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Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma: Advocate of Peace and Development

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This essay describes the advocacy of Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma, currently the co-president of Pax Christi Philippines and archbishop emeritus of the archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao, Philippines, towards peace and development not only in Mindanao but also throughout the country. He is a strong proponent of interreligious dialogue and the importance of addressing the roots of the armed conflict so there can be an enduring peace in the Philippines and beyond.

Keywords: peace, development, interreligious dialogue, Mindanao

Introduction

“There is no peace without development, and neither will there be development without peace.”

Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J.

Amplifying the nexus between peace and development has been a consistent theme of the work of the gentle and good-hearted Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma, currently the co-president of Pax Christi Philippines and archbishop emeritus of Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao, Philippines. It is this profound understanding of the intimate connection between having social peace on one hand, and equitable and sustainable development on the other, that has inspired him to work tirelessly for both these overarching goals as a Church leader.

Bishop Tony, as he is fondly called by many, has been a bishop for nearly three decades now and has had many achievements. However, for this essay the focus will be on his advocacy of peace and development particularly in and for Mindanao, parts of which were armed conflict-affected areas prior to the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in early 2019. The BOL completed and finalized the comprehensive peace agreement between the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The Bangsamoro territory is currently governed by a transition government with former non-state armed actors along with others appointed by the country’s president. Democratic elections of Bangsamoro leaders are expected in 2025.

A Brief Backgrounder

In the late 1960s, two major non-state armed groups (NSAs) rose up against the government (GPH) led by then President Ferdinand E. Marcos, and this was in fact used by him as among the reasons for declaring martial rule in 1972. These NSAs were the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People’s Army- National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF), and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Armed hostilities resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and widespread suffering due to human rights violations, displacement, and other negative impacts of the fighting.

In 1986, after the nonviolent People Power Revolt that paved the return of democracy in the country, peace talks were initiated under the new President Corazon C. Aquino.

In 1996, a Peace Agreement was signed between the GPH and the MNLF. However, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rejected the peace agreement and broke away with the MNLF. The former wanted to continue the struggle for self-determination or secession, until a halt in military hostilities happened in 1997 due to a ceasefire agreement which helped facilitate the peace negotiations between the GPH and MILF. The peace talks between them led to a comprehensive peace agreement signed in 2014, and this was finalized in early 2019 by the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law.

This positive development in the Mindanao Peace Process was welcomed with much relief by all parties concerned. In the southern Philippines from the early 1970s until 1997 (when the ceasefire agreement started between the GPH and MILF), 120,000 people have been killed due to the armed hostilities according to one estimate (Tolibas-Nunez, cited in Larousse, 2001, p.21).

On the other hand, the negotiations with the CPP-NPA-NDF have been suspended many times and are still stalled as of this writing.

Bishop Tony and Interreligious Dialogue

Since the late 1960s, religious leaders have held many serious formal dialogues to analyze the problem of mistrust and misunderstanding between Christians and Muslims (*Peace Insight*, 2015). Bishop Tony recalls that his own serious involvement in interreligious dialogue started in 1996 when he became the bishop of the Prelature of Ipil (Zamboanga Sibugay province). The community in Ipil then was just recovering from the “Ipil massacre” during the Holy Week of April 1995, when a combined group of Muslim militants (Moro National Liberation Front), including the Abu Sayyaf, attacked the town at noon, burned the marketplace and killed about 60 persons. This raid widened the gap between Christians and Muslims in the area, but his predecessor, Bishop Escaler, counseled the Ipil residents not to retaliate against the Muslim minority in Ipil. As Bishop Ledesma recalled: “This was the setting when we decided to bring together for Culture of Peace seminars participants from the Christian, Muslim and Subanon/indigenous communities of the Ipil Prelature”. (Ledesma, 2022).

In November 1996, the Bishops-Ulama Forum was organized during a meeting of Mindanao Catholic bishops and Muslim ulama in Cebu. Ulama is the term (plural of *aleem*) for religious scholars (the equivalent of theologians) among the Muslims. Since Muslims do not have a hierarchy similar to that of the Catholic Church, the ulama are the closest counterparts for bishops in terms of moral authority over their respective religious communities (Ledesma, 2002).

For the next 15 years, the BUF met three or four times a year to show that Muslim and Christian religious leaders were united in working for peace. The BUF (which later became the Bishops-Ulama Conference and included Protestant religious leaders) was headed by three co-convenors representing the Catholic bishops, the Muslim ulama and the Protestant bishops. Bishop Tony was part of the smaller tripartite commission that prepared the agenda for the subsequent dialogue meetings in many Mindanao cities: Pagadian, Iligan, Davao, Cotabato, Zamboanga, Malaybalay, Marawi and Cagayan de Oro (Ledesma, 2022)

In his remarks presented at the Asian Conference on Religion and Peace in 2002, he posited that “the missing component in many failed peace efforts was an affirmation of the convergent spiritual and cultural bases for peace” (Ledesma, 2005). In the same remarks, he said that it was during the periods of violent conflict that the BUF played a key role by issuing joint statements against violence and insisting that the armed conflict was not a religious war. He cited the declaration of an “all-out war” in 2000 by then President Joseph Estrada as a huge challenge to the peace process.

Bishop Tony found additional inspiration from Church documents that upheld the necessity of interreligious dialogue. The study by Abesamis (2009) quoted Bishop Tony: “These documents are *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World); *Nostra aetate* (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church with non-Christian Religions); and *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Freedom).” The study added his conclusion that these three documents expanded the engagement of the Church in the modern world through dialogue and openness to other religions. It can be surmised that Bishop Tony also saw the urgency of interreligious dialogue in the light of the violent conflicts both in the country and the world.

To promote awareness and to generate widespread support for peace in Mindanao, Bishop Tony mentioned their initiation of special activities such as the annual Mindanao Week of Peace beginning 1999, starting on the last Thursday of November until the first Wednesday of December. In addition to this, they encouraged local gatherings of Christian and Muslim religious leaders as well as leaders of the indigenous people communities to address local issues. The BUF also worked with other peace advocates in Mindanao towards supporting the GPH-MILF peace process, including the monitoring of their ceasefire agreement.

Bishop Tony’s commitment to interfaith peacebuilding continues and has gone beyond the context of the Mindanao armed conflict. In his talk to a gathering of the UNI Harmony Partners Philippines to mark the World Interfaith Harmony Week in 2021, he said that religious leaders should assume the role of “advocates for justice and peace, defenders of human rights (including the rights of minority communities and the rights of nature), and mediators to promote the common good. In a world of conflicting interests, religious leaders can help promote a ‘culture of encounter’ through dialogue. Instead of building walls in the heart, religious leaders can build bridges and work for the promotion of human rights without borders” (Ledesma, 2021).

‘Development is the new name of peace’

The above message is at the heart of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, released in 1967. This encyclical “denounced the social inequalities that deny people their dignity and laid the foundation for the vision that each person has the right to integral human development, in other words, equal access to the resources for social, economic, political, cultural, personal and spiritual development” (CIDSE, 2017). It emphasized the fight against poverty and the preferential option for the poor as a central concern of the Church.

It is a task that Bishop Tony has taken seriously because one of the roots of the violent conflicts in the country was poverty and economic injustice. When he started his episcopate, his motto was “Peace and Development” because he felt neither peace nor development was present in his Mindanao area (Abesamis, 2009). He has expressed concerns about equity and sustainability and

stressed how these are important in the process of development where the basic needs of the poor are addressed.

Bishop Tony, in his remarks during the Golden Jubilee of the Archdiocese of Jaro, Iloilo, 17 November 2001, aptly said: “Mass poverty in the Philippines today has been described as structural violence. As such, it becomes an antithesis to a culture of peace. The war against poverty is the first step in laying down the foundations for a culture of peace” (Ledesma, 2005). In the same remarks, he continued to say that the second Plenary Council of the Philippines envisioned the Church of the Poor as one that is in solidarity with and collaborates with the poor themselves and with others to lift up the poor from their poverty. All throughout his message, he explained how efforts to promote a culture of peace in its varied dimensions (human rights, disarmament, environmental care, among other dimensions) actually redound to the benefit of the poor.

One illustration of Bishop Tony’s peace and development efforts is his establishment of a Peacebuilding Ministry in the archdiocese of Cagayan de Oro. As a result, he inspired a group of women volunteers to set up an organization called Group of Women Advocates for Peace in the Archipelago (GWAPA). It was a unique organization composed of Christian, Muslim and Indigenous women locally known as *Lumads*. Since its birth in 2017, they have been active in promoting people’s participation in peacebuilding, including campaigning for the Mindanao peace process, supporting the victims of the Marawi war earlier that year, and hosting Transitional Justice conferences. The GWAPA’s goal is to foster spirituality and solidarity with all sectors in society and to build meaningful relationships not only with other people but also with the natural ecosystems. It believes that diverse peoples should be able: to live life to the fullest in accordance with one’s faith, and to inspire everyone to become agents of goodness, justice, equity and the common good. (GWAPA, 2020)

Peace Negotiations with the CPP-NPA-NDF; Extra-judicial Killings

Currently, Bishop Tony is actively involved in another conflict arena. As a convener of the Philippine Ecumenical Peace Platform (PEPP), he has repeatedly called on churches and religious groups to host “local peace conversations” among stakeholders to advance peace efforts with communist rebels and avert an escalation in violence. Time and again, he has also called on the government and the rebels to resume peace negotiations at the national level after the peace talks ended in 2018. He has cited a series of killings of activists and government critics in the recent past years and is concerned about agrarian unrest (*Sunday Examiner*, 2019).

In a pastoral letter, Bishop Tony said the wave of extrajudicial killings that have claimed even young lives and many others without due process is a cause for alarm. He argued that “summary killings and human right violations cannot be justified by invoking the greater common good – which our recent history teaches us will only lead to greater recourse to authoritarianism and a worsening malaise in society”. He noted that “addiction is not hopeless or untreatable because many people are in recovery from it” and that community-based drug rehabilitation centers in his archdiocese have shown that a significant number of drug dependents “can be treated and empowered to live again productive lives” (CBCP News, 2017).

Conclusion

Although the foregoing description of Bishop Tony's thoughts and initiatives related to peace and development are not exhaustive, it gives us a glimpse into his response to said issues. He is not only against the direct violence of armed conflict and extra-judicial killings but is also an advocate of building capacities that augur well for peace, such as interreligious dialogue, economic justice and peace negotiations toward an enduring political settlement.

In his message to religious leaders and interfaith workers (Ledesma, 2021), he was emphatic in saying "No! to violence of any kind". He said wars and armed conflicts represent the breakdown of dialogue and the shredding of human fraternity. May Bishop Tony's vision of a world characterized by dialogue, nonviolence, justice and solidarity be ours too.

Loreta Navarro-Castro is the Founding Director of the Center for Peace Education based in Miriam College, where she also teaches in the International Studies and Education departments. She is currently the co-president of Pax Christi Philippines and a steering committee member of the Catholic Nonviolence Initiative of Pax Christi International. She has been actively involved in the work of mainstreaming peace education, interfaith peacebuilding and nuclear disarmament. Loreta expresses her deep gratitude to Archbishop Antonio J. Ledesma, S.J., for enabling her to complete this article.

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