

DIALOGUE: INTERPRETIVE KEY FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH IN ASIA

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When Pope Paul VI visited Asia in November 1970, he set in motion a dynamic process which has significantly impacted the Church in Asia for the past four decades (1970-2010). As he met with 180 Asian bishops, he challenged them to enter deeply into the life experience of all God's Asian peoples. "You have before you," he told the bishops, "an immense field for your apostolate."

Recalling the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI encouraged the bishops "to take as our guide the teaching of the recent Ecumenical Council." Later the pope noted: "You are certainly aware that in these days the Church has wished to open herself still more to fraternal contact with all peoples of all civilizations and all religions. She respects and admires the treasures bestowed on all people, and she invites them to join with her wherever collaboration is possible for a more perfect and universal reign of justice and peace...."

At the conclusion of the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM), the participants in their final message confirmed their desire to be engaged with Asia's "nearly two billion people, almost two-thirds of mankind." This dialogical approach would include "the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel"; the bishops urged "a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples." In addition, they stated: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers

of other great religions of Asia.” Furthermore, Asia’s bishops forcefully asserted: “It is our resolve, first of all, to be more truly ‘the Church of the Poor’.” Indeed, Asia’s Church leaders committed themselves to be “at the side of the multitudes in our continent.”

Emerging from the 1970 ABM resolution to establish a “permanent structure” among the Asian episcopal conferences, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) was officially established on November 16, 1972 when its statutes were approved by Pope Paul VI. Then, in 1974 in its First Plenary Assembly, the FABC succinctly stated that it would pursue a programmatic evangelization by building genuine local Churches in dialogue with Asia’s peoples, especially the poor, as well as with Asia’s rich and multifaceted cultures and religions; she would be “in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, and the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people.”

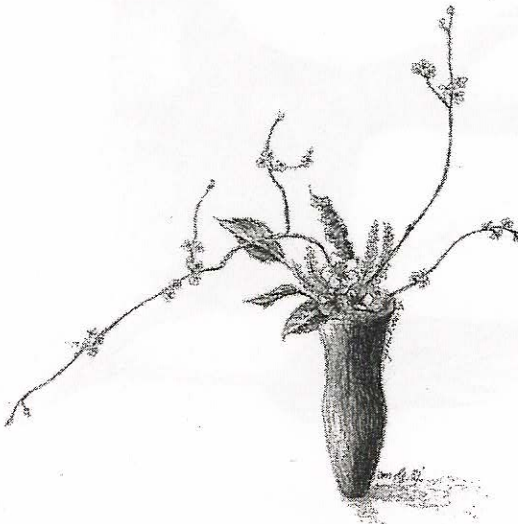
Now, four decades later, the local Churches of Asia through the FABC vigorously pursue their evangelizing mission through dialogue. As Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, OMI, current Secretary General of the FABC, noted in an interview as the Ninth FABC Plenary Assembly was opening in Manila in 2009: “The vision of FABC for the Church in Asia is to be in triple dialogue—dialogue with the poor, with cultures and with religions. FABC offices do this by organizing seminars, institutes, assemblies, meetings in the areas of inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and human development.”

The booklet you hold in your hands contains two scholarly studies, one on the dialogue with culture, the other on interreligious dialogue. These two studies, both published in the prestigious *Studia Missionalia* of 2008 and 2009, provide a panoramic overview of the Asian Church’s committed dialogue with culture and religions. The material presented here has

been minimally modified from the original published texts, so as to provide greater clarity. In addition, readers will discover some communalities in the introductory sections of these two studies. The author's goal was to provide two essays that could stand independently of each other and also be comprehended as integral presentations.

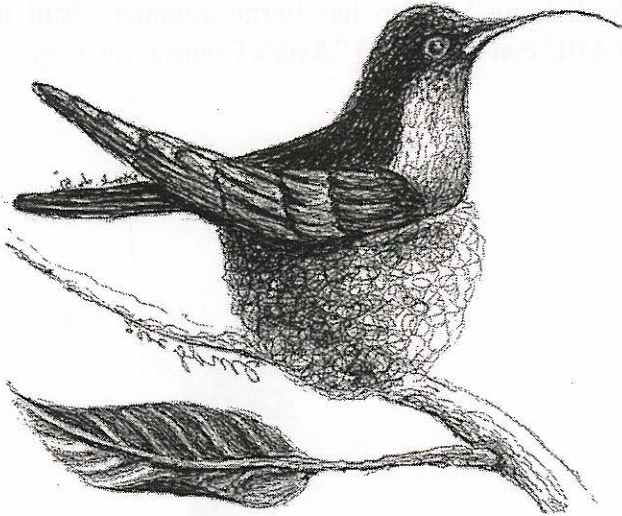
Readers will be pleased to discover that a current, focused bibliography accompanies each piece; this material is provided for interested individuals who may wish to explore the thematic in greater depth.

As this material is being readied for publication, one can note that the "Vatican II Era" has now entered its fiftieth year (1959-2009). It was on January 25, 1959 that Blessed Pope John XXIII announced his intention to convoke a universal Church council, which ultimately unfolded from 1962 to 1965. The FABC was conceived, born, and grew to maturity in the context of a "renewed Church" envisioned by the Council. The "new way of being Church" that is promoted by the FABC through its "triple-dialogue" vision has borne abundant fruit in Asia. Indeed, FABC can be termed "Asia's Continuing Vatican II."



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I. THE FAITH-CULTURE DIALOGUE IN ASIA

Ten FABC Insights on Inculturation

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has been the most influential body in the Asian Church since the Second Vatican Council. It has strengthened the bonds of communication among Catholic communities and their bishops and has contributed to the development of a shared vision of the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia. The FABC asserts that the pathway for the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity is to continually engage in a three-fold dialogue: with Asian peoples (especially the poor) [integral development], Asian cultures [inculturation], and Asian religions [interfaith dialogue]. This programmatic vision of a "triple dialogue" has constructively guided the FABC for over three decades. In a word, one can validly assert that the FABC is truly "Asia's Continuing Vatican II."

An FABC Introduction. Before addressing inculturation, the specific topic of this presentation, a brief background contextualization on the FABC appears necessary. The FABC is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together eighteen bishops' conferences from the following countries as full members: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. FABC has ten associate members drawn from the ecclesiastical jurisdictions of East Timor, Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Thus, in total, twenty-eight countries are represented in the FABC, which grew out of the historic gathering of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 Asian visit.

Aside from a modest central structure, there are nine FABC offices, which carry out many concrete initiatives and projects. The offices, purposely scattered among various Asian nations, are focused on evangelization, social communication, laity and family, human development, education and faith formation, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Each of these offices sponsors a wide variety of activities that promote the growth of the Asian local Churches.

The supreme body of the FABC is the Plenary Assembly, which convenes approximately every four years. The themes, places, and dates of the nine plenary assemblies include the following: “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia” (Taipei, Taiwan: 1974); “Prayer—the Life of the Church in Asia” (Calcutta, India: 1978); “The Church—Community of Faith in Asia” (Bangkok, Thailand: 1982); “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia” (Tokyo, Japan: 1986); “Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium” (Bandung, Indonesia: 1990); “Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life” (Manila, Philippines: 1995); “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service” (Samphran, Thailand: 2000); “The Asian Family toward a Culture of Integral Life” (Daejeon, Korea: 2004); and, “Living the Eucharist in Asia” (Manila, Philippines: 2009).

The basic documents of the plenary assemblies and the initiatives of the FABC offices are available in the four volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia* [FAPA] (Manila: Claretian Publications). The FABC Papers, continuously published since 1976, are available in print form and on the UCANews website with its *FABC Papers* link; see numbers 100 and 125 for comprehensive indexes. The four FAPA volumes and the individually numbered *FABC Papers* are indispensable resources for FABC material; both will be copiously utilized for this presentation. Thirty-four entries are cited in the selected

bibliography; particularly apropos to the FABC and inculturation are the following: Bevans, FABC:TAC, Kroeger, Nemet, Phan, Tan, and Wilfred. To date (2009), twenty-six doctoral dissertations have been completed on various FABC themes; they are published as *Theology from the Heart of Asia: I – II* (Manila: Claretian Publications).

FABC Perspectives on Inculturation. The Asian local Churches are aware, enthusiastic, and committed to the pivotal challenge and obligation of inculturating the Christian faith in the Asian milieu, an assertion this presentation seeks to elaborate. “Asian” Church workers, both indigenous Asians as well as expatriate missionaries, view the inculturation of the Christian faith as a specific missionary and pastoral commitment.

An FABC statement, made over three decades ago, validly expresses their vision: “the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia—Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others.... If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future” (FAPA I, 70). This quote succinctly captures the urgent imperative of both building and strengthening each local Church to be, in the words of the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974, “a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated” (FAPA I, 14).

Capturing the FABC vision, extending over nearly four decades since its 1970 beginnings, may be a formidable task in a paper of modest length. This writer has chosen to identify ten pivotal “inculturation” themes as his approach to digesting the impressive body of FABC materials that are incredibly rich, amazingly visionary, and deeply inspirational. Each theme will be accorded a separate presentation, introduced by a short caption or title. In addition to the author’s brief narrative, the FABC documents themselves will receive pride of place; pivotal

quotes will form the bulk of the presentation, thus allowing the fresh, insightful vision of the FABC and the Asian Churches to emerge. Readers are encouraged to appreciate the spirit inherent in each of these ten themes and discover the action of the “befriending Spirit” at work fostering the emergence of genuine Asian Christian communities. This writer asserts that because the inculturating Asian Churches are discovering their own identity, they have a bright and hopeful future! The FABC continues to foster an “Asian Pentecost”!

(1) An Urgent Imperative. A little known fact is that the word *inculturation* was used for the first time in Church parlance in Asia. When the Asian bishops met with Pope Paul VI in Manila in 1970, they reflected, as noted in their final statement, on “the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia” (FAPA I, 6). Since that historic meeting from which the FABC eventually emerged, rooting the faith in Asian soil has remained a leitmotif of FABC concerns and reflection. The Christian communities of Asia continue to search for appropriate means to make the Church truly Catholic and truly Asian.

This struggle to integrate faith and life involves a process of ecclesial self-discovery. As noted above, Asians desire is to be “Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others,” because they are convinced that if they “do not discover their own identity, they will have no future” (FAPA I, 70). It is imperative “to deepen the dialogue in Asia between the Gospel and culture, so that faith is inculturated and culture is evangelized” (FAPA III, 27). A constant refrain in FABC literature on evangelization is the desire for “intensifying our efforts, especially in the area of inculturation” (FAPA III, 215). One must also note that for the FABC the question of the faith-and-culture integration is primarily encountered *concretely and pastorally* as the local Churches engage with people and all the life-realities of Asia.

For Asian Christians, this is an *urgent imperative* due to the perceived “foreignness” of the Church. A 1991 FABC theological consultation stated the challenge quite starkly: “As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering colonial image survives.... The Church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and religious and cultural identity.... The Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western trained leadership and in its theology. Christian rituals often remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian.... Seminary formation often alienates the seminarian from the people. Biblical, systematic and historical theology as taught are often unpastoral and unAsian” (FAPA II, 195-196).

While honestly admitting the enormity of the challenge, Asian Christians do see significant opportunities emerging. “As Asia comes out of the colonial period, its people have become more aware of their national identity. There is a renewed sense of pride in their religious and cultural values.... Reviewing the life of the Church in Asia since Vatican II, we find that the Churches in Asia recognize the indispensable necessity of inculturation as a path of mission. This has been constantly reiterated by the official documents of FABC and the National Episcopal Conferences.... The emergence of indigenous theology, spirituality, religious life, creativity in liturgical celebrations, etc. are clear evidence of the commitment the Churches have made to achieve this goal [inculturated evangelization]” (FAPA III, 217). Yet, the urgency of the imperative remains.

(2) A Descriptive Definition. One looks in vain in the FABC literature to find a consistent definition of culture and inculturation. For example, in the early FABC documents, terms like “adaptation,” “incarnation,” “acculturation,” “indigenization,” and “inculturation” were often used interchangeably. Yet, this lack of a single term has resulted in a

wide variety of descriptions of the inculturation process, some of which border on the poetic. While maybe not sociologically or theologically precise, these various descriptions elicit a vision or dream of the mission to be accomplished.

In 1970 the Asian bishops committed themselves to “develop an indigenous theology and to do what we can so that the life and meaning of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historical cultures of Asia, so that ... Asian Christianity may help promote all that is ‘authentically human in these cultures’” (FAPA I, 9). The 1974 FABC plenary assembly states: “Indigenization renders the local church truly present within the life and cultures of our peoples. Through it, all their human reality is assumed into the life of the Body of Christ, so that all of it may be purified and healed, perfected and fulfilled”; the same assembly listed several key tasks in the preaching the Gospel in Asia, one of which is “*Inculturation*, which renders the local church present within the life of our people” (FAPA I, 16, 23).

The 1979 mission conference in Manila devoted one workshop precisely to inculturation as an Asian missionary task. Precious insights were forthcoming. “Inculturation is not mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation, but rather a creative embodiment of the Word in the local church. This is the basic and fundamental process of inculturation.... In this process of inculturation a people receives the Word, makes it the principle of their life, values, attitudes and aspirations. In this way they become the Body of Christ in this particular time and place—a local church.... The community discovers a new identity, losing nothing of its cultural riches, but integrating them in a new whole and becoming the sacrament of God’s liberating love active among men” (FAPA I, 138).

As the FABC vision of inculturation matured over the years, an earlier “uni-directional” view [from faith into culture] is

clearly replaced by a dialogical understanding. “Inculturation is a dialogical encounter process understood in its deepest meaning that comes from the salvific movement of the Triune God, because evangelization itself is above all a dialogue between the Gospel message and the given reality” (FAPA I, 138-139).

The “Theses on the Local Church” by the FABC Theological Advisory Commission notes that mutuality and reciprocity are essential to inculturation. Thus, an inculturated Church “comes into existence and is built up through a deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture and tradition.... Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium, but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating them through the cultural resources of a people. As a result, the concrete shape of the local church will be, on the one hand, conditioned by the culture, and, on the other hand, the culture will be evangelized by the life and witness of the local Church” (*FABC Papers* 60, 18).

A comprehensive analysis of the copious FABC material shows that through time and experience an integral view of culture and inculturation emerges. Both elements are to be understood in a holistic sense; they incorporate “all the life-realities” of a given people; they encompass “whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thought and its language, its songs and its artistry—even its frailties and failings its assumes, so that they too may be healed” (FAPA I, 14). Because culture is dynamic, inculturation will address “the emergent cultures of Asia, a combination of many diverse elements of modern civilization, yet still rooted in local traditional values” (FAPA II, 198). In the FABC perspective, the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit is imperative, given the complexity of culture and the challenge of inculturation (FAPA I, 73, 130).

(3) A Dialogical Approach. The FABC is eminently clear in stating its conviction about what approach is needed for rooting the faith in Asia. "Dialogue is a primary means and way for *inculturation*" (FAPA I, 142). "We perceive dialogue as a necessary condition and instrument for *inculturation*" (FAPA I, 249). These assertions are consistent with the FABC's comprehensive view of mission and evangelization. "Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode [dialogue].... Mission in Asia will also seek through *dialogue* to serve the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures, and socio-political structures" (FAPA I, 281-282). "The local Churches of Asia will proclaim Jesus Christ to their fellow humans in a dialogical manner" (FAPA I, 346).

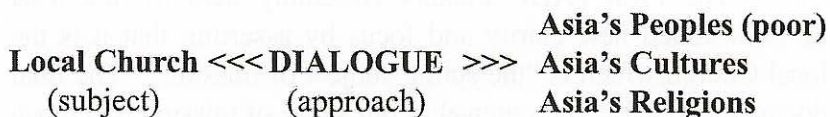
A dialogical approach is the only possible avenue, given the multiracial, multilinguistic, multireligious, and multicultural reality of Asia, the earth's largest continent and home to nearly two-thirds of the world's population. Such a dialogical approach is not a mere external methodology that the Church in Asia will adapt; the Church herself is called to be "a community of dialogue. This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church" (FAPA I, 332).

As a community of dialogue, the local Church "is never centered on itself but on the coming true of God's dream for the world" (FAPA I, 333). Such an engaged Church "will necessarily be transformed in the process. In other words, it will become inculturated—at a level which includes but goes deeper than changes in ritual and symbol. Such a Church may at last become a Church of Asia and not simply a Church in Asia. It may then be perceived as no longer an alien presence. In this model of Church, dialogue, liberation, inculturation and proclamation are but different aspects of the one reality" (FAPA I, 333).

The dialogical approach finds its roots in the earliest

FABC sources. The programmatic document “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia” from the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974 outlined a unique kind of dialogue; it noted that building up a truly local Church, one that is “indigenous and inculturated,” demands a faith-community that is 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” (FAPA I, 14).

This “triple dialogue” paradigm has been verified in subsequent FABC assemblies; the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000 noted that the “triple dialogue” that the FABC developed “over the past thirty years ... is still valid today” (FAPA III, 4). The dialogue approach revolves around three key poles: local Church, dialogue, and the Asian peoples and their realities. Almost simplistically, it can be represented in a schema:



One must point out that the arrows on either side of the word dialogue move in two directions. Certainly, this indicates that this dialogical approach is always a two-fold process of dynamic interaction. There is always mutual reinforcement; this means that while the Church influences the people, their cultures and religions, the Church herself is concomitantly being shaped and molded. In a word, the dynamic of inculturation is always at work.

This *operative paradigm* of holistic evangelization [the “triple dialogue” approach] is the *interpretive key* to understanding and appreciating the inculturation process in Asia today. This is how the Church “lives and breathes” in Asia. Here

one finds the Holy Spirit at work. This is an authentic reception and continuation of the Second Vatican Council in Asia.

(4) Primary Actor: Local Church. Explore any major document that has emerged from the extensive reflection of the FABC and you will probably find several creative insights on the local Church in the Asian context. It was the 1970 Asian pastoral visit of Pope Paul VI with the Asian bishops that gave the impetus for the local Churches to begin formulating a vision of Church and mission adequate to the “new world being born” in Asia in the post-colonial period. They asked themselves: How would the Churches incarnate a decisive “turning to history” and a “turning to the Gospel” within history “for all the peoples of Asia”? How would the FABC articulate an overall vision that captures what “being Church in Asia today” truly means. This is the context for appreciating the role of the local Church in the inculturation process.

The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly held in Indonesia in 1990 added new clarity and focus by asserting that it is the local Church which is “the acting subject of mission.” The final document stated: “The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local Church* living and acting in communion with the universal Church. It is the local Churches and communities which can discern and work out (in dialogue with each other and with other persons of goodwill) the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God’s Kingdom realized in their own place and time” (FAPA I, 281).

The statement continues: “In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches. This local Church, which is the acting subject of mission, is the people of God in a given milieu, the whole Christian community—laity, Religious and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic

Ecclesial Community and other groups. Their time has come for Asia” (FAPA I, 281).

As the FABC asserts that the local Church is the “acting subject of mission,” it concomitantly affirms that it is the “acting subject of inculturation,” since inculturation is essential in contemporary mission. In addition, since the local Church is the *entire* people of God, the inculturation process demands the involvement of all members of the Christian community. Authentic inculturation presumes—even demands—a fully participative Christian community.

The FABC corpus is rich with statements affirming the pivotal role of the local Church in inculturation. “Dialogue with cultures or inculturation takes place when the local Church lives its faith and the Gospel in terms of the cultures of its peoples, the Church being enriched internally by these cultures and in turn transforming them from within” (FAPA I, 266). “Local Churches, servant and inculturated, are the subject of the evangelizing mission” (FAPA II, 202). As a living cell of the local Church, the Basic Ecclesial Community or Small Christian Community is to serve as “a seedbed of inculturation” (FAPA III, 110).

In the FABC perspective, becoming truly local Churches, an urgent task in Asia today, demands that “more and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church.... We grasp something of the significance of local Church and inculturation in this context; those who cannot understand this fail to resonate with the signs of our time, and the heartbeat of our peoples” (*FABC Papers* 60, 52).

“Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian

societies. This calls on the part of the Churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage” (FAPA I, 72-73). Indeed, “if the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future” (FAPA I, 70).

(5) An Interfaith Linkage. A previous section of this presentation was devoted to the dialogical approach essential to inculturation in the Asian context. It spoke about FABC’s “triple dialogue” paradigm and noted that the Asian religions are one of the key “dialogue partners” of the local Church. Building upon that previous discussion, this section turns to the place of Asia’s venerable religions in the inculturation process.

Eighty-five percent of all the world’s followers of other living faiths (besides Christianity) are Asians. Christians in Asia are less than three percent of the total population. In short, except for the Philippines and East Timor, Christians are a small minority. There are seven times more Muslims in Asia than there are Christians; the four largest Islamic countries in the world (2007) are in Asia: Indonesia (216 million), Pakistan (161 million), India (147 million), Bangladesh (122 million). These brief Islamic statistics (not to mention Buddhism and Hinduism) are concrete realities confronting the Church, her vision and praxis.

The FABC is very aware of the challenge posed by these demographics. In addition, there is “a strong interrelation in Asia between religion and culture” and often “Asia tends to identify nationality, religion and culture” (FAPA II, 194). “Religion, providing ... contact of the human with the Divine, is the soul of culture” (FAPA II, 21). “Each culture provides the context for understanding reality and expressing religious faith” (FAPA II, 23). A pivotal question surfaces: How does the FABC view these Asian religions vis-à-vis inculturation?

In brief, the FABC takes a positive approach to the

religions, promoting constructive collaboration, dialogue, and critical interaction. The presence of the “seeds of the Word” and the action of the Holy Spirit in these religions is affirmed. Thus, they have insights, values, and virtues that can inform the Church’s inculturation process. No detailing of the numerous FABC interfaith workshops and activities is possible or necessary; it is sufficient to sensitively listen to the FABC perspectives, perceiving how they can positively influence an in-depth inculturation.

The First Plenary Assembly in 1974 gave this orientation toward the religions in its final statement—expressed with poetic elegance. It asserts that building up a truly local Church “involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. 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 contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations” (FAPA I, 14).

Springing from this positive assessment, the bishops continue: “How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them? Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God (*Ad Gentes*, c. I, 9). This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples’ deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for

brotherhood among His sons. Finally, this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God's Word" (FABC I, 14-15).

Dialogue with Asia's religious traditions is also an occasion to give witness to Christian faith: "On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son, the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and fellowship [in] the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation" (FABC I, 15). Indeed, this is a wonderfully balanced assessment of Asia's religions—and a clear rationale for involving them in the Church's efforts to foster inculturation.

(6) An Asian Pastoral Method. As noted earlier, in Asia the "faith-and-culture integration" is primarily encountered *concretely and pastorally*, rather than theoretically or theologically; this reality is reflected in the FABC documents themselves. It also has another ramification related to the pastoral methodology promoted by the FABC. To facilitate the growth of an inculturated local Church, the FABC has evolved a unique approach of pastoral engagement. This four-stage "Asian" methodology has been termed: the "Pastoral Spiral" (cf. FAPA I, 231-232).

The process begins with *exposure-immersion*; it may also be called "entering into a dialogue-of-life." Exposure-immersion follows the basic principle of the Incarnation; local Christians seek to share the daily lives of their neighbors and communities. They seek to understand and appreciate—through direct experience and interaction—the life situation shared by Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. In a word, all are invited to practice "good neighbor-ology."

The second stage of *social analysis* follows. Communities try to evaluate the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious systems in society. They observe and analyze events and trends, discerning the impact of rapid social change on human lives. They evaluate the signs of contemporary times, the events of history, as well as the needs and aspirations of people and communities. It is an interfaith effort to comprehend the realities that shape their lives.

Asians have seen the necessity of integrating social analysis (stage two) with the *contemplative dimension* (stage three) of integral evangelization; this third stage of faith reflection emerges from Asia's religio-cultural heritage. Through this contemplation people discover God's presence and activity within social realities, discerning not only negative and enslaving social aspects, but also the positive, prophetic aspects of life that can inspire genuine God-awareness and spirituality. This stage in the total process has proven very beneficial; for example, it enables the poor to make their unique contribution to inculturation; it brings prayer and spirituality into the endeavor.

The third stage of ongoing spiritual-theological reflection issues into the fourth stage called *pastoral planning*, which seeks to translate the previous three stages into actual, realizable mission plans of action. Indeed, concrete, inculturated programs of evangelization are ultimately necessary, but they are better conceived through this Asian process that actively discerns what the Lord of history is challenging the Church to be and to do.

One should note that this process is a *spiral*—it must be repeated frequently; hopefully, at each turn or cycle it moves upward and forward. The FABC, committed to this approach of inculturated evangelization, has further developed it through numerous AsIPA programs [As = Asian, I = Integral, P = Pastoral, A = Approach] (cf. FAPA II, 107-111; FAPA III, 107-112). These initiatives concretely respond to the criticism:

“At times our efforts towards inculturation have remained too theoretical and failed to resonate with the people at the grass-roots level” (FAPA III, 216).

A final, brief “footnote” may be added to link the FABC pastoral spiral and AsIPA programs with the “see, judge, act” methodology, traditionally associated with programs of Catholic Action. This approach to social transformation encourages Christians to “see” (observe concrete social realities), “judge” (analyze and evaluate these realities), and “act” (make decisions and take concrete steps to transform the reality). FABC has enunciated a similar approach, expressed with the “3-D” terminology; Asian Churches must “dialogue” with life’s realities, then prayerfully “discern” the situation in faith, and lastly, engage in appropriate Christ-like “deeds” to transform the situation (cf. FAPA I, 281-285). There are, ultimately, many parallels in these inductive pastoral approaches (whatever one names them); the crucial factor is that the Christian community, motivated by Gospel faith and anchored in concrete life situations, remains actively engaged in the transformation of the world. The result is true inculturation, the result of faith-filled praxis.

(7) Pastoral Concerns and Ministries. FABC pastoral-theological reflection is decidedly inductive—emerging from life’s concrete realities. Consequently, many FABC documents frequently identify specific pastoral concerns, because the Church seeks to be—in fact, not only in theory—the “Church of the poor” and the “Church of the young”; she shares the vicissitudes of the “Church of silence” in several parts of Asia (cf. FAPA I, 5-6, 18). Her pastoral priorities concern the displaced (refugees and migrants), women and the girl-child, youth, workers, families, the indigenous peoples, etc. (cf. FAPA III, 9-11). As the Church addresses these specific concerns, she tries to develop a theology and praxis which will be “a service to life”; she “initiates and develops a process of inculturation” (FAPA II, 226-227).

Considering the numerous areas of pastoral concern that beckon the Asian Church's compassionate involvement, the FABC organized the highly successful 1977 Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church [ACMC] (FAPA I, 67-92). The FABC noted the intimate link between pastoral concerns and the necessary ministries to meet these same concerns. Thus, the ACMC investigated "the theological context and the experiential reality of the Church's ministries"; it focused on the "endeavor to make the ministries of our Churches more relevant to our times and better suited to meet the needs of our peoples" (FAPA I, 67-68).

The colloquium proceeded with the awareness that each local Church as she is led by her servant Lord "has to discover time and again what ministries and what ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfill her mission to offer to a human society the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ" (FAPA I, 72). In a word, the ACMC was about developing "inculturated ministries." The gathering strongly affirmed that "Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things" (FAPA I, 72)—including her ministries and ministerial structures.

The ACMC was not about getting additional workers for Church apostolates; its focus was development of "appropriate" ministries, inculturated ministries. The ACMC noted: "The servant Church can never adequately exercise her ministeriality through one uniform type of ministry"; the Church accomplishes mission "by creating new forms of ministries, alongside the existing ones.... The exact form of these ministries will depend to a great extent on the local situations in our countries" (FAPA I, 78).

A 1988 FABC assembly noted: "Inculturation appears to us as indispensable to prepare Christian communities and their leaders for dialogue.... Hence we suggest that the process of inculturation in our Christian communities be deepened and that the formators (pastors, seminary professors, catechists, community

organizers) be given specific training in inculturation..." (FAPA I, 311). The process of fostering inculturated ministries in Asia remains an ongoing FABC commitment.

(8) Links with Spirituality. The Second FABC Plenary Assembly in 1978 focused on "Prayer—The Life of the Church of Asia"; it was held in Calcutta, India, the land of prayer and pilgrimage centers where the Christian ashram movement has flourished in recent years. The final 1978 statement is a rich resource for appreciating how the Church can both give and receive from the spiritual treasury of Asia's venerable religions. This is a fertile ground for inculturation.

Asia's bishops noted: "In keeping with the economy of the Incarnation..., the prayer-life of our local Churches should 'take over the riches of our nations, which have been given to Christ as inheritance.' Important above all, in our present context, are those ways of prayer which have been developed by the native genius of our peoples.... We are daily more convinced that the Spirit is leading us in our time, not to some dubious syncretism (which we all rightly reject), but to an integration—profound and organic in character—of all that is best in our traditional ways of prayer and worship, into the treasury of our Christian heritage" (FAPA I, 34-35).

"Asia has much to give to authentic Christian spirituality: a richly developed prayer of the whole person in unity of body-psyche-spirit; prayer of deep interiority and immanence; traditions of asceticism and renunciation; techniques of contemplation found in the ancient eastern religions; simplified prayer-forms and other popular expressions of faith and piety of those whose hearts and minds so readily turn to God in their daily lives. This is Asia's gift of prayer to the Church" (FAPA I, 42).

The FABC Theological Advisory Commission has also shown the "inculturation potential" of Asia's religions. They write:

“The life in the Spirit, which is spirituality, must be attuned to and reflect the experience of the Spirit by a people in their culture and tradition. For we know that the Spirit is present and active among peoples of Asia, in their histories, traditions, cultures and religions. *Inculturation will be thus a meeting of the Spirit with the Spirit*, fostering the bonds of spiritual communion and solidarity with the people among whom the local Church lives and grows [emphasis added]. The spiritual riches and religious values by which the people of our continent have been nourished through millennia and centuries must flow into the life of the local Church to enrich it” (*FABC Papers* 60, 29).

(9) The “Asian Way” of Being Church. The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly in Indonesia used a phrase that has captured the imagination of many Asian Christians; the bishops’ final statement speaks about “a new way of being Church.” The phrase is meant to envision “alternate ways of being Church in the Asia of the 1990s.” Several key dimensions of this “new” community were noted: the Church is to be “a communion of communities,” a “participatory Church,” a “prophetic sign,” a “Spirit-filled community” (FAPA I, 287-288).

For some unfamiliar with the growth of the local Churches in Asia after Vatican II, the phrase “new way of being Church” may raise questions. The phrase implies no rejection of essential dimensions of ecclesiology; it attempts to capture the aspirations of Asian Christians to live their faith in the Christian community in an “Asian way.” This “new way of being Church ... is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia.... For the spirituality of the new way of being Church is the spirituality of those who place their complete trust in the Lord.” Their lives are marked by “Gospel values [that] resonate deeply with the cultures of Asia” (FAPA I, 288). In a word, the phrase expresses well the deep desire to be an inculturated Christian community.

Building on the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly and its vision of “a new way of being Church,” the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000 spoke about “the challenge of discerning the Asian way.” While noting that “Asia is a cultural mosaic shining with its rich diversity,” Asia’s bishops stated their position: “We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life” (FAPA III, 8).

The bishops noted: “For thirty years [since the founding of the FABC in 1970], as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another.... These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act ‘integrally’.... Inculturation, dialogue, justice, and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do.” Rejoicing in the “Asian Way” of being Church and seeing it as a gift of the Spirit, the bishops stated: “We are aware that this Asianness, founded on solid values, is a special gift the world is waiting” (FAPA III, 8-9). This is Asia’s gift to the entire Church.

(10) Special Themes—Not to be Lost. This final section is, in fact, a kind of potpourri of many smaller insights on inculturation from the FABC perspective. One will not find a detailed “theology of inculturation” in the FABC material, which is decidedly pastoral in its orientation. However, solid theological underpinnings are found in several FABC documents. Some brief “theological roots” are noted.

The Church as a pilgrim in history “needs to be conformed to Jesus and his Reign, lest the quality of her witness be impaired.... The same conformity of the Church to her master is the decisive theological foundation for the inculturation of

the local Churches” (FAPA II, 201); in a particular way, this is related to the theology of the Incarnation (FAPA I, 14, 34, 46).

In several places the FABC notes that inculturation will follow the pattern of the paschal mystery. “This Paschal Mystery thus constitutes the law and meaning of the life and mission of the Church. The process of incarnation/inculturation thus calls for the process of death and resurrection, so that the Church, and the local Church in its own time and place, may become truly the sign and instrument ... [of] the Crucified and Risen Lord” (*FABC Papers* 60, 34). FABC notes the process of inculturation: “This necessary but painful and complex process is the cross and resurrection of inculturation” (FAPA I, 150-151); it also “demands a *kenosis* modeled after that of Jesus [and] ... *Kenosis* implies death and resurrection” (FAPA I, 331).

Several additional themes related to inculturation surface in the FABC corpus of documents. One finds an emphasis on the theology of harmony (FAPA I, 249, 317-322; FAPA II, 163-164, 229-298). Special care must be taken to preserve the cultures of Asia’s many indigenous peoples (FAPA III, 227-229). The Church appreciates her task of promoting a culture of integral life (FAPA IV, 18) and the challenge to evangelize culture (FAPA IV, 33-34). The “faith-culture” dynamic should receive special attention by the Church (FAPA III, 28-29). Other FABC topics relevant to inculturation could be noted; those mentioned here suffice to emphasize the continuing role of Asia’s dynamic Churches in the whole inculturation process.

Conclusion. This presentation has focused on the dialogue of faith and culture in Asia; it has surfaced ten thematic insights of the FABC. In this endeavor, the journey of the Churches in Asia to become “truly local Churches” and “truly Asian in all things” has emerged; they struggle to en flesh “a new way of being Church” in the Asia of the third millennium.

This journey of nearly four decades, since the beginnings of the FABC in 1970, has been perceptively described in the final document of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000. The “call of the Spirit to the local Churches in Asia ... to be truly inculturated local Churches” can be understood as “a concerted series of movements toward a renewed Church,” captured in eight overarching movements.

The FABC sees its growth as: (1) a movement towards a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young; (2) a movement toward a “truly local Church,” toward a Church “incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated”; (3) a movement toward deep interiority and a praying community; (4) a movement toward an authentic community of faith; (5) a movement toward active integral evangelization, toward a new sense of mission; (6) a movement toward empowerment of men and women; (7) a movement toward the service of life in Asia; and, (8) a movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor, and with Asian cultures (cf. FAPA III, 2-4).

This eight-fold movement of growth of the local Churches in the FABC region of Asia, particularly in the Vatican II era, is indeed: “Good News from Asia.” It is an inspiring story of faith and service. It is a profound witness to the action of the befriending Spirit in Asia. It is a story of a Church renewed in its evangelizing mission. It is a narrative of God’s love becoming incarnate, a story of inculturation. **JHK**

II. FABC PERSPECTIVES ON INCULTURATION

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III. WALKING THE PATH OF DIALOGUE IN ASIA

FABC Wisdom on Interreligious Dialogue

A. INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

(1) Asia's Rich Diversity. Concrete facts and statistics are most helpful in grasping the enormous challenges facing the Church in Asia. Current Asian statistics may surprise and startle us; they should shake our complacency. In a word, they concretize the task at hand: *bringing the light and power of the Gospel into the multi-religious and pluri-cultural reality of contemporary Asia.*

Asia, the world's largest and most populated continent, constitutes one third of the land area of the whole world (17,124,000 square miles) and is home to almost 60% of humanity. It is a continent of the young (about 40% are below 15 years of age); there are more than 30 mega-cities in Asia with populations ranging from 5 to 20 million. The nine most populous nations (in descending order) are: China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Philippines, and Thailand. China's population exceeds one billion; India's populace crossed the one billion mark in the year 2000. With this massive bulk goes a wide variety of diversity and contrasts—physical, ethnic, social, economic, cultural, political, and religious.

Asia is a continent rich in non-Christian cultures. It is the homeland of three eminent world religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam; 85% of all the world's non-Christians are in Asia and they adhere to several of the great religions. Hinduism, born about 5,000 years ago, has about 650 million followers, most of them in India and neighboring countries. Buddhism is a religion and philosophy developed from Hinduism by Siddhartha

Gautama, (the “Enlightened One”); it has 300 million followers, mostly in Asia.

Islam, established by the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, is a monotheistic religion; it incorporates elements of Judaic and Christian belief. Islam numbers some 700 million followers in Asia alone; the Catholics of Asia are slightly over 110 million. Significantly, well over 50% of Asian Catholics are found in one country alone—the Philippines; thus, Catholics in most Asian nations are a small—even tiny—minority (frequently less than 1%). The four largest Islamic nations in the world (2007), each with over 100 million Muslims, are found in Asia: Indonesia (216m), Pakistan (161m), India 147m), and Bangladesh (122m) [2007 statistics]. Other significant religious and philosophical-ethical systems in Asia are Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, as well as many indigenous, traditional belief systems.

(2) Catholic Church in Asia. Catholics worldwide constitute 17.2% of all people; all Christians are 33.1% of humanity. Catholics in Asia (approximately 110+ million) represent only 2.9% of the nearly 3.5 billion Asians. The Church in Asia continues to grow. In 1988 there were 84.3 million Catholics; now they have reached 110+ million (an increase of about 25%). The number of priests rose from 27,700 to 32,291 during the same period. Asian countries with the most seminarians (given in descending order) are: India, Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam. The vast majority (86%) of religious sisters are also Asian; countries with the largest number of indigenous sisters (in descending rank) are: India, Philippines, South Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The Church in Asia is known publicly for its commitment to education, health care, and social services.

Regarding the individual nations in the region covered by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), abundant

statistics are available; only two items are presented here. For several FABC countries the estimated population in millions at the beginning of the third millennium is listed; this is followed by the percentage of Catholics in that nation: **Bangladesh** (145.8m / 0.27%); **Bhutan** (1.8m / 0.02%); **Burma/Myanmar** (48.8m / 1.3%); **Cambodia** (10.3m / 0.02%); **China** (1,239.5m / 0.5%); **Hong Kong** (6.9m / 4.7%); **India** (1,000m / 1.72%); **Indonesia** (202m / 2.58%); **Japan** (127.7m / 0.36%); **Korea-North** (22.6m / ?); **Korea-South** (47.2m / 6.7%); **Laos** (6.2m / 0.9%); **Macau** (0.5m / 5%); **Malaysia** (22m / 3%); **Mongolia** (2.5m / ?); **Nepal** (23m / 0.05%); **Pakistan** (142.6m / 0.6%); **Philippines** (76.2m / 81%); **Singapore** (3.1m / 6.5%); **Sri Lanka** (20.8m / 8%); **Taiwan** (22.1m / 1.4%); **Thailand** (61.6m / 0.4%); **Vietnam** (78.2m / 6.1%); **East Timor** (1.114m / 96%).

These few secular and religious statistics already indicate that “being a missionary Church in Asia” demands creative, innovative, *dialogical* and *inculturated* approaches to Gospel proclamation. Local Churches must consider diverse cultural, religious, political, social and economic realities as they envision a pastoral program of integral and dialogical evangelization; they must ask themselves how they can serve to build relationships that will manifest God’s covenantal love for all peoples. The task before the Churches is great; they must respond with enthusiasm and insight!

(3) Presenting an Asian Perspective. The Church in Asia, like anywhere in the world, necessarily seeks to accomplish her mission within a definite context. The great diversity and uniqueness across Asia on many levels has already been noted; several studies would be needed to explore the many facets of the evangelization process in Asia (a lengthy study on the FABC vision of inculturation in Asia is included in this FABC Paper). This current presentation focuses primarily on the broad area on religions and dialogue in Asia, and it is presented from the perspective of Asia’s bishops (FABC).

This presentation will include two major sections. *First*, after a brief introduction to the FABC, a comprehensive overview of the insights of the FABC on religions and dialogue will be presented; it unfolds under two rubrics: (a) missiological foundations for dialogue, and (b) dialogue praxis. *Second*, an extensive and current bibliography is presented in a separate section, drawing upon FABC material as well as important “Asian” theologians and missiologists; the sources include indigenous authors and expatriate missionaries—all of whom have a “heart” for Asia.

This approach [separating the FABC documents from the works of theologians] has been chosen so that the original insights of the FABC will be retained in the main body of the text. This author finds that the FABC texts themselves are very insightful and eloquent; they are poetic; they are visionary, inspiring, and soul-stirring. Thus, this author prefers to extensively quote the original material, rather than mix commentaries by theologians and missiologists with the FABC texts themselves. And, at the same time, hoping not to lose the profound insights of the theologians, their works are extensively cited in the bibliographical section, which simply follows an alphabetical and chronological arrangement.

Readers will find the quoted FABC material meticulously referenced. The original FABC source will be provided in the text, using abbreviations and numerical references; an example is the following: [*Source*: FABC I (Taipei): 8]. This style of referencing enables a reader to find the original quote, regardless of the printed version or possible translation. A standard reference tool is the four-volume collection of FABC documents, *For All the Peoples of Asia* [FAPA]; this helpful series is printed by Claretian Publications in Manila. A newly published two-volume resource, which presents all the FABC doctoral studies written from 1985-2008, can serve as a useful source-book; also

published by the Claretians in Manila, it bears the title *Theology from the Heart of Asia: I – II*.

(4) A Brief FABC Introduction. The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together bishops from twenty-eight Asian countries; it grew out of the historic Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM), when 180 bishops met with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 Asian visit. The bishops committed themselves to build "bonds of brotherhood and love," to foster "a true family of nations in this part of the earth," and to participate in building "a true community of peoples" in Asia [Source: ABM (Manila): 27, 12].

Aside from a modest central structure, there are nine FABC offices, which carry out many concrete initiatives and projects. The offices, purposely scattered among various Asian nations, are focused on evangelization, social communication, laity and family, human development, education and faith formation, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Through their diverse activities, each of these offices promotes the growth of the Asian local Churches.

The highest authority of the FABC is the Plenary Assembly, which convenes every four-to-five years. The themes, places, and dates of the nine plenary assemblies are the following: **I.** "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia" (Taipei, Taiwan: 1974); **II.** "Prayer—the Life of the Church in Asia" (Calcutta, India: 1978); **III.** "The Church—Community of Faith in Asia" (Bangkok, Thailand: 1982); **IV.** "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia" (Tokyo, Japan: 1986); **V.** "Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium" (Bandung, Indonesia: 1990); **VI.** "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life" (Manila, Philippines: 1995); **VII.** "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service"

(Samphran, Thailand: 2000); **VIII.** “The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life” (Daejeon, Korea: 2004); and **IX.** “Living the Eucharist in Asia” (Manila, Philippines: 2009). The FABC central secretariat publishes the *FABC Papers*; they are available on the UCANews website with its *FABC Papers* link; see numbers 100 and 125 for comprehensive indexes.

The FABC has been the most significant body in the Asian Church since the Second Vatican Council. It has enhanced the bonds of communication among the bishops in the region and has contributed to the growth of a shared vision about the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia (copious FABC quotes in this presentation will reveal the depths of this FABC vision).

For the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity it must continually engage in a three-fold dialogue with the peoples (especially the poor), the cultures, and the religions of Asia [the focused subject of this presentation]. This programmatic vision of a “triple dialogue” has guided the FABC for nearly four decades. One can assert that as the FABC pursues its vision and practice of dialogue, it forges bonds of unity; in a broad sense this dialogue is actually a process of “forging solidarity” and “covenant building.” In addition, one may truly conceive of the FABC as “Asia’s Continuing Vatican II.”

B. MISSIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

(1) Church’s Commitment to Missionary Evangelization in Asia. The Catholic Church in Asia is committed to bring the Good News to Asia and to gather its peoples into a family united by bonds of mutual respect. However, local Christians are not always fully involved in this mission. The FABC documents assert that: “... the preaching of

Jesus Christ and His Gospel to our peoples in Asia becomes a task which today assumes an urgency, a necessity and magnitude unmatched in the history of our Faith in this part of the world. It is because of this that we can repeat the Apostle's word, and repeat it joyfully, 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel,' (I Cor. 9:16) for it is 'the love of Christ which presses us' (II Cor. 5:14) to share with our peoples what is most precious in our hearts and in our lives, Jesus Christ and his Gospel, the unsurpassable riches of Christ (cf. Eph. 3:8)." [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 8].

Asian Christians believe that: "... it is as *servants of the Lord* and of *humanity* that we Christians share the same journey with all the Asian peoples. The Church was not sent to observe but to serve—to serve the Asian peoples in their quest for God and for a better human life; to serve Asia under the leading of the Spirit of Christ and in the manner of Christ himself who did not come to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for all (Mk. 10:45)—and to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family. As servant of Yahweh and of humanity, the Church will seek above all faithfulness to God and to the Asian peoples, and will also invite to full participation in the Christian community those who are lead to it by the Spirit of God." [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 6:3].

The Asian Church admits its limitations: "... how insufficient for the most part has been our missionary consciousness and responsibility. We have so frequently forgotten that the summons and challenge to make known the person and message of Jesus Christ to those who do not know him is a mandate addressed to even the youngest Christian community." [Source: FABC III (Bangkok): 9:9]. "Unfortunately for many Catholics, faith is only something to be received and celebrated. They do not feel it is something to be shared. The missionary

nature of the gift of faith must be inculcated in all Christians.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.2.3].

(2) FABC’s Vision of Integral Evangelization. This task of evangelization is holistic and comprehensive in its scope; Pope Paul VI noted: “For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.” [Source: Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 18]. FABC describes missionary evangelization: “Mission, being a continuation in the Spirit of the mission of Christ, involves a being with people, as was Jesus: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (Jn. 1:14).” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.1.2]. “Evangelization is the carrying out of the Church’s duty of proclaiming by word and witness the Gospel of the Lord.” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 25].

The **content** of evangelization is noted: “... mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions (FABC I).” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.1.2].

“Local Churches, servant and inculturated, are the subject of the evangelizing mission.... The principal elements [are] as follows: (1) simple presence and living witness; (2) concrete commitment to the service of humankind; ... (3) liturgical life ... prayer and contemplation; (4) dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions; ... (5) proclamation and catechesis.... The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements.” [Source: CTC (Hua Hin, 1991): 36].

“Integral Evangelization requires that we become

witnesses in our lives to the values and norms of the Gospel based on our baptismal consecration.” [Source: SFMWA (Hong Kong): 28]. A holistic approach to evangelization like that promoted by the FABC fosters harmony and solidarity; thus, it can manifest God’s covenantal love of all peoples (cf. Gen. 9:1-17, 10:1-32).

The FABC has also spoken about the **motivation** for missionary evangelization: “Renewal of a sense of mission will also require a renewal of our motivations for mission. There has been perceived in some way a weakening of these motivations so necessary to persevere in this demanding task. Why indeed, should we evangelize? ... (a) We evangelize, first of all, from a deep sense of *gratitude to God*.... (b) But, mission is also a *mandate*.... (c) We evangelize also because we *believe* in the Lord Jesus.... (d) We evangelize also because we have been *incorporated by baptism into the Church*, which is missionary by its very nature.... (e) And finally, we evangelize because the Gospel is *leaven* for liberation and for the transformation of society.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.2].

(3) Announcing the Person and Promises of Christ.

The Churches of Asia see a clear Christological component to evangelization; they assert: “While we are aware and sensitive to the fact that evangelization is a complex reality and has many essential aspects—such a witnessing to the Gospel, working for the values of the Kingdom, struggling along with those who strive for justice and peace, dialogue, sharing, inculturation, mutual enrichment with other Christians and the followers of all religions—we affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity.” [Source: BIMA I (Suwon): 5-6].

“It is true that in many places Christ cannot yet be

proclaimed openly by words. But He can, and should be, proclaimed through other ways, namely: through the witness of the life of the Christian community and family, and their striving to know and live more fully the faith they profess; through their desire to live in peace and harmony with those who do not share our faith.... Our proclamation of Jesus must also be urgently directed towards the workers, the poor and needy, and the oppressed....” [Source: BIMA III (Changhua): 10-11].

FABC continues: “... challenged by the stark reality of millions on our continent who have not yet been evangelized, we welcome ... this opportunity to face with a sense of urgency the task of making Christ known, loved and followed by the vast multitude of our brothers and sisters.” [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 2]. “More than two billions of Asians have perhaps never encountered the Person of Jesus in a knowing and conscious way; more than two billions of Asians have never really heard His message. While this fact fills us with sorrow, it also spurs us on to longing and hope, because we know He will accompany the ways of all those whose footsteps are lovely because they bring the good news of His mercy and love.” [Source: BIMA III (Changhua): 4].

“We affirm ... that ‘the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization.’ ... But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, *a proclamation through Christ-like deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds—this is the first call to the Churches in Asia.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.1]. “The local Churches of Asia will proclaim Jesus Christ to their fellow humans in a dialogical manner.” [Source: CTC (Hua Hin): 51]. Indeed, Asian Christians are committed to “telling

the Jesus story”; one key source of their motivation is their own covenantal relationship with the person of Christ.

(4) Interfaith Dialogue as a Key Dimension of Mission.

Asia’s bishops have a deep appreciation of the role of dialogue in the evangelization process; they hold: “Interreligious dialogue is another integral part of evangelization which in the situation of our Churches needs to become a primary concern. We live in the midst of millions of people belonging to the great religious traditions.... In this context we believe that interreligious dialogue is a true expression of the Church’s evangelizing action in which the mystery of Jesus Christ is operative, calling us all to conversion.... We would wish to see interreligious dialogue become a reality at the grassroots level of our Church, through greater openness and reaching out of all their members towards their brothers and sisters of other religious traditions.” [Source: BIMA II (Trivandrum): 14].

“The Church, the sacrament of God’s message in the world, continues Christ’s work of dialogue.... The Church is particularly concerned with man’s religious experience, the motivating and leavening agent in his culture. This means that the Church must constantly be involved in dialogue with men of other religions (cf. *Nostra Aetate* 2). The Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 13).” [Source: BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur): 11]. Therefore, “It suffices for the present to indicate here the continued building up of the local church as the focus of the task of evangelization today, with dialogue as its essential mode, ... through interreligious dialogue undertaken in all seriousness.” [Source: IMC (Manila): 19].

Indeed, since the Church in Asia is a “small flock,” the FABC insightfully asserts: “Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia: it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode:

[dialogue].” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.1]. “From our experience of dialogue emerged the conviction that dialogue was the key we sought—not dialogue in the superficial sense in which it is often understood, but as a witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives....” [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 5]. The FABC documents do not often use explicit biblical “covenant” language; they more frequently employ the Asian categories of dialogue and harmony. Yet, this focus on mutual relationships is a central dimension of all bonds of solidarity, no matter what language may express it. Thus, FABC asserts that dialogue is key for them in becoming an Asian Church.

The FABC bishops affirm: “In the context of dialogue we tried to penetrate the meaning of the uniqueness of Christ—in our own inner experience, in our contact with others; ... we realized that there is still much to be discovered, and much that is already discovered but not sufficiently integrated in our lives and in our missionary effort.... We feel that the Christian experience in contact with the age-old religious experience of Asia has much to contribute to the growth and the transformation in outlook and appearance of the Universal Church.” [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 12].

FABC adds an important point of clarification: “Dialogue does not call for giving up one’s commitment, bracketing it or entering into easy compromise. On the contrary, for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith.” [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay): 10]. “Dialogue within the Church is important and it is this attitude that will lead us to respect others and to understand evangelization as a process of listening to what they are expressing in and through their lives of the goodness of the Almighty God. It is clear that Dialogue is not for Conversion.” [Source: FIESA IV (Kuala Lumpur): 12].

(5) **God's Saving Design is at Work in the Asian Reality.** FABC documents are premised on a broad vision of God's loving plan of salvation, a design expressed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition through many covenants. In addition, "Christians believe that God's saving will is at work, in many different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22; *Lumen Gentium* 16), that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church (cf. *Redemptor Hominis* 6). God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person.... His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace." [Source: BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur): 12].

"God, the Father of all, has called all men to share in his life and love through his son Jesus Christ. The risen Christ and his Spirit are active in the world making this love a present and growing reality, making all things new. This same love urges us on to dialogue with people of other religions, because we have, especially since the Second Vatican Council, an increasing awareness of the positive role of other religions in God's plan of salvation." [Source: BIRA III (Madras): 2].

FABC continues: "In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation." [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 14]. And again: "... a clearer perception of the Church's mission in the context of the Asian reality helps us discover even deeper motivations. Members of other religious traditions already in some way share with us in the mystery of salvation." [Source: CTC (Hua Hin): 50]. Furthermore: "We are glad that Vatican II affirmed the presence of salvific values in other religions. We are grateful for the timely insights.... The

Gospel fulfills all hopes, a Gospel which Asia and the whole world direly need.” [Source: BIMA I (Suwon): 7].

On this theme Pope John Paul II has written: “The Spirit’s presence and activity affect not only individuals, but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.... The Church’s relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: ‘Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man.’” [Source: *Redemptoris Missio*: 28-29]. Within the awareness of the Holy Spirit’s action and their commitment to dialogue, Asia’s bishops boldly state: “... we shall not be timid when God opens the door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.3].

C. DIALOGUE PRAXIS IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

(1) Basic Attitudes Essential to Dialogue Practice. The commitment of Asia’s bishops to interfaith dialogue is clear and consistent; the FABC enunciates foundational attitudes essential to this dialogue. “In Asia, the emphasis in interreligious dialogue falls not so much on academic or theological discussions, as on the sharing of life at all levels. Christians carry out the mission entrusted to them by Jesus Christ when they participate fully in the social and cultural life of the societies in which they live, enriching others by the values they have learned from the Gospel, and finding themselves enriched by the spiritual treasures of their neighbors of other faiths. Thus, the ‘dialogue of life’ is central to Christian life in Asia.... Christians in Asia are called to live their faith deeply, in openness and respect for the religious commitment of others.” [Source: FIRA IV (Pattaya): 4].

Dialogue demands transformed attitudes: "... to be able to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue, we need to deepen our self-knowledge and continuously discover our personal identity.... we need to be continually healed of negativities like suspicion and fear.... in order to go deeper into ourselves in this inward journey to the God of the Ongoing Dialogue, we need to integrate Asian forms of prayer.... We acknowledge here the tremendous opportunities we have of learning from the other religious traditions of Asia, especially from the mystical traditions." [Source: FIRA I (Ipoh): 3.2-3.3].

"Any dialogical enterprise requires certain basic attitudes, as exemplified in Christ: — a spirit of humility, openness, receptivity, and ... for what God wishes to tell us through them [Asia's religions]; — a witnessing to the saving grace of Christ, not so much by the proclaimed word but through love in the Christian community, so that its universal validity is seen and felt as such; — a placing of priority on fellowship..., so that we are led spontaneously and naturally to deeper religious dialogue." [Source: BIRA I (Bangkok): 18].

FABC promotes a balanced appreciation of dialogue: "... for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith.... While firmly adhering to our commitment to Christ, it is indispensable for dialogue that we enter into the religious universe of our dialogue partner and see his or her sincere and unflinching faith-commitment. More than that, we should appreciate the commitment of the other.... That is why listening attentively with our heart to the personal commitment of faith and witness of the other partner can not only facilitate dialogue, but also enrich us and make us grow in our faith, and help us to reinterpret it." [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay): 10-11].

"Dialogue is a crucial challenge to the Churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the kingdom.

This challenge is fraught with risks.... However, with the confidence that the Spirit is with us and helps us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26), we commit ourselves to this task of dialogue....” [Source: BIRA III (Madras): Conclusion]. In short, similar to a covenant relationship, dialogue among the followers of diverse religions is to be lived in the daily vicissitudes of life.

(2) Specific Attitudes toward Asia’s Venerable Religions. The FABC in its first plenary gathering enunciated a profound—even poetic—appraisal of Asia’s religions: “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 contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations.” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 14]. “How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 15].

“Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God (*Ad Gentes* 9). This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples’ deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons.” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 16]. One notes that these very words could also be used to describe the growing intimacy in a covenanted relationship.

The FABC observes that “this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God’s Word.” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 17]. Asia’s bishops continue: “On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son; the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and in the fellowship of the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation—a salvation which assumes and gives meaning to human freedom, earthly realities, and the course of this world’s history.” [Source: FABC I (Taipei): 18].

(3) Necessity of a “Spirituality of Dialogue.” For over three decades the FABC has asserted that spirituality is linked to authentic dialogue: “In Asia, home to great religions, where individuals and entire peoples are thirsting for the divine, the Church is called to be a praying Church, deeply spiritual, even as she engages in immediate human and social concerns. All Christians need a true missionary spirituality of prayer and contemplation.” [Source: FABC VII (Samphan): C-2].

“At the center of this new way of being Church [in Asia] is the action of the Spirit of Jesus, guiding and directing individual believers as well as the whole community to live a life that is Spirit-filled—that is, to live an authentic spirituality. It is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 9:1].

“To risk being wounded in the act of loving, to seek to understand in a climate of misunderstanding—these are no light burdens to bear. Dialogue demands a deep spirituality which enables man, as did Jesus Christ, to hang on to his faith in God’s

love, even when everything seems to fall apart. Dialogue, finally, demands a total Christ-like self-emptying so that, led by the Spirit, we may be more effective instruments in building up God's Kingdom." [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay): 16].

"In Asia, the dialogue of prayer and spirituality is highly valued. Prayer together, in ways congruent with the faith of those who take part, is an occasion for Christians and followers of other faiths to appreciate better the spiritual riches which each group possesses, as well as to grow in respect for one another as fellow pilgrims on the path through life. Human solidarity is deepened when people approach the divine as one human family." [Source: FIRA IV (Pattaya): 8]. Here again, one can see how the dialogue process fosters a spirituality similar to that inherent in a living covenantal relationship. At the First Asian Mission Congress in 2006, the participants committed themselves to "living and promoting a spirituality of the dialogue of life with the peoples of Asia." [Source: AMC I (Chiang Mai): Orientations, Part One].

The Asian bishops have a "friend of dialogue" in the person of John Paul II (see *Redemptoris Missio* [RM] 55-57); elsewhere in the same document the pope has written: "... the interreligious meeting held in Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that 'every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart'." [Source: RM 29].

Asia's bishops face the challenge of dialogue with realism: "Interreligious dialogue is never easy, it calls for its own spirituality. It is our resolve, therefore, to live and witness to this spirituality of dialogue...." [Source: FIRA I (Ipoh): 4.2]. "... credible evangelization demands from us Christians in Asia a life of authentic contemplation and genuine compassion.... Only an ego-emptying, and consequently powerless, Christian community has the credibility to proclaim the folly of the message

of the cross. Such a process of evangelization fosters a culture of dialogue in Asia.” [Source: FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.4.1-2]. Finally, “The call of the laity to holiness and consequently, to the apostolate of the Church..., is a demand of their Christian identity in virtue of the Christian’s full incorporation into Christ and in the Holy Eucharist.” [Source: BILA III (Singapore): 6].

(4) Dialogue Serves a New Humanity and the Kingdom. FABC asserts that dialogue is always oriented outward in service of people and God’s kingdom. Just as Israel in its covenant relationship with Yahweh was a blessing for all nations (Gen. 18:18, 22:18, 26:4), so also the involvement of the Church in dialogue can be seen as a blessing for all the peoples of Asia. “Dialogue is a crucial challenge to the Churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the kingdom. This challenge is fraught with risks arising out of confusing socio-political tensions, besides other causes. However, with the confidence that the Spirit is with us and helps us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26), we commit ourselves to this task of dialogue in order to unite the whole universe in Christ so that God may be all in all (I Cor. 15:28).” [Source: BIRA III (Madras): Conclusion].

“We build the Church in order to build the Kingdom in our Asian societies and cultures.... Our mission therefore must be a dialogue with those of other religious ways that will require us both to proclaim and be proclaimed to, to speak and to listen, to teach and to learn. Through such a dialogical mission, God’s Reign will grow in Asia and the Church will become more truly an Asian Church, inculturated in Asian realities.” [Source: FIRA II (Pattaya): 3.5].

“The Kingdom of God is therefore universally present and at work. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent divine mystery which impinges upon them and go out of themselves in love and service to fellow humans, there the reign of God is at work.... This goes to show that the Reign of

God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is the fundamental 'mystery of unity' which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart." [Source: CTC (Hua Hin): 29-30].

With clear resolve, Asia's bishops state: "Therefore, we commit ourselves: ... To take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an 'Asian face,' using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols; ... To present the Gospel message as humble servants of the Kingdom of God, always sensitive to the religious and cultural traditions of the people where the Spirit leads us to make Jesus known." [Source: AMSAL I (Tagaytay): 2].

"This common spiritual pilgrimage demands that we take inspiration from the praxis of Jesus, especially his table fellowship with publicans and sinners, wherein we discover the primal form of the Church of Christ. Before Christianity got established as a structured religion, it was a spiritual movement: Jesus' journey with the poor towards the Kingdom of God. In close dialogue with the poor and the religious cultures of Asia, the Church would be able to rediscover its pristine dynamism which demands a radical emptying (*kenosis*) in its thought patterns, ritual forms and community structures. This age of journeying with sisters and brothers of Asian religions is a privileged moment (*kairos*) for the Church to return to its original call." [Source: FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.5.1].

(5) Local Church: Identity, Ministries, and Service.

To promote and concretize this dialogical vision, the FABC links its implementation with Asia's local Churches and their ministries. "Each local Church is determined by her human context and lives in a dialectical relationship with the human society into which she

is inserted as the Gospel leaven. Since each local Church should embody into the context the task entrusted to her by the servant Lord, she has to discover time and again what ministries and what ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfill her mission to offer to a human society the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ....” [Source: APMC (Hong Kong): 25].

“The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local church* living and acting in communion with the universal Church. It is the local churches and communities which can discern and work out ... the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God’s Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local churches.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 3.3.1].

The FABC forcefully asserts: “Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls on the part of the Churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage.” [Source: APMC (Hong Kong): 26]. These same qualities can manifest how Asia’s local Churches live their identity as the covenanted People of God.

“Now—as Vatican II already affirmed with all clarity and force—every local church is and cannot be but missionary. Every local church is ‘sent’ by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding milieu, and to bear it also into all the world. For every local church this is a primary task.... Every local church is responsible for its mission....” [Source: IMC (Manila): 14].

With great conviction, Asia’s bishops state: “... the

decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia—Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others. The consequences will be tremendous ... [in] all aspects of their life.... If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future.” [Source: APMC (Hong Kong): 14].

“Each local church has its own vocation in the one history of salvation, in the one Church of Christ. In each local church each people’s history, each people’s culture, meanings and values, each people’s traditions are taken up, not diminished or destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled ... in the life of the Spirit.” [Source: IMC (Manila): 15].

D. A BANGLADESHI BEGGAR WOMAN

Ecclesia in Asia (EA), the document that emerged from the 1998 Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops (Asian Synod), explored a step-by-step pedagogy of evangelization. Among several insights, EA noted that “narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do.... In this perspective, the Synod Fathers stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples...” (EA 20). Faithful to the insight of the Asian Synod as well as to the FABC vision, this author would like to employ a poignant narrative to conclude this presentation on religions and dialogue in Asia. For this writer, the experience narrated here was a gift of the Lord; without doubt, it deepened my relationship with God and humanity.

During the Lenten season some few years ago, while I was a visiting professor in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I had a “graced

moment,” a “defining experience” in my missionary awareness and perspective. It has remained seared in my consciousness and has forced me to ask many foundational questions about faith, mission and my own commitment. It involves a Bangladeshi beggar woman.

I saw her on the road, in front of the large walled compound of a wealthy family dwelling. I could not clearly see her face, as she was several hundred feet ahead of me. Her tattered clothes covered a malnourished body; she was alone, although other beggars were walking ahead of her on the road. I was proceeding along the same path, leisurely taking a late afternoon walk.

Suddenly a luxury car approached with its horn blowing. The driver probably wanted the beggars to disperse and also wanted the gate of the compound opened by the servants. The woman appeared startled as the car turned sharply in front of her and the gate swung open. Within seconds two large dogs emerged from the compound and jumped at the woman, knocking her to the ground. She screamed and cried both from fear and the pain caused by the dogs nipping at her. I stood frozen, horrified at the sight.

A well-dressed madam promptly emerged from the chauffeur-driven car. She ordered the driver to bring the car into the compound; the dogs were called to return inside; the servants were commanded to close and lock the gate. And, the beggar woman? She was left alone on the ground—outside the gate. I stood helpless, gazing at this appalling scene.

Only the other frightened beggars came to the aid of the woman. Only they showed mercy and compassion. I stood at a distance and wept at this scene of crucifixion. I admitted to being a guilty bystander. My fears and inadequacies left me paralyzed. I had not one *taka* coin in my pocket to give; I could not offer one word of consolation in the Bengali language which I did not speak;

I did not approach the woman for fear of misinterpretation that a foreign man would touch a Bengali woman in public in this strictly Islamic culture. I simply wept in solidarity. I wept long and hard. And, in succeeding years, I have frequently returned to that scene and prayed to God: “Do not let me forget that experience. Allow it to shape my life and mission vision. Permit it to remain a ‘defining moment’ in understanding my mission vocation.”

My Christian faith, along with the insights of FABC, provide me with a vision to interpret this experience. I believe in a God who is radically compassionate to everyone—Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian. Thus, relying on God’s grace, I look forward to meeting once again that Muslim Bangladeshi beggar-woman—she who so deeply shared in the paschal mystery—in the resurrected life with Christ the Lord in heaven. I am confident she will be there!

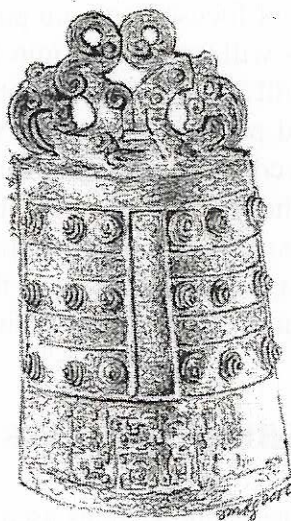
Added to this narrative of the beggar, this author finds great insight in a particular papal quote. Pope John Paul II, speaking in Manila to all the peoples of Asia during his 1981 Philippine visit, asserted that the goal of interfaith dialogue should be altruistic (not focused only on personal enrichment); he stated: “Christians will, moreover, join hands with all men and women of good will ... [and] work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful society in which the poor will be the first to be served.” Yes, a key Asian way of mission is dialogical service of the needy. This approach can clearly reveal the face of Jesus in Asia today, strengthen bonds of relationship with Asia’s burgeoning masses, and place the Church firmly at the side of the multitudes in the Asian continent. **JHK**

ABBREVIATIONS

NOTE: All these abbreviations used in the text and cited below refer to FABC documents found in the four volumes of *For*

All the Peoples of Asia, produced by Claretian Publications in Quezon City (Metro Manila), Philippines.

- ABM** - Asian Bishops' Meeting (Manila – 1970)
- ACMC** - Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (Hong Kong – 1977)
- AMC** - Asian Mission Congress (Chiang Mai – 2006)
- AMSAL** - Asian-born Missionary Societies of Apostolic Life
- BILA** - Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate
- BIMA** - Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate
- BIRA** - Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs
- CTC** - Conclusions of Theological Consultation (Hua Hin – 1994)
- EN** - *Evangelii Nuntiandi*
- FABC** - Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences
- FEISA** - Faith Encounters in Social Action
- FIRA** - Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs
- IMC** - International Mission Congress (Manila – 1979)
- RM** - *Redemptoris Missio*
- SFMWA** - Statement on Filipino Migrant Workers in Asia



IV. RELIGIONS AND DIALOGUE IN ASIA

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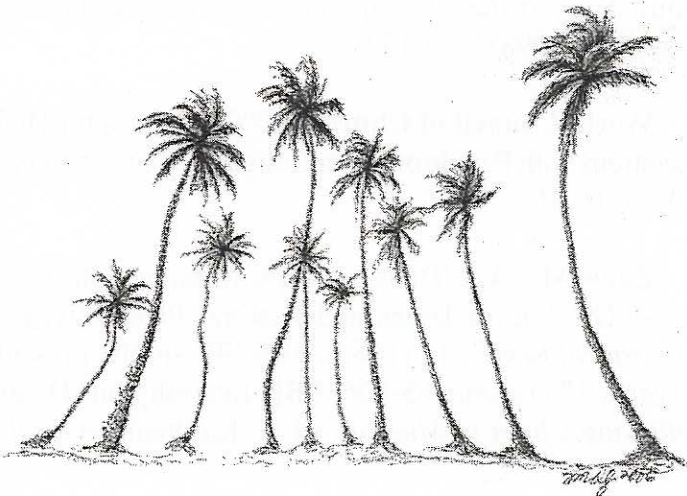
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