

FABC: FROM DAEJEON TO MANILA AND BEYOND

(Report of Secretary General to 9th FABC Plenary Assembly)

Introduction

This presentation attempts to provide a perspective from which to view our present 9th FABC Plenary Assembly in the context of the previous eight Plenary Assemblies.

I hope to do this in terms of a continuum of renewal that began at the 1st FABC Plenary Assembly in Taipei and is continuing today in the 9th Plenary Assembly here in Manila.

From that same continuum perspective, I shall present a summary of the activities of the FABC Offices since the 8th Plenary Assembly in Daejeon, Korea in 2004.

Finally I would like very briefly to suggest how Episcopal Conferences in Asia could move forward in the task of Church renewal.

A VISION OF A RENEWED CHURCH-IN-MISSION

Gathered in Taipei 35 years ago in 1974 at their First Plenary Assembly the Asian Bishops articulated what today remains as the overarching pastoral vision and direction of the Church in Asia.

It was a vision of renewed Church in a mission of integral evangelization. Its locus is the continent of Asia with a distinctive three-fold characteristic:

- Asia as a vast continent remarkably enriched with a brilliant mosaic of ancient cultures that had to a substantive extent determined their civilizations;
- Asia as the cradle of ancient religious and philosophical traditions of the world (Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam);
- Asia as the continent of teeming millions living in massive poverty, where two thirds of the world's poor mightily struggle for life.

In this Asian context the Asian Bishops envisioned the mode of mission as dialogue, in fact, a three-fold dialogue: dialogue with the cultures of Asia, dialogue with the religions of Asia, dialogue with the peoples of Asia, particularly the poor. The mission of proclaiming Jesus, the Lord and unique Savior of all, is through a living and dynamic conversation and interaction with these three Asian realities.

The fundamental components of a renewed Church-in-mission that have emerged repeatedly in various FABC plenary assemblies, institutes and formation sessions could be integrated in the following vision:

The Church in Asia is in a renewed mission of telling in word and deed the story of our unique Savior, the Lord Jesus, to all Asians. As a community of faith led by the Spirit of Jesus, it is rooted firmly in the cultures of Asia and in dynamic dialogue with other religions. It is a Church-in-mission, a communion of communities and the humble herald and servant of the Gospel, accompanying the peoples of Asia towards full life in the Reign of God.

Such a vision of the Church-in-mission is translated into the primary pastoral focus of the FABC, so remarkably articulated by the Asian Bishops in 1974. In this age of materialist secularism and relativism many people are losing sight of the fundamental relationship between universal truths and their particular expressions or have somehow drifted away from communion and solidarity. It is well for us today to recall in full that magnificent 1974 vision of a local church:

To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our people. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time of our history, is the building of a truly local Church

For the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time.

It is not a community in isolation from other communities of the Church one and catholic. Rather it seeks communion with all of them. With them it professes one faith, shares the one Spirit and the one sacramental life. In a special way it rejoices in its communion and

filial oneness with the See of Peter, which presides over the universal Church in love.

The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meaning and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. – Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God's Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery (First FABC Plenary Assembly, Final Statement, 1974, nos. 9-12).

How many of us Asian Bishops have taken our inspiration for Church renewal from this grand vision of Local Church! We have reflected deeply on its fundamental components: incarnation, triple dialogue, communion, transformation. We have discovered their challenges and implications. How formidable they are!

The building of a local church is truly an enormous and daunting task of renewal, a thoroughgoing renewal that encompasses the renewal of mission, of faith and prayer life, of community, clergy, laity and religious, of church structures and ministries, of leadership styles, etc.

Renewal in Asia has been guided, I believe, by the following key principles: co-responsibility, participation, committed engagement in mission with its constitutive dimension of social transformation, contextualization, authenticity and credibility.

Again and again these key principles are cited in FABC assemblies, Bishops' Institutes, programs and plans. Again and again they are identified by scholars who have written doctoral dissertations on various pastoral themes developed by FABC through the years.

In the light of the above vision and key guiding principles, the 7th FABC Plenary Assembly in Samphran, Thailand nine years ago (2000) identified

the movements of renewal that the Church in Asia is still undergoing, namely:

1. A movement towards a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young;
2. A movement toward a “truly local Church;”
3. A movement toward deep interiority;
4. A movement toward an authentic community of faith, a communion of communities of authentic participation and co-responsibility;
5. A movement toward active integral evangelization and a new sense of mission.
6. A movement toward “empowerment” of the laity in the mission of the Church, requiring a spirituality of discipleship;
7. A movement toward active involvement in generating and serving life in the light of death-dealing forces in Asia;
8. A movement toward the triple dialogue - with other faiths, with the poor and with cultures.

It is within the framework of a movement toward a renewed Church-in-mission or toward the building of the Local Church, that I propose a perspective of considering the meaning of the Plenary Assemblies in Daejeon and Manila.

Daejeon described a movement of forming the family as the focal point of evangelization toward a culture of integral life in Asia.

Our Manila Plenary Assembly would present, I believe, a movement towards rooting Christian life in Asia firmly and dynamically in the Word of God and in the Bread of Life, the Eucharist.

Renewal is a continuum of movements that might have different beginnings but has no end. Church renewal is today and always. There are periods of dormancy and periods of awakening, periods of decline as well as periods of intense sustained renewal. Church renewal is a process of continuous beginnings, moving two steps forward, one step backward, three steps forward and one step backward. There are also long periods of staying in comfort zones, not wanting to risk going forward into the uncertainties of transformation.

Would this be the experience of Local Churches in Asia? I believe so.

Thus we need to see the Daejeon Assembly and our own Manila assembly in the next few days within that continuum of renewal.

The questions may be: where can a Bishop locate his local church in that continuum of renewal? How can the FABC Offices be of assistance to the episcopal conferences in their striving to towards a renewed Church-in-mission? Or from another angle, how have the FABC Offices contributed to towards a renewed Church-in-mission since the Daejeon Assembly in 2004?

To respond to this last question that I would like to provide a summary report of the activities of the FABC Offices, the details of which will be presented by the Offices during this Assembly.

THE FABC OFFICES SINCE DAEJEON CONTRIBUTING TOWARDS A RENEWED CHURCH-IN-MISSION

In the movements of Church renewal in Asia, several principles are fundamental: the FABC vision of a renewed church-in-mission, requiring the primary pastoral focus of building the Local Church-in-mission; the renewal of clergy, religious and laity in view of that vision and task; and the principles of communion, co-responsibility and participation.

In the light of these elements of Church renewal and of the general mandate of the FABC to assist the Episcopal conferences, the FABC Offices have organized and conducted assemblies, institutes, meetings, conferences, and symposia.

Renewed Mission in Asia

With the active collaboration of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Thailand, the FABC Office of Evangelization organized and conducted the First Asian Mission Congress in Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18-22, 2006. [In fact the Office of Evangelization had already organized two Asia-wide assemblies on the mission of evangelization: (1) The Congress on Evangelization in Manila on November 16-20, 1992, inspired by Pope John Paul's encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio*; (2) The Symposium on

“Evangelization in the Light of *Ecclesia in Asia*.” held in Pattaya, Thailand, Sept. 3-7, 2002].

More than 1000 delegates from all the Episcopal conferences and from most of the associate members of the FABC, including observers, participated in the Mission Congress in Chiang Mai.

The theme was “Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia.” It was inspired and guided by John Paul II’s post-synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*. It developed what the Pope had written in EA:

- that “dialogue is a characteristic mode of the Church’s life in Asia” (EA 32);
- that proclamation must be “joyful, patient, and progressive” (EA 2) that could finally lead to the full explicit proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ;
- that proclamation in Asia has to use “evocative pedagogy” (EA 20), like that of the Sacred Scriptures, through concrete images and stories of Jesus, taking seriously the concrete life-situation and cultures of Asian peoples;
- that in many places in Asia, “the silent witness” of authentic Christian life “remains the only way of proclaiming God’s Kingdom” (EA 23).

In this light the Mission Congress dealt with telling the story of Jesus through personal experiences and testimonies in various religious and cultural contexts, thus recalling the triple dialogue of the 1st FABC Plenary Assembly in Taipei - inculturation, inter-religious dialogue and “integral liberation.” It dealt with special emphasis on “journeying” with the youth of Asia towards authentic discipleship and “entrusting” them with “active participation” in a Church-in-mission. Finally the Congress emphasized the necessity of evangelizing the tools of social communications and harnessing their immense potential for mission.

This presentation of the 2006 Mission Congress is in fact a summary of the concrete work that has been done by the FABC Offices since Daejeon, Korea to address the vision of FABC and its pastoral focus in the light of the multi-religious and multi-cultural context of Asia.

Theology at the Service of the Church in Asia

The work of FABC is basically pastoral. It is the task of the Office of Theological Concerns to deepen theological reflection on issues faced by pastoral work. Thus, following the suggestion of many Bishops at Daejeon in 2004, the Office of Theological Concerns held a Bishops' Institute for Theological Animation (BITA III) on the issue of inter-faith marriages in Hong Kong from May 8 – 12, 2006. 24 Bishops participated in this theological-pastoral reflection. Some of the papers presented at BITA III were published as FABC Paper, no. 118. The topic was further deepened by OTC in its second paper "A Few Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Inter-Faith Marriages (FABC Paper, no. 127).

In addition, OTC also produced a reflection paper (FABC Paper, no. 120) on "Respect for Life in the Context of Asia" to deepen our understanding of the Daejeon Final Document on the "Family towards a Culture of Integral Life." The striving for integral life is especially impacted by our own understanding of Christ in the context of Asian realities. Thus, in 2005 the OTC published the papers that had been presented at the OTC Theological Colloquium a year before on "The Asian Faces of Christ." It also issued a reflection paper on "Religious Freedom in the Context of Asia" (FABC Paper, no. 112)

But it is not only the Office of Theological Concerns that does theological-pastoral reflection on the issues that confront the mission of integral evangelization, the vision of Church in Asia, and the primary pastoral focus of building the Local Church. When the other Offices organize their own Bishops' Institutes, symposia, and assemblies, competent resource persons help the Bishops through reflection papers on the issues.

Faith Formation and Education in an Asian Context

The mission of the Church in Asia and formation for mission are the concerns of the Office of Evangelization and the Office of Education and Faith Formation (earlier called the Office of Education and School Chaplaincy). Since the Daejeon Assembly, the Office of Education and Faith Formation has taken the values of Asians as its fundamental theme. This theme on values is based on the 8th Plenary Assembly's vision of the Family in Asia whose values are under siege by the values of an emerging secular, materialist, consumerist and relativistic culture.

The Office has also dealt with dialogue on moral and religious formation in Education, instilling gospel values through family catechesis to meet the challenges of inter-religious marriages, single parenting, migrant workers, etc. as well as through dialogue-encounter with various religions.

Renewal of the Clergy and Religious Towards a Renewed Local Church

The vision of a renewed Church-in-mission (“a new way of being Church”) and the pastoral focus of building the Local Church evidently require the renewal of Clergy and Religious. Therefore, the FABC Office of Clergy and Office of Consecrated Life have the task of assisting Clergy and Religious in their renewal towards a new way of being Church.

In its series of seminars for Bishops and for Priests the Office of Clergy provided reflection papers on: Asian Challenges to the Human Formation of Priests, the Identity and Vision of the Priest in the Asian Context, Bishops’ Role in Caring for Priests, Asian Families and Vocations to the Priestly and Religious Life, Priestly Spirituality. These reflections have been published as FABC Papers.

In turn the Office for Consecrated Life in its first seminar in July 19 – 23, 2005 explored the Role of Religious in the Building Up of the Local Church. 102 Bishops, Women and Men Religious, and Lay people from 20 Asian countries participated in this important seminar which took up the “primary focus” of the mission of evangelization – the building up of a truly local church.”

Renewal of the Laity towards Participation

The FABC Office of Laity and Family (earlier called the Office of Laity) targets the formation and renewal of the laity towards participation in the mission of the Church. Directly addressing the Daejeon theme, the Office organized a Bishops’ Institute for the Lay Apostolate (BILA) on “Avenues and Approaches to Respond to the Challenges in Pastoral Care of Families in the 21st Century.” Thirteen Asian countries participated in the Institute.

The AsIPA desk (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) of the Office concentrates on the building of Basic Ecclesial Communities (or Small Christian Communities). AsIPA is a significant pastoral approach towards building the Local Church as a Church of Communion. The AsIPA desk

focuses on the Family as the nuclear cell of BECs or SCCs. The Daejeon Plenary Assembly had considered the Family as the “focal point of evangelization.” As well as publishing training modules for community building, the desk continues to organize training sessions in collaboration with Episcopal conferences to train community facilitators and leaders. These efforts towards a “new way of being Church” have already attracted some members of the Church in Germany, bishops, religious and lay people into personally observing SCCs in Korea and adapting the AsIPA method in a highly secularized context.

The Women’s Desk in turn assists in the empowerment of Asian women in responding to challenges facing the Family, the Church and society. For this purpose it has organized seminars for women, particularly one on the discipleship of women in the Asian context. Especially notable was a very helpful dialogue in 2008 between bishops and women theologians.

Finally the Youth desk continues its work of helping the youth programs of Episcopal conferences and other youth groups in forming Asian youth leaders and ministers. The purpose is to help them gain the confidence and skill to become active evangelizers and community builders. The 4th Asian Youth Day in Hong Kong in 2006 was especially significant. The theme, “Youth, the Hope of Asian Families,” connected the Daejeon theme to the role of Youth. Young people from at least 18 Asian Episcopal conferences with their bishop-representatives, including observers from 4 European countries and two African countries, participated in this great gathering of Asian youth.

The Task of Integral Liberation in Asia

The Office of Human Development is the oldest Office of the FABC, even predating the official establishment of the Federation. It has also been most active in organizing seminars to enable Bishops to know and respond to the pastoral challenges in the Church’s dialogue with the poor towards integral liberation. Poverty, justice and development are the main issues that the Office deals with. Such challenges are reflected upon in the light of the Social Doctrine of the Church. In its work the Office of Human Development collaborates with other religious groups, with civil society and various non-government organizations and most especially with the Justice and Peace Commissions and/or Caritas organizations of Asian Episcopal conferences.

Thus, together with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand, the Office presented the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church to 157 Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, Clergy, Religious and Laity in 2007. In the past five years the Office has also focused on the plight of Asian migrant workers, one of the major pastoral priorities that had been identified by at least two FABC Plenary Assemblies.

The Task of Inter-Religious Dialogue

Finally the FABC through its Office of Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs reaches out to brothers and sisters of other faiths and religions in the mode of dialogue. It has dealt with formation towards inter-religious dialogue. For this reason, the Office conducted for its staff an orientation seminar on inter-religious dialogue in 2008.

In 2005 in Pattaya, Thailand the Office organized an important consultation with Episcopal commissions in the FABC that deal with ecumenical and inter-religious affairs. The topic of the consultation was on relations with those Churches and ecclesial communities that have not taken part in the ecumenical movement, particularly Evangelicals and Pentecostal Christian communities.

The Office continues to collaborate with the Christian Conference of Asia and has expanded its collaboration with the holding of a Conference of Theological Students, already thrice held in 2000, 2005, and 2007 exploring such themes as contextualized theological method, feminist theologies, and Islam.

With the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea, the FABC-OEIA participated in a Colloquium in 2006 together with Bishops mostly from East and Southeast Asia. It identified different priorities such as formation for ecumenism, common witness, and common prayer in order to promote better relations.

Finally it collaborated with the CCA in 6th Congress of Asian Theologians last February, 2009 in Iloilo, Philippines/ The Congress saw the need for mission in Asia in humble solidarity with the poor and the oppressed and many other deprived groups.

Finally we have to take note that to many assemblies and consultations organized by the other Offices observers and resource persons from other faiths and religions are invited in order to present their own reflections.

Social Communication at the Service of the Church and of FABC

The power of social communication to influence cultures and foster a new culture has been frequently seen from its negative side – that today the tools of social communication are eroding the treasured values of Asians and introducing into Asia a culture of materialist secularism, of hedonism, and relativism.

The work of the FABC Office of Social Communication has looked at the positive side – at the vast potential of social communications for the mission of evangelization.

We take for example the work of Radio Veritas Asia. Many Bishops do not know that the FABC and its member Episcopal conferences are also responsible for Radio Veritas and that it is our task to help support it.

When asked, what is Radio Veritas Asia really doing? The simple answer is: “Immense!” It broadcasts religious programs and news to the remotest corners of Asia in their own language, especially where the Good News is especially needed.

In addition, the Office of Social Communications has conducted Asian Bishops’ meetings on “Asian Spirituality for Communications” (Hua Hin, Thailand, 2005) and on “Managing Communications for Bishops’ Conferences (Taytay, Rizal, Philippines, 2006). It organized a Round Table discussion seminar on “Social Communication in Religious Traditions of Asia” (Bangkok, 2005). It also devoted its Bishops’ Institute for Social Communication (BISCOM) in 2004 to the theme of “Inter-Religious Dialogue as Communication.”

Thus the Office continues to develop the various concerns of the FABC vision of a renewed Church-in-mission in terms of social communication, significantly contributing depth to these concerns while trying to place the tools of social communication at the service of the Church.

The FABC Offices Preparing for the Manila Assembly

While the Central Committee of the FABC chose the theme of the present Plenary Assembly, the FABC Offices spent considerable time together to work out the fundamental sub-themes of “Living the Eucharist in Asia.” They gave suggestions to the drafting group, the Office of Theological Concerns, on what should be considered and treated in the working document for the Plenary Assembly.

Last year, the Youth Desk of the Office of Laity and Family drew up and administered a Youth survey on the Eucharist in order to help the catechetical ministry of Episcopal conferences in the faith formation of the youth. At the same time, the Office of Education and Faith Formation did a consultation on the “Eucharist and Education in Asia.” Finally, the Office of Social Communication organized a meeting of Bishops on the “Eucharist and Communication.”

The general shape of this Plenary Assembly and its daily activities are due to the work of the FABC Offices. In our Plenary Assembly the Executive Secretaries will be at the service of the Bishops to serve as facilitators and reporters of the various workshops.

BEYOND DAEJEON AND MANILA – SOME SUGGESTIONS TOWARDS A RENEWED CHURCH-IN-MISSION

In the light of what I have so far presented, I hope that the following have become quite clearer: the vision of a renewed Church in Asia; the primary pastoral focus of building the Local Church; the dimensions of a continuum of renewal from the 1st FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974 to the present 9th Plenary Assembly; and the role of the FABC Offices in assisting Episcopal conferences.

Looking beyond Daejeon and Manila, may I respectfully present to our Episcopal conferences and associate members the following fundamental suggestions on Church renewal:

1. Use the FABC vision of a renewed Church-in-mission and its primary pastoral focus of building the Local Church as an inspiration and guide for renewal.

2. Begin with the profound renewal of clergy and religious as servant leaders and authentic prophetic witnesses. They are the main collaborators of Bishops and, given the cultural context of Asia, no significant renewal of the Church can take place without their leadership and witnessing.
3. The renewal of the laity and their formation to communion and participation has to take place in tandem with the renewal of clergy and religious. Only with a committed and participatory laity can church renewal be enduring and lasting;
4. The new way of being Church in Asia is best expressed at the grassroots level through the building of Basic Ecclesial Communities or Small Christian Communities. They are to be built as believing and praying communities of the Lord. Centered on the Word and Bread of Life they are committed to dialogue with cultures, religious traditions and with the poor.
5. In all the above we have to be aware of the possible assistance of the Episcopal Conferences. Today you might have become better aware of the assistance that the FABC Offices can offer through their Bishops' Institutes, consultation and training sessions, formation modules and publications.

Conclusion

The continuum of renewal enables a local church to begin anew when renewal has become moribund, to retrace its steps when a foundation block of renewal has been weakened or has become dormant, or to move forward in the process of renewal as inspired and led by the Spirit of God.

To live the Eucharist as our present Assembly enjoins is a peak moment in the continuum of renewal for the Church in Asia. It is a moment that we all strive to reach and, when reached, it is a moment to be perseveringly sustained. Sustaining that graced moment towards a renewed Church-in-mission can only be realized through the grace that comes from the Eucharistic Lord.

Renewing and sustaining the Local Church for mission -- that is our dream
and our prayer.

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9th FABC Plenary Assembly
Manila, August 11, 2009