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Opening Plenary Address at the Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World Conference

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Opening Plenary Address
at the Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World Conference
June 20, 2022
H. E. Cardinal Charles Bo
President of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences

Distinguished guests and dear friends:

It is a great privilege and honor to be invited to address your very important conference on “Catholic Peacebuilding in Times of Crisis: Hope for a Wounded World,” and to do so on the theme of “Hope in Times of Crisis.” While the world, throughout its history, has faced many crises, many dark chapters and suffered many wounds, recent years appear to have ushered in a new dark age across the world.

The rise of far -right populism and far left militancy, of nationalism, extremism and intolerant secularism in various forms across the Western world, from North America to Europe and across Asia and beyond, has shaken well-established pillars of stability, foundations of tradition, accepted norms and truths and values.

The Covid-19 pandemic devastated millions of lives, through death, long-term sickness, economic hardship, mental health challenges and the grief faced by so many who lost loved ones. **The virus did not discriminate** – rich and poor, developed and less developed, free and oppressed countries all suffered.

Wealthier, developed and democratic countries were better able to weather the storm, with the resources to provide furloughs and welfare benefits for those unable to go to work due to lockdowns, to strengthen medical care, to invest in research into vaccines and to produce and disseminate the vaccines. And with the constitutional and institutional systems in place to hold leaders accountable for their decisions.

For countries, already in poverty, such as my own nation of Myanmar, countless numbers of people died without treatment, without a vaccine and in destitution. And with no leader held to account. Least of all the leaders of China where the virus escaped, the carnage was unleashed and the pandemic began. But the whole world suffered.

And now today we face a truly horrendous, evil war which Vladimir Putin has inflicted on the people of Ukraine with absolutely no justification whatsoever. A war that was unprovoked, unjustified, unjustifiable and inhumane. A war that threatens not only the people of Ukraine, but the whole world. A war that has inflicted suffering on Ukrainians first and foremost, but has also led to the grief of Russian mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters who see their loved ones forced to serve as Russian soldiers for Putin’s wicked war returning home in body bags. Not all wars are clear-cut. **Many are complex**, with wrong on both sides. But in Putin’s war in Ukraine, it is clear. It is a war between authoritarianism and freedom, **between dictatorship and democracy and between darkness and light, lies and truth.**

And then we turn to the region in which I was born and brought up, in which I have always and will always live and which I will **always love: Asia**. As President of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, I see the challenges and wounds across the continent.

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North Korea remains one of the world's most closed countries, ruled by one of the world's most repressive regimes, now facing the challenges of Covid-19 only recently admitted because it has a regime that rules by lies and by covering the truth.

Sri Lanka, an island that has already endured the wounds of civil war and then more recently terrorism, now engulfed in political turmoil. Even among the region's fragile democracies, religious intolerance is a growing dark cloud, in Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Philippines has recently elected to replace Rodrigo Duterte, a populist leader who allowed human rights violations with impunity, with Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, the son of the late dictator. Democracy faces a struggle for survival against resurgent authoritarianism. In China, we see an assault on human rights the like of which we have not seen since the **Tiananmen Square massacre, the 33rd anniversary** of which we recently commemorated. Under Xi Jinping we see the genocide of the Uyghurs, continued atrocities in Tibet, the crime against humanity of forced organ harvesting, a severe crackdown on civil society, lawyers, local and foreign journalists, bloggers, **severe persecution of Christians, increasing threats to Taiwan** and the dismantling of Hong Kong's freedoms.

Just last month, my brother Cardinal and fellow Salesian, His Eminence Cardinal Joseph Zen, aged 90, was arrested, for the so-called "crime" of serving as a trustee of a Hong Kong foundation that provided legal aid to protesters facing prosecution. How can it be a crime to help accused persons have legal defence and representation? Please pray for my brother, Cardinal Zen, and for the peoples of Hong Kong – and all the peoples of China – at this time.

Brothers and sisters, I have spoken about some of the dark times the world is facing. But before I speak about the theme of my talk – Hope – I want, if I may, to bring one other dark corner of the world to your attention. Because I am very concerned that as the international community focuses on a great many challenges, not least the war in Ukraine, the economic crisis, the aftermath of Covid, climate change and other issues – all of which require our attention and coordinated action – the crisis in my own country, Myanmar, is forgotten. For about half a century, my country was ruled by a succession of military dictatorships. From our independence in 1948, we had a decade of fragile democracy, until General Ne Win took power in 1958. Fresh elections were held in 1960, and we had two years of democracy, until again the military seized power in a coup in 1962 and ruled, in various guises but essentially uninterrupted, until 2015. But in 2012, the military-led government embarked on what appeared at the time to be a process of reform – a glimmer of hope. Political prisoners were released, ceasefires in many parts of the country with ethnic groups were agreed, space for civil society and independent media opened, and I, along with so many of my fellow citizens and so many people around the world, believed **Myanmar was finally set on a path for a better future.**

That moment of flickering hope lasted just a few years. Even during that time of opening, new dark clouds emerged – the dark clouds of religious nationalism, religious intolerance and hatred. A campaign of hate speech, discrimination and violence against the Muslim population in general, and the Rohingyas in particular, broke out, leading to atrocities and unspeakable crimes that broke my heart. At the same time, the military unleashed new military campaigns particularly against the predominantly Christian Kachins as well as the Buddhist Shan. It became clear that even if some

form of quasi-democracy was dawning, there was a great need for dialogue, reconciliation and peace-making among my country's diverse religious and ethnic peoples.

My friends, **I have deep experience of my country's diversity.**

I am Bamar, from the majority population, but within that population, I am a minority as a Christian, as most Bamars are Buddhist. Within the Church, I am a minority, because most Christians come from the Kachin, Chin, Karen and Karenni populations. I have been viewed with suspicion as a Christian by Bamars and as a Bamar by my Christian brothers and sisters.

As a young priest and as a bishop, my ministry was in the ethnic areas – in northern Shan State and in Karen areas. I learned their languages, and I learned the importance of dialogue and understanding and breaking down barriers.

Hope in times of crisis, my friends, can be found in small acts of conversation and communication, appreciating one another's differences and celebrating what we have in common. Hope in times of crisis comes from seeing the **Imago Dei** in the other, recognizing that though their customs, culture, language, food or religion may be different from your own, it is in that diversity that we can find unity and through that discover hope.

But I won't pretend that when the military seized power in a coup yet again, on 1 February 2021 hopes were not dashed. They were, very severely. In the almost 18 months since the coup in Myanmar, over a million people have been internally displaced, according to the United Nations. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reports that just under 14,000 people have been arrested, and almost 11,000 are still detained. Over 1,800 have been killed. And those are only the recorded statistics.

Earlier this month, Myanmar's junta announced that it will execute a former legislator from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party, along with a prominent pro-democracy activist, in the country's first judicial executions since 1990. Former MP Phyo Zeya Thaw and the activist Kyaw Min Yu, better known as Ko Jimmy, "will be hanged according to prison procedures," the regime declared. While the military has killed thousands of people, it has not used the death penalty judicially in more than three decades.

As Cardinal of Myanmar I plead – from the very depths of my heart – with the junta, not to hang these men, and I appeal to the world to act. If the regime goes through with this, it marks a new low for this already brutal, barbaric, inhumane and criminal junta.

The peoples of Myanmar, for over a year, have endured a triple whammy of crisis, with suffering as a consequence of Covid-19, coup and conflict. They face a human rights, humanitarian, economic and political catastrophe. And in the midst of this crisis, the Church is again enduring its Calvary. So many of our churches have been bombed, desecrated or damaged, priests and lay people arrested, tortured, killed, Church NGOs restricted or targeted. So to ask me to speak about "Hope in Times of Crisis" is both apposite and appropriate, as well as challenging.

Friends, I have painted a picture of some of the world's woes so far. And we all know, there are more issues I could touch on. I have not spoken about the **Middle East, Yemen, Sudan,**

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Afghanistan or climate change. But this talk is about “Hope in Times of Crisis” and I want to address the question of “hope” and not only focus on crisis. For we, as people of faith, are an Easter people, and that means we are, whatever the **circumstances, a people of hope.**

Where does our hope come from and how do we sustain it?

I want to respond to that question with two particular passages of Holy Scripture.

The first is from St Paul’s Letter to the **Philippians, chapter 4, verse 13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”** That is my motto as a Priest, Bishop and as well as Cardinal: **Omnia possum in eo.** As we reflect on that verse, let’s remember the verses immediately preceding it: Verse 11 says “for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances,” and verse 12 says: “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.” What this passage tells us is that **we should not be defined by our circumstances.** That is easy to say and harder to fulfil, but it is still a vital guide. If we put our hope in Him who strengthens and guides us, we can have hope – eternal hope, hope shaped **not by the times but by our destiny** – that can transcend our fears, our heartache, our trials and tribulations. Such hope does not take away the pain of the tragedies and challenges we live through. It is not some form of anaesthesia that numbs us and makes us feel nothing. On the contrary, as people of faith – and hope – we feel the pain of our world’s crises all the more, as does Our Lord. **But the hope that gave Our Lord strength to endure the Cross** is one we, if we are united with Him, will give us some strength to endure our hardships and reach out to others to offer that hope to them.

The second passage to which I wish to refer is **from St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13. Love,** it says, is “patient”, “kind”, it does not “boast” and is not Proud.” It is not “rude,” “self-seeking” and is not “easily angered.” It “keeps no record of wrongs.” Love “does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.” It “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres”. Love “never fails.”

Crucially, St Paul emphasises that while we on this earth must have faith, and hope, and love, we only have part of the picture. We do not have all the answers. Indeed there is so much we do not know. “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

In other words, life is a journey, to our destination in eternity, and we must keep journeying, and as we do so we begin to form a picture, which will be completed when we reach our destination. That surely gives us hope. That famous passage ends with these words: “**And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**” If we have love for one another, that will give us hope. If we have love for our communities, our countries, our brothers and sisters in humanity, our values, our goals, we will not lose hope.

But there is one caveat. Do we understand – truly, deeply what love means?

For the love St Paul speaks of and to which I refer is not a narrow, selfish love. It’s not a love simply for your own kind, a love for those who share your faith, a love for those who think as you do, a love for those who look like you do, a love for those who speak your language. Of course it

includes them, but it does not and must not stop with them. **Instead it is a bold, outward-looking, sacrificial love. A risky, dangerous love.**

On the wall of my dining room in Archbishop's House in Yangon hangs a painting which inspires me daily. It is of the cross, with cloth draped over it, as is our custom during Lent as we remember our Lord's Passion before celebrating his Resurrection. On it are these words:

**I asked Jesus, 'how much do you love me?'
'This much,' he answered
Then he stretched out his arms
And died.**

In so many places around the world people are enduring their Golgothas and Calvaries, walking their "Way of the Cross." My own country, Myanmar, suffered over half a century of carrying the cross, then apparently enjoying a decade of flickering resurrection, before being plunged back into the darkness of crucifixion.

Whether we are carrying our cross or rising from it, we must hold on to hope. Not a false hope. Not a Hollywood hope. Not a hope of romantic happy endings that we see in the movies. But **a gritty, earthy, real hope**, grounded in our real source of strength – our Crucified and Risen Lord.

The question now, friends, is what do we do with that hope?

After all, it is no good sitting around comfortably and inactively through times of crisis saying "**I have hope**" but **doing nothing with it**. Hope is not like a large cake that will be brought to you and which you can lazily devour. Hope is more like petrol – it is fuel provided to equip you to break through the crises.

And if you light the match of faith and the match of love to the petrol of hope, you have a fire that will carry you forward through all adversity.

**Sometimes the flame blazes.
Other times the flame flickers.
But never ever let the flame go out.**

In St John's Gospel, the message is clear: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." And we must never allow the darkness to overcome it.

We must take that flame of hope into three spheres:

The first is the sphere of dialogue, peacebuilding, conflict resolution and reconciliation;

The second is the pursuit of justice, accountability and truth;

The third is the provision of humanitarian assistance – food, shelter, medicine, education – all the means of survival for those who need it.

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As I said earlier, our love cannot be restricted to those who believe, think or look the same as we do. We must be beacons of light and life well beyond our communities. That is why I place such a priority on building relationships, friendships, dialogue with Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus, and with my Protestant brothers and sisters, in **Myanmar and around the world. It is why I treasure the work of Religions for Peace, an organisation** I am privileged to serve as Co-President. When Pope Francis visited Myanmar in November 2017 – the first Pope ever to visit my country – one of the highlights was accompanying him to meet Buddhist and Muslim leaders in an attempt to douse the flames of religious hatred, intolerance and extremism.

When we have hope in times of crisis, that hope should turn into an outstretched hand of friendship to others who may have different beliefs but the same humanity. And when we have hope in times of crisis, we should deploy that hope to build bridges between peoples, ethnicities and cultures, to break down barriers, and to pursue peace.

Peace is the path we must pursue. Peace is the only way.

But true peace must be grounded in the values of the second pillar I outlined earlier: the pursuit of justice, accountability and truth. Peace, dialogue, reconciliation can only be achieved when wrongs are acknowledged, truth is upheld and those responsible for terrible crimes – atrocity crimes – are held accountable and justice is done. The teaching of the Church is abundantly clear: truth and reconciliation go together, and justice and peace walk hand-in-hand. You cannot have one without the other. It is an impossibility.

Lastly, if we are to be agents of hope in times of crisis, we cannot only be about words. **We must also be about action.**

Throughout our world, and in my own country of Myanmar, millions are displaced, living as refugees, enduring dire poverty, deprived of basic healthcare, shelter, food and education. We must increase our efforts to provide for their needs. Without food on the table, a roof over their heads, some basic treatment for illness and basic schooling for their children, how can people be expected to engage in what may seem to them **abstract concepts of ‘hope’, ‘faith’ and ‘love.’**

These values must be tangible.

The ‘Body of Christ’ – represented most supremely in the Blessed Sacrament, which sustains us all daily – must also develop ‘hands’ and ‘feet’: the hands of those from Church charities and others who provide humanitarian assistance, the feet of those who go to the darkest corners of the world, to bring food for the body and food for the soul.

St Teresa of Calcutta wrote the following words, which are inscribed on the walls of the children’s home in Calcutta, and they provide a basic guide for us all for how to build peace in times of crisis, and how to find hope for a wounded world.

She said:

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self centered;

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;

Be honest and frank anyway.

**What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight; Build anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
Be happy anyway.
The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
Do good anyway.
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
Give the world the best you have got, give anyway.
You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;
It was never between you and them anyway.**

My brothers and sisters, we live in a time of real trial. A time of war, of disease, of climate change, of threats to religious freedom, the scandal of human trafficking with which I am deeply engaged through my role in the Santa Marta Group, of unprecedented displacement and refugee flows. How do we have hope? We have hope through immersing our mind, intellect, heart, soul and spirit in the body of Christ, and through Him, in the body of Catholic Social Teaching.

We do it through prayer and action. By taking time to step back, pray, meditate, reflect, and then by acting.

Never is it one or the other. Never just contemplative. Never just be activist. **Always by combining the two: prayer and action.** As it says in James 2: 14-26:

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith; I have deeds.’ Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

We live our faith and our hope through our actions for others.

And we can be inspired by reading the great encyclicals, especially of St John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Pope Francis.

By embracing the spirit of **Laudato Si and Fratelli Tutti.**

And by remembering, as the Holy Father writes in **Laudato Si**, that “the Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge.” As Pope Saint John XXIII said, “**The secret of everything is to let yourself be carried by the Lord and to carry the Lord.**” And as Pope Saint John Paul II said: “**Duc in altum!**” These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the **past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence:** Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” It is with that knowledge that we can always have.

Thank you for your attention.