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Review of the PhD thesis by Robert Kyaw Thu entitled:

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

written under the supervision of Rev. prof. ucz. dr hab. Wojciech Kluj OMI,
Warsaw 2025, pp. 225.

1. Aim of the thesis

In the introduction to his thesis, the author clearly defines the purpose of his study: “ This study analyzes the contemporary challenges confronting the Catholic Church in Myanmar and examines how Pope Francis’ magisterium provides a framework for addressing them. By applying Catholic teachings, particularly those of Pope Francis, in a threefold perspective of peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation, it seeks to outline the general perspective of the Church’s contemporary challenges in Myanmar” (p. 8).

This overarching goal is explored through the three main areas of engagement of the Catholic Church in Myanmar: peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue and reconciliation, which are also embedded in the universal teaching of Pope Francis, but especially in his message to the people of Myanmar during his unique visit in 2017.

2. Structure of the thesis

Robert Kyaw Thu's dissertation consists of a list of abbreviations used, an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography, and two appendices.

In the 8-page introduction, the author presents the main research question, some historical background, and a detailed exegesis of the title of his dissertation, with particular emphasis on the role of Pope Francis' visit to Myanmar in 2017 and its consequences for the country and the Church. There is also a reference to John Paul II's encyclical, *Redemptoris Missio* and a presentation of Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng, who through her heroic actions, become a symbol of the courage of the Catholic Church in Myanmar facing military dictatorship.

In the main body of the dissertation, the author competently and smoothly guides us through the history and challenges of the contemporary politics and evangelization of Burma/Myanmar.

The first chapter presents Myanmar's cultural diversity, religious plurality, and the historical struggles that have defined the country's journey. Myanmar remains caught in civil war, with tribal conflicts fueling violence and divisions across the nation for more than seven decades. Following the 2021 military coup, conditions continue to worsen, as homes burn, soldiers are recruited, and armed groups expand in every state. The chapter examines Myanmar's broader geographical, political, and religious contexts, offering a comprehensive perspective on the nation's struggles. The author discusses the history and current state of Catholicism in Myanmar, emphasizing its contributions and challenges. The country remains fragmented, with ethnic and political tensions shaping daily life. Despite this, signs of peace and hope persist. However, instability, interreligious dialogue, reconciliation, and unity remain key challenges as Myanmar strives to heal divisions and create a more unified future.

The second chapter explores peace, or rather its absence, as Myanmar's central challenge. It focuses on the situation before Pope Francis' 2017 visit and the subsequent deterioration afterward. It demonstrates how Myanmar's lack of peace affects relations between the mainland government and ethnic groups, as well as between Catholicism and Protestantism, highlighting the martyrdom of Myanmar's first blessed, Isidore Nge Ko Lat. It defines the Catholic Church's role in peacebuilding within conflict zones, aligning with Pope Francis' principles of nonviolence. The author demonstrates how, despite worsening conditions, the Church remains a steadfast advocate, promoting peace through humanitarian aid, interfaith collaboration, and justice advocacy.

The third chapter explores the second challenge of the thesis: interreligious dialogue, emphasizing its crucial significance within Myanmar's diverse and multi-religious society. Myanmar exhibits religious pluralism, with Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and various traditional belief systems coexisting. While this diversity is a cultural asset, it also poses challenges in a nation struggling with ethnic conflict and political division. Pope Francis consistently emphasizes mutual respect, dialogue, and the exchange of gifts to promote peaceful coexistence among religions. These principles shape the Catholic Church's role in Myanmar, guiding its interactions with leaders of various faiths to foster dialogue, understanding, cooperation, and peace. Suu Kyi affirms that Myanmar's future depends on citizens helping and forgiving one another. She urges people to collaborate rather than hate, highlighting that a strong, inclusive democracy relies on collective effort, reconciliation, and a shared vision. Her policy closely aligns with Church teachings, reflecting the influence of her Christian education on her Buddhist beliefs. This reveals the Church's quiet but significant role in interreligious dialogue.

The fourth chapter examines the third challenge facing the Church in Myanmar: reconciliation. Myanmar's profoundly divided and wounded society continues to struggle with the effects of decades of civil war, ethnic tensions, and religious strife, leaving deep scars on its collective identity. The pursuit of peace is both political and spiritual, demanding trust and relationship-building across entrenched divisions. Drawing on Pope Francis' teachings on reconciliation, this chapter explores the complexities of fostering harmony and unity. It highlights the Catholic Church's contributions to promoting forgiveness, healing, and solidarity, engaging in grassroots programs that advance reconciliation as both a political necessity and a path to national and spiritual renewal.

In the conclusion the author presents his action proposals for the Catholic Church in Myanmar based on the teaching of Pope Francis:

- “1. Deepening theological reflection on peace, reconciliation, and interreligious harmony using Pope Francis' teachings as guiding principles.
2. Strengthening grassroots initiatives to heal historical wounds and foster trust among diverse communities.
3. Promoting inclusive education, humanitarian aid, and pastoral care as tools for social transformation, particularly among youth and marginalized groups.
4. Engaging in sustained interreligious dialogue as a prophetic witness to unity amidst division.

5. Empowering local Church leadership: clergy, religious, and laity alike, to become agents of nonviolence and builders of a reconciled society” (p. 171).

Those postulates are well-grounded in the sociological analysis and supported by the arguments presented in the doctoral thesis.

3. Content

Robert Kyaw Thu’s doctoral dissertation is a unique contribution to the research, exploration, and presentation of a very important and at the same time little known chapter in the contemporary history of the Catholic Church in Asia. The political and religious history of Myanmar is not well known to the general public and especially to the Catholic readership in the world. The work of Robert Kyaw thus fills this gap in a very committed way.

Furthermore, the thesis offers a more intimate perspective on the intricacies of the Myanmar situation by incorporating the testimony of Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng and other historical and contemporary witnesses of faith in Myanmar, notably, Charles Cardinal Maung Bo whose biography, which is academically referenced, could be incorporated into the main body of the text.

The sentence finishing the second chapter raises some surprise: “At the end of the day, however, the Church’s mission is rooted in supernatural life and visible results are not the ultimate criterion” (p. 98). While it is accurate to assert that the primary objective of the Church is to guide individuals toward holiness and eternal life, this assertion is made without an adequate introduction, resulting in the reader being left with the impression that earthly endeavors are of minimal value.

Finally, it would be beneficial for the reader to have an introduction that provides a comprehensive overview of the current landscape of academic and non-academic publications related to the situation of the Church in Myanmar. It is imperative that the author clearly states his subsequent remarks regarding confidentiality and the potential risks associated with utilizing certain local sources at the outset of the text.

4. Formal assessment

The dissertation is distinguished by its lucid and coherent structure and language. The presentation of the content is methodical and logical, with introductory sections addressing both historical and theological aspects of the major topics examined in the dissertation. It is evident that the majority of the statements presented in this text are meticulously referenced, with the exception of a few paragraphs that appear to be founded on the authors’ personal

understanding of the subject matter. It would have been judicious for these paragraphs to explicitly state the personal nature of the knowledge they convey. In addition, the sections addressing biblical arguments could be supported by the inclusion of footnotes that provide pertinent references.

The language employed in the dissertation consistently meets or exceeds the expectations of the reader. The text contains a limited number of editorial mistakes and inconsistencies, both in the main body of the text and in the footnotes. In conclusion, it is evident that a number of the teachings of Pope Francis have been reiterated, even though such reiteration is perhaps superfluous. A significant proportion of the sources utilized in this study have been obtained directly from internet sources. As previously mentioned in the comments, this topic could be adequately addressed in the introduction.

5. Questions for debate

I would like to propose two questions for discussion.

- The first question relates to the third chapter, which touches on the theme of interreligious dialogue. The candidate correctly describes all its dimensions, but does not include a dimension that usually precedes it, which is ecumenical dialogue. What is the current state of ecumenical dialogue in Myanmar?
- The second question is related to the last chapter. The candidate presents the impact of the papal visit in the country and in the Church and mentions only the efforts to reconcile different ethnic groups within the Catholic Church. What are some of the initiatives in the Catholic Church that help different peoples live together peacefully?

6. Final conclusion

There is no doubt that the dissertation by Robert Kyaw Thu meets the criteria defined for a doctoral thesis and can serve as the basis of further registration and conferment procedure for a doctoral degree. I put forward a proposal to admit Robert Kyaw Thu to further stages of the registration and conferment procedure for a doctoral degree.

Ottawa, 8. 05. 2025

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