

Session X

Case Studies of Regional Discord – Sri Lanka, Philippines

- The Rt. Rev. K.B.S. Illangasinghe (Diocesan Bishop, ACS)
- The Most Rev. Ignacio C. Soliba (Primate, ACP)

THE SRILANKAN CONFLICT

– Some Observations –

The Rt. Rev. K.B.S. Illangasinghe (Bishop of Kurunagala)

The Nation

The Island nation of Sri Lanka has been referred to as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean and The Cradle of the Universe. There is no distinguishing set of features that mark Sri Lankans. The races have blended from East and West, since the Island is strategically placed along the sea routes, and traders and visitors have left their mark from ancient times.

Sri Lanka is a pluralistic country of people belonging to many races, following many religious traditions, speaking different languages, and traditionally living in specific geographical areas, even though a large sector of the population is living as mixed populations in the urban areas.

Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was once known, was colonized first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch, and finally the British. The entire island came under British domination in 1815. The western dress, manners and names are still popular in Sri Lanka, although movements for an indigenous cultural identity began even before independence from the British in 1948.

Political Trends in Post- Independent Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has been fortunate to have achieved independence without a bloody struggle, due to the political maturity, the statesmanship and the genuine commitment

of the then leaders who belonged to all the communities, but struggled together with a shared vision. However, it was only a nominal political independence that was won. The political power that was wielded by the British was handed over to an elite leadership in Sri Lanka, a group that was Western oriented due to their upbringing and Western education. This reality led to a continuation of the same style and structure of administration that had been used in colonial times. The only difference was that the personnel involved were Sri Lankans.

The above pattern of things continued until 1956, when under the charismatic leadership of the Hon.S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, changes were introduced in the political arena, and the status of the common people was lifted, recognizing the Pancha Maha Balawegaya (Sangha, Veda, Guru, Govi and Kamkaru), the five leading powers in traditional Sri Lankan society. These powers were the Buddhist monks, the native physicians, the teachers, the peasants, and the labor force. Bandaranaike also introduced Sinhala as the official language and gave special recognition to the vernacular languages the Swabhasha. Even though in retrospect we can now understand some of the sad repercussions of this historical move, no one can deny that it had lasting progressive effects in the areas of education , social development, employment opportunities, and many other important aspects of life in Sri Lanka.

The next important change took place in 1972 when Sri Lanka was made a Democratic Socialist Republic, still continuing to remain within the Commonwealth of Nations. The period up to 1972, a difficult one for all Sri Lankans, was marked by many labor disputes, and unrest among peasantry and students, culminating in a youth uprising in 1971. A high rate of unemployment, lack of educational facilities, and similar problems, faced by the rural youth, compelled them to take up arms.

The year 1977 saw the unprecedented landslide victory given by the people to the United National Party. The United National Party government was led by Hon.J.R. Jayawardena, who later became Sri Lanka's Executive President. Jayawardena introduced radical changes in the economic sphere. A free and open market economy saw the light of day in Sri Lanka. His was a total and final shift from the socialist policies of the earlier independence government.

The constitution of 1978 established the office of Executive President, with very broad powers, and Parliament headed by a Prime Minister. The country has experienced, since 1978, the wide-ranging ill-effects of concentrating executive power in one person, and making the Parliament subservient. The office of President is hardly

accountable to anyone, except in certain less important areas. Over 17 long years, people had not benefited much from these reforms and they eagerly awaited a change from a repressive rule. At this time there began to be a strong movement on the part of many to change this situation and to once again strengthen the role of the House of Representatives, and to make the Executive President accountable to the Parliament.

Frustrations have also surfaced in the area of race relations. The long patience of the Tamil people in the face of repeated and almost regular riots, killings, and looting had to end. The troubles broke out and were the worst in the history of the country. The happenings of Black July led to militant groups among the Tamil community deciding to take up arms and fight for a separate state to be called Elaam.

In 1994 the opposition alliance, the Peoples Alliance led by Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunge, came to power with many promises, as usual, of restoring democracy, abolishing the Executive Presidency, etc. the main concern for the people was the promise that the national conflict that had lasted over a decade was to be resolved and peace brought to the country. There was a lot of hope and the president herself showed much courage in offering a package of political reforms to solve the problems faced by the Tamil people in the country, to alleviate the fears of the majority Sinhala community, and to establish peace and justice among all communities of the country. But it was sad that the whole process ran into many difficulties, caused by extremist, fundamentalist factions. War erupted again in 1995.

Thus, we see that there have been clear phases in the post-independence history of Sri Lanka, where specific socio-economic and political changes have impacted the lives of the people. The church on the whole has attempted to respond positively and creatively over the years, guided by the values of the Gospel. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the church in this country is basically a middle class community that to a great extent has been unable to disconnect itself from the colonial heritage and the continuing domination experienced in contemporary times from a variety of power blocks all over the world. There is no doubt that this situation has, to some extent, hampered the mission of the church in modern Sri Lanka.

Present cross-section of Sri Lanka Society

The very fabric of Sri Lanka society has deteriorated and been demoralized over the

last few decades, mirroring similar crises in other parts of the world. The war in the North-East has continued without an end in sight. This very clearly illuminates that brokenness both of the world and especially that of our country. For the sake of their own future, all political parties have put off the search for a solution that would establish equality, right of self-determination and identity for the Tamil people. Violence has crept into all areas of Sri Lankan society. Violence seems to have become the order of the day for many people in our society seeking to achieve their ends. Our national suicide rate has increased.

In the face of the current emergency, the democratic rights of the people are held hostage, while the current constitution has critically affected the role of Parliament. It appears that the people of our country are fast losing the trust and confidence in practical democracy and democratic institutions elections, for instance. Hence the crying demand for independent commissions like the Police Commission, the Elections Commission, the Public Service Commission etc, however fragile the functioning of such commissions might be.

Sri Lanka has already experienced the dangerous trends that can result in an unstable political situation. Unfortunately, the political leadership has succumbed to the desire for power either by holding on to it or by making use of every opportunity to gain it, at any cost to the nation and the people. There is sufficient evidence for us to believe that the country at large has been saddened by the lack of statesmanship shown in solving our national problems. There is a great need to continue to uphold in our prayers the leaders and others who create opinion in the country.

Amidst recent events, prominent people in public life have been forced to admit corruption in their own dealings. Dishonesty and injustice are rampant in the society, and ordinary people have become the victims. The criminal underworld has been active quite openly with definite political support and nurture. The numerous detected cases of abuse of children and women and the prevalent abuse of drugs and the results of such practices speaks volumes for the moral and spiritual degradation of the society. Religious and social disharmony has resulted from the actions of those persons and groups that have destroyed the social institutions of the people.

In our fast moving world, we find that information is available easily and freely, but the desire to gain wisdom is lacking. Therefore, true wisdom is hard to come by. The media play a dominant role in creating opinion in any country. But the performance of

the media in Sri Lanka has been rather pathetic. Freedom of the media is a fundamental right of the people, and all media are expected to function with utmost responsibility. However, a good majority of the media in Sri Lanka have opted to serve either own commercial or political interests. It is certainly incumbent on all media in a democratic society to serve the interests of the people, not their own special or partisan interests.

It is in the midst of such sad and seemingly hopeless realities that the Christian community is called upon to be truly obedient to the challenges of the Gospel. We need to reflect on our role, bearing in mind the challenges and opportunities available.

The Christian Community

The instability within the country has created a state of shock among many religious people, and they are at a loss about how to proceed. There is confusion among the progressive sections of the Christian community as regards their social responsibilities and roles in the context of the society we live in, a society in which social abuses are on the rise, where social values are being eroded, and the cost of living is rising, Christians are being called upon to be a truly witnessing community. The progressive Christians, who in the past had rendered much service amidst social problems and pressures, are today in a crisis situation themselves, facing many dilemmas. Lack of accountability and transparency in managing funds and the shifts in visions of international Christian funding organizations have caused a fall in obtainable funds. On the other hand, aid obtainable by fundamentalist Christian groups is on the increase. This has discouraged some dedicated and committed mainstream Christians who have worked hard for social transformation in past decades.

It is in this environment that the church in Sri Lanka is struggling to be faithful to the demands of the gospel, and has continued the ministry of reconciliation and peace making.

National Reconciliation : The Church' s Prime Task

Amidst many such challenges the national conflict remains the prime concern for the

church in Sri Lanka today. But there have been many other priorities of concern for mission in recent times in addition to what has already been mentioned. The problem of the deteriorating state of human rights in the country, the large scale threats to democracy, the plunder of the environment, and matters pertaining to medical ethics, the abuse of the children, the challenges posed by the fundamentalist approached to the faith, threats to ecumenism and the rise of denominationalism are some on these concerns on the main issue that is disturbing us all, the need for national reconciliation and establishing peace with justice and fair play. Have we been adequately sensitive to the challenges posed by the national conflict and the resulting war, as a community comprising both Sinhala and Tamil ethnic groups? To what extent have we been able to raise this as an issue of dialogue within the church? It is true that we do not experience the direct impact of the war in southern Sri Lanka. But the devastating impact of destruction elsewhere in the country is felt in all spheres of life. The task of the church should be to facilitate an authentic and clear understanding of the conflict among our people. It is necessary for all of us to have first hand information about the agonies of those Sri Lanka who have been caught up in the war and whose lives have been changed or destroyed by it.

Stand of the Church

In addition to this, I believe it is necessary for us to know what we believe as a church on the issue. Here are some of the positions already evolved during the long struggle of the church in this connection. The church has always believed that Sri Lanka should remain a united country and that no forms of division will be acceptable. In this context, the welfare of all communities will have to be taken care of, ensuring the dignity and the rights of all. We believe that the solution lies in constitutionally entrenched devolution of power to ensure wide participation in the governing process. For this process the church supports a negotiated settlement. A military solution has never been an option for the church, and it rejects all forms of violence to resolve any form of conflict among human beings. The war should be stopped immediately, and the church believes that justice and good will should be maintained and every effort should be taken to alleviate fear, suspicion, and hatred. This can only be done through repentance, forgiveness, and our total committed to the ministry of reconciliation. We also believe that it is important for those committed to peace to work together for a

lasting solution.

The Response of the Church

The church in Sri Lanka has always believed that God has placed the church in such a time and place as this. At this time of crisis the church has been given the opportunity to fulfill the purpose of God and to face the challenges inherent in God's purpose. The community of faith also believes that they have been called by God to reject all forms of violence, which are essentially a manifestation of human sin. This sinfulness has been manifested in the war in the cruelest form for over two decades. Every citizen of Sri Lanka has been affected, either directly or indirectly, by the misery and continuous suffering brought to our country by war. It is said that human beings who have been made in the image of God are distorted and disfigured as the ultimate result of any war. Therefore the church has condemned and rejected war and all forms of violence. The basic principal of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to affirm life in all its fullness.

The human person needs forgiveness for the cruelest form of violence perpetrated by humankind, in crucifying Jesus on the cross. Christ endured violence, to the extent of dying on the cross so that sin might be defeated completely. Jesus essentially endured violence on the cross in order to reject violence as a means to resolve human conflict and to redeem humanity from all consequences of violence.

It is against such backdrop that the church in Sri Lanka has resolve to be an agent of reconciliation and peacemaking. The church is placed in a very strategical position to do this, being the only religious group that claims to include faithful, from both of the national major ethnic communities. Therefore it is not only a responsibility but a right. The church is mindful that the ministry of reconciliation is not an easy one but a costly and a risky one. The consequences of misunderstanding can be disastrous for individuals and communities.

We observed that the war has brought about untold suffering to the people, a good majority of them being innocent victims without much voice. The church has realized that it is necessary to be identified with the thousands of such victims and to be their voice. The church has taken on the responsibility of ensuring the welfare of all communities irrespective of caste, creed, or ethnicity, and to be mindful of the needs

of smaller, powerless minority communities. The church has also learnt to work together with all well-meaning people crossing the boundaries of religion and language and within the Christian community to transcend denominational barriers. The church has, over the years, kept vigilant watch over the values of the Reign of God and the genuine rights of people. This has empowered us to speak out for the truth, believing that truth alone will make us free. Seeking peace and pursuing it has become the challenge to face and we must be ready to do it at any cost.

With such commitment, the church in Sri Lanka has been genuinely involved in practical terms in enhancing and strengthening the peace building capacity of the various denominations. It is appropriate at this juncture to examine the practical ways by which the church is struggling to make an effective response.

The Community of Faith as Peace Makers

The Vision

While the Protestant denominations have been working together for some time, there is also a desire and a commitment to work together with the Roman Catholic Church in Sri Lanka. With the leadership and the guidance shown by the National Christian Council of Sri Lanka, * the church's vision entails all communities religious, ethnic, political and secular pursue a relationship of reconciliation so that the dignity and equality of opportunity and justice leading to a unified Sri Lanka may be realized. In order to achieve this, the war must come to an end and all forms of violence, visible and institutional, must be overcome and social trust and reconciliation deepened. The Christian community already engaged in this process has a continuing prophetic role to play ecumenically in this task.

It has been proposed as joint action for delegations from the church to meet the President and the Prime Minister from time to time to express whatever concerns that may arise and to encourage all parties concerned to say in the peace process, no matter what the consequences of such a commitment might be. It is also important to pursue matters of concern and facilitate understanding on emerging issues, with visitors to the Vanni (LTTE controlled area of the country).

The Memorandum of Understanding

The church has welcome the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the government and the LTTE as an opportunity to give more space for a new orientation towards national reconstruction. This can only be a first step in the long and difficult journey that we need to embark on in order to achieve lasting peace and prosperity, and to reconcile all the communities of our country. The church has already made a request through a signature campaign to ensure that all issues in the MOU be fulfilled as quickly as possible. The church further reiterates this by facilitating educational and awareness among all Sri Lankans.

However the MOU is not in operation effectively today even though both parties have said that they are still committed to the MOU. Both parties have violated the MOU at varied degrees at different times. At the rate that the war and the hostilities have escalated we cannot accept that they are genuine and that the MOU is still valid.

Education and Awareness

The church believes that education and awareness is necessary for all Sri Lankans and has committed to assist in this area by organizing activities to strengthen the peace process, both within society and the church. Peace education and activities related to conflict resolution are uppermost among our priorities. This is planned through the educational institutions, the churches, and with the public at large. This will also include issue-based activities like sharing information on campaigns, detainees, war, arms dealers, protest and boycott of racist or war mongering media, the cost of war etc. This will also involve monitoring media reports, using media to promote peace, and creating awareness among journalists for responsible reporting. While giving due consideration to such issues, the responsibility of the church in alleviating suffering and other activities relating to relief and rehabilitation are not forgotten.

The church considers that this area needs wider participation of persons and groups. At this very opportune time in the history of Sri Lanka, it is important to work together with people of other faiths recognizing the multi-faith of Sri Lankan society. While organizing

and participating in peace marches and interfaith vigils, there is a necessary for interfaith seminars and consultations for dialogue and reflection, which in turn can lead to formulating principals for harmony among ethnic and religious groups.

Relief and rehabilitation

This has involved continuous assistance to those affected by the war and the conflict in general. The speedy resettlement of the displaced communities and individuals, the rehabilitation of combatants, and sharing the cost of such activities are urgent priorities. Peace building by way of relief and rehabilitation will also include strengthening interaction between communities separated by war in given geographical locations, trauma counseling with a focus on peace building, peace building among children, and responding to related issues such as widespread crime and an active criminal underworld. This will automatically involve initiating study and reflection on the linkages between crime and the ethnic conflict, raising awareness about crime and the underworld and joining in activities connected with them. This will lead to many issues also linked to the state of human rights, for which all parties involved in the conflict are separated and jointly responsible.

Human Rights

It has become necessary to motivate people in the churches to carry out relief and rehabilitation programs. Representations are to be made to the **LTTE** on the pass system, the conscription of children, and tax collection. A campaign for uniform identity cards for all citizens of Sri Lanka, the issues connected with detainees and deserters. These issues, all matters of high priority, include seeking assistance for those who find themselves in this situation from lawyers dealing with human rights concerns, identifying and promoting potential training and linked up of support, and dealing with the whole issue of demilitarization of all combatants.

The human rights situation in the country has deteriorated drastically in the present context. There are violations on both sides. The United Nations and many other international organizations have raised concern over this. In fact there is a great demand for the setting up of an office of the UN human rights body in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion – The Task of Stewardship

The church has inherited the stewardship of the ministry of Jesus Christ. We have the calling to continue with the risen Christ the work of reconciliation of Jesus during his earthly pilgrimage and on the cross. We have the task of being the stewards of the mission of Jesus Christ of proclaiming the Good News as very clearly depicted in the Gospels. This demands affirmation of life in every sense. In addition we have been

entrusted with the stewardship of the resources of God's church. The scripture have shown that, creative skills of management and administration are marks of a good steward. It is important to be mindful of the responsibilities that have been entrusted to us of being good stewards of God's resources in the church, invested in God's people and in all other material investments.

Against such a background I would like to summarise the main concerns of the conflict as follows.

- The difficulties and the challenges faced by the ordinary people of Sri Lanka will have to be addressed.
- The cost of the war and the security expenses have increased from one billion in 1983 to close upon one hundred and fifty billion today. This heavy burden has been reflecting in the day today problems faced by the people.
- The culture of violence is enhancing by the day. This has reflected in violence in non military or non conflict areas of the country like the brutal murders, violence on children and women, domestic violence and those in work places etc.
- Criminal offences like murders, destruction of life under normal circumstances, inflicting of injuries and the like have escalated in the society.
- The number of people who have been displaced in their own land and elsewhere have increased tremendously over the years.
- The environment and the general property have faced a lot of destruction in the recent years. This has had a very deteriorating effect both physically and in the minds of people and communities.
- There is a huge breakdown of law and order in the country. The organizations that maintain law and order have become less and less effective and it appears that the responsibility has got passed on to other illegal bodies and very dangerously to the para-military bodies, whose number has grown fast over the years.
- Extortions have become the order of the day. This has placed the business community and other ordinary people and their lives at risk.
- Forceful abductions and disappearances are prevalent in the society and it is alleged that all parties to the conflict are involved and responsible for this.
- Corruption and the destruction of all resources in the country has become a very

series consequence of the conflict.

- Sri Lanka is increasingly becoming indebted to the world and the debt burden is increasing all the time. This is also resulting in the increase of inflation.
- The cost of living index in the country as well as the COL in reality has been rocketing high at a terrific speed in the recent past.
- On all the above realities the general development in the country has suffered enormously.
- The emotional shock , the mistrust and the disunity has been taking precedence.
- There is a lot of international pressure and intereference from countries outside and multinational organizations.
- There is also a minority of powerful people in the country who are benefiting from this situation.
- There should be a basic draft of a solution to be put forward by the authorities as a base for further negotiations. The absence of such a base has left the country some what hopeless and frustrated.
- The only possible way out will be a justifiable negotiated solution with justice and fair play for all communities in the country. Such a solution should be able to affirm quality of life for all people.