

The Asian Way to the Social Doctrine of the Church:
Religious Pluralism, Good Governance and Responsible Leadership

Leland Joseph R. Dela Cruz, Ph.D

Assistant Vice President for Social and Environmental Engagement for Development
and Sustainability; Laudato Si University Magis Aspiration Coordinator
Ateneo de Manila University

I was born in the Philippines but studied elementary in Bangkok, Thailand at an international school. When you start schooling in an international, multicultural environment, you grow up not really noticing differences in nationality or religion. I had good friends and it really didn't matter that they were Sikhs from India, Muslims from Pakistan, Buddhists from Thailand, Taiwan, or Japan, or Christians, and in fact, I didn't know the religion of most of them because it didn't matter. What mattered was how friendly someone was. In fact the class bully we avoided was a Filipino Catholic.

While reflecting on religious pluralism and rereading Centissimus Annus, I remembered my childhood upbringing and thought to myself that what the Popes have been saying for the past century and a quarter is so true: that at the core of it all is human dignity which in itself is grace because we are all created in the image and likeness of God, regardless of religion. The way I think about it is that to be Catholic isn't a privileged position but to be bestowed a responsibility not to proselytize but to work towards solidarity, another of the Popes' favorite words in the Social Teachings of the Church.

There is a place in the Philippines called Marawi. More than 50 years ago, Marawi was a place where Muslims were the majority and they co-existed with Christians, just like I co-existed with my classmates. Marawi was prosperous. But in the 1970s, the dictator encouraged some people from other island groups to settle in Mindanao in places like Marawi and they did so aggressively which started a cycle of violence that endures until today. Since then, Marawi has been a hotbed of conflict leading to a prolonged siege in 2017 and until today, the central part of Marawi is, for the most part, uninhabitable. Just over two years ago, in December 2023, a bomb exploded during a Catholic Mass at a university gym there. In a land where more than 80% of Filipinos are Christian and Catholic, the people from the other island groups who acted aggressively in the 1970s and started this cycle of violence were probably Catholic but were not behaving like true Catholics and certainly not heeding Church Social Teachings. The President who ordered the move and the soldiers who fanned the flames were also Catholic. Clearly a

failure in leadership precisely because there was no sense of solidarity with those in Marawi.

One thing I've learned is that some people benefit from stoking religious differences which leads to violence. In political science they say that there has to be a political entrepreneur who leverages the tension. Conflict is not our natural state as my own experience showed. But I have to acknowledge that not everyone grows up in a multicultural environment. And that is why we must make an effort to grow in solidarity with others of different faiths.

And I think one of the ways in which we can grow in solidarity is if we tackle common problems faced by humanity. Environmental problems come to mind. And as suggested by Pope Leo, problems created by Artificial Intelligence. When we acknowledge that these problems transcend religions, races, and nationalities, we get in touch with our common humanity.

We must bring ourselves to a point where we acknowledge that we share problems and even more, that the problems faced by the poor and the victims of religious violence are caused by us in many ways, through our consumerism, our indifference, or our leadership, or lack of it, which leads to the absence of solidarity.

Religious pluralism happens in Asia when we consider each other as friends beyond our religions, recognize our neighbor as sharing in our common humanity, and act to address our common problems with solidarity. The issues that Catholic Social Teachings talk about are not abstract concepts to us in Asia; we live these problems daily.

As we search for spirituality in a fractured world, freedom and pluralism are realized not when we isolate ourselves in our respective dogmas, but when we stand together in the trenches of human suffering. By recognizing the dignity of every person - whether a Buddhist classmate in Bangkok or a Muslim neighbor in Marawi - we live out the true essence of Church Social Teaching. We don't just teach solidarity; we practice it.