldiers who kill the Muslims. I remember also Muslim friends who used to tell me: “ You are so good, why do you not become Muslim?” Hearing this comment I usually smile, but on some occasions I used to say to close friends: “ My goodness is fruit of my faith in Jesus, the Emmanuel, God among us”.

The determination to continue my mission moved me to study Islam and Arabic for two years in Rome, while I was in my “exile” in Italy . The occasion to go back to the Philippines came when I was invited to become the Regional Superior of the PIME community in the Philippines.

In 1984 I started in Zamboanga City the Silsilah Dialogue Movement with some Christian and Muslim friends sharing my understanding of dialogue as a style

of life and a spirituality. I can mention many other adventures of my life in dialogue. One of the most touching for me is when a close friend of mine, Fr. Salvatore Carzedda, PIME, was killed in Zamboanga in 1992 in his mission of dialogue in Silsilah during a summer course on Muslim-Christian dialogue. That was another time when I was forced to leave Mindanao and go back to Italy. The second exile.

Well, I just reaffirm with these few stories of my experience that indeed nothing is impossible with God if we believe and we are patient to wait, investing our life for this mission. With this spirit I believe we have to face also the challenge of the Bangsamoro as an opportunity for the future peace in our country starting from a better dialogue between Muslims and Christians in our country.

I often find people, including priests who have a very narrow understanding of interfaith dialogues. I was executive secretary of the CBCP commission on Interreligious dialogue long ago and often before, but also now, I had the chance to share with bishops and priests the spirit of interreligious and interfaith dialogue for us Catholics. Usually, the perception of many is that the urgency of dialogue is related to the problem that we have to face. Example the conflict in Mindanao. So, we have to be in dialogue with the Muslims. If this is the understanding of dialogue we can say that inter religious dialogue becomes only a strategy and this kind of dialogue can not last long.

Since the beginning of my commitment to dialogue, I was convinced to promote a dialogue that starts from a spiritual experience, encouraging Muslims and Christians to find reasons in their own faith, moved by an experience of life-in-dialogue as Muslims or Christians. For this reason I choose the words "Silsilah" (chain or link) with spiritual identity taken from the sufi experience that also bring us closer to the understanding that the "chain" or genealogical tree of "Silsilah" or "Salsilah" (in the perception of Muslim groups in Mindanao) can reach all as part of the same human family, created by the same God. I have to confess that was a risk thirty years ago to give a clear spiritual foundation to the Silsilah Dialogue Movement at a time when the normal orientation of NGOs in Mindanao was more in the line of action and struggle.

3) Bangsamoro and Catholic Educators in the Philippines

How can Catholic educators answer today to the signs of the times, especially in the context of the Bangsamoro agreement that is becoming a divisive issue, even if all claim that they work for peace?

We can not divide Mindanao from the rest of the country. Anything good or bad is reflected on the national level. In the specific case of the Bangsamoro we can not divide Mindanao from the rest of the country, it can be, in the future, a positive experience of dialogue among Muslim and Christians or a chapter of the sad story of conflict in Mindanao. Considering the emerging of radicalism we expect that the implementation of the Bangsamoro will encounter, along the way, difficulties in the implementation, with the consequence of more divisions among religious groups. To overcome this possible obstacles the Catholic educators have to be ready to face the new reality.

The Christians, especially the Catholics, in the Philippines have a big network, including schools and universities and you, as Catholic educators, have a big responsibility. You are called to rebuild the trust and the hope for the future peace in Mindanao and in the country.

I have been invited to some schools and universities around the country and often I get the impression that the understanding of the real problem in Mindanao is limited and often it reflects what the media projects. People, especially the youth, communicate often on Facebook now and less on real relations, meeting people and share the dreams and aspirations, including the difficulties and frustrations. There is the temptation to live in a virtual world and education becomes selective because people try to avoid the real problems of society. There is the tendency to live in denial of the reality. This tendency is reflected also in the Muslim- Christian relation, often because of fear.

Indeed, the need to build trust among Muslims and Christians is the most important aspect of the possible success of the Bangsamoro. Thus, how we can build trust among groups? Indeed the trust among Muslims and Christians is still poor. But a big question for many is: “ Why are the Muslims divided among themselves?” and “how can this help our dream about the future peace in Mindanao? This is true also for the Christians, but in the context of the Bangsamoro the question is relevant.

Among the many things that you as Catholic Educators can do in this situation is to start with a primer or something similar focusing on some basic questions and answers. One suggestion can be to start from “ CARE” used as a name, but also an acronym (C.A.R.E.)

C – COURAGE

Under this part on COURAGE the primer can emphasize:

- 1) Why we need courage to witness our faith, without compromise, developing a deeper and better experience of faith as a style of life, and sharing with courage love, forgiveness, harmony and solidarity in a language that the young people can understand and appreciate.
- 2) The courage to proclaim the Catholic identity and in the same time sharing love, friendship and solidarity to all. We are questioned as Catholics by those who follow the trend of a society affected by “secularism”, “individualism”, “egoism” etc. and we need a great courage to oppose this trend and to show the real face of Christianity.
- 3) The courage to rebuild the unity and sanctity of the family and to rediscover the dialogue with God, the self, others and creation as a way to educate youth to holistic form of dialogue.

A - APPRECIATION

- 1) In the spirit of inter faith dialogue the Catholic educators have to find ways to educate the youth to appreciate their own faith first and encourage them to be in dialogue with others as part of the same human family.
- 2) Catholic educators are encouraged to present positive stories of people or groups who can inspire the students to follow the spirit of interfaith, promoting experiences of immersion among people of different faiths through proper exposure or documentation.
- 3) Catholic educators have to promote activities done together with students of different faiths to develop skills in line with the proactive approach and the active-harmony paradigm in the spirit of friendship and solidarity.

R - RESPECT

- 1) Respect the identity of others in case there are points in other religions that are not in line with our own faith and moral principles that we follow.
- 2) Catholic educators have to prepare students to face, with kindness and determination, ideologies and groups who clearly are against their religion, especially if they advocate and justify any form of violence.
- 3) Respect in the spirit of sensitivity the traditions and attitudes of others in the way they act and dress inviting moderation and avoiding extreme practices that disturb others' sensitivity and privacy.

E - EXAMPLE

- 1) Be open to evangelization of the Christians and the Daw'a of the Muslims in schools and universities in the spirit of dialogue, encouraging the witness presence as a sign of faithfulness to each own faith and beliefs.
- 2) Propose activities that promote leadership for dialogue and peace inviting students and faculties to be creative and become models of dialogue and peace.
- 3) Promote forms of dialogue that are signs of dialogue and solidarity with those who are in need, sustaining the good example with the prayer and meditation.

4) The Challenge of the Culture of Dialogue, path to Peace

We in Silsilah believe that we have to choose the longer way of education, forming our people on the Culture of Dialogue, as Path to peace.

The Culture of Dialogue is the fruit of a process of personal and social transformation that each one is invited to experience, deepening the basic concepts of our human and spiritual aspirations that often are nurtured in the context of our own faith. Thus, different faiths are not an obstacle to the culture of dialogue, rather they are challenges to move together for the common good of society.

How do we apply this concept related to the issue of the “Bangsamoro Agreement” that gives a special focus to the so called “Moros”? The challenge is to revisit the concept of Culture of Dialogue in the new set up of Mindanao, starting NOW! Living the experience of the Culture of

Dialogue, in principle, means to live and promote dialogue among people of different religions. Thus, the Culture of Dialogue is a holistic approach that includes all aspects of dialogue, including the “Intra Religious, Inter Religious and Ecumenical Dialogue”.

The Culture of Dialogue has to deepen this experience as a spirituality of life-in-dialogue with God, the self, others and creation in any situation we will be involved. The Culture of Dialogue is a way to revisit our life as an “encounter, relation, dialogue” that becomes a style of life. The expression “Dialogue starts from God and brings people back to God” best express this dynamic journey of life and the Culture of Dialogue.

Pope Francis often presents the need of the “Culture of Encounter”. Well, it is an appropriate way to say, but in the context of the Philippines where “encounter” is often used to indicate “fighting” we feel it is more appropriate to present “encounter” with the term “dialogue”. Thus, we choose the expression “Culture of Dialogue”.

UNESCO in the 90’s launched the concept of the “Culture of Peace” proposing a list of priorities and issues to achieve peace in the world. The Culture of Dialogue focuses more on the spiritual aspects of life that prepares people to face the issues with more sustainable spirit. Thus, the Culture of Dialogue is a longer process to achieve a “vision of peace”.

Vatican II, among the many points to renew the spirit of the Church, has indicated the way of dialogue, encouraging Christians to be in dialogue with all, with a special attention with the Muslims who share the same origin of the faith.

For the Muslims, dialogue still remains a point that needs more time to be internalized and applied, especially today with the emergency of different radical groups in the Islamic Ummah. We can not ignore also that the history of Islam started about six centuries after Christianity. Christians before were also not very open to dialogue with people of other religions because the perception of dialogue was often related to

the truth and the faith that we believe. Now Catholics are still invited to be faithful to their faith, but also to see people of other faiths as part of the same human family with the same rights and dignity and to see also in other faiths some “rays” of our faith.

Considering the historical process we can say also that the Muslims are entering in the spirit of dialogue not only as “tolerant” of the others, but also on a deeper level. One of the great examples is a letter of 138 Muslim scholars of the world addressed to Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 and other Christian leaders of the world saying that Muslims and Christians are today the biggest religions of the world and together we have to work for peace based on the teaching of the love of God and the love of neighbor in Islam and Christianity. This move is in the right direction because it indicates the WHYs of dialogue that are the love of God and the love of neighbor. This open letter answers the fundamental question: “Why do we have to live and promote dialogue introducing the concept of LOVE of God and love of neighbor?”

This presentation helps me to say that meanwhile it is convenient to continue to talk about interreligious or inter faith dialogue, we have to grow holistically and to overcome the concept of dialogue as a strategy and give more attention to the concept of dialogue as an expression of love in action, silence and harmony. In this way dialogue is not only a “means” but also a “goal” and a style of life that we have to experience and share.

An example

Months ago I was in the airport of Manila waiting for my flight to Zamboanga. The pre departure area was full of passengers waiting like me. At a certain point a young man came close to me and asked if I was “Fr. Seb”. I said yes. It was a joy to meet again together. He was a young Maranao who started a long sharing. He told me that he was before a radical Muslim, to the point to be against the Christians, but he decided to attend the Silsilah Summer course around ten years ago there he was transformed and now is promoting dialogue in Mindanao State University (MSU). This is a little consolation among the others, but I

know that many young Muslims today and also some Muslim leaders are turning their back to the common good of society for more radical ideologies.

Conclusion

A legitimate question can be:” Will the Bangsamore entity be able to control radicalism or will it be used as a ground for more radical groups in Mindanao to claim more rights and divide our people more?

Often we hear that most of the leaders of the country receive their formation in Catholic schools and universities. This is a point of reflection. Related to the issues of the Bangsamoro the most important role of the Catholic educators is to build real understanding and experience of dialogue and interfaith dialogue.

This is the challenge and the opportunity to contribute for the future peace in the country creating an atmosphere of trust and friendship.