

Catholic Religious gather to pray for the people of Burma/Myanmar

In an online prayer service organised by Catholic Religious Australia (CRA), 90 Religious and friends, family and colleagues came together on the 24 August 2021 to pray for peace, justice and interethnic, interfaith reconciliation in Burma/Myanmar. The event was timed to closely follow the U.N. International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief (held on 22 August).

While events in Afghanistan and Haiti have understandably attracted the media spotlight in recent days, the unfolding humanitarian and political crisis in Myanmar, with violent crackdowns by the military, continues to be of grave concern.

Leading into the prayer service, presider Jill Harding FCS noted Myanmar's devastating spike in COVID-19 infections as the Delta strain impacts a country whose health system has already collapsed in addition to the impact of political upheaval. Jill recalled the plea of the Catholic Bishops of Myanmar in a special appeal for prayer issued on 2 August: "People of Myanmar: Let us raise our hands and pray," they wrote. "Let every heart raise its voice to God to save us all."

Peter Carroll FMS, CRA President, who opened the event, noted its interculturality and introduced the six Religious who would lead the prayers and reflections – all of whom were either born in Burma, were of Burmese descent, or whose ministries were linked in some way. Their presence in the liturgy was deeply inspiring.

"Their links to Burma/Myanmar gave real heart to our time together. We felt connected to the people through them," observed Anne Walker, CRA National Executive Director.

Also present were 12 students, mostly from Religious Congregations, enrolled in English language studies at Yarra Theological Union (Melbourne). Says their teacher, Margaret Bentley FMA, "We often have a student from Myanmar with us. Most have returned but three are still here in Australia with no hope of returning. So, a gathering like this is close to our hearts."

The gathering was educative as well as prayerful and included a brief overview of the complex situation in Myanmar by Emma Carolan, CRA Justice Officer. Excerpts were also read from a reflection by Cardinal Archbishop Bo of Yangon.

Salesian Provincial William Matthews SDB, who was born in Burma and came to Australia in 1994 on a humanitarian visa, shared a personal reflection on what it was like hearing about the military coup last February. He recalled his intense pain, anger and sorrow knowing how greatly his people were suffering; yet also expressed his firm hope and belief that, with God's help, the Burmese people would eventually prevail in their cause for justice.

Scripture readings and prayers were led by Aung Seng Ja FMM, Geraldine Kearny SGS, Trevor Trotter SSC, Barbara Brown-Graham FCJ; followed by silent reflection for all participants to consider personal

pledges of prayer and action for Burma/Myanmar. The gathering concluded with a song of peace, aptly chosen as it was the theme song for Pope Francis' 2017 papal visit to Myanmar.

In the face of unimaginable sorrow in a country far away, we often feel powerless. Yet for those who identify as the body of Christ, communal prayer does wield power. As one of the participants put it, "Uniting like this is something we *can* do. And we feel connected through it."

To follow up the gathering, the CRA publication *Just Now* contains further information about the situation in Burma/Myanmar, along with details for financial donations to church aid in Myanmar through the CRA Members. Access [Just Now at the CRA website](#).

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