

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo

Remarks Prepared for the Religious Freedom Institute South and Southeast Asia Consultation Colombo, Sri Lanka | March 15, 2018

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Distinguished Guests, Friends,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to offer a greeting to you, although I am sorry that I am unable to be with you in person at your important gathering in Colombo.

Gatherings such as this one organised by the Religious Freedom Institute are vital. By bringing people together from different countries and different religions, and by bringing together religious leaders, political actors, human rights defenders and civil society, to discuss the challenges of religious freedom in South and Southeast Asia, you are helping to build a much-needed network of champions of human dignity, to support each other and learn from one another. It is through such dialogue and personal interaction that people of different religious, cultures, countries and backgrounds can understand each other and come together to celebrate the unity in diversity which our world so urgently needs.

By meeting to discuss the threats and challenges to religious freedom across our diverse region, you are engaging with one of the most important tasks we face. Asia is perhaps the world's most diverse continent – where all the world's major religions meet, and where a majority in one country is a minority in another. It is also a continent that has seen growing intolerance, which threatens the fabric that holds our societies together. Extremism and nationalism have joined forces to produce a dangerous cocktail of hate and intolerance that we see in all our countries in different forms – whether radical Islamism in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, radical Hindu nationalism in India, militant Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka and my own country of Myanmar, or communist authoritarianism in China, Vietnam or Laos. Those of us, of whatever religion or country, who believe in human dignity, human rights and religious freedom for all must unite to defend those values for everyone, everywhere.

As I have said before, “Freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as detailed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is perhaps the most precious and most basic freedom of all. Without the freedom to choose, practise, share and change your beliefs, there is no freedom.” In an article in the Wall Street Journal which I had the privilege of co-authoring with Alissa Wahid from Indonesia, we wrote: “We must learn to separate race, religion and

politics. We must speak out for the freedom of religion or belief for all.” I repeat that message today. It is so important that we defend not only the rights of our own particular religious community, but the right to religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

Although I cannot be with you in person at this gathering, I want to offer my hand of friendship and partnership to you all.

Let us work together to end violence, hatred and terror in our region, and to build a world where every man, woman, and child of every race and religion is recognized both as our fellow citizen and as our brother and sister in humanity. Let us build a world where hope is not an illusion, and where we can join hands, regardless of ethnicity or religion, in peace and solidarity. I pledge to renew my efforts to that end, and I extend my hand to any of my brothers and sisters of any race or religion who will join with me. Peace with justice is possible. Freedom of religion or belief for everyone is achievable. Unity in diversity – where we celebrate such diversity – must be our goal.

I will pray for a fruitful conference in Colombo, I hope to join you at future gatherings, and I wish you every blessing as you work for a world in which everyone, everywhere is free to choose, change, practice and share their beliefs in peace and with respect for one another.