

ADDRESS

FABC AT FORTY

At the occasion of the consecration of the Manila Cathedral, December 7, 1958, and at the invitation of Manila Archbishop Rufino J. Santos, the Arch/Bishops of Asia were invited. The Vatican sent Cardinal Agagianian, Prefect of Propaganda Fide, as Papal Legate; and the desire for harmonious and collaborative work among Bishops including the needs of evangelization in continental Asia in the 50's were discussed. From that historic meeting of Asian Bishops in Manila Radio Veritas was born.

Pope Paul VI, in his pastoral visit to the Philippines in November 1970 said this: "You have before you an immense field for your apostolate. It is difficult to speak of Asia as a whole since more than half of mankind lives here. One can however point to a certain network of common interests, a certain identity in the way of looking at life and a certain harmony of aspirations. Young in its peoples but rich in civilizations often thousands of years old, Asia is impelled as by an irresistible desire to occupy her rightful place in the world, and her influence is effectively increasing" (Paul VI, *Address to all Bishops of Asia*, Manila, Nov. 28, 1970). Those words sounded like they were pronounced only yesterday.

The same Supreme Pontiff continued by encouraging the Asian Bishops to take the then recently concluded Ecumenical Council as guide in their Asian Pastoral Ministry. Noting that the "natural disposition of Asian people for religious mystery" could serve as a sign of their call to Christian revelation", he further added that the missionary vocations in this continent would be the sign of the maturity of Asia's local churches.

Not long after that first Papal visit to Asia, a select group of leading Asian Church men met at the Jesuit Francis Xavier Provincial House in Manila, with the Jesuit Provincial, then Father Horacio de la Costa, assisting them. They were Cardinals Valerian Gracias of Bombay, Stephen Kim of Seoul, Justin Darmojuwono of Semarang, Bishops Stanislaus Lokuang of Taipeh, Francis Hsu of Hong Kong and Mariano Gaviola of the Philippines. Taking off from Vatican II's *Christus Dominus* on the need of regional conferences, this handful of Bishops, inspired by the Spirit prayed and later accepted that there was a great need for a regional conference of Bishops in Asia. Most insistent and taking the firmest initiative among these, rightly called, FABC Fathers, was Cardinal Stephen Kim of Korea who practically directed the group towards the establishment of the regional conference which, in fact, would take place only at the Taipeh Conference.

As we recall the role of these leading Church men in Asia in the founding of FABC, we include, in grateful memory, the role of the Reverend Father Catalino Arevalo, S. J., Asia's eminent theologian, who, out of his love for the

Church, has guided the development of Asian theology, refined the theological thought of many a theological-pastoral statement of Bishops for nearly forty (40) years.

Everything was preparatory, until 1974 when the Bishops of Asia finally met in the historic Taipeh Conference, where the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) was formally established. It was in that Conference where Asia's Bishops, reflecting on the situation, history and needs of the Asian people decidedly assigned to themselves the challenges of Evangelization among their people: the triple dialogue (a) the Dialogue with the old Religions of Asia, (b) the dialogue with the rich cultures of Asia, and (c) dialogue with the poor. The Triple Dialogue accepted by Asia's Bishops in Taipeh truly was the response to the needs of the people in this oriental continent; but it was also their acceptance of the proposal of Pope Paul VI's Encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, where dialogue was presented as an efficient means to Evangelization.

Significant themes have been discussed and reflected on by FABC the past 40 years: Evangelization in Modern Day Asia, in 1974; Prayer: the life of the Church in Asia, 1978; the Church, a Community of Faith in Asia, 1982; the Vocation and Mission of the laity in Asia, 1986; Journey Together to the Third Millennium, 1990; Christian Discipleship in Asia: Service to Life, 1995; a Renewed Church in Asia: Mission of Love and Service, 2000; the Asian Family: Towards a Culture of Integral Life, 2004; Living the Eucharist in Asia, 2009.

Worth mentioning too was the Asian Bishops' participation in the celebrated International Mission Congress in Manila (1979) the first ever in this part of the world whose final message became something like an "Asian Magna Charta" for local church mission and evangelization labours.

All these initiatives of the Asian Bishops towards an ever impassioned manner of reaching out to people with the message of Jesus, as also taking place in other parts of the world, but with greater challenges for the Pastors in Asia, are what the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI said he appreciates and accompanies with his prayers.

We look back at those grace-filled years of evangelization in Asia; and we thank God for what have been accomplished, and how those experiences have challenged all to further reach out towards the "fullness of life" that the Lord promised to those who accept Him.

From this celebration of forty years we have the duty to "look ahead" to what the call of the grace of evangelization is drawing us. This year also two events have just been inaugurated in the Church, "The Year of Faith" and "the New Evangelization".

In his homily at the closing of the recent Synod on the New Evangelization, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI reminded Bishops, Priests and the Laity that the new evangelization applies to *all* in the Church.

First, it will concern the faithful in the Sacrament of Christian Initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist. And because these Sacraments lay the

foundation of every Christian life, they will be treasured by everyone who has met Christ. In these Sacraments we encounter the Lord's call to holiness, including also the celebration of God's mercy in Confession. The Sacrament that we call penance, beyond the forgiveness of sins, is really the Sacrament that invites us to celebrate the greatness of God's love and mercy, a need many have set aside these days on account of the present day delusion that peace is attained only when one is in comfort and satisfied. On the other hand the Lord Jesus showed that peace is attained through repentance and renewal, and when one is again embraced by God, who, as Father, loves His sons (Luke 15:11-31).

Second, the new evangelization is linked to *Missio ad Gentes*. Jesus and his message of the Father's love in the Kingdom must reach peoples, especially in Asia. Those who never heard about Him and those who long ago had been evangelized, but had forgotten Him or had placed Him as second or lower choice, needed to hear about Him (again).

Continental Asia is different from the rest of the world, because again and again it has been termed as the home of the world's great religions, and yet the first proclamation of Jesus is still awaited among its teeming billions. Have we not heard in the hall of the recent synod that for Asians Evangelization is just beginning?

In today's global phenomenon of migration hundreds of millions – including many Christians – are on the move to other countries and across continents for social, political, economic, ethnic and many other reasons. In the end it is not at all only a matter of earning a living, but moving out to another country commits the migrant to an inestimable way of life; for the Christian wherever s/he is, his or her "light" must shine in the sight of men, so that seeing their good works, other may give praise to the Father in Heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Evangelization is inevitably linked to witness. The way a person lives puts at stake what s/he believes.

Pope Paul VI thus expressed the truth of evangelization in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "The person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn". (E. N., 24).

Thirty-nine years ago Pope Paul VI wrote to the Bishops stating that "Above all, the Gospel must be proclaimed by witness ... Through this wordless witness these Christians stir up irresistible questions in the hearts of those who see how they live: Why are they like this? Why do they live in this way? What or who is it that inspires them? Why are they in our midst? Such a witness is already a silent proclamation of the Good News and a very powerful and effective one. Here we have an initial act of evangelization" (E. N., 21). And when other questions are posed which presume presence, friendship, sharing and compassion, the soul-searching friend may finally admit that what s/he had

sensed for so long and yet could not say or name can only be Jesus that Christians love and follow. Such is the power of witness that when people ask questions like “where or why”, the answer will always be, “Come and see”. Just recently in his homily at the closing of the Synod, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI said that “the real protagonists of the new evangelization are the saints – who speak a language intelligible to all through the example of their lives and the works of charity”.

Love speaks all languages so that even the blind is enabled to “see” the truth and attractiveness of what is good; in love the deaf can “hear” the call and the bidding of compassion. This too is the reason why His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI said that charity is the language that is intelligible to all. Evangelization that is coupled with charity makes Jesus and His message intelligible to and welcomed by all.

Again, the proclamation of Jesus will not only be directed “ad extra”, for the reason that even in the countries that were long ago called Christians, there is the great need for the Lord Jesus Christ to be received again, but this time in a profoundly new and lovingly welcoming way.

In the words of the Holy Father the Year of Faith that we celebrate the whole year round (2012-2013) is indeed “a summons to authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Saviour of the world”. And just as evangelization takes place only in Jesus, any renewal in the Church can only mean a “renewed conversion to Jesus” – through a renewal that is a turning away from evil by a heart that has been hardened by sin, but, through proclamation, can slowly learn the road back to God whose love one discovers in Jesus. We become reconciled to God in Jesus; we know the Father only in His Son Jesus. “No one can know the Father except through me. If you know me, you know the Father also”, the Lord said. (John 14:6, 7).

Pope Paul VI again underlined the centrality of Jesus in the Church’s evangelization when he said that evangelization can be “defined as the proclamation of Jesus to those who do not know Him” (E.N., 17). There is no evangelization that does not have Jesus as the centre of proclamation. In the New Evangelization we become inventive, in the sense of being spiritually creative, in making the Lord Jesus captivating again. We awaken that hunger for the Lord in this new evangelization. We must say that we need Jesus again!

In the apostolic letter *Porta Fidei* Pope Benedict XVI puts it this way, “We must rediscover a taste for feeding ourselves on the word of God, faithfully handed down by the Church, and on the bread of life, offered as sustenance for his disciples”.

The different themes discussed and reflected on by the Asian Bishops in past FABC assemblies – Prayer, the Triple Dialogue, Christian Discipleship, Renewed Church: Mission and Love – the thoughts and reflections gathered then could now be employed in the renewal that is called for by the new

evangelization. We need not reinvent the attractiveness of Jesus; He already is “the desire of all nations”. That longing for Christ needs to be fanned, awakened to the truth that the hunger for that unknown and unnamed tranquillity or peace, truly, is a yearning for a Saviour Jesus.

And **lastly**, Christians whose lives do not reflect the demands of Baptism must be helped to meet and encounter Jesus Christ again. They need to be approached using new language attuned to the cultures (age old or recent), always dialoguing within an attitude of friendship, but always animated by love that is rooted in God.

The Holy Father expressed in his letter to this legate his desire for the Brothers in the Episcopacy to generously continue in the commitment to “the Bishops’ duty to manifest, by their renewed strength and zeal, the love of Christ, the Church and the Gospel. Burning with the virtue of faith, they should foster human culture and diligently pursue dialogue among the peoples”.

On our part we will communicate to His Holiness what we see and hear of the dedicated efforts of the Asian Bishops, with the assistance of the FABC, in keeping ever alive the dialogues with peoples, religions and long subsisting cultures in the large Asian continent in relation to the evangelization in Jesus, initiated years ago.

We bring to you the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI’s wish of expressing his charity to all the Bishops of Asia, and through you, beloved Bishops, the same love is extended to the Priests and the beloved Faithful of Asia. Happy to be informed of your efforts and initiatives to disseminate the Gospel, he assures all that he accompanies you in spirit and encourages all with his prayers.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus and Queen of Apostles, always protect and guide us, as we retell the story of Her Son with words and deeds.

God Bless!

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