

(The following is a joint statement of all Ateneo presidents on the current situation in Mindanao.)

Marawi, an old and storied city, has almost 400 years of history. It is Mindanao's Kilometer 0; the starting point for all other baseline measurements on the island. In recent days Marawi has become the center of a furious battle between government forces attempting to arrest a senior Abu Sayyaf member and forces sympathetic to his goals.

People who behead, kidnap, steal, destroy, and extort for any reason are lawbreakers and are criminals of the worst kind. Reference to any religious creed to rationalise their action does not mitigate its criminality, but makes it more horrifying. For the Supreme Being worshipped both by Christians and Muslims alike is a God of Compassion and Peace. The "God" therefore that is claimed to call forth the bombing of innocent men, women and children is a false god, as Pope Francis has repeatedly pointed out. The undersigned wholeheartedly support the members of the Armed Forces and the police who give their last full measure of devotion so that our country may be safe.

To keep us safe, the President has declared Martial Law in Mindanao. He has speculated that this condition may have to be extended to the entire country. The declaration of Martial Law is of course one of the powers vested in the President by the Constitution. There are numerous safeguards in place against the abuse of Martial Law. Essentially both of the other branches of government have the power to revoke the actions of the President.

Some have questioned the scope of the declaration as overbroad as it encompasses the entire Mindanao. Moreover, the President has other powers, such as calling out the armed forces to quell lawless violence.

Admittedly though, many voices favor Martial Law, claiming they are not afraid because the security apparatus of the state will keep them safe. These voices argue that only criminals are afraid of Martial Law.

We have more than a decade of reasons to be wary of Martial Law. We have seen what happens when every dissenting voice is labeled as seditious, when every inquiring mind is denounced as unpatriotic. We are not supporting terrorists by remembering our scars and learning from our pain.

A Martial Law limited in scope, enforced with discipline and restraint, with respect for the Constitution and the inviolability of human rights, can solve specific problems. An unrestrained Martial Law, one that keeps its decisions and movements quiet and secret from its citizens, unconcerned with human dignity, will only compound the problem it seeks to solve.

We call on our government officials to act judiciously as they exercise the immense range of their power. Civilian rule must always reign supreme over military rule. We call on everyone to remain vigilant, to hold our officials accountable for their actions, to demand to know and to be told the truth at all times. We expect that the safeguards placed in our Constitution to curb the abuse of power will be respected and followed.

And we trust our President when he tells us that martial rule shall only be limited and temporary.

Let us not waver in our desire and action to bring peace to our land, especially in Mindanao. Martial Law might buy us short-term cessation of hostilities. But it does not uproot the despair that has bedeviled our people for years. Let us aim for the very roots of our temptation to terror and violence. We listen to our Provincial superior, Fr Tony Moreno SJ, himself a Mindanaoan, who has written:

“Conflict in Mindanao, we know, is rooted in social injustice. Poverty in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao is the highest in the country. Educational delivery is worst in the country. Conflict in Mindanao is increasingly caused by what Pope Francis has so often decried, and most recently repeated in Cairo: ideology that masquerades as religion. In Mindanao, our Muslim friends decry a corruption of their religion of peace into a Wahabi-Salafi ideology of hatred that victimizes not only Christians but especially Muslims of peace. Even so, many Muslim youth in Mindanao today are drawn to this ideology. It comes with many names: ISIS, BIFF, Abu Sayaf, Maute. Eliminate these, and there will still be many more. They are frustrated by rounds of ostentatious negotiations that do not prosper; they are wearied of their hunger or joblessness; they are fascinated by the idea of a world where their ideology rules supremely and exclusively. All who do not agree, they are taught to hate. Or kill.

“This is the heart of the serious conflict in Mindanao that we must address. Before it ever explodes in violence like in Marawi, it brews in the frustration and pain of social exclusion. And martial law and any such hard-fisted solutions do not get to the roots of this problem, let alone benefit the country as a whole.”

In this month of Ramadan, we pray with our Muslim brothers and sisters for God to show us the way to lasting peace. And we pledge our support to our brothers and sisters of Marawi, for all that they will need to rebuild their beautiful city.

ad majorem Dei gloriam,

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