

Easter Message in the Age of Anxiety

Easter Message by Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, Myanmar

Dear Friends in Christ,

Happy Easter!

Let the hope of the Risen Lord continue to throw the light in our path. Say with joy “Alleluia! Jesus is risen!” Resurrection is our faith; resurrection is our hope. More than any year we need more faith and hope in 2020.

True - these are dark days - a huge, suffocating cloud of fear and anxiety engulfs the whole humanity. Like the ‘Dark Night of Soul’ experienced by saints like St John of the Cross, the whole humanity’s hope is strangled by the darkness of despair that comes in the name of COVID. These are tough times, abnormal times, these are periods of faith in which our certainties, hopes for the future, beliefs about God, and even faith itself are eclipsed. Half a million people are infected, more than 22,000 people have died and 200 countries are affected. Italy has seen 63 priests and more than 20 doctors perishing in their service to the affected people. The Four Horsemen of Apocalypse seemed to have arrived.

Yet we proclaim with joy “Alleluia! Jesus is risen!”

COVID-19 is virtually the Way of the Cross for humanity. Thousands have been crucified to a cruel death by a viral organism that cannot be seen by eyes. Thousands have been walking an excruciating Way of the Cross in many countries. We pray that thousands afflicted and walking in their way of the Cross, be strengthened by the faith that the Cross ends in Resurrection.

So let us shout with joy – despite all challenges – “Alleluia! Jesus has risen!”

But COVID-19 challenges our faith. The Catholic Church is about communion. In joy and fellowship, in every mass we gather to affirm and celebrate our communion. Our mission is to build communion and yet in this time of crisis, we seem to surrender ourselves to isolation. Paradoxical as it may seem, keeping distance from one another means we truly care for each other, because we want to stop the transmission of the deadly virus.

The most painful reality has been that churches are closed. Pope Francis once said the Church should be like a “field hospital”, available where human brokenness and the wounded need the healing touch of Mother Church. Yet the places where we sought God, where we shed our silent tears of brokenness and sought human fellowship are now closed. The Vatican remains closed. In many countries, the Sacrament of Communion, the Eucharist, is stopped. What wars and persecutions could not do; the invisible virus achieved without much do?

This is painful. This is a long “Holy Saturday”, when the Church waits amidst all signs of death. “Holy Saturday” when the Church “abstains from the celebration of the Eucharist” meditating on the passion of the Lord and awaiting his resurrection.

We, Catholics and all humanity, wait with hope that this Holy Saturday will end with a victorious Easter. All long dark night’s end with the dawn. Evil has an expiry date. Good has none. The Church is God’s hope-generating agency. So, with joy and hope say: “Alleluia! Jesus is risen!

With the Psalmist let us sing with hope in these troubled times:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should, I fear?

The Lord is my life’s refuge; of whom should I be afraid?

For God will hide me in his shelter in time of trouble,

He will conceal me in the cover of his tent. (Psalm 27: 1, 5)

Humanity and the Church have waded through valleys of tears before: the various plagues mentioned in the Bible, the Black Plague of the Middle Ages, when half of European people perished and nearly half of the church personnel sacrificed their lives, the ‘Spanish’ Flu that took more than 50 million of world population. Nothing new now.

COVID-19 will leave nothing unchanged. This angel of death, like the Seventh Seal of the Book of Revelation, brings a shattering message. Nothing will be same again. The way we worship, the way we relate with one another, the way we work, will all change. We are at the dawn of a new consciousness, a radically fresh approach to our life as the human family in a fragile world. Social distance risks bringing social paranoia – fear of my brother and sister. Instead, we must insist that these measures arise from and lead to new forms of solidarity.

COVID-19, the invisible virus, has already taught existential lessons: the richest and more powerful nations that have arrogantly stockpiled nuclear arms and weapons, are brought to knees by a virus. World powers that arrogantly negate all transcendent powers, learn with humility that life is fragile and that we all need one another. More than anything, all powers can learn to acknowledge the presence of a Power that is above all. With great pain many countries realize that they have more soldiers in their countries in the business of killing than they have doctors who can save lives. Humanity itself is on the way of the Cross. May this Cross lead all nations to consign enmity and war to fire and, rather, see resurrection in human solidarity. Now is the time for the Church to accompany the world in this resurrection to justice and human solidarity.

Pope Francis, deeply pained by the human suffering and the closing of the churches, diagnosed today’s humanity’s problem in his Urbi et Orbi exhortation:

When evening had come” (Mk 4:35). The Gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people’s gestures, their

glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm.

Our destiny, the Pope urges, is connected to each other. That is the message of Easter:

We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat... are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing" (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

Into that new world of human solidarity and love let a new Easter be Born!

So let us say with hope and proclaim from the roof tops: "Alleluia – Jesus is really Risen!"