

Filipino 'Peace Talks' Focuses on Role of Religious Leaders

Juluis Malicdem

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Manila, Philippines -- UPF-Philippines held its first national "Peace Talks" webinar on the topic, "The Role of Religious Leaders: Moving Through and Beyond the Coronavirus Crisis," on the evening of May 8, 2020. The interactive discussion featured 12 speakers and panelists and was attended by 94 participants, including religious leaders, members of the academia, government officials and Ambassadors for Peace. Co-hosts of the event were the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), an initiative of UPF, and the World Clergy Leadership Conference.

The webinar started with warm greetings and an introduction of the program from the moderator, Archbishop Elias T. Soria, president of the Asian Clergy Leadership Conference–Philippines, and an opening prayer offered by Monsignor Isagani Fabito of the Philippine Independent Church.

Dr. Chung-sik Yong, regional group chairman of UPF-Asia Pacific, encouraged the cooperation of religious leaders to be the lighthouse the world needs during this challenging time. He said that it is now time to let religious leaders fulfill their roles and become the conscience of people, and to let this crisis become an opportunity for the revival of faith. "Especially during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic in which many people are confused and grieving, the role of religion and religious leaders [has] become more paramount," he stressed.

Hon. Ek Nath Dhakal, chairman of UPF and the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP) of the Asia Pacific, emphasized the core values of interdependence, mutual prosperity and universally shared values, which underpin the vision of UPF and were discussed during UPF's World Summit 2020, held in February in Seoul, Korea, and have become more relevant as the world goes through this crisis. He also shared that in midst of this crisis, UPF encourages the following best practices: unity, cooperation, dialogue and compassion.

Dr. Robert S. Kittel, president of Youth and Students for Peace (YSP) International, spoke about universal values being key to interdependence, mutual prosperity and building an ideal society. He shared that during the World Summit 2013, UPF Co-Founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon emphasized two fundamental principles: the dual-purpose principle, in which we live for others by prioritizing the mind

over the body or the spiritual over the physical, and the pair-system principle, in which we find not gender equality but gender humility. He also said that the coronavirus pandemic is not God's plan to destroy the world. "God's will is absolute and unchanging so physical destruction will not solve evil as evil started with a self-centered condition of faithlessness and disobedience." He shed light on the growing problem of HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnancy among Filipino youth which jeopardizes the future of the Philippines. He concluded by underscoring that the role religious leaders need to fulfill in times of darkness and despair is to give hope, courage and reignite the conscience and faith of people.

The first panelist was Father Eliseo Mercado Jr., OMI, director of autonomy and good governance in Cotabato City, Mindanao. He said that the pandemic reminds us of our interconnectedness as everyone is affected by it. This ignites the spirit of compassion, care and generosity towards one another that goes beyond race, religion and nationality. He also said that on the bright side, the pandemic has given the earth time to heal and that it reminds us that despite the advancement of science and technology, we are not in charge; God is always in charge. And that is why this is the best time to give thanks and reverence to Him.

Monsignor Joseph Lalo from the Holy Eastern Catholic Church said there are two disturbing realities that people are currently facing: fear and depression. "These two negative feelings will bring us to the last days of our life if we lose our direction," he said. "The COVID-19 phenomenon seems initially to be evil, but when one comes to think of it, it is an eye-opener to non-believers. This invisible virus is no match for man to fight alone." He said that fear will break us if we do not recover our spiritual relationship with God and that this is the best time to transition from deviating with the material things of the world into spiritual consciousness. "A strong faith should not fear. If God is with me, then who should I fear?" Only God can heal our state of depression amidst the coronavirus pandemic. These times are compelling us to witness God's unconditional love for humankind. This is the time to stand up against immorality and corruption of the mind and matter. He closed by saying that the pandemic should also ignite a spiritual pandemic in which every soul is infected with God's love, peace and mercy so that we can be one with God through eternity.

Bishop Joy Bendoy, president of the Evangelical Conference of the Philippines, from Cebu City, said that if we follow the universal principles that Dr. Kittel discussed we will naturally begin to care and live for the sake of others, despite any challenges we are facing. He shared that when he first learned of the concept of "living for the sake of others" at a UPF conference, it struck his heart when he realized that the struggle to go beyond our differences of religion and race endures because we have forgotten the teaching of Jesus Christ to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. He said, "In this pandemic, the best thing for us to do is to see what we can do for our brothers and how we [can] become a blessing to them." He shared that he has been volunteering and providing goods to front-liners of the pandemic and people in need in the community. "If we live a life with peace and harmony in our hearts, we should always remind ourselves that we are not living it for myself or for my family, but for the entire society, nation and world. When we apply this, we can impact the lives of many others and others will feel genuine love from you."

Bishop Ramil Gerner, Sr. of the United Methodist Church, from Puerto Princesa, Palawan, spoke about the role of religious leaders during the pandemic. "We need to give people a PIE," which stands for prayer, interreligious harmony and unity and education of universal family values, he said. This is the time to pray and humble ourselves in front of the living God. He quoted 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." He emphasized that "The role of religious leaders during this time is to advocate the values of absolute sex (abstinence before and fidelity in marriage) and be the public's voice and conscience to speak out on social and moral issues that plague our society." With regards to interreligious harmony, he urged religious leaders to work alongside national leaders in forming religious assemblies or a council of

religious representatives within the structure of the United Nations. He added that living for the sake of others and filial piety are the values that can make this world a better place for everyone.

Bishop Rene Ballenas, president of the Association of Christian Evangelist Inc., from New Jersey, United States, said that people are scared because they do not know what will happen and cannot visibly see the enemy. He reminded us that in times of fear, God is our refuge and that the pandemic should not let our hearts be troubled. This problem lies with the fact that not so many people have that personal experience with God. "We have a responsibility to our neighbors, which is to carry one another's burden. We need to help one another regardless of our religious inclinations or what we preach." He also spoke of the role of religious leaders during this time: "What the world needs today is not division among religious leaders but their unity. We need to restore hope and joy among people and restore peace in the hearts of those who are scared and confused."

Dr. Jaime O. Cempron of the Married Priest Alliance, Quezon City, said that as people live in fear and uncertainty during this time, the role of religious leaders should start with their acknowledging that their being a religious leader does not give them religious authority. "You are not superior to others. You do not own the deposit of truth and others are only recipients of it. People need to consider us as pastors and true shepherds." He said: "We are caretakers of the souls of people who are now living in the state of darkness. We need to become the beacon of light..."

There was time for only four questions at the end. First, Dr. Cempron addressed a question to Father Mercado: "As religious leaders, how do we show this kind of unity in the things that we do as caretakers of the souls of others?" Father Mercado responded: "We are one and we all suffer. Since we are connected, there is a growing consciousness of universal charity. The expression of this is that we share the common table of assisting those who are victims, who suffer during this time."

Dr. Kittel also answered that this can also be expressed by simply treating people like they are family as the family is like the microcosm of all relationships in our society.

The second question was: What must be the new normal guidelines on practicing ones religious faith during the pandemic? This was answered by Dr. Kittel: "We need to put our family above religion."

The third question was: "What will be the clear responsibility of everyone?" Father Mercado answered: "Do not simply rely on the government to assist; this is why we need to cooperate as individuals."

The final question was: "How does the religious sector perform its role if the government is imposing limits during the COVID-19 pandemic?" This was answered by Dr. Kittel, who said that we live in the age of the internet. "What we are doing right now is the best model. We are building relationships and educating in the best way" we can.

Bishop Ballenas also responded, saying that, "During this pandemic, churches are closed for worship but homes now are open for worship. The basic unit of society is the home. This is the right way to worship God. We need to start worshipping God in our families. All problems in society stems from families."

The webinar ended with a song, "Heal Our Land," which all the participants sang together.