

in
black
& White
with Milinda Moragoda



His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith with Milinda Moragoda.

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith engages in an interesting discussion with Milinda Moragoda on 'In Black and White', telecast on TV One (MTV). They focus on topics that are foremost in the public's mind, giving much for everyone to think about.

MM: Your Eminence, all Sri Lankans know you and they admire the leadership and inspiration that you have provided at moments of crisis in our country. But very few Sri Lankans know about you as a person if I may say that.

Could you tell us about how you entered spiritual life, what has motivated you and what has kept you going?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: As I was a child, I came in contact with some priests and religious leaders who were in our parish, who appeared to me to be very selfless and dedicated to the people and deeply religious minded people. Their life made me think, perhaps I should also follow the same path. Of course as a child, when you are called, so to say, you feel it from inside and you feel attracted to it. That was one of the reasons that made me think of a priestly life even as a little child after I received my first communion. I was inclined to priesthood from around the age of about six or seven. And then it went on and also my family encouraged me. Simultaneously, inside me there was this strong desire to be of service to the society, which was also motivated partly by my own family background, where my uncle was fully involved in politics. He was the deputy mayor of Colombo as well as later on he was the President of the Western Provincial Council. As children, we participated in his campaigns. So there was a stream of political-oriented service inclination inside. This grew up with me.

MM: Your Eminence, a main part of your spiritual career was during the war. How did you serve during that period?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: By the time, the war started I was already a priest, and then I began to see that whole attempt to impose language on the people or cultural values on the people by means of legislation was not on the right path. Therefore, from the very young days as a young man, and later on as a young priest, I found that these kind of extremist propaganda was not good for our country in the long run. As a result, I engaged in social work very much, where we thought that our outreach must not be limited to Christians but must reach to all people.

MM: Did you travel to the North and East during that period?

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His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: Later on, as a Bishop, I was the Chairman of the Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Bishops Conference. In that capacity from 1995 onwards, I was fully involved in trying to see whether we can bring about an understanding between the LTTE and the Government, a number of times along with Bishop Rayappu Joseph, who was the Bishop of Mannar. I went across to the other side and then we had many meetings with them. In fact, around 2000, we led a delegation of Buddhist monks to see the LTTE in order to see if a greater understanding can be created between the North and the South. Over a period of five years, by the year 2000, the first contacts were made between Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga's Government and the LTTE that resulted in the ceasefire agreement. We hoped that this agreement and the subsequent discussions would help the two communities to come together in some way. Of course there were those, knotty questions about political solution, devolution and acceptance of one opinion or the other, those were a bit difficult. At that point of course the Government worked it out with the assistance of Norway. That kind of process went on and we were involved at an initial stage, trying to create the atmosphere for a dialogue between the two sides. That was during Mrs Kumaratunga's time and she was very keen on it as well.

MM: You have been closely engaged with Sri Lankan societies over the post Independence period, and seen the good and the bad. What are the changes you have noticed in society?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: I would say that we have a great heritage compared to many developed countries. Our historic heritage and cultural heritage is very rich and also there is a great diversity among us. Not only due to cultural differences but religious and ethnic differences, which are important for the building of a conscience of being Sri Lankan. I think that is what we should always aim at. This rich heritage, we should appreciate it, value it and we should not try to erase it. The tendency to flatten everything out and have a kind of a classless difference-less society is a failure. Down the history, specially after Carl Marx, the attitude that you can erase all these differences and create a kind of equal society for everyone did not succeed. Because it is not



possible. Human beings are so different. Each human person is unique, but we should have been conscious of that, and we should have tried to build a Sri Lankan psyche, based on that. Unfortunately, this did not happen. That is where the bad side of the question is.

MM: You have often spoken of Buddhism being the moral anchor of our society. As a leader of a different religion, what has made you to take that position?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: Because we are all people, anchoring the soil of a country and of a place. We have been blessed to be born in this country and in this country, the basic heritage and history is all linked with Buddhism. Most of what we are as a Sinhalese for example, we have garnered from a Buddhist cultural angle, a spiritual angle, which influenced us, even though we may not practice Buddhism directly. But many things that we do in our day to day life reflect Buddhist values. Therefore, we have to accept that heritage. But it does not mean that we have to think only of a mono cultural social set-up. We have to learn to have that maturity and prudence and intelligence to understand that inside this so-called cultural heritage, or if I call it the 'tree', inside this tree, as the branches, all of us have to contribute to the wellbeing of the main tree. The main tree has to look after the branches and the branches

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have to strengthen the main tree. In this country, we have to learn to appreciate our history and heritage but at the same time, appreciate the differences that exist. We cannot create a mono cultural society in such a place, because we have thousands of years of history together. That is why it is important for us to recognize the value of Buddhism and then also learn to appreciate it. At the same time learn to integrate ourselves into that fabric while expecting the major community to respect the different aspirations of other smaller groups.

MM: You have also taken a lead in interfaith activities. You mentioned it in the context of trying to find peace in the North as well. Recently you have been very active as well. Could you talk about that as well?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: Well, you know human society today, more and more are not living in islands. It is an experience, where humanity with modern technology and modern discoveries is coming closer, and becoming one village, a global village to say. So, we have to appreciate the differences and the beauty that is found in the others. Therefore, the different religious heritage that each nation carries, is a richness for humanity, which we must appreciate and learn to dialogue with, live together, understand each other and share our common concerns, you know. There are common concerns that touch all of us, whether we belong to one religion or one ethnic group or some other group, we are part of humanity. We have to think of this interfaith interaction as an important component in the future of humanity as a totality.

MM: In the recent past, have you been focusing on any particular aspects in terms of interfaith dialogue?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: In Sri Lanka, I meet with all religious leaders. We have our Congress of Religions, and we have various other groups coming together and common activities. We should not be afraid of each other. Because one thing is to influence each other in a positive sense, learn to appreciate the differences and then try to come closer together. When someone wishes to shift from one to the other that is their personal prerogative, so we must respect that as well. All of us can work together in one human fam-

ily and in Sri Lanka, we specially need to do that. There is no time for us to be quarrelling with one another.

MM: I as a Buddhist feel that every human being has to have some kind of religion, whatever that can be. And we must have a moral compass and moral anchor. The younger generations, do they feel the same way?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: That is a challenge you know. Younger generations cannot be convinced today by arguments or by teachings. You have to convince them by the way you live. That is the challenge the older generation has to set the example. The older generation expects the young people to follow religious principles, then the older generation must do that themselves by example, by their way of living, so that the younger people are inspired. You cannot convince the younger people merely by arguments. They need to see facts and that is what is necessary today. Unfortunately, in some areas we see weaknesses coming in and causing some amount of dissatisfaction among the the youth, which tends to create a reaction mentality to religious values, which is unfortunate.

MM: From your point of view as a leader here, what are you doing to reach out to the youth?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: We are doing various programs. The Archdiocese of Colombo has named this year as the Year of the Youth. At international level, Holy Father Pope Francis has called for a special reflection on youth in 2018 and 2019. Thus, concentrating on reaching out to the youth and speaking to them in faith language, which is palatable, acceptable, and which is challenging to them. This is important for the Church, because otherwise, we become fossilized with some ideas that are completely out of touch of human lives. There is only one life we have to live, so why make life miserable for others? You can make your life happy for yourself as well as make it happy for everyone else. If that is what we have to live and if religion helps us to do that, then why not? Someone might say, I have a happy life and a committed life as an atheist, well, he can try it out. But he does not mean that religion itself has not played a role or need to play a role. Religion has to play that role and has to make you happy. Religion can be a very

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strong instrument of happiness for humans if you learn to live its principles carefully.

MM: The world watched the way in which you dealt with aftermath of the tragedy on the April 21st. The leadership and the inspiration you gave the people in their time of need. Now we are going through a difficult healing process at the moment. In your view, what needs to be done for us to heal and to bring closure?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: As far as the incidents of Easter Sunday are concerned, what we did was just to control the situation and appealed to the good sense of the people and ensured that there was no reaction and no violence in any community. But then, after that there are some questions that always remained in the minds of the people who were affected and some of them have very clearly spoken to me about their pain. Some of them are still traumatized and they are going through suffering. Even this morning, I went to see a family in Mattakuliya, that has been completely blasted and shattered. All their dreams gone. They have basic questions that we always ask and also they ask us. Who and why and what happened. Why were we targeted and there are questions on the various reports coming from all kinds of sources of gross neglect of duty and also of political manipulations, both local and international. People are completely lost in this, and they are asking on whatever they notice and they are asking for the truth. They have a right to know the truth. This is what also happened during and after the 30-year war. There have been questions about why things had gone that way and why did things go this way and who is responsible. We should not hide these things under the carpet. What we call accountability is important. Therefore, even for this incident, we are asking for accountability.

MM: That is why you have asked for the Commissioner of Inquiry for the truth?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: Our people have the right to know the truth. It is not pinpointing at politicians but generally, what I see is a failure to bring social justice to these people. During the elections time, there was an attempt to focus attention only on that. Everyone had forgotten about what happened on Easter Sunday and the aftermath, and its

reasons. Everyone was only talking about elections. That is the convenient way of getting out of the problem. But it does not work. We have to tell our political leaders that we must be honest, with themselves and our people. Let us know or inquire and find out what happened.

MM: When it comes to extremism and radicalization in society, it is happening all over the world. How can religious leaders help to manage that?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: Well, we have to of course, our pulpit, whereby we preach, an important instrument whereby we can influence our people positively. You know there are so many good things in this religious philosophies that we follow, the religious faiths we follow. Try to bring that out and try to bring the best in the human person. If it is Buddhist, bring it out in the Buddhist way, if it is a Christian bring it out in a Christian way or a Muslim, bring it out in a Muslim way. Each of these religious philosophies have had one time or the other certain strong points and weak points. We must stress on the stronger points and if we stress on that, human life will improve qualitatively.

The choices we make, as I mentioned earlier, it is not like wearing a coat or something. It is a way of living; everyday options are made on the basis on the strong teachings of a faith. Then when you live that, everyone will come closer to each other because if you are an honest person and a spiritually enriched person, you will not kill anyone else. You would want to enhance the dignity of the other person. Your religious thinking should help you to reach out to the other person and enhance his or her dignity.

MM: Do you feel that the moment we are reaching out is enough in that way. What do you think?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: We should concentrate more on that, but we tend to be very ritualistic you know. That way we are much more narrow and limited. We have to reach out to the infinite truths that we find in these religious philosophies. Then that will bring humanity together. It has a tremendous potential for social transformation.

Unfortunately, we the people who represent those philosophies, have adulterated and reduced it to something of a matter of incantations

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and rituals. You know certain types of beliefs and other things but not the noble teachings.

MM: Have you been able to communicate this?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: We have been trying our best to do all that I have been saying in the last so many years. That is why I have been stating very boldly, when we go out and reach out, other religious philosophies have a tremendous contribution that they can make to us. That is how we can say in Sri Lanka, that we have a rich heritage of religiosity and devoutness.

Our society would be miles ahead of so many other societies but we are not, because we have also got entrapped in that very self-centered understanding of religion; that religion is to only save ourselves. No religion is to save others.

I am responsible for the salvation of others, that is very important for us to understand. It is true, that certain philosophies such as Buddhism speaking about understanding the truth by oneself, because of the doctrine of Anatha. You are the savior of yourself, but when you live that philosophy, faithfully, immediately and automatically you draw yourself closer to others. Because they also have the same outreach. Christianity is also the same, so the challenge is that.

MM: Your Eminence, is there something that you would like to directly communicate to the Sri Lankan people?

His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith: I would say that Sri Lanka is such a beautiful place and it has such a beautiful variety. It is time for us to not think of our smallness, but to think of our greatness, and the greatness lies in appreciating each other and reaching out to each other, generously and lovingly and helping each other to create a better society. That is a challenge that we will always carry. But I would like to appeal to the Sri Lankan people to be magnanimous. Not to think about only our religion, our caste, our race, our language, but reach out to the other people and it is an enrichment.

Each race and religion, if we reach out in a genuine and noble aspiration to nobility, to greatness, then we will create a better Sri Lankan society. Not less religious than it is today but more religious and more committed and at the same time, more united.

MM: Thank You. ☐

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