

## Burmese Cardinal visits New Malden parish



Cardinal Bo at St Joseph's Pastoral Centre, New Malden with Fr Peter Edwards, parish priest and parishioner and human rights activist Benedict Rogers of Christian Solidarity Worldwide. © Amanda C Dickie

**Amanda C Dickie**

**Surrey:** Cardinal Bo, Myanmar-Burma's first ever Primate, visited St Joseph's Catholic Church in New Malden last Friday. He had wanted to visit Benedict Rogers' parish, as he received him into the Catholic Church three years ago in Myanmar-Burma.

Ben is a human rights activist working for Christian Solidarity Worldwide in Asia. Calling for religious freedom and inter-faith dialogue, peace and justice in his country, the cardinal described himself as a "voice for the voiceless." He likened his nation to having been "a Good Friday people", enduring crucifixion, then "buried in the tomb of oppression and exploitation for six decades" now emerging as an Easter people. "A new dawn has arisen" he said, "for the first time in my

lifetime – of making progress towards reconciliation and freedom as a nation. There is a vibrant civil society and a freer media..... We desperately need to work to defend rights without discrimination, to establish equal rights for all people in Myanmar, of every ethnicity and religion."

He said that one of the two Vice Presidents in the first democratically elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy is a Christian. However the other had been appointed by the military and he warned of the fragility of democratic transition as "the military remains powerful, corruption is widespread, and ethnic conflict continues."

Decades of military dictatorship impoverished Myanmar, destroying the economy, education system and failed to invest in public health, he said. Myanmar is the second biggest

producer of opium in the world causing further problems. Church schools have been closed for 50 years and he made a particular plea to his country's Government: "give us back our schools, and allow us to contribute to educating our people."

The Catholic Church in Myanmar is working with Buddhist and Muslims of varying ethnicities to build a Myanmar that is genuinely at peace with its diversity, "Unity in diversity...in a rainbow nation," he proclaimed. "If Myanmar is to be truly free, peaceful and prosperous, the rights of all ethnicities and religious faiths must be protected."

Commenting about meeting with the UK Minister of State that day, he joked that it was "scary" how much the Minister agreed with him! He hoped that international pressure, including that of the United

Kingdom, could persuade the UN to send a special delegation on the Freedom of Religion and Belief to visit his country and meet with different groups working for ethnic and religious harmony.

"We are a wounded nation, a bleeding nation. ....no society can be truly democratic, free and peaceful if it does not respect – and even celebrate – political, racial and religious diversity, as well as protect the basic human rights of every single person, regardless of race, religion or gender." He appealed to people in Britain and around the world to help ensure that everyone in Myanmar, of whatever race or religion, has their rights protected, without discrimination. "I believe, truly, that the key to interreligious harmony and peace is that most basic of human rights, freedom of religion or belief for all."