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Doctoral dissertation review :

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***Contemporary challenges of the Catholic Church in Myanmar
in the Light of the Teaching of Pope Francis***

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The Republic of the Union of Myanmar (Pyidaungzu Thanmada Myanma Nainngandaw), which was previously known as Burma until 1989, is a significant country in Southeast Asia. The nation currently has a population of approximately fifty-eight million individuals residing within an area that is more than twice the size of Poland. Myanmar possesses a complex history and social structure, with roughly 90 percent of its population adhering to Buddhism, specifically the Theravada school, also referred to as Hinayana. Additionally, a little over six percent of the population identifies as Christian, predominantly Baptist, with one-sixth belonging to the Roman Catholic faith.

The doctoral dissertation currently under review examines the role of the Catholic Church in Myanmar and the challenges it faces in light of the country's complex social, religious, economic, and political circumstances. It is important to note that for many years, with brief interruptions, the nation has been governed by a military junta that overtly disregards the outcomes of democratic elections and detains political opponents, including the internationally renowned Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite making up approximately one percent of the population, the Catholic Church in Myanmar remains actively engaged in promoting peace, fostering inter-religious dialogue, and advocating for national reconciliation.

The dissertation is structured into an Introduction, followed by four chapters. The first chapter, entitled "Myanmar - The Context of Study," introduces the reader to the issues related to the country's history and social structure. The second chapter, entitled "Peacebuilding as a Challenge for the Catholic Church in Myanmar," is devoted to the problem of the Catholics' efforts towards peace. The third chapter, titled "Interreligious Dialogue as a Challenge for the Catholic Church in Myanmar," addresses the key issue of relations with the Buddhist majority. The fourth chapter, named "Challenge for the Catholic Church in Myanmar - To Be an Agent of Reconciliation," examines the significant issue of reconciliation in the wake of large-scale government violence leading to murder and forced migration. The main body of the work concludes with a Conclusion summarizing the theses presented earlier. Additionally, the

dissertation comprises two appendices: the first includes an interview with Sister Ann Rose, who participated in protests against government violence, while the second provides a brief biography of the current Archbishop of Yangon, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo. Furthermore, it is pertinent to mention that a meticulously compiled list of abbreviations utilized by the author is presented at the beginning of the dissertation. The work is also accompanied by an extensive bibliography of nearly thirty pages, systematically divided into five sections: A. The Bible, B. Church Documents (1. Catechism, 2. Vatican II Documents, 3. Documents of the Popes, 4. Documents of Pontifical Commissions and Councils, 5. Pope Francis' Homilies, Messages, Meetings, and Talks during his visit to Myanmar, 6. FABC Sources, 7. CBCM Sources and Local Church Sources), C. Books, D. Electronic and Website Sources (1. Messages, Homilies, General Audiences, Letters, and Speeches of Pope Francis, 2. Messages, Homilies, Statements, Letters, and Speeches of Local Sources, 3. Periodicals, Journals, Bulletins, Reports, News, and others), E. Unpublished Sources. As evident from the aforementioned list, the classification within the bibliography has been executed with great care; however, it is noteworthy that section C also encompasses peer-reviewed articles, in addition to books.

In the Introduction, the author of the dissertation provides a detailed examination of his objectives regarding his thesis. Initially, he delineates the primary challenges confronting Catholics in Myanmar. These challenges, he articulates, include peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation among the numerous national, political, and religious groups that constitute the fabric of the country's society. The principal research objectives of the dissertation are to investigate how the aforementioned tasks are articulated in the teachings of Pope Francis, particularly as expressed during the Holy Father's notable visit to Myanmar in 2017. During this visit, the Pope engaged with several key figures, including the nation's President Htin Kyaw, NLD (National League for Democracy) leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto leader General Min Aung Hlaing, and the Supreme Sangha Council of Buddhist monks. The author's emphasis on the teachings of Pope Francis signifies that the dissertation pertains to explicitly contemporary times; Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu states unequivocally that the term "contemporary" in the title of his dissertation signifies that the subject matter in question is temporally constrained, specifically encompassing the last twenty-five years, commencing at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the author broadens his research scope by incorporating significant papal and ecclesiastical documents from the concluding decades of the preceding century.

The layout of the dissertation, together with its division into chapters and subchapters, aligns with the objectives specified in the title and elaborated upon further in the Introduction. In my assessment, the structure of the dissertation is appropriate and suitable for the content it encompasses. Furthermore, the dissertation text reflects a commendable level of meticulousness; however, the author exhibits some minor stylistic inaccuracies. Overall, the text remains clear and effectively communicative. Therefore, from a formal standpoint, the dissertation is composed appropriately.

Turning to an analysis of the content of the 225-page dissertation, I will discuss the individual chapters of the dissertation. The first chapter, comprising five subsections, addresses issues related to Myanmar's geography, political history, culture, and religion, with particular emphasis on the development of Christianity in the country, specifically focusing on the role of the Catholic Church. It is noteworthy that the history of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, is exceedingly complex, encompassing numerous dynastic periods, the era of British colonization from 1826 to 1948, and a prolonged period marked by troubled sovereignty over the last nearly eighty years. This latter period was predominantly characterized by military rule, interspersed with brief attempts to introduce democracy. The intricate political and social landscape, as the author observes, is influenced by the demographic composition of the country,

as the government indicates that Myanmar is home to over one hundred thirty ethnic groups, the largest of which include Bamar (68%), Shan (10%), Karen (7%), Rakhine (3.5%), Chinese-Han (3%), Mon (2%), Indians (2%), Kahin (1.5%), Chin (1%), and Kayah (0.8%). Representatives of the predominant Bamar group occupy a decisive role. In terms of religious affiliation, the social situation is more uniform, as approximately 90% of Myanmar's population adheres to Buddhism, slightly more than 6% profess Christianity, over 4% identify as Muslims, and 0.5% are Hindus; additionally, various forms of animist and folk cults are present. The author of the dissertation presents the aforementioned issues in a competent and engaging manner in the initial two subsections of Chapter One. Subsequently, in the following two subsections, he discusses the origins of the Christian faith in present-day Myanmar (subsection 3) as well as the history and current status of the Catholic Church within the country (subsection 4). Both subsections encompass a considerable amount of detailed information; notably, the developments regarding the historical evolution of Catholic evangelization efforts undertaken by various orders, including missionary orders, warrant significant attention. Although the initial contacts between the people of present-day Myanmar and Catholicism trace back to the late thirteenth century, it is posited that the pivotal moment occurred with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1510. The author identifies three distinct phases of evangelization in Myanmar: the first phase occurs between 1554 and 1721, during which Catholic clergy primarily served as chaplains ministering to Europeans. The second phase spans from 1721 to 1939, characterized by intensified evangelization efforts among the local population. The third phase transpires between 1847 and 1939, during which nuns and monastics arriving in Myanmar engaged in educational and developmental activities. Following a brief period of Japanese occupation and the subsequent return of the British, Burma achieved independence in 1948, a transition that coincided with the preferential treatment of Buddhism, which was declared the state religion in 1961. In the wake of a military coup, numerous church institutions, including hospitals and schools, were forced to close during the years 1965-1966; additionally, many foreign missionaries were compelled to depart the country.

Catholicism in Myanmar, primarily influenced by indigenous forces, is experiencing significant growth. Currently, it encompasses three archdioceses and fourteen suffragan dioceses. The majority of the adherents, however, originate from marginalized ethnic groups, including the Kachin, Kayach, Karen, and Chinese communities. The reluctance exhibited by military governments toward these minority groups is evident. Consequently, the Catholic Church assumes the role of advocate for their rights, extending beyond religious freedoms to encompass the preservation and development of their cultural identities. This scenario underscores a critical theme of national reconciliation in Myanmar, alongside efforts to address conflicts primarily instigated by military authorities. The fifth subsection of Chapter One is dedicated to the engagement of the Catholic Church in reconciliation efforts. It highlights the tripartite nature of the Church's initiatives in this domain, specifically fostering peace, promoting interreligious dialogue, and facilitating intercultural dialogue. Furthermore, ecological issues have been integrated into the discussion in recent years, reflecting the influence of Pope Francis' perspectives, particularly his encyclical "Laudato si".

In Chapter Two of his doctoral dissertation, Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu addresses the fundamental issue concerning the call directed towards Catholics in Myanmar to engage in the promotion of peace. This chapter is structured into five subsections, the initial of which focuses on the comprehension of the concept of peace as articulated in both the Old and New Testaments, alongside papal encyclicals, commencing with "Pacem in terris" by John XXIII. The author particularly emphasizes the understanding of the term "shalom" within the context of the Old Testament and provides an analysis of the concept of the peace of Christ found in the New Testament. Both concepts convey that authentic peace is, by its inherent nature, considerably

more than the mere absence of hostilities. It embodies a mutually respectful, justice-based, and harmonious coexistence of the human community in the presence of God. Genuine peace explicitly excludes severe inequality and extreme poverty, and for evident reasons, it also precludes discrimination on the grounds of religion or nationality. Generally, it rejects the employment of violence as a means for conflict resolution. Conversely, violence serves as a breeding ground for conflict, obstructing peaceful coexistence among diverse social groups. In subsection two, the author articulates Pope Francis' message advocating for peace to the people of Myanmar during his pilgrimage to the nation in 2017, which bore the motto "Love and Peace." The Holy Father reiterated the importance of peace, explicitly mentioning the term nearly forty times in his various homilies and speeches. In the subsequent section of this chapter, the author conducts a thorough examination and analysis of the content of Pope Francis' messages delivered to the nation's authorities, bishops, youth, as well as members of the Supreme Sangha and representatives of other religious groups present in Myanmar. The predominant theme of his speeches centered on the concept of establishing peace through justice, the renunciation of violence, and the promotion of collective responsibility. The Pope asserted that the foundation for enduring peace must be justice, which is understood as the recognition of the dignity of every individual and the respect for every religious and ethnic community. He also highlighted the inequalities that hinder development, particularly the insufficient support provided to the impoverished. These inequalities are primarily a result of the pervasive violence within the country and the mistrust that exists between various national, religious, and social groups. While the Holy Father did not directly address the extermination of the Rohingya people in his speeches and homilies in Myanmar, he did so emphatically during the latter part of his pilgrimage in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the Pope emphasized the necessity of shared responsibility as a fundamental and crucial step towards achieving peace.

In the following two subsections of the dissertation, specifically the third and fourth sections, the socio-political situation of the country following 2017 is presented. Regrettably, this situation has not improved; rather, it has significantly deteriorated, particularly due to another military coup that occurred in 2021. The Pope has consistently advocated for peace and an end to violence, which includes the bombing and forced displacement of civilians belonging to ethnic groups persecuted by the authorities. Pope Francis has expressed his spiritual solidarity with the victims, especially with the youth engaged in resisting violence. He has proposed the concept of a fraternal convention as a spiritual platform designed to unite all individuals striving for peace in Myanmar. Additionally, the Catholic Church within the country has actively engaged in efforts to promote justice, foster reconciliation among national and religious groups, and support democracy, sponsoring humanitarian relief operations for those affected by the ongoing civil conflict. In their message, the Church leaders emphasize the importance of rejecting violence, extending compassion, and promoting nationwide solidarity.

In the third chapter, the author of the dissertation addresses the significant and intricate issue of interreligious dialogue, which in Myanmar primarily, though not exclusively, pertains to discussions with Buddhists of the Theravada school (also referred to as Hinayana). This dialogue is particularly complex due to the disparities between the Christian message and the teachings of the Buddha. At this juncture, it is imperative to recall that Buddhism, in its most traditional formulation, is a soteriological doctrine that emphasizes practical concerns. The principles of refraining from evil deeds, avoiding feelings of anger and hatred, and demonstrating compassion toward all suffering beings are essential elements of Buddhist morality that align with the ethical teachings of Christianity. However, it appears that the Buddha's original message is not theistic in nature. For Buddhists, the doctrine of the omnipresence of suffering, along with the methods and means to address it, is of paramount importance; this topic is explored within the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path.

Furthermore, Buddhist concepts incorporate a wisdom aspect, which is fundamentally distinct from the Christian faith. The notions of anatta (absence of self), sunyata (emptiness), dependent origination, and karma contribute to a Buddhist understanding of reality—this includes its anthropology, which is characterized by a processual nature rather than an essentialist one, as is found in Catholicism. Notably, concepts such as God and soul are absent in Theravada Buddhism. One aspect that the reviewer somewhat overlooks in the dissertation is a comparative analysis of the conceptual framework of Buddhism in contemporary Myanmar and the principles of Catholic theology, as both the differences and certain similarities establish the parameters for interreligious dialogue within the nation.

The author of the dissertation, within the four subsections of Chapter Three, expounds upon the teachings of the Magisterium of the Church following Vatican II regarding the subject of interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, he discusses the teachings of Pope Francis on this matter, elucidates the ecumenical content present in the Holy Father's speeches during his visit to Myanmar, and delineates the attitude of the local Church towards representatives of other religions, notably Buddhism. The author observes that dialogue transpired on various levels: institutional, verbal, and spiritual. Joint meetings and reciprocal visits are conducted. A person-to-person method of dialogue is advocated. This dialogue, from the perspective of the Catholic Church, is profoundly anchored in documents such as “*Nostra aetate*” and, to a lesser degree, “*Gaudium et spes*”. Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu also references biblical quotations, including Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 22:20, the prophetic books, and the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman as described in the New Testament. The author notes that as early as 1966, Pope Paul VI established the Secretariat for Non-Christians. A significant contribution was made by Pope John Paul II's 1990 encyclical, “*Redemptoris missio*”, along with the document produced by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “*Dominus Jesus*”, which was drafted under the leadership of Joseph Ratzinger in 2000. In this context, it is essential to acknowledge the promotion of solidarity and shared responsibility by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC); the bishops underscore the importance of the factors that unite diverse faiths and nations, and in this regard, utilize the term “family of nations.” In their engagement with Buddhism, they primarily identify commonalities in moral teachings and highlight that both Christianity and Buddhism share a missionary mandate. During his visit to Myanmar, Pope Francis implored his audience to engage in dialogue as an indispensable precursor to peace initiatives. In one of his addresses, he referenced words attributed to Buddha (Dhammapada XVII, 223), drawing a comparison with assertions made centuries later by St. Francis of Assisi; furthermore, in the context of endeavors to promote mutual understanding among followers of various religions and communities, he additionally cited St. Paul the Apostle, quoting Romans 12:15 and Galatians 6:2.

Regrettably, following the conclusion of the Holy Father's visit, Myanmar continued to experience turmoil and civil disorder. The military coup of 2021 further intensified the nation's challenges. As noted by the author of the dissertation, Cardinal Charles Bo played a pivotal role in efforts toward national reconciliation, engaging consistently with both the democratic opposition, which holds the support of the majority of the populace, and the military authorities. Additionally, the cardinal's actions placed certain members of opposition groups, who adopt a more confrontational stance, at risk. Despite the inability to exert direct influence over the authorities, the Catholic Church in Myanmar is fostering a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to establish a framework for understanding within the divided nation. The Church endeavors to facilitate regular meetings between representatives of various religions, notably among the Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim communities. Although the Catholic Church has been deprived of the capacity to manage its own educational institutions since 1963, it nonetheless provides education and care for young individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds

in boarding schools associated with parishes. The author notes that the Church plays a significant role in advocating against environmental degradation caused by large corporations, much of which is linked to the People's Republic of China. In this regard, the Church in Myanmar participates in the universal Church's global initiatives, alongside Pope Francis himself, in support of ecological sustainability as articulated in the encyclical "*Laudato si'*".

The concluding fourth chapter of the dissertation effectively compiles and summarizes the content of the preceding chapters while maintaining a structure similar to that of Chapters Two and Three. This chapter addresses the theme of reconciliation, drawing on selected biblical texts and papal teachings. It subsequently explores Pope Francis' perspectives on this issue by examining the papal message delivered during the Holy Father's pilgrimage to Myanmar, and ultimately presents the local Church's response to this teaching. The author titles his analysis of the biblical sources, along with several encyclicals and other relevant Church documents linked to the chapter's themes, "*The Theology of Reconciliation*." The material discussed in this subchapter forms the foundation for considerations in the subsequent subchapters. The author asserts that true reconciliation is grounded in recognizing the image of God in one another (Genesis 1:27). Additionally, the concept of reconciliation as a restoration of a rightful relationship with the Creator is mentioned in the prophetic texts, including a reference to Leviticus 25. In the New Testament, conversely, the significance of Matthew 5:23-24 and Luke 15:11-32, among others, is highlighted; these passages emphasize the necessity of reconciliation with God before offering sacrifices, as well as the reconciliation between the prodigal son and his father, who awaited his return. Furthermore, there is ample opportunity to reference St. Paul's theology, as the author cites the well-known phrase: "God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Robert Kyaw Thu also references documents from the Church's Magisterium such as "*Nostra aetate*", "*Gaudium et spes*", and "*Lumen gentium*", further underscoring the significant role of Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical "*Populorum progressio*", Pope John Paul II's 1984 "*Reconciliatio et poenitentia*", the same Holy Father's 1990 "*Redemptoris missio*", and Benedict XVI's 2005 "*Deus caritas est*".

In the subsequent two subsections, the author conducts an analysis of Pope Francis's teachings concerning the topic of reconciliation. He presents a comparative study of the Church's mission in the context of today's divided world, likening it to the function of a field hospital, a metaphor utilized by Francis in one of his speeches. Addressing wounds and providing comfort constitute significant elements of the Church's pastoral responsibilities. Following this discussion, the 2013 exhortation, "*Evangelii Gaudium*", which delineates the Catholic Church as a community of mercy, is examined in relation to relevant aspects of the current work. Within this document, four principles are articulated on which the Pope seeks to base the engagement of Catholics with the realities of the world: 1) the primacy of time over space; 2) unity prevails over conflict; 3) reality assumes greater importance than ideas; and 4) the whole is greater than the part. When these principles are appropriately understood and applied, they can serve as a foundation for the challenging process of dialogue and the establishment of unity rooted in genuine reconciliation. Another papal document analyzed by the author of the dissertation is the encyclical "*Fratelli tutti*", released in 2020, which followed the Pope's visit to Myanmar by just three years. In this encyclical, the Holy Father underscores reparation as the cornerstone of reconciliation. He also highlights the significance of sincere dialogue and refers to what he identifies as a culture of encounter.

The Church in Myanmar is actively engaging with the teachings of the universal Church in its initiatives, particularly in recent years under the guidance of Pope Francis. The author discusses this in the final subsection, referencing numerous statements made by Cardinal Charles Bo regarding dialogue, reconciliation, and peace. Alongside delineating the Church's

initiatives to foster peace, the subsection also examines the political context and highlights the efforts of the democratic opposition to transform the nature of governance in Myanmar. The author's personal involvement in the challenging political and humanitarian circumstances currently facing the country is distinctly perceptible in the presentation, thereby enhancing the value of the reviewed study.

The dissertation concludes with a section that succinctly summarizes the content presented in the preceding four chapters. As previously mentioned, the work includes two appendices dedicated to two significant figures of the Church in Myanmar, namely Sister Ann Rose and Cardinal Charles Bo. Both of these individuals are personally known to the author, which serves to underscore his personal engagement with the subject matter of the dissertation.

Upon conducting a comprehensive assessment of the dissertation, it becomes evident that it articulately and competently delineates the challenges currently confronting the Church in Myanmar. The author identifies interreligious dialogue, peace-building initiatives, and the pursuit of national reconciliation as the primary objectives of the Catholic community within the nation. The reviewer affirms that this diagnosis is accurate. In examining the objectives above, the author adopts a somewhat repetitive structure in the presentation, which includes citing biblical texts relevant to the issues at hand. Subsequently, he references Church documents pertaining to the subject, including conciliar constitutions and encyclicals, with an emphasis on the thoughts of Pope Francis and the teaching and pastoral practices of the local Church. He effectively achieves his objectives through the application of textual research methodology and the method of participatory observation. As previously noted, the dissertation is generally composed in proficient and communicative language, albeit with some minor ambiguities that are inconsequential in nature. From the reviewer's perspective, the dissertation's subject matter is original and significantly enhances the understanding of the challenges faced by the Church in this pivotal Southeast Asian nation. Pertaining to the issues raised within the dissertation, the reviewer presents two queries to the doctoral candidate. First: What are the primary theological and pastoral barriers to dialogue with the Buddhist community in Myanmar? Second: How can the current state of relations between the Church and the government in the country be evaluated, and what are the prospects for future dialogue?

Conclusion:

In summarizing the aforementioned comments concerning the doctoral dissertation authored by Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu, it is imperative to note that the dissertation encapsulates original content and constitutes a significant contribution to the field of scientific research addressing the challenges faced by the Church in Myanmar. The author engages with the subject matter in a profound manner, and his narrative effectively incorporates a range of complex and diverse references. In the opinion of the reviewer, the dissertation meets the statutory requirements for doctoral theses. Furthermore, it may serve as a foundation for further deliberations in subsequent stages of the doctoral thesis defense.



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