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Burma: Light and hope amid brutality

by NCR Staff



Locals cross the 1.2 kilometer, teak U Bein Bridge in Mandalay, Burma (Newscom)

A reporter for NCR recently went to Burma to look into what many call a troubling relationship among the church's hierarchy, clergy, ordinary Catholics, and the military dictatorship. Because Burma's internal spy agencies follow coverage of Burma in the foreign press and harshly punish citizens suspected of talking to reporters, names have been changed and geographical locations, occupations and other identifying details are not used.

The junta changed the country's official name to Myanmar in 1989, but many international institutions and media outlets still use Burma.

Part 1 of 3

BURMA -- Little Aung tugs at Sister Rosy's hand in front of a simple, whitewashed wooden building on a dusty lane in a Burmese village. Aung has something important to say: It can't wait. The midday sun beats down unrelentingly, giving the sister's habit an almost blindingly white appearance. Feeling the pull, Sister Rosy looks down, smiles warmly and lovingly squeezes the 9-year-old girl's hand. She is

ready to listen.

Two years ago, Aung's parents were swept away in the floods when Cyclone Nargis tore through lower Burma. They were just two of the estimated 100,000 people who perished in one of the world's deadliest storms. Tiny Aung survived by clinging to branches high in a tree. Now she lives in that whitewashed building, an orphanage that quickly doubled the number of its occupants after the storm.

Women religious such as Sister Rosy and her order, which lovingly provides care for orphan children, represent one of the many bright spots of the Catholic presence in Burma. But all too often repression at the hands of a brutal dictatorship obscures these rays of light and hope.

Catholics in Buddhist-dominated Burma are small in number (about 1 percent of the population, or 500,000 people) but historically have had a disproportionate influence on the country's life. Catholic orders once ran the best schools in Burma, graduating numerous elites in the pre- and post-independence years. But a coup d'état in 1962 dealt a stunning blow to the church -- and to education in Burma -- when a newly-installed junta nationalized schools, banned clergy and religious from teaching in them, and deported foreign missionaries.

Currently, the church's educational ministries consist of a smattering of technical training centers and numerous afterschool tutoring classes, which supplement the abysmal teaching in government schools. The Catholic orders and some dioceses also run boarding houses for poor youth, along with a smaller number of orphanages.

After the storm

Even with huge swaths of the country reeling from the devastation of Cyclone Nargis, Burma's isolationist regime refused to open its borders to international aid organizations. But the Catholic church was already there on the ground and put to work its network of parishes and religious orders.



“Many of these people would now be dead if it had not been for the

work of the church,” the archbishop of Mandalay, Paul Zingtung Grawng, told a gathering of Caritas Internationalis in Rome. “Church workers went immediately into the worst hit villages to rescue people and bring them to safety. We are able to provide food, shelter and medicine to people in camps in churches.”

While the government did not completely obstruct the church's aid effort as it did other organizations?, the authorities were by no means cooperative.

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“Basically, I would say that the junta helped by not interfering with our work,” said one priest heavily

involved in relief efforts.

But a lay Catholic who spent a year working the church's relief effort on the ground -- and who with a few others spoke more frankly about the aftermath -- said that junta officers rarely missed an opportunity to enrich themselves in storm's wake. They regularly forced church officials to pay bribes just for permission to deliver basic aid.

Permits for construction projects, ranging from rudimentary chapels to larger housing units, also required hefty bribes to officials. Other times, authorities would simply deny permission to build. One brother said his order had to abandon plans to expand a hostel for poor boys because it lacked funds to bribe the requisite officials.

The constitution of the Union of Myanmar contains numerous platitudes on freedom for religious groups, but as one senior nun put it, "They say freedom of religion, but no, nothing -- it's all a bluff."

Catholic citizens are routinely denied better-paying administrative jobs and barred from what little social services the government provides. While the junta often subsidizes Buddhist temples, it asks for large bribes for proposed church projects, or just blocks their construction outright.

"The military is both jealous and frightened," explained an elderly priest who was once jailed for teaching in spite of the law banning religious from the schools. "If you're doing good, they will hate you for it."

Religious, diocesan differences

That said, outspoken Catholics in Burma note that the church's troubles cannot be blamed solely on the repressive regime. According to a number of women and men religious, there is a feeling within their communities that diocesan parishes do not do enough for average Catholics.

"They say Mass, that's it," said one senior nun, speaking about rank-and-file parish priests. There are exceptions, she noted, but most appear more concerned with making their own lives more comfortable than improving those of their poverty-stricken parishioners. The sister, along with others, said it was no secret that many priests had personal economic interests, as middlemen in lucrative village industries like cowhide tanning, for instance.

Saying Mass can also be a significant revenue generator for some priests. Numerous religious complain of parish priests collecting money to dedicate Masses, not just in memory of one family (a common practice around the world), but in the name of dozens of them at a time. The practice might be justified if the money was well spent, but most of the money seems to go to the priests personally. In the cities, priests engaging in this fee-for-blessings scheme can bring in \$400 per month, a huge sum in Burma.

Some clergy and religious also worry that the church in Burma is far behind in implementing Vatican II reforms. Laypeople and women religious are still barred from being eucharistic ministers, and only recently -- because of sheer necessity, a brother reported -- have church leaders allowed brothers to distribute Communion. Meanwhile, there are no female altar servers and altar rails sometimes continue to separate priests from the laity. In some instances, priests continue to celebrate Mass with their backs to the parishioners during Mass.

But most religious in Burma seem unwilling to let matters get in the way of serving the people. Nor do Catholic workers allow the abuse and corruption of the junta to eclipse their vocational calling. The Sister Rosys and little Aungs of Burma reveal a light that refuses to die, no matter how dark the prevailing clouds sometimes seem to be.

Read all three parts:

Light and hope amid brutality -- Part 1

A tale of two schools -- Part 2

Power, politics and the church in Burma -- Part 3

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