

Feature

Shouting from the heart

I watched the Pope navigate a political minefield in Burma. What I saw was a man bravely preaching Christ's message, with deeds as much as words

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As we approach the birth of our Lord once again, we would do well to reflect on the multiple dimensions to His character, all of which are needed in the world today.

Our Lord is the baby born in the manger, coming as Emmanuel – “God with us” – to be with His people. He is the perfect dissident, who challenged the world’s rules and paid the ultimate price, liberating and saving us by so doing. He is our Advocate in heaven, pleading our cause but unafraid to tell it like it is too – turning over the tables in the temple in righteous anger. And he is the Prince of Peace.

It is through the lens of these multiple dimensions to Jesus Christ that we should view events and tragedies in the world and the response of the Church. At times the Church should act with the innocence of newborn infants and doves, albeit with the wisdom of serpents too. At other times the Church should speak out boldly and sacrificially against injustice, as dissidents and advocates, pleading a case, defending the vulnerable and, when appropriate, turning over tables in fury. At other times, the Church is the peacemaker, mediating between different communities to bring reconciliation and healing.

All of these roles are accompanied by danger. At a minimum they are met by some with cynicism and charges of naïvety. In extremity, they may lead to martyrdom – as with Fr Maximilian Kolbe, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero or my friend Shahbaz Bhatti. Sometimes they result in promotion and success, accompanied by new challenges – as with St John Paul II, Dorothy Day, East Timor’s Nobel laureate Bishop Carlos Belo, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and William Wilberforce. We would do well to study all of these saints and martyrs, from Catholic and Protestant traditions, past and present, this Advent season as we reflect on a troubled and turbulent world.

Sometimes different individuals, or different parts of the Church, play these different roles, in tandem or in conflict with each other. Sometimes the context dictates which role is most appropriate at a given moment. At times, though, one individual can combine all these elements. That is what Pope Francis did on his recent visit to Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh.

Francis came to Burma and Bangladesh



Pope Francis in Burma: ‘Do not be afraid to ask questions that make people think’

– two countries riven with poverty, conflict, religious intolerance and enormous injustice – as an advocate and defender of the victims of inhumanity. He stood very clearly with the marginalised. Yet he did so with the gentleness of

So often joy and grief walk hand in hand, as they do in the Christmas story

the baby in the manger and with the message of reconciliation inspired by the Prince of Peace.

As I stood among hundreds of smiling Burmese from different ethnic groups on the street in Rangoon to see the Holy Father drive past, waving, on his way into the city from the airport, and as I stood among more than 150,000 people at the

Mass at a racecourse two days later, I shared the joy of Burma’s Catholics at this historic occasion.

No pope has ever visited Burma before. Francis’s visit came after a series of historic moments for the local Church – a celebration of its 500 years, its first beatification and the appointment of its first cardinal. And for me, this was not just of historic interest but also of personal significance, because I became a Catholic in Burma, inspired and received into the Church by Cardinal Charles Bo, in St Mary’s Cathedral, on Palm Sunday 2013. So to see Pope Francis in the country of my spiritual rebirth was a deep joy.

And yet the context of his visit was heartbreaking. The crisis unleashed in Rakhine state has been described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”, with signs of genocide.