

In other parts of the country, particularly in Kachin and Shan states, crimes against humanity continue. The hopes of peace and democratisation in this fragile country, still dominated by the military, appear to be fading.

So often joy and grief walk hand in hand, as they do in the Christmas story. The birth of the Christ Child was followed immediately by the slaughter of innocents. The infant was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. God who came to walk among us was born into scandal as the child of a virgin and as a refugee. The light that shines in the darkness could not be overcome. In the figure of the Pope, a flicker of that light was shone in a dark place.

The theme for the papal visit, festooned on banners and T-shirts, was "Love and Peace", and that was his consistent message. In his speech to government officials, diplomats and civil society Francis emphasised justice and human rights. In his first homily he spoke of healing. In his speech to bishops his message was reconciliation and the Church's prophetic role in defending human dignity. His address to a gathering of Buddhist monks emphasised mutual respect and religious freedom. And in his final Mass, he told Burma's youth: "Do not be afraid to make a ruckus, to ask questions that make people think ... I want you to shout! But not with your voices ... with your lives, with your hearts."

Francis was criticised for not making a ruckus about Burma's current crisis: the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingyas, a severely persecuted Muslim minority. On the advice of the local Church, he did not refer to them by name, nor did he speak publicly about their plight, despite having done so in Rome on several occasions. Other persecuted ethnic groups, such as the Kachin, who are also suffering at the hands of Burma's military, failed to get a mention too.

But no one who read the Pope's speeches or observed his body language could have failed to miss the implicit message. He still shouted, but not with his voice. And since he chose not to name the Rohingyas, it was right that he did not name any group, but instead focused on human rights for everyone. He spoke with the voice of Christ the peacemaker.

It was in Bangladesh that the Pope recovered his voice, holding the hands of Rohingya refugees (right) and telling them: "The presence of God today is also called 'Rohingya'." He asked for forgiveness for the "indifference of the world" to their plight, and admitted later that he wept as he heard their testimonies of horrific violations. Some are asking, rightly, why the Pope didn't go



## Incarnation

From the remotest, coldest dawn, from a yellow eye,  
sharp as the eagle's, that sees each tiny one of us  
scuttling in the black shadow of a protective wing,  
You fall to Earth – blind. Those first nights  
the short distance between her breast and face  
is as far as You can see. She is Your first sight  
of the world as man – the one pure sign  
we have; all else is blackness. She only knows  
Your Christ-eyes latching onto hers as fiercely  
as Your gums clamp down for milk. The future scrabbles,  
gnaws bloodthirstily like rats through the barn's corners  
and its eaves. But she is transfixed by Your skin  
and insistence on her as the only visible, only beautiful thing –  
the present moment; this is the first lesson of prayer.

*Sally Read*

to the refugee camps, an hour's flight from Dhaka. "I would have liked to go," Pope Francis answered. He spoke with the voice of Christ the advocate.

Many argue that Francis should have used "the R-word" in Burma. And in an ideal world he would have. But as the Pope explained, the reality is that, had he done so, doors would have been slammed in his face. He wanted his message – of peace, justice and human rights – to "arrive", to be heard. Had he used the word, the Church in Burma might have become a target for angry ultra-nationalist Buddhists. He chose to exhibit Christ the gentle infant, and Christ the victim, rather than Christ the angry dissident turning over tables in the temple.

Pope Francis and the Holy See may be playing a long game, perhaps offering their good offices to mediate in Burma and to promote peace and inter-religious dialogue. Had he gone on the offensive, that bridge would have been burned before it was built.

It is clear that behind closed doors, Pope Francis was more forthcoming. He said that in private conversations he did "go beyond" his public remarks, to address specific human rights concerns. In his meeting with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the Burmese army, he "didn't negotiate the truth".

Significantly, Pope Francis also emphasised that he has "two types of meetings" – those where he goes to meet people, and those in which he receives them. The general requested the meeting. "And I received him. I never close the door." He made it clear to the general that the army's conduct – described by most commentators as crimes against humanity – "isn't viable". In these private meetings, Christ the peacemaker and Christ the advocate came together.

In an interview after the Pope's departure, Cardinal Bo said that the fruits of his trip "are still to be seen". At the very least his visit showcased Burma's tiny 800,000-strong Church as a diverse and joyful community, engaged in addressing the challenges faced by the country's 50 million people. If Francis's message of love and peace influences the behaviour of those who heard it, and his more open advocacy outside the country for its most persecuted peoples awakens the world's conscience, then his visit will have confounded his critics and proven a historic success.

If the Church can play a role in peace and reconciliation in Burma, then the trip will have been worthwhile. Time will tell. What is clear, however, is that Francis exhibited the light of Christ in all its multi-dimensional layers, in one of the darkest corners of the world. Let's pray that that light grows and overcomes the darkness.

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