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***CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH OF
MYANMAR IN THE LIGHT OF THE TEACHING OF POPE FRANCIS***

Abstract

This dissertation examines the contemporary challenges the Catholic Church faces in Myanmar (Burma), known as the “Golden Land,” in light of Pope Francis's teachings and pastoral vision: peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation. Focusing on the current socio-political and religious climate of the beginning of the 21st century, it highlights how Pope Francis’s historic apostolic visit to Myanmar in 2017 catalyzed the Church’s renewed commitment to peace, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation. His message, delivered under the theme of his apostolic visit “Love and Peace,” emphasized nonviolence, respect for human rights, and the moral responsibility of the Church to act as a healing presence within society.

During his visit, Pope Francis engaged with key political leaders, religious authorities, leaders from different religions, and Myanmar’s Catholic minority. His meetings and messages underscored the importance of peacebuilding, interreligious harmony, and the dignity of every person, particularly those marginalized and the oppressed. The visit also revealed the delicate balance required to maintain both pastoral compassion and diplomatic prudence in a country marked by ongoing conflict and oppression.

By drawing on Pope Francis's teachings and actions during and after his 2017 journey, the study seeks to clarify how his moral leadership offers a framework for the Catholic Church in Myanmar to address its most pressing challenges today. Through this lens, the dissertation explores how the Church can serve as a prophetic voice and agent of unity in a deeply divided society.

The Catholic Church in Myanmar confronts significant challenges in its mission, particularly in promoting peace, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation within a nation long plagued by political unrest, ethnic strife, and religious tensions. This dissertation explores how Pope Francis's teachings, especially during and beyond his 2017 apostolic visit to Myanmar, offer a theological and pastoral framework for addressing these pressing issues. His messages—centered on peacebuilding, fraternity, a culture of encounter, and dialogue—resonate deeply within Myanmar's fractured socio-political landscape.

Focusing on the Church's contemporary role, the study examines how Pope Francis's magisterial teachings, including his encyclicals, exhortations, public speeches, and pastoral messages, can guide the Church's engagement with Myanmar's challenges. The analysis is rooted in theology and ecclesiology, with socio-political realities providing contextual depth.

The dissertation is structured into four chapters. Chapter I explores the context of Myanmar as the background of the study. Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia, characterized by its vast ethnic diversity, rich cultural heritage, and complex political history. Bordered by five nations and traversed by major rivers, its geography has significantly influenced its agriculture, trade, and cultural development. Historically home to multiple waves of migration, including

Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, and Tai-Chinese peoples, Myanmar evolved through ancient kingdoms, colonialism, and military rule. British colonization and subsequent Christian missionary efforts introduced lasting divisions, particularly along ethnic and religious lines. Despite gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar has struggled with political instability, notably under prolonged military rule and brief periods of democratic reform led by figures like Aung San Suu Kyi. The country's internal conflict is deeply rooted in ethnic tensions, with 135 officially recognized groups and a national identity long intertwined with Buddhism. Ethnic minorities, many of whom were historically autonomous, continue to seek federalism and equal rights amid ongoing civil unrest. Economic fragility, social unrest, and limited external influence shape Myanmar's contemporary challenges. The nation's future remains uncertain, influenced by historical grievances, entrenched military power, and grassroots calls for unity, democracy, and reconciliation.

This dissertation explores Buddhism's historical, cultural, and religious development in Myanmar, tracing its origins from early legends involving Gautama Buddha and the founding of the Shwedagon Pagoda to its establishment as the country's dominant spiritual and social force. While Theravada Buddhism is the principal tradition practiced, evidence points to the historical coexistence of Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism, and local animist beliefs such as nat worship. The Pyu civilization played a significant role in embedding Buddhism into Myanmar's cultural fabric. Over centuries, Buddhism in Myanmar evolved and integrated deeply with national identity and local customs, including astrology and *nat* devotion. Key pagodas like Shwedagon and numerous others highlight the religious landscape, underscoring Buddhism's prominence. Political involvement by monks, from the independence era to the 2007 Saffron Revolution, reflects the continued significance of the sangha in civil society. Contemporary figures

such as Sayadaw U Thumingala advocate for peace and inclusivity, while others like Ashin Wirathu represent a more radical nationalist stance. Buddhism in Myanmar is a deeply spiritual path and a socio-political force, shaping the nation's identity and values.

Myanmar, predominantly a Buddhist nation, is home to a diverse range of religious communities including Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and indigenous animism. Christianity, comprising about 6.2% of the population, is primarily practiced by ethnic minorities such as the Chin, Kachin, Karen, and Kayah. Christian presence in Myanmar dates back to the 13th century, with early signs found in Pagan, and significantly expanded with the arrival of Portuguese missionaries and later Protestant Baptists, particularly through the efforts of Adoniram Judson in the 19th century. The Catholic Church's development began with the Portuguese in the 1500s and was furthered by missionary societies from Europe. Catholic education, healthcare, and social services flourished under the guidance of various religious orders. However, religious persecution, colonial embarrassments, and later political upheavals, including military rule and nationalization of church-run institutions, severely disrupted Christian activities post-1948. Despite challenges such as ethnic marginalization, repression, and economic hardship, both Catholic and Protestant communities have remained resilient. The modern Church continues to struggle with religious freedom issues, socio-political tension, and the need for indigenized theological education, while striving to serve marginalized communities and foster interfaith harmony in a multi-ethnic society.

In Chapter II, the study pointed out the root causes of instability and lack of peace in Myanmar. Myanmar's protracted history of conflict is deeply rooted in centuries of dynastic struggles, colonial exploitation, and religious and ethnic divisions. This study explores how colonial-era policies, particularly the British "divide and rule" strategy, institutionalized divisions and sowed the seeds for ongoing instability. Despite gaining

independence in 1948, the country has remained plagued by internal strife, fueled by unresolved ethnic tensions, religious rivalry, especially between Buddhism and Christianity, and military dominance. The violent legacy of colonialism, combined with political repression and systemic displacement, has fostered deep distrust and fractured social cohesion. Through case studies such as the murder of Christian martyr Isidore Ngei Ko Latt, recent mass displacements, and Fr. Donald Martine's brutal killing, this study highlights the complex intersections of religion, politics, and identity in Myanmar's conflict landscape. Ultimately, this paper underscores the urgent need for inclusive peacebuilding efforts that promote reconciliation, interfaith dialogue, and social justice as pathways to a unified and stable Myanmar.

Pope Francis' 2017 apostolic visit to Myanmar embodied a powerful commitment to peacebuilding amid the nation's deep-rooted ethnic, religious, and political conflicts. Centered on the motto "Love and Peace," the visit emphasized peace as a political goal and a moral and spiritual imperative. Through numerous public addresses, Pope Francis highlighted themes of reconciliation, justice, human dignity, and nonviolence, calling on the Church and broader society to reject the violence and embrace a more inclusive vision of peace grounded in the Gospel. Drawing from Catholic social teaching, biblical theology—especially the concept of *shalom*—and recent magisterial documents such as *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si'*, and *Fratelli Tutti*, the Pope articulated a holistic vision of peace rooted in fraternity, social justice, and human rights. His message in Myanmar advocated for a Church engaged in social transformation, supporting conflict and environmental injustice victims, while fostering interreligious dialogue. This study explores the theological foundations and practical implications of Pope Francis' peace message, the Church's role in peacebuilding in Myanmar, and how his visit represents a vital moment in the country's ongoing struggle for national reconciliation and unity.

In his messages, the Pope highlighted the critical importance of peace built on the foundation of justice, focusing on respecting the dignity and rights of all individuals, particularly marginalized communities. Pope Francis also condemned the use of violence, urging Myanmar to embrace nonviolent means of conflict resolution, as violence only deepens divisions and perpetuates suffering. Moreover, he called on all sectors of society, from civil leaders to religious communities, to take shared responsibility in fostering peace, emphasizing that peace is not a privilege but a collective right that requires the participation of everyone. His vision underscores the necessity of dialogue, inclusion, and respect for diversity, offering a blueprint for a future where justice, nonviolence, and shared responsibility form the cornerstone of a harmonious Myanmar.

However, despite his calls for healing and reconciliation, Myanmar's situation has worsened, especially after the 2021 military coup. The coup marked a severe deterioration of the political landscape, with the military junta's violent crackdown leading to widespread repression, civilian deaths, and forced displacements. In the consequences, Pope Francis has steadfastly advocated for Myanmar, persistently calling for nonviolence, peace, and dialogue, offering spiritual solidarity to the oppressed and urging international intervention. The Pope's repeated messages have been a source of consolation and inspiration for Myanmar's people, particularly the youth, who are at the forefront of resistance. His call for a "fraternal convention" and nonviolent action aligns with his broader vision for a world based on solidarity, love, and collective compassion. Despite the increasingly brutal military actions, the Pope continues to emphasize the importance of peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation, urging Myanmar's citizens to pursue democratic change through peaceful means.

This study examines the continuing challenges faced by Myanmar in the wake of the Pope's visit, highlighting his ongoing efforts to inspire hope, encourage nonviolent

resistance, and advocate for human dignity. Through his messages of spiritual closeness, moral guidance, and support for democratic movements, Pope Francis remains a significant figure in Myanmar's quest for peace, justice, and reconciliation. However, the road to stability remains fraught with difficulty and uncertainty.

Chapter III explores interreligious dialogue as a critical pastoral and theological challenge for the Catholic Church in Myanmar. Rooted in the broader Asian context shaped by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), interreligious dialogue is examined as both a mission imperative and a means of promoting peace, especially within Myanmar's predominantly Buddhist and multi-ethnic society. The chapter outlines the Church's evolving theology of dialogue, grounded in Vatican II documents such as *Nostra Aetate* and *Redemptoris Missio*, and supported by scriptural insights from both the Old and New Testaments. These biblical narratives provide a framework for mutual respect, justice, and compassion in religiously plural societies. The socio-political complexities in Myanmar, marked by religious tensions and ethnic divisions, highlight the urgent need for authentic dialogue grounded in Gospel values and theological integrity. The Church's bridge-building role is emphasized as both a response to conflict and a proactive engagement in fostering a culture of reconciliation. Historical Church teachings, papal initiatives, and symbolic actions underscore the Catholic commitment to dialogue, especially with Buddhists, while acknowledging the ongoing challenges and the necessity for practical, sustained efforts in Myanmar.

This dissertation explores the teachings and actions of Pope Francis regarding interreligious dialogue, highlighting their relevance to the contemporary challenges of religious pluralism, particularly in the context of Myanmar. Drawing inspiration from the etymological meaning of "pontiff" as "bridge-builder," Pope Francis has placed dialogue at the heart of his papacy, as articulated in primary documents such as *Evangelii*

Gaudium, Laudato Si', and *Fratelli Tutti*. These writings emphasize a culture of encounter, ecological solidarity, and universal fraternity as foundations for peaceful coexistence. The dissertation further examines the Pope's significant gestures, including joint declarations with Islamic leaders and messages for the World Day of Peace, where he consistently advocates for dialogue, reconciliation, and social justice. Special attention is given to his 2017 visit to Myanmar, where he called for collaborative efforts among religious and political leaders to foster unity, protect human dignity, and build a culture of peace amidst ethnic and religious tensions. By integrating Catholic social teaching with practical pastoral action, Pope Francis models a dialogical approach that respects religious differences and sees them as opportunities for shared growth and healing. His vision challenges faith communities to engage in sincere, inclusive, and action-oriented dialogue, presenting a compelling framework for interreligious cooperation in divided societies.

Pope Francis's apostolic visit to Myanmar in 2017 highlighted the vital role of the Catholic Church in a country marked by ethnic diversity, religious minority status, and political instability. His call for peace and interreligious dialogue served as a beacon of hope in a nation facing growing turmoil, especially following the 2021 military coup. This paper examines the Church in Myanmar's multifaceted challenges after the Pope's visit, focusing on three key dimensions: peacebuilding through religious dialogue, educational contributions, and ecological advocacy. Under the leadership of Cardinal Charles Bo, the Church has positioned itself as a mediator advocating for nonviolence, dialogue, and reconciliation with all factions. One is the military—an approach that has sparked both support and controversy. Historically, Catholic mission schools contributed significantly to national education and moral development, and today, the Church continues this legacy through boarding houses that foster interfaith harmony and holistic

formation. In light of environmental degradation disproportionately affecting the poor, the Church champions ecological dialogue, aligning with Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* to promote environmental justice and interfaith collaboration. The Church's engagement across these areas reflects its enduring commitment to justice, unity, and peace amid Myanmar's profound political, social, and environmental challenges.

In the face of Myanmar's ongoing conflict and recent natural disaster—the devastating earthquake of March 28, 2025—Cardinal Charles Bo's leadership underscores the essential role of compassionate, interreligious dialogue in healing a fractured nation. By establishing the Myanmar Earthquake Response Church Initiative (MERCi), Cardinal Bo called for a nationwide ceasefire and urgent humanitarian aid, reminding all parties that shared human suffering must transcend political and ethnic divisions. His appeal emphasized that empathy and unity in times of crisis reflect a more profound truth: human solidarity can overcome even the most entrenched hostilities. This paper explores how the Catholic Church in Myanmar continues to act as a moral compass amid a volatile landscape shaped by religious diversity, political oppression, and ethnic conflict. Drawing inspiration from Pope Francis' 2017 visit, which promoted the “dialogue of love,” the Church embraces interfaith collaboration not as a strategic option but as a moral imperative. Despite significant challenges from state and societal forces resistant to change, the Church remains steadfast in fostering a culture of encounter, mutual understanding, and peace. Myanmar's experience offers a powerful lesson: authentic dialogue grounded in love is essential for reconciliation and lasting peace in the face of suffering and division.

In Chapter IV, the study discusses reconciliation as the healing process of the wounded nation. Myanmar's enduring struggles with violence, political instability, and ethnic-religious divisions present a profound challenge to the Catholic Church's mission of

reconciliation. Amid decades of suffering, including armed conflict, oppression, and social fragmentation, the Church is called to be a healing presence and a voice for peace. Grounded in biblical teachings and the magisterial tradition, the theology of reconciliation frames this mission not only as a spiritual imperative but also as a social and political necessity. Pope Francis' message of "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Peace" during his apostolic visit to Myanmar emphasized the Church's vital role in restoring broken relationships and healing deep-seated wounds. This vision aligns with the emerging global theological paradigm, as outlined by scholars like Bevens and Schroeder, where reconciliation becomes the central focus of missionary work in divided societies. Drawing upon Old and New Testament themes, Pauline theology, and Vatican II's teachings, the Church in Myanmar is invited to engage in transformative action: not only proclaiming reconciliation but embodying it through solidarity, interreligious dialogue, and social engagement. The Catholic Church, though a minority, is urged to journey with the suffering people of Myanmar, bearing their burdens and working collaboratively to rebuild trust, unity, and peace. In a world marked by division, the Myanmar experience affirms that reconciliation, rooted in love and justice, is the heart of authentic Christian witness.

Pope Francis has consistently envisioned the Church as a "field hospital"—a place of healing and compassion for a wounded world. The call for reconciliation as a spiritual and social imperative is central to his papacy. Drawing from his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, his encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*, and his visit to Myanmar in 2017, the Pope advocates for a Church that engages deeply with human suffering, promoting mercy, dialogue, and solidarity. His teachings emphasize that reconciliation is not mere diplomacy but a transformative process rooted in justice, truth-telling, and mutual respect. The concept of "reconciled diversity" emerges as a

cornerstone in his vision, recognizing unity amid difference as a source of strength. In Myanmar's context of ethnic conflict and political upheaval, Pope Francis' repeated messages—before, during, and after his visit—highlight the Church's role in healing historical wounds, fostering interreligious dialogue, and supporting the marginalized. His appeals transcend religious boundaries, urging all people of goodwill to embrace compassion, respect, and the dignity of every human being. Through spiritual exhortation and concrete action, Pope Francis calls for a culture of encounter, where forgiveness and fraternity pave the way toward lasting peace and national reconciliation.

Reconciliation remains one of the most pressing challenges for the local Church in Myanmar amid the nation's ongoing political turmoil, ethnic conflicts, and deep-seated religious divisions. Despite being a minority in a predominantly Buddhist country, the Catholic Church is vital in promoting peace and justice through a ministry rooted in compassion, dialogue, and hope. Drawing on key insights from figures like Pope Francis and Cardinal Charles Bo, this study explores the Church's commitment to healing national wounds by fostering inclusive dialogue, amplifying the voices of the marginalized, and confronting historical injustices. It situates the Church's mission in a broader framework of restorative justice, national reconciliation efforts, and humanitarian response. The Church's task is complicated by military authoritarianism, religious intolerance, and systemic exclusion. Yet, its witness remains grounded in the belief that true reconciliation is ultimately a spiritual calling—an expression of the Gospel's power to transform even the most broken societies. The study underscores that reconciliation in Myanmar must be more than a political strategy; it must become a way of life rooted in the person of Christ, where faith, justice, and mercy converge.

This dissertation examines the role of the Catholic Church in Myanmar's pursuit of peace, reconciliation, and interreligious dialogue, focusing on Cardinal Charles Bo's leadership and the influence of Pope Francis's teachings. Asia, with its vast cultural and religious diversity, offers unique challenges and opportunities for interfaith cooperation, particularly in Myanmar, where ethnic and religious tensions are compounded by political instability and social injustice. Pope Francis's advocacy for dialogue, exemplified during his apostolic visit to Myanmar, has become a beacon of hope in a country torn by conflict, especially after the 2021 military coup. Cardinal Bo has been instrumental in promoting peace through dialogue with Myanmar's military government and among various ethnic groups, despite facing significant controversy. His approach highlights the Church's commitment to fostering communication and understanding even under challenging circumstances.

This dissertation presents the Church's historical and ongoing role in Myanmar's educational and ecological dialogues. Mission schools, once a cornerstone of Catholic efforts in Myanmar, laid a foundation for cultural exchange and mutual understanding through education. Although the political landscape has changed, the legacy of these schools remains significant, with boarding houses continuing to serve as spaces for fostering interfaith dialogue and academic excellence. Additionally, the environmental crisis in Myanmar, exacerbated by both human actions and natural disasters, has underscored the need for religious communities to unite in advocating for ecological responsibility. Pope Francis's calls for a global response to environmental degradation

resonate in Myanmar's context, where religious leaders like Cardinal Bo have urged collaboration in addressing ecological and humanitarian issues. Through these dialogues of love, peace, education, and ecology, the Church in Myanmar continues to embody Pope Francis's call for interreligious dialogue as a path to peace and a more just, inclusive society.

While there have been significant strides toward peace and reconciliation since 2011, deep-rooted ethnic and religious divisions continue to plague the country, impeding true societal healing. Myanmar's people long for understanding, cooperation, and reconciliation among diverse groups, recognizing that peace is essential for sustainable development and a stable future. In this context, Pope Francis's message about forgiveness, reconciliation, and peace resonates deeply with the Myanmar population, offering hope amidst the darkness of conflict. His visit emphasized the importance of reconciliation in response to the nation's divisions and called for accepting past failures to move forward together.

Sr. Anne Rose's courageous actions during the violent clashes in the Myitkyina diocese in February and March 2021 serve as a powerful symbol of reconciliation, compassion, and nonviolent resistance amidst intense military oppression. In the face of escalating violence, Sr. Anne Rose boldly intervened to protect peaceful protesters, kneeling before soldiers to stop the bloodshed and demonstrating an unwavering commitment to peace. Her dramatic appeal emphasized her belief that reconciliation, not violence, was the only path forward. By directly confronting the soldiers, she bridged the gap between the opposing forces, advocating for peace over retribution.

In addition to her nonviolent stance, Sr. Anne Rose provided critical medical care to the wounded, offering refuge and protection to those at risk without alerting the soldiers. Her

actions, supported by the clinic staff, formed a collective resistance to violence, ensuring the safety of many and exemplifying the power of compassion and everyday bravery in the face of oppression. Through these courageous acts, Sr. Anne Rose became a symbol of hope, resilience, and the potential for nonviolent resistance in a context defined by cruelty and division.

Sr. Anne Rose's story reflects broader ideals of reconciliation, unity, and peace. It poignantly reminds us that even in the darkest times, the human spirit's capacity for empathy, love, and defiance can persist. Her unwavering commitment to nonviolence, protection of life, and dedication to healing embodies the values of justice and peace essential for Myanmar's future.

The reconciliation and unity principles highlighted by Sr. Anne Rose and Pope Francis are vital for Myanmar's journey toward peace and a cohesive society. Pope Francis's teachings on reconciliation, rooted in the Gospel, emphasize the importance of healing, justice, and cooperation in overcoming historical divisions and socio-political conflicts. Through actions like those of Sr. Anne Rose, the Church in Myanmar continues to sow the seeds of reconciliation, fostering interreligious dialogue and promoting a vision of harmony and cooperation that can lead to a just and inclusive future for the nation.

In conclusion, this study explores the contemporary challenges facing the Catholic Church in Myanmar, particularly peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation, in light of Pope Francis's teachings and pastoral vision. Drawing from historical analysis and theological reflection, it examines how Pope Francis's emphasis on mercy, nonviolence, and dialogue offers a framework for the Church to act as a bridge-builder and a "field hospital" amid societal wounds.

His study explores the leadership concepts in Myanmar, *Hna Lone Yee* (moral power), as metaphors for coercive power and ethical leadership. Instead of force and political dominance often rooted in military control, moral power represents compassion, justice, nonviolence, and reconciliation. Anchored in biblical theology and the teachings of Pope Francis, the study presents *Hna Lone Yee* as the model of leadership most aligned with Gospel values and the urgent needs of Myanmar's divided society.