



As Pope Francis continues his visit to Burma – also known as Myanmar – this week, he is encountering a country where life for Catholics can be difficult.

Just 1.3 percent of the population in Burma is Catholic, and while freedom of religion exists on paper, evangelizing in the majority Buddhist country is met with obstacles.

In an interview published by the Pontifical Missionary Works, a Spanish missionary who has been in Burma for seven years described life in the country. He spoke anonymously, to avoid jeopardizing his mission.

**“The presence of foreign missionaries is not allowed. They’re afraid you’ll proselytize,”** he said. “In fact, the brothers from native Burmese communities, even though they are recognized as such, officially they cannot evangelize. There are almost no conversions here; the growth of Christianity is mostly from births.”

But those who are Catholic are enthusiastic about their faith. The missionary said they expect some 300,000 people to attend the papal events with Pope Francis, out of about 700,000 Catholics in the country.

“Since the people are poor and it’s very expensive to travel to the capital, **the Church is making a major effort so the faithful can attend the events,**” he explained, adding that Bishop Charles Bo of Rangoon wrote to all the parishes, dioceses, congregations and bishops asking them to facilitate getting the people to the events.

“We all collaborated financially to be able to support transportation,” and even “Buddhist monks offered their facilities to take in the pilgrims,” he said.

With 87.9% of the population identifying as Buddhist, members of minority religions do not always find equal treatment in their day-to-day lives.

While minority religious services are permitted, non-Buddhists have fewer opportunities to get good jobs, including jobs in government.

However, the missionary said, the situation in the country has improved somewhat. "Before December 2016 we had to leave the country every 70 days. Currently they're giving permits for longer stays."

Still, he is not able to identify himself as a missionary. When he meets people, he tells them that he is a teacher and a translator. He is not registered as a religious, but instead has a business visa.

Currently, there are more than nine different congregations with a missionary presence in Burma, he said.

"We have been getting together to share difficulties, experiences, and mutually encourage one another through reflection and formation, especially on inculturation." They also discuss goals, including creativity in evangelizing and how to best reach rural areas.

A few days after the missionary arrived in the country, he was asked by Bishop Bo to live in a poor neighborhood where the majority of people were Indian Muslims or Hindus.

"We began visiting poor families, old people living alone. We prayed with them and brought Communion to the Catholics. In addition for a year we had a house to welcome young people who came to the capital thanks to scholarships from the Jesuits," the missionary recalled.

He also said that some of those young men wanted to follow their charism, and so they had to begin an intensive formation program for them.

"It's very important that when a new house is opened up and native vocations are coming forth, that they are well trained, so they can be the ones who can work with more freedom of movement and knowledge of their own society," he said.

The missionaries are currently offering English classes to the children in the neighborhood who are all Buddhists. "They're normal families with few resources. We want to offer them the possibility of their children learning English and Korean, because they all dream of going to South Korea."

The missionary said that the Catholic Church is a "witness to peace, unity, and encounter" within Burmese society and pointed to their initiative in the city of Mandalay, the cradle of Buddhism, where they have an ecumenical group that brings together Muslims, Buddhists, Protestants and Catholics.

Ultimately, he remains hopeful about the future of the Catholic Church in Burma.

"In 1962, the government expropriated all the Church's schools and centers, leaving

only state-run education,” he said. “But now it looks like they just gave approval to the possibility of setting up kindergartens. I know that some congregations are getting ready to open official kindergartens in different areas of the country.”