

[A Reference Paper also for the Eighth FABC Plenary Assembly]

**THIRTY YEARS OF FABC:
HISTORY, FOUNDATION, CONTEXT AND THEOLOGY**

by
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1. INTRODUCTION

FABC has become, perhaps, a household name in many churches throughout Asia. Even if it was initially an institution founded specifically for the bishops, it has been successfully influential upon practically every aspect of church life, as well. To be sure, the Asian Church's concern for interreligious dialogue, inculturation and integral liberation has its roots in the many seminars and assemblies of the FABC. Likewise, much of the renewal programs of the laity, as well as the Religious, take FABC orientations as starting points for their reflections. It is, therefore, not too far-fetched to suggest that FABC is to the Church in Asia what the Vatican is to the universal Church.

FABC has been in existence for thirty years now. But it was only very recently that people are taking an interest in what FABC stands for. Theologians from all continents have been citing the works and orientations of the FABC, when speaking of progress and development in theology. Many are seeing FABC play the same role as did the Latin American CELAM in the peak years of liberation theology. FABC's concern, of course, has to do with the theology of religious pluralism. There is a perception that what FABC is doing in Asia is not only novel, but also critical for the future of the Church universal.

In this regard, Thomas Fox, publisher of the United States' weekly, *National Catholic Reporter*, recently published a book, entitled, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*. Its aim, according to Fox, who writes as a Westerner, is to introduce "a

new kind of Catholicism," especially for peoples of the West. Fox continues: "I am of the opinion that Asian Catholics today have something very important to share with the wider church. If we open our minds, if we challenge the way we think about church, we could begin to see Catholicism from a whole new perspective, a non-Western perspective, 'an Asian perspective'."²

It is the aim of the present article to look at Asian Catholicism, especially its development since the Second Vatican Council. Since Asia is not only very vast, but diverse as well, the research will confine itself to looking only at the works of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), perhaps the only pan-Asian institution which can rightly claim to represent the Catholic Church in Asia.

The article begins by studying the origins and foundations of the FABC, paying attention to its structures, mandate and programs. The various documents which issue from FABC will also be looked at, especially with reference to its ecclesial authority. It then looks at the context in which FABC operates, with special focus on the socio-political, and the cultural-religio-economic factors, which have shaped the concerns of the Asian Church. Subsequently, the article will examine the theological thrust of the FABC, as discerned through the various statements made as a result of the various programs central to the life of the FABC.

2. FABC'S FOUNDATION AND CONTEXT

Before one can appreciate the Asian Church's theology, it is important first to have an understanding of whom and what is being referred to by the "Asian Church." This section begins by exploring the foundation and structure of the Church in Asia, as represented by the FABC. It discusses how this Asian institution came into being; who constitutes it; how it operates; as well as its scope and limitations. It, then, looks at the *Sitzen-im-Leben*

² Thomas Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), xi.

in which the Church does its theology, with specific reference to the pluralistic structures inherent in Asian societies. Finally, the section looks at how the Asian Church conceives itself and its mission in such Asian realities.

2.1 THE INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATION OF FABC

2.1.1 Origins and History

The institution of the FABC can actually be traced back to the Second Vatican Council.³ It was during this period, while in Rome, that many Asian bishops were meeting one another for the very first time. Arising from the months of staying together, friendships were formed, as was a sense of common identity. The Asian bishops realized that hitherto they have had little to do with one another; and in fact had more relationships with bishops from Europe, in particular Rome, than with bishops from Asia. Thus, they began to talk about the need for a structure which would enable them to have more interactions amongst bishops across Asia.

The papal visit of Pope Paul VI to Asia in November 1970 then provided the occasion for the bishops of Asia to come together in Manila, the Philippines. A gathering which brought together 180 bishops from all across Asia, the Asian Bishops' Meeting (as the event was called), was also a time when the notion of a Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was conceived and conceptualized.⁴ Citing Yves Congar, Filipino Jesuit priest, C.G. Arevalo, who was present at that meeting, and subsequently served as a peritus to the FABC for many years, suggests that the Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM) can be regarded as the beginnings of the truly Asian Church: "And now the heirs have found their

³ C.G. Arevalo "...The Time of the Heirs", in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1970 to 1991, Vol. I*, eds. Gaudencio Rosales & C.G. Arevalo, (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997) xviii. [Hereafter called *FAPA, Vol. I*]

⁴ *Ibid.*

own voice; they can now speak for themselves... It is now the time of the heirs."⁵

Indian theologian Felix Wilfred — who has also served as theological consultant to the FABC for many years, albeit in the second generation — had this to say about the Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM): "Never before had Asian bishops come together to exchange experiences, and to deliberate jointly on common questions and problems facing the continent. The meeting marked the beginning of a new consciousness of the many traditional links that united the various peoples of this part of the globe."⁶ To be sure, the *Message of the Conference* issued by the bishops at the ABM acknowledged that as part of the "awakening [to the new consciousness], we see the face of an Asia at long last coming to birth as a true community of peoples. For barriers which have so long isolated our nations from one another are falling one by one; and the desire grows among us to know each other and to find each other as Asian, sister-nations, among whom relationships of friendship and trust, of collaboration, sharing and genuine solidarity may be firmly, lastingly wrought" (ABM, art. 12).⁷

The rest of the ABM's *Message of the Conference* addressed the context of Asia in which the Asian Church is situated. It analyzed the context by speaking about the "changing faces of Asia," and subsequently looked at how the "Church's response of service," ought to be so that the Church, along with the other peoples of Asia, can move "towards the New World of Asia."⁸ The bishops also issued a report, *Resolutions of the Meeting*, in which they urged the setting up of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: "The Episcopal Conferences here represented are urged to authorize and support a permanent structure for the effective implementation of the decisions of this meeting."⁹ With that mandate, a group of bishops began working on the appropriate structures and called for their first meeting to be held in Hong Kong four

⁵ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁶ Felix Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), Orientations, Challenges and Impact," in *FAPA, Vol. I*, xxiii.

⁷ *FAPA, Vol., I*, 4. ⁸ *FAPA, Vol., I*, 3-7. ⁹ *FAPA, Vol., I*, 8.

months later, in March 1971. This meeting, which brought together the presidents of eleven Bishops' Conferences, was to discuss the nature, objectives, and scope of the proposed Federation.¹⁰

The bishops, however, encountered their first obstacle when Bishop Edward Cassidy, the then Taipei-based nuncio, informed them that the Roman Curia had expressed reservations about the proposed Federation, and advised against the meeting. In an interview with South Korean Cardinal Stephen Kim, who was among the bishops who attended that ground-breaking meeting in Hong Kong, Thomas Fox records the Cardinal saying: "Cassidy told us that there was nothing that could be done. The only thing left [for us] to do was to go shopping—or leave Hong Kong right away. We were shocked."¹¹ Undoubtedly, the fear that the proposed Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences might turn out the way the Conference of Latin American Bishops (*Consejo Episcopal Latino-Americano*—CELAM, established 1956) turned out, seems at the base of the fear-reactions from Rome. The propositions of the 1968 Medellin conference, which endorsed a fundamental option for the poor, was perhaps still fresh in the minds of the curial bishops. They certainly did not wish to see yet another irruption from the Church's periphery, especially after the Asian Bishops' Meeting had more or less also endorsed the fundamental option for the poor. In fact, the curial bishops had actually criticized the ABM statement as "a work more of sociologists than churchmen."¹²

With Cassidy's implicit blessings, the Hong Kong meeting continued anyway, and came up with the proposed structures and draft Statutes, which were eventually approved in November,

¹⁰ Miguel Marcelo Quantra, *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents*, (Quezon City: Claretian, 2000), 9.

¹¹ Fox, *op. cit.*, 24.

¹² Bishop Julio Xavier Labayen, "Historical Background of the Office of Human Development and the BISA," in *The Bishops' Institutes for Social Action of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, FABC Papers No. 6*, (Hong Kong, FABC, 1977).

1972. Thus, FABC was officially constituted, two years after the *ABM*, an event often regarded as the product of "prophetic inspiration" and a "grace of collegiality."¹³

2.1.2 Structures and Functions

The Statutes of the FABC states that it is a "voluntary association of episcopal conferences in South, Southeast, East and Central Asia" (art. 5).¹⁴ At present, there are 14 full member conferences: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam. The following, which are not full episcopal conferences, enjoy associate membership status: Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Krygystan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁵

Article 6 of the Statutes goes on to state that "FABC functions through a hierarchy of structures consisting of the Plenary Assembly, the Central Committee, the Standing Committee, and the Central Secretariat, and its Offices and Commissions."¹⁶ Effectively, this means that the Plenary Assembly, which meets in "ordinary session every four years," is the "supreme body of FABC."¹⁷ The members of the Plenary Assembly are the presidents of the member conferences (who comprise the Central

¹³ Arevalo, loc.cit, xvii.

¹⁴ *Statutes of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)*, (Hong Kong: FABC Central Secretariat, 1999), 2.

¹⁵ The countries of Central Asia are a recent addition. It was during the 1998 Synod for Asia that, after encountering and being impressed by the FABC bishops, the Central Asian bishops asked to join FABC as associate members. However, on account of the distance with much of Asia, their bishops have not been involved in any significant way in FABC events. This might change soon, as some of their bishops have now begun inviting FABC officials to visit their constituencies. As a result, FABC's directions might even change under the influence of the Church in Central Asia.

¹⁶ *Statutes of the FABC*, 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4

Committee); bishop-delegates (elected by member conferences; the number of which is proportional to the number of bishops in the conference), bishops representing countries holding associate membership; and the members of the Central Committee (five bishops elected periodically from different parts of Asia).

In between, the Plenary Assemblies, the Central Committee (which meets at least once every two years) directs the FABC. In between, the Central Committee meetings, the Standing Committee (which meets at least once a year) implements the directives of the Central Committee. The Standing Committee, in turn, is assisted by the Central Secretariat, which is the "principal service agency of the FABC."¹⁸ Under the charge of the Secretary General, the Central Secretariat's day-to-day running is the task of the Assistant Secretary General. The various Offices which have been established are "specialized agencies of FABC functioning through the Central Secretariat."¹⁹

There are at present seven Offices, viz., the Office of Human Development (OHD), the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), the Office of Evangelization (OE – previously called the Office of Mission), the Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy (OESC), the Office of Social Communications (OSC), the Office of the Laity (OL), and the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC – previously called the Theological Advisory Commission [TAC]). A commission of 3-5 bishops, appointed by the Central Committee, is responsible for each office, with one of them serving as Executive Chairman. The bishops may be assisted by an Executive Secretary; who, in turn, may have the assistance of a staff.

As a voluntary association, the FABC's primary purpose is "to foster among its members solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of Church and society in Asia."²⁰ It does this through the promotion of communication, study, and co-operative projects,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

both within and among the various episcopal conferences; as well as with other Christian churches, religious communities, and all peoples of goodwill. All of these are done "in the light of Vatican II and post-conciliar official documents; and according to the needs of Asia."²¹

As a "voluntary association," the FABC is by no means a supra-Episcopal Conference and so its decisions and recommendations are "without juridical binding force."²² Instead, the FABC respects the autonomy of each bishop, of each member episcopal conference, and of each FABC regional assembly."²³

2.1.3 Programs and Statements

Plenary Assemblies

As the supreme body of FABC, the Plenary Assemblies naturally are given special importance. They are normally attended by about 200 participants, of whom half are bishop-delegates. The rest is made up of officials of the various Offices, their partners and consultants, members of the clergy, Religious congregations and laity involved in grassroots ministries. Usually a ten-day event, the Plenary Assemblies are occasions where the bishops can study a particular issue together, not only among themselves, but with input and interactions from the various sectors of the Church as well. There are usually several lectures by experts in the field, followed by workshop group discussions; and other related activities, such as eucharistic liturgies, meditative prayers, table-fellowship and recreation. In a sense, the Plenary Assemblies, far from being stoic academic sessions, are really occasions for living as "Church" together, and with Church peoples from different ministerial sectors, and from different geographical regions. At times, invitations are extended to significant persons of other Christian Churches, as well as of other religions.

All the participants at the Plenary Assemblies are either appointed by their episcopal conferences, or are recommended by

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

the various FABC Offices. As such, they attend with the blessings of the bishops. Likewise, the resource persons and *periti*, especially those who deliver lectures, and others who lead the workshops, attend with the approval of the Central Committee. From among these *periti* are usually appointed a drafting committee, charged with the task of producing a Statement for the assembly. These are usually theologians, some of whom will necessarily be bishop-theologians from Asia.

The Statements which issue from the Plenary Assemblies are, therefore, not only reflective of the experience of FABC, but also very much accepted and co-owned by each and every episcopal conference. This is because the participants, coming from the various episcopal conferences, have every opportunity to bring their experience and perceptions into the discussions, either at plenary sessions or in workshop groups. Their reflections, together with the reflections offered by the resource persons and messages offered by other key persons (for e.g., the Pope or a Vatican official), constitute the raw data for the drafting of the Statement. Working under the pressure of time, the drafting committee brings out the Statement towards the end of the assembly and subjects it to a vote. Only the official delegates, viz., bishop-members, are allowed to vote. It is, therefore, not too far fetched to suggest that the Statements which issue from FABC Plenary Assemblies are not only the voice of the bishops but that of the entire Church in Asia as well (i.e., in so far as the participants are representative of the Church). FABC Statements can, therefore, be regarded at once as the Asian bishops' voice, as well as the Asian Church's voice. Moreover, since many of the Statements are drafted under the influence of some of Asia's best theologians, one can even suggest that the voice of the Asian bishops are often times very similar to the voice of Asian theologians.²⁴ By extension, FABC theology is also very similar to what is often

²⁴ Most of the renowned theologians of Asia have, one time or another, been resource person at FABC Assemblies or Seminars. These include Tissa Balasuriya, Aloysius Pieris, Jacques Dupuis, Michael Amaladoss, Samuel Rayan, D.S. Amalorpavadass, S. Arokiasamy, Luis Tagle, etc. However,

regarded as Asian theology.

Thus far, there have been seven Plenary Assemblies. The first, often regarded as *FABC I*, was held in Taipei, Taiwan, in April 1974; *FABC II* was held in Calcutta, India, in November 1978; *FABC III* was held in Bangkok, Thailand, in October 1982; *FABC IV* was held in Tokyo, Japan, in September 1986; *FABC V* was held in Bandung, Indonesia, in July 1990; *FABC VI* was held in Manila, Philippines, in January 1995; *FABC VII* was held in Bangkok, Thailand, in January 2000.

Bishops' Institutes

Aside from the Plenary Assemblies, the next most important events of the FABC are the numerous seminars and formation programs, generally called Bishops' Institutes; but which have also taken on other names to better express the programs. These are programs organized and run by the various FABC Offices, primarily for the education and formation of the bishops. However, with time, many bishops also brought along with them key members in Church-leadership positions, among whom are the clergy, Religious and the laity. The nature, scope, thrust, and content of these Bishops' Institutes vary significantly; and are generally organized in response to a felt pastoral need. They are thus pastoral in focus; aimed at helping bishops address particular issues. Each Office has its own series of such pastoral programs, which are generally given names associated with the

this by no means suggests that the views of the theologians are adopted by the bishops unquestioningly. To be sure, lively debates have often ensued. For example, at the Seventh Plenary Assembly several interventions from the floor requested that the Statement reflect a stronger stance on explicit proclamation, similar to that taken by the Vatican-issued *Ecclesia in Asia*. The bishops recorded all of the interventions, and returned to the drafting room to deliberate on them. The eventual document abstained from taking the stronger stance requested, but not before engaging in severe debate and discussion. In the end, the consensual agreement which prevails usually takes into account the overall orientations of the FABC, not only of that particular Assembly, but of all its Assemblies and Seminars of the past thirty years.

concerns of the office.

The programs of the Office of Human Development — OHD — are social action programs, appropriately named Bishops' Institute for Social Action (*BISA*), or Asian Institute for Social Action (*AISA*), or Faith Encounters in Social Action (*FEISA*). The programs of the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs — OEIA — have to do with interreligious affairs and so are named Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (*BIRA*), or Seminar for Interreligious Affairs (*SIRA*), or Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (*FIRA*). The OEIA also runs programs on ecumenism, called Asian Movement for Christian Unity (*AMCU*) and Joint Ecumenical Formation (*JEF*). The programs of the Office of Evangelization — OE — have to do with mission, and so are named Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (*BIMA*). The OE also organizes programs on the Bible, called Bishops' Institute for Biblical Apostolate (*BIBA*). The programs of the Office of the Laity — OL — have to do with the laity, and so are named Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate (*BILA*). The Laity Office also runs the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (*AsIPA*) programs. The programs of the Office of Social Communications — OSC — have to do with communications, and so are named Bishops' Institutes for Social Communications (*BISCOM*). The programs of the Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy — OESC — have no specific names as such, but take on topics pertaining to seminary-formation, student or chaplain ministries. The programs of the Office of Theological Concerns — OTC — are named Bishops' Institutes for Theological Affairs (*BITA*). But more significantly, the OTC has been charged with studying particular theological issues of Asian interest; and their publications are not so much named after the OTC, as are in the name of whatever theological issues under investigation. Aside from the above-mentioned programs, the various Offices also organize consultations, colloquiums and/or other seminars which do not necessarily have particular names. Like in the Plenary Assemblies, most — not all — of the FABC Office's programs culminate with a Statement, which were duly approved — or at least, met with no objection — by the bishop-participants, or bishops responsible for the Office. As such, these Statements can also be regarded as the voice of the bishops and as of the voice of the Church in Asia (since most of

the programs draw participation from across Asia).

As is to be expected, the various programs organized by the different FABC Offices differ significantly in view of the fact that they cater to different ministries, as well as to a different clientele. It follows that each FABC Office might have its own set of bishops and pastoral leaders who participate in their programs. Of course, there are some bishops who would participate in the programs across Offices. But, by and large, only those who are open to the ministry, for example, of "social action" will participate in the OHD activities; and those open to the ministry of "dialogue" will participate in the OEIA activities. This, of course, is in keeping with the FABC policy of voluntary participation. On the other hand, it simply means that not all the bishops of FABC have the same orientations, or are equally open to particular ministries, such as social action or interreligious dialogue. Moreover, it also means that the different FABC Offices, because of their differing thrusts, would also have different theological orientations. All of this testifies to the catholicity, diversity and plurality which FABC not only entertains but nurtures.

FABC Statements

The proceedings and Statements from the FABC Plenary Assemblies and the programs of the various FABC Offices, especially the Bishops' Institutes, are published by the FABC Central Secretariat and disseminated as *FABC Papers*. It is through these Statements that the theological positions adopted by the bishops of Asia are revealed. The *FABC Papers* are the principal source by which one discerns the bishops' thinking, much like what the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* is to the Vatican. Most of these official Statements have also been collated and published in the three volume book, *For All the Peoples of Asia (FAPA)*.

The *FABC Papers* is also an organ to publish theological reflections of Asian experts deemed useful for the formation and education of the bishops. However, the disclaimer found in the *FABC Papers* is useful to note: "The opinions expressed are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily represent the official policies of the FABC or its member Episcopal Conferences." Likewise, even the publications of the Office of Theological Concerns

(Theological Advisory Commission) have a note of caution: "The document is offered *solely* as a basis of a continuing discussion with the wider community of pastors and professional scholars" [emphasis added]. Again, these words of caution are reminders of the voluntary and non-judicial nature of the FABC.

In view of the preceding discussion on the plurality of FABC programs and, by extension, of the FABC Statements, how then would one be able to discern the theological orientations of the FABC? How, one might ask, can anyone be able to identify which theological position is FABC's, and which belongs to traditional classicist theology? Put another way, is there anything which can be said to be specifically FABC's? The hermeneutical principles to be employed, I posit, are those which can be borrowed from modern Biblical scholarship, especially those used in the quest for the historical Jesus. Firstly, by the principle of "multiple attestation," one can discern certain themes in the many FABC Statements which seem to occur more frequently than they do in traditional theology. Secondly, by the principle of "*dissimilarity*," themes which have little or no parallels in traditional theologies can be surmised as authentically, or innovatively, FABC/Asian material. Thirdly, by the principle of "*theological disharmony*," themes which seem not "in sync" with the declared objectives of a specific seminar or FABC Office cannot be regarded as non-authentic FABC material.²⁵ Invoking these three principles, one can discern that themes such as "triple dialogue," "dialogue of life," "commitment to life," "harmony," "witness of life," "communion of communities," and "new way of being Church" are probably

²⁵ For example, BIMA I, a Bishops' Institute organized specifically to promote the mission agenda, where mission is understood as the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ in view of bringing others to conversion in Christ and baptism into the Church, had this to say: "*Religious dialogue* is not just a substitute for or a mere preliminary to the proclamation of Christ, but should be the ideal form of evangelization" (BIMA I, art. 10), in *FAPA, Vol. I*, 94. In other words, because the notion of religious dialogue—often regarded as a "compromise" to the mission of evangelization—is not seemingly in synchrony with the aims of a mission Institute but yet appears in the Statement, it must be a peculiarly FABC agenda which cannot be done without.

specific to FABC and/or Asian theology.

This brings us to the discussion on the ecclesial authority and/or theological status of these FABC Statements. Do the FABC Statements have any authority? Going by the preceding discussions it would seem that they do not, since, from the outset, it is unambiguously stated that FABC itself has no juridical binding force. Its Statements are merely to nurture and to support. In the end, it is the local bishop of each diocese who wields authority, including the authority over whether FABC positions ought to be accepted or adopted. Moreover, the debate over the theological status and doctrinal authority of the very institution of Episcopal Conferences itself is still far from being resolved.²⁶ Do Episcopal Conferences (national or regional) exist by divine right or merely by positive ecclesiastical law? To be sure, differing interpretations adhere. In this regard the FABC's Theological Advisory Commission's position is that the Episcopal Conferences (EC) "are historically and theologically rooted in developments of ecclesial structures in the early Church" (*TAC-Local Church*, thesis 15).²⁷ It further comments:

....regarding the authority and role of ECs as instances of collegiality, we must keep in mind that Vatican Council II has both a stricter and a broader understanding of the term and the reality of collegiality. Collegiality in its more strict sense entails the activity of the entire College of Bishops throughout the world in communion with the Roman Pontiff. However, in the discussion on the topic (LG, 22-23), the Council enumerates many instances of episcopal collegiality understood in a wider sense, and thus in practice sees it as an analogous and in some measure a fluid concept, under which the institution which

²⁶ See Felix Wilfred, "Episcopal Conferences, Their Theological Status" in *Sunset in the East?*, (Madras: University of Madras, 1991), 310-334.

²⁷ Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), "Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context," *FABC Papers No. 60*, (Hong Kong: FABC, 1991), 47.

is the contemporary EC may rightfully be included (*TAC-Local Church*, 15.06).²⁸

Leaving aside the issue of the ecclesial authority of the Episcopal Conferences, there is still no denying that the FABC and its Statements have greatly influenced the thinking and praxis of Christianity in Asia, especially through the Catholic Church. In particular, the "overall thrust of FABC's activities in recent years has been to motivate the Churches in Asia towards 'a new way of being Church,' a Church that is committed to becoming 'a community of communities' and a credible sign of salvation and liberation" (*FABC VI*, art. 3).²⁹ In a word, the FABC texts are a potent force for change and transformation, not only of the Church but of the Asian society as well. They could be starting points for the radicalization of Christian theology in Asia. C.G. Arevalo suggests that "these pastoral texts become a *locus theologicus* in our time."³⁰

This is precisely what FABC is all about. Its focus is primarily pastoral, never theological, or doctrinal. Thus, questions about its authority and theological status are not questions FABC would ask; nor are concerned about. Its concerns are with whether the Churches in Asia are living up to the Gospel message in the context of the realities of Asia. Its authority resides in its message and orientations, not in its position. In other words, while it may have no position power, it certainly has value or inspirational power.³¹ Such authority comes "from below," never bestowed "from above." It is authority earned and respected, not

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹ *FAPA*, Vol. II, 3.

³⁰ Arevalo. *op. cit.*, xxii.

³¹ FABC commentators suggest that perhaps it is because of this lack of authority that FABC Statements seem more bold and progressive. Without the burden of binding authority the bishops seem more free to endorse theological positions which may be regarded as controversial from Rome's perspectives. Perhaps this is how the Spirit works: freedom from authority allows for greater faithfulness to the Spirit's promptings and, hence, the Gospel imperatives. See also Fox, *op. cit.*, 26.

because of its ecclesial status but because of the authenticity of its directives and message. By itself the message attracts and so need not be enforced. There is never any mention that a teaching has to be "firmly believed;" or that one must submit in "obedience of faith" (ref. *Dominus Iesus*). On the contrary, episcopal member-conferences are constantly reminded that there is never any binding authority in the FABC Statements. That notwithstanding, most episcopal conferences throughout Asia have embraced the teachings and positions taken by the FABC over the years. Reflecting on the 25 years of FABC's existence, Archbishop Michael Rozario, the convener of the 1995 *FABC VI* Plenary Assembly, testifies to this: "Our Federation has been for us a very concrete and effective forum for sharing our Asian way of thinking about the implications of the Gospel of Jesus for all the peoples of Asia."³²

2.2 THE CONTEXT AND MISSION OF FABC

Having reviewed the structure and functions of the FABC, and its development and contributions over the years, it is now time for a review of the *Sitzen-im-Leben* in which the Church of Asia is situated. This is not only important so as to discern the Church's mission; it is also the very way the FABC engages in most of its theologizing efforts. FABC begins most of its programs by looking at the contextual realities. The context is examined in view of postulating an appropriate theological response to the pastoral issues confronting the Church in Asia. This is but the contextual approach to doing theology.

2.2.1 Extra-Ecclesial Context of the Church in Asia

(Post-Colonial Asia)

"With the era of colonialism now a moment of the past, we witness throughout Asia today the emergence within each of our

³² Michael Rozario, "Words of Greetings: Reflections on Twenty-Five Years", in *Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life—A Summary Report*, The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, (Hong Kong: FABC, 1995), 8.

nations, both old and new, of a new consciousness and a new self-understanding" (*ABM*, art. 9).³³ The Asia of the last thirty years has not only been struggling with weaning from its colonial authority, but also with forging its own self-identity. In this regard many countries saw the rise of a spirit of nationalism, at times exaggerated and manifesting itself in anti-colonial or anti-Western tendencies.

While most Asian countries have "some sort of democratic government, they do not follow the same model of democracy" (*FABC VII*, part II C).³⁴ Corruption, authoritarian rule, centralization of power, militarization, politicization of every facet of life have more or less hijacked the very notion of democracy. Fragmentation of nation-states, civil war, and political oppression are but common occurrences in many parts of Asia. One can call to mind events such the separation of East and West Pakistan in the 1971, the annexation of East Timor by Indonesia in 1975, the Cultural Revolution in China, the Killing Fields of Pol Pot and the ultra-Communist Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the Vietnam and Korean wars, martial law in the Philippines, and the subsequent 1986 Peoples' Power revolution, the military dictatorship in Myanmar, and the Tamil-Sinhala civil war of Sri Lanka, to realize that Asia has been anything but peaceful in the last thirty years.

Globalization

"Modern-day Asia is marked today by swift and far-reaching transformation, a continent undergoing modernization and profound social change, along with secularization and the break-up of traditional societies" (*FABC I*, art. 4).³⁵ While there are undeniable benefits from these societal transformations, the by-products of many of these processes have left Asia with serious

³³ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 4.

³⁴ Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*, *FABC Papers No. 93*, (Hong Kong: FABC, 2000), 7.

³⁵ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 13.

problems. "The loss of a sense of belonging in community, depersonalized relationships, disorientation and loneliness" (*FABC II*, art. 8)³⁶ are but some of these negative by-products. Other more serious consequences include increase in drug addiction, alcoholism, suicides, abortion, gangsterism, delinquency and a host of other social problems.

Most of these societal transformations are propelled by the economic globalization which has pervaded the fabric of practically every country, not only in Asia but around the world, as well. There are even more negative consequences attached to this economic globalization. For one, inequalities and the gap between the rich and the poor has widened significantly. "It has enabled only a small proportion of the population to improve their standards of living, leaving many to remain in poverty. Another consequence is excessive urbanization, causing the emergence of huge urban conglomerations and the resultant migration, crime and exploitation of the weaker sections" (*FABC VII*, part II A).³⁷

The Teeming Poor

Asia is a "continent of the teeming masses... [with] ...almost two-thirds of mankind. It is a face largely marked with poverty, with under-nourishment and ill health, scarred by war and suffering, troubled and restless" (*ABM*, art. 5).³⁸ Asia is at the same time a "continent of the young. Nearly sixty percent of its people are below twenty-five years in age: the world of the youth of mankind" (*ABM*, art. 6).³⁹ These two factors add up to make Asia a place where the "many and the young" have to compete for the scarcity of Asia's resources, especially since much of it has already been exploited by the colonial powers and continue to be exploited by the neo-colonialism of globalization.

The young, women, and especially the girl-child, are the most susceptible, fueled in part by the oppressive structures of society. "Many are living under wretched conditions, unable because of

³⁶ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 30.

³⁸ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 4.

³⁷ *FABC Papers*, No. 93, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

poverty to liberate themselves from the bondage of ignorance and illiteracy, and are shackled to a life severely limited by inadequate skills and knowledge. They are also vulnerable to the temptations of materialism and consumerism; they become prey to various ideologies that claim to offer liberation from ideologies and injustice" (*FABC IV*, art. 3.2.2).⁴⁰

Cultural and Religious Pluralism

"There is, too, the face of the Asia that is the continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colors" (*ABM*, art. 7).⁴¹ Asia is the cradle of all the major world's religions. As such, there is an innate and relentless quest for the Divine within the psyche of the peoples of Asia. This has expressed itself over the millennia by the multiplicity of ways for this quest, resulting in the many religions which we witness today. It is these "great religious traditions in Asia which form the basis of the establishment, growth and development of the many cultures and nations of this great continent" (*FABC IV*, art. 3.0.2).⁴²

This pluralism brings with it certain problems. The diversity in the spiritual search has often given rise to conflict and tension, where the different religious communities are pitted one against the other. Religious differences are often exploited and instrumentalized to incite hatred and even wars, often for the political and/or economic gains of a very few. "The struggle for power spawns militant fundamentalism, by which a majority group or a powerful minority imposes its values on the rest of society" (*FABC V*, art. 2.1.5).⁴³ This then destroys "the harmony of peoples' lives and their solidarity already witnessed to in a dialogue of life" (*FABC VI*, art. 7).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 181.

⁴¹ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 4.

⁴² *FAPA*, Vol. I, 179.

⁴³ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 276.

⁴⁴ *FAPA*, Vol. II, 4.

2.2.2 The Intra-Ecclesial Context of the Church in Asia

In attempting to posit the mission of the Church in Asia, the Asian bishops were cognizant first of the various hindrances impeding the Church; in part on account of its history and context, as well as its priorities and vision. The 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting captures the sentiments of these hindrances well:

But we must acknowledge too, with regret, where we have been found wanting: where we have tended to foster only narrow and "domestic" interests; where we could have shown more compassion and solicitude for the poor, and have not been sufficiently vigorous in speaking out for justice and the defense of human rights; where we have not incarnated the Christian life and enfleshed the Church in ways and patterns of our respective cultures, and thus kept it an alien in our lands; where we have not sought understanding of, reconciliation and collaboration with, our brothers of other Christian Churches and of other faiths (*ABM*, art. 17).

Foreign Religion

The most serious of these hindrances to the Church's mission is the fact that the Church continues to be viewed as foreign to the peoples of Asia. Its colonial origins, heritage, and continued association with the West. Its dependence upon Western norms, finances and authority are liabilities which keep the Church from being accepted by most Asians. While other religions have successfully inculturated itself in parts of Asia where it was brought to (e.g., Buddhism, born in India but flourishing now in East Asia); Christianity (born in Asia, but brought back from Europe) has not. The Church remains an alien to the peoples of Asia and has not been accepted as a part of their religio-cultural fabric. To be sure, Christianity is no doubt still regarded as a foreign religion; just as Westerners living in Asia—even if for decades and centuries—continued to be viewed as foreign. In fact, the Malay and Indonesian languages even call Christianity *agama orang putih*, which literally means "the white man's religion." To make matters worse, the Church, in some places, secludes itself and forms little ghettos; and thus is disengaged from the local populace.

Little Flock

To compound the problem, Christians are a small minority in most of Asia. Except for the Philippines and East Timor (whose Christians make up about two-thirds of all Christians in Asia), and perhaps Korea (with 25% of its population Christian), the other countries in Asia have a Christian population, which number no more than 1 or 2% of the nation's population. In some places (e.g., Thailand, Japan, Mongolia, Cambodia) they are even less than 0.1% of the population. A minority religion comes with all the complexes which accompany minority groups. For instance, a preoccupation with the need to survive can be exaggerated to the extent that out-group members are viewed as enemies or potential persecutors.

The Church then tends towards a maintenance mode, wherein most of its energies and focus are on how best to survive and maintain the status quo. In this regard, Church life has little to do with the society outside the Church walls. It is inward-looking, separate and disengaged from the realities of the cultural milieu. The injunctions of "pray, pay, and obey" best characterize much of such Christian attitudes, as exemplified by the Church of the 1960s and 1970s. Christian living referred to an individualized I — God relational experience, with little concern for neighbor. On the other hand, there is also the preoccupation with how to increase one's flock, since recruitment is viewed as the only way to preserve one's existence. Mission, therefore, refers to active evangelization in view of converting the other to Christianity and the Church. Such tendencies augur well for a Christianity which becomes some sort of ghetto religion, barricaded within and divorced from without.

Non Dialoguing

As such, the attitudes of Christians towards peoples of other religions and other Christian denominations tended towards the negative. The age-old adage of "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" shaped much of these attitudes. When the Church is believed to be the only means of salvation, other religions are at best in error, but could also be evil or demonic. There was no question of engaging in any form of dialogue or relationship with persons of other religions, when error has no right to exist. If anything, the

Christian's task is to attempt to evangelize them and bring them to baptism for the sake of the salvation of their souls, which could otherwise be banished into the fires of hell. In such an atmosphere, other religions could be perceived as enemies or competitors of the Church. They are, therefore, to be avoided, if not annihilated altogether. The cross of Christ becomes the sword for Christ. The Church's teaching on the uniqueness and absoluteness of the message of Christianity and of Christ may have helped justify such arrogant attitudes, even those of aggression.

Non Prophetic

Another characteristic of a minority religion is the fear of getting involved in actions on behalf of justice and peace. This is not so much because the Christian does not believe in the virtues of justice and peace, as that the Christian is afraid of what such actions could entail. Often times, prophetic actions have not only to alleviate pain and suffering, but also to speak out against structures which cause the pain and suffering. In the process of challenging these structural evils, the Christian risks incurring the wrath of the powers that be, usually the ruling elite and/or politically connected and wealthy persons. Because the Church fears that its own survival may be threatened, it may choose to be silent; and at times even has chosen to side with the dominating elites and dictatorial regimes. The Christian prophet who proclaims the message of God's Kingdom of justice, peace, and integrity of creation has even at times been disowned by the Church, for fear the Church would be implicated by her/his actions.

Non-Communion

On account of its history and tradition, the Church has in the main been very institutional and hierarchical. It is looked upon more as an orderly and structured institution than as a community of faith. This institutional image is communicated by the way the Church operates, with bishops as its head and a priestly caste, who bear clear authority, guiding and directing the events of the Church. There are precise protocols and norms of relationships; as there are exact formats for worship, and even theological patterns. Pluralism and dissent are not tolerated; and sanctions readily applied where there is deviance.

Such a view of the Church does not augur well for the participation of the majority of its members who would belong to the laity. It leaves no space for any significant involvement of lay persons; and so their gifts are neither recognized nor utilized. Thus, a participatory church was found wanting, as was a church of communion. Moreover, the Church, because of its access to foreign funds, has been regarded for its wealth; and has a certain status in society. It is thus more aligned to the rich and the elites, than to the poor and the marginalized. This, therefore, keeps the Church apart from the populace, the majority of whom are poor. Such a Church, which is not in communion amongst its own laity, nor with the larger society of the poor, does not portray the Gospel imperatives of love for one another.

3. FABC'S CENTRAL THESES

It is in light of such a context of Asia and the history and tradition of the Church that one can better appreciate FABC's contributions, not only to the Church in Asia, but for all the peoples of Asia as well. In particular, FABC's central theses and thrust have been that the Lord Jesus and the Church are not only relevant but absolutely necessary for Asia; except that they have to be presented in a somewhat different mode. A look at the various concerns which each FABC Plenary Assembly addressed will shed more light on this. These concerns, albeit pastoral in nature, reveal the theological underpinnings and foundational principles which have been guiding FABC.

3.1 PLENARY ASSEMBLIES' THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS

As discussed earlier, the FABC's Plenary Assemblies are the supreme representative body for the Church in Asia. No other structure can rightly claim to represent the Asian Church more than does the Plenary Assembly. The Assemblies' concerns can be regarded as the prime concerns of the Church in Asia at those particular periods in history. To be sure, each Assembly addresses a different theme, especially chosen to reflect a concern of the Asian Church, or to coincide with an event of the universal Church. It is the Central Committee which chooses the theme, often after much debate, reflection and discernment. Looking

back at the various issues addressed over the years, one can certainly see the Holy Spirit at work in the discernment of these themes.

3.1.1 FABC I: Evangelization in Modern Day Asia

The 1974 Plenary Assembly had, as its theme, *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*.⁴⁵ The theme was chosen to coincide with the Synod of Bishops for Evangelization, which was to be held later in the year. *FABC I* was thus an event to prepare the Asian bishops before they went to Rome. A study of the Vatican's post-Synodal document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ought to reveal where the Asian bishops had a bearing on the proceedings of the Synod. On the other hand, the universal Church's concerns also greatly influenced the Asian bishops at *FABC I*. The final Statement of the Assembly saw the bishops affirming the urgency of evangelization: "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" (*FABC I*, art. 8).⁴⁶

However, the bishops go on to state almost immediately that "to preach the Gospel in Asia today, we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples" (*FABC I*, art. 9).⁴⁷ In this regard, "the building-up of a truly local church" (*FABC I*, art. 9)⁴⁸ is of prime importance, and for this to be effected, the Church must be "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" (*FABC I*, art. 12).⁴⁹ *FABC I*, therefore, implores the Church to be in "dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples" (*FABC I*, art. 13),⁵⁰ and to actualize a "local church," which simply means to be "in dialogue with its people, [which] in so many countries in Asia means [a] dialogue with the poor" (*FABC I*, art. 19).⁵¹

⁴⁵ *FAPA, Vol. I*, 11-25.

⁴⁶ *FAPA, Vol. I*, 13.

⁴⁷ *FAPA, Vol. I*, 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *FAPA, Vol. I*, 15.

3.1.2 FABC II: Prayer as Life of the Church

The 1978 Plenary Assembly had, as its theme, *Prayer: The Life of the Church in Asia*.⁵² The theme, according to the bishops, was chosen as a reflection of the "profound conviction that our minds and hearts have to turn, at this time, to that source from which light and energy from the Lord come to us, to that river of life which must water and fecundate, vivify and nourish the entire life and activity of each of our communities and each one of us" (*FABC II*, art. 4).⁵³ By prayer, the bishops were specifically referring to "Christian prayer, the prayer of Jesus living on in the heart of His people" (*ibid.*).

In the very next article, the bishops state that "it is significant that this assembly was held in India. India is 'a land of ancient culture, the cradle of great religions, the home of a nation that has sought God with relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence, and in hymns of fervent prayer.' We have been introduced to some Asian approaches to prayer by competent and discerning guides. Thus our meeting has not been one for study and discussion only, but equally a time of contemplation and search for God's light and grace" (*FABC II*, art. 5).⁵⁴ The bishops then speak of this search as involving inculturation, adopting the best from Asia's heritage: "We are 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. Thus, a fuller catholicity made possible in this age of the Church" (*FABC II*, art. 31).⁵⁵

The Asian bishops are also emphatic that "the Church in Asia must become more fully a true community of prayer, a deeply praying community whose contemplation is inserted in the context of our time and the cultures of our peoples today" (*FABC II*,

⁵² *FAPA*, Vol. I, 27-48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵³ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 30

⁵⁵ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 35.

art. 12).⁵⁶ This renewal in prayer is prayed for with the trust that "the grace of the Spirit will flow to fill with new power and love all those activities to which the mission of the Church in Asian countries summons her today" (*FABC II*, art. 21).⁵⁷ This new power and love are best expressed in the Church's contribution in the area of human development, education and the "conduct of everyday life" (*ibid.*). The means towards this renewal in prayer also include inculturation and interreligious dialogue (*FABC II*, art. 30-38).⁵⁸

3.1.3 FABC III : Church as Community of Faith

The 1982 Plenary Assembly had, as its theme, *The Church: A Community of Faith in Asia*.⁵⁹ The theme, chosen in thanksgiving for one fruitful decade of FABC's existence, also invites Catholics in Asia "to consider the Church as a community realizing its communion and mission in its own being and life, and in relation to other communities, in whose midst we live in the Asian context" (*FABC III*, art. 5).⁶⁰ The bishops posit "that the Church is at its deepest level a *communio (koinonia)* rooted in the life of the Trinity; and thus in its essential reality a sacrament (*mysterium et sacramentum*) of the loving self-communication of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in faith, hope and love" (*FABC III*, art. 7.1).⁶¹ They also speak of the Church as a "*discipleship in the Gospel*" (*FABC III*, art. 7.3), always "led by the guidance of the Spirit" (*FABC III*, art. 7.4), "nourished by the sacraments of faith" (*FABC III*, art. 7.5), and sharing in a spirit of "authentic participation and co-responsibility" (*FABC III*, art. 7.6) (emphasis in original).⁶²

More importantly, the Church, while "in true *oneness with its pastors*" (*FABC III*, art. 7.7), "is a community not closed in on itself and its particular concerns, but *linked with many bonds to other communities of faith*" (*FABC III*, art. 7.8). Together, they

⁵⁶ FAPA, Vol. I, 31.

⁵⁷ FAPA, Vol. I, 33.

⁵⁸ FAPA, Vol. I, 34-36.

⁵⁹ FAPA, Vol. I, 49-65.

⁶⁰ FAPA, Vol. I, 55.

⁶¹ FAPA, Vol. I, 56.

⁶² *Ibid.*

"fulfill the Gospel mandate of mission; proclaiming the Word through word and witness; reaching out to others through ways of dialogue; and serving in evangelical *diakonia*; so that the Word and the Spirit may be shared in fidelity and joyfulness with our brothers and sisters in the human communities which surround it" (*FABC III*, art. 7.9) (emphasis in original).⁶³

The bishops also assert that the Church in Asia "must listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith; who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history; and that they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others 'in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute,' and that thus they are to be 'sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion'" (*FABC III*, art. 8.2).⁶⁴ Thus, the Church is "called to give witness to the people, expressing them in its presence, dialogue and praxis in all the spheres of its activity as Church in history, within its own real world" (*FABC III*, art. 15). This it does as it "moves forward in mission" and "accompanies all humankind in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom of the Father" (*ibid.*).⁶⁵

3.1.4 FABC IV: Vocation and Mission of the Laity

The 1986 Plenary Assembly had as its theme, *The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia*.⁶⁶ Chosen in view of the Synod of Bishops for Laity which was to be held the following year, the theme also reflected the urgency to follow-up on *FABC IV*'s call that the Church has to be a "community of faith", and hence must respond together, with all the Peoples of God, of whom the laity constitute a significant proportion (*FABC IV*, art. 2.3).⁶⁷

"May your Kingdom come! (Lk 11:2)" were the first words of the *FABC IV*'s Statement (*FABC IV*, art. 1.1). The plea was at

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *FAPA, Vol. I, 57.*

⁶⁵ *FAPA, Vol. I, 60.*

⁶⁶ *FAPA, Vol. I, 177-198.*

⁶⁷ *FAPA, Vol. I, 179.*

once a "vocation and a challenge to the Church" (*FABC IV*, art. 1.2). "The battered condition of Asia," its "poverty, wretchedness and misery" (*FABC IV*, art. 1.3), are the "dark realities" which challenge us as we "place our hope in the Lord who remains, despite our valiant efforts, the ultimate builder of the Kingdom (cf. Ps 127)" (*FABC IV*, art. 3.0.1). As we go about our vocation and mission, we are ever cognizant that a "Basic Presupposition," with which we work, is that this "struggle for a full human life is not confined to the Christian community, [as we] acknowledge that there are many great religious traditions in Asia which form the basis of the establishment, growth and development of the many cultures and nations in this great continent" (*FABC IV*, art. 3.0.2) (emphasis in original).⁶⁸

This "vocation and mission of the laity for the salvation of Asia" can be discovered and discerned by the manner in which we respond to the "challenges of Asia" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.0.1). Specifically, as Christians, we "discover our genuine and specific place in the multi-religious cultural context of Asia", as we "discover Jesus Christ as the Liberator of Asia, and his Church as the servant and instrument of that liberation" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.1.1).⁶⁹ In a discipleship "rooted in the realities of Asia" we espouse a "Christian spirituality [which is] incarnated" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.8.3). Such a spirituality "grows and matures in the midst of continuous tensions and struggles with the destructive powers of sin and its consequences, of conflict and injustice" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.8.3). It is also a spirituality which is "Christocentric, and inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, the Liberator" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.8.3).⁷⁰

Such a spirituality not only listens "to Christ as the Word, in the Scriptures and in the Church," but also listens "to the Word in persons and in events, in the ebb and flow of life; to listen to the poor and the needy and to reach out to them as Jesus did, for they are the least of his brethren" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.8.5). "In Jesus, the Reign of God began; he came that we might have life to the

⁶⁸ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 178-179.

⁶⁹ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 191.

⁷⁰ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 195.

full. The struggle for fullness of life in Asia is a seeking of the Kingdom" (FABC IV, art. 4.8.7).⁷¹

3.1.5 FABC V: New Way of Being Church

The 1990 Plenary Assembly had, as its theme, *Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium*.⁷² With the more specific subtheme, *The Emerging Challenges for the Church in Asia in the 1990s: A Call to Respond*, FABC V was more or less a turning point for the Church in Asia in that it called for a totally "new way of being and becoming Church" (FABC V, art. 1.6).⁷³ It began by acknowledging "the huge landmass of Asia and our 'teeming millions'" as the "context of God's creative, incarnational and redemptive action, the theater in which the drama of Asia's salvation is enacted" (FABC V, art. 1.6).⁷⁴ It is within this context that our "challenge is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood in these Asian realities. In short, it is to work to make the Kingdom of God a reality" (FABC V, art. 1.7).⁷⁵

This mission for God's Kingdom begins by acknowledging the truly human; as "when the truly human is discovered and deeply contemplated, it reveals to us the mystery of the Divine, of the creative Being who loves all creation in ways beyond even our deepest hopes and imaginings" (FABC V, art. 2.3.9).⁷⁶ This acknowledgment leads us to view "the movement in Asia towards modernity" as a challenge calling for "a joyful response from the Church; as it accompanies our Asian people, as partner with them in all positive movements of the human spirit" (*ibid.*). Such a calling demands a renewal in our understandings of the sense of mission, premised on "our faith that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to be the savior of all" (FABC V, art. 3.1).⁷⁷ Thus, "mission, being a continuation in the Spirit of the mission of Christ, involves a being with the people, as was Jesus: 'the Word

⁷¹ FAPA, Vol. I, 196.

⁷² FAPA, Vol. I, 273-289.

⁷³ FAPA, Vol. I, 275.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ FAPA, Vol. I, 279.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14). Therefore, 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*)" (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.2).⁷⁸

It follows then that while "mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia, it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode." (*FABC V*, art. 4.1).⁷⁹ In particular, "we affirm, together with others, 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 Christlike 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" (*ibid.*).

While mission in Asia is through dialogue, the Church must not hesitate "to proclaim explicitly the Lord Jesus as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence" (*FABC V*, art. 4.3).⁸⁰ This proclamation, however, is not so much a proclamation of the absoluteness or uniqueness of Christ as it is a proclamation of what the Lord Jesus himself proclaimed:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set the liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk 4: 18-19)" (*FABC V*, art. 4.3).⁸¹

⁷⁸ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 280.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁷⁹ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 281.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The bishops summed up their entire approach to mission in the "New Way of Being Church," as such:

Our reflection on the Asian situation in the light of our mission of evangelization has led us to realize the enduring validity of a process: (a) *dialoguing* with the realities of Asia from within; (b) *discerning* the movement of God's Spirit in Asia; and (c) *translating into deeds* what the Spirit bids us to accomplish. This process has to be the general approach for our total response as Church in Asia (FABC V, art. 7.1).⁸²

3.1.6 FABC VI: Discipleship as Service to Life

The 1995 Plenary Assembly had, as its theme, *Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life*.⁸³ FABC VI was at once a celebration of the 25 years since the ABM and Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila; and it was a celebration of the 10th World Youth Day and Pope John Paul II's visit to the same city. It was thus a time of looking back at the 25 years of FABC's "commitment to life" (FABC VI, art. 3-5)⁸⁴; as well as a looking ahead at the "vision of life" (FABC VI, art. 6 ff)⁸⁵ for the peoples of Asia. The 25 years of FABC are described as "the story of a listener attentive to the perils of life, to the visions of life; to celebratory songs of life, and who wants to share the singular wealth one has, which is the memory of the person named Jesus who is for us the Way, the Truth and the Life" (FABC VI, art. 5).⁸⁶ In exploring the theme of "Service to Life" the bishops began with "a rapid scan of Asian realities... simply to situate more clearly the struggle of Asia for life" (FABC VI, art. 6).⁸⁷

⁸² *Ibid.*, 284.

⁸³ Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1992 to 1996, Vol. II* (Quezon City: Claretians, 1997) 1-12. [Hereafter called *FAPA, Vol. II*].

⁸⁴ *FAPA, Vol. II*, 2.

⁸⁵ *FAPA, Vol. II*, 3-12.

⁸⁶ *FAPA, Vol. II*, 3.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

After looking at the variety of "death-dealing forces" (FABC VI, art. 7) and "life-giving forces" (FABC VI, art. 8), the bishops pondered in a search "not simply for the meaning of life but for life itself" (art. 9).⁸⁸ In this regard the bishops posit a vision of life which is "a vision of *unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples*" (FABC VI, art. 10). It is also at once a vision of "holistic life, life that is achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class or color; as is a *life with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion for the multitudes, especially for the poor and the needy*" (*ibid.*). Finally, it is a "life of *solidarity with every form of life and of sensitive care for the earth*. It is thus life that unites us Asians among ourselves and with the whole of creation into one community of life" (*ibid.*) (emphasis in original).⁸⁹ Such is the FABC's vision of life for Asia.

The bishops then proposed that as disciples of Jesus, whose duty is to "contribute to the shaping and achieving of such a vision of life in Asia" (FABC VI, art. 11),⁹⁰ we ought to respond by following after the footsteps of Jesus. In this regard, the Spirit-filled Jesus proclaimed: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10) (FABC VI, art. 13). These words at once depict the mission of "announcing and inaugurating the Kingdom of God (Mk. 1:15), the hope of subjugated Israel for the fullness of life in God" (*ibid.*).⁹¹ In Jesus' life one sees that the Kingdom entails "*communion with Abba... the ultimate source of life*" (FABC VI, art. 13.1); "*liberating and re-creating communion among neighbors*" (FABC VI, art. 13.2); "*death for the life of many*" (FABC VI, art. 13.3); "*rising from the dead [as proof] that God is the Master of life*" (FABC VI, art. 13.4); and "*the gift of the Spirit of Life*" (FABC VI, art. 13.5).⁹² As disciple-communities, ours is to be in "'solidarity' with God" (FABC VI, art. 14.1); to be "*liberating and recreating communion among neighbors*" (FABC VI, art. 14.2); to be "*dying for the many*" (FABC VI, art. 14.3); to be "*living in the Risen One*" (FABC VI, art. 14.4); and to be "*walking by*

⁸⁸ FAPA, Vol. II, 4-5.

⁸⁹ FAPA, Vol. II, 5.

⁹⁰ FAPA, Vol. II, 6.

⁹¹ FAPA, Vol. II, 6.

⁹² FAPA, Vol. II, 6-7.

the Spirit of Life" (FABC VI, art. 14.5).⁹³

The bishops concluded FABC VI by reiterating very succinctly that the Church's vision and contribution to life in Asia entails the following three key aspects: (i) "Jesus and his Gospel of Life"; (ii) "sharing of *Abba's* liberating and reconciling life and love with others; (iii) "authentic discipleship in the creative Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of Life" (FABC VI, art. 14.7).⁹⁴

3.1.7 FABC VII: Renewed Church – Mission of Love and Service

The 2000 Plenary Assembly had, as its theme, *A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service*.⁹⁵ Deliberately held in the year of the Jubilee, it was also an event which followed soon after the presentation of the November 1999 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*. It came as no surprise then that the theme of FABC VII also followed closely the Asian Synod's theme, which was "Jesus Christ the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: '...That They May Have Life, and Have it Abundantly' (Jn. 10:10)." It is interesting to note, however, that the FABC's theme is conspicuously absent on the mention of "Jesus as savior" for Asia; whereas that was the central theses during the Vatican-organized Synod of bishops for Asia.⁹⁶ In any case, the FABC's Plenary did take as starting point many of the concerns raised by the document *Ecclesia in Asia*.

In discussing the vision of renewal, FABC VII looked at the thirty-year history of the FABC to sift out "eight movements that as a whole constitute an Asian vision of a renewed Church" (FABC VII, part I.A)⁹⁷:

⁹³ FAPA, Vol. II, 7-9.

⁹⁴ FAPA, Vol. II, 10.

⁹⁵ FABC Papers, No. 93.

⁹⁶ Elsewhere I have written extensively on this disparity. See Edmund Chia, "The 'Absence of Jesus', in the VIIth FABC Plenary Assembly," *Vidyajyoti* 63 (1999), 892-899.

⁹⁷ FABC Papers No. 93, 3-4.

- (i) "A movement towards a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young" (*ABM*);
- (ii) "A movement toward a 'truly local Church,' toward a Church 'incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated'" (*FABC II*);
- (iii) "A movement toward deep interiority so that the Church becomes a 'deeply praying community'" (*FABC II*);
- (iv) "A movement toward an authentic community of faith. Fully rooted in the life of the Trinity, the Church in Asia has to be a communion of communities of authentic participation and co-responsibility" (*FABC III*);
- (v) "A movement toward active integral evangelization, toward a new sense of mission" (*FABC V*);
- (vi) "A movement toward empowerment of men and women" (*FABC IV*);
- (vii) "A movement toward active involvement in generating and serving life" (*FABC VI*);
- (viii) "A movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor and with the cultures."

Synthesizing all of these movements, *FABC VII* then had this to say:

"For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, the Asianness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. 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 act 'integrally.' As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters, and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do" (*FABC*

3.1.8 Bandung: FABC's Transition Point

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, the FABC has indeed grown and progressed, not only in fraternal collaboration amongst the episcopal conferences, but also in its theological elaboration on critical issues pertinent to the Church in Asia. As noted, it was perhaps the Fifth Plenary Assembly which put into perspective the FABC's approach to mission and evangelization in Asia.⁹⁹ It synthesized all the previous Assemblies' concerns and called for a totally "new way of being church." Effectively, this signaled an end to a reductionistic and compartmentalized approach to mission and evangelization. In a reductionistic approach, mission is understood from only one or two perspectives, usually proclamation, or the *missio ad gentes*. Such an approach explicitly aims at bringing others to conversion to Christ and baptism into the Church. In a compartmentalized approach different programs, departments and offices engage in different activities, some of which may actually contradict or nullify the activities of another department. For example, the Office of Evangelization, might, in view of the need to generate enthusiasm for missionary activities, depreciate the need for interreligious dialogue (as, for example, making claims to Christianity's superiority), hence rendering the efforts of the interreligious department more difficult. Whereas, an integral approach suggests the need that every component of evangelization (community, proclamation, service, witness, dialogue, etc.) is addressed simultaneously; and be regarded as complementary and mutually inclusive, rather than contradictory, or mutually exclusive. Looking back at *FABC V*, the Seventh Plenary Assembly called this approach "active integral evangelization" (part I.A).¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁹ See Felix Wilfred, "Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC: An Interpretation of its Theological Orientations," in *Sunset in the East?*, (Madras: University of Madras, 1991) 298-308.

¹⁰⁰ *FABC Papers No. 93* (Hong Kong, FABC, 2000), 3.

FABC V, or the Bandung Assembly (as it has come to be known in view of its significance)¹⁰¹, can, therefore, be regarded as the transition point for the Church in Asia. It moved the Church from a stage where it was exploring separate dimensions of mission to considering them integrally and holistically. Considering that the Bandung Assembly was held during the 20th year of *FABC*'s existence, it was as if it had come of age and moved into the stage of adulthood. Thus, developmental changes manifest themselves. For example, the earlier years, on account of having preoperational and concrete operational stage thought-patterns, saw *FABC* primarily focused on single issues, one at a time (e.g., inculturation, dialogue, option for the poor, social justice, proclamation, etc.) and treating them separately. Whereas, the later post-Bandung years, with formal operational-stage thought patterns, saw the ability to grasp a variety of different issues simultaneously, addressing all of them integrally and inclusively.

Moreover, if the early years saw *FABC* addressing mainly intra-ecclesial issues (e.g., evangelization, prayer, community, vocation and mission of the laity), the later post-Bandung years saw the *FABC*'s concerns as primarily extra-ecclesial. The first twenty "childhood" and "adolescent" years, as it were, were individuation and identity-seeking years. Preoccupied with individuating from its colonial identity, in favor of forging a local identity, they were years when the task was to find a place for the Church in Asia, to become a truly local and incarnated Church. Whereas, the later "adulthood" years were generativity years, where the concern was more with the Church's role and contribution to Asian society and the community at large.¹⁰² A look at the vari-

¹⁰¹ The bishops were well aware that it was also in Bandung that "the Non-Aligned Movement was born 35 years ago as a Third Force between the first world of capitalism and the second world of colonialism" (*FABC V*, art. 1.3).

¹⁰² The metaphors from human development here are borrowed from the works of American psychologist-theologian James Fowler, especially in his appropriation of Jean Piaget, Eric Erikson and Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental theories to apply to what Fowler calls "Faith" stages. These faith stages apply equally to individual development of persons, as to collective development of institutions. See James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); James Fowler, *Becoming Adult Becoming Christian*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984).

ous FABC Statements will reveal that the later documents devote greater space and emphasis to issues of societal concerns, such as globalization, trans-national migration, militarization, ecology, refugees, girl-child, etc. The Seventh Plenary Assembly, in fact, concluded its Statement by referring to the Jubilee's celebration of the birth of Jesus and the opening of the "Holy Doors" of churches. Acknowledging that "it is there beyond the doors that we hear [Jesus'] reassuring and empowering word," the bishops then added that "it is through the same doors that we now go out into the world of the peoples of Asia into their struggles and joys, which are also ours" (*FABC VII*, art. III. C).¹⁰³

The following section will take this development and transition of the Bandung Assembly into consideration as it addresses the FABC's theological thrust. Specifically, in discussing FABC's thrust, it begins by presuming the post-Bandung orientation of an integral and holistic approach to evangelization, substantiating this approach with the different and separate theological and pastoral concerns taken up over the years in Plenary Assemblies, as well as in the various FABC consultations and bishops' institutes.

3.2 FABC'S THEOLOGICAL THRUST

As the supreme body of the FABC, the plenary assemblies can be likened to the sessions of the Second Vatican Council. Their respective documents provide the general orientations and foundational theological positions for later elaboration and systematization. The FABC Offices are like the Asian counterparts of the Vatican's various dicasteries (viz., the congregations and pontifical councils). They take as starting points the orientations of the FABC plenary assemblies, and then engage in further study and elaboration on specific issues and themes. In particular, the Office of Theological Concerns (counterpart, perhaps, of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) is charged with explicitly studying specific theological

¹⁰³ *FABC Papers* No. 93, 16.

issues, often over a period of one or several years, and then making their findings available to the FABC. This section looks at the FABC's theological thrust by taking, firstly, the statements of the Plenary Assemblies,¹⁰⁴ and then looking at how these have been elaborated upon by the various FABC Offices, through their institutes, seminars and consultations.

3.2.1 Renewed Understanding of Mission

That mission and evangelization are inherent in all Christians is a given and not a point of contention. In the conclusion to the Statement of the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate, the bishops had this to say: "We go home more deeply aware of the urgent duty to proclaim the Good News to the peoples of Asia, more encouraged in this our primary task by the support we have received from one another; fully convinced of our union with the entire Church, as we carry out the mission entrusted to us by the Lord to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19); and to bring all men to the saving knowledge of the one true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent (Jn 17:3)" (*BIMA I*, art. 19).¹⁰⁵ Even as such a position may seem very similar to the traditional classicist theology of mission, there is actually a significant difference in how the concept of mission and proclamation is understood from within the Asian context. In particular, "making disciples of all nations" and "bringing all men to the saving knowledge of the one true God and Lord Jesus Christ" take on a completely different stance, if viewed from FABC's overall vision of mission and evangelization. In this regard the Bandung statement offers a useful synthesis of the FABC's renewed understanding of mission.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ In view of the importance of some of the Plenary Assemblies' Statements, the following section will inevitably repeat some articles previously discussed.

¹⁰⁵ First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate, (Baguio City, Philippines, 1978), *FAPA*, Vol. I, 96.

¹⁰⁶ In view of the significance of the Plenary Assembly Statements, a repetition of some of points previously made is inevitable.

A renewal of our sense of mission means, first of all, renewal of our faith that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to be the savior of all. This Son, through whom all things are made (Jn 1:3; Heb 1:2), became like us in all things, sin alone excepted (Heb 4:15). He went about doing good and healing all who were in the power of evil (Acts 10:38). Filled with the Spirit, he preached the Good News of the Kingdom of God, and commanded his disciples to do the same. Lifted up from the earth, he draws all peoples to himself through his Church, and through other ways unknown to us. He is the light that enlightens every human being (Jn 1:9). He has imprinted traces of his revelation in the world which exists in him (Col 1:16), and in the "seeds of the Word" found in cultures and in other religious traditions. The Spirit sent by the Father and the Son, and ever-present and active in the Church, in the world and in the human heart, leads all to their unity and fulfillment (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.1).¹⁰⁷

Elaborating on this statement, which perhaps can be regarded as *FABC V*'s mission manifesto, the bishops of *FABC V* emphasized that this renewed sense of 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" (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.2). The mission statement also implies mission as a mandate: "We evangelize because we are sent into the whole world to make disciples of all nations" (*FABC V*, art. 3.2.2). That aside, a more significant reason for our evangelization is because "the Gospel is *leaven* for liberation and for the transformation of society" (*FABC V*, art. 3.2.5). Seen, especially in the context of the suffering, pain and cries of Asia and its peoples, the Good News is indeed a leaven which is urgently needed: "Our Asian world needs the values of the Kingdom and of Christ in order to bring about the human development, justice, peace and harmony with God, among

¹⁰⁷ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 279-280.

peoples and with all creation that the peoples of Asia long for" (*ibid.*).¹⁰⁸ In a similar vein Indian theologian Felix Wilfred says that "Jesus is relevant to Asia, not because the bulk of the Asian masses are *non-Christians*, but because they are *poor*."¹⁰⁹

Moreover, it is significant that there is not the slightest mention or hint of the *missio ad gentes* in the Bandung manifesto. Instead, the Asian bishops insist that God does draw all peoples to Godself not only through the Church but "through other ways unknown to us" as well. From this perspective, mission and evangelization have a totally different goal from how it is traditionally conceived, viz., soul-saving and church-planting. This renewed concept of mission is what the Third Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs calls a "fuller" perspective: "The Church all over Asia is being called by the Spirit to a fuller understanding of mission and innovative forms of witness, service and dialogue" (*BIRA IV/3*, art. 17).¹¹⁰ It is an understanding of mission where Christians, "along with our Asian brothers and sisters, will jointly make the Reign of God more visibly present, a Reign of freedom, justice, love and peace" (*ibid.*).

3.2.2 God's Kingdom: Goal of Evangelization

What then is the goal of mission and evangelization? As is evidenced from the foregoing discussion, and especially the directions taken by the FABC at the Plenary Assemblies, a renewed sense of mission always takes as its starting point the realities of Asia. The Fourth FABC Plenary Assembly reminds that "we need to confront the dark realities in the heart of Asia – not in order to moan and wail in despair, but in order that we may be challenged by the magnitude of the task, and thus place our hope in

¹⁰⁸ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 281.

¹⁰⁹ Felix Wilfred, "Images of Jesus Christ in the Asian Pastoral Context: An Interpretation of Documents from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences," *Concilium*, (1993/2) 52.

¹¹⁰ Third Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the "Theology of Dialogue," (Hong Kong, 1986) *FAPA*, Vol. I, 261.

the Lord who remains, despite our valiant efforts, the ultimate builder of the Kingdom (cf. Ps 127) (*FABC IV*, art. 3.0.1).¹¹¹

Commenting on the FABC Statements, especially the one of Bandung, Felix Wilfred had this to say: "In seeking to respond to the challenges of the Asian context, the Kingdom of God becomes, in the thought of the bishops, a focal point. It offers the most suitable framework for making sense of their two major experiences, which are also their chief concerns: the religious and cultural plurality of the Asian peoples, and the prevalence of massive poverty."¹¹² A renewed sense of mission, therefore, is always oriented towards how the realities of Asia can best be addressed by the Church. It is not an *a priori* mission vision, but one which evolves out of the context of Asia. As suggested by Wilfred, the "Kingdom of God" is the Asian bishops' response to these Asian realities. In this regard the FABC's 1988 All-Asian Conference on Evangelization posits that "the ultimate goal of evangelization is the ushering in and establishment of God's Kingdom, namely God's rule in the hearts and minds of our people" (art. 5).¹¹³

What exactly is the FABC's understanding of this Kingdom of God? The Statement of a theological consultation organized by the FABC's Evangelization Office offers some hints: "Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent divine mystery which impinges upon them to go out of themselves in love and service of fellow humans, there the reign of God is at work" (art. 29).¹¹⁴ Such a statement clearly discloses that the reign of God is the preoccupation of not only Christians, but also of all peoples concerned about their relationship with the transcendent God, as well as with their fellow human beings. The Kingdom of God is, therefore, a "universal reality, extending far beyond the

¹¹¹ *FAPA I*, Vol. I, 179.

¹¹² Felix Wilfred, *Ibid.*, 53.

¹¹³ All-Asian Conference on Evangelization, (Suwon, South Korea, 1988), *FAPA Vol. I*, 292.

¹¹⁴ Conclusions of the Theological Consultation, (Hua Hin, Thailand, 1991), *FAPA, Vol. I*, 341.

boundaries of the Church" (art. 30.).¹¹⁵ It is not merely a rhetoric but a world-transforming force, symbolized by the presence of "the powerful yet compassionate God who brings salvation to the universe" (*BIRA IV/10*, art. 7).¹¹⁶ It is a Kingdom which "confronts the forces of injustice, violence, and oppression," all of which represent "structures of sin" (*BIRA IV/10*, art. 8).¹¹⁷ It is also a Kingdom which upholds "the preferential option for the poor, since they are the victims of these structures" (*ibid.*). In short, "solidarity with the poor is a response to the Good News of God's Kingdom" (*ibid.*).

3.2.3 Jesus Christ: Way to the Kingdom

While insisting on the universality of the Kingdom of God and its accessibility beyond the confines of the Church, the Asian bishops have also been insisting on the primacy of Christ and the Gospel to the Christian Faith. This has already been asserted from the very first FABC Plenary Assembly itself: "It is our belief that only in and through Christ and His Gospel, and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that these quests [to find meaning, overcome destructive forces, shape a new society, to free ourselves from structural bondage, to foster human dignity, and to create a genuine communion among all peoples] can come to realization. For Christ alone, we believe, is for every man 'the Way, the Truth and the Life,' (Jn 14:6) 'who enlightens every man who comes into the world' (Jn 1:9)" (FABC I, art. 6-7).¹¹⁸ As far as the Asian bishops are concerned, the centrality of Christ to Christian faith is beyond any doubt, even in multi-religious Asia. The 1991 Theological Consultation is succinct in expressing this article of faith: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, is at the center of our Christian faith" (art. 28).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹¹⁶ Tenth Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue, (Sukabumi, Indonesia, 1988), *FAPA*, Vol. I, 314.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 13.

¹¹⁹ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 341. It might be worth noting that this consultation was organized by the FABC's Office of Evangelization, whose professed objectives is the evangelization of Asia, i.e., evangelization as it is traditionally understood.

Such profession of faith, however, has always to be understood not so much in relation with or in comparison to other religious figures, as within the context of the Kingdom of God. The Second Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs expresses this commitment thus: "The purpose of the Church's proclaiming the message of Christ—which is its central mission—is to call man to the values of the Kingdom of God" (*BIRA II*, art. 13).¹²⁰ The orientation and focus on God and God's Kingdom is thus paramount in the FABC's theology of Christ. God has spoken and continues to speak to humankind, inviting them to actualizing the Kingdom. This is God's Word, the eternal message which God gives to all peoples at all times. It was the Word made "incarnate in Jesus, who announced the Good News of God's reign in this world" (*BIRA II*, art. 10),¹²¹ and who continues to be relevant, not only for Christians but for all the peoples of Asia, as well. It is in this context that *FABC I*, in a prayer, refers to Christ not only as the Christ of Christians but as "Christ of the peoples of Asia" (*FABC I*, art. 46).¹²²

3.2.4 The Human Jesus: Face of Christ in Asia

Who is this Christ of the peoples of Asia? How would Asians respond to the question "Who do you say I am?" This specific question was studied extensively by the FABC's Theological Advisory Commission in an International Theological Colloquium (*TAC-Colloquium*) held in 1994.¹²³ Its final statement acknowledges that, first and foremost, the Christ of Asian Christians is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (cf.

¹²⁰ Second Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1979), *FAPA*, Vol. I, 115.

¹²¹ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 115.

¹²² *FAPA*, Vol. I, 19.

¹²³ FABC International Theological Colloquium, "Being Church in Asia: Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life," (Pattaya, Thailand, 1994), *FAPA*, Vol. II, 217-228. [Since this Statement of the colloquium represents a composite and synthesis of the views of the FABC over the years; and because the very same ideas and orientations have been repeated in subsequent FABC assemblies and seminars; the present section will draw primarily from the Statement of this Colloquium.]

Col. 1:15). This, of course, is no different from the faith of the Apostles (*TAC-Colloquium*, art.26).¹²⁴ It then goes on immediately to state that reflecting on "the harsh underside of suffering Asia, the image of Jesus that captures our imagination is his human portrait in the Scriptures" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 27).¹²⁵

Thus, for Asians, the face of Christ in Asia is one "born of woman (Gal 4:4)," one "who pitches his tent among us (Jn 1:14)," and one who "empties himself to be in solidarity with the little ones, those treated as non-persons — the poor and deprived, the outcast and marginalized, the oppressed and downtrodden, the sick, those who do not count, children and women" (*ibid.*). This is also the Christ who "breaks down social barriers," who "challenges religious exclusivism," and who "announces a radically new worshiping of God." It is the Christ who "dares to touch the untouchables"; and who "calls women to be his close disciples." It is the Christ who "forgives and reconciles"; and who is "the person of harmony, " the person of "peace" (Jn 14:27; 20:21-23; Eph 2:14) (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 28).¹²⁶

This Christ announces the reign of God, "the Kingdom is here, in your midst! (Lk 17:21)," is "compassionate," "calls the poor blessed," and even announces that the "Kingdom of God is theirs!" (Lk 6:20). Such a Christ signals "the compassionate irruption of the Kingdom of God into our space and time" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 29).¹²⁷ On the reverse side of the coin, this Christ is also one who "confronts the powers that be," especially in addressing issues such as "greed," "hypocrisy," "corruption," and "oppression" (Mt 23:13-36; Lk 12:1). He "relativizes wealth," "condemns slavery to mammon," and rebukes any form of "idolatry to wealth" (Lk 12:13-21; Mt 6:24). "Thirsting for justice," the actions of such a Christ "subvert the values of this world" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 30).¹²⁸ This Christ also looks upon power as not so much an opportunity to "dominate" or to "oppress," but "to serve" (Jn 13:15; Lk 22:27; Mk 10:45). In short, this is the Christ of "authenticity,

¹²⁴ *FAPA, Vol. II, 222.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 222-223.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

transparency, credibility, [and] truth." And, for this reason, he was "killed" as his perspective of truth was not in consonance with the "religious claims" of the time, nor with the "ruling elite's idea of the common good" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 31).¹²⁹

It was in defense of the values of the Kingdom and for the love of humankind that this Christ was also willing to die a "death by the cruel and brutal execution on the cross" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 32).¹³⁰ "This is what it means to be the anointed, the Christ, the Person who by dying gives life to humanity. The bitter cup of suffering he accepts (Mk 14:36; Mt 26:39, 42)" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 33).¹³¹ In this regard, Jesus has conquered death in order to restore life and "his rising from the dead makes him 'the Victory of Suffering Humanity'" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 34).¹³² This is the image of Jesus with an "Asian face," a Jesus who is "word of life," and who represents the Good News to all the peoples of Asia (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 35-36).¹³³

For as he was Good News to the poor of his time, so today he cannot but be Good News to the 'teeming millions' of Asia. This human image of Jesus, born of woman, God-made-poor, God-with-us, our Peace, teacher and prophet, healer, a person of harmony, suffering servant-leader, liberator, life-giver, is one that powerfully resonates with Asia's situation of servitude, with Asia's struggle towards justice and harmony, with our struggle for life (*ibid.*).

3.2.5 Discipleship: Face of the Church in Asia

Flowing from the foregoing perspective of the face of Jesus in Asia, the mission of Christians, the disciples of Jesus, ought to follow suit: "If the Master, so the disciple-community, the Church" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 37).¹³⁴ In this regard the Church in Asia has to "present to Asia the face of a confessing, serving, discerning and contemplating Church" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 38).¹³⁵

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, 223-224.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

Thus, the Church has to be "a Church that does not resist being incarnated in a weak humanity; a Church that will not turn away from the crosses of history; a Church that does not hold back in emptying itself; a Church that dares to be the Church of the Poor" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 40).¹³⁶ It has also to be a Church which is the "sacrament, the sign and the instrument, of the communion with God and with humanity that Jesus brings (cf. LG, 1)" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 41).¹³⁷ This entails that the Church be seen as a builder of communion, not only with its own members, but also with society, and especially with peoples of other Churches and religious communities. The Church, therefore, has to be a "Church of dialogue," as "dialogue is the primary mode for the Church of Asia in the promotion of harmony" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 43).¹³⁸

The preceding description of Church has to be modest, simple and unassuming, devoid of the "triumphalism in Church life and structures," so as to be a "humble servant of the Kingdom" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 44).¹³⁹ It has also to be a prophetic Church, ready to denounce mammon and evil, as well as to announce truth and freedom, while proclaiming the dawn of justice and liberation. In a culture which is becoming more and more preoccupied with "prestige and power," the Church has to be "the embodiment of compassion, caring, mercy, selflessness and love" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 45).¹⁴⁰ Just as the Crucified Lord experienced darkness amidst abandonment, the Church, too, has to remain faithful to God's Kingdom, even amidst "the darkness of unloving" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 47).¹⁴¹ With a faith that believes the cross to be also a symbol of the Risen Christ, the Church continues to love and to serve, so as to fill the world "with joy and hope" (*TAC-Colloquium*, art. 47).¹⁴²

3.2.6 Other Religions: Partners in Dialogue

In discussing the Church's relations with, or perceptions of,

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 225-226.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

other religions, it has to be stated from the outset that all the seven FABC Plenary Assemblies do not make any explicit mention of the matter. More specifically, the Plenary Assemblies do not discuss the other religions in light of the economy of the divine plan of salvation; much less pass any form of negative judgment upon them. At most, the Plenary Assemblies simply affirm the Christian faith in Jesus as the way, the truth and the life (cf. *FABC I*, art. 7),¹⁴³ but without in any way suggesting that other religions or other "saviors" are less true or less perfect. Instead, the FABC is explicit in asserting that other religions are indeed "significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation" (*FABC I*, art. 14).¹⁴⁴ These religions of Asia have been the source and inspiration for generations of peoples; and have helped in the spiritual development and growth of an entire continent for millennia. It is in this context that the First FABC Plenary Assembly asks, albeit rhetorically: "How then can we not give them [the other religions] reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?"¹⁴⁵

In view of the importance of the issue of interreligious relations in Asia, the FABC commissioned its Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) to do an in-depth study of the matter.¹⁴⁶ To begin, the FABC theological study team, in its publication *Theses on*

¹⁴³ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 13.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ A word about the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC), which later changed its name to Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), is in order. Constituted in 1986, the topic of interreligious dialogue was the very first which the TAC attended to, the results of which were published in 1987. The significance of its study is that the TAC is composed of a team of theologians officially appointed by each of the Episcopal Conferences, with a group of bishop-theologians heading it. Moreover, most of the studies undertaken are worked at and debated upon over a period of a year or two, and are by no means the result of rushed efforts. The teachings or statements of the TAC are thus very representative of the theological views of the FABC. The following reflections on the Church's relations with other religions draw primarily upon this source, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* (TAC-Dialogue).

Interreligious Dialogue (TAC-Dialogue), suggests that it is on account of the Asian bishops' own personal experience with persons of other religions that has led them to a "positive appreciation of [the role of other religions] in the divine economy of salvation" (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 2.2).¹⁴⁷ This experience, in turn, relies upon their theological conviction that "God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples" (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 2.3).¹⁴⁸ It is inherent upon Christians, therefore, to discern how God's saving activity is in operation and made manifest in the other religions. Interreligious dialogue is the mode of this Christian duty. Quoting Pope John Paul II, the FABC asserts that "by dialogue, we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God" (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 1.4).¹⁴⁹ Interreligious dialogue is, therefore "a demand of the Church in its very life as mission" (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 2.5).¹⁵⁰ It is "a demand of our Christian faith in the Trinity, which is a mystery of communion in interpersonal dialogue... Dialogue is a process of growing into the fullness of divine life. It is participation in the quest of all peoples for the full realization of the Truth" (*TAC-Dialogue*, thesis 3).¹⁵¹ As such, interreligious dialogue is an activity of persons of different religions aimed at "journeying together in a communion of minds and hearts towards the Kingdom to which God calls all peoples" (*TAC-Dialogue*, thesis 4).¹⁵²

Following from the preceding theological presuppositions, the FABC views dialogue and proclamation as "integral but dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church's mission of evangelization" (*TAC-Dialogue*, thesis 6). Because God's action in the world is beyond the grasp of the Church, the Church has to be in constant discernment of God's activity. Dialogue allows the Church to listen and learn from the other religions, while proclamation allows the Church to share with others God's presence and action within the Church. Interreligious dialogue, therefore,

¹⁴⁷ "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection," *FABC Papers No. 48* (Hong Kong: FABC, 1987), 7.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 10.

includes "a witness to one's total Christian faith," but at the same time it is also "open to a similar witness of the other religious believers" (*Ibid.*). Through this process of interreligious dialogue, all peoples – Christians included – are called by the Spirit "to conversion," which is given to mean not so much "a change of religion," but a "turning of the heart to God and his Kingdom in obedience to his word" (*TAC-Dialogue*, art. 6.6).¹⁵³

In this regard, interreligious dialogue, as an integral part of the evangelizing mission of the Church, is aimed at the building of the Kingdom of God. As Christians, we understand the Church as being a sacrament of this Kingdom, "visibilizing it, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it" (*TAC-Dialogue*, 6.3).¹⁵⁴ It follows then that the Kingdom is certainly wider than the Church. Nevertheless, the building up of the Church is still necessary, as it is at the service of the Kingdom. By extension, the building up of the other religions is also as necessary. It can be surmised from here that the FABC's theology accepts the phenomenon of religious pluralism as not only *de facto*, but also very much *de jure*. The plurality of religion is not only tolerated but accepted as very much part of God's design of salvation of human beings: "The great religions of Asia, with their respective creeds, cults and codes, reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God, whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures" (*BIRA IV/7*, art. 12).¹⁵⁵

This does not in any way imply that the FABC tends towards relativism. To be sure, the issue was specifically addressed at another study session of the Office of Theological Concerns, the results of which were published in 2000. In the document entitled, *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology – Doing Theology in Asia Today (OTC-Methodology)*,¹⁵⁶ the FABC-OTC points out that "any discussion of pluralism must reckon with the question of how we

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Seventh Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, on the Theology of Dialogue (Tagatay City, Philippines, 1988), *FAPA Vol. 1*, 310.

¹⁵⁶ "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology (Doing Theology in Asia Today)," *FABC Papers No. 96* (Hong Kong: FABC, 2000).

understand pluralism in theology in relation to the threat of relativism" (*OTC-Methodology*, art. 1.1).¹⁵⁷ While emphatically rejecting theological positions which claim that all religions are the same or of equal value, the Asian bishops then conclude that "just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism" (*ibid.*). The document then quotes from the Eleventh Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, which asserts that "diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as 'live and let life.' The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness" (*BIRA XI*, art. 15).¹⁵⁸

3.2.7 Harmony: Theological Foundation of FABC

This leads us to the discussion of the notion of "harmony." If there is one concept or notion which undergirds all of FABC's theological thrust, then it is the notion of "harmony." In confronting the realities of Asia, especially its poverty and injustice, as well as its cultural and religious pluralism, the underlying guiding principle which has shaped FABC thought is how the society and culture can be made more harmonious. The 1984 Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs points out that "*harmony* seems to constitute in a certain sense the intellectual and affective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia" (*BIRA IV/I*, art. 13).¹⁵⁹ To be sure, according to Malaysian theologian Jonathan Tan, harmony is a "quintessentially Asian" value, while it is at the same time an "authentically Christian" principle.¹⁶⁰ In this regard, the FABC's

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ *FAPA*, Vol. I, 321.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁶⁰ Jonathan Tan, "*Missio ad gentes in Asia: A Comparative Study of the Missiology of John Paul II and the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)*," (unpublished dissertation, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.) 139.

seven-year *BIRA IV* series on the theology of dialogue, which began with *BIRA IV/1* in 1984, and ended with *BIRA IV/12* in 1991, turned out to be an indirect call for in-depth study into the concept of harmony as experienced in the Asian context.¹⁶¹ In fact, the final few seminars, viz., *BIRA IV/10* and *BIRA IV/11*, had their themes changed specifically to address the theology of harmony.¹⁶² Subsequently, a fifth *BIRA* series was developed, which focused solely on the theme of harmony. This *BIRA V* series, held between 1992 and 1996, was unique in that it brought together the Asian bishops and leaders of other religions, as they explored together the theme of harmony.¹⁶³ All of these initiatives, took as their starting point the 1990 Bandung Plenary Assembly's call for an integrated and holistic approach to understanding the mission of the Church in Asia. In the "New Way of Being Church," Asia's organic¹⁶⁴ world view—in contradistinction with the architectonic world view more peculiar in the West—has to be taken seriously. Thus, the FABC's Theological Advisory Commission conducted an in-depth study of the *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony (TAC-Harmony)*, the results of which were published in 1996.¹⁶⁵ This study took as its starting point the vision state-

¹⁶¹ (See, e.g., *BIRA IV/1*, art. 13) *FAPA*, Vol. I, 249.

¹⁶² Cf. *FAPA*, Vol. I, 313, 317.

¹⁶³ *BIRA V/1*, held in Multan, Pakistan, in 1992, was a Muslim—Christian Dialogue; *BIRA V/2*, held in Pattaya, Thailand, in 1994, was a Buddhist—Christian Dialogue; *BIRA V/3*, held in New Delhi, India, in 1995, was a Hindu—Christian Dialogue; *BIRA V/4*, held in Nantou, Taiwan, in 1996, was a Taoist-Confucian—Christian Dialogue; *BIRA V/5*, held in Bali, Indonesia, in 1996, was a multi-lateral dialogue amongst Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Scholars of Confucian and Taoist Traditions. Cf. *FAPA Vol. II*, 143-171.

¹⁶⁴ Felix Wilfred points to the difference between an Eastern and a Western world-view as that of a difference between an organic and an architectonic vision of reality. The former sees reality as an interrelated web of relationships; while the latter sees reality as disjointed parts which are only functionally interrelated to each other. See Felix Wilfred, "Towards a Theology of Harmony: Some Fundamental Reflections", in *Yearbook of Contextual Theologies* (Aachen: MWI, 1993) 146-158.

¹⁶⁵ Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," *FABC Papers* 75, (Hong Kong: FABC, 1996). Also in *FAPA*, Vol. II, 229-298.

ment of harmony advanced by the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly:

In the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths is a vision of *unity in diversity, a communion of life* among diverse peoples. In this context we seek to become persons of dialogue. Ours is a vision of *holistic life*, life that is achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class or color. It is the fruit of integral development, the authentic development of the whole person and of every person. We envision a life *with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and the needy. It is thus a life that unites us Asians among ourselves, and with the whole of creation, into one community of life. For us to live is to live with integrity and dignity, in peace and justice, in freedom and participation, in mutuality and complementarity. It is to live in simplicity and friendship. At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian *reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness. This deep interiority draws people to experience *harmony and inner peace*, and infuses ethics into all of creation (FABC VI, art. 10, emphasis in original).¹⁶⁶

In attempting to postulate an Asian theology of harmony, the bishops of FABC insist that an experience of a life of harmony must precede any theological reflection. Thus, the spirituality of harmony has to be examined first. This spirituality unfolds in four stages: "Starting from consciousness of the God-given harmony within oneself, one moves into harmonious relationship with one's fellow humans; then one spreads out to be in harmony with nature and the wider universe. This unfolding and realization of right relationship within oneself, with the neighbors and the cosmos, leads to the summit experience of harmony with God"

¹⁶⁶ FAPA, Vol. II, 5.

(*OTC-Harmony*, art. 5.1.5).¹⁶⁷ Such a process entails a constant struggle with forces of sin and evil, a spirituality of self-emptying (*kenosis*) and a radical openness to others, a genuine respect for creation, and an attitude of self-surrender to God, who is *Abba*.¹⁶⁸

The FABC's vision of harmony, therefore, is one which involves the "whole person" and the "entire human family" in view of a "cosmic harmony" of all life and all things (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 4.11.1).¹⁶⁹ Its starting point is the "death-dealing forces" and disharmonies caused by the conflicts and oppressions, sin and dehumanizing structures, which inflict themselves upon Asian societies. It is a vision of harmony aimed at alleviating these disharmonies in order to build true communion. This vision of cosmic harmony originates from the one Creator God, "the communion of Father and Son in the Spirit," who nourishes and provides a model for human harmony "by the 'circumincension' (*perichoresis*) in divine life (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 4.11.3).¹⁷⁰ It is through Jesus Christ, who "enfleshed himself in humanity in order to break down barriers and create harmonious unity" that "humans may have life and have it to the full (Jn 10:10)" (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 4.11.4).¹⁷¹ Christians, as disciples of Jesus, therefore, have a duty to be "effective signs of union with God and unity of humankind, sacrament in its fullest sense of human harmony" (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 4.11.5).¹⁷²

In this regard, "the community of Christ's disciples, as a tiny minority among the teeming millions in Asia, as a 'little flock' (*pusillus grex*), will never be able to do it alone. They are, with open mind and a humble heart, to recognize in all sisters and brothers, of whatever faith-conviction and culture, fellow wayfarers to God's Reign" (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 4.11.6).¹⁷³ This vision of harmony can therefore be actualized only when the Church, the Christian community, is in dialogue and collaboration with persons of other religions and, indeed, with all persons

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 286-287.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 287.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 285.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

of good will. Its eventual target is not so much an ecclesial target, but that of "eschatological fulfillment that is coterminous with final harmony and peace in the world" (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 5.2. 4).¹⁷⁴ Such is the Asian vision of harmony; it is consonant with the "Asian approach to reality, a world-view, wherein the whole is the sum-total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other; in a word, *harmony*, a word which resonates with all Asian cultures" (*OTC-Harmony*, art. 6).¹⁷⁵

4. CONCLUSION

The present paper looked at the Asian Church from the perspective of the contributions of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. As a product of the Second Vatican Council, the FABC has taken seriously the injunction of *Gaudium et Spes* of reading the "signs of the times" first, before engaging in mission and theology. This, of course, is the contextual approach to doing theology, an approach which has become all too common in today's context. But this was not so in the beginning years of the FABC. Suffice to say, FABC has indeed pioneered not only a new way of doing theology, but also a new way of being Church.

While its influence has hitherto been within the Asian region, more and more theologians and bishops from outside of Asia are looking in the direction of the FABC for hints on how the future of the Church will be. Specifically, in the context of the globalization of cultures and religions, it is only a matter of time before the countries of the West, which have hitherto been predominantly Christian, become more religiously plural. When that day arrives—and arrive it has to—the churches from these Western nations will have FABC's decades of experiment to help them in encountering the Church of the new era. In a way, one can say that FABC has probably been ordained by God to pave the way for what a World Church ought to be. In this World Church, the other religions will be looked upon as partners and collaborators in the mission of bringing about God's Kingdom here on earth and in heaven.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 294.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 298.

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