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Misguided siege mentality

The dripping venom from those who find it difficult to understand the religions of fellow Malaysians is acerbic and the spiteful perpetrators appear cocooned in siege mindset.

IN my years as a student at Saint Paul's Institution, Seremban, in the 1960s and 70s, Catechism and Bible Knowledge classes at primary and secondary levels were filled to the brim with students from various religious backgrounds.

Non-Christians voluntarily attended these classes — and not because they had to in a Catholic mission school.

None of their parents had any reason to be suspicious there was an attempt by the La Salle brothers of Christian schools and Catholic churches to convert their children to Christianity.

None of the parents of Christian students created an uproar when they were encouraged to attend Agama (religious) classes where Jawi script, used mainly for religious purposes, was taught as well. Some of my staunch Catholic friends had even studied Malay literature and Islamic History in Form Six.

A Malay teacher in my neighbourhood, the late Abdullah Kassim, was among several people who convinced me to take the name of the patron saint Patrick for my Confirmation — one of seven sacraments through which Catholics pass in the process of their religious upbringing by receiving the Holy Spirit.

Well-read Abdullah told me the virtues of Saint Patrick that symbolise the conquest of good over evil would rub off on me. He stands vindicated.

So many more celebrated events of pluralism happened in my growing years. A stand-out was the annual trooping of Christians hand-in-hand with non-Christians — Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists — to the midnight service on the eve of Christmas at the Church of Visitation in Seremban.

In and out of church, we knelt in rows — if only to show the

belief that the existence of different types of people within the same society is a good thing. And we, Christians, never hesitated to return this warm gesture at their respective places of worship.

Looking back, I marvel at the young and old who were spectacular in their commitment to social equality and pluralism.

It was all about understanding and appreciating each other's religion better.

It was the perfect setting for a tolerant society, respectful of an individual's beliefs.

Regrettably, that was in the past.

Today, in the spirit of Saint Patrick, the patron of Ireland, whose triumph over paganism is likened to the exorcism of venomous reptiles, I want to devour the insensitive trouble rousers who are making it their ruinous obsession to fan sentiments of religious negativity.

The dripping venom from those who find it difficult to understand the religions of fellow Malaysians is acerbic and the spiteful perpetrators appear cocooned in a siege mindset.

To be sure, every religious fraternity has to take responsibility for this raging loss of respect and tolerance that is increasingly causing conflicts all over the world.

If anyone believes in religious harmony, then the sanctity of any faith cannot be violated unless one does not want religion to build a cohesive society.

The row over the raid by the Selangor religious department (Jais), with the police in tow, on the Damansara Utama Methodist Church last Wednesday on an allegation that Christians were proselytising to Muslim guests has once again pitted Muslims against Christians.

It has also raised serious constitutional questions of trespass into places of worship.

If there was any evidence of unlawful proselytising to Muslims at the dinner function, both Jais and the police should have politely called the pastor of the church and the organisers instead of barging into a religious place of worship.

You'd think one needed a

warrant to conduct a raid in a place of worship, but Jais holds firm that Selangor's Non-Islamic Religions (Control of Propagation Amongst Muslims) Enactment (1988), which outlines offences deemed as acts of proselytisation by non-Muslims toward Muslims, grants the religious authorities powers to launch investigations and arrest individuals without producing a warrant.

I feel the police should have advised Jais against this raid because of the volatile relationship between Muslims and Christians.

Turns out, the occasion was a fund-raiser for HIV support activities and we as a society cannot accept nor tolerate such a despicable raid conducted on loose evidence that the words "Quran" and "pray" were used at event in the presence of Muslims.

And for all you know, it might just be hearsay. So, it would be interesting to see what evidence Selangor executive councillor for religious affairs Datuk Dr Hasan Ali of PAS will produce.

He claimed Jais had found incriminating materials at the function, that some participants had tried to flee through the back door but were stopped and that 12 Muslim diners had been ordered to appear at the Jais enforcement office for further investigation.

One report quoted him as saying there was no raid while another said Jais officers came at the end of the event. So, how could they have known what transpired in the early part of the event?

The Selangor government's immediate reaction to gag Pakatan Rakyat leaders from commenting on the issue until the probe was completed is pathetic.

For a party that reacts with "rottweiler" instincts when this involves the other side of the political divide, vocal leaders were strangely muted. I agree with an editorial in *The Star* that in a serious public interest issue, fair comment is not only expected but obligatory.

The aggression, however, has come from two Malay dailies that embarked on Christian bashing by suggesting Christian organisations were secretly trying to convert impoverished Muslims through welfare aid.

Christian churches have since demanded evidence behind allegations that Christian charity groups were involved in covert conversions.

I don't expect the dailies to stop their attacks. So far, the papers have mentioned only one Muslim woman who claimed she was forced to accept cash and free food from a church, after failing to get aid from Baitulmal or the State fund for the poor, which is generated from tithes collected from mosques.

In a response to the stories, influential cleric Dr Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin questioned if red tape and the lack of State alms had forced impoverished Muslims to seek help from Christian churches.

The *Malaysian Insider* reported that in an essay to the online news portal, the former Perlis mufti said it was not a sin for destitute Muslims to receive aid from non-Muslims.

He noted the blame lay with practitioners of Islam who were supposed to help their fellow believers.

"Where have all our wang zakat (alms) gone? Collections of hundreds of millions of ringgit are announced every year," he said.

The storming of the church and the spin-off issues has had serious ramifications on Malaysia that is working hard to embrace the principles of inter-religious harmony and respectful

co-existence. The church incident came so soon after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak's meeting mid-July with Pope Benedict XVI, the worldwide leader of the Roman Catholic Church, at the Vatican to accentuate collaboration and dialogue between various religious groups.

It cannot be denied that the government's move to establish relations with the Vatican has been badly affected. It cannot be denied that the Catholic commu-

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nity in Malaysia that makes up the largest group of Christians in the country — about nine per cent of Malaysia's 28 million people are Christian, with Catholics numbering about 850,000 — has been hurt as well.

I sense soulless trouble rousers seem fearful there actually exists togetherness in our nation and that's alarming. They have lost

spiritual steadiness and inverted their values.

Last January, I wrote about a rosary my Muslim buddy Nara gave me as a gift for Christmas. He got it blessed by a bishop during a trip to the Vatican and the rosary gift remains a status update in my life — one that bespeaks the spirit of mutual respect. and thumps home the

need to refrain from the slippery slope of needless religious and race comparisons.

To me, the rosary deed will always make me want to forget those amongst us "blessed" with knuckle-headitude.

Both Christians and Muslims are people of the book and we can only be in awe of the idiocy

of people who clasp fanaticism and turn on the tap of chaos.

FRANKIE D'CRUZ is editor-at-large of *The Malay Mail*. The multiple award-winning journalist can be contacted at frankie@mmail.com.my