Peacebuilding in the Philippines: The Challenge of Mindanao

by Robert Schreiter, C.PP.S.

The Philippines is the largest Christian country in Asia, and its Catholic population makes it the third largest Catholic country in the world, after Brazil and Mexico. It has produced some distinctive forms of theology, notably one that uses Filipino anthropological categories and, in the 1970s and 1980s, a theology of struggle developed against the Marcos dictatorship. I want to focus here, however, on a theology that is growing out of another dimension of life in the Philippines, namely, a theology of peacebuilding.

Although there are struggles against poverty and corruption throughout the Philippines, the situation in Mindanao will be the focus here. The distinctive dimensions of peacebuilding there mark not only the struggle that has been going on for over a century, but also the way religious voices, of Christianity and Islam, have come together in a way not replicated elsewhere in the world.

Since 2007, I have been privileged to be part of that process in a small way. At the invitation of Catholic Relief Services and the Episcopal Commission on Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, I have made regular trips to Mindanao to lead workshops, give talks and retreats, and accompany groups seeking peace and working out of a faith framework. But the main work there has not been my own. There are numerous other groups and institutions working for peace, and common actions to strengthen solidarity in the wider community for a more peaceful future. What has been emerging from this is a distinctive kind of theology of peacebuilding that for the most part has not been formalized in written form, but is a living organism in Mindanao.

This article attempts to give a view into the remarkable things that are going on in Mindanao, through the eyes of an outsider who has grown to love the Mindanao people and feel deeply for the cause of peace they so earnestly seek. To do that, I will begin with a brief history of the conflict in Mindanao as it has taken shape over the past 125 years. Then there will be a presentation of some of the salient institutions and figures that have emerged within Mindanao as signposts of peace. This will be followed by an account of my own experience working with others there, and conclude with some thoughts about what is emerging there as a distinctive theology of peacebuilding both for Mindanao and for the rest of the world.
Mindanao and Its Conflict: A Brief History

Mindanao is the second largest of the Philippine Islands and is at the southernmost end of the archipelago. It has several mountain ranges and also wide plain areas. It is agriculturally rich, and has timber and mineral resources as well.

It has been settled since prehistoric times through successive waves of immigration. Muslim traders reached Sulu, one of the smaller islands to Mindanao’s southwest, in the thirteenth century and established a sultanate there. In the fifteenth century they converted native people on the island of Mindanao itself and established the Sultanate of Maguindanao. From Mindanao Muslim traders moved north through the archipelago as far as Manila.

The Spanish arrived in 1521 and were amazed to find Muslims there. They had just completed the Reconquista in the Iberian Peninsula, driving out the Muslims, or Moros, as they called them. This became the name they applied to the Muslims they encountered in the archipelago, which they named the “Philippines” in honor of King Philip II of Spain. They established a fort at the westernmost point of Mindanao in 1559, a strategic location, and later founded a city there (now known as Zamboanga City).

The Moros resisted the colonization by the Spaniards on a sporadic basis, but the Spaniards made little effort to consolidate their hold on Mindanao until the nineteenth century. In the Filipino War of Independence at the end of the nineteenth century, the Moros hoped that they would win their independence from both the Filipinos in the North as well as the Spaniards. When the Philippines were ceded to the United States, they continued their efforts to become independent. The Moros felt more affinity to their fellow religionists in Brunei, Malaysia, and the Dutch East Indies than to the distant government of Manila.

The Americans set up a military occupation of the island, which led to much stronger resistance. They also developed a Resettlement Program, aimed at exploiting the agricultural, timber, and minerals wealth of Mindanao, by sending thousands of Christian Filipinos from the Visayas and elsewhere into Mindanao. Before that time, Mindanao was relatively sparsely populated, with Moros along the western half of the island, and indigenous peoples (called collectively Lumads) in other parts. By the mid-twentieth century, the demographics of the population had shifted dramatically. Mindanao was now 63 percent settlers, 32 percent Moro, and 5 percent Lumad.

With the coming of independence from the Americans in 1946, the struggle for the Moros was now twofold: independence from the rest of the Philippines, but even more importantly, reclaiming what they felt was their homeland.

Armed conflict between the Moros and the Armed Forces of the Philippines became more intense. In 1969 a professor at the University of the Philippines founded the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a secessionist movement seeking independence from the Government of the Philippines. Fighting intensified after Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law (1972-1986). Huge numbers of civilians were displaced from their homes by the fighting. At one point it reached 41 percent of all households in Mindanao. In 1990, an agreement was reached between the MNLF and the government to set up a territory in the western and northern part of Mindanao over which the Moros would have limited autonomy from Manila. It was known as the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). But internal divisions within factions of the liberation front, older clan loyalties, and corruption weakened its influence. A splinter group from the MNLF formed, called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which resumed armed conflict with the Armed Forces. In the meantime a more radical group was begun by two brothers from a Christian-Muslim family from the islands off the coast of Mindanao. This group, called Abu Sayyaf, reportedly had al-Qaeda connections and burnt towns and engaged in kidnappings and beheadings.
of prisoners. They have menaced the southwestern part of Mindanao and made international headlines for their taking foreign hostages (often tourists or foreign aid workers) and demanding ransom.

In 2000 President Joseph Estrada declared an all-out war against the MILF, and fighting reached a new intensity. An estimated 930,000 people were displaced. A cycle of violence and attempted peace talks recurred during the following decade. In 2012 a Framework Agreement on the Bangsamoro (Moro Nation) was begun between the Government and the MILF. The process was disrupted in 2013 with an attack by a rogue group of the MNLF on Zamboanga City that displaced more than 100,000 people, with over 1,000 homes and small businesses destroyed or severely damaged. In March 2014, however, a peace agreement was completed, giving greater autonomy for governance and collecting taxes to the Bangsamoro. This was then drafted into a Bangsamoro Basic Law which, at this writing, is being reviewed by the Philippine Congress. If passed by the Congress, it will replace the arrangements of the ARMM with an even greater autonomy. However, the Abu Sayyaf and the New People’s Army (a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist group operating in the northern part of Mindanao), as well as what is left of the MNLF, have not been party to the peace agreement. There is also some clan conflict still active that further endangers the peace. But there is considerable agreement that the launching of the Bangsamoro will mitigate the worst of the violence that the people of Mindanao have been enduring for more than a century.

Efforts at Peace

Over the last two decades, there have been numerous efforts to bring about peace, functioning at different levels. Many of them have been initiated by Church leaders and others, seeking to engage both Christians and Muslims. Here is a brief overview of some of them.

The Silsilah Dialogue Movement was begun in 1984 by PIME Father Sebastiano D’Ambra, along with Muslim and Christian friends. It makes its home in Harmony Village, a meeting and retreat center in the northern part of Zamboanga City. Silsilah is an Arabic word that means “chain” or “link,” connoting that Christians and Muslims need to work together. It regularly offers programs that bring Christians and Muslims together, and is a Christian site where many Muslims feel comfortable gathering. It is also used for other peacebuilding events. Father Salvatore Carzedda, one of its early members and fervent promoter of dialogue, was gunned down in front of his parish church in 1993. (He was a CTU graduate who had written an MA thesis on dialogue.)

The Bishops-Ulama Forum (now Bishops-Ulama Conference) was founded in 1994, and consists of Catholic Bishops, Muslim religious leaders, and Protestant Pastors and Bishops. It was founded to give interreligious support to the peace process. It continues to meet to show a public face of harmony to the public in Mindanao. It is headquartered in Davao City, with Archbishop Romulo Valles as its moderator. In recent years, interest has been shown in setting up similar arrangements in other parts of the Philippines where there are now significant Muslim populations due to internal migration. Since 1999, the BUC has sponsored the Mindanao Week of Peace, a Mindanao-wide event held at the end of November and the beginning of December, where there are speeches, workshops, marches, and other events to build peace. The theme of the 2014 Week was “Pray for Long-Lasting Peace: Give, Share, Live and Proclaim Peace.”

In Zamboanga City, two other organizations deserve mention. PAZ (Peace Advocates Zamboanga) is an interfaith organization that works in advocacy for peace. Another organization, ZABIDA (Zamboanga-Basilan Integrated Development Alliance) seeks to provide material support, especially through the building of houses, to create Muslim-Christian neighborhood harmony. They have been especially active since the attack of September 2013 there. Behind them both is a longtime Spanish Claretian missionary, Father Angel Calvo, a dynamic and energetic advocate for peace and interfaith understanding.
In Cotabato City, in the very heartland of the ARMM, Notre Dame University, an institution sponsored by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, has a strong commitment to building interfaith understanding. Sixty percent of its students are Muslim. Its core curriculum for undergraduates integrates both Christian and Muslim values. It is also a major center for peace research, led until recently by Father Eliseo (“Jun”) Mercado, O.M.I. Initiatives for youth (such as programs in sports and music) are also part of the strategies for building understanding between the communities.

Two overarching institutions that have been committed to peacebuilding in Mindanao are the Episcopal Commission on Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, and Catholic Relief Services, the relief-and-development agency of the United States Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

The Episcopal Commission on Interreligious Dialogue has been the ecclesiastical umbrella under which the Catholic Bishops of Mindanao have gathered to work together for peace. Chaired for many years by Archbishop Antonio Ledesma, S.J., of Cagayan de Oro, it is currently chaired by Bishop Angelito Lampon, O.M.I., Vicar Apostolic of Jolo, in Sulu.

Catholic Relief Services has made a commitment to working for peace for many years. Coordinated by Myla Leguro, it is headquartered in Davao City. Leguro and her colleagues, especially Maria Ida (“Deng”) Giguento and Orson Sargado, have been a team that has aided me greatly in my work in Mindanao, both because of their deep knowledge of Mindanao and also through their skills in facilitating training exercises in workshops.

My Experience in Peacebuilding in Mindanao

I came to work in peacebuilding in Mindanao through the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, a group of institutions of higher education and offices for justice, mainly in the United States. Coordinated by Gerard F. Powers at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, it offers its resources and services for Catholic peacebuilding initiatives in Mindanao, the Great Lakes Region of Africa, Colombia, and most recently, also in South Sudan. The Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Center for Theology and Ministry at Catholic Theological Union is one of the sponsoring institutions. It was at the Bernardin Center that meetings were convened that led to the publication of Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, Praxis, edited by R. Scott Appleby, Gerard Powers, and myself.¹

I have been to Burundi under the auspices of CPN, and now several times to Colombia, but Mindanao has been the center of my CPN-related peacebuilding work. In this latter endeavor, I have worked also with two other CPN colleagues, John Paul Lederach and Gerard Powers. Lederach and I gave a two-day workshop for the entire Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines in 2009, and have worked together on occasion in Mindanao since that time.

¹ (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010)
What is it I do in peacebuilding work? My role is a modest one. I have not worked in mediation or negotiation, but rather have focused upon how Christian spiritual traditions can inform the work of peacebuilding. When most people think about the work of peacebuilding and reconciliation, they tend to start with the end product of peace and harmony. But this neglects the long, circuitous, and often frustrating work of getting there. Techniques and strategies are useful, but one needs to develop a sensibility for peace that is more like a spirituality. Indeed, I have often said that reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy. There is a “soul” to building peace, as John Paul Lederach has put it, that informs all the efforts toward peace. Through the years I have become more and more committed to this insight.

My work has been principally in the rebuilding that needs to take place in human relationships following conflict and the wounds that the conflict has wrought upon communities: loss of life, of home and property, of livelihoods, of the network of personal and social relationships that make us human. In these so-called “post-conflict” situations much needs to be attended to and healed. The formal negotiations that might bring an end to the armed conflict occur at a high level, between governments or key national actors. These can help create the conditions in which such healing can happen, but distinct initiatives still have to be undertaken at mid- and grassroots levels for the human healing to take place. And that is where my work comes in.

The Goals of the Visits

In order to grasp some of the dimensions of what goes into these various visits, it might be helpful to see some of the questions I have been asked to address. In the 2009 meeting with the Bishops’ Conference as a whole, their interest was how a theology of reconciliation came together with Catholic Social Teaching. For some of them, this was an introduction to what their fellow bishops in Mindanao were dealing with. Reconciliation meant for many of them the sacrament of Reconciliation. How did the biblical, the Christian message of reconciliation connect with rebuilding communities and relationships? The bishops as a group were interested in their role as teachers of their people: how could reconciliation, Catholic Social Teaching, and the papal message for the World Day of Peace be brought together in a way that reflected the “mind” of the Church, and engaged the concrete situations in which their people found themselves? Many of them still had memories of the resistance to Marcos’ declaration of Martial Law from 1972 to 1986, and the resistance that that had called forth, especially by the EDSA People’s Power Uprising in 1986, so strongly supported by Jaime Cardinal Sin at the time.

Subsequently, in meeting with most of the Mindanao Bishops in Cagayan de Oro, an additional issue was getting a common vision of the situation among the bishops themselves, so that they could speak with a single voice. This was necessary if their action was to give guidance to the priests and not confuse ordinary people, as well as strengthen the peace process. It was not surprising that there were differing opinions and differing levels of motivation for pursuing peace. Some of the bishops had been directly affected by the conflict, having lost loved ones or having seen their families forced to flee their homes ahead of armed troops. Others, working in more tranquil parts of Mindanao, felt overwhelmed with the amount of things they were already being asked to address, and saw the peacebuilding agenda as just one more task that they were being asked to take on. Others were just plain uneasy about walking along the contested boundary between religion and politics out of fear of Vatican reprimand. All in all, however, it came down to the fact that there was nothing in their backgrounds that prepared them to take on this kind of leadership role as peacebuilders. (In fact, it is only in recent years that newly appointed bishops get any instruction on how to deal with relief agencies in the event of a natural disaster, let alone an armed conflict.) As conflict becomes more part of local situations—especially conflicts that are within nations rather than between nations—it becomes incumbent upon those preparing leaders for the Church to provide some instruction on these

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issues and how to take leadership in these situations. This has become a big part of what I have been called upon to do, not only in The Philippines, but in Colombia, in the Great Lakes, and elsewhere.

On other occasions I have worked principally with priests, from the dioceses around Zamboanga, in Tacurong in Sultan Kudarat, and in Cagayan de Oro. On those occasions, what I had experienced among the bishops replicated itself among the priests, only more sharply. The priests understandably live much closer to the day-to-day lives of their people, and so carry the same wounds of displacement, loss, and breaches of trust as they do. Many had experienced violence in their own lives. I recall one priest telling me about how first his father and then later his mother had been killed by insurgents in the years before his ordination. Others had developed a thick carapace of resistance in response to the violence they had seen. The phrases that embody that distrust I heard often: “The only good Moro is a dead Moro” and from the Muslim side, “You can never trust a Christian.” At the Zamboanga meeting was a priest I had been warned about: when he presides at Mass, he first puts his gun on the altar. In Tacurong, where the sentiment against the Moros was quite strong, a good number of the younger priests simply left before the workshop was over. I was told, too, to expect that.

The priests, as mid-level leaders who accompany local communities, are on the front line of the conflict and are key actors in the long-term efforts to build peace. The suffering of which they speak is not some abstraction: it has names, stories, places. Especially when they themselves carry wounds of the conflict, it is much more difficult to take the leadership to move beyond the trauma to reconstruct lives and even, perhaps, come to forgiveness. Yet at the same time I saw evidence of so many who had committed themselves to this daunting but so necessary task.

A third kind of occasion was extended workshops with a mixture of bishops, priests, religious women, and lay leaders. Two stand out in my mind. The first brought about 175 people of the Archdiocese of Cotabato City together. As already noted, Cotabato City is at the epicenter of the ARMM. While I was there, the Sultan of Brunei announced the construction of a huge Islamic Center in the city. There had been bombings in Cotabato City, including one in front of the cathedral. Archbishop (now Cardinal) Orlando Quevedo, O.M.I., had given me the invitation and attended the three-day session himself. In such a setting one gets a feel for the sheer complexity and diversity of the situation. There were lethal encounters in the urban areas, but also stories of grassroots cooperation and utter alienation in the remote regions of Cotabato. Difficult questions about rebuilding sundered trust kept coming up. A common question was: Why can’t we get more people involved in Christian-Muslim relations? I responded by saying that, when trust has broken down, to dare step across the chasm of separation toward the “other” means you risk no longer “belonging” to your own group. And the need to belong is stronger in the hierarchy of human needs than altruism. Certainly one of the key things to be overcome in rebuilding trust is dismantling the “us versus them” or “in group-out group” divisions that become hardened in conflict and do not come down easily.

As the workshop went on, I got more and more questions about when responding to violence with violence is acceptable or even necessary. Some of it was coming from a very committed young Missionary Oblate. It turned out he was from Sri Lanka, and had had to flee there because there was a price on his head (this was shortly after the defeat of the Tamil Tigers there in 2009). This too put things in perspective: as perilous as things were in Cotabato, it was still considered safer than Sri Lanka! I was invited to Sri Lanka a couple of years after that, and got to see for myself the devastation there.

The other occasion that stands out especially was a weeklong workshop held at Harmony Village for bishops, priests, religious, and lay leaders from the four westernmost dioceses of Zamboanga City, Jolo, Isabel, and Ipil. Three of the four bishops attended (the Bishop in Jolo could not attend; the cathedral had been bombed during Midnight Mass. No one was killed, but he felt he needed to be with his people. He sent a young priest instead.),
along with about forty priests, religious, and lay leaders, with the youngest lay leader being only twenty-one. In the group were young priests, who were committed to building peace.

What was distinctive about this experience was how bishops, priests, religious, and laypeople all worked closely together. Myla Leguro and Deng Giguento led them through a number of trust-building exercises, where the bishops joined in as eagerly as anyone else. Age differential figured in strongly as well, since the ages ranged from twenty-one to seventy. Women's experience figured in strongly (as it had in Cotabato). But most striking of all were the stories of trauma that had occurred in their own lives, either to them directly or to their loved ones. One young priest talked about how hard it was for him to get used to blessing body parts after a bombing. What became evident too was how necessary it is to talk about traumatic experiences in your first language, since it is there that you have the words for emotional states most deeply felt. We were using English, although some from Sulu and Basilan did not speak it well. Now and then the Zamboangans would break into Chavacano (a Spanish Creole). During the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass, six different languages were used, in order to express better the heartfelt petitions that had grown out of the conversations and the stories.

In this workshop and others that I have been part of, I have been struck by the deep faith that gives people the resilience to keep moving in spite of overwhelming odds. The use of humor—both humor with a critical edge and sheer playfulness—is a powerful antidote to creeping despair that can set in during a protracted conflict, or a post-conflict situation where there are constant setbacks and disappointments. When in Bukidnon, I was told you could tell how safe an area was by what kind of weapon the guard at the doors of a Jollibee was carrying. (Jollibee is a Pinoy version of McDonald's.) If he is carrying a pistol, it's pretty safe. But if he has an automatic weapon, you had better watch your step! At our last evening of the workshop at Harmony Village, the younger set decided it was time for me to become an honorary Filipino, so I was given an honorary Filipino birthday party (complete with cake!). The next morning, at Mass, the young priest who had organized it congratulated me on my birthday of the day before. The bishops were aghast: they had forgotten my birthday! I quickly put them at ease explaining that this was only an “honorary” one.

What I Have Learned: Filipino Peacebuilding as a Gift to the Rest of Us

If the Bangsamoro Basic Law makes it through Congress, and there is a real implementation of it, this will put the Philippines—and Mindanao—on a new footing. To be sure there will be setbacks and frustrations along the way. A healed people does not rise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of war and conflict. Yet there are many resources there that can be drawn upon: a robust sense of the human, a deep faith, a sense of tears and lament that can help through the contradictions and paradoxes that always mark the road to recovering humanity, trust, and community.

Mindanao has taught me much. It has done so, first of all, by the questions that have been posed to me. How do you restore basic trust, when children are taught from their infancy to suspect and distrust the “other”? How do you deal with a history where colonizers move populations around, movements that in turn cause conflict with the local people? How do you stop the “spoilers” who have an interest in keeping conflict going for the sake of their own gain? What happens when, over time, insurgents drift away from goals of social justice to become criminals extorting the very people they claim to be protecting? How do you differentiate insurgency itself from mere criminal activity or tribal claims to domination? Is violence sometimes necessary?

I did not have adequate answers to these questions, but a few things have become clearer to me. First of all, there is a connection between personal and social healing. If you do not have a critical mass of people who have found healing and forgiveness in their own lives, it will be hard for a larger group to find it on their own. In our own time, Nelson Mandela was a great example of this. He saw that vengeance only kept conflicts going. The film *Invictus*...
illustrated this dramatically, how he was able to transform the Springbok rugby team from a hated symbol of apartheid into a source of shared national pride.

Second, the importance of healing of memories. A toxic memory can thwart any move to some thing or some place better. It keeps people hostage to the past. Forgiveness cannot be rushed. But it cannot be indefinitely postponed either. If the memory is transmitted to the next generation, it typically become less ambiguous and paradoxical. The space to see the wrongdoer as more than the deed narrows or disappears altogether. This has happened in parts of Mindanao.

Third, the importance of truth-telling. People who have suffered under cultures of silence—as in authoritarian governments that do not allow them to speak or to lament—or under cultures of lies, that twist the stories to keep wounds open and people demonized—hunger for the truth. But when a culture has been made toxic by silence and lies, it can be hard to have a healthy exploration of the truth. Moreover, the truth is more than objective facts. It must be able to explore the “why” questions in order that a new story about what happened can be constructed. Even more importantly (and more difficult) is finding a way to tell the story of the past that deals with the paradoxes and ambiguities, as well as bringing out the best of each side even as the failings and wrongdoings are not passed over or obscured.

Fourth, justice must be pursued. But it has to be a justice that is tempered by the healing of memories and the quest for the truth, in order that justice does not become merely an occasion for vengeance. So-called “transitional justice” (justice enacted after a conflict is over) must have a special focus on restorative justice, a justice that rebuilds the community as best it can. Utopian schemes typically fail because they do not deal with paradoxes and the complexity of human motivation and relationships.

Fifth, ways must be found to move toward forgiveness. Often this cannot happen until the generation that experienced the violence as adults is no longer with us. It will fall to the next generation, born after the violence or who were children during the violence, to find ways to honor the suffering of their parents yet also seek out a new relationship to their erstwhile enemies of their own age cohort and subsequent generations.

Sixth and finally, the importance of ritual. While healing is sometimes seen to happen best through judicial proceedings and the payment of reparations, ritual is increasingly seen as an important resource for bringing people together. Its pathways can be vehicles for lament at what has been lost, of storytelling about an earlier and more peaceful time, of remembering those who have been shining examples of life together.

All of these principles can be held together by faith. One thing that I have discovered in the case of interreligious peacebuilding is that Islam and Buddhism (the two traditions I have had the most experience with, although I suspect it holds for the others as well) share many of the concerns of Christians for justice and forgiveness. What gives Christianity its particular power is that the story we tell of God and creation is a paradigm for reconciliation itself: that God created the world good and rejoiced in it, that sin has entered the world, that we have been accorded a reconciliation by God’s entering deeply into our world and our frailty, and that all things will come together in the
end. This narrative provides a framework that allows us to situate themes of memory, truth-telling, justice, and forgiveness in ways that allow these concepts to relate more closely to one another. It gives the Christian understanding a special inner cohesion that in turn calls forth a spirituality to nurture and strengthen it.

Every conflict has its own history, its own twists and turns, its failures, but also its hidden wisdom about what might have been done and what could be done now. The Mindanao conflict is no exception to this rule. How it moves forward can be instructive to the rest of us. These are some of the things that I see more clearly now through some eight years of interaction with the people of Mindanao. It has been a great gift to me and, I think, an equally great one for others elsewhere.