

ASIAN CELEBRATION OF THE
50TH ANNIVERSARY OF *NOSTRA AETATE*

BISHOPS' INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS - BIRA VI

FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA)

Redemptorist Center, Pattaya, Thailand

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Edited by

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PART 1

CONTENTS

- I. Welcome Address
- Archbishop Paul Tschang In-Nam, Apostolic Nuncio
- II. Letter of 16 November 2015
- His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, President-FABC
- III. Keynote Address: *Nostra Aetate* - An Overview: History, Theology and Challenges for Today "In Our Time" Revisiting *Nostra Aetate* after Fifty Years
- Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, M.Afr.
- IV. *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II: An Asian Re-Reading after Fifty Years and the Way Forward
- Fr. Felix Wilfred
- V. The Fruits of Dialogue in Asia Over the Past 50 Years: What are the Fruits and Where Are We Now 50 yrs Later, What Have We Learned and Where Do We Go?
- Bishop Bejoy Nicephorus D'Cruze, O.M.I.
- Fr. Matthew Park Moonseong
- Cardinal Orlando Quevedo, O.M.I.
- VI. Final Statement BIRA VI

I. WELCOME ADDRESS

- *Archbishop Paul Tschang In-Nam, Apostolic Nuncio*

Your Eminence Cardinal Oswald Gracias, President of the FABC, Your Eminence Cardinal Orlando Quevedo, Archbishop of Cotabato, Your Grace Archbishop Felix Machado, Chairman of the OEIA of the FABC, Brother Bishops, Brother Priests, Reverend Brothers and Sisters, Dear Friends,

As Apostolic Nuncio in Thailand, it is my pleasure to welcome you all to this beautiful country: Thailand, the Land of Smiles.

I welcome you to this Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Conciliar Declaration "*Nostra Aetate*", organized by the FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

50 years ago, on 28th October 1965, through the promulgation of the Declaration "*Nostra Aetate*", the Catholic Church, putting herself in listening to a world in rapid changes, invited her faithful to promote relations of respect, friendship and dialogue with persons of other Religions and Beliefs.

Rightly, the "*Nostra Aetate*" is considered as a basic document and the Magna Charta for fruitful relations between the Catholic Church and other non-Christian Religions. The message of "*Nostra Aetate*" remains always relevant, urgent and important in the world today and particularly in Asia, when we consider the situation of the Church in this Asian continent and the challenges that it faces.

Asia is a vast Continent where the Church is called to live together with different Religions and Cultural traditions. The Church in Asia is a "*pusillus grex*, a small flock", immersed in the immense population with its ancient cultures and traditions. The Church is "a true mustard seed, a very small seed", sown in the vast continent of Asia.

In Asia we have very few countries where Christianity is a major Religion (Timor East, Philippines, Lebanon, Vietnam), while the majority of population in other countries profess Islam (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia), Hinduism (India), Buddhism (Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka), etc. Such a situation of minority religion represents to the Local Church in Asia different types of challenges, institutional ones as well as non-institutional

ones: from discrimination to persecution, attitudes of intolerance, rise of fundamentalism and religious violence, subtle control and restrictions on Church's missionary activities, etc.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis, through his enlightening witness, encourages us to continue on the path of Interreligious Dialogue, to meet with the faithful of other beliefs with a clear consciousness of our own identity, but with a spirit of respect, esteem and friendship, ready to work together with those who pray and think in a different way than ours.

He encourages Asian Bishop with the following words: "On this vast continent which is home to a great variety of cultures, the Church is called to be versatile and creative in her witness to the Gospel through dialogue and openness to all." Thus, "*Dialogue is an essential part of the mission of the Church in Asia.*" (*Address to Asian Bishops during the Pastoral Visit to Korea in August, 2014*).

The Holy Father reminds us that, in undertaking dialogue with individuals and cultures, our point of departure and our fundamental point of reference is our own identity, *our identity as Christians*. "We cannot engage in real dialogue unless we are conscious of our own identity...If we are to speak freely, openly and fruitfully with others, we must be clear about who we are, what God has done for us, and what it is that he asks of us."

Recently, during the Interreligious General Audience on 28th October last, commemorating the present anniversary, Pope Francis said: "The dialogue that we need cannot but be open and respectful, and thus prove fruitful. Mutual respect is the condition and, at the same time, the aim of the interreligious dialogue: respecting others' right to life, to physical integrity, to fundamental freedoms, namely freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression and of religion." (Pope Francis, *General Audience 28th October 2015*).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Let us persevere in aspiring to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the full, in hope, in joy, in thanksgiving, with courage and constancy.

I join with you in praying for the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit for the gift of wisdom, while entrusting to the Blessed Virgin Mary this journey in faith.

Once again, my heartfelt welcome and I wish you all a fruitful Asian Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of “*Nostra Aetate*”.

As they say welcome in the Thai language: Yin-dii Tón Ráp. Sawaat-dii Khrap.

II. LETTER OF 16 NOVEMBER 2015

- *His Eminence Oswald Cardinal Gracias, President, FABC*

My dear Archbishop Felix Machado and Fr. Bill LaRousse,

I regret very much that I am unable to attend our BIRA VI Meeting in Pattaya. I was looking forward very much to it. The dates were fixed in consultation with me. And I had booked my tickets to Bangkok.

Unfortunately, due to a bout of fever which has not left me, the doctors have advised me to cancel all engagements. Our Archdiocese of Bombay hosted the National Eucharistic Congress which concluded yesterday, and that was energy consuming!

My particular regret is because I was eagerly waiting to learn more about inter-religious dialogue from this FABC Meeting. I know all the Speakers and I am aware they will have some original ideas to contribute to the thinking on Dialogue.

On the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* we are once again reminded of the great importance of Inter-Religious Dialogue. When I recently read the document I realized how very relevant the Decree is even today.

In recent meetings in Rome and even in the Synod of the Family just concluded, the need for Inter-religious dialogue has repeatedly been stressed.

We are living in a world of great intolerance and much violence. In their great wisdom and foresight the Council Fathers had given us initial principles to start on the path of Dialogue. For us in Asia, Dialogue is a necessity. I am sure this FABC-OEIA Meeting will further deepen our understanding of *Nostra Aetate* and give directions for the future.

For the FABC, Dialogue is a foundational pastoral thrust. We have reflected much on the triple Dialogue: Dialogue with Religions,

Dialogue with Cultures and Dialogue with the Poor. This meeting will further that reflection.

I wish you a very fruitful meeting.

Warm greetings to each one of the participants.

With kind regards and best wishes,

Yours fraternally in Christ,

✠ Oswald Cardinal Gracias
Archbishop of Bombay
President, FABC

**III. KEYNOTE ADDRESS: *NOSTRA AETATE* - AN OVERVIEW:
HISTORY, THEOLOGY AND CHALLENGES FOR TODAY
"IN OUR TIME" Revisiting *Nostra Aetate* after Fifty Years
- Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, M.Afr.**

Introduction

We sometimes have the opportunity of visiting old friends whom we have not seen for a long time. We often ask ourselves whether we shall still recognize them, or whether they have grown old beyond all recognition. We wonder if they have kept up with the times, and ask ourselves whether they have anything to say to us today. These questions can also be put with regard to *Nostra Aetate* (NA), the Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. We may ask whether this document has any relevance today, fifty years after the beginning of the Second Vatican Council.

The origins of *Nostra Aetate*

Let us remember first of all that NA was a surprise result of Vatican II. It had not been foreseen in the preparatory agenda. There were, it is true, some pioneers who were advocating a new attitude towards followers of other religions. We make think of Matteo Ricci and Roberto De Nobili, and also of John de Brito in the past. We could mention more recently Yves Monchanin and Henri Le Saux (Abhishiktananda), followed by Bede Griffiths, for their approach to Hinduism; Louis Massignon, Louis Gardet, Georges Anawati, and Vincent Courtois with regard to relations with Muslims; and Thomas Merton, for his openness to Buddhism, as also Enomia Lasalle and Fr

Oshida for their understanding of Buddhism. Yet there was in the Church no strong movement for interreligious dialogue, comparable to the biblical, liturgical and ecumenical movements, which could have provided a stimulus for treating this theme. At the origin of the Declaration was the desire of Pope John XXIII to issue a statement about the relations of the Church to Judaism in order to counter the anti-Semitism that was rife even among Christians. Because of political and ecclesial circumstances it was decided to widen the document to encompass all religions. As is well known, the bishops from the Arab world present at the Council warned that a statement about relations with Jews would be understood as support for Israel, and therefore they advised that, if the document were to be maintained, it should also mention Islam. Then the bishops from Asia, and in particular Cardinal Doi of Tokyo, and bishops from Africa pleaded for a broader treatment of religions. Consequently the document, though remaining one of the shortest of the Council, became more general in its outlook¹.

If there is anything to learn from this event, it is that the Church has to be ready for surprises and has to realise that the Spirit who leads the Church can turn obstacles into advantages.

Paragraph 1

“In this age of ours (*Nostra Aetate*), when men² are drawing more closely together and the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened”.

We can read this as a prophetic statement, for today the world has indeed become a smaller place on account of easier travel and the greater facility of communications. Yet we might perhaps be less sanguine than the Council Fathers. Is it true that the bonds of friendship between different peoples are being strengthened? Conflicts are taking pace in many parts of the world, including Asia. There are some who are tempted to talk about a clash of civilisations.

¹ On the genesis of *Nostra Aetate* cf. G. M.-M. COTTIER, O.P. “L’historique de la Déclaration” in A.M. HENRY (ed.), *Les Relations de l’Eglise avec les Religions Non-Chrétiennes*, Paris, Cerf, 1966, pp.37-78; the intervention of Cardinal Doi is mentioned on p.46.

² The text is quoted according to the translation reproduced in Francesco GIOIA (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II* (1963-2005), Boston, , Pauline Books & Media, 2006, n 1-19. Today, out of sensitivity to gender equality, we would prefer to say “people”.

Should we not say rather that the greater inter-connection of peoples can have both positive and negative effects? A tsunami can bring out concrete expressions of solidarity throughout the world, but disrespect for a religious figure can provoke demonstrations on an almost universal scale.

The movement of peoples has brought closer attention to the situation of religious minorities. Their presence has given rise to new questions concerning religious liberty and the legitimate requirements of religious communities. It is not, however, NA that deals with these questions, but rather *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Freedom.

I mention this fact in order to recall that NA is not to be taken in isolation, but rather must be read in conjunction with the other documents of Vatican II. Attention has to be given to *Ad Gentes* which deals with the mission of the Church in a world marked by religious plurality. NA is obviously connected with *Gaudium et Spes* which outlines how the Church relates to the modern world. There is above all *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which provides the theological foundation for relations with people belonging to other religions.

“Ever aware of her duty to foster unity and charity among individuals, and even among nations, she (the Church) reflects at the outset on what men have in common and what tends to promote fellowship among them...All men form but one community. This is so because all stem from the one stock which God created to people the entire earth and also because all share a common destiny, namely God.... Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence.”

One can notice here, in these statements, the tension that exists between unity and plurality. The unity of humankind is emphasized, a unity of both origin and destiny, while however recognizing the fact of religious plurality. The affirmations in this paragraph are based on the Christian Scriptures, yet it would seem to me that the followers of other religious traditions could agree with them, although they might not formulate them in the same way.

It is noted that all human beings are faced with the same fundamental questions regarding human existence, thus indicating a certain unity in their aspirations and anxieties. Yet they turn to different religions

for their answers. As the Declaration says, all people have a common destiny, but they remain divided in the way they set out to reach this goal.

NA lists the fundamental questions that people are struggling with – about the meaning of life, about suffering (the fundamental question for Buddhism), about death and what happens after death, about genuine happiness. It is recognized that people turn to religions to find answers for the “unsolved riddles of human existence”, and this capacity to give meaning to human existence is seen to be one of the values of religions in general. These basic questions are still posed. Scientific progress has not eliminated them, but perhaps has only rendered them more acute. To give just two examples, the possibilities opened up through bio-engineering have to be evaluated in the light of the fundamental understanding of the dignity of the human person, and the effects on the environment of industrial development with increasing carbon emissions raise the question of the place of the human person within the created universe. We may ask ourselves whether people are still turning to religions for the answers. Among people in the West it was perhaps thought that religion had had its day, and that the whole world was moving towards secularisation, but this persuasion, or even the hope, of some has proved to be false, for in fact in recent years it has become evident that religion is an important factor in life for many people.

A first conclusion can therefore be drawn from these reflections. The human being has to be recognized as *homo religiosus*, a being with an innate drive to something beyond. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published twenty years ago, states: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself In many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behaviour: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a *religious being*” (CCC 27-28).

It is surely significant that the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which is by no standards a revolutionary document, adopts a reasonably positive attitude to the different aspects of religions.

Accordingly attention in theology should be given to the virtue of religion, not only in general but also as it comes to be expressed within each particular religious tradition.

It would seem possible to arrive at a further conclusion, namely that the different religious traditions are to be taken seriously, since they have shaped the religious outlook of the people who follow these traditions. It would not therefore be right to assert, for instance, that one has respect for Muslims, but not for Islam, and to evoke NA in order to defend this assertion.

Paragraph 2

The second paragraph of NA deals succinctly with what we would now call Traditional Religions, and then very briefly, but in carefully chosen terms, with Hinduism and Buddhism. A percipient commentator on this text has stated that it would have been difficult to give the essentials of Hinduism in fewer words. He also notes that any one versed in this religion would be able to supply the classical Sanskrit terms for every word used in these few lines.³ The same commentator observes that NA, with regard to Buddhism, immediately and rightly mentions its different forms, though without using their specific names.⁴ Although all Buddhists refer to the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana (or Tibetan) traditions of Buddhism do indeed manifest significant differences, and these should be taken into account in any dialogue. In fact when the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue took the initiative to organise dialogues with representatives of these different traditions, there resulted a considerable dialogue among the Buddhist participants, especially between those belonging to the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. It could be said that the Catholics were contributing to a form of Buddhist ecumenism! Of course some would question whether Buddhism should be considered a religion at all, since most Buddhists are not concerned with the question of God, and therefore dialogue with Buddhists is sometimes dismissed as nonsensical. We may say here *contra facta non disputatur*, there can be no disputing facts; a

³ Cf. J. MASSON, S.J., "Valeurs religieuses de l'hindouisme" in A.M. HENRY (ed.), *Les Relations de l'Eglise avec les Religions Non-Chrétiennes*, Paris, Cerf, p.163.

⁴ Cf. J. MASSON, S.J., "Valeurs du bouddhisme" in A.M. HENRY, op. cit. p.181.

serious dialogue has been going on for many years now between Christians and Buddhists, especially among monks and nuns of both traditions.⁵

If NA were being written today, it would surely have to give more attention to Traditional Religions under whatever name they are called, whether Tribal Religions as in India and in other parts of Asia, or Native Religions as in the Americas, or Indigenous Religions as among the Aborigines of Oceania. When the Secretariat for Non-Christians, which Pope Paul VI had established in 1964 for the specific purpose of the application of NA (even though at that date this document had not yet been voted on), produced a series of booklets on dialogue with the followers of different religions, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, it included one entitled *Meeting the African Religions*. This caused consternation among some missionaries in Africa who said that they had been doing their utmost to stamp out these false religions, and now the Vatican was putting them on a pedestal. In fact these guidelines for Africa, which could apply *mutatis mutandis* to Asia also, were not intended to glorify other religions, but simply to help to overcome prejudices, following the spirit of Vatican II.

This paragraph of NA goes on to make an important declaration: "The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men."

"True", "holy" – these are strong words which must be given their full weight. Moreover, it is surely safe to presume that this statement applies not only to those religions mentioned previously, but also to those that are dealt with afterwards, namely Islam and Judaism. It can also be applied to those religious traditions that have been passed over in silence, for if it were being written today the Declaration would also necessarily give a distinct place to Sikhism found now not only in India but in many different parts of the world, as well as to

⁵ See the online journal *Dilatato Corde* of the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) for further details.

Shinto and Tenrikyo in Japan, and the religion of the Baha'i.⁶ If this presumption is correct, it provides a confirmation of the conclusions drawn above, for whereas "life and conduct" can be taken to refer to persons, whether as individuals or as members of a community, "precepts and doctrines" certainly belong to religions as such. This means that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, and other religions, though they differ from Christianity on essential points, are not totally rejected. They are seen as containing, or at least as reflecting, the truth which enlightens, or in other words the truth which is salvific. It means also that holy people belonging to these religions - and I am sure that you have all met such holy people - have come to holiness not in spite of their religion but helped by certain elements of their religion.

This balanced approach is then complemented by another strong affirmation: "Yet she (the Church) proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is 'the way, the truth, and the life' (Jn 14:6). In him, in whom God reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Co 5:18-19), men find the fullness of their religious life."

Though the beliefs and practices of different religions are regarded with respect, on account of the elements of truth and holiness they contain, the uniqueness of salvation in Jesus Christ is nevertheless maintained. Religions are not in themselves ways of salvation, for salvation is always in and through Jesus Christ.

The Incarnation, by which is meant the fact that God has sent his Son into the world out of love (cf. 1 Jn 4:9), has always been central to Christianity. This is reflected in the documents of Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes* states that, through the Incarnation, the Son of God has in a certain way united himself with every human being (cf. GS 22). John Paul II echoed this in his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*: "Man - every man without any exception whatever - has been redeemed by Christ. And with man - with each man without any exception, whatever - Christ is in a way united, even when man is unaware of it. Christ who died and was raised up for all, provides man, each and

⁶ It is disappointing to find that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, although referring briefly to Islam and more fully to Judaism, makes no mention of these religions, not even of Buddhism or Hinduism.

every man, with the light and strength to measure up to his supreme calling" (RH 14).

This conviction, which could perhaps be termed a mystical vision of the unity of the whole of humankind in Christ, gives an added dimension to the dignity of the human person. This certainly influences, or should influence, the way Christians encounter people who do not belong to their own faith. They are not to be considered as mere fodder for hell⁷. What is being stated here is not that there is no salvation for those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, but that salvation comes to them through Christ, through his death and resurrection, even though they may not be aware of this fact. Salvation comes through Christ alone.

The Church has had to defend this truth in order to prevent it from being watered down by the stream of relativism. This is the whole burden of the document *Dominus Jesus* issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. Should this reaffirmation of a central truth of Christianity be considered as a proof of an exclusivist attitude? To that question I would respond with some other questions. Is it exclusivist to believe in one God rather than in a multiplicity of gods? Is it exclusivist to believe in one Incarnation rather than in many? It is precisely because the Incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ touches the whole of humanity that any other incarnation becomes superfluous. Christ remains the Way to the Father, a way that He has opened up for all people through his passion, death and resurrection.

There is thus only one single divine economy of salvation. It is incorrect, states *Dominus Jesus*, to postulate a separate economy of the Holy Spirit which would be broader than that of the Incarnate Word. The latter cannot be seen as limited in time and space to the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. The spirit is not an alternative to Christ, because in fact the Spirit is given by the Risen Christ (DJ 12).

There has surely been a development in pneumatology since Vatican II, signaled by the encyclicals of Saint John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem* and *Redemptoris Missio*, which build on the teaching of the

⁷ In a prayer that I recited in my youth, at the junior seminary of the Missionaries of Africa, we implored Our Lady of Africa to intercede for the Mohammadans (sic) who were falling into Hell because of their ignorance of Jesus, their Redeemer.

Council. According to *Lumen Gentium* good is found sown not only in the hearts of individuals, but also in the rites and customs of peoples (LG 17). This can be attributed to the action of the Spirit for, as *Ad Gentes* observes, "Without doubt the Holy Spirit was at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG 4). It is obvious the impact such a teaching can have on the encounter of Christians with people belonging to other religious traditions. The Christian is not someone who has everything, meeting with someone who has nothing. Rather it is the Holy Spirit present in the Christian who is able to meet the same Spirit present in the interlocutor of a different religious tradition. Is there a contradiction between the idea that the Spirit was at work even before Christ was glorified, and the conviction that the Spirit who acts is indeed the Spirit given by Christ? To my mind the Resurrection is the key concept here. It is through the Resurrection that Jesus overcomes the limitations of time and space. The redemptive value of his Passion, Death and Resurrection is valid for all periods of history, from the very beginning of humankind to the consummation of the world. It is also valid for all peoples, in whatever region of the earth they are to be found.

It can therefore be said, and must be said, that there is only one way of salvation, in Jesus Christ, and that the religions are not alternative ways of salvation. Yet this does not mean that other religions are insignificant. Theologians are encouraged to investigate the way salvific grace, offered in Christ through the work of the Spirit, can be mediated by different elements of the religious traditions (cf. DJ 21). The role of Jesus as unique Mediator between God and humankind does not exclude subordinate mediations.

Dialogue with people of other religions is therefore by no means excluded. Paragraph 2 of NA concludes by encouraging Christians to enter into discussion with the followers of other religions and to collaborate with them. Moreover it encourages them, while witnessing to their own faith, to "Acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture."

Christians therefore are not expected to combat other religions, opposing their religious and cultural expressions. They must rather to seek to appreciate and defend the spiritual and moral values enshrined in them. Pope John Paul II, addressing the small Catholic

community in Ankara, Turkey, stated: "I wonder whether it is not urgent, precisely today when Christians and Muslims have entered a new period of history, to recognize and develop the spiritual bonds that unite us"⁸. This sentiment could surely be applied to the attitude towards religions other than Islam.

Paragraph 3

NA now comes to an explicit consideration of Islam. I hope I will be forgiven if I deal with this section of the Declaration at greater length, since Islam is the religion with which I am most familiar, apart from the Christian faith to which I belong. Notice should be taken both of what NA says and of what it does not say⁹.

"The Church has also a high regard for the Muslims." This affirmation must have come as a surprise to many in the Church who have had in mind the wars of Islamic expansion and the Crusades. It still may surprise some, since with the end of the Cold War it is often Islam that is considered to be the enemy number one in the world, and in more recent years Islam is often accused of breeding terrorism. What has to be noticed here is that although the text speaks of Muslims, it continues by referring to elements of Islamic faith and practice. It can therefore not be used as a basis for the position: "I respect Muslims, but I detest Islam".

"They worship God, who is one, living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has also spoken to men.... Further they await the day of judgment and the reward of God following the resurrection of the dead."

As with the brief description of both Hinduism and Buddhism in paragraph 2, the terms used here to describe God have been carefully chosen, echoing the language of the Qur'an. In a previous draft of this declaration reference was made to belief in a personal God. This was omitted in the final text, since the term "personal" is not part of the vocabulary of Islam. Of course, there is a profound difference in the way Christians and Muslims understand God. While Christians relate to a God in whom they see unity in Trinity, Muslims deny the Trinity

⁸ Cf. Francesco Gioia (ed.) *Interreligious Dialogue*, n° 339.

⁹ For a fuller discussion of this passage see Michael L. FITZGERALD and Robert CASPAR, *Signs of Dialogue. Christian encounter with Muslims*, Zamboanga, Silsilah Publications, ch. 11 "Islam according to Vatican II" pp.233-245.

which they feel destroys the unicity of God. Islamic theology, *kalâm*, is also called *tawhîd*, which means establishing or declaring unicity. Kenneth Cragg, the Anglican bishop and writer on Islam (who died in November, 2012, at ninety-nine years of age), has characterised Islamic theology as being “antiseptic”, in that it wishes to destroy all germs of *shirk*, that is of associating someone or something with God. Despite this difference in understanding, *Lumen Gentium* can state quite clearly of Muslims that “together with us they adore the one, merciful God” (LG 16). Consequently there is no valid reason for Muslims to arrogate to themselves the use of the name *Allâh* for God, and forbid its use by Christians; in fact, as is well known, Arabic-speaking Christians speak of God as *Allâh*.

Islam exalts the transcendence of God, and yet holds that God “has spoken to men”. NA does not develop this affirmation, making no reference to the Islamic concept of revelation, to Muhammad as the Seal of Prophecy, to the Qur’an as the very word of God. This silence has always disappointed Muslims. Yet if the Council had wished to make a positive statement about Muhammad, it would have had to hedge it round with many provisos. In my own theological reflection I have been helped by Karl Rahner’s discussion of prophecy in the life of the Church¹⁰. He remarks that prophecy can continue even after the death of the last Apostle, yet without bringing any substantially new revelation. Nevertheless any prophecy is subject to discernment, since it can be mixed with merely human inspiration. This, to my mind, could apply to the religious experience of Muhammad. We know only too well, however, what strong reactions are aroused among Muslims by anything that would seem to harm the reputation of their Prophet. Therefore it is often more prudent to remain silent on this matter, unless the right conditions exist for expressing one’s position.

“They strive to submit themselves without reserve to the hidden decrees of God, just as Abraham submitted himself to God’s plan, to whose faith Muslims eagerly link their own.”

The reference to submission is significant, since submission is the literal translation of the Arabic *islâm*. It is worth noting also the reference to faith in God. The Declaration *Dominus Jesus* distinguishes

¹⁰ Karl RAHNER, *Visions and Prophecies*, Quaestiones Disputatae 10, London, Burns and Oates, 1963; original *Visionen und Prophezeiungen*, Freiburg, Herder, 1958.

between *theological faith* and *belief*, the first confined to Christians, the second found in other religions (cf. DJ 7). This distinction would seem to belittle the faith of Muslims, since this faith can truly be considered the foundation of Islam. The Letter to the Hebrews (ch.11) comments favourably on the faith of the ancestors, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and Abraham, and so on. One could ask whether what is attributed to them is to be disallowed for Muslims.

A first draft of this section of NA contained a reference to Ishmael, the son of Abraham from whom the Arabs are supposed to descend. This mention was omitted in the final document as not being appropriate. It could be remarked that not all Arabs are Muslims, and not all Muslims are Arabs. Moreover, what is important for Christians is not physical descent, but the spiritual link with Abraham. The approach to Abraham is different in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and yet there is a sense in which they are all Abrahamic religions, as a number of associations grouping members of the three religions recall.

On the other hand Muslims, referring to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, speak often of the three “heavenly” religions. Since Christians do not generally accept that Islam is a revealed religion, they usually avoid the term “heavenly”, preferring to speak about “monotheistic” religions. Yet it is not correct to speak about “the three monotheistic religions”, as if Judaism, Christianity and Islam were the only religions with this character. There are other monotheistic religions, such as Sikhism, which should not be overlooked. It is good to see that there has been a development recently on the Muslim side, allowing for a greater readiness to enter into dialogue with other religions beyond the Abrahamic trio.

“For this reason they highly esteem an upright life and worship God, especially by way of prayer, alms-deeds and fasting.”

In highlighting some of the practices of Muslims, NA mentions three of the five Pillars of Islam: prayer, fasting and alms-giving. The first pillar, *shahâda*, the profession of faith, is omitted, presumably because it includes the mention of Muhammad as the Prophet of God. As you know, the *shahâda* is made up of two “words”, first the attestation that there is no divinity except God (*Allâh*), and secondly that Muhammad is the Messenger of God. It could nevertheless be pointed out that “witness” (another meaning of *shahâda*) is a rich theme which it would be profitable for Christians and Muslims to examine together, since it

is concerned not only with creedal expressions but also with the daily living out of one's faith. It can lead moreover to a reflection on those witnesses who are martyrs (*shuhadâ'*), a live topic at present, especially in the Middle East. The last pillar, pilgrimage to Mecca, was also omitted, again probably because it bears too particularistic a stamp. Certainly the idea of pilgrimage in Islam differs greatly from Christian pilgrimages. Yet here again, the common examination of the purpose of pilgrimage, and also of some of the rites and prayers accompanying the pilgrimage, could be very fruitful. This would apply also to the Shi'a practice of visiting the burial places of Imams and other holy people.

Between the two statements about faith and practice comes a qualified recognition of Islam's acceptance of Jesus and Mary: "Although not acknowledging him as God, they venerate Jesus as a prophet, his virgin Mother they also honour, and even at times devoutly invoke."

Islam rejects the Incarnation as being incompatible with divine transcendence. It rejects also the salvific death of Jesus on the Cross (something which NA passes over in silence). Christians cannot make concessions on these points without ceasing to be Christians. What can be examined, however, is how religious practices handed down in the Islamic tradition can help Muslims to enter into the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection (this observation holds good in similar fashion for other religious traditions). It is surely through dying to self, and living for others that one can walk along the path to salvation traced out by Jesus. Mary, honoured in both religions, though with a differing understanding of her role in salvation history, can serve as a model. It is surely encouraging to note that Lebanon has declared the 25 March, feast of the Annunciation, to be a public holiday for all its citizens, both Christians and Muslims.

Paragraph 3 ends with a well-known passage: "Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom."

The first part of this sentence is a rather euphemistic way of describing the *futuhât*, the Islamic wars of conquest, and the Crusades. Behind this phrase lies also the experience of many Christian

communities, particularly in the Middle East, surviving under Islamic domination, as well as the Muslim communities' experience of humiliation during the colonial period. These memories are still very much alive and continue to shape current attitudes. It is perhaps difficult to "forget the past", as the Council exhorts, but it may be possible to "redeem the past" through a process of re-reading history together and coming to a purification of memories. The further suggestion of NA is to forego confrontation, to refrain from exchanging mutual accusations with regard to the past, in order to look together towards the needs of humankind at the present. There are many themes that can be addressed in common discussion leading to active cooperation: the defence of life, marriage and the family, an ethical approach to business and finance, respect for the environment, the banning of nuclear armaments for the sake of true peace. Such questions are of course not confined to the followers of religions, but the religious point of view can be a valid contribution to their discussion.

Paragraph 4

The fourth paragraph of NA deals with Judaism. It underlines the spiritual bonds that link "the people of the New Covenant" with those of "Abraham's stock", reminding Christians strongly that Jesus, his mother Mary, and the first disciples were all Jews. It emphasises that God "does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues" to His Chosen People. Though the Jewish authorities of the time opposed Jesus, all Jews cannot be held responsible for his death, and so the Jews are not to be considered an accursed race. The Council asks for this to be taken into account in preaching and catechesis.

It is not necessary to go into further detail, as the Jewish presence in Asia is minimal. Since the Council, the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews has issued Guidelines on religious relations with the Jews¹¹, as well as notes on preaching¹², and an important document on the *Shoah*, the Holocaust¹³. What I wish to remark on here is that Muslims have difficulty in accepting the asymmetrical

¹¹ Cf. Augustin FLANNERY (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Mumbai, St Paul's, 2004, pp. 657-662.

¹² Cf. Secretariat for Christian Unity, *Information Service* 57(1985/I)

¹³ Cf. *Information Service* 97(1998/I-II)

relationship of Christianity to the other two Abrahamic religions. Christianity is rooted in Judaism, whereas it cannot be said that Islam is rooted in the religions that preceded it. On the contrary, Islam, professing to be the original religion prescribed by God, would rather see other religions as pale or even distorted reflections of itself. Of course, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine interferes with a sober reflection on relations with Jews, rendering bilateral and trilateral dialogue much more difficult. We have to remember that theological reflection is not carried out in a vacuum, but is subject to the influence of its surroundings.

Paragraph 5

The concluding paragraph of NA turns to a practical conclusion from all that has gone before, namely the condemnation of all discrimination on the basis of race, colour, condition in life, or religion. Unfortunately, almost fifty years later, such a statement is as relevant as ever. Even here, a theological basis is suggested, namely the Fatherhood of God. This is a very Christian approach, and has to be recognised as such. Many Buddhists do not wish to talk about God at all. Many Hindus would not object to speaking about the relationship with God as the basis for human conduct, but some might feel that to speak of Father goes against the spirit of *advaita*, the fundamental non-dualism which aims at absorption into the divine. Muslims too could object to the name of Father given to God – it does not appear among the Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names – because they would consider that it brings God down to human level. Nevertheless they accept the idea of human dignity being rooted in God’s creation. We see here the need for discussing together the way we speak about God, and trying to determine both the validity and the limits of the language we use. We can see too that even practical questions have a theological dimension to them.

Conclusion

The Declaration NA is not a perfect document. I think that the bishops at Vatican II who in their vast majority voted in its favour would admit this, as also Pope Paul VI who promulgated it. Because of its brevity – a deliberate choice, probably to avoid long discussions and controversy – it does not do full justice to the different religions in the world. With regard to the Christian theology of religions it leaves much to be developed. In fact, as has been pointed out, the theology

underpinning the new attitude of the Church towards other religions has to be found in other documents of the Second Vatican Council. This particular document can be considered as invitational rather than prescriptive.

Another weakness of NA is that it considers the different religions in succession. There was perhaps no other way of treating them, but it gives the impression that only the bilateral form of dialogue exists, without any attention being paid to multilateral dialogue. This does not really reflect experience. Particularly in India, but also in other countries of Asia, such as Malaysia and Singapore, and to some extent in Indonesia, there is a constant practice of multilateral dialogue. In these countries it is the bilateral dialogue which would rather be the exception.

It is good to recall in this context the World Conference on Religions for Peace which held its first assembly in Kyoto, Japan, in 1970, at which Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, of New Delhi, was elected the first president. Religions for Peace, to give it its current title, lays special emphasis on bringing religious leaders together to work for peace. We can remember also the World Day of Prayer for Peace which Pope John Paul II convoked in Assisi in October 1986, and as a response to this initiative, the interreligious prayer for peace that has taken place every year since 1987 in Mount Hiei, Japan.

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue also organised some colloquia on a multilateral base, for instance on marriage and the family, and on spiritual resources for peace. Perhaps the most significant meeting was the Interreligious Assembly, held in October 1999 on the eve of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. This brought together some 200 people from a great number of religious traditions. It concluded with a gathering in St Peter's Square in Rome at which Pope John Paul II presided¹⁴.

Both forms of dialogue have their advantages and drawbacks. Bilateral dialogue allows for sharper focus on both similarities and difficulties, but it can sometimes engender tension. Multilateral

¹⁴ Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Towards a Culture of Dialogue. Interreligious Assembly, Vatican City, 25-28 October 1999*, Vatican City, 2000.

dialogue may sometimes appear to be superficial, but it can create a spirit of harmony leading to greater cooperation.

Despite its weaknesses, NA has been, and still is, an inspirational document. The Popes, from Paul VI onwards, have frequently referred to it in their writings and allocutions, and have pledged to abide by its spirit. It has given rise to two important documents produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue: *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions. Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (1984)¹⁵ and *Dialogue and Proclamation. Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1991)¹⁶. It is to be hoped that the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* will lead many people to re-examine the teaching of this document, perhaps to re-examine also their own consciences, and to live according to the spirit that this Declaration promotes, for greater harmony and peace among people of different religions and for the greater glory of God.

IV. NOSTRA AETATE OF VATICAN II: AN ASIAN RE-READING AFTER FIFTY YEARS AND THE WAY FORWARD

- Fr. Felix Wilfred (Emeritus Professor, State University of Madras)

Nostra Aetate was a turning point in the relationship of Christianity to other faiths. Indeed, it is the *Magna Carta* of dialogue for our times. Seen against the general hostile attitude of Christian theologians and missionaries to other religions throughout history, *Nostra Aetate* was a revolution. It was a landmark in the two thousand years of Christian doctrinal history when an Ecumenical Council accepted positively other religions and their validity. Even more, *Nostra Aetate* could be considered as signifying the *conversion* of the Church to the religiously other. Instead of a blanket “no” to other religions on the assumption that to be Christian is a state of possessing all truth and wisdom, *Nostra Aetate* signifies the historic moment when the official Church looked straight into the eyes of the religiously other. It read on the face of the religiously other, things which it never cared for. What comes

¹⁵ Cf. Francesco GIOIA (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching*, N° 808-851.

¹⁶ Gioia, N° 925-1013.

out is a humble recognition of the value and richness the faiths of others signify.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (NA 2).

We realize the depth and significance of this statement if we compare it with so many other statements and practices through Christian history which rejected outright other religions. A glaring example is the statement of the Council of Florence which states,

[The Holy Roman church]... firmly believes, professes and preaches that “no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans,” but also Jews, heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41), unless before the end of their life they are received into it.¹⁷

This revolution of *Nostra Aetate* was strongly supported by a *new theological vision* which the document outlines in a very concise manner. It speaks of the universal salvific will of God, the common origin and destiny of humankind, and the presence of the Spirit in human history. Here the traditional soteriology and pneumatology undergo a transformation. These are all important elements in the new theological vision which paved the way for a positive relationship with other religions.¹⁸

¹⁷ Council of Florence, from the Decree for the Jacobites (1442) – For the English translation of the text see, J. Neuner – J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973): 265.

¹⁸ Viewed from Asia, this looks to be the abiding significance of Vatican II. This is different from the view of Rahner, who saw the enduring significance of Vatican II in that the Church got actualized for the first time as universal and Catholic. For critical comments on Rahner's position seen from an Asian perspective, see Felix Wilfred, “Vatican II and the Agency of Asian Christians”, in Elochukwu E. Uzukwu ed., *Mission and Diversity: Exploring Christian Mission in the Contemporary World* (Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2015): 99-111.

Nostra Aetate has taken to its logical conclusion the ecclesiology of *Lumen Gentium* which extricates itself from the understanding of the Church as *societas perfecta* (perfect society) with closed doors. Instead, it characterizes itself as a sign and sacrament of communion with God as well as of the unity of the human family (LG 1), and thus tries to reach out to others (LG 16). What have we to make out of the spiritual legacy of the one human family of which all of us are part, is what *Nostra Aetate* sets out to do. That we cannot settle down with a realized eschatology, but need to look forward to a futuristic eschatology has become clear from the orientation of the Council and its different documents. This became evident particularly in considering the Jewish faith in relation to Christian faith, as worked out in *Nostra Aetate*.

I would like to also highlight here that *Nostra Aetate* and *Gaudium et Spes* have the same theological axis and they complement each other. In *Nostra Aetate* we see a Church blinded by its own closed claims of the past open its eyes to see the marvels of God blooming in innumerable spiritual gardens of humanity, whereas in *Gaudium et Spes* we see a Church closed on itself by insulating from the world, reaching out to the wonders of temporal realities, thanks to a fresh reinterpretation of theology of creation. In both cases the mutual relationship is fostered by continuous dialogue. To be able to understand in depth the dialogue with peoples of other faiths advocated by *Nostra Aetate*, we need to relate also to the Conciliar document on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*). If *Lumen Gentium* paved the way for an open ecclesiology pointing to the entire humanity, the document on revelation provided the grammar for dialogue. It sees God's self-revelation itself having taken place through a process of *conversation or dialogue*. In *Dei Verbum* we could hear the echo of the words of *Ecclesiam Suam* of Pope Paul VI which imbued Vatican II with the spirit of dialogue. It states,

Revelation too, that supernatural link which God has established with man, can likewise be looked upon as a dialogue. In the incarnation and in the Gospel it is God's Word that speaks to us...the whole history of man's salvation is one long, varied

dialogue, which marvellously begins with God and which he prolongs with men in so many different ways.¹⁹

All this has rooted *Nostra Aetate* even more firmly in the field of inter-religious dialogue.

Confirmation of Asian Initiatives and Practices

Even before *Nostra Aetate*, the necessity of dialogue was keenly felt in Asia, especially in India as numerous initiatives pre-dating Vatican II show. Dialogue was already an experiential reality in Asia. The initiatives to explore the riches of other religious traditions and experience the Christian mystery in dialogue with the experience and spirituality of Hinduism took the form of *ashrams*. Pioneering works in dialogue was done by these ashrams, thanks to Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, Jules Monchanin, Swami Abhishiktananda, Bede Griffiths and others. At a time when such initiatives were looked upon by many as unorthodox and even heretical, *Nostra Aetate* came to confirm that such works of dialogue taking place in Asia are in keeping with Christian faith, and even more that such initiatives need encouragement and further expansion. Hence, under the inspiration of *Nostra Aetate*, further new initiatives were taken, centres of dialogue were created, and also commissions for inter-religious dialogue were established at national, regional and diocesan levels in different parts of Asia. FABC took the vision of *Nostra Aetate* one step further when it stated in its very First Plenary Assembly in Taipei as follows:

In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts and the home of their

¹⁹ *Ecclesiasm Suam*, No. 70.

contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.²⁰

These words bring to mind millennial Asian practice of living together of peoples of different religious traditions in harmony and mutual respect. Daily life in Asia bears out that people go about respectfully with the religious experience, sacred places and religious teachings of others. This is something inherent in the Asian way of life and daily existence. Hence we could look at *Nostra Aetate* as a confirmation as well of the traditional Asian approach to other religions in the spirit of harmony and understanding.

Dialogue - A New Culture and a New Process

How do we put into practice this new vision about other religions? It is here that the general spirit of all-round dialogue initiated by Vatican II finds its application vis-à-vis other religious traditions. Even before the close of the Council, Pope Paul VI gave a fillip to the Council by highlighting in his *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), dialogue as the new way of being Church. Dialogue became a key concept that inspired the entire corpus of Vatican II documents. What *Nostra Aetate* did was to set in motion a new culture and a process of dialogue with peoples of other faiths. It implied a *change of attitude* towards other religions as it viewed them in a completely different light. Dialogue involves also a process of learning.²¹

The spirit and orientation of *Nostra Aetate* was sustained through the several official documents of the Church, such as the encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* which spoke of the presence of the Spirit outside the confines of the Church (RH. 16) in the various religious traditions; so too *Redemptoris Missio*, where the role of the Spirit outside the bounds of the Church gets even more deeply acknowledged and stated. According to it, the Spirit is present in “individuals...society and history, peoples, cultures and religions” and it goes on to add

²⁰ Statement of the First Plenary Assembly of FABC, no. 14 (Taipei, Taiwan: 1974); for the text, see *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1970-1991*, Gaudencio Rosales – C.G. Arevalo, eds. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992): 11ff.

²¹ As *Ad Gentes* puts it, “through sincere and patient dialogue they [Christians] themselves might learn of the riches which a generous God has distributed among the nations” (AG no. 11).

“the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history” (RM 28).²²

From a theological point of view, if we start from *pneumatology* we will understand the mystery of Jesus Christ more deeply, and it is the same pneumatology which opens the doors for us to understand the religious experience and traditions of our neighbours of other faiths. Hence, one need not be preoccupied that acknowledging the presence of the Spirit in other religions would water down the mystery of Jesus Christ. Rather when we start from pneumatological considerations we will be able to relate harmoniously our faith in Jesus Christ with the recognition of God’s grace and the presence of the Spirit in other religious traditions.

Closer Spiritual Affinity

The landmark event of Pope John Paul II praying with leaders of other religious traditions in Assisi in October 1986 is but a logical consequence of the grand vision of *Nostra Aetate*.²³ The realization of one common humanity and the experience of sharing in one and the same ultimate mystery in which “we live, move and have our being ...” (Acts 17:28), cannot but naturally lead us to invoke together the same mystery in prayer. This was exactly what the event in Assisi was. When Pope John Paul II made his concluding address at the event, one could hear the echo of *Nostra Aetate*. He said,

We hope that this pilgrimage to Assisi has taught us anew to be aware of the common origin and common destiny of humanity. Let us see in it an anticipation of what God would like the developing history of mankind to be: a fraternal journey in which

²² When I served as the secretary of the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), a long document (almost 100 pages) on “The Spirit in Asia” was prepared which brings out more concretely how the Spirit is operative in other religious traditions and in various other forms in the life and heritage of Asia. For the text of the document see, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1997-2001*, Franz-Josef Eilers, ed. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002): 237-327.

²³ For an overview of the statements and gestures of Pope John Paul II, see *John Paul II and Interreligious Dialogue*, Byron L. Sherwin – Harold Kasimow, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999)

we accompany one another towards the transcendent goal, which He sets for us.²⁴

The bold initiative of praying with others, made rumbles in certain quarters of the Church, including several ecclesial leaders. The pope defended the legitimacy of a common prayer with others when he spoke to the Roman Curia in December, 1986. He said, "We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person... every man and woman is capable of... submitting oneself totally to God".²⁵

Humanistic Import of *Nostra Aetate*

The times of *Nostra Aetate* did not witness the kind and scale of violence, religious fundamentalism and chauvinism we are experiencing today. The developing situations in the world is a crisis of great magnitude. Peace and understanding among religions have become an imperative necessity for the future of humanity. The challenges of the hour globally and in Asia, make dialogue no more an option but a necessity. This shows why relationship of Christianity with other religions should not be treated as a matter of Christian doctrine alone; one has to critically look at the claimed doctrine whether it contributes to peace and harmony among religions and peoples, or whether it becomes a threat to these ideals all of humanity is called upon to pursue relentlessly. In other words, we have to take into account the humanistic and political implications of Christian doctrines, especially when it touches upon the delicate question of inter-religious relationships, which has become so very crucial for peace in the world. Further, increasing migration of peoples from one geographic region to another, from one cultural and religious setting to another has brought about also intriguing issues of co-existence and tolerance, identity, recognition and respect.

Even though *Nostra Aetate* did not envisage such issues and situations, nevertheless, if we do a re-reading of it, what we would find is that it

²⁴ *L'Osservatore Romano*, weekly English edition (3 November, 1986): 3.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, "Address to the Cardinals and the Roman Curia, 22 December 1986", in *Assisi: World Day of Prayer for Peace, 27 October 1986* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace: Vatican Polyglot Press, 1987): 146.

is a document not only about a new theology of religion, but also a more basic document about peace and inter-religious understanding on the basis of a larger vision of humanity. As such, *Nostra Aetate* continues to be an inspiration even as we face new and increasingly complex questions bearing upon religions and religious beliefs. Today we are in a position to draw the implications of *Nostra Aetate* in terms of its humanistic import.

An Intermezzo – Asia on the Procrustean Bed

When *Dominus Iesus* (2000)²⁶ appeared, many in Asia were wondering how to reconcile it with *Nostra Aetate* and many other documents that followed which corroborated the vision of this Conciliar document. For many Asians, *Dominus Iesus* was an embarrassment, and it appeared to be the case of one step forward and two steps backwards!²⁷ The language of power, suspicion, intimidation and threat go back to pre-Vatican II times.²⁸ Many Asians were asking themselves whether such a regression has taken place. For, the document seemed to speak a different language and set a different tone from *Nostra Aetate*. It says, “objectively speaking they [other

²⁶ *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000). This declaration was issued by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. Text of this document as well as other documents relating to dialogue and evangelization are readily available online at the official websites of Vatican as well of different congregations and offices of Vatican.

²⁷ To understand how *Dominus Iesus* came across to Asians, see the special issue of *Jeevadhara*, vol. 31, no. 183 (2001). This issue contains the contribution of several Asian theologians - Francis X. D' Sa, Michael Amaladoss, Edmund Chia, Rui de Menezes, José de Mesa, Jacob Parapally, Sebastian Painadath. For reporting, see, “Japanese indifferent to *Dominus Iesus*”, in Union of Catholic Asian News UCAN, 5 October 2000; “*Dominus Iesus* Brings Cultural Tension for Vietnam Catholics”, UCAN, 18 September 2000; “Indians of Various Religions Shocked over ‘unnecessary’ Vatican Document”, UCAN, 19 September 2000; “Theology Institute Initiates Public Discussion on *Dominus Iesus*”, UCAN 29 December 2000; “Media Say Vatican Document Threatens Dialogue: Communal Peace”, UCAN 3 October 2000; “Bishops Note Room for ‘Theological Inquiry’ in Toning Down *Dominus Iesus*”, UCAN 3 May 2001.

²⁸ Cf. John O’ Malley, et al., *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); see also ID., John O’Malley, “Trent and Vatican II: Two Styles of Church”, in *From Trent to Vatican II: Historical and Theological Investigations*, Raymond F. Bulman and Frederick J. Parella, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

religions] are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church have the fullness of salvation" (no. 22). It was difficult to see for Asians, for that matter anyone who makes a comparative study of texts, how *Dominus Iesus* could square with *Nostra Aetate* which is imbued with the spirit of dialogue and *Lumen Genitum* which has an inclusive approach. Dialogue takes place when we try to understand peoples of other faiths the way they would like to be understood. We close the doors of dialogue when we are prejudiced, become judgmental and want to reduce the other within our scheme of things.

Moreover Asians saw in *Dominus Iesus* a document written primarily from a doctrinal preoccupation, and intended to serve as a caveat. The question of dialogue was approached through neo-scholastic method and in its spirit. Any essentialist philosophy like neo-scholasticism sees identities as fixated, clearly defined and demarcated. In actual life, however, identity is not defined by isolation but in relationship. One needs to avoid carefully binary like "we" and "they", "inside" and "outside. In the dominant Western theological tradition, however, there is an obsessive preoccupation and inquietude to know clearly who is in and who is out. This is what I would call *theology of "Noah's ark"*. Either you are inside or you are outside the ark. It is difficult to apply this philosophy, and this kind of image in the realm of mystery, which is the case when we deal with the sacred realm of religious experience. It is a grey zone. Totalitarianism is not only political. It has also a religious version. When we want to create out of Christianity a system of thought, similar to the philosophical system of Kant and Hegel, Christianity is emptied of the sense of mystery, and one seeks to place everything in a particular slot or pigeonhole of the overarching grand system of thought. The religious traditions of our neighbours get truncated when they are forced into our system of thought and belief, reminding us of the Procrustean bed.²⁹ Moreover, such an approach does not vibrate with the Asian ethos either, which sees the reality organically interrelated; it tries to connect things rather than demarcate and circumscribe one from the other.

²⁹ Procrustean refers to Procrustes, a Greek mythical figure who attacked people and stretched them on an iron bed, and then cut off their legs so that they could fit into the size of the bed!

Asian theology has been under a cloud of suspicion of not proclaiming the uniqueness of Christ and of having fallen into relativism. To be able to gauge such suspicious attitudes, we need to remember that the pastorally oriented Asian theology is read and interpreted through Western systems of thought, categories and preoccupations. Asia is not understood in its context and cultural setting. Generally, when relativism is spoken about, one understands it to mean that “there are many truths which vary according to the subjects who hold different opinions of reality”.³⁰ This is not the way we approach truth in Asia. Instead Asian spiritual traditions tell us that *truth is not many but one*. This was expressed laconically in Rig Veda, “*Ekam sat viprah bahudah vadanti*” (Truth is one, the sages have called it by many names).³¹ The one mystery appears differently in relation to the diverse experience of people which is very important and crucial. Far from a dilution of truth, as being feared, it is an enrichment of truth. If this is applied to the understanding of the mystery of Christ, we arrive not at any indifferent relativism, but an engaging and enriching pluralism.³² The mystery of Jesus Christ is richly illuminated through a plurality of experiences. The rich pluralism which Asian theology is trying to highlight is being misunderstood through the Western understanding of relativism, so much so the attack on Asian theology often amounts to a shadow-boxing. Is it not a case of mistaken identity? To fathom the depth of Asian theology of religions, especially the mystery of Jesus Christ in its multifaceted nature, one needs to study closely the statements of

³⁰ The Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of FABC is of the view that such a position is a misunderstanding. It clarifies how Asia offers space to look at one truth from different perspectives. See OTC document on “Methodology: Asian Christian Theology: Doing Theology in Asia Today”, in Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *Sprouts of Theology from Asian Soil: Collection of ATC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]* (Bangalore: Claretian Publication): 255- 343, 258.

³¹ *Rig Veda* 1:164.46.

³² Cf. Felix Wilfred, “In Praise of Christian Relativism”, in *The New Pontification: A Time For Change, Concilium 2006/1* (London: SCM Press, 2006): 86-94.

FABC, in particular, those of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA).³³

Moving ahead with the Spirit of *Nostra Aetate* in Asia

Thanks to *Nostra Aetate* and the many dialogical efforts preceding Vatican II, Asia moved ahead to new horizons in developing a theology of religions and practiced inter-religious dialogue which all became an issue of highest priority, given the fact that Christians in this continent live amidst great masses of peoples who are Buddhists, Hindus, Daoists, Confucianists, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsis and peoples of primaevial religious traditions.

The Roman Synod on Asia saw the theological and pastoral prowess of Asian bishops, under the influence of FABC. That notwithstanding, the end-result of the Asian Synod in Rome in the form of *Ecclesia in Asia* would have left many bishops wondering, whether this was what they really tried to say at the synod. Two months after the Asian Synod, FABC Plenary Assembly gathered in Thailand in January 2000, and its theme had another focus than doctrinal Christology of *Ecclesia in Asia*. The theme is “*Renewal of Church in Asia: The Mission of Love and Service*”. The doctrinal approach of proclamation, gives place to an evangelization of love and service in the spirit of the Gospel. Here one hears another language which the Asian bishops could say authentically is their own, and not filtered. Their language is not one of other religions waiting to be fulfilled by Christ, rather one of solidarity and partnership. The poor of Asia become the focus of this partnership:

As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths.³⁴

³³ An excellent doctoral research work was done by Edmund Chia on the contribution of FABC to interreligious dialogue by analyzing its numerous documents. See Edmund Chia, *Towards a Theology of Dialogue*, (Nijmegen, 2003); see also Preman Niles, *The Lotus and the Sun: Asian Theological Engagement with Plurality and Power* (Barton ACT: Barton Books, 2013):150 ff.

³⁴ Final Statement of VII FABC Plenary Assembly – for the text see, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1997-2001*, vol. 3, Franz-Josef Eilers, ed. (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002): 8.

When the house is on fire, we need to pay attention to save the essentials, and there is no point in disputing who should do the work of saving. Everyone is called today to the mission of saving humanity and nature from the critical situation. Our neighbours of other religious traditions become brothers and sisters in a common task of justice, and in the defence of the dignity and rights of human beings – be it the question of the marginalized, women, indigenous people or migrants and refugees. Therefore, simply *missio ad gentes* is not enough; nor *missio inter-gentes*. We need *missio cum gentibus*. This presupposes a theology of mission and a theology of dialogue from the perspective of the *Kingdom of God*.

That inter-religious dialogue should not be conditioned by doctrinal preoccupations was clearly brought out by the Japanese Bishops' Conference already in the context of Asian Synod. Reacting to a *lineamenta* overly preoccupied with the proclamation of Jesus as the unique Saviour, the Japanese bishops responded saying,

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the Truth, we must search much more deeply into how he is the Way and the Life. If we stress too much that “Jesus Christ is the One and Only Saviour”, we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions. The Church, learning from the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ, should be humble and open its heart to other religions to deepen its understanding of the Mystery of Christ.³⁵

The thought of Pope Francis, his statements and many symbolic gestures confirm the position of Japanese bishops and the vision of FABC in general.

New Trajectories of Dialogue in Asia

I would like to present a few thoughts which will help the future of theology of religions and praxis of dialogue in Asia.

To be on the Way

We need to move away from theological disputes to inter-religious collective praxis and transformation. This is what the papacy of Pope

³⁵ Peter Phan, ed., *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002): 30.

Francis beckons us to do. Issues like uniqueness of Christ, the relationship between dialogue and proclamation, which were the centres of attention and hotly debated a few years ago,³⁶ are receding to the background, as Pope foregrounds the common engagement of all religions to respond to the plight of humanity and of nature. We hardly hear him speaking about those hot theological debates of the past. In his address in Turkey³⁷, for example, he pointed out areas of common concern which religions need to respond to urgently. The message is the same when he met religious leaders in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. He has articulated it clearly in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG).

We can then join one another in taking up the duty of serving justice and peace, which should become a basic principle of all our exchanges. A dialogue which seeks social peace and justice is in itself, beyond all merely practical considerations, an *ethical commitment* which brings about a new social situation. Efforts made in dealing with a specific theme can become a process in which, by mutual listening, both parts can be purified and enriched. These efforts, therefore, can also express love for truth (EG 250).

There are two clear indications in the theology of Francis which will be helpful for our project of inter-religious dialogue in Asia. In the vision of Francis, *to be Christian is to be on the way, to be on a journey with others* – religious, secular – for the transformation of humanity and the flourishing of nature. The orientation of the pope confirms our own vision and practice in Asia. In fact, in 1987 there was a consultation between FABC and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) on the question of dialogue with peoples of other religions. It was titled: *“Living and working with Brothers and Sisters of Other Faiths”*. FABC

³⁶ This question led to the issuing of a few official documents by the Church trying to clarify the relationship between dialogue and evangelization. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (then known as Secretariat for Non-Christians) issued a document called *Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (1984). The Congregation of Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue jointly brought out a document entitled: *Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflections and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ* (1991).

³⁷ See <http://www.bbc.com/news/p.104-105.world-europe-30250098> accessed on 10 February, 2016.

general assembly in 1986 in Tokyo, Japan meaningfully captioned its final statement as “*Journeying together toward the Third Millennium*”. Journey and pilgrimage are very dear imageries in Asia. The motif of journey re-appears again and again in the thought of Pope Francis, his speeches and documents, including *Evangelii Gaudium*.

Mercy and Compassion

A second theme which is very helpful for our dialogue in Asia is that of *mercy and compassion*. *Mercy is the key word to characterize the pontificate of Pope Francis*.³⁸ It is the *mainspring* of the praxis of Francis. This for him is *the hermeneutical key to read the entire Scriptures and the life and teachings of Jesus*. It is the jewel of the Sermon on the Mount. “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful” (Lk 6: 36). In the narration of the Last Judgment too (Mt 25: 31-46), mercy and compassion are the criteria by which human beings are ultimately judged. If this is the case, then mercy and compassion should also get reflected in our relationship with peoples of other faiths. Instead of claims of superiority or absolute possession of truth which, unfortunately, has contributed to create a gulf between Christians and others in Asia, we need to encounter the other with a lot of love and respect for what they hold and practice as sacred. With this approach, we could join peoples of other faiths to transform the world and society more just and compassionate. In fact, Pope Francis during his visit to Turkey spoke of the need of religions joining together in the struggle against terrorism and fundamentalism. He said, “interreligious and intercultural dialogue can make an important contribution to attaining this lofty and urgent goal, so that there will be an end to all forms of fundamentalism and terrorism which gravely demean the dignity of every man and woman and exploit religion”.³⁹ Against skeptics on the role of religion in the modern world, pope speaks of the collaboration among religions to contribute to the life of the world. In the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper,

For Francis it is not only a matter of dialogue about the common as well as different cultural and religious traditions, but also about a common contribution to the well-being of the poor, the

³⁸ In fact, the Episcopal motto of Jorge Mario Bergoglio was “*Miserando atque eligendo*”.

³⁹ See www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30250098 accessed on 10 February 2016.

weak, and the suffering; it is about common service to justice, reconciliation.⁴⁰

Dialogue and Evangelization

We do admit that evangelization and dialogue are inter-related, and they are a mutual enrichment. However, in the past in Asia we had difficulties to accept the way evangelization and dialogue were related, especially when dialogue was converted into a means for evangelization. We raised in Asia critical questions regarding this position, and it came out very clearly in the joint FABC-CCA meeting held in Singapore, way back in 1987. It stated,

We affirm that dialogue and mission have their own integrity and freedom. They are distinct but not unrelated. Dialogue is not a tool or instrument for mission and evangelization, but it does influence the way the Church perceives and practices mission in a pluralistic world. ...Dialogue offers opportunities for Christian witness.⁴¹

Today we can confidently revisit the question of dialogue and proclamation, if we take mercy and compassion as the key point of reference, since they reflect the heart of the Gospel. For, under the inspiration of Pope Francis, there is a fresh approach to mission, evangelization and dialogue. Evangelization is not seen as an *occasion or opportunity* to justify the doctrinal claims of Christianity. There is a great spiritual depth in Pope Francis in that he sees proclamation not only related to truth but also to *mercy and love*. The way he thinks of proclaiming the Gospel and especially the manner he does it makes us realize that we can indeed bring together both these realities harmoniously into Christian life and praxis. If we proclaim God's love

⁴⁰ Walter Kasper, *Pope Francis' Revolution of Tenderness and Love* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015): 63-64.

⁴¹ For the text of the statement, see *Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia: An Ecumenical Consultation*, Singapore, July, 5-10, 1987 (Singapore: CCA-FABC, 1989): 104-105. This way of relating evangelization and dialogue is very different from considering interreligious dialogue as "part of the Church's evangelizing mission" (Dominus Iesus no. 2), which does not seem to recognize the validity of dialogue in itself. One would defeat the spirit of dialogue if it is made simply an instrument for something else, and not a value in itself.

and mercy in Jesus Christ, who will be against such an evangelization in Asia? After all, the message of compassion will vibrate with Asians, seasoned in the Buddhist religious and cultural tradition with focus on *karuna* or compassion. The moment Christians raise their pitch and start proclaiming doctrines from a high pedestal making many unique claims above the head of the people, they will put themselves in a position of not being heard, and even could be perceived, instead of being messengers of love, peace and divine compassion, as a threat to societal harmony.

Ecology and Inter-religious Dialogue

Ecology has become a new and important motive for interreligious dialogue. Integral cosmic vision is characteristic of Hindu, Buddhist, Daoist, Shintoist and primaevial traditions in Asia.⁴² But if we are to dialogue with them, we need to revisit our traditional Anselmian soteriology - *Cur Deus Homo?* The dominant Christological discourse is associated with a particular and limited conception of salvation. There is need to rethink salvation in new terms closer to the Gospel. The Gospels tell us that Jesus was concerned about human suffering and privations rather than about *sin*. Unfortunately, Christian soteriology came to be constructed around sin and not on the most important aspects of Jesus' praxis for the wellbeing (*salus*) of human beings and of communities.

We have in *Laudato Si* an attempt to re-conceptualize the traditional understanding of salvation. Salvation - *salus* or wellbeing - is

⁴² Western theologians may leaf through the pages of their philosophers - Kant and Hegel, Paschal and Kierkegaard, Habermas and Foucault, Lyotard and Levinas -, and they will find in none of them the kind of cosmic and integral vision of reality we note in Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism and Shintoinism. Hence, the message of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si* cannot be interpreted in the light of these philosophers. Rather here is a call to go to those traditions which have embedded in them a cosmic vision of reality which enlightens us also on the mystery of God, world and the human, avoiding all kinds of dangerous dualism. In the West itself, there are instances of individuals who have fostered integral vision of reality like St Francis of Assisi, from whose canticle Pope Francis has culled out the title of his encyclical - *Laudato Si*. However the tradition St Francis represents is a marginal and neglected one in Western history.

extended to the whole of creation and nature.⁴³ The new anthropology and soteriology implied in *Laudato Si* brings us closer to Asian religious traditions than ever before. This new and refreshing opening to nature and creation, together with recognition of the universal reach of God's salvation and the presence of the Holy Spirit offer a new theological basis to dialogue with neighbours of other faiths. By affirming nature as an integral aspect of Christian theological vision, *Laudato Si* leads us also to rethink present forms of Christian worship excessively centered on the word and preaching, whereas these religious traditions have worship close to the elements of nature – earth, water, fire, air, ether (*the mahapanchabhuta*). We could look at *Laudato Si* as a document that leads *Nostra Aetate* to new horizons.

Conclusion

The Challenge of Praxis

Asia, perhaps, is the continent in which this shortest and highly significant Conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* found the most reception. The contribution of FABC to inter-religious dialogue, inspired by *Nostra Aetate*, is universally recognized. Through the years, FABC has developed a grand vision, and an impressive theology of religions and dialogue. What is missing, however, is *realization* of this theology and its implementation in concrete praxis. The opposition to dialogue and skepticism about it is not only from without, but from within too. This is in great part due to lack of an *adult faith*. Infantile faith, nurtured by all kinds of sanctimonious practices and pious devotions, will not find it easy to accept a new theology of dialogue. The conclusion is that we need to cultivate pastorally an adult faith among the believers in Asia for theology of religions and inter-religious dialogue to gain acceptance and bear fruit. The dissonance and asymmetry between infantile faith and inter-religious dialogue need to be overcome with appropriate pedagogical means.

Religious Cosmopolitanism

One of the important pastoral means is to include in Christian catechesis a chapter presenting positively other religious traditions

⁴³ Cf. Felix Wilfred, "Theological Significance of *Laudato Si*: An Asian Reading" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections* vol.79 (September 2015): 645-661.

and their spiritual experience. For some, this may sound provocative. But I think this should be normal, if we take seriously the grand vision of *Nostra Aetate* on humanity and its quest for God. If *Nostra Aetate* is one of the sixteen documents of the Council, forming integral part of its teaching, what prevents us making other religions integral part of Christian catechism? Further, the numerous educational and other institutions run by the Church need to impart the students, including Christian students, knowledge about other religions which will lead to respect and appreciation for them.

Living everyday in the midst of the religious world of our neighbours, Christians in Asia will acquire not only the skills to dialogue with them, but also feel at home in their religious places like pagodas, mosques, gurudwaras, temples, etc. This is what I would call *religious cosmopolitanism*.⁴⁴ Pope Francis not only visited the Great Synagogue of Rome,⁴⁵ but also mosques, and a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka. Were he to visit India one day, we can surmise, he will visit also a Hindu temple. He has no doctrinal inhibitions when it comes to respecting the sacredness of the religious experience of peoples of other faiths.

Religious cosmopolitanism is the ability to enter into the religious universe of the other, without losing one's identity. It requires a lot of openness. "Men and women do not have to forsake their identity, whether ethnic or religious, in order to live in harmony with their brothers and sisters," Francis said in his address to the religious leaders in Sri Lanka during his visit in January, 2015.⁴⁶ Religious cosmopolitanism requires an adult faith, and unconditional openness to the infinite mystery. It calls for a new catechesis and faith-education in Asia.

⁴⁴ See my lecture on this topic at a conference at the University of Louvain, held in November, 2014, entitled "Christianity and Religious Cosmopolitanism". This text will be published shortly by the Oxford University Press, Oxford: *The Past, Present and Future of Theologies of Inter-religious Dialogue*, ed. by Terrence Merrigan.

⁴⁵ See *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly edition in English (22 January, 2016).

⁴⁶ <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-highlights-importance-of-interfaith-dialogue> accessed on 10 February, 2016.

Collaborative-Partnership Model

We noted how important this model of partnership is for Asia, faced with many socio-political and ethical challenges. Today, the realization is growing about the importance of religion in public life and its potentials to create peace and harmony. The issue is not merely that of peace among religions for social harmony. Rather religious resources are increasingly in demand for the creation of peace and justice in the world, and for upholding dignity of human beings and their rights. Besides, at the global level, events like 9/11 have brought to the consciousness of humanity the importance of religion in international affairs. Mere secular pursuits may not be able to create a world of equality, justice and peace. To save the human, religions pointing to something beyond seem to be very necessary. This is well expressed by Jüergen Habermas when he states, “Among modern societies, only those that are able to introduce into the secular domain the essential elements of their religious traditions which point beyond the merely human realm will also be able to rescue the substance of the human”⁴⁷. Given this overriding importance of religion for harmony, social cohesion and for saving the human, interreligious dialogue on the model of partnership could substantially contribute to the transformation of the world and societies. Hence in Asia we are challenged to be *partners* with our neighbours. However, there is more to the joint working of peoples of different faiths than social action or involvement. Religions could bring to our contemporary social and political life a necessary *mystical* dimension of seeing everything interconnected and interdependent. It is not a mysticism of closed eyes; it is a “mysticism of open eyes”.⁴⁸

Particularly important would be the working together of religions for peace. “Interreligious dialogue is a necessary condition for peace in the world, and so it is a duty of Christians as well as of other religious communities” (EG 250), reminds us Pope Francis. United Nations and its various bodies, especially UNESCO have proposed inter-religious

⁴⁷ As quoted in Michael Reader and Josef Schmidt “Habermas and Religion”, in *Awareness of what is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010): 5-6.

⁴⁸ John Baptist Metz, *Mistica degli occhi aperti: Per una spiritualità concreta e responsabile* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2013)

dialogue as an important means for peace. We need to strengthen the efforts of humanity for peace by promoting inter-religious understanding. The global world rightly awaits a significant contribution from Asia on this question. This challenge takes the Asian Church beyond the walls of the minority Christian communities to the larger agenda of the entire humanity.

V. THE FRUITS OF DIALOGUE IN ASIA OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS: WHAT ARE THE FRUITS AND WHERE ARE WE NOW 50 YRS LATER, WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED AND WHERE DO WE GO?

- *Bishop Bejoy Nicephorus D'Cruze, O.M.I.*

- *Fr. Matthew Park Moonseong*

- *Cardinal Orlando Quevedo, O.M.I.*

What Are the Fruits of Second Vatican Council Concerning Interreligious Dialogue

- *Bishop Bejoy N. D'Cruze, OMI, Bishop of Sylhet, Bangladesh*

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council brought a radical and fundamental change concerning relationship with other religions and people of other Religions. It created a new mentality and attitude towards others Religions. It was the first time that the Magisterium sheds light on relationship with others. The door of the Church was open to the people of other Religions. I see the following important fruits of the Second Vatican Council.

New Concept of God and Man: It has broadened the concept of human race and Creator, beyond the religious affinity. God is the creator of all. *Nostra Aetate* declared that there is only one divine plan for every human being who comes into this world (Jn 1:9), one single origin and goal.

Theology of Salvation: Salvation is seen from universal perspectives. The mission of the Church is not restricted only to convert people. It is something more. The theology of salvation for the unbaptized was explored. For the first time in the history of the Church the role of the religions were seen more positively. Instead of condemning them it recognized the important role of religions, traditions indicating their origin. Thus, God granted salvific grace to all, baptized as well as non-

baptized. They are not beyond the reach of salvific grace. Salvation is the self-in-stilled destination of man. K. Rahner insisted that a salvific role can't be denied to the non-Christian religions on the ground of the limitations and aberrations (irregularities) that may be found in them. It recognizes that all these religions, traditions, life, conduct and "spiritual and moral truth" often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (NA 2).

Importance of Dialogue and Correct Motivation: It spoke about dialogue with other religions and sincere cooperation with them especially in the field of fraternal cooperation, establishing harmony, justice and peace in the world. It gives proper motivation of dialogue. The aim of dialogue is to listen to the others and to learn from others. It is walking together towards truth and working together in projects of common concern. It is not a kind of compromise but a sincere testimony of truth which one finds in one's religious tradition. This testimony and witness can illuminate others to deepen their understanding of the truth which they hold. It is a mutual enrichment. Through dialogue we remove our prejudices and misunderstanding. Our prejudice did lots of harm to others and hindered human progress. Dialogue makes us open to others. Jean Louis Tauran said, "Religions are the patrimony of human civilization". All the values stored in these religions can contribute a lot to shape the human life. Inter-religious dialogue teaches us that all religions are not of equal value but all those in search of God have equal dignity. God remains always beyond us even beyond any written scriptures.

Dialogue became a familiar word: The word dialogue became a very common word not only in Religions but also in family, society, politics, Institutions, business etc. Dialogue has lots of impact on our everyday life.

1. Where are we Now:

In this direction we progressed a lot. In many places and countries Interreligious activities are going on well. The relationship with the people of other religions is becoming better. We do lots of programs together. There are lots of types participation of people of different Religions in common activities of our lives. We are entering into new relationship with the people of other Religions. We have lots of sharing, exchange of greetings and gifts during our feasts. There is a saying: Religion is for the particular person of that group but feast is for all.

2. What have we learned:

We came to know more about the Religions and the traditions of other people. We overcame many prejudices. We find more openness. Positively speaking Religions taught us about harmony, peaceful coexistence, justice, honesty, the importance of hard work, and the need to take care of God's creation. Believers are prophets of hope. As Paul says: Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another (Rom 14:19). We also realized that dissension, disagreement, quarrel and fights inflicted lots of pain, suffering and brought death to many people in the past. Therefore at the conclusion of the World Day of Prayer for Peace in 1986 the Pope John Paul II said to the participants at Assisi: "Either we learn to walk together in peace and harmony, or we drift apart and ruin ourselves and others". Some people are open to it and others are suspicious about our motivation. They appreciate our services especially in the field of education, medical care and other charitable works. Islam sees Christianity as a kind threat for them. They are suspicious about our charitable activities whether we have some hidden agenda. They do not like to accommodate or consider other Religions as good as their Religion. Muslims are very confident and fixed that Islam is last and perfect Religion. They merely tolerate other Religions. They would become happy if other Religions do not exist.

3. Where do we go:

In the light all these years of relationship and activities we can say something about the future. Magisterium needs to work more on the doctrinal questions too like: *La ilaha illa Alla, wa Muhammad rasul Allah*. "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet." We worked out a lot about the concept of God between these two religions and their closeness. Church is still silent about the question of Muhammad. For Muslims Allah is not acceptable without Muhammad. It was the God about whom Muhammad revealed, he is His last prophet. What about the revelation of the *Quran*? What is its position and Authority? More direct answers are needed; more clarifications are to be done. After Second Vatican Council, a good number of documents came out along with the teaching of the Popes. Still Inter-Religious dialogue did not become an integral part of church's mission. Most of the time official dialogue is done. Interreligious dialogue has to be taken seriously in our Parishes and Institutions. It needs to be more informal, part and parcel of our life and mission. Time has come that we need more direct contact and

more lived experienced without expecting any worldly benefit. We need to get rid of our ghetto Christian mentality and move towards greater and focal points where we shall be able to meet together and make a more fraternal world of brothers and sisters. Marcello Zago: referring to the Kingdom of God and its universal values said: the kingdom values play an important role in the inter-religious dialogue: the purpose of mission which must not only evangelize to convert and build up the community, it must also try to extend the values of the kingdom beyond the confines of the Church and be a forceful attraction towards eschatological kingdom of all peoples.

Present Status and Prospect of the Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Church in Korea Based on “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”

- *Fr. Matthew Park Moonseong, Member of the Committee for Promoting Christian Unity and Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea*

1. Introduction

I’d like to give deep thanks to the Archbishop Felix Machado (Chairman of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the FABC) for allowing me this opportunity to introduce the status of the interreligious dialogue of the Catholic Church in Korea, and to present the prospect for the future to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. I sincerely hope that the meaning and importance of interreligious dialogue for the future of the Church will be better revealed through this precious conference.

Nostra Aetate was originally prepared to clarify the position of the Church on the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War. However, after having gone through troubles and difficulties, it came to express the Church’s position not only on the Jews but on the people of other religions in general. According to the Declaration, the reason for interreligious dialogue can be summed up into two: the first is “*the pursuit of truth*” (*Nostra Aetate* 2) and the second is “*the peaceful co-existence*” (*Nostra Aetate* 5).

Based on these two key words, the interreligious dialogue of the Catholic Church in Korea has been continuously carried out until

today. Prior to the examination, I'd like to introduce the circumstances of the religions in Korea briefly.

2. Religions in Korea

A variety of religions have been introduced into Korea throughout the long history. First, Buddhism was introduced to Korea around 4th century. Catholicism was introduced at the end of the 18th century, and Protestantism later one century after Catholicism. Today, numerous religions co-exist in South Korea. According to the census of 2005, out of the 47 million population, Buddhists comprised 22.8%; Protestants, 18.3%; Catholics 10.9%; other religions 1%; non-religious, 46.9%.

With this census, Buddhism and Christianity are shown as great importance in South Korea, but under the surface, Shamanism, Taoism and Confucianism are exerting great influence on the religion of Korea. Hence, non-religious who are nearly 50% need to be regarded as those who have indirect influences from these cults and thoughts. So, they are not complete atheists.

With such religious backgrounds, Korean people amplify opportunities to contact the different kind of religions in daily life. It is often observed that they decide on their religion after they have tried one religion or another.

3. Catholic Church in Korea and Interreligious Dialogue

Until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the Decree of *Nostra Aetate* (Oct. 28, 1965), the interreligious Dialogue has been not attracted enough attention in Korea. Since the Council and the Decree, it has continued to expand its areas and activities. We could divide them into three parts broadly as follows: The first is *Engagements in society in general*. The second is *Activities through namely "the Korean Conference on Religion and Peace."* The third is *Voluntary activities of each religion*.

3.1. Engagements in Society in General

During the past 30 years, cooperation among the religions has been made to solve the important social issues of Korea. Religious groups have participated in many activities: such as,

1. Campaign to Abolish Capital Punishment.

2. Campaign to Save Four Main Rivers in Korea (from 2008 to 2012). Etc.

3.2. Interreligious Dialogue through “the Korean Conference on Religion and Peace”

In 1965, leaders of the six religions gathered together, and started to have the interreligious dialogue. In 1986, “the Korean Conference on Religion and Peace” was established by the leaders: Buddhism, Confucianism, Catholicism, Protestantism, *Won* Buddhism and *Cheondogyo*. In 2001, the Association of Ethnic Religions in which shamanism additionally joined it, and currently a total of seven religions are engaged. With positive financial support from the government, the Conference is conducting the following programs: such as,

1. Youth Peace Camp with different religious (since 1997).
2. Stay in Neighbour Religious temple or church (since 2012, once a year).
3. Since 1998, Open Lectures on Neighbouring Religions has been conducted every year or two years. Besides that, most of Catholic seminaries in Korea have a professor on the non-Christian Religions and Eastern Philosophy, and teach seminarians as a title “Eastern Philosophy” “Buddhism” “Confucianism” etc., by a regular curriculum.

3.3. Voluntary Activities

Voluntary activities with neighbouring religions are performed in their local areas, and they are receiving very positive responses from people. The activities are following: such as,

1. Bazaars to help needy neighbours.
2. Sending greetings of congratulations to a neighbouring temple or church on a special day.
3. *Samsohoe*, which is to promote unity and peace among religions, are made up of nuns of Buddhism, *Won* Buddhism, Catholicism and the Anglican Church, are having regular meetings every month since 2001, and sometimes holding a concert for needy.

4. Evaluation and Prospect for Interreligious Dialogue in Korea

In Korea, numerous religions co-exist with their unique teachings, and there increase some converts because of the competition among the religions, but it is not serious enough to make interreligious dialogue impossible. But according to the examination, it was found that the dialogues in Korea have been approached more on peaceful co-existence rather than the pursuit of truth.

However, interreligious dialogue pursues more than the purpose of peaceful co-existence. Through the mutual visits and academic exchanges with neighbouring religions, participants learn much about the truth of other religions. At the same time, through these experiences we could confirm and enhance our own religious identity deeper and further.

Still, not a few people regard the interreligious dialogue as a new activity of the Catholic Church. They even think that the activity is for specially selected people who wish and choose it. However, *Nostra Aetate* deals with "the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," not like "the Relationship of Non-Christians and some Christians interested in it." Therefore, it is requested that Church leaders and Catholics switch their attitude and recognize the interreligious dialogue as the essential act of faith of the Church.

I'd like to conclude this presentation by quoting the short speech delivered by the Pope Francis on Aug. 18, 2014 in Mass with the religious leaders of Korea.

"I thank you for the kindness and affection which you have shown by coming here to meet me. Life is a journey, a long journey, but a journey which we cannot make by ourselves. We need to walk together with our brothers and sisters in the presence of God. So I thank you for this gesture of walking together in the presence of God: that is what God asked of Abraham. We are brothers and sisters. Let us acknowledge one another as brothers and sisters, and walk together. May the Lord bless you! And please, pray for me. Thank you!"

Interreligious Dialogue in Asia: Fifty Years After *Nostra Aetate*

- His Eminence Orlando B. Cardinal Quevedo, O.M.I., Archbishop of Cotabato, Philippines

Introduction

May I first express my thanks to Archbishop Felix Machado, Chair of FABC-OEIA, and to Fr. Bill LaRousse, his secretary, for inviting me to give this presentation. This is a historic gathering. We are celebrating the 50th anniversary of the groundbreaking Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*. If I remember correctly, Archbishop Fitzgerald narrated this morning that the document originated from a very simple request to Pope John XIII to condemn anti-semitism.

[I am happy to see faces of my generation of FABC bishops here, all *emeriti*, Archbishops Soter, Murphy, and Anthony of Malaysia. They all seem to be more happy and more healthy after retirement. This is why I am also looking forward to my own retirement. I am also happy to be in Pattaya once again. Happy because I am confident that the assembly will not “volunteer” me to have short nights writing drafts of final statements of Bishops’ Institutes and other FABC-related assemblies].

In this presentation I wish to contextualize into the Asian situation the reflections of Bishop Bejoy D’Cruz of Bangladesh and of Fr. Matthew Park of Korea. [Bp Bejoy and I are both missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. We are sometimes known as O.M.I. or “Open Mouthed Idiots.”]

I shall ask the three guide questions suggested by OEIA:

Regarding IRD, where are we in Asia?

What have we learned?

Where shall we go from here?

A. The Present Situation of Interreligious Dialogue

Background

A brief historical background of the FABC experience of IRD may be helpful.

1. Pre-FABC (Before 1974)

With the publication of *Nostra Aetate* 50 years ago, this historic document became the principal and almost the lone official and ecclesial inspiration for the task of IRD. Archbishop Fitzgerald and Bp. Bejoy have noted the universal and theological significance of the document.

Before the FABC was formally set up in 1972 and before its 1st Plenary Assembly in 1974, IRD work was almost exclusively the initiative of individual local churches, religious congregations, and other church-related groups.

IRD work was also distinctively local. Its specific localization is due to the diverse pastoral situations in various countries, where various religions predominate. Thus Hinduisim in India, Buddhism in Thailand, Confucianism and Buddhism in Taiwan and Singapore.

Such individual and local efforts before the 1st Plenary Assembly of FABC were not linked with one another neither in pastoral strategy or thrust. They had their own approaches to IRD.

2. Post-FABC (Since 1974)

An Asian View of Evangelization and Vision of Church

With the 1st Plenary Assembly of FABC (FABC I) in 1974, an *Asian view* of Evangelization emerged. The seminal insight of Asian Bishops on the now well known “Triple Dialogue” described the approach for Evangelization in Asia.

In view of the “teeming millions” of poor people of Asia, the Church has to proclaim the Good News of Jesus by way of dialogue with the peoples of Asia, especially the poor. Its vision of Church is to be a *Church of the Poor*.

In view of the rich mosaic of ancient cultures of Asia, the Church has to be in dialogue with Asian cultures. Its vision of Church is to be an *Inculturated Church*.

In view of Asia being the cradle of ancient major religions, the Church has to be in dialogue with the diverse religious traditions of Asia. Its view of Church is a *Church of Interreligious Dialogue*.

Given this approach “Triple Dialogue” to Evangelization, one of the major dimensions of the vision of Church in Asia is for the Church to be a *Church of Dialogue*.

As a result of *Nostra Aetate* and *FABC I*, we see an evolution of IRD work in Asia.

1. *From Individual Local Initiatives to a Common Asian Pastoral Thrust*

The FABC Office devoted to ecumenism and inter-religious affairs became a resource center to assist Asian episcopal conferences. The various BIRA exposure-immersion-reflection seminars on Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Shintoism, etc. (already mentioned by Bp. Machado this morning) enabled IRD to move from individual local initiatives towards an Asian pastoral thrust. The FEISA series of the FABC Office for Human Development (OHD) also helped towards this purpose.

2. *From specific pastoral strategy to an Asian Vision of Church*

The same BIRA series enabled local churches to move from specific pastoral strategy towards an Asian Vision of Church as a Church of Dialogue and Harmony. A close reflective reading of the paper on the Asian idea of “harmony,” written by the FABC Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) would also be most helpful in understanding this vision.

An Asian View of Dialogue

Implicit in the Asian view of evangelization is an expansive understanding of “*dialogue*,” an understanding that is not in dichotomy with the concept of “*proclamation*.” For Asian Bishops the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus, the Lord and Savior, is by way of dialogue. Pope John Paul II himself acknowledged in *Ecclesia in Asia* [EA, 1999, no. 3], that dialogue “is the characteristic mode of the Church’s life in Asia.”

Even simply living as faithful Christian is already proclamation. As Pope John Paul wrote: The “*silent witness of life*” is “the only way of *proclaiming* God’s kingdom in many places in Asia where explicit proclamation is forbidden and religious freedom is denied or systematically forbidden” (EA, no. 23).

This should remind us of the instruction of St. Francis to his Franciscan brothers: God and proclaim the Gospel, and now and then, speak.

In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis evidently understands dialogue in this expansive way when he elaborated on dialogue with cultures, peoples, the poor, the State, society, science and reason.

B. Experiential Learning towards a Church of Dialogue

1. From our experience of IRD, we are now more than ever aware that there is no one way, no single approach, no systematic step by step methodology of IRD.

2. This is so because the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of IRD. The Spirit blows where he wills and works mysteriously in all cultures and religions.

3. We have also become aware that IRD, once merely a suspect idea (as Archbishop Fitzgerald noted), has become a reality. We have success stories of IRD all over Asia in the local churches, in parishes and grassroots communities.

4. Peace and harmony have been the fruit of various levels of IRD. We have very harmonious *dialogue of life* in schools, in places of work, in the neighborhood, in the market place.

5. Going further, as in the Korean experience, we have success stories of *dialogue of action* all over Asia involving a wide range of issues related to justice, peace and development.

6. In many places fruitful *dialogue of theological exchange* has taken place. For instance in Mindanao, Philippines, at the Bishops' Ulama Conference, we have discussed the place of Mary in the Qur'an and in the Bible as well as the fundamental ideas based on our respective Scriptures on the integrity of creation, global warming and climate change.

7. When ideology or politics or certain brands of religious fundamentalism enter into the relationships between members of various religious beliefs, tensions emerge and even explode into sectarian violence.

8. Most importantly through experience and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have learned that for IRD to be fruitful, fundamental attitudes of the mind and heart are required.

It is in the very process of interreligious encounter that such attitudes are learned and imbibed. The process of moving from hostility, mistrust, and suspicion to harmony involves:

- listening with the ears and with the heart;
- opening the mind and heart;
- recognizing the common origin of the human person;
- recognizing the universality of human dignity and human rights;
- acknowledging individual, social, cultural, religious differences;
 - building communities that are diverse but united;
- mutual respecting and understanding;
- trusting and loving;
 - building communion among peoples;
- being aware of our common journey to God's kingdom;
- being aware of the mysterious activity God, of the Holy Spirit, in our world of great diversity.

May I quote here as apropos the words of the Jewish thinker, Martin Buber, in his work, *I and Thou*. He describes dialogue as an encounter of friendship.

“When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”

“Dialogue is not to be identified with love. But love without dialogue, without real outgoing to the other, reaching out to the other, the love remaining with itself – this is called Lucifer.”

C. Need to Respond to Burning Issues

For the final part of my presentation, I simply wish to enumerate what I believe are the major agenda that awaits IRD in Asia:

1. to discover the convergences of various religions as common responsive forces for justice, peace, and development;

2. to bring the praxis of various levels of IRD down to the grassroots;
3. to respond effectively to Religious Freedom and Human Rights under siege by radical fundamentalism, violent extremism, and terrorism;
4. to address the humanitarian crisis of massive displacement of peoples, its political and economic causes and its implications to world order;
5. to explore viable solutions to the “new slavery” of migrant workers;
6. to explore common approaches to respond to the threats confronting the millions of indigenous peoples in Asia;
7. to dialogue on the status and treatment of women as understood by different religions and provide positive approaches towards gender sensitivity and equality;
8. to assist in the search for moral and juridical norms to economic globalization that often result in marginalization;
9. to address effectively the ambivalent values of cultural globalization, the gradual and subtle penetration of secularism as a global culture into Asian societies;
10. to join the rising chorus of voices seriously concerned about the ecological challenge of global warming and climate change;
11. to initiate *Intra-religious dialogue* between FABC and the Middle East Bishops’ Conferences towards a better understanding of religious extremism and common collaborative approaches towards it;
12. to have a closer FABC linkage with the Pontifical Offices related to Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue.

Thank you very much.

VI. FINAL STATEMENT BIRA VI

1. It is by God's grace and providence that we 87 participants in the Sixth Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA VI), from 17 different countries, have come to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* in our Asian context and in our time. We are grateful for the funding we received from Missio Aachen that helped make this gathering possible.

2. In this grace-filled gathering, we have worked together as the Church in Asia retracing our steps along the path of dialogue; praying, reflecting and sharing our experiences and thoughts on the questions of what we have done so far and what we need to do further for interreligious dialogue in Asia.

3. We recognize that *Nostra Aetate* is still inspiring and challenging us to realize the vision of the Church as the people of God in dialogue in our time, facing the interdependent reality of the complex and diverse influences of globalized socio-economic-cultural-political structures, we reaffirm the strong need of the "triple dialogue" with the poor, cultures and religions, in a journey towards the Kingdom of justice, peace and ecological harmony.

4. Through our experience of dialogue and action for the last five decades, we have learned that interreligious dialogue is not only to be a specific pastoral strategy of the Church, but rather an Asian vision of the Church. It is a Church that proclaims the values of the Kingdom without fear, in dialogical collaboration (partnership) with the people of other religions.

5. Struggling against any kind of fundamentalism, terrorism and proselytism, the Church in Asia is called to work together with others as co-pilgrims. In protecting the poor and the environment through our interreligious network, we are not doing social work together, but building a mystical union of God's Kingdom as inter-dependent beings (in the harmony of our relationship with one another and with all creation).

6. The Church in Asia confirms that we cannot engage with others in a real dialogue without having a clear identity of who we are and constantly growing in our own faith. In the pluralistic contexts of Asia,

the Church, as a “little flock,” is called to learn a *kenotic* (self-emptying) spirit of love and service from Jesus Christ. It is through our humble and open-minded approach that real trust and mutual understanding with others can be established. We are aware of the importance of grassroots interreligious dialogue, which usually starts from inter-personal friendship and grows to communal action for justice and peace.

7. The Church in Asia takes seriously the challenges of today for all religions: various conflicts and violence, massive poverty and global inequality, the increasing numbers of refugees and migrants, pollution and environmental crisis, corruption and moral degradation, human trafficking and the breakdown of social cohesion, terrorism and all forms of fundamentalism.

8. One of the most urgent challenges in Asia is to proclaim Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, while acknowledging and respecting what is “true and holy in other religions” (*Nostra Aetate*, No. 2). As a community of disciples, we give witness to Jesus through our personal and communal lifestyle of love in three interconnected ways: silence, presence, and story-telling. In an existential silence, we empty ourselves and listen deeply to the voices of the other without judging, with a loving heart. In the depth of our silence, we are aware of Jesus’ presence among us, which is inspiring our journey of interreligious dialogue and action for transforming the world. It is by telling our own story of transformation through Jesus, as individual persons and as communities, that the globalized culture of indifference and greedy consumerism is to be transformed into the gospel-culture of solidarity and sharing.

9. In our common journey with others, we Christians in Asia recognize the importance of basic human communities at the grassroots level, where the dialogue of life and action is going on, especially together with the indigenous people. It is through these basic human communities that the Church in Asia learns the holistic world view and the sacred cosmic spirituality which awake us to take care of “our common home.” We are called to go beyond our comfort zone and to develop a new narrative of dialogue, coming from our common experience, with the hope of rediscovering the harmonious

relationship between humanity, cosmos and God for the future generation.

10. We commit ourselves more passionately to interreligious dialogue in Asia in different ways for example:

To develop local interreligious dialogue and action in the grassroots communities.

To organize formation programs for interreligious dialogue within the Catholic community (e.g. Seminaries, religious houses of formation and for the laity).

To promote intra-dialogue between Christian churches and within Catholic institutions.

To support dialogue activities and forums. (e.g. UN Interfaith Harmony Week).

To advocate interreligious dialogue and action in the public sphere and cyberspace.

To provide adequate preparation and pastoral care to the interreligious family.

11. After these days of reflection and sharing of our experiences of and insights on interreligious dialogue in the light of *Nostra Aetate*, guided by the Holy Spirit, we have come to realize again the importance of openness towards the people of other religions and the indispensable role of witness to the Kingdom of God ever growing in the heart of Asian people. Through our sincere commitment to dialogue, "Jesus Christ will be better known, recognized and loved." (PCID, *Dialogue in Truth and Charity*, No. 39).

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151. "The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy", XI FABC Plenary Assembly, Colombo, Sri Lanka, FABC Central Secretariat, March 2017

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