

Going Beyond the Bangsamoro Basic Law

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Distinguished administrators, faculty and staff, graduates, students, parents and friends, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for the invitation to join this baccalaureate ceremony and to visit once more your beautiful campus. The first time I was here in Marawi was in 1969 with Fr. Francisco Demetrio, SJ, upon invitation of his good friend, Dr. Mamitua Saber. The occasion was the inauguration of the Aga Khan Museum. The second time was in 1997 during a Bishops-Ulama Forum dialogue held at the Ayala Hotel. After our dialogue meeting, I remember we all went to visit the King Faisal Mosque on this campus to show our respect for places of worship. Both visits were instances of inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

It is in this light that I share the deep disappointment of many of you over the non-passage of the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law. Allow me to quote the words of Congressman and Deputy Speaker Pangalian Balindong which also express my sentiments:

“Today with a heavy heart and a disturbing sense of foreboding, I close the book of hope for the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law. 51 public hearings, 200 hours of committee level debates, and 8 months of consultations are all put to waste – thrown in the abyss of uncertainty and darkness. This is the lowest and saddest day of my legislative work.”

Congressman Balindong continues, describing his earlier expectations and dream:

“The Bangsamoro Basic Law offers the Muslim minority in this country the recognition of our distinct identity, protection of what remains of the Bangsamoro homeland, and the opportunity to exercise self-determination through a parliamentary form of government that will be run in accordance with the Moro culture, faith and way of life. BBL will guarantee that as a minority, we stand in parity of esteem with our Filipino brothers and sisters.” (Privilege Speech in Congress, January 27, 2016)

I Peace Advocacy

As peace advocates, Cardinal Orlando Quevedo and I, together with other bishops, have expressed our own disappointment at the turn of events. Last year, I presented to Christian communities ten Easter challenges for peace in Mindanao. The first one was this: “Christianity and Islam are both religions of peace.” A Muslim friend shared with me a quotation from the

Koran: “If the enemy inclines toward peace, you also incline toward peace. And trust in Allah, for he is One that hears and knows all things” (Surah 8, ayah 51). For Christians, the Bible states: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

Secondly, I pointed out that the vast majority of Muslim, Christian, and indigenous people communities in Mindanao aspire for peace. Many of these communities have experienced the ravages of war, the loss of lives and the pain of dislocation. The most vulnerable victims of armed conflict are the women and children. It is for them and future generations that we need to build structures of peace today.

Thirdly, I mentioned that all-out war is not the answer to the Mindanao situation. It has been tried and failed – in the early 70’s, and the years 2000, 2003, and 2008. There was widespread destruction and dislocation of families but no end to the armed conflict.

Then I also outlined the three major grievances felt by Muslim communities: the reduction of their ancestral territory, the erosion of their cultural identity, and the loss of self-determination in the development of their communities.

Among other challenges, I mentioned that the draft BBL did not happen overnight, but was the result of five years of consultation and widely-publicized peace negotiations. It also comes at the end of 17 years of failed negotiations with Muslim militant groups. For me, the draft BBL represents “a reasonable, practicable and carefully crafted settlement for attaining a just and lasting peace in Mindanao.”

Questions of constitutionality have been amply discussed over the past months. The Mamasapano mis-encounter in the short term should not derail the long-term goals of the BBL in addressing the root causes of injustice and providing the institutions for the development of Muslim communities. Indeed, instead of viewing the MILF as enemies, the BBL makes them and the envisioned Bangsamoro entity partners for peace and development in Mindanao. All-out peace, I proposed, can open wide the doors for the all-out development of Mindanao.

How then can we go beyond the BBL? We do not need to wait for our public officials to bring about peace. A peace document will only remain a piece of paper, if we do not go to the grassroots communities to forge a culture of peace.

II Consultations in Mindanao

We can recall the results of *Konsult Mindanaw*, a project of the Bishops-Ulama Conference in 2010. More than 300 Focus Group Discussions were conducted by the research team among Catholic, Muslim, Protestant, and Indigenous People communities throughout Mindanao. The manifold findings were summarized in six S’s.

For me, the first S in importance is **Spirituality**. Participants in the FGDs repeatedly pointed out the need for spiritual moorings in the quest for lasting peace. A Muslim participant remarked: “Peace can be attained here on earth and in heaven when we follow the words of Allah.” In the creation of our Bishops-Ulama Forum, in 1996, we religious leaders pointed out that the missing dimension in the peace process was the spiritual and transcendental values of Christian and Muslim communities – which can provide the framework for the peace process as well as a unifying vision of one God, one common origin and destiny for all.

A second S is intercultural **Sensitivity**. The *Konsult Mindanaw* report stresses that “the key to peace in Mindanao lies in celebrating diversity through respect for each other’s cultural values and belief systems.” One FGD participant completed the statement: Peace is ... “when people smile at me even if I am wearing the *hijab*.”

When I was working on my dissertation at the International Rice Research Institute in Los Baños, I had a Muslim friend from Bangladesh who came into my room one day and saw a thick book on my desk covered by a pile of papers. He asked me about the book. I told him it was the Bible. He was shocked and told me gently that for Muslims the Koran is always put on a special place. From that incident with my Muslim friend, I learned more about the value of a sacred book like the Bible.

A third S in pushing forward the peace process is **Solidarity**. Despite cultural and religious differences, we agree on common human values. We live on one island Mindanao and in one country.

When I was the bishop of Ipil Prelature, we conducted a Culture of Peace seminar for a mixed group of Christians, Muslims, and *lumads*. One exercise was to form separate groups of Christians, Muslims and lumads. We asked them to list the positive and negative traits they perceived in the other groups. During reporting time, the Christians said that Muslims cannot be trusted, but that they are united and help each other during times of crisis. The Muslims said that Christians are able to follow civic regulations, but that they are land-grabbers and oppressors. The lumads said that Christians and Muslims are better educated but that they oppress the tribal minorities. Christians and Muslims also saw the lumads as uneducated, but closer and more protective of the environment.

In summarizing all these stereotype images, the facilitator challenged the three groups. Can we not build a Culture of Peace by focusing on the positive traits of each cultural group? – e.g., to follow rules like the Christians, to be united and support each other like the Muslims, and to be closer to nature like the lumads? Solidarity can be forged from the positive traits of each cultural group, which are then integrated into an all-embracing Culture of Peace among all the groups.

The fourth S is **Sincerity**. Negotiating panels in the peace process have to show transparency and commitment in their pursuit for a just and lasting peace. The Mamasapano incident has severely tested the sincerity of both sides as it has also tested the sincerity of the general public in pursuing peace. Deep-seated prejudices and biases have resurfaced, but so also has the advocacy for peace been echoed by many civil society organizations.

And this is where the fifth S needs to be stressed: **Security**. Cessation of armed hostilities has to take place. Both contending groups have to hold the peace through a ceasefire. Over the past 5 ½ years, a ceasefire has actually been honored by both sides – with the exception of the Mamasapano fire fight (which for many observers was initiated by a third party, not privy to the ceasefire agreement).

The sixth S is **Sustainability** which focuses on the need for legislation like the proposed BBL in order to provide the structures for a lasting peace. The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro was signed in March 2014. This still provides the framework for a revised or resurrected BBL at the next Congress. The key principles and aspirations summarized in the six S's have been articulated not only for the continued work of negotiating panels, but more so for all of us – in churches and mosques, in academe (like MSU), in civil society, and in the homes of lumad, Muslim, and Christian families throughout Mindanao.

In his closing remarks in the halls of Congress, Deputy Speaker Balindong states: “As a minority in this country, we may have lost in terms of numbers but we have never lost in the discourse as it springs from the justness and legitimacy of our cause.” This then is the challenge for all of us: to continue the discourse in our communities, with or without the present BBL, and to celebrate the “dignity of difference” as well as the undying aspirations for a just and lasting peace in Mindanao.

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