

## **“Catholics and Buddhists together to heal the wounds of the Burmese people”**

*Francis’ meeting with the supreme Council of Buddhist monks of Yangon appointed by the State, “we need to surmount all forms of misunderstanding, intolerance, prejudice and hatred”. The Pope quotes Buddha and Saint Francis*



*Pope Francis meets with the state Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee in Yangon*

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Pope Francis is surrounded by monks dressed in dark red in the Kaba Aye Center of Yangon and on his third day in Myanmar, he wants to send a strong signal in a country where Buddhists are the majority and where Muslim and Christian religious ethnic minorities suffer discrimination. “May Buddhists and Catholics walk together along this path of healing, and work side by side for the good of everyone who lives in this land,” Bergoglio says, asking to surmount “all forms of misunderstanding, intolerance, prejudice and hatred”.

The meeting takes place in the afternoon, in the symbolic site of Theravada Buddhism: the Kaba Aye Center is dominated by the homonymous “Pagoda of world peace” and is one of the most venerated Buddhist temples in South-East Asia. The building, built in 1952, is surmounted by an imposing golden dome supported by six pillars, symbol of the six councils of Buddhism, the last of which was held here from 1954 to 1956.



Francis is welcomed and greeted by the venerable Bhaddanta Kumarabhivamsa, Chairman of the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee. Thura Aung Ko, Minister for Religious Affairs and Culture of Myanmar, is also present. At the entrance, Bergoglio takes off his shoes, like everyone else when entering the pagoda, and crosses the threshold wearing only a black pair of socks.



The monks are seated on carved wooden chairs on one side of the hall, while the Pontiff sits on the other side with his following.

In his speech, the monks' president states, "In our present world, it is disgraceful to see "terrorism and extremism" carried out in the name of religious beliefs. For all religious doctrines teach only of the "good of humanity", we cannot accept that terrorism

and extremism be born of a certain religious faith". We firmly believe - he adds - that terrorism and extremism are the result of misinterpretations of the original teachings of the respective religions, for some followers add amendments to the original teachings pressured by their own desires, instincts, fears and disappointments - the four obstacles to righteous thinking". The meeting - the Pope explains as he takes the floor, "is also an opportunity for us to affirm a commitment to peace, respect for human dignity and justice for every man and woman. Not only in Myanmar, but also throughout the world, people need this common witness by religious leaders. For when we speak with one voice in affirming the timeless values of justice, peace and the fundamental dignity of each human person, we offer a word of hope. We help Buddhists, Catholics and all people to strive for greater harmony in their communities."

The Pope recalls injustices and conflicts, which "in our own day seem to be especially pronounced", and asks not to resign oneself but to follow the "way that leads to healing, mutual understanding and respect. A way based on compassion and loving kindness." Francis expresses "esteem for the all those in Myanmar who live in accord with the religious traditions of Buddhism. Through the teachings of the Buddha, and the dedicated witness of so many monks and nuns, the people of this land have been formed in the values of patience, tolerance and respect for life, as well as a spirituality attentive to, and deeply respectful of, our natural environment. As we know, these values are essential to the integral development of society."

The great challenge of our time, he continues, "is to help people be open to the transcendent. To be able to look deep within and to know themselves in such a way as to see their interconnectedness with all people", realizing that "we cannot remain isolated from each other". Bergoglio cites Buddha and Saint Francis, "If we are to be united, as is our purpose, we need to surmount all forms of misunderstanding, intolerance, prejudice and hatred. How can we do this? The words of the Buddha offer each of us a guide: "Overcome the angry by non-anger; overcome the wicked by goodness; overcome the miser by generosity; overcome the liar by truth". Similar sentiments are voiced in a prayer attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, let me bring pardon... Where there is darkness, let me bring light, and where there is sadness, joy".

Francis hopes that "this wisdom may continue to inspire every effort to foster patience and understanding, and to heal the wounds of conflict that through the years have divided people of different cultures, ethnicities and religious convictions. Such efforts are never solely the

purview of religious leaders, nor are they the competence of the state alone. Rather, it is the whole of society, all those present within the community, who must share in the work of overcoming conflict and injustice. Yet it is the particular responsibility of civil and religious leaders to ensure that every voice be heard.”

To do this, “greater cooperation between religious leaders will be required”. And the Pope assures us, “you to know that the Catholic Church is a willing partner”. “May Buddhists and Catholics walk together along this path of healing, and work side by side for the good of everyone who lives in this land.”