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Review of Doctoral Dissertation in the Discipline of Theological Sciences
by Robert Kyaw Thu: *Contemporary Challenges of the Catholic Church in Myanmar in the Light of the Teaching of Pope Francis* produced under the
scientific direction of Rev. Prof. UKSW Dr. Hab. Wojciech Kluj, Cardinal Stefan
Wyszynski University in Warsaw, Faculty of Theology, Warsaw 2025, pp. 225.

I. Research Objective, Method, Sources of the Dissertation, and its Content

The Catholic Church in Myanmar faces numerous challenges, particularly in the context of ongoing civil conflict, humanitarian crises, and political instability. Pope Francis has consistently advocated for peace and dialogue in Myanmar, urging an end to violence and calling for sincere efforts toward reconciliation. His teachings emphasize care for the marginalized, including refugees and victims of war, which aligns with the Church's mission in Myanmar.

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, a key figure in Myanmar's Catholic community, has highlighted Pope Francis' deep respect for the people of Asia and his commitment to supporting those suffering in Myanmar.

The Pope's visit to Myanmar in 2017 was a significant moment, as he chose to stand with the people despite external pressures advising against the trip. His presence brought attention

to the plight of Myanmar's citizens and reinforced the Church's role in advocating for justice and peace.

To analyze the research topic in more depth, the author of the dissertation gives some indications and formulates relevant question: How are these three major challenges of the Catholic Church in Myanmar (peacebuilding, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation) presented in Pope Francis' teaching? (p. 8). Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu explains: The study will employ Pope Francis' magisterial teaching, particularly his encyclicals, apostolic exhortations, speeches, pastoral letters, and messages, as well as his remarks during his visit to Myanmar and on other occasions. The study will show the framework of this teaching in official Church documents. While socio-political factors are discussed, the study remains primarily theological and ecclesiological in its approach (p. 13).

The research method of the dissertation is not explicitly declared by the author of the dissertation. However, his intention is the analysis of the statements and papal documents of the research topic and the drawing of appropriate conclusions. Therefore, it can be concluded that his method of research will be analytical with elements of synthesis. (p.13).

The author has drawn diverse sources of documentation to address the historical, cultural, religious, and theological dimensions of the research topic.

In addition to the introduction, general conclusion, and a list of abbreviations, this thesis consists of four chapters, each divided into titles and subtitles. Chapter I is a brief description of the general situation in Myanmar, including other religions, especially the Catholic Church. It also discusses the problematic issues faced by the Catholic Church that arise from the context of studying. Chapter II discusses the challenges for the Catholic Church in the peace-building process that the people of Myanmar are seeking. It highlights some significant aspects of Pope Francis' visit to Myanmar and is dedicated to promoting the spirit of fraternity as a means of peacebuilding. The urgent need for interreligious dialogue in Myanmar is discussed in Chapter III. It also highlights important aspects of the messages of Pope Francis to the people of Myanmar with regard to other religions. Chapter IV is a discussion of issues of reconciliation and unity in the country as a means of healing the wounds of the past and paving the way for a better future for the nation.

The author concludes his work with a discussion of the implications of this study and recommendations for future research and bibliography.

II. Formal and Substantive Qualities of the Dissertation

Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu undoubtedly makes a contribution to the study of the contemporary challenges of the Catholic Church in Myanmar in light of the teaching of Pope Francis. The dissertation presents a well-structured and theological analysis of the teachings of Pope Francis as they relate to the Catholic Church in Myanmar. It is comprehensive, thoughtful, and academically rigorous, demonstrating a careful balance between theological reflection and socio-political awareness.

While grounding its analysis in Catholic theology, particularly missiology, the dissertation provides a well-structured background by tracing Myanmar's political and religious history. The historical overview helps to contextualize why Christianity has been perceived as an alien religion and why inter-religious tensions continue to exist.

By drawing on Pope Francis' magisterial teachings, including his speeches, encyclicals, and exhortations, the study provides a framework based on papal teaching and shows how the Pope's messages can serve as a roadmap for addressing Myanmar's challenges. The inclusion of his pastoral visit in 2017 adds depth to the analysis, demonstrating the tangible impact of his advocacy. The focus on peacebuilding, dialogue, and reconciliation aligns with Pope Francis' broader mission for the Church as an instrument of healing. Highlighting how these challenges relate specifically to Myanmar makes the study particularly valuable in theological and missiological discourse.

Key strengths of this dissertation.

1. Symbolic & Systematic Approach: The division between symbolic and methodological conclusions is particularly effective. It fits well with Pope Francis' emphasis on witness through action to use Sister Anne Rose as a symbolic representation of the Church's response.
2. Pope Francis' Vision of a Church in Mission: The study encapsulates Pope Francis' desire for a church that goes beyond self-preservation - a Church that actively engages with society. The emphasis on peacemaking, interreligious dialogue, and reconciliation underscores the missiological foundation of his teachings.

3. The interweaving of theology and social reality:: The engagement with biblical themes, especially the contrast between the "power of the hand" and the "power of the heart," enhances the theological depth of this research while making it applicable to Myanmar's historical and political context.
4. A practical framework for the church in Myanmar: The dissertation's proposed steps for the Church - including deepened theological reflection, grassroots initiatives, and leadership empowerment - offer a meaningful blueprint for engagement with Myanmar's social and religious realities.

Weaknesses of the Dissertation.

The dissertation is well-structured and insightful. However, there are a few areas where refinement would strengthen the clarity, depth, and balance of the analysis.

1. Limited engagement with primary theological texts: Although Pope Francis' speeches and apostolic visit are strong resources, further integration of key magisterial texts such as *Evangelii Gaudium* (on missionary discipleship) and *Fratelli Tutti* (on social fraternity) would strengthen the theological foundation.
2. Lack of comparative context: The challenges in Myanmar are not unique countries with Catholic minorities and interreligious tensions (e.g., Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Iraq) have faced similar struggles. Including brief comparisons would demonstrate the universal applicability of Pope Francis' teachings.
3. Overemphasis on symbolic representation: While Sister Anne Rose is an effective symbol, relying too heavily on symbolism in the conclusion could detract from the methodological rigor expected in theological research. Strengthening the systematic analysis section would balance emotional appeal with scholarly depth.
4. Risk of overgeneralization: Certain statements-such as that the Church is "an advocate for peace" - could benefit from more nuanced discussion. While Pope Francis' teachings encourage peacebuilding, acknowledging the specific challenges the Church faces in implementing these teachings would provide a more realistic assessment.

Questions for discussion:

1. What does Pope Francis mean by a “Church without self-reference”?
2. What is the significance of interreligious dialogue in Myanmar according to Pope Francis?
3. What is one of the practical recommendations for the Catholic Church in Myanmar based on Pope Francis' teachings?

III. Conclusion

The study of the problem undertaken is methodologically and factually correct. The objections, questions, or doubts raised in the review can be discussed. The doctoral student has undoubtedly achieved the stated goal. The reviewed dissertation is a scientific work and meets the requirements of the *Ustawa z dnia 14 marca 2003 roku art. 31 o stopniach naukowych i tytule naukowym oraz o stopniach i tytule w zakresie sztuki (Dz. U. z 2017 r. poz. 1789*. Therefore, I make a motion to the Council for the Discipline of Theological Sciences of Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński University in Warsaw to continue the doctoral dissertation of Rev. Robert Kyaw Thu

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