Opinion



Pope Francis meets with Myanmar's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, in Naypyitaw, Myanmar, on Nov. 28, 2017. (RNS/Pool/AP/Max Rossi)



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It is hard to be both a diplomat and a prophet, but Pope Francis pulls it off better than anyone else.

Prior to visiting Myanmar, the pope was urged by human rights activists to condemn the murder, rape and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar military. Hundreds of villages in Rakhine state were burned by the military, and over half a million Rohingya fled as refugees to Bangladesh.

But Myanmar's cardinal, Archbishop Charles Bo, asked the pope not to use the word "Rohingya" because he feared the small Catholic minority would be attacked by the Buddhist majority who see the Rohingya as illegal aliens who are a threat to their nation. The military denies any persecution is taking place, even though the evidence collected by journalists and human rights organizations is overwhelming.

Thus, Pope Francis was faced with a terrible dilemma: Be prophetic and put at risk Christians in Myanmar, or be silent and compromise his moral authority.

Pope Francis chose neither. Instead he carefully threaded the needle by being both prophetic and diplomatic. He told Myanmar's leaders that the country's people have suffered "from civil conflict and hostilities that have lasted for too long" and called for "peace based on respect for the dignity and rights of each member of society, respect for each ethnic group and its identity," without using the word Rohingya.

No one misunderstood his message. Although the media noted his not using the word Rohingya, they also knew and reported that in his speech he was referring to the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in Myanmar, especially the Rohingya Muslims.

Rohingya activists and human rights activists were not satisfied. They wanted him to specifically and publicly criticize the military and the government for its treatment of the Rohingya. I certainly understand and sympathize with their view.

On the other hand, it is one thing to be prophetic and personally suffer the consequences; it is another thing to put others at risk by your statements.

I have no doubt that Pope Francis would have been willing to put his own life at risk, but to put other lives at risk would be reckless, especially when it is unlikely that his words would have had any effect on the military, which continues to deny that any discrimination or ethnic cleansing is going on.

Were the pope and the Myanmar cardinal being overly cautious about the possibility of a blowback? Not at all. Christians are already being persecuted in Myanmar — also known as Burma — as has been clearly documented by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in its report "Hidden Plight: Christian Minorities in Burma."

(Although I am a USCIRF commissioner, the views expressed here are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of the commission.)

Radical Buddhist monks are working arm in arm with the military in demonizing religious and ethnic minorities. Religious services have been disrupted, churches have been burned, ministers have been killed, and discrimination is rampant. Even getting a government ID is very difficult for non-Buddhists. In the minds of the military and most of the Buddhist population, you cannot be a Myanmar citizen unless you are a Buddhist, even though Catholics have lived there for over 500 years.

Some experts fear that the anti-Muslim violence in Rakhine state, which led to the refugee crisis, will spread to other parts of Myanmar.

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Granted the terrible situation in Myanmar, has the pope's visit had any effect?

It clearly has not made matters worse, which goes for progress in Myanmar. The trip certainly gave encouragement to the Catholics of Myanmar who rejoiced in the pope's visit. He also gave encouragement to those who are working for interreligious reconciliation and dialogue.

[Updated Dec. 1] His trip to Bangladesh continued to keep the focus on the horrendous plight of Rohingya refugees. Not only did he thank the Bangladesh people and government for welcoming refugees from Rakhine state and called on the international community to do more to help them, he also used the word Rohingya when he met with 16 refugees while in Bangladesh.

Pope Francis recalled the Islamic creation story where God “at the beginning took a bit of salt, put it in water and created the souls of all people.” Speaking of the Rohingya, he said, “These brothers and sisters carry the salt of God within them.” Then he surprised all present by adding, “The presence of God today is also called Rohingya.”

Thus, Pope Francis played the diplomatic prophet in Myanmar, but became more forceful in Bangladesh.

So, I would judge the visit to be a net positive but no miraculous accomplishments. But then, we should not expect miracles from the pope. He can’t walk on water.

This story appears in the **Francis in Myanmar and Bangladesh** feature series. View the full series.