



TOWARDS FRATERNAL HUMANITY FOR PEACE IN OUR LAND

As the Catholic Church in the Philippines dedicates this year 2020 to "Ecumenism, Interreligious Dialogue and Indigenous Peoples," we can recall the historical statement signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the two highest leaders of Christianity and Islam, on February 4, 2019 in Abu Dhabi. The joint statement is entitled, "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together." This is addressed to the peoples of the East and the West, particularly to the world-wide Christian and Muslim communities represented by the Catholic Church and Al-Azhar. This is the first time that two supreme leaders of the two largest world religions have signed a common statement addressed to all their members and to all people of good will.

The document starts with the keynote statement: "Faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved." It points out the remarkable scientific and technical progress achieved by the modern world. However, it also notes the somber realities of mass poverty, conflict and suffering in many regions of the world due to "the arms race, social injustice, corruption, inequality, moral decline, terrorism, discrimination, extremism and many other causes." The document points out some of the major causes of the crisis of the modern world, such as "a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies...in place of supreme and transcendental principles."

To counter this, both religious leaders "declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard." Thus, our CBCP motto for this year is "Dialogue Towards Harmony." For the Holy Father and the Grand Imam, "dialogue among believers means coming together in the vast space of spiritual, human and shared social values and, from here, transmitting the highest moral virtues that religions aim for."

The joint statement calls for the protection of places of worship, alluding to the desecration of the Catholic Cathedral in Marawi on May 23, 2017 and the bombing of the Catholic Cathedral in Jolo on January 27, 2019. It condemns terrorism and its manipulation by extremists "due to an accumulation of incorrect interpretations of religious texts." Both supreme religious leaders declare "that religions must never incite war, hateful attitudes, hostility and extremism, nor must they incite violence or the shedding of blood." They further state, "God, the Almighty, has no need to be defended by anyone and does not want his name to be used to terrorize people."

In the Southern Philippines, we should not forget the mass displacement of families due to the outbreak of war in Central Mindanao in the years 2000, 2003 and 2008, the Zamboanga siege in 2013, the Mamasapano fire in 2015, and the Marawi occupation in 2017. We welcome the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao as the outcome of a peace process that addresses the root causes of unrest among Muslim communities. We likewise join the call for the resumption of the GRP-NDFP peace talks, along with local peace conversations, to put an end to the protracted conflict between the New People's Army and government forces in the various hinterlands of the country.

While deploring religious-inspired violence, the two religious leaders also note that "situations of injustice and lack of equitable distribution of natural resources -- which only a rich minority benefit from, to the detriment of the majority of the peoples of the earth -- have generated, and continue to generate, vast numbers of poor, infirm and deceased persons." Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb thus call for the protection of human rights --in particular, the rights of women to education and employment; the rights of children to grow up in a family environment; and the rights of the elderly, the weak, the disabled, and the oppressed. "It is likewise important," they note, "to reinforce the bond of fundamental human rights in order to help ensure a dignified life for all men and women of East and West."

The joint statement ends with a directive: "Al-Azhar and the Catholic Church ask that this Document become the object of research and reflection in all schools, universities, and institutes of formation, thus helping to educate new generations to bring goodness and peace to others and to be defenders everywhere of the rights of the oppressed and of the least of our brothers and sisters." This is also an appeal directed to all our dioceses and church communities.

As we continue to engage in dialogue with our brothers and sisters from other Christian churches, and from Muslim and Indigenous People communities, let us heed the invitation of Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmad Al-Tayyeb to pursue "a universal peace that all can enjoy in this life."

For the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines,


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