

FABC Bishops Identify Challenges for "New Evangelization"

XUAN LOC, Vietnam – Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, secretary general of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), opened the second full day of the 10th FABC Plenary Assembly on Dec. 12 with a summary of the working paper written by his predecessor Archbishop Orlando Quevedo of Cotabato, Philippines.

The 30-page text, whose title is based on the assembly theme, "FABC at Forty Years - Responding to the Challenges of Asia: A New Evangelization," outlines the federation's history and highlights the theme of every previous plenary assembly, the FABC's highest governing body.

The document also lists 14 "megatrends" that "shape the evangelizing mission of the Church in Asia": globalization, culture, poverty, migrants and refugees, indigenous peoples, population, religious freedom, threats to life, social communication, ecology, laity, women, youth, Pentecostalism and vocations.

The next section of the text offers a theological basis for the Church's proclamation and evangelizing mission. Lastly, the document briefly describes the prophetic role of the Church embodied in a "new evangelization" based on the FABC's understanding of a "new way of being Church in Asia."

The document, which was sent to the FABC's 19 member bishops' conferences and its nine associate members before the Dec. 11-16 assembly began, aims to provide a basis for the participants' reflection during their sessions at Xuan Loc Pastoral Centre, part of a large compound of the Catholic diocese of Xuan Loc in Dong Nai Province, east of Ho Chi Minh City.

Following a brief presentation of the working paper by Cardinal Gracias, several participants shared their reflections and reactions, largely based on realities they must deal with in their respective local Churches. Their interventions sketched a snapshot of challenges the Church in Asia must address as it revitalizes its evangelization efforts.

Archbishop Patrick D'Rozario of Dhaka agreed that a "new evangelization" is needed in Asia, but he suggested that serious deliberation be given to what this means. An appropriate response to the challenge of new evangelization, he said, is to consider two basic dimensions of human society today – namely, "a tendency for a materialistic secular culture resulting from the unilateral advances in secular sciences and technologies," which is in contrast with "a quietly felt need for the spiritual."

The 69-year-old prelate, a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross and president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh, then identified six specific areas of mission concern in Bangladesh: indigenous people comprising about half the country's Christians; over-population and problems arising from unethical birth control measures; ecology, which is a major issue for Bangladesh because it is so harshly affected by climate change; evangelization among Muslims; the promotion of the dignity of women; and widespread injustice and corruption at various levels.

Bishop Norberto do Amaral of Maliana diocese in Timor Leste asserted that the working paper's 14 megatrends are valid and that his country must "face the same challenges

and share the same reality." In coming years, he said, preparing a strategic pastoral plan would pre-occupy Timor Leste's newly launched bishops' conference, and the bishops would especially address the negative consequences of globalization, the spread of erroneous doctrine, keeping the youth in the flock, and strengthening familial bonds while preserving culture and tradition.

Cardinal Telesphore Toppo of Ranchi, president of the Conference of Catholic Bishops' of India - Latin Rite, listed four major concerns of the Church in South Asia. One is the need to preserve and promote the Church's faith identity through interreligious dialogue and inculturation. Another need is to take a prophetic stand in the face of "unacceptable ethical trends and practices," such as contraception, abortion, euthanasia, and others, which undermine "objective foundations and universal norms."

Cardinal Toppo then spoke of the necessity to evangelize in ways that will "preserve authentic Asian cultures." Citing Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation "Ecclesia in Asia" (Church in Asia, 1999), he said, "The Church's mission of evangelization in Asia will be made more meaningful, intelligible, effective and fruitful by giving it an authentic local Asian face." He also stressed that "sensitivity toward tribals and indigenous peoples" needs concrete expression through "socio-pastoral plans" which aim towards the people's socio-economic welfare.

Archbishop George Valiamattam of Tellicherry, a leader of India's Syro-Malabar Catholics, said, "The Syro-Malabar Church is in a position to make great contributions to the evangelization of Asia with her strong roots in faith, active participation in liturgical and sacramental life, universal presence and large number of vocations." Through the FABC, he added, the Asian Church "needs to recognize this great potential of the Oriental Churches in India for the evangelization of Asia."

Meanwhile, Bishop Thomas Mar Anthonios of Trivandrum, a prelate of India's Syro-Malankara Church, asked the assembly to consider making "sufficient introspection of megatrends within the Church that are barriers to her mission." He went on to identify some of these "countersigns to the vision and mission of the Church": the presence of electronic trash posing an ecological threat in Asia's developing countries; the misuse of pesticides threatening human health and the environment; the decrease in vocations in "fertile vineyards that are becoming affluent"; and the "danger of high secularization which makes liturgical celebrations a hi-tech mega-program."

Bishop John Hsane Hgyi of Pathein, Myanmar, drew attention to Asia's migration phenomenon which is affecting his country as it now democratizes and enjoins diaspora nationals to return to their native land and participate in national recovery and development works. Catholic migrants have a role to play in this era of new evangelization, he said, and as they face "the vast field of secularity," they must "witness the true nature of the Church as a community of prayers, a community of faith, and a communion of communities."

Japan's Archbishop Joseph Mitsuaki Takami of Nagasaki, a member of the Society of Priests of St. Sulpice (Sulpicians), said the FABC should contribute more to interreligious dialogue efforts of the Catholic Church and learn from its 40 long years of relevant experience. In his own country, he said, the Church needs to emphasize the importance of small communities in mission lands and to assume a prophetic role to help overturn

Japan's nuclear power policy that is often unethical, inhumane and against the Gospel. He added that the Church should also "intervene in addressing the widening gap between the rich and the poor" along with related issues concerning human rights.

Archbishop Tomasz Peta of Maria Santissima in Astana, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Kazakhstan, called on the Church in Asia "to carry out her mission fruitfully and to live the spirituality of communion" through "prayer, beginning with the pastors." For the Church in his Central Asian republic, prayer is a sure way not only to sustain the local Church but also live the challenges created in this era of new evangelization, he said.

When Korea's Bishop Peter Kang U-Il of Cheju spoke about pastoral challenges facing the Asian Church, he stressed how important it is to "work together in the spirit of solidarity and cooperation at various ecclesiastical levels." With such unity, the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea said, the Church's prophetic mission will be practiced in "a concrete way" with dedication to the new evangelization and enthusiasm in the face of secularism and materialism.

Bishop Rufin Anthony of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, the secretary general of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops Conference, pointed out that where Christians are a small minority as in his own country, the Church has to be more vigorous in the areas of catechesis, vocations promotion and the formation of priests and religious men and women. Such measures, he said, could help address structures of discrimination, poverty, illiteracy, fundamentalism and the threat of terrorism evident in Pakistan.

The Church of Sri Lanka sees the mission of the new evangelization as a genuine communication of the Good News only in so far as the "messenger" or evangelizer embodies the message, according to Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka. This involves a personal commitment to live what we believe, he said, and the need of the Church in Asia is to "rediscover priestly spirituality" and sustain such spirituality "by the daily Eucharist and prayer."

"Being rooted in Christ," the cardinal emphasized, "is the uncompromising foundation to bring about a renewal in the life of the missionary. In the context of new evangelization, 'evangelizing the evangelizer' is certainly an important task." He also pointed out other pressing needs of the Asian Church, including: renewal in the family, pastoral care of the family, renewal in social commitment, renewal in liturgy, and lastly, strengthened efforts in catechesis and Catholic education.

Archbishop Louis Chamniern Santisukniran of Thare-Nonseng, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand, shared the experience of the Church in Thailand regarding its understanding and practice of interreligious dialogue, "a perfect means for the new evangelization." Interreligious dialogue, he said, should "create positive interaction with all groups of other faiths in the community," leading to harmony, collaboration and societal practices strongly marked with positive ethical values.

Archbishop Peter Nguyen Van Nhon of Hanoi, president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, stressed that the FABC and the Asian Church should strengthen efforts to dialogue with the poor as well as the religions and cultures of Asia, particularly when confronted by forces of globalization and secularization that undermine people's

values and traditions. This plenary assembly marking the FABC's 40th anniversary, he said, "is an opportunity for all of us to rediscover the meaning of faith." He also stressed, "We need to return to Christ, change our mind, and strive more to seek the wisdom of the cross."

Bishop Wenceslao Padilla, apostolic prefect of Ulaanbaatar and a Filipino member of the Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, likewise stressed that the Church in Asia must be Christ-centered and make this "friendship with God through Christ" the basis of our relationship with one another. "Evangelization speaks to the heart, from a believing heart," he said, and this is important for facing the numerous issues and challenges brought about by megatrends such as globalization and widespread economic progress.

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