



VII AsIPA General Assembly

"GO...I AM WITH YOU ALWAYS" (MT 28:19-20)

SCCs/BECs LIVING WITH PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT FAITHS AND BELIEFS

Thursday 22nd – Wednesday 28th October 2015

Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Training Center, Archdiocese of Bangkok, Thailand

FINAL STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

1. We, the 118 participants – 34 lay, 14 religious, 57 priests and 13 bishops - from 15 countries (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, Africa/SECAM-Ghana, and Germany) came together at *Baan Phu Waan* Pastoral Centre in the Archdiocese of Bangkok in Thailand to participate in the VII Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) General Assembly from October 22nd to 28th, 2015. We aimed to deepen our communion and to discover our source of inspiration from the Word and the Eucharist, especially to share our experiences in Small Christian Communities/Basic Ecclesial Communities (SCCs/BECs) on living with people of different faiths and finding creative ways to bring deeper peace and solidarity in our world.

2. As part of the program, we visited a few SCCs/BECs in three dioceses of Thailand. The visit was an impressive experience of openness and harmonious living with people of different faiths as we were welcomed by them even in their mosques and temples and shared the joys and hopes of interreligious life. We were also strengthened by the faith of SCCs/BECs as we joined them for gospel sharing and visiting the neighborhood. We deeply thank the Church of Thailand for their very warm and generous hospitality and witness of a Church that is alive.

SCCs/BECs AN EXPRESSION OF COMMUNION AND MISSION

3. This assembly is significant because we celebrate fifty years since the Second Vatican Council and twenty five years of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Fifth Plenary Assembly in Bandung, Indonesia. The Second Vatican Council redefined the Church as People of God and put communion at the heart of what it means to be Church. The foundation of communion is to be understood in the context of the Holy Trinity. Communion, however, is intrinsically linked to mission because mission shapes the way we are to be church (Ecclesia in Asia [EA] 24). The People of God, where every baptized person participates in the priestly, prophetic and kingly role of Christ (*Lumen Gentium* [LG], Chapter 1) naturally forms local faith communities.

4. The efforts of the FABC to understand communion from an Asian context has been greatly beneficial. Its constant thrust in forming SCCs/BECs has resulted in many local churches in Asia taking steps to promote them. At the FABC V Plenary Assembly, it was clearly mentioned that the Church in Asia will have to be a 'communion of communities', where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as brothers and sisters in a common mission (FABC V 5, 8).

5. SCCs/BECs have been viewed as the renewing instrument and direct fruit of this Church as People of God in communion and mission of the Second Vatican Council. In its reception in Asia, FABC has supported the growth of SCCs/BECs as a New Way of Being Church. The reports from different countries during the VII AsIPA General Assembly saw the SCCs/BECs enmesh the Second Vatican Council vision of Church as follows:

- 5.1. People have experienced a deepening of the faith through the SCCs/BECs.
- 5.2. SCCs/BECs have become a 'launching pad' to nurture the laity; those who have been trained have become more confident facilitators of SCCs/BECs with a clear vision of the Church; have grown in awareness of their dignity and call as baptized and have become co-responsible with the ordained in the mission of the Church.
- 5.3. Thirst for Jesus and His Word has deepened with the different Bible sharing methods used in SCCs/BECs; by living the Word of God, they edify each other, even to the non-believers, not only by words but by action as well.
- 5.4. SCCs/BECs have broken down barriers between priests and people, as priests and even bishops now sit together with them for SCC/BEC meetings.
- 5.5. SCCs/BECs are growing and more dioceses are promoting it.
- 5.6. The AsIPA General Assemblies become a source of revival for the SCCs/BECs. The AsIPA tools enable them to develop a deeper relationship with God through the Word and the Eucharist. The AsIPA methods and texts are very helpful and fruitful for the New Evangelization – of families, communities, and parishes. Publication of locally-designed modules for SCCs/BECs is also taking place.

6. However, there are still many areas for improvement as follows:

- 6.1. Many of the laity are traditional and are not open to the new challenges for the renewal of the Church; on the other hand, those who are involved in Church activities lack appropriate formation.
- 6.2. Many parishes are still clergy-centered and do not involve the SCCs/BECs in the parish activities.
- 6.3. SCCs/BECs are not made a pastoral priority in the dioceses; transfers of priests without supportive replacement can affect the functioning of SCCs/BECs; there are also not sufficiently-motivated priests, religious and lay animators to promote and nurture SCCs/BECs.
- 6.4. It is not easy to get the youth involved in SCCs/BECs.
- 6.5. Mass Media, extra tuition, seasonal farming, employment, etc. hinder some from participation in SCC/BEC activities.
- 6.6. In some countries, church leaders are unable to attend SCC/BEC meetings because of political and religious restrictions.

7. However, even more than the talks, reports and discussions, we the participants in this assembly also experienced being a communion-in-mission as we deepened our relationship with Jesus and with one another through sharing the Word of God and celebrating the Eucharist every day. The AsIPA texts on Spiritual Formation, Training of Leaders and Interreligious Dialogue motivated us to go forward. The Word of God also challenged us especially in living with people of different faiths. In this assembly, we took on this challenge seriously.

SCCs/BECs IN THE MULTI-RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF ASIA

8. Asia, the birthplace of many of the world's ancient civilizations and religions, is a continent blessed with vibrant communities with their colorful mixture of cultures, religions and philosophies, many of which are more ancient than Christianity. St. John Paul II also identified and appreciated this multi-religious nature of

Asia when he said "Asia is also the cradle of the world's major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is the birthplace of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism. Millions also espouse traditional or tribal religions, with varying degrees of structured ritual and formal religious teaching" (EA 6).

9. In Asia only 4.5% of the total population is Christian and only less than 3% of Asia's population is Catholic. In the face of our multi-religious and minority context in Asia the FABC, positively appreciating this pluralism and diversity as enriching, calls upon the SCCs/BECs to prepare themselves to engage in a dialogue with the people of different faiths.

SCCs/BECs LIVING WITH NEIGHBOURS OF DIFFERENT FAITHS

10. Although ignorance and intolerance of other religions continue to plague society and have produced tensions, conflicts and violence, in this assembly we have exchanged a lot of positive stories on interreligious dialogue through SCCs/BECs that have inspired us. From these stories, we learned that:

- 10.1. To have genuine interreligious dialogue, we must honestly recognize our differences as well as our common beliefs. Genuine interreligious dialogue begins first by entering deeply into our own faith. It also means stepping into the shoes of the people of the different religions and trying to see the world as they see it. To enter into a dialogue demands that we are poor in spirit, in order to be rich in love. Love is the method of dialogue.
- 10.2. SCCs/BECs engage in the "dialogue of life" with our brothers and sisters of other religious traditions, greeting them on their feast days and being with them in life's happy and vulnerable moments such as weddings, sickness, natural calamities and death. Relationships and friendships built in these dialogues enable us to support, encourage and reach out to each other.
- 10.3. SCCs/BECs also engage in the "dialogue of action" acting as good Samaritans to peoples of other faiths, and working with them on issues of justice, peace and solidarity for the common good.
- 10.4. SCCs/BECs exercise the "dialogue of religious experience" by entering into the different spiritual traditions through celebrations and sharing. It is done through a life of listening, learning and a constant reflection on what God may be saying through these other religious traditions. In and through interreligious dialogue we mutually exchange our divine experience.

CHALLENGES FACED BY SCCs/BECs IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

11. God "wants everyone to be saved and reach the full knowledge of the truth" (1Tim. 2:4). In this line, the Church also says that it rejects nothing that is true and holy in the other religions (cf. *Nostra Aetate* 2).

12. In our engagement with peoples of other faiths, we are faced with the following challenges:

- 12.1. To give our people a sufficient understanding of their Christian identity and Church teachings to avoid confusion in interreligious dialogue.
- 12.2. A lack of knowledge about the other religions, fear of the unknown, suspicion, lack of self-critical assessment, superiority and inferiority complexes, disparity between those taking part in dialogue, confusion between faith and reason; culture and religion, may also hinder interreligious dialogue.
- 12.3. A lack of qualities needed for dialogue like attentiveness, kindness, respect, patience, forgiveness, acceptance of the other person as belonging to the same human family also affects interreligious dialogue.
- 12.4. A lack of enthusiasm to witness and proclaim Christ and substituting proclamation with dialogue can pose a challenge to the mission of the Church (EN 41, RM 42).

- 12.5. Instrumentalization of dialogue for personal, political or economic gain blocks authentic interreligious dialogue.
- 12.6. A lack of proper understanding of God's Kingdom also affects interreligious dialogue. SCCs/BECs are challenged to witness and to live in solidarity with all people of the human family.
- 12.7. Besides strengthening the already existing SCCs/BECs, there is a need to form and encourage Basic Human Communities (BHCs) that can be a powerful means for communal peace and harmony and help us to move from religiosity to spirituality in action (FABC Papers No. 48, 1987).
- 12.8. Theological issues raised by interreligious dialogue such as concept of God (are we praying to the same God), concept of the People of God (are they also people of God (LG 2,16), Jesus as the only Savior (EA10), relativism, inculturation (Christianity as a foreign religion), etc. may generate negativity towards people of other faiths. Interreligious dialogue is an attitude that makes us capable of meeting God in the mysterious ways God is present in other religions. It also reminds us and our SCCs/BECs to find creative paths for articulating and living our faith in a multi-religious context (EA 18).

CONCLUSION

13. We therefore recommend:

13.1. To the SCCs/BECs:

- a. That special effort is made to involve youth and the whole family in SCCs/BECs;
- b. That SCCs/BECs seriously enter into interreligious dialogue;
- c. That we join efforts with people of other faiths to promote human rights and address especially issues of the environment, poverty, injustice and violence.

13.2. To bishops and priests:

- a. To ensure strong supportive structures for SCCs/BECs at the national and diocesan levels;
- b. As spiritual leaders to be at the forefront of interreligious dialogue promoting unity inside and outside the Church.

13.3. To the FABC - AsIPA Desk:

- a. To develop a pastoral plan, more resource materials and to organize training programs that can help promote interreligious dialogue at the SCC/BEC, parish and diocesan levels.

14. Our experience in this general assembly has strengthened us and challenged our SCCs/BECs even more to be "solid starting points for a new society based on a civilization of love" (RM 51, EA 25) especially as Pope Francis challenges us to be a church of mercy and compassion (*Misericordia Vultus 15*).

15. We want to thank our SCC/BEC pastoral teams and especially our SCC/BEC communities who untiringly live the Christian faith and its mission. We also acknowledge with deep gratitude the generous support given to us by Missio-Aachen, Missio-Munich, Aid to the Church in Need, Propaganda Fidei, many benefactors, the local organizing team in Thailand and the AsIPA Resource Team as well as the FABC-OLF, AsIPA Desk, for overall coordination work.

16. Ending this Assembly on October 28, the very same day that the Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions was issued fifty years ago, challenges our SCCs/BECs even more to promote interreligious living. May our dear mother Mary intercede for us to live creatively and faithfully with peoples of different faiths!