



PRESS STATEMENT OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF MALAYSIA

The Catholic Church in Malaysia is greatly disturbed by the Ministry of Education circular dated 21st October 2023, instructing schools to organise *Minggu Solidariti Palestin* from 29th October – 3rd November 2023 in support of the Palestinians in Gaza.

Children and students in schools are considered as minors and should never be dragged into such polemics. In our particular case, when students were asked to lend support to Palestinian against Israel, this can give rise to anti-Jew sentiment as seen by some overzealous teachers.

Many of us were shocked to see videos of school teachers carrying toy guns and students being instigated to step on a flag whom adults labelled as the enemy's. I find such expression of solidarity and the introduction of guns (toy) and violence to children in school, very disturbing.

Ever since the formation of Malaysia in 1963, Malaysians have been taught in schools to live in harmony, to respect the differences in each other's faith and culture and above all to work for a prosperous and harmonious nation. This was enshrined in the 1970 *Rukun Negara*, which was formed with the main purpose of building a strong unity and harmony for the stability and prosperity of our nation Malaysia.

Malaysians in general are considered as generous in giving aids and donations to alleviate suffering, especially for the innocent victims and communities affected by wars or natural disasters. Such kindness is indeed commendable. However, it is always inappropriate to encourage children to use violence or to vent their anger against those whom adults labelled as the enemy. What is even more terrifying is that while world rulers are trying to resolve the conflict, such violence can be brought right into the classrooms and imprinted onto the innocent hearts of our young children. **Guns and school should never mix together.**

The videos that are currently circulating in social media showed how children, even from a very tender age, can easily be manipulated by adults as they learn how to hate and show aggression towards anyone whom adults labelled as the enemy.

Let us be reminded that schools are set up for education and not for learning to hate others. The priority of education is to equip students for life and to have good moral values and civic mindedness. Schools are the forum where children form friendship and are educated to be good citizens to build harmony and progress for our nation Malaysia.

In Malaysia, where we live, study and work together side by side in a multi racial, cultural and various faith communities throughout Malaysia, let our energy be focussed on economic recovery, creating employment for our people, working for better understanding and harmony between all people of Sarawak, Sabah and Semenanjung.

I applaud the prudence of Sarawak as Ministers opt not to follow the MOE directives so as not to stir up anything about this issue. And instead, be in solidarity to pray for peace in Palestine. On behalf of the Catholic Bishops in Malaysia, and in solidarity with people and neighbours of goodwill, I appeal to our Malaysian spiritual and political leaders to ensure that our respective houses of worship and schools promote peace and harmony. Let us implore God to touch the hearts of world leaders and pray for peace in Palestine, Ukraine and throughout the world.

+ Simon Poh

Archbishop Simon Poh, President - 27th October 2023

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