BROKERING PEACE: The Conflict Through the Eyes of Father Bert

Father Roberto C. Layson, fondly known to all as Fr. Bert, is a man with the ability to still a room. His piercing blue eyes make contact with a room full of student researchers, buzzing with questions on the peace process here in Pikit, Cotabato Province. Although short and unassuming, dressed casually in a simple white T-shirt, black slacks, and sandals, his stature carries an intensity of experience. A small square cross pendant hangs around his neck, the only marker of his status as the parish priest of Pikit. We are here in this renowned, self-proclaimed Peace Zone as students (as part of the 2015 “Challenges to Peacebuilding in Mindanao” course) trying to understand the nuanced challenges to the peace process. But really, we are here to meet Father Bert.

Photo Credit: Eyn Simpson

Father Bert has received international acclaim for his efforts in building peace across Central Mindanao. Over the past 20 years he has been a key figure in advancing inter-religious dialogue among Christians, Muslims, and Lumads (Indigenous Peoples). They are all caught in the crossfire of the conflict.
whether they are members of the armed groups, of the government forces, or of the local community. In the years of his ministry in Pikit (1997-2008), there were four wars between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government’s military, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). “In war,” he tells us, “helping is not a matter of choice; it’s a responsibility.”

Father Bert’s readiness to lead is a manifestation of a profound personal transformation in his own life. He describes his past to author Antoinette Hildering in the book “You Can Inspire: Personal Stories of Peace from Asia” (CIDSE 2007).

Growing up in a family of Christian “settlers” in a predominantly Muslim community, he was deeply entrenched in ethnic hatred and violence in the conflict he witnessed since he was a boy. His family emigrated from Silay City on the island of Negros so that he and his nine siblings would not have to continue working in the sugarcane plantations, but could pursue secondary education in the Land of Promise. As a teenager, he witnessed firsthand the atrocities of war, of systematic raids, disappearances, killings, and gun violence. He recalls memories of refusing to flee and hiding from the paramilitary groups beneath the floorboards of his house.

An Accelerated History of the Conflict in Pikit
Population (2010) – 133, 014 (42 barangays)

- 2000 – The “All-Out War” launched by President Estrada against the MILF. Over 1 million people are displaced across Central Mindanao. 41,000 people were displaced in Pikit, which was ground zero.
- 2001-2004 – The 7 barangays establish a Peace Zone, known collectively as GiNaPaLaD TaKa Peace Zone.
- 2003 – Massive fighting breaks out between the MILF and the AFP. 45,000 displaced in Pikit. Bilateral Ceasefire is declared (July 19, 2003) and the Mindanao People’s Caucus organizes the Bantay Ceasefire Watch. The Ceasefire is monitored by a network of local volunteers.
- 2014 – Erratic violence by MILF, BFF, and bombings that no one took responsibility for.
- 2015 – On Jan. 25, 2015 the AFP attempts to capture a wanted terrorist, which results in a daylong gun battle with the MILF and over 50 people killed.
  - The peace process and the negotiations around the passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law are postponed.

In 1977, at the age of 18, he joined the Seminary of Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Cotabato, and was ordained a priest in 1988. He was first assigned to the city of Jolo, in the southern islands of Sulu, then nearby in the Bongao Municipality in Tawi Tawi, both Muslim majority regions.

In 1994, his faith was deeply shaken when his mentor and spiritual teacher, the Bishop Benjamin de Jesus, was gunned down in front of Mt. Carmel Cathedral in Jolo. He had been working in the community there for 19 years. The tragedy affected Father Bert deeply, seeding distrust and hatred of the community and members of his parish. After that, he would cry at the mention of the bishop’s name. Father Bert had no prejudice before, but he testifies he hated all Muslims after that.

The turning point came when he was reassigned to Pikit in 1997. Shortly after, war broke out and thousands were displaced. He saw firsthand the desperation and suffering in the eyes of the evacuees, and it resolved his conviction to help, no matter if they were Christian or Muslim.

Father Bert’s reputation for impartiality and compassion
grew during the years of the “All-Out War” in 2000, and violent clashes in 2003, where Pikit was ground zero. Father Bert and the parish were one of the only disaster response teams on the ground in those years, supporting the wounded and displaced, and providing food, medicine, and counseling. No one else was willing to enter the firefight and to help both Muslim and Christian fighters, whether combatants, armed soldiers, or civilians. Father Bert stood boldly and dangerously between two deadly forces. He and his team were always the first to respond to any violent clash. They documented the fighting, alerted others to the locations of gunfire and bombings, and counted the dead.

The Peace Zone
In the aftermath of the “All-Out War,” the community of Pikit established the Peace Zone to protect and ensure security. It was a project grounded in grassroots organizing and community consensus building. Yet the severity of the violence was too much. Only with the formal collective agreement in place could people begin to return to their homes. The Peace Zone, known collectively GiNaLaD TaKa (represents the names of the many villages in Pikit), began in the barangay (village) of Nalapaan (“Na”). In 2001, the Na were the first to declare their community a peace zone and the initiative soon expanded to seven territories in Pikit.

Following the war, there were long years of negotiation and community organizing to establish the Peace Zone, spanning seven barangays of Pikit. Father Bert and his ministry continued to coordinate aid and relief efforts from external funders including the Philippine National Government, NGOs, and international donors. “We cannot do it alone,” he says. These growing peacebuilding networks are crucial to the survival of the Peace Zone.

Father Bert’s distinctive position allows him to maintain legitimacy in the community. As part of the Monitoring Team of the Bantay Ceasefire Watch and a well-respected religious leader, he was able to make contact with both commanders of the MILF and the leaders of the AFP. Throughout his ministry, Father Bert made visits to the combatant camps and proved his commitment to the welfare of the community, slowly building trust among the fighters. Recently, when three kidnappings occurred, he was able to call upon his contacts in the MILF and negotiate, reminding them of their promises to the peace process.
His reputation as a communicator and peace broker has not gone unnoticed by AFP military officials, who also seek his counsel. The strategy, he says, is a “dialogical approach, rather than confrontational.” As the parish priest, he is the central negotiator among armed combatants. In his view, “No one has the monopoly of goodness, or of evil.” The fighters were victims of their circumstances, he explains. “In war the impact on relationships is worse than the physical destruction.”

Father Bert’s faith and dedication compels him to the frontlines, and his cause is just as strong as the insurgents’ war. “If war escalates, peace escalates also,” he says. His weapon of choice is words. Now, the main mission of the parish and affiliated NGO partners is to promote inclusivity, and inter-religious dialogue among stakeholders. He also recognizes that grassroots peacebuilding (given that the war in Mindanao is intertwined with other types of violence such asrido, or clan, based conflict, criminality, and settling personal conflicts through force) in the long term requires an equal consortium of efforts for programs providing basic services, inter religious dialogue, and developing sustainable livelihoods.

Of the many initiatives to eliminate dissent and distrust, he along with other peacebuilders stress that the Culture of Peace workshop is a crucial part of building peace. The three-day workshop brings educators, youth, and leaders together from all – Christian, Muslim, and Lumad – affiliations to bridge the identity divide and find common ground. The “youth” could be students or farmers, or soldiers or rebels: in the seminar, setting the space is for everyone. “This is not a religious war,” he emphasizes, “but it has a religious color.”

In addition to the workshops, Father Bert publishes and preaches extensively on compassion and tolerance, by debunking the fierce stereotypes and discrimination that hound the culture of violence. He persists in transforming biases, although he concedes that there are difficulties. “The unseen war in Mindanao is people’s hearts filled with bias, hatred and anger.” Where war is seen as the only way to solve problems, he admits it is difficult to convince people otherwise, especially when people think humanitarian help is wrong. “You have to orient them,” he says. Through inter-religious dialogue, people have the opportunity to come together and address the traumas of the past, and bridge their differences.

Has he ever wanted to give up? Yes, he replies wearily. “It is a tiresome process.” Being the pillar of both ministry and political life comes with both its responsibilities and critics. Both the MILF and other priests have criticized his brand of activism and labeled him a rebel. Support for inter-religious dialogue is an incessant struggle, and the campaign requires great strength in the face of the danger of the conflict. Friends, colleagues and mentors have been killed in the ongoing fighting. But Father Bert maintains; “We cannot surrender.” As a peacebuilder, his belief in God keeps him going, supporting his resolve. “We must believe more in our faith, than in our fear.”

The Peace process stalled, Spring 2015
As a result of the Jan. 25, 2015 battle (Referred to in Box 1), the national peace negotiations were postponed. The incident violated the trust that had been painstakingly cultivated in the past years of the peace process between the Government and the armed groups. The passage of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL) would have created a new autonomous Bangsamoro (Muslim and IP) zone. The hopes for peace with this new resolution have been all but abandoned.

On Feb. 25, the Philippine military ordered an all-out offensive against the BIFF causing thousands of families to flee for their safety in North Cotabato. As of March 5, the Philippine Star reported that more than 75,000 people had been displaced by the ongoing firefight. Thousands of families took shelter in evacuation centers in Pikit, and other locations, where humanitarian relief was desperately needed. There is no resolution in sight.
On Jan. 25, 2015 – nine days after we met Father Bert – the conflict erupted again. The Philippine National Police (PNP), the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), clashed in a daylong firefight in the nearby town of Mamasapano, Maguindanao Province. Over 50 people were killed from all sides, as well as an untold number of civilians. Thousands more were displaced across Central Mindanao.

The greatest challenge to peace is that the conflict never seems to be over. Father Bert will continue the long and arduous struggle for peace because he believes in the power of reconciliation, of transforming hate into compassion, and fighting for peace for generations now and in the future. In the face of seemingly insurmountable violence, Father Bert stands firm for peace, grounding those around him to escalate the movement.

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Chrysalis is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating a pathway to self-sufficiency for homeless and low-income individuals by providing the resources and support needed to find and retain employment. Chrysalis operates three centers that are located where homelessness and poverty are most pervasive: on Skid Row in Downtown Los Angeles, Santa Monica, and in the Pacoima area of the San Fernando Valley. In 2013, Chrysalis helped 2,014 clients secured employment and served over 400 clients a day at its three centers.

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