

WHAT IS GOING ON IN MINDANAO

I have told the Basilan story many times before in different forums that I lost count of the number. From the time I was released after my kidnapping in 1994, to time of siege of Parish last June, 2001. There were many things that happened there, as there are many tales to tell---by those of us who were kidnapped and survived, by those who didn't and those who paid the ransom, by those who benefited and those who connived, and by many innocent hapless victims whose lives, limbs and property were destroyed and damaged, not to mention the trauma it caused to countless peoples

You know how difficult our/my situation is, as a priest. To say that you understand our predicament and to emphasize are two different things. For, what would you do and feel, if priests, nuns and lay leaders are kidnapped or ambushed? What would you feel if crosses are destroyed and demanded to be taken out? What would you do and feel in an environment of seemingly endless atrocities, where kidnappings has become a lucrative business? Where kidnapped husbands are either beheaded or maimed and wives are raped, while the children helplessly witness the commission of the crime and eventually orphaned? What will you do in an environment of prejudice and biases ? (PAUSE)

Our response?

As a Church and as Christians, we have embarked on advocacies on Peace. We sponsored seminars on how to build a Culture of Peace. Engage in a continuous Dialogue of Life and Faith; lectures, forums on tolerance, respect and peaceful coexistence; rallies, prayers, and masses. We have tried all sorts, name it. We have lecturers from all over Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, from different foundations, different speakers- both Christians and Muslims ----in the hope of eradicating biases and prejudices, --- in the hope of forging a better and more lasting solution to Peace and Order. We have a term for this ---active non-violence. But all these are short-lived! And they would kidnap again, kill again and threaten more. We called on our government authorities, and would come, they would see, but never conquered.

These events have led me to become more vocal; more vigilant active in my campaign against terrorism, which I have discovered later, have something to do with money, and perpetrated by corrupt government officials, who were elected to high offices in our civil government and appointed to the military hierarchy & some military officers/GENERAL.

My anxieties and apprehensions were shared by our faithful parishioners, who have sensed that we are fast becoming a persecuted church, inspite of our reconciliatory stance. They would later form a group called "Concerned Basilan", which now I openly support. These are the people who are out to defend our life and our faith, if aggressed upon. Are they armed? Yes.

And some sectors would say, Father, you know our church abhors violence. You cannot solve conflict by arming yourself. There should be continuous dialogue. Be more patient, more tolerant, ---- active non-violence na lang, and besides Father, it is better to waste our saliva on dialogue than to waste our lives. But I said, "All these years, we have tried that, and all these years we have wasted both our saliva and our lives.

As their pastor, shall I leave my parishioners to cry and die and say, "be patient"? "Time will come when God will beat their swords into ploughshares, and there will be peace," without doing anything?

As the popular quotation would say "For evil to triumph, it is enough for good men to do nothing." But even if we are good, and many, but are not doing anything to stop terrorism and corruption, they, the evil, will surely triumph. ("Daghan man kaha tang mga but-an, pero kung wala man tay gibuhat para mahunong ning tanang kabuangan, pildi ta. Way silbi ang atong pagkabut-an.)

I love life. I respect life. I believe it is a gift from God. And because of that I will do anything to preserve it, even if I have to arm myself.

If we respect life we should protect it as well from those who wish to take it wantonly, indiscriminately.

Because even if we love and respect life, the Abu-sayyaf Group don't. And the authorities we expect to protect us, cannot do so. In fact, some have allowed our lives to be wasted upon. (Don't you know that the personalities involved in the Lamitan siege were promoted?)

And because life is a gift, it should not be wasted. It would be shameful if I die without using this God-given gift to further preserve the lives of my parishioners.

My sisters and brothers, I do not want to be perceived as a person or priest that has been jaded by the harsh realities. I was raised as a peaceful person. Our Bible in fact tells/teaches, that the last words of Jesus were about Peace and Peace-giving. But Peace-giving is different from peace keeping. Because, peace-givings not just letting things be and allow harm to our faith. In arming and defending ourselves, we intent to preserve, keep and contain peace. I do not wish the rebels to rub us out the Peace that Jesus gave us.

Again, I would like to emphasize that I am against violence. But does not mean that I or we should be passive. Instead we should be active, and to be active, is to continuously dialogue with vigilance that our faith and our life not be demeaned.

My sisters, and brothers, this does not mean that I have not seen the blessings, given the circumstances and what it did to me and the people.

These trying times I have seen the best of our faithful. We have never been more united in standing by our faith. I have never been more courageous in my pronouncements in defending our faith. We/I have become more vigilant.

During my captivity, seemingly, the Lord abandoned me--for how could He allow my kidnapping. He didn't. I have seen the hand of the Lord protecting me, guiding me. My captivity have deepened my relationship with the Lord. I attribute my survival to Him--all to Him, --my strength,--fortitude, my perseverance without being despondent, overcoming the dangers and pains. I have had the opportunity of communing with Him, deep in the jungles, even with the presence of the enemies. Everyday became a day of complete surrender to Him.

During the recent siege, I have seen lives lost and the bitterness and the sufferings of Lamitanos, yet I have seen them stand for the truth and justice even against the mighty military authorities and the highest government official in the province-- the governor. You have noticed how they braved the Senate. How candid, spontaneous and truthful they were in their testimonies. How they fought for justice, and how they shamelessly cried on public in disgust over their dead and damaged properties and asking why, these things are happening for more than 30 long years.

We gave support to each other. We drew strength from each other. Their support and stance inspired me. My words and God's message inspired them, to become socially responsible for others and for our faith. Everyone stood and wants to be counted. If you were there during the congressional and senate hearing you will be overwhelmed by their support.

After the incidents, many have advised me to go on vacation or leave Basilan---take a back seat, "kay init kaayo ka", not only to the ASG but to some beleaguered military generals and to the governor who were hurt in the course of my expose. (there were already attempts in my life).

But no, I decided to stay. I will stay. I believe there is a purpose and meaning to everything. As in the Senate investigation, I believe I was there to be the people's voice for truth, for justice, and for our faith. After all we are here to continue Christ's Mission not only as Priests but as Prophets--who should speak for truth and justice, and as Servant-Kings ready to serve and even sacrifice that others may have life to the full.

I would like to end my talk quoting the words from the letter of Paul to the Phillipians, which I believe aptly describes my present disposition:

"My deep desire and hope is that I shall never fail in my duty, but that at all times, especially right now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being, I shall bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die."

God Bless us all, and good evening.