

**THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS IN THE BUILDING UP
OF THE LOCAL CHURCH**

**First Symposium of the FABC Office of Consecrated Life
Salesian Retreat House, Hua Hin, Thailand**

**by
FABC Office of Consecrated Life**

CONTENTS

- I. Witnesses & Prophets Building Up the Local Church in Asia
- Archbishop Orlando B. Quevedo, O.M.I.**
- II. The Role of the Religious in the Evangelizing Mission of the Church
- Archbishop Thomas Menampampil, S.D.B.**
- III. Asian Religious Identity in the Context of the Building Up of the
Local Church
- Sr. Julma C. Neo, D.C.**
- IV. Dialogue: Ministry of Religious in Building the Local Church
- Fr. Soosai Arokiasamy, S.J.**
- V. Relationship Between Bishops and Religious in the Context of the
Local Church in Asia
- Prof. Sugawara Yuji, S.J.**
- VI. Final Statement**
- VII. Appendix**
 - 1.1 Welcome Address of Most Rev. Joseph Prathan Sridarunsil, S.D.B.**
 - 1.2 Address of His Excellency Most Rev. Salvatore Pennacchio,
Apostolic Nuncio**

I. WITNESSES & PROPHETS BUILDING UP THE LOCAL CHURCH IN ASIA

- Archbishop Orlando B. Quevedo, O.M.I.

Introduction and Some Preliminary Notes.

My task as I see it, is to develop one or several particular tasks that consecrated persons have to do toward the building up of the local church. I wish, instead, to suggest a perspective, a vision if you will, and some general directions for pastoral ministry in the local church. From this perspective or vision, consecrated persons in Asia could then view their missionary and pastoral tasks.

Allow me to state this perspective at the very beginning. I am going to suggest that consecrated persons see their role as credible and effective witnesses as well as courageous prophets in the building up of the local church in Asia.

But first a preliminary note on the terms "local" and "particular" church. We usually understand the term "local church" to mean a particular limited ecclesial territory, such as a parish, an apostolic vicariate, prefecture or diocese or archdiocese. In other words, a physical space in which the church grows. We usually refer to the head of such an ecclesial territory as the "local Ordinary". Or perhaps we might even use the term "local church" to mean a regional grouping of dioceses, such as those belonging to a particular "Oriental rite" in a religion. This is differentiated from the "universal church" or the Church as a whole.

Vatican II uses the term "particular church" (24 times) more than it uses the term "local church" (8 times) or a grouping of churches. Thus in Vatican II the two terms are usually used synonymously. However, in these reflections I shall use the term "local church".

In this reflection I shall also use the terms "consecrated person" and "religious" interchangeably. Admittedly, members of some societies of apostolic life do not have explicit commitment to the evangelical counsels (see VC,11), although they are generally considered "religious".

A. The Local Church, a Theological and Socio-Cultural Reality

Many of us would probably understand the "local church" in terms of ecclesiastical jurisdiction and territory, a physical geographical space in which a particular church would grow and prosper. With this understanding we might plan on building the local church by increasing the number of church and Mass attendance, the number of people receiving communion, the number of baptisms especially of

adult catechumens, and the number of education or charitable or social service institutions, and the like. We might also plan on giving more pastoral care to families, children, women, and migrant workers. And of course, we might want to intensify our vocation programs in order to increase the number of seminarians and candidates to the religious life. As a pastoral consequence, religious would be called to build the local church by helping provide or train and form catechists, social service workers, family life workers, teachers, nurses or primary health care workers. Religious would thus have to work not only in their own institutions but also in diocesan socio-pastoral programs, even at the level of formation, coordination and supervision.

All these pastoral strategies are certainly valid. They are, indeed, necessary in building up the local church. But to limit religious ministry and apostolate to these pastoral strategies would, I believe, miss the most important point.

A local church is more than a geographical reality. A local church is a theological and spiritual reality with concrete socio-cultural dimensions. It is after all the insertion of the mystery of Christ's Church in a local culture. The First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in 1974 provided a felicitous description of the local church: "...the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time (no. 9)". Or even more fully:

"...The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions - in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own." (Ibid, No. 12)

B. Evangelization by the Mode of Inculturation

This theological reality of the local church has a fundamental postulate. It presupposes that the message of Christ has to be "truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our people." Therefore, the First FABC Plenary Assembly would conclude, "*The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church*" (Ibid., No. 9; see also FABC Theological Advisory Commission, *Theses on the Local Church, Part III, "The Birth, Life and Mission of the Local Church"*, particularly Theses 5-8). Thirty years after the First FABC Plenary Assembly, its statement, I believe, is still valid. We have a long way to go in building up the

local church. I do think we are far from being "a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue...with all the life realities of the people." This task remains the "primary focus" of evangelization.

C. Missionary and Pastoral Implications for Religious

The theological and socio-cultural reality of the local church has significant missionary and pastoral implications on the role of the religious.

1. They have to genuinely insert themselves as members of the one Body of Christ in the local church.
2. They have to help build up the local church as a communion of life and love.
3. They have to help build up the local church as a sign of unity and fellowship.
4. In the local church, religious have to be engaged in the triple dialogue that the Church in Asia has long advocated - dialogue with other faiths, dialogue with cultures, dialogue with the poor. Religious are often better formed and equipped to do this triple dialogue.

Such pastoral implications would require creative insertion of religious congregations into the life-realities of the local church, its pastoral vision and its pastoral thrust. Here there would be a truly dynamic and fruitful interplay between religious charisms and ministry in the local church.

Likewise necessary would be the collaboration of religious toward the envisioning of a common pastoral vision in the local church and the building of structures of communion. Such structures would include those of governance toward a more participatory church as well as structures of coordination. This is so in order that the diversity of gifts in the members of the Body of Christ that find their expression in diverse pastoral programs in the local church might come together due to a united direction toward a common pastoral vision.

D. Witnesses and Prophets of the Spirituality of Communion

Above all, the role of religious in the formation of the People of God in the local church toward communion of life and love, unity and fellowship is necessary.

Religious have long been recognized as "experts of communion". This well deserved reputation recognizes that building communion is a fundamental call to a religious vis-à-vis their religious communities.

Religious are witnesses and prophets of communion. That is part of their identity. It is their life. To be authentic, a religious community has to teach and form its members to be in communion with one another, to share with one another, to love and serve one another. *Vita Consacrata* states, "Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to practice its spirituality as witnesses and artisans of that plan of communion which stands at the center of history according to God" (VC, 46).

Beyond their religious community, religious are to be in communion with the rest of God's people. Their identity as consecrated persons in community impels them to teach and form others toward communion. This communion flows from the Trinitarian God, finds its most sublime expression in the Eucharist, and is reflected in the unity and fellowship that should characterize the People of God.

The most lasting contribution that religious can provide involves "the task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the Church community and even beyond its boundaries, by beginning a dialogue in charity, especially in those places where today's world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence (VC, 51: quoted in "Staring Afresh from Christ", 29). This is the particular "task" that the "Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life" (*Loc.cit.*). Its prophetic value is evident in a world of social dissonance, violence and discordance.

The pastoral implications of the triple dialogue of religious in the local church will not be dealt with in this talk. In this symposium there are forthcoming reflections on evangelization and inter-religious dialogue that would surely pick up the first two kinds of dialogues (with diverse cultures, with other faiths).

E. Dialogue with the Preferential Option for the Poor

By now, some forty years after Vatican II, we all realize that the Church is called to be authentically conformed to Christ. His preference for the poor demonstrates the nature of our loving God in Jesus as God-made-poor. Especially in the Asian world of immense poverty and intensifying marginalization, the disciple-Church has to be the true image of Christ-made-poor for the sake of the poor (seeEA, 34).

In living the Lord's disconcerting paradigm of Gospel poverty, Religious have a privileged place (see "Staring Afresh from Christ", 34; VC, 82). Evangelical poverty is their daily religious norm and commitment. They have to live it daily. This connotes a profoundly humble form of servant-hood at the service of the needy and poor. It requires a clearly visible form of dispossession and austerity so that

“the poor might become rich”. Further, by the very nature of religious life, the commitment to and the living of evangelical poverty is not only individual, it is communal.

And therein lies the rub. We need to look deeply into ourselves as Church or as religious, and ask in the depths of our hearts whether we are evangelically poor. Surely we can give a new meaning to the vow of poverty as a commitment to share or a commitment to be available to those who are poor. But the evangelical poverty of Christ-made-poor surely goes beyond these descriptions. He lived as a poor man; he called the poor and announced the gospel to them. He walked with them and called them to be his disciples. He identified himself with them. This identification and solidarity with the poor powerfully challenges the whole Church, especially Bishops who are Vicars of Christ. It likewise strongly challenges those who have vowed to follow the poor Christ as the radical norm of their daily life in order that they might be in deep and effective communion with the poor.

F. Missionary and Pastoral Implications

Because evangelical poverty is a distinctive sign of consecrated persons and their communities, the following would be a few of the implications:

1. In the context of Asia's multitudes of poor people, religious need to review their lives, religious structures, missionary and pastoral commitments in the local church and undertake the necessary steps for genuine renewal. Speaking to us through the faces of the poor, the Lord is calling us to continual conversion.
2. A missionary and pastoral commitment to a preferential option for the poor impels religious to reach out to new faces of the poor in the local church and care for them. Such are the faces of oppressed women and children, broken families, marginalized indigenous peoples, AIDS victims, migrant workers and their families. New ministries have to reflect a vision of the local church as the sign of the poor Christ's saving and healing presence. Truly deserving of our deep gratitude are consecrated persons who “were able to leave the security of the known to thrust themselves into unknown places and works ...Wherever they are, they have constituted a link between the Church and the marginal groups and those not reached by ordinary pastoral ministry” (*Staring Afresh from Christ*, 36).
3. Today in various parts of Asia the local church is envisioning a “new way of being Church” through the building of Basic Ecclesial Communities/Basic Christian Communities (FABC TAC, thesis 9, describes BEC's as “especially significant ‘places’ of inculturation

and the building up of the local church"). Religious congregations need to contribute their own time, talents and resources generously in community formation among the grassroots. Such sharing could be to train and empower lay leaders, to teach people how to listen to the Word of God through prayerful reading and reflection, to develop inculturated liturgy, and build fellowship and solidarity. These goals would certainly require the setting up of new ministries and the development of modules of formation for their own members.

G. Witnesses and Prophets of the Call to Holiness in the Local Church

The *raison d'être* of the mission of evangelization and the task of inculturation is the one universal call of God to holiness. This is the reason for the Church's existence, the reason therefore, for the local church. This is why the Lord intended the Church to be the instrument of salvation for the world.

Indeed, the urgent call to religious today is to teach and help form the People of God in the spirituality of communion. Religious are to help us to become saints. With Pope John Paul II, I believe that holiness is the first priority in the third millennium. *Novo Millennio Ineunte* contains "fundamental themes already mentioned in the Exhortation *Vita Consacrata: Christ the center of life for every Christian, the pastoral practice and teaching on holiness, its demanding character, its high standard of ordinary Christian living, the widespread need for spirituality and prayer realized principally in contemplation and listening to the Word of God, the irreplaceable effects of the sacramental life, the spirituality of communion, and the witness of love which is expressed in a new creativity of charity towards those who suffer, towards a wounded world enslaved in hatred...*" ("Staring Afresh from Christ", 4).

There is no doubt that Asia today faces growing materialism and secularism, the enormous pressure of economic and cultural globalization that at the present is a marginalizing phenomenon of incredible magnitude. In this context religious, by their very calling are to "*focus primarily on spirituality*" (*Loc.cit*).

Within the Church consecrated persons are witnesses and prophets of a world beyond this world, but a world that challenges the people of this world to become truly an image of God. The very life of consecrated persons as totally dedicated to God dramatizes the primacy of God and the life of grace. How especially evident this is with regard to the contemplative life as well, as to life lived prayerfully and actively in the frontiers of mission! Such lives demonstrate total openness and

vulnerability, total faith dependence in God. Truly a life in the Spirit, a life of intimate communion with the Triune God!

Such a life cannot be sustained unless nourished by prayer and contemplation, and especially by the life-giving sacrament of love, the Holy Eucharist. For surely the Eucharist, the very Body and Blood of Jesus, is “a privileged place of encounter with the Lord. There He once again makes himself present in the midst of the disciples, he explains the Scriptures, he warms the heart and enlightens the mind, he opens eyes and allows himself to be recognized (cf. Lk. 24:13-35)” (VC, 26). The Eucharist is “the source and summit of existence and apostolic action”, where we become one with Him in full intimacy and communion (Pope John Paul II, Homily of February 2, 2001, cited in “*Staring Afresh from Christ*”, 26).

H. Missionary and Pastoral Implications for Religious

In the light of the consecration and communion that are at the heart of religious life and identity, the primary focus of the Third Millennium on holiness calls religious to assist in the formation of God’s people in the local church towards holiness.

1. Religious are in a privileged position of leadership in exploring the inculturation of Christian spirituality as it draws from religious and cultural heritage of the local church in Asia, e.g. Asian ways of approaching the Divine Word and ways of praying. Religious are to help instruct lay people in the ways of the Lord, in approaches to prayer that consider their active involvement in secular matters. They should also help “lay people to relate the Word of God to the events of their daily lives” (FABC TAC, Theses on the Local Church, “Pastoral Corollaries and Recommendations, VII).
2. They should take a leading role in evaluation the renewing popular devotions and practices of popular piety (see *Ibid*, VI).
3. They are to invite lay collaborators to deeper communion with them and with the Lord by associating them more closely with the spiritual life of their congregations, in a creative manner that is in accord with their state of life.

It is most commendable that many religious men and women are assisting members of the diocesan clergy toward a deeper appreciation and love for their own ministry in the local church. Religious are also helping to develop an authentic spirituality that emerges from pastoral experience and in turn responds to the many challenges of active ministry.

I. Conclusion

This presentation has reflected on three dimensions in the life of the local church: (1) the announcing of the Gospel by way of inculturation; (2) preferential option for the poor; and (3) the call to be holy. It has presented a number of missionary and pastoral implications for religious.

The three dimensions are not three separate tasks. Rather, they are fundamental features of the birth, growth and mission of the local church. They are essential characteristics that should suffuse the life of every member of the local church. They should be part and parcel of every apostolate and ministry. Finally, every religious should see these dimensions from the perspective of witness and prophecy.

I pray that this reflection may help you to understand more deeply the important and indispensable role that religious play in the local church. May we always be in profound communion with the chaste, poor and obedient Christ. May his Mother, herself poor, chaste and obedient, be our daily companion and guide so that our efforts in building up the local church may with God's grace bear abundant fruit - fruit that lasts.

II. THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS IN THE EVANGELIZING MISSION OF THE CHURCH - *Archbishop Thomas Menampampil, S.D.B.*

A. History

The Beginnings

In this brief historical sketch, I would like to draw your attention to some of the less remembered events in the history of missions in Asia. The evangelization of Asia did not begin with St. Francis Xavier. It did not begin during the Vasco da Gama era. It began on that glorious day when Christ came on the shores of the Sea of Galilee announcing: "The Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). It took another step forward when he sent out his disciples two by two saying, "Preach as you go ... Heal the sick, raise the dead ... You received without paying, give without pay" (Mt 10:7-9).

His disciples continued this mighty undertaking, beginning with Peter and the other Apostles on Pentecost Day. Some of them fleeing persecution settled in Antioch, where they came to be known as "Christians" for the first time, and there again for the first time they began presenting their Master as the "Lord Jesus" in order to make his figure intelligible to the Greeks. Early steps in inculturation!

It is from Antioch that the Evangelization of the world begins, the Christian community sending out Paul and Barnabas to carry the Good News to new areas. Paul was to become the first Asian missionary to Europe, and he was not the last¹. Peter went to Rome, James to Spain, and Mark to Alexandria. In the same way, Bartholomew and Thomas came eastwards to Persia and India.

The evangelical zeal of the first generation Christians was picked up in later times by persons of the *monastic tradition*. It was through them that the radical living of the Gospel, which martyrs had stood for earlier, became visible again in the Church when a life of compromise made its way into the Christian community with the freedom that Constantine gave. In the monks we have also the *prototype of the religious missionaries* of later days. While the ascetics of Egypt withdrew into the desert seeking isolation, those of Syria chose to become *wandering missionaries*. Even as early as 225, Syrian monks had reached our across the Persian Empire and set up Christian communities as far as today's Afghanistan (Bevans, 78).

With these monks began various forms of inculturation. They "*borrowed from the storehouse of indigenous languages, cultures, religions, and ideas that they found around them*. The results were new and sometimes creative expressions of faith that reflected the living nature of the Christ whom they worshipped" (Irvin, 115). They also advanced theological thinking. The theological writers of this period were inspired mostly by a missionary motivation. And Christianity spread. What is interesting for the religious in Asia today is to take special note of the fact that it was precisely *hermits and "monks" that took the Christian message to the heart of Asia those days* (Bevans, 80)².

Persia, India

It is said that Constantine wrote to the Persian emperor (Shah of shahs) pleading for benevolent treatment of Christians. Whether the message was received or not, the declaration of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire made it appear to the Persians that the Christian religion was closely allied to Rome, Persia's chief rival and enemy. An image of having alien loyalists would cling to the

¹ During the next generation, Asian Irenaeus. Moving Westwards from Asia Minor to Lyons, is described as having learned the language of the "despised barbarians" and emerged as a great evangelizer. Church organizer, and prominent theologian in the Western world. Christianity is Asian. "Founded in the Near East, Christianity for its first thousand years was stronger in Asia and North Africa than in Europe, and only after about 1400 did Europe (and Europeanized North America) decisively become the Christian heartland" (Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York, Oxford University Press 2002, 15)

Churches in parts of Asia during the entire colonial period, making it appear like an unrooted and unreliable community in the larger Asian society, to be constantly watched. As the Zoroastrian priests in Persia looked at Christian missionary endeavours with an unfriendly eye, religious and cultural zealots within Asian communities would warn the people to keep a strict watch out for Christian activities. Hostile governments would victimize this minority community. Much misunderstanding would linger on to our own days³.

Persecution, far more severe than the one in the Roman Empire, weakened the Persian Church. Many fled east and west. A significant group of 400 Christians, under the leadership of Thomas of Cana, possibly a merchant of Armenian origin, migrated to South India (Kerala) around 350. Their arrival strengthened the existing community there, known as "St. Thomas Christians". We have an account from an Egyptian monk of the sixth century, known as Cosmos the Indian Navigator, who noticed on the Kerala coast, a community with strong Semitic cultural links under a bishop from Persia, and in Sri Lanka also Christians of Persian origin (Bevans 104).

In the midst of varying vicissitudes, "*monasteries became important centres for preserving Christian identity and life*" in Persia and Central Asia (Ibid 101). Monastic centers became "*fortresses of theology and spirituality*"⁴.

In those days, Asia was the center whence learning emanated. It is very interesting to note how much Greece, which was the chief

² The Church in Persia called the east Syrian church, with its headquarters at Seleucia-Ctesiphon flourished from 226 when the liberal Sassanid dynasty took power from the Parthians. Strongly under semitic cultural influence, it did not use images in the churches, but a bare wooden cross. One of its weaknesses was that it continued to use Syriac as its church language, possibly because its early membership was confined to Ayriac-using people. It moved its theological center from Syrian Edessa to Persian Nisibis (Bevans, 78) which became the most famous center of learning in all of Asia outside China with courses in philosophy and medicine (Ibid 103). While merchants, migrants, slaves, travelers, soldiers "*gossiped the Gospel*" wherever they went, there were a large number of fulltime evangelists too like Addai, Tatian, Gregory Illuminator and Pantaeus who spent their entire energies for the spread of the Gospel. Thus Christianity spread in Asia. The first nation to call itself Christian was an Asian country, Armenia (around 301). The new religion made an immediate appeal to the masses (Ibid 89). Women felt their position enhanced in the Christian community. Widows and orphans found security. Travelers and migrants were given a sense of belonging. Within a short time half of Asia Minor had become Christian.

³ The plight of the Christians was very similar both in the East and in the West in the early days. A second century document describes the Christian situation like thus: "They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens they share all things with others; but like aliens suffer all things... They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished by evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given a new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility" (Letter to Diognetus).

civilizing force in the Western world, had borrowed from Asia. Clement of Alexandria argues that the Greeks had plagiarized the Egyptians, Chaldeans, Indians, and a host of others (Irvin 124). Tatian said that the Greeks had “learned the art of astronomy from Babylon, magic from Persians, geometry from Egyptians, the alphabet itself from the Phoenicians” (ibid 143).

The distances that grew between the Christian communities of Asia, Africa and Europe due to the Christological debates preceding the Council of Chalcedon (451), were not all for theological reasons but also for political, cultural, nationalistic and other reasons as well. The resulting mutual alienation was the chief cause of the decline of the eastern churches.

China, Central Asia

In 635 an East Syrian missionary team under Alouben reached Chang'an (now Xian), the T'ang capital of China (Palmer 39). The emperor financed the construction of the first Christian church in China. Other churches and monasteries came up in due course. Several Christian works were published, among them “Jesus-Messiah Sutra”⁵. A certain bishop Adam was known for his proficiency in the Chinese language, and even Buddhist missionaries came to consult him. It is said that he helped a group of Indian and Japanese Buddhist monks to translate seven volumes of Buddhist Sutras into Chinese (Bevans 105).

This offers us a very early example of inter-faith cooperation. Undoubtedly Christian monks had to interact with Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Manicheans, Taoists, Confucians, Hindus, Muslims, and leaders of tribal religions among the Turks, Hans, Mongols, during their peregrinations (Ibid 101). There was much mutual borrowing. We find certain Buddhist and Taoist expressions being used to articulate Christian teachings (Irvin 314). And the Christian community continued to grow.

⁴ From the 4th to the 10th century, a network of monasteries arose all along the road to India and along the “silk route” to China, serving the interests of the Christian missions and offering hospitality to “Christian merchants, artisans, physicians, administrators” (Bevans 102). But, more particularly, their contribution to civilization deserves special attention. It was precisely these monks who passed on *Greek philosophy, science and medicine* to the Arab world. “One of the greatest contributions of the Asian church to the history of human thought was its key role in transmitting to the Arab empire the heritage of the Greek classics and, through the Arabs, preserving them for rediscovery and transformation of the West in the Renaissance and Reformation” (Moffet, *Christianity in Asia*, 354)

⁵ The Jesus-Messiah Sutra speaks of the “compassionate joyous lamb” who will “free us of the karma of our lives, bring us back to our original nature”. The worshippers pray that God will “hear our prayers, send Your raft of salvation to save us from the burning streams” (Palmer 202).

Under Islam

Within a century of the death of Muhammad, half of the world's Christians were under Muslim political rule (Irvin 271). Christian leaders had little choice but develop a skill for dialogue. Caliph Mahdi of the Abbasid dynasty, we are told, invited the Persian patriarch Timothy I for a debate on Christology and the Christian understanding of Muhammad. Both approached the question with absolute seriousness and mutual respect⁶. Indian emperor Akbar was to attempt similar inter-religious dialogue in later times. Living and working with people of many religious persuasions is nothing new for Asian Christians. That is the only experience they are familiar with. But they never failed to witness to the Gospel⁷.

By 1000, Christianity had reached the Kerait Turks in Mongolia⁸ and probably Korea and Japan (Bevans 109). However, with the fall of the tolerant T'ang dynasty, Christian fortunes waned. But the east Syrian monks continued to serve as a mighty force for evangelization (Ibid 121). They did what the Irish monks did in the West, whose "Peregrinatio pro Christo" took faith to new areas and new ethnic groups. Carrying the Gospel to new people is not a by-product of colonialism, nor a sign of a conquest mentality; it is a sign of the believers' love for people. The Syrian monks also offered medical, pastoral and educational assistance

⁶ Patriarch Timothy I seems to have been an amazing missionary strategist. We are told that he was preparing to consecrate a bishop for Tibet. Christian monasteries continued to spread to areas that are today Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Tibet and West China (Bevans 109).

⁷ Speaking of dialogue with Muslims, we may recall the example of St. Francis of Assisi, whose encounter with the Sultan brought a war to an end. It is said that the Christian saint admired the Muslim periodic call for prayer. Dialogue benefits both parties. It is not that Francis did not preach. His unflinching message was, "Preach always, and, if necessary, use words".

The impact of Christian monasticism on the Muslim society was so great, that it prompted the development of a distinctive form of Islamic mystical and ecstatic tradition known as Sufism (Irvin 283).

While we admire the early Christian efforts for dialogue in Central Asia, we must also admit that some isolated Christian communities merging in thought and religious expressions with other religious groups, lost their separate identities. We have no trace of them. Something similar happened towards the end of the first millennium in India when the Hindu and Buddhist thought and lifestyle came so close to each other, that most Indian Buddhists were absorbed into Hinduism. This is happening in our own days, when a group of Hindus, who have accepted Buddhism under Ambedkar during the last century, have become hardly distinguishable from neighboring Hindus. Multiple belonging is not uncommon in Asia. But it obscures identity.

⁸ John of Monte Corvino, a papal delegate, claims to have baptized 6,000 persons by 1305 among the Turks. Then there were the tolerant Mongols who had established a short-lived empire stretching from the Pacific to the Polish borders, a veritable Eurasian empire. During their rule in China, the Franciscans led several missionary expeditions to that country: in 1313, 1322, 1342. But this venture came to an end in 1369 with the overthrow of the Mongols. Scholars have speculated how different Asia's history would have been if the Mongols accepted Christianity instead of Islam during those crucial years.

to Christian communities and to the neighborhood, much like what the Religious do today in different parts of Asia.

The minority status of the East Syrian Church in many nations, the need they felt for dialogue, and their determination to preserve their identity and share the Gospel with others in the face of all odds, the great role the monks played in all this ... offer great lessons for the religious working in Asia today.

A brief sketch of more recent times

St. Francis Xavier's mass baptism of fisher-folk on the shores of South India and Sri Lanka, his work among the people of the Malay Peninsula and Japan, are too well known to be retold. He converted some Buddhist monks in Japan, who provided leadership to the young Christian community there. With the adoption of the local cultural models of the "ministry of the word" by Alessandro Valignano, the community stabilized (Bevans 186).

Matteo Ricci's approach to Chinese scholars and Robert di Nobili's efforts to come to terms with the caste system in India, have received much attention from mission historians. Likewise, Alexander de Rhode's skill in empowering lay evangelists in Vietnam is greatly remembered. It would be too long here to recount the achievements of Fr. Lievens in Chotnagapur, the recent progress of the Church among the tribals of North-east India, and similar advance of the Christian Church in Korea, Indonesia and Mainland China. And various religious congregations did much of this work.

It must be admitted that during the colonial period, the national rivalries among imperial powers played an undue role in determining the fortunes of the infant Christian communities. However, we cannot ignore the fact that the present Church in Asia today (except for the Oriental Churches) is the fruit of the apostolic labours of the very many generous missionaries of this period. Unfortunately there is a school of thought that is far too critical of the most dynamic era of Mission history, alleging that the evangelization efforts in those days were too closely associated with imperialism. This is an unfair way of looking at things.

The reason is that the missionary team in that period of history lived and worked under several compulsions. Just as in modern times we have learned to judge people of our cultures kindly, because they are used to other ways of thinking and acting, we ought to judge people of an earlier era of history according to their own understanding of what was proper and good. Again, as we have special sympathy for Christian communities who labour under totalitarian regimes, or excessively nationalistic governments, or fundamentalist administration, it is

helpful for us to remember that so many of our missionary pioneers during the last half a millennium worked under hostile governments, anti-clerical authorities, heartless adventurers, and insensitive empire-builders. There were times when many of their missionary societies were struggling for their very existence in their own homeland. It would have been impossible for them to move to mission territories, much less become effective in the field, without some measure of accommodation to the demands of those hard-hearted colonial authorities. In spite of all that, the miracles they worked under such a tyrannical dispensation amazes us today⁹.

Despite insurmountable difficulties, those heroic souls penetrated the most inaccessible places, confronted the most unwelcome rulers, transcended immense cultural barrier, announced the Gospel, built up communities, put languages into writing, provided literature to linguistic groups, pursued ethnological studies, intervened in behalf of oppressed communities, offered services in the field of health and education setting up impressive institutions, pressed for social reforms, introduced entire societies to modernity, and planted ideas into the hearts of people to guide their society to freedom and offer leadership in the Church and in the wider society. They initiated theological reflection in different cultural contexts, with an edifying measure of self-criticism that laid the foundation of today's missiological thinking. We ought to be proud of these and other accomplishments. If the Church in Asia has emerged as a force to reckon with, the credit is greatly due to these valiant men and women.

Conclusions

Profiting by the insights of Stephan Bevans and Roger Schroeder in their *Constants in Context*, I would like to draw a few conclusions

⁹ It is persons who are excessively nationalistic in their outlook today that find it most difficult to understand persons of a similar nationalistic vision in an earlier era. They suffer from the same sort of narcissism that they accuse others of. But people who read history insightfully and cultivate a broader outlook and truly Catholic view of the human reality, discover people of the same attitude in every period of Church history. It is they who build up the Universal Church and give continuity to the story of believers. They find it easy to empathize with people of every persuasion in every age of history and of our times. All that I am saying is not to deny that there are many historic wounds that need to be healed. In fact, it is part of the mission of the Evangelizer to work for the healing of the **historic memories** of the society in which he/she lives. We need to e over our post-colonial complexes, and reacquire the serenity typical of the Asian wise man/woman to be able to engage ourselves creatively in fresh theological and missiological thinking. Schribner speaking of the era says, "The collision that occurred in the sixteenth century was not just between opposing cultures, or between races, or between historical products; it is not between "more advanced" and "backward" cultures, or "civilized" peoples and "barbarians". It was essentially, between **two states of consciousness**, and this is perhaps why it is so painful". (Bevans 175).

from what we have said above: 1. the need to enter into the world of other communities with respect, 2. to communicate with people in a way intelligible within a local culture, 3. recognize the Gospel values already present in that culture, and thus continue the tradition of Origen, Justin, Cyril and Methodius¹⁰.

“While we witness to the Lordship of Christ, we also pay due respect to the wonderful power of human reason, human experience, and human culture: (Bevans 54). It means listening attentively to cultures in order to notice the presence of God and the activity of the Spirit, to discover the hidden treasure of Christ in cultural patterns and values, to call cultures to their deepest identity through the message of the Gospel (Ibid 60), to draw people to fulfill their deepest potentiality, and answer their most profound desires. It means to keep learning all the time, which someone described as “mission in reverse”. This type of learning attitude implies a “missio inter gentes”.

B. The Present Context

There have been changes since those days. The change from the colonial period to an era of free nations was so radical that we have hardly got over it. In the meantime the world has changed again in an unforeseen manner, from the 1980's: the demise of communism that had held so many unrealistic hopes to the poor of the world, the dismemberment of the Soviet Union, change of economic balance due to the rise of oil prices, emergences of Islamic nations as a world force often confronting the West, resulting situation of confrontation in many parts of the world, and the new phenomenon of global terrorism, rise of the so-called Asian tigers and the unexpected crisis they faced, growing power of multinational companies and the globalization of market economy, transition of third world countries from political dependence to economic dependence (often called neo-colonialism), hardening of the neo-liberal ideologies, formation of the European Union, rapid growth of China as an economic giant.

There are other trends more specific of Asia in recent years: population growth running ahead of economic growth in many countries; starvation deaths (it is said that 35,000 children die every day of starvation, Asia Focus, August 8, 2003); urbanization on a gigantic scale; consequent send of uprootedness of people rushing to the cities for jobs; mass migration of Asian to Western countries or to Japan or the oil-rich countries of West

¹⁰ For Clement of Alexandria, philosophy was a steppingstone to Christ. Origen said: “Every wise man to the extent that he is wise, participates in Christ who is Wisdom” (Commentary on the Gospel of St. John). For him, it is the work of the Christians to take materials out of the secular world and fashion from them objects for the worship and glorification of God (Philokaim xiii).

Asia, which makes an impact also on their home-countries; fragmentation of rural societies; xenophobic, ethnocentric and racist attitudes of countries receiving migrants and guest workers; political mobilization of people using religious symbolisms; self-assertion of Asian nations in search in search of a place in the newly emerging political scenario; arms race between neighboring countries¹¹; political exploitation of religious sentiments of people; conflicts between neighbouring countries that are defining their roles in a regional power-alignment or over-claiming their boundaries; persistence of personality cults and dynastic rule; perpetuating feudalism in new forms; democratic forms not yielding democratic values; identity affirmation of minority ethnic groups within nation-states leading to secession-struggle or ethnic conflicts; threat to the integrity of God's creation and biodiversity, i.e. violence to nature in a massive scale to serve the new economy.

There are more problems still directly affecting our value-systems: violence coming to be accepted as a respectable way of pressing one's point of view, and state violence in response; all pervasive corruption becoming recognized as normal to public life; popular religious movements like Falun Gong (China) and Sangh Parivar (India) winning an impressive following; weakening of ideologies that promoted social commitment; a sense of helplessness before mighty problems like HIV/AIDS or SARS, TB, malaria, drug addiction, illiteracy, unemployment, pornography, urban violence; increase in the number of street children, divorces, unwed mothers, prostitutes, handicapped persons, exploited women, untrained youth, gambling (casino) centers; idealism vanishing from the ranks under pressure from harsh realities of the new economy.

Looking at the changes in the Christian world, we notice a decline of Christianity in the West (especially in Western Europe) and the shift in the center of gravity to the non-Western world. The Catholic population in Africa, for example, has trebled during the last twenty-five years. There are more than 100 million Catholics in Asia today¹².

We notice new tensions building up too: 1. as the economy is being globalized, so is poverty and uneven distribution of wealth; and in response, a perception of injustice grows deeper and terrorist trends

¹¹ For all the self-assertion of Asians, individual Asian countries prefer to keep close to the Western nations that they are comfortable with, and are largely indifferent to the fortunes of neighboring countries thus losing many opportunities for natural assistance. There are tensions in many zones: Kashmir, Kurdistan, Tibet, Iraq, Kuwait, Aceh, Mindanao, Laos, East Timor, etc. Crude pragmatism seems to be all that counts. The triumph of cut-throat competition keeps eroding the Asian values of harmony and solidarity. The recent popularity of the biographies of Genghis Khan, Attila the Hun, Alexander the Great, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the presentation of their military strategies to business executives as though they were models to be followed in an effort towards the elimination of rivals, can make us wonder in what direction our world is moving.

grow wider; 2. in the face of the secularization of life and media, people seek the security ensured by exaggerated forms of religiosity and fundamentalism; 3. as mighty nations interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign nations in the name of democracy and human rights, the weaker ones respond with terrorism and violence in the name of religion and culture; 4. as the former try to impose mono-civilizational solutions upon a multi-civilizational world and seek to homogenize cultures, the latter confront the trend by an exaggerated reaffirmation of local and subaltern cultures.

In this complex world, the mission of evangelization too has become complex. As an air of helplessness seems to come upon us as we observe humanity moving around in circles searching for an answer. It is not that justice is more important than peace, or vice-versa. It is not that we have no choice between a crassly materialistic outlook on life and a fiercely fanatic form of religious self-expression. It is not as though an economic boom is a supreme value even at the risk of damaging persons, local communities, natural environment, cultural identities, and human relationships. It is not that we can promote the values of the Kingdom and pretend that the King does not exist. It is not that the wrong done by those who believed in Jesus as the unique saviour of mankind will be rectified by placing him in a wider pantheon.

No, we can be sure that there is an answer to every problem, though we cannot pretend that we have ready-made answers, or that all the answers have already been given centuries ago, or that we do not need

¹² Religious communities too are realizing that "the geographic and cultural shifts can become a new stage of refoundation and of evangelical radicality, revisited with new eyes" (Congress on Consecrated Life, "Passion for Christ...Religious Life, October-December, 2004, pg.29).

Year	Western	Southern
1900	77%	23%
1970	49%	51%
1980	42%	58%
2000	30%	70%

(Religious Life: Asia, April 1999)

There is a growing perception that the future of Christianity will not depend on the speculations of the intellectuals of the declining Churches, but on the life experiences of the growing Churches. These latter Churches have not put their experiences, perceptions, reflections and convictions into writing as yet. They have not become vocal as yet. But one day they will. Anyone who wishes to have an insight into the future, must observe thoughts and events there. They seem to lean towards what others describe as "conservative". Many of them are inclined to Pentecostal and Charismatic styles of belief and worship.

For many people of Asia, conversion to God does not take place during a brilliant lecture, but during a deep prayer-experience with a believing community. These growing communities have a vision that is clearly Christ-centred. They are dynamic; they seem to give life and energy to various ecclesial movements. Historically speaking, all growing Churches manifested these traits in the period of their expansion. The charismatics keep growing in Asia, Africa, eastern Europe and other places. Surprisingly, the post-modern culture in the West too, seems to be open to Pentecostal and charismatic forms of worship. Is the world moving towards the new Pentecost that John Paul II foresaw?

to search and reflect, discuss, discover and rediscover in every human context what we ought to do, where we can find wisdom, whence we can derive strength.

Discovery of our way through life, amelioration of the human condition, and the manner in which we find our role in human history and the path to our ultimate destiny is not something that we can attain without assistance. His assistance is what may be described as Evangelization. It is a complex reality.

Evangelization includes being involved in human development and living through the painful realities of social tension, bringing about reconciliation and peace, building up human communities in the context of their cultures, tapping the resources of their civilizational heritage, unraveling the mysteries of human existence, accompanying people on their pilgrimage towards God. It calls for respect of people's traditions and religious experiences, and being prepared to be "co-pilgrims", a humble searcher, while offering guidance based on faith. It calls for courage, humility, daring, and readiness to offer the ultimate form of witness: death/martyrdom. Such persons of evangelical boldness have to become icons of God's love for his people, like Archbishop Oscar Romero, Mother Teresa and Pope John Paul II.

C. Religious Life in the Asian Context

The great cultural changes that came upon the Western world during the last half century have so affected religious life that members are no more merely seeking to restructure community life and re-dimension apostolic activities, but questioning the very foundational principles on which this form of life was built. Some are asking whether it has a future at all. In this crucial period of religious history, maybe it is time that we looked at religious life in the Asian context itself quite independently of the reflection that is going on in another part of the world.

There should be no identity crisis for the religious working on this continent, unless it is imported from elsewhere, and unless we make ourselves culturally uprooted. Here, religious life is understood, its relevance is recognized, its contribution is appreciated, its representatives are respected; for, we Christian religious are not the only ones in the field; there are native models of religious life belonging to other Asian religions. History tells us that monasticism flourished in Ireland and certain parts of Germany soon after the acceptance of Christianity, because such a form of life had native models. In the same way, in Asia vocations are on the rise (except in areas where the culture has changed substantially), new congregations come into existence, new

religious initiatives are launched, because such a trend corresponds to the general atmosphere prevailing in the larger society, where every religion is renewing itself, and where religious "virtuosos" are convinced of their identity and not lost in constant self-questioning.

While vicariously participating in the anxieties of other parts of the world, we should be careful not to think that their problems have a universal application. And while studying in the context of the recent changes in religious life, we need not adhere too closely to the self-description of religious everywhere, as though our own Asian society has gone through the same historic experience that another society has gone through and thought the same thoughts that intellectuals elsewhere have thought. Unless we resist the temptation to slide towards developing the "carbon copy syndrome", and specialize in what Arnold Toynbee has described as *mimesis*, we will swing like a pendulum with the changing cultural moods elsewhere. We need to look at our own histories, observe native models, stand close to the indigenous religious identities and austerities, and build up and preserve values, attitudes, relationships, traditions and symbols, that have meaning in our own context. For example, in Asia what people admire most in a religious person is renunciation rather than efficiency, moral authority rather than mobilizing skill, God-experience rather than political correctness.

Historically speaking, most of our religious orders and congregations were born in the West. We need to be extremely grateful. They were founded in an era when the Western society did not differ greatly from the Asian - both were rural, agricultural, very attached to the family, to tradition, very loyal to religion; in that period both societies enjoyed an impressive measure of inner cohesion. During the extension of the activities of these orders and congregations to Asia, the Asian members found it easy to identify themselves with their founding stories, documents, charisma, emphases, thrusts, and priorities. This is not to deny the differences that existed even in those days.

However, more particularly during the last half a century the Western cultural world had undergone such radical changes, that religious life, in an effort to respond to these changes has rightly set itself on a process of on-going transformation. But since all those changes have not taken place in the same manner in Asia, it has not been easy for Asians (while recognizing the significant value of many of those reflections and changes), to identify themselves with all the debates that have arisen within the societies whose leadership and membership live and work largely in another hemisphere of the world. Asian problems, possibilities, anxieties and ambitions are different.

Most congregations recognize the need for reflection in the context of different cultures; which means Asian religious need to be aware of and respond to the religious traditions of the Asian people and the cultural changes that are taking place here, if they which to play a meaningful role are religious on the Asian continent. In this area we may have failed¹³.

This is not to claim superiority for the Eastern over the Western, or vice-versa, or to assert an Asian identity in an arrogant, aggressive, chauvinistic or grievance-ridden manner, much less to build up an Asian lobby of regional interests, or to seek special importance or special exemptions for the Asian sector. Nor do I claim this reflection can be done in isolation, or that it has nothing to with Western authors who have set in motion a deeper study of religious life in Asia. If the type of reflection I am suggesting has to be of any value, it must be done with

¹³ To take one or two examples, when we introduced with absolute enthusiasm various forms of freedoms into our renewal programmes that stood for special respect for the individual, we responded correctly to the cultural wave that had been sweeping the West during the last few generations. We did a good thing. But meanwhile, we distanced ourselves from the general communitarian ethos that prevailed in Asian societies. Individualistic undertakings and subjective spiritualities can be alienating in Asia. If at that time we had tried to renew and strengthen community bonds in our religious communities, we would have retained an organic relationship with the culture around us. Pressing fervently for inculturation while we are inattentive to the organic nature of the culture does not reveal perceptive depth. In the same way we began to emphasize the secular dimension of our services, and our discussions and interest moved in the direction of a perfectly secularized academic world (of work, thought, journalism, research), we came on the wavelength of academicians in the West, but in the meantime we moved away from the local society that was steeped in religiosity, with which we became incapable of dialogue, in whose name we were taking up issues. Meanwhile, we were becoming more and more strident in our criticism against missionary pioneers, crying hoarse against slow steps in inculturation and imposition of "western ideas" by the highest Church authorities on accommodating Asians. My argument is not that Asian values are absolute, but they deserve attention even while we are welcoming new ideas. As the criticisms grew harsher in fighting for an Asian identity and respect for Asian civilizations, what became more evident was that the themes of discussion, approach to problems, styles of communication, quality of relationships were all non-Asian. Vocabulary was closer to Voltaire, Nietzsche, Hegel, Sartre, Marx and Darwin rather than to the Buddha, Panchshila, Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, and Asian concepts of harmony. We spoke in two voices, some of those who spoke louder in Asia's interest seemed culturally un-rooted people, over-concerned with issues marginal to the consciousness of the Asian masses, though in keeping with the interests of equally un-rooted Asians. Meanwhile other more relevant themes received too little attention: like the cultural identities of Asian societies, continuity and change in Asian cultures and civilizations, revival of Asian religions, ways of preventing communal conflicts and ethnic strife, possibility of tapping the resource of religion for ethical behaviour and social commitment, correct outsider's point of view. There was too little depth, perception, creativity, and cultural insertion. And insider's understanding was missing. Thus too much of Asian energy was running to waste in negative exercises.

There were for awhile debates on "Asian values". But as they were proposed by persons who wanted to justify their authoritarian regimes, the proposal did not make much headway. This little note is an invitation to the in depth study of the nature of our cultures, retaining an Asian

a deep sense of responsibility towards the Universal Church, avoiding anything that sounds like excessively nationalistic or regionalistic¹⁴. It must be undertaken only for deepening the core values of religious life itself and ensuring greater pastoral effectiveness in various cultural contexts. It must seek to draw from ancient resources of Asia's religious traditions. Asia, with her profound sense of the sacred may have something to offer the world.

It is true that the West has set the whole world rethinking¹⁵. With greater economic and technological development in the different countries of Asia, some of the Western experience may be repeated here. However, no matter how profound the impact of the West, Asian societies seem serenely determined to preserve their identities and strengthen them further with insights derived from the Western experience. Religious personnel on this continent will need therefore to walk with these societies, understand the religious psychology of these communities, draw from inherited religious sturdiness of the Asian peoples, while guarding against their in-built weaknesses. For, we have examples of renounced and contemplative traditions in Asia, going back to the earliest times, especially because this was *the continent where a radical living of religion took on a certain definitive shape*.

1. Historically speaking, Hinduism is the oldest world religion, dating from about 2,500 B.C., and presently claiming over 820 million adherents. "It is the seedbed of formal religious life... Today, there is an estimated one million monastics in India alone" (O'Murch 16). In the Hindu tradition, there is a great deal of freedom and flexibility, marked by a vast variety of lifestyles and spiritualities. There are hundreds of thousands of God-seekers and world-renouncers in India. "Hinduism has always differentiated between the priest and the monk" (Ibid 21). "The monks and nuns take three vows: poverty, chastity and reverence of elders... They are accountable to a spiritual master..." Their spiritual guidance is sought after. Some are celibates. Some are involved in education and healthcare.
2. "Buddhism originated as a monastic religion. The Buddha himself was a monk and passed on to his followers a well developed monastic system which took its main ideas from Hindu Sanyasi" (O'Murch 19). Buddhist monks follow a communal lifestyle. They are subject to authority. They are considered sources of wisdom and inspiration. They have a long tradition of begging and ascetical practices. "Buddhist monks do not recruit; the people try to ensure that there is a constant supply of candidates" (Ibid 22). Though, today, we notice Buddhist monks (like Hindu Sanyasis) getting

quality about the entire debate. We know for certain that the cultural values of the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Shintoist, Islam and tribal societies have something to offer the world civilization, e.g. sense of the sacred, solidarity, community, renunciation, respect for life, attachment to family and tradition, love for mysticism.

¹⁴ The use of the term "Western" with a negative connotation is unfair. It is as unfair as using phrases like "oriental despotism" or "Asian decadence". There is nothing negative about being Eastern or Western, Asian or European. Every form of stereotyping is odious. We feel hurt when Christians are stereotyped in Hindi films as unprincipled villains. In the same way, Muslims can feel hurt if they are pictured as terrorists, indigenous communities (tribals) can feel humiliated if they are presented as uncivilized people. Our friends from the West can feel uncomfortable, if we constantly refer to "Western" things with a tone of the "negative other". The fact is that both Eastern and Western civilizations are two mighty streams of human experience which have frequently overflowed one into the other, and in which many rivulets of each are very close to those of the other. What is important is that there be respectful sharing, intelligent and **selective acceptance of organic assimilation.**

¹⁵ Civilizations grow and diversify for a multiplicity of reasons: varied geographical settings, climactic differences, diverse historical experiences. Every civilization has something unique to offer to humanity even though its vision of life and insights are specific to its own historic experience: (a) Thus, the European society in its struggle against monarchy and various other forms of absolute power, develop a deep understanding of and appreciation for democracy and individual freedoms. We might say a very specific contribution of the Western society to humankind has been the concept of "the individual's rights" as against every sort of interfering authority; (b) On the African continent, on the contrary, tribal and village solidarity was found to be the greatest strength of the society in its struggle for survival both against natural elements and threatening communities. A powerful "sense of community", continues to characterize the African society, along with an attitude of mutual dependence and natural assistance.; (c) It may be argued that a distinct contribution of the Asian society to humanity is a belief in "strong family bonds". They help to keep clear of exaggerated individualism popular in modern times and excessive subordination to the larger society (tribe, class, village, etc.) as seen in some contexts. But there is no perfect balance in any of them. Humanity will be wise, if it learns to profit from these different insights without absolutizing any one in particular. **A dialogue of civilizations must go on.**

Nor can we deny basic differences among various civilizational and cultural zones of Asia itself, nor ignore the cultural changes that are taking place in all Asian societies. As the Western society, coming under the full impact of Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, totally renewed itself over the centuries, Asian societies coming under the impact of Western thought and experience are trying to rediscover and redefine themselves. This impact is not undifferentiated. For example, the pace of change has been different from one society to another. Each one has also opted for that stream of the Western thought that pleased it best. For example, while Japan opted for Western technology from its earliest days of exposure to the West, India indicated its special preference for a democratic policy; while China was deeply impressed by the egalitarian ideas that sprang up in the West (Marxist and others), Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Korea were affected by the Western economic experience; other countries like Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia were also influenced in the same way; the Philippines by Western lifestyles. While most accepted the concept of nationalism that developed in the West, a few were contented with forging an opportunistic alliance with it while retaining Machiavellian ruling styles. In this way, the countries of Asia deriving inspiration from opposing schools of thought from the West have become even more differentiated.

For all the legitimate pride that we have in our ancient civilizations, an external stimulus was necessary for Asia in a particular period of history. To societies that had grown complacent and self-absorbed, a stimulus from outside came as a major shock the shock when it comes. Self-universalization is the greatest weakness of any civilization, even of the modern one. Criticisms that come from the outside may be painful, but are beneficial.

involved in politics, it is a departure from sound tradition.

3. Sufism arose in Islam as a counter-cultural movement, emphasizing prayer and contemplation, a simple and frugal lifestyle. They follow a hierarchic structure, pledging strict obedience. Some are celibate. "They have a strong reputation for holiness and learning on par with many of the great orders of Christianity" (Ibid 14).
4. There are other traditions too. Jain monks propagate non-violence. Religious professionals in Sikhism and Judaism do not seek to live a life of celibacy, but austerity of life is a hallmark of all persons professing a deeper commitment to religion.

Sandra Schneiders says that there are many things in common between Catholic religious life and the monasticism in other religions¹⁶. She argues that ours is the historical realization of the "monastic archetype" that is always present in the collective subconscious of every society. She emphasizes further, "Monasticism as the single-minded concern with the God-quest, institutionalized in a distinct life form, is at the heart of religious life..." (Schneiders 13). She sees a common desire to go apart, "aleness" (Ibid 9).

Certain things emerge in this brief study of religious life in Asia: intense God-searching, simplicity of life, a tradition of renunciation and asceticism, concepts approximating the Christian practice of poverty and obedience in more radical form, celibacy for those who have chosen it, disciplined community life for those who have opted for that form of life, witness to God's holiness and compassion, source of wisdom and inspiration, moral authority in the contemporary world, propagation of religious teachings in society¹⁷. It is important to remember that these elements do not depend on the recent General Chapter or the revised Constitutions, since they do not have any such authorities. But when one fails to be true to these traditions, one ceases to be a religious person in the estimation of Asian society.

¹⁶ Among the religious professionals of other religions, we notice too that candidates discern their vocation, elders advise and assist, (they) go through temporary and then more permanent commitment, accept a life of poverty even of an extreme nature and adhere to simplicity of life. This form of life almost always includes some form of submission to an authority, regulated by a fixed schedule conducive to orderly and disciplined lifestyle (Schneiders 10). "...asceticism in the form of silence and solitude, fasting, restriction of sleep, and exposure to the elements; meditation and chanting; confession and public penances for infractions of the rules; study of the sacred texts of the tradition. Very often the monastic community becomes a center of learning and transmission of culture, both sacred and profane" (Ibid 10-11)

¹⁷ I may add one more helpful point. Most Asians have always lived in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural situation. Living with people who are very different from oneself is nothing new for Asians. That is why Asians could make a useful contribution to the reflection on the emerging multi-cultural situation in religious life and in the larger society in many parts of the world..

D. The Religious in the field of Evangelization in Asia

There are certain areas where the Religious are at their best. If God-quest is the central goal of religious life in itself, pointing to God is a related obligation. It is the absolute joy of the religious evangelizer to speak about God and his wonderful plan for the ultimate good of his people. That is what Asians expect from a religious teacher.

1. Have answers for those who ask serious questions.

In spite of an apparent appetite for superficial things in life (money, pleasures, excitement, continuous change), humanity has not lost taste for something more serious: something deeper in meaning, higher in destiny. That is precisely the area where religious persons are expected to be especially competent. If you know how to come on the wavelength of individuals and communities, you win a hearing. Speak of something that touches lives closely, no matter how serious the topic, there will be listeners. Even as some seek distance from such messages because of their own superficiality, others draw close. Even in the very rejection of the transcendent by some, you will notice a hunger for the invisible in their deeper selves.

The age of religion is not over, it is just beginning. When people give up formal religious practices, reject excessively organized religion, and go for religious experiences and devotional thrills, they are not giving up religion; they are only manifesting their religious earnestness and spiritual hunger for what constitutes the core concern of religion. Unconsciously they are also exposing the lack of authenticity and seriousness in too many of our religious practices. Give these practices and traditions depth, meaning and relevance, and people will return..

2. People search for depth, admire renunciation

In Asia, we are not living in a secularized world, but in a society that takes religion seriously. It is not a "death-of-God" theology that is gaining her, but "God-is-alive" conviction. What we have to struggle against is not godlessness, but the misuse of religion for political and partisan purposes. Our task is not to plant faith in human hearts (it is already there), but to channel people's faith-fed energies towards human growth the way Jesus did.

In order to be able to do this, we need to be people of deep faith. It is in this area that the religious can be experts. But it happens that when an inquirer comes to an Evangelizer, he is surprised to find that the bearer of so profound a message is totally lacking in depth" depth as a person, depth in conversation, in relationships, in understanding God's Word, in relationship with God. Some evangelizers are lost in administration, some in debates over concept, and some in self-display. "Where is the man of God", the inquirer asks, "Where is the committed person?"

As religious persons we need to take our religious life seriously. Soon after Vatican II, congregations were updating themselves and re-dimensioning their communities. The questions they were asking were about timetables, structures, relaxation of rules, extension of freedoms, etc. Today the religious are asking far more profound questions: What is religious life? What do people of all races and faiths expect from persons who are fully given to their religion (consecrated dedicated persons, sanyasins, monks, religious professional)?

3. Announcing the Message through symbols - becoming icons of God's love for His people

The religious are the prophets of our age, and visionaries of the future. But their main mission is to become icons of God's love for His people. There is something unique about icons. They speak to the collective subconscious of communities. They are able to speak to illiterates, to the masses, to poetically sensitive persons, to religiously open people. They influence culture at a very deep level. They address the Gospel to the human psyche¹⁸. That is why the icon of Mother Teresa was unbelievably intelligible and acceptable to the Indian masses. That is why too John Paul II has emerged as a meaningful and appealing icon in our days. Gandhi was similarly an icon to millions of Indians. The innumerable martyrs that Asia has produced are the icons of the evangelical boldness and fidelity of our ancestors. The Religious who propose to live the message of the Gospel in a radical measure will most eloquently announce the message by allowing themselves to grow and become icons of God's love for His people.

Images mean much to a society in which non-verbal communication has the privileged place, where non-argumentative sharing is the more desirable mode of communication in the area of religion. We Asians are especially gifted in communicating through images. Mahatma Gandhi was a wizard at image-creation: the loin cloth, the spinning wheel, the Salt March, inter-faith meetings, staying among the humbler caste people, periods of silence... all these had powerful symbolic meaning that appealed to the Indian population.

Jesus spoke in pictures: light, salt, lamp, net, coin, mustard seed, fig tree, water, straying sheep... The Church too uses images in educating people in the faith: water, oil, fire, candle, colours, the use of art, architecture, stained glass windows, etc.

¹⁸ Scholars speak of communications that are pre-verbal, epiverbal, subverbal and nonverbal (Rhetoric in Intercultural Contexts, ed. Alberto Gonzalez, Dolores V. Anno, International & Intercultural Communications Annual, 1999, Vol. XXII - Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2000). Asians generally prefer a non-argumentative approach to matters related to religion. The Chinese often say, "We do not argue" (Ibid 59).

Reformation ushered in an era of the "Culture of the Word" in the West (Wessels 162). Statues, paintings and many other religious images were banished from the places of worship, and in the practices and observances of Christian life. But with the popularity of the television in modern times, we are returning to an era of images once again. Images can ensnare, enslave or empower people. While TV and other visual media can mislead and confuse, they can also become "narrative theologians"... The best textbooks are not grievance-ridden and ideologically loaded theological discussions and social disputations, but the living works of artists who are connected to the sources of fantasy" (Ibid 184)¹⁹.

4. Making of our works symbols of transcendent realities

All the services we render will have value only if they point to something beyond themselves. We should not rejoice solely in the number of children we educate, or the sick people we heal, or the social goals we achieve. Can all these visible achievements be made symbols of invisible realities and reminders of abiding truths? Can they be made to speak, to teach, describe and point to something beyond the "visible", to things more than what can be counted and measured and calculated? Can they be made images of His abiding love, His forgiving mercy, His reconciling initiative, His healing touch, His transforming message?

A religious who is a social worker witnesses to God's caring love for his people; as a doctor or a nurse, to his healing touch. Persons belonging to different cultures living and praying together in a religious community witnesses to the unity of humankind and to its eternal destinies; it is a sign of God's presence and action in the world that cannot be resisted; it translates the Gospel into life and writes its achievements into human history. The religious, by their very authentic life, are powerful evangelizers even in the midst of the greatest obstacles. They constitute what may be called a "living image". Anthony Wessels calls such a "living image" the "Fifth Gospel" (Wessels 184), especially when it uses the language of love (Ibid 194) as Mother Teresa did.

¹⁹ "The ultimate" mystery can certainly be presented in the symbols of myths than the concepts of thought", says Hans Jonas (Wessels 176). Emerson once said, "I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind can comprehend it". "Myth" produces a sense of awe, gratitude, wonder, ecstasy. "Myth" in this sense is not an object of knowledge, but a category of knowledge. It corresponds to the "subtle and direct language of experience, and re-enacts moments of signal truth with its haunting universality". It is the symbol of a higher reality with "archetypal significance". "The Christian revelation did not destroy the matrices of human imagination but made use of them and added a new value to them" (Ibid 179).

5. Ability for personal encounter, personal relationships

Services in the field of education, health, development, social change - these are all possible contexts of encounter. Unless a genuine encounter between the Evangelizer and the person(s) to be evangelized takes place, the service bears no fruit. This encounter cannot be mechanized or made in an impersonal way through mass contact, e.g. T.V. appeals, though such contacts can serve as a starting point. What is important is that the Scriptural Enquirer may be exposed to the living faith of the Believer, not to a lifeless list of doctrines, opinions, rules, and practices. A personal encounter makes all the difference.

6. Searching for relevance

The question we pose is not therefore whether the Gospel has something to offer the people of our times but how we make it intelligible and acceptable' how it can be made to address the problems of the day and point to greater human possibilities. The Gospel needs to be addressed to a people (tribe, caste, community, ethnic group, society) in a way that it responds to its needs, aspirations and longings, in a particular period of history. And then indeed the message truly comes alive. Such an announcement of the Gospel is not merely a matter of academic excellence, oratorical or demagogic skill, but the right interpretation of history, correct understanding of the era in which one lives, an ability to re-interpret such an understanding for the specific area where one works, a firm grasp of the diverse social trends and conflicting forces at work, a sober search for one's role in this complex situation.

7. Searching for God

We notice a gap constantly widening between religion and "irreligion". Here we are not speaking of legitimate forms of secularism. We rather are referring to a form of lavish consumerism, a soul-less materialism and a type of egocentrism that seeks to crush out the "Other" form of existence.

The future polarizations will not be between religions as Hans Kung argues; not between civilizations as Samuel Huntington contends; but between those who promote the human spirit and those who seek to put it out. Beginning with a healthy and legitimate form of secularism, large segments of human society are becoming totally alienated from anything that has reference to religious faith. If Asian society is not moving in that way, Asian elite is strongly tempted in that direction. The human spirit seems to find no recognition in the modern secularized society, and one seems to be vainly searching to place the foundations of a morally sound society somewhere. The barrenness of materialism and self-seeking nihilism do not offer any hope. "If men

thought of God as much as they think of the world, who would not attain salvation?" asked an ancient Indian (Maitri Upanishad 6:24).

Criticism of Christianity by persons of other persuasions (and from within) purifies the Christian society. Only those with the highest motives and firmest faith will endure. But having been purified inwardly, they will become irresistible witnesses to the Truth and convincing announcers of the Gospel. Such persons will truly be the God-experienced messengers that Asia is waiting for. They will be sharing realities that they have personally experienced at the depths of their hearts. They will repeat with John "...What we have seen and heard, we are telling you so that you too may be in union with us, as we are in union with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn. 3).

E. Presenting Christ

We do not intend to deny the difficulties that the Evangelizer experiences in Asia. The word "conversion" has acquired a negative connotation in many countries on this continent. Not rarely, people associate this word with a change of religion under duress, deceit or enticement. We know that genuine conversion is something different. However, if this word or any other gives offence, we should opt for other expressions. Nonetheless, it is legitimate to claim, on the one hand, the right to choose one's religion, and on the other hand, the freedom to share one's faith.

It is not true that a missionary spirit is proper of Christianity only and that it is a sign of intolerance. Every universal religion has had among its chief traits the desire to share its message with the whole of humanity. The Rig Veda said, "This message ensuring the ultimate good has to be conveyed to all men". The Buddha ordered, "Go you now, monks, for the benefit of many, for the welfare of mankind, out of compassion for the world. Preach the doctrine, which is glorious in the beginning, glorious in the middle, and glorious in the end". The Koran instructed, "And we do not send them as messengers, but as bearers of good tidings and warnings. And who so shall believe and amend, there is no fear on them or shall they grieve. But who so shall charge our communications with falsehood, on them shall fall a punishment of their wicked things." (Koran VI, 48,49). So with other religions. It is quite unfair to say the Christianity alone believes in self-propagation.

Something always happens when people are confronted with God's word²⁰. How it touches human hearts remains always a mystery. It transforms the lives of people.

1. The unique figure of Christ

Of late there is a growing anxiety in the mind of some Christian believers that, while Christ's teaching about human brotherhood is welcome in Asia, his unique person is an obstacle. Such a fear is largely entertained by those who have never had a living experience of presenting Christ to a Searcher. We are absolutely certain that the person of Christ is not an obstacle, but the most attractive force and the most inspiring figure on the continent of Asia. Is he not the most eminent of Asia's children?

The problem is not actually with the image of Christ itself but difficulties may arise in other areas. There may be unhealed colonial memories of historic injuries received from countries that are considered Christian. There may be perceptions of political and economic threats from such nations even today. Such perceptions certainly need to be considered carefully. In fact, it is a part of the evangelizer's mission to heal the memories of the past within the society in which he or she lives. Forgiveness is the only path to the future. However, what is significant for us to realize is that there is no aversion to Christ himself and what he stands for.

2. The definitive opting for Christ is always a miracle

We are living through troubled times. There is uncertainty, confusion, despair, but also, thank God, expectancy and hope. God is "shaking the nations once more". The hour has come again for the Gospel. There is a growing hunger for God, of which many Christian thinkers and pastors are little aware of. New religious movements, rebirth of traditional religions, and emergence of new forms of spiritualities (related to ecology, tribal traditions, indigenous deities, healing, esoteric experiences) are telling us something. The religious could be those persons best suited to address this situation and get the work done.

To decide to whom to whisper the Gospel directly, when and how to do it, whom to invite to a definitive choice and decision ... is a spiritual skill an evangelizer should daily pray for. Asia's soul awaits this message!

²⁰ If chosen passages from the Bible are made available to the people, if notice boards, picture cards, wall posters, printed leaflets, dance, songs, dramatized stories carry God's word in attractive forms, somewhere someone will be touched. You will find from expertise how great Jesus' words are, how stunning his images. It is important to place art at the service of the Gospel. "Art and beauty are icons of cultures; artists help the communities of consecrated life fight against a consumeristic mentality, create beautiful spaces for prayer, find new symbols to tell new stories to the hearts of men and women who listen" (Congress on Consecrated Life, Passion for Christ... Religious Life: Asia, October-December, 2004). Encourage the communication of the Christian message through art. The world can be won for God only by beauty, not arguments. Search for beauty in its billions of forms, and place it at the service of God's message. Religious art teaches. Religious dance communicates. Music evangelises. We should always encourage musicians and composers to carry God's word to the depths of their hearts.

A definitive choice of Christ is always a wonder. It is nothing short of a miracle. How it happens no one can tell. But it happens through you and me. It happens in spite of me ... and yet, it happens also through me. I have an irreplaceable role in this divine economy. If I fail, that God given role will not be fulfilled. No one else can fulfill the task assigned to me. May the Lord enable me to discover that irreplaceable role and may He enable all of us to do so. "Do great things for us, O Lord, for You are mighty, and holy is Your name".

III. ASIAN RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BUILDING UP OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

- Sr. Julma C. Neo, D.C.

A. Introduction

I would like to begin this reflection with a story.

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in the nest of a backyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them. All his life the eagle did what the chicks did, thinking he was a chick. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.

The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked.

"That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We're chickens- we belong to the earth".

So the eagle lived and died a chicken. That's what he thought he was.

Identity questions are always important. They condition how we live and die.

In my presentation, I will presume that we Asian religious know and live our religious identity notwithstanding the many difficulties that threaten it today. I will focus on the Asian-ness of this religious identity in the context of the local Church.

There are several ways of approaching this question. I propose that we consider it from the perspective of the inculturation of charisms, which was one of the major strands in the discussions at the 1994 Synod on Consecrated Life and the 1998 Synod on Asia. A workshop was devoted to it at the 2004 Congress on Consecrated Life. John Paul II dealt with it in *Vita Consecrata and Ecclesia in Asia*.

B. Historical Context

Reflection on inculturation is at a nascent stage.²¹ When one tries to know more about inculturation of charisms, one finds it mentioned often enough during meetings and in written materials. Its importance and its urgency are always stressed. But there is hardly anything beyond this mention. One gets the impression that talking of inculturation of charisms is like running after a mirage in the desert! As someone said, it has been “slow to begin, remains timid while the challenges are tremendous”.²² Given our historical development as Church, I suppose, this is understandable.

We are heirs of a mono-cultural Church that for centuries was rooted in European soil and that continued to be so even when it crossed the ocean with colonization in the 16th and 19th centuries.²³ With this transplantation of the Church, religious congregations and the European model of religious life that they embodied were similarly transplanted from their European Motherhouses, resulting in ways of living religious life that were often foreign to their new cultural contexts.

The prevailing theology of religious life until Vatican II further reinforced this “foreign-ness” by advocating flight from the world and detachment from all that is of the world and from what is human - including cultures- as the ideal of religious life. For many Asian religious, entering religious life signified complete rupture with the religious and cultural traditions they grew up with. The result was the formation of religious who were totally dedicated to religious ideals but indifferent to human and secular concerns.

For the past decades, however, a different wind that is friendlier to cultures and cultural diversity has been blowing in the Church and in religious congregations.

²¹ FABC used it for the first time in an official Church gathering during its 1st Plenary Assembly in April 1974 (Taipei). It is said to have been used by the Asian Bishops for the first time in an official Church gathering of the universal Church at the 1974 Synod on Evangelization in the Contemporary World. All the subsequent FABC Plenary Assemblies- FABC 2 to 7- as well as the meetings of its various offices, repeatedly took up this theme. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, considered the “Charter of Inculturation,” was written by Paul VI after the 1974 Synod. But it was not until the 1977 Synod that the term found its way into official Church documents. Cf. Ary Crolius, *What is So New About Inculturation* (Rome, 1984), p. 18.

²² Marguerite Letourneau, “Feminine Apostolic Religious Life: New Vitality and New Challenges Summary of Reports,” *UISG Bulletin*, Special Number 92 (November 1993), p. 10.

²³ Cf. Aylward Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* (New York, 1988), pp. 153-190 for an historical overview of the development of inculturation from the 16th century to the period before Vatican II. This identification of Christianity with the West has given the Asian Church a foreign face right from its origin in the continent. See also Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues* (New York, 2003), p. 56.

The de-colonization of many nations after World War II contributed a great deal to this new breath. Technology, advanced social communications, migration, tourism and the global movements of peoples reinforced it. Sociologically, the profile of the Church and that of religious congregations has experienced radical changes. The growth of Christian populations and religious membership in the southern hemisphere and their diminution in the north has given the Church and religious congregations a "face of many colors" and "a new geography of vocations". The new theologies of the Church and of mission elaborated during and after Vatican II have opened more doors for this fresh wind to enter.

This changed consciousness provides the context for our reflection today. I do not, however, presume to give you an exhaustive treatment of the subject. I shall try simply to open up some possibilities that can be explored more adequately by others.

C. Inculturation of Charisms: a Hope for the Future?

The Working Document for the 1994 Synod on Consecrated Life identified inculturation of charisms as one of the seeds of hope for the future.²⁴ It is not, however, an easy task.

Inculturation of charisms involves an ongoing dialogue between charism and culture.¹⁵ On the one hand, it entails incarnating a religious charism in a particular cultural context in such a way that the charism renews the culture from within while expressing itself through elements proper to the culture. On the other hand, it involves taking from the culture the positive elements ("seeds of the Word") already present there and that are compatible with the charism. The result of this dialogical process is a mutual enrichment. For real inculturation to take place, this mutuality has to happen.

Historically, however, we know that this did not always happen in Asia. Due to the prevalent ecclesiological and theological conditions at the time, the cultural expressions of the charism were either imposed by or borrowed from the dominant cultures that introduced the charism to our Asian countries. Thus, many Asian religious congregations had a "foreign face" right from their origins.²⁵

True inculturation of charisms goes much deeper than adaptation. It touches the "Asian soul" that the charism then tries to bring to its fullness. When charisms have finally taken roots in our Asian soul,

²⁴ Instrumentum Laboris Synod on Consecrated Life # 23.

Cf. Julma Neo, "Inculturation and Consecrated Life", an article in *Suplemento al Diccionario Teológico de Vida Consagrada* currently being printed by Claretian Publications, Madrid, Spain.

then an Asian religious identity can be born.

Both charisms and our Asian cultures lay claim to the totality of our lives. They either form a harmonious unity or they exist side by side separately. Without this harmonious integration of culture and charism, religious life will somehow always remain "foreign". On the contrary, where authentic inculturation has taken place, this harmony between culture and charism permeates all areas of religious life.

D. Letting the Lotus Bloom

Forming an Asian religious identity through inculturation of charisms is like letting the lotus bloom. The lotus always carries its roots with it, wherever. Inculturation asks that we stay with our cultural roots, and that we let the charism water these roots so that our Asian religious identity can bloom.

Inculturation entails the following elements:

1. Understanding Asian cultures and religious charisms

For inculturation, it is important that we understand cultures, in some general way, and Asian cultures in particular and regard them as dynamic, complex realities. Inculturation does not mean simplistically going back to the cultures of the past and reliving them today.

We likewise need a lived understanding of our religious charisms and of the various ways in which charisms are dynamically related to cultures. Knowing this will make us freer for the discernment needed in inculturation. Charisms are *cultural* in that their externalization is always mediated by culture. At the same time, they are *transcultural* i.e. they transcend cultures. Their embodiments should not be permanently identified with any culture, not even that of the founders. To do so would be to weaken the dynamism of the charism. Charisms, like the Gospel where they are rooted, are counter cultural. They provide criteria against which cultures can be judged.

2. Discernment with regard to Asian cultures and charisms

Reflection on our Asian religious identity makes us realize that to some extent, we are losing some of our characteristic Asian values.²⁵ We have surrendered them in the course of our pre-Vatican religious formation. For example, we have set aside a healthy devotion to

²⁵ The charism is never transmitted in a vacuum. Thus, in reality the desired dialogue in inculturation is between two cultures. When the two cultures are unequal, mutuality does not often happen. Some theologians prefer interculturalization rather than inculturation to stress this dynamics. See for example, Michael Amaladoss, *Becoming Indian: the Process of Inculturation* (Rome, 1992) and Franz Xaver Scheurer, *Interculturality: a Challenge for the Mission* (Bangalore, 2001).

²⁶ See *For All the Peoples of Asia*, eds. Gaudencio Rosales, DD and Catalino Arevalo, SJ (Quezon City, 1992), p. 68 and *Ecclesia in Asia* # 6, 23 for some of these values shared in common by Asians. See also *Instrumentum Laboris Synod on Asia* # 8-9

the family in the name of detachment, celebration for the sake of a simple lifestyle. And we continue to do so now with even more serious consequences. We have sacrificed at the altar of modernity and post modernity, our Asian value of care for persons in exchange for efficiency. Our sense of community is being corroded by individualism and absorption in media. Contemplation is threatened by activism, asceticism by hedonism, and simplicity of life by consumerism. We can continue multiplying these examples.

Many values in religious life are also Asian values. For example, compassion, love of wisdom, silence, contemplation, hospitality, asceticism, primacy of the things of the spirit, unrelenting search for God and thirst for the supernatural.²⁷ But somehow in our religious formation, we do not always consciously build on these foundations. We try to develop a spirituality and a lifestyle as though this foundation were not already there.

These Asian values are the gifts of our Asian cultures to religious life. But unfortunately we are either exchanging these precious gifts for others or are setting them aside.

A critical reflection on our religious identity also reveals that some cultural expressions of our charism that we hold on to are not the most appropriate for us as Asians. They are the results of acculturation in the past, considered normal then. But should we continue to keep these expressions today?

All these point to the need for critical discernment when we inculturate charisms. This discernment is an important moment for our identity formation as Asian religious.

3. Integration of charism and Asian cultural values in our daily life

The most difficult part of inculturation is choosing in favor of the charism rather than the culture, when there is a question of different priorities or conflict between charism values and cultural counter values. We know from experience how the value of peaceful interpersonal relations coupled with a fear of conflict can obstruct free and open dialogue, how an excessive deference to age and authority or an equally exaggerated stress on personal freedom can make obedience difficult. Superiors among us experience how difficult it is today to move some sisters or priests or brothers from one community to another!

Inculturation is not possible without a deep and passionate commitment to Jesus and His way of life. Only when we have kept this passion- or recovered it- can we have the courage to embrace the Paschal mystery inherent in inculturation.

²⁷ *Ecclesia in Asia* # 6, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, op.cit., p. 30.

4. Creative expression of religious identity

It is at this creative moment when the Asian-ness of our religious identity becomes visible in terms of apostolate, lifestyle, community living, celebrations, governance and structures. These expressions will be truly creative and new, not simply the result of adaptation but of an encounter between new cultural situations and the dynamism inherent in the charism. The culture then “feels at home” with the charism and the charism “finds a home” in the culture. When this happens, then Asian religious life can become a “new cultural model”, an “innovative cultural proposal”²⁸ for our Asian peoples.

E. An Example: Inculturation and Hospitality ... Opening Hearts, Opening Doors

To concretize these reflections, let me take one example.

Hospitality: an Asian and a Christian value

Hospitality is one of the cultural values often mentioned in Church documents and in articles on religious life in relation to inculturation of charisms.²⁹

Asia is well known for its proverbial hospitality whose roots are profoundly religious. Today its practice is being adversely affected by modernization, migration, changes in family structures, and the corresponding attitudes that these create. In some places in Asia, where it is more and more associated with tourism and commerce, hospitality has taken on a meaning that is in fact a distortion of its traditional meaning and practice. (When I searched in the Internet for entries regarding hospitality, I was struck by the fact that most of the entries related to tourism and hotel business!) A new vocabulary has even been invented to describe this new understanding e.g. hospitality girls, hospitality trade, hospitality management and hospitality industry.

When we return to the roots of our Christian tradition in the Old Testament and in the early Christian communities, we discover that hospitality was very much part of it. Extending hospitality to strangers in the Old Testament was integral to the covenant relations between Yahweh and Israel. In the New Testament, this obligation became even weightier since Jesus identified Himself with the stranger and made hospitality one of the criteria against which we shall all be judged. “I

²⁸ *Vita Consecrata* # 80, 90.

²⁹ See for example, *Instrumentum Laboris Synod on Consecrated Life* # 94, *Vita Consecrata* # 90. Hospitality is identified as one of the seven contemporary virtues needed for consecrated life today. Cf. “What the Spirit Says Today to Consecrated Life: Convictions and Perspectives”, an unpublished manuscript from UISG.

was a stranger and you welcomed me".³⁰ Throughout the history of the early Church, hospitality covered the physical, social and spiritual dimensions of life.³¹ In the Middle Ages, the practice of hospitality started to wane for various sociological reasons. Recently there have been spiritual and theological writings that aim at recovering this very rich Christian tradition and reinterpreting it in our context today.³²

Let us look at some elements of hospitality as practiced in our ancient Christian tradition and in our Asian cultures and see what insights they offer us as regards inculturating charisms.

Some Elements

1. In early Christian tradition, hospitality was primarily directed to those at the margins of society, the poor and the strangers, without excluding family and friends.³³

2. Christian hospitality personalized the stranger and the poor. It established a new way of relating between the hosts and the guests. Some Church fathers, like Chrysostom, repeatedly insisted on its personal dimension. Wealthy Christians who played hosts should personally serve the poor and the strangers that they welcomed.³⁴ Hospitality in monasteries was personal and face-to-face.³⁵

3. For the early Church, hospitality was a way of transcending social barriers and counteracting social stratification. Sharing meals at the same table leveled off social differences and was its great symbol.

4. Hospitality flourished when those who played hosts - households, the Church, institutions- were at the margins of the society of their time e.g. when the Church was poor, persecuted and a minority.

5. Hospitality was a counter cultural and a prophetic proclamation of the reign of God.

It pointed to a different system of valuing and an alternative model of relationships. Far from being a tame practice, "Christian hospitality had a subversive, counter-cultural dimension".³⁶ From this perspective the shared meal offered in hospitality foreshadowed the eschatological condition when all will partake fully of the Messianic banquet.³⁷

³⁰ Mt. 25: 35.

³¹ Cf. Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Michigan, 1999), p. 8 ff. All subsequent remarks in this paper regarding hospitality in early Christian tradition were taken from this book.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 196-200 for a select bibliography.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-19.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

6. Later, however, during the Middle Ages, hospitality became largely identified with the rich even though the poor and the strangers continued to be received in monasteries and ecclesiastical households. With its institutionalization and commercialization, the personal dimension gradually weakened. Then the poor had different tables or food or they were kept at the gate while the interior was reserved for special guests, the wealthy and the socially well connected. Thus exercised, hospitality simply reflected the existing social structures. When the Church and religious orders became associated with temporal power and material prosperity, the practice of hospitality simply reinforced the gap between the rich and the poor and lost much of its vibrancy and spiritual meaning.

7. Reflecting on our Asian cultures, we see that in most of them hospitality has elements similar to those mentioned above. Its practice is not limited to friends and family members but is extended to all, especially the poor and the strangers. In some Asian cultures, hospitality comes as a religious obligation. Guests are sometimes regarded as manifestations of the divine. Hence, they are to be revered and honored. Only the best should be given them. The best of the harvest is set aside for visitors. Guests are to be treated well, given good food and comfortable accommodation. The welcome given them is characterized by warmth, joy and great personal attention from the moment they come until they leave.

The sharing of meals is part of Asian hospitality and takes various forms: from simple drink and food to lavish banquets. In some cultures, a portion of the meal is reserved for God or for passers by.

Hospitality in most Asian cultures covers a wide network of relationships that are characterized by kindness, warmth, generosity, friendship, brotherhood, neighborliness and openness of heart symbolized sometimes by the gifts that hosts and guests mutually give to one another. A festive atmosphere usually accompanies the welcome of the guests. The joy of the hosts is to see their guests happy and satisfied. When persons from different religions meet together in the context of hospitality, then hospitality becomes a natural setting for inter religious dialogue.

The practice of hospitality in Asian cultures is not limited to the rich. It is, in fact, sometimes more remarkable among the poor that go out of their way to share their meager resources to whoever comes—whether friends, family, other poor or strangers. And they do so with apparent joy and generosity.

Asian hospitality needs purification in several aspects. In some Asian cultures, space, time and material goods are shared according

to a hierarchy dictated by the culture. Thus, certain groups of persons are excluded from this range of hospitality due to differences of socio-economic status between the hosts and the guests. The exploitation of women and children in the hospitality industry needs to be denounced.

The practice of hospitality today has been most affected in cities where impersonality, constant insecurity and fast living have taken over. This poses difficulties for inculturation.

Religious Life and the Practice of Hospitality in Asia Today

Today the context for the practice of hospitality has tremendously changed. The concept of households and families has evolved and a new phenomenon- "homelessness" of massive numbers- has developed. The faces of the "strangers" and the poor are very different from those at the time of the early Church.

Given this changed context, how are we religious to situate ourselves vis-à-vis the Asian practice of hospitality? How are we to understand "welcoming the poor and the stranger" and "sharing home" with them? How can hospitality and religious life mutually enrich each other? Certainly, it is not a question of a fundamentalist return to the original practice of hospitality in the early Christian communities. Neither is it a matter of an uncritical acceptance of its practice in our different Asian cultures. Rather it is a question of recovering some of its elements, reinterpreting them and integrating them in our religious life in a way that harmonizes with its values. Let me indicate some possibilities.

1. *Mission among "strangers"*: "Strangers" more and more populate Asian societies, especially in the cities. Even our Churches share the same fate. Welcoming "strangers" today means first of all asking: Who are the "strangers" in Asia today? Where are they? It means asking further: What keeps them in their status as "strangers"?

This search for the "strangers" today can lead us to the "new poor", the victims of globalization who are often uprooted from their families, countries, cultural or religious groups.³⁸ It can challenge us to review our priorities in our ministries and our forms of ministries. Ministry among the poor and "strangers" today implies works that not only address the effects of poverty but also its personal and structural causes - socio-economic, political and cultural- that maintain them in their "stranger status".³⁹ Searching for the "strangers" and welcoming them will encourage us to greater creativity and imagination in our mission.

³⁸ *Ecclesia in Asia* # 34.

This same spirit of welcome for “strangers” will challenge us to identify attitudes and structures in community living that make us “strangers” to one another and that make some religious houses look like “boarding houses” or “transient homes”. Such communities do not witness to the communion asked of us as “experts of communion”. The first beneficiaries of our hospitality should be our brothers and sisters with whom we live.

2. *Recovery of the personal dimension in mission:* Welcoming the poor and the “strangers” in the spirit of hospitality means attentiveness to them as persons. The person is the subject and the goal of all human development. But the market driven economy of many Asian societies with its emphasis on production has obliterated the person in favor of economic gains. Unfortunately this orientation has also affected religious making us overly conscious of efficiency and competence to the detriment of persons.

The spirit of hospitality invites us to refocus on the primacy of the person in our mission and relationships, to a balance between the global, the local and the personal. Sometimes in relating to those who are poor, we only see their needs and not their persons. The poor are more than their needs. To welcome them we need to be convinced that God’s love is for every person, not for an anonymous collectivity. Welcoming the poor and the “strangers” includes opening ourselves to the “gifts” they offer us. Allowing them to share their gifts with us confers on them a dignity in a way that cannot be replaced by the material help we give or the service we render them.

The practice of hospitality will challenge us to develop more personal relationships in community, to have time for one another and not to allow media or technology to replace personal encounters with our brothers and sisters (I was told that some religious now send text messages to their fellow religious in the same house instead of knocking on their doors!). It calls into question business-like relationships, communications that are overly time-conscious, a mode of governance that veers more towards corporate management rather than a Christian service to one’s brothers and sisters.

3. *Mission, multiculturalism and religious pluralism:* As Asians, we claim harmony as a core value. Our “new way of being Church” is a communion of communities. The triple dialogue with the poor,

³⁹ We need to transform cultures if we wish to effect socio-economic-political structural change. John Paul II addressed this question of evangelization of cultures with a sense of urgency in his post Synodal Apostolic Exhortations. See for example *Ecclesia in Europa* # 58-59 and *Ecclesia in America* # 70. The great drama of our time - the “split between faith and culture” - continues today with even more adverse consequences

with cultures and with other religious traditions to which the Asian Church has committed herself, asks us to stretch our capacities for relationships that are more inclusive.

At the same time we are witnessing in many Asian societies the spirit of a ruthless competition and of deeply entrenched prejudices and conflicts related to caste, gender, ethnicity or religion that effectively eliminate the weak from harmonious social integration. As religious, we, too, experience obstacles to establishing inclusive relationships. Specialization in our ministries can narrow our outreach. Our historical origins as congregations that identify us with particular cultural or social groups sometimes make it difficult for us to break free from these constraints.

To practice hospitality today, we need to ask: What does it mean to share "home" with "strangers"? "Home" means relationships that give people a sense of connectedness and belonging. "Home" can be as large as our religious congregations, the local Church and the world. The earth, too, is "home" for the entire human family, a "home" that we need to preserve for future generations.

Sharing our "home" with the poor and "strangers" means including them in our network of relationships. Welcoming them to our "home" implies "opening our hearts" before "opening our doors". It entails developing relationships devoid of prejudices, ethnocentrism, superiority and inferiority complexes and being comfortable with sitting down with those who are "different" from us.

This sharing can lead us to ask: What place does ecumenical and inter religious dialogue have in our mission projects? In the allocation of our personnel, do we think of mission beyond our traditional borders, even beyond our continent? With whom do we collaborate in our mission? It also implies building religious communities where no one feels cut off from friendships and participation in community decisions. It demands building "open communities" and developing a spirituality of crossing borders. Such a spirituality implies a committed following of Jesus who crossed the divine-human border to become one of us.⁴⁰

4. Religious life, solidarity with and proximity to the poor: The situation of religious life and of our Church in Asia is paradoxical. In one sense, we are at the margins, suffering from a "minority complex". In another sense, we are at the centre. We may be small in number but we have a radius of influence that can be quite extensive. Our institutional base, our connections whether domestic or international, give us access to resources and influence that constitute no little power.

⁴⁰ Phan, *op.cit.*, p. 130 ff.

For years, Asian religious have been talking about solidarity, preferential option for the poor, and living in proximity to them.⁴¹ Many have attempted to live close to the poor, to be "inserted" in poor milieus. Immersion programs in formation tried to develop the conviction that sharing in the marginality of the poor is essential for solidarity. In some instances, these initiatives gave birth to "creative compassion" that translated itself in significant transformations in the life and mission of religious.

On the other hand, we are still encumbered by much "excess luggage" - institutional, traditional or psychological- that makes proximity to those who are poor an anxiety-provoking project. Fear, preoccupation with security, and attachment to traditions hinder our refounding efforts.

To recover the vibrancy that characterized hospitality among the early Christian communities, we need to experience in some way the marginality of the poor and the "strangers" in Asia today. Being hospitable means not only opening our doors to the poor and "strangers" but also geographically moving some of our houses closer to where they live so that they can more easily come to us. The physical, psychological and spiritual closeness that this creates will help us re-read our life from the optic of those at the margins. Proximity to them means encountering them directly in their situations of vulnerability. For this, the virtual proximity provided by media will not suffice. It is when we have looked at the eyes of the poor and related to them as persons that we will be moved to share their world and be transformed.

5. *Religious and prophetic witnessing*: We have often heard it said that Asian peoples are looking for prophetic witnesses, for holy guides rather than learned teachers (or eloquent preachers).⁴² We need to take this search of our Asian peoples more seriously.

Our people challenge us to be prophetic witnesses by our "being", by who we are and not simply by what we do or say. To be prophetic, our witnessing must be radical, visible, effective and credible. Radical because it reaches to the roots of our being: our desires, our affections, our values, our attitudes and our relationships. Visible because it can be seen by those around us. Visibility in our context today implies the witness of communities and institutions, not only of individuals.

⁴¹ The need to promote the ongoing presence of religious among the poor as well as religious involvement in pressing for social, political and economic change without usurping the role of the laity was one of the four themes presented for consideration by the 1994 Synod. Cf. "1994 Synod Working Paper: Consecrated Life's Role in the Church and the World," *Origins*, XXIV, 7 (June 30, 1994), p. 99.

⁴² *Ecclesia in Asia* # 42.

Effective because it presents alternatives to ways of living that do not promote fullness of life. Credibility calls for consistency, integrity and harmony between words and deeds, proclamation and life.

Our Asian people must be able to "read" our witnessing. This "readability" will depend on our sharing their language, symbols, meanings, their hopes, struggles and dreams for a better life. In this connection, it is worth reflecting on the two areas singled out by FABC 3 for inculturation of charism: lifestyle and dealing with the poor.⁴³

After 40 years of Vatican II renewal, we are in a better position to assess our prophetic impact. It seems that we have created for ourselves an image of very competent and dedicated professionals but not so much an image of poor, simple spiritual leaders. In our attempt to adapt to the modern world and to recover the incarnational dimension of religious life- neglected for so long before Vatican II- perhaps we have compromised the counter cultural character of religious life by indiscriminately accepting what modernity and post modernity offer us. Some may have also absolutized an ideal Asian culture of the past to which they hold on ignoring all demands for change. Both these situations call us to a prophetic response.

If we Asian religious practice hospitality in the sense we have indicated, we can be prophetic witnesses to our Asian peoples and to the world. We will announce and make visible to them the reign of God and the new order it inaugurates, an alternative order to the present where those who welcome the "strangers" and the poor in Jesus' name will be called "blessed". At the same time, we denounce the false values of societies that dehumanize persons in the so called hospitality industry, that close their doors to migrants and refugees, denying them basic human rights while taking advantage of their cheap labor to develop their own economies.

This prophetic witnessing through the practice of hospitality will require fidelity to Christ and the Gospel, to the Church and its mission, to our charism and to the men and women of our time. ⁴⁴This fidelity will help us develop an integral spirituality that harmonizes the individual and the social, the immanent and the transcendent, contemplation and action, community and mission.

I hope that this reflection on hospitality in relation to inculturation, though inadequate, will have contributed to making us more aware of the gifts that our Asian cultures can bring to our charisms and of the

⁴³ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, op. cit., p. 48. This lifestyle should correspond to that of the Asian ideal man or woman of God and men and women for others characterized by simplicity, contentment, renunciation and concern for others.

⁴⁴ *Religious and Human Promotion*, 1980, # 13-31.

unexplored possibilities that inculturation holds for us. It is not without reason that the Synod on Consecrated Life has identified inculturation of charisms as one of the great challenges for the future of religious life in the world.⁴⁵

F. Asian Religious Identity and the Local Church

Finally, I would like to respond to the question implicit in the topic given me: How is an Asian religious identity related to the building up of the local Church?

In 1974, FABC 1 described the local Church as one that “*is incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated... concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions...in brief, with all the life realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own*”.⁴⁶ In a word, the local Churches in Asia will eventually become Churches of Asia, Churches that are “Asian in their way of thinking, living and sharing their own Christ-experience with others”⁴⁷ when they shall have become inculturated. This implies a “new way of being Church”.⁴⁸

The ecclesial dimension is constitutive of religious life and consecrated life “belongs undeniably to the (her) life and holiness of the Church.”⁴⁹ Thus, the reality of our Asian religious identity cannot be separated from that of the local Church. A truly inculturated local Church will be an ideal context for the growth of an Asian religious identity. In the same way, the presence of religious that are truly Asians and truly religious will contribute to the building up of an authentic local Church. Asian religious who are perceived as “foreign” will make the realization of a truly inculturated local Church difficult. Similarly, a Church that remains “*foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western trained leadership and in its theology*” will not help us religious to be serious about our Asian identity.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Instrumentum Laboris Synod on Consecrated Life* # 93, See also *Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod on Asia* # 50 on inculturation as a major missionary challenge for the Church in Asia.

⁴⁶ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, op.cit. p.14.

⁴⁷ *What the Spirit is Saying to the Churches* # 3, an unpublished manuscript prepared for the Office of Theological Concerns.

⁴⁸ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, op.cit. p. 287.

⁴⁹ *Lumen Genitium* #44.

⁵⁰ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, op. cit., pp. 69, 337. See also *Instrumentum Laboris Synod on Asia* # 13-14, *Ecclesia in Asia* # 9.

I would like to identify some areas where we as religious and as local churches can work together to grow in the Asian-ness of our identities.

1. Creating an atmosphere conducive to creativity. Inculturation is a creative process that will not happen unless there is an atmosphere of freedom to create, to take risks, to be open to untried possibilities, to make mistakes and to dare to be different. We need to be freed from fears in order to let go familiar ways when they no longer help. After much reflection on this subject, I am more and more convinced that the "newness" of the faith/the charism will be stifled unless we courageously allow it to be unleashed. Contact with changed cultural contexts provides this necessary provocation.

Ultimately this atmosphere has to be based on a profound respect for and courageous trust in the Spirit at work in cultures, in the world, in the living tradition of our religious congregations and in the Church. The Spirit is the primary agent of inculturation.⁵¹ The Spirit breathes new life but we need to open doors to let in this new breath. A lack of freedom, courage and creativity can impede this action of the Spirit. We can draw strength from the courageous example of our many Asian martyrs, when following the lead of the Spirit begins to cost.

2. Fostering dialogue as a permanent posture in our religious life and in the life of the local Church. The Church of Asia has adopted dialogue as its preferred mode for evangelization.⁵² If inculturation is dialogue, then we need to help one another to grow in the understanding and practice of dialogue as a permanent attitude not limited to certain moments or activities or to verbal dialogue. Our efforts to develop a dialogical posture should stand on four pillars: respect for and acceptance of those who are different from us by reason of charisms, cultures, social status or religions; humility to recognize the gifts of these "others"; openness to receive from them and a deeply contemplative spirit characteristic of our Asian spirituality.

3. Collaborating with expatriates in the local Church and in religious congregations. Expatriates can be facilitators and catalysts in the inculturation process, links with other cultures/local Churches to keep us from developing a myopic view of reality. They can reflect back to us the liberating truth about us. When spoken with respect and love, such feedback will help us grow in our Asian identity. As in any identity formation, we grow in our understanding of who we are as Asians by our relationships with non-Asians. Expatriates in

⁵¹ *Ecclesia in Asia* # 21.

⁵² *For All the Peoples of Asia*, op. cit., pp.281 ff.

our religious congregations and in our local Churches can render us this invaluable service. Offering the wealth of their cultures and of their Churches of origin, as well as their personal experience, while respecting the freedom of those to whom these are offered, and sharing their human and material resources are gestures of humility. Through this sharing, they mediate communion between local Churches and become irreplaceable symbols of the universality of the Church.

4. Forming religious, clergy and lay for inculturation. Such formation presupposes a solid understanding of the faith/charisms and of their own culture. It will encourage critical and creative reflection, rather than indiscriminate assimilation of external influences. Discernment will be an essential element of this formation to enable them to distinguish the values from the counter values in their cultures and to identify the faith/charism expressions that are not appropriate for our Asian cultures. Formation must help them to continually move from awareness to critical reflection to contemplation and finally to creative exploration of alternatives in their encounters with our Asian reality. For this, a formation for sensitivity to the Spirit and for dialogue as a permanent attitude is indispensable.

Inculturated formation is rooted in contemporary Asian realities. Therefore formation houses are not built like hothouses that shield those being formed from the realities of our Asian peoples, their struggles, their hopes and their dreams for a fuller life. It employs an Asian methodology that is experiential, that uses symbols and stories.

In the context of today's world, formation in cultural settings different from one's own has become more and more common. This has the advantage of giving Asians a more global vision of reality. Inculturation and internationality are not mutually exclusive. At the same time, it needs to be accompanied by critical assimilation. Otherwise, formation in cultural contexts very different from those of Asia will only reinforce our "foreign-ness".

5. Promoting lay and women religious in our local Churches. Asia counts a formidable force of 145, 413 women religious⁵³ whose possibilities for contributing to the Asian-ness of our identity should not be underestimated. *Vita Consecrata* has underscored the need for a "new feminism" and the irreplaceable contribution of women in the future of the new evangelization.⁵⁴ FABC meetings in the 70's and 80's already anticipated this thinking.⁵⁵

⁵³ Maximus Fernando, "Present Situation of Consecrated Life in Asia: a Sociological Approach", in *Religious Life in Asia* Vol. VI, No. 1 (2004), 51-52.

⁵⁴ *Vita Consecrata* # 57-58.

⁵⁵ For All the Peoples of Asia, op.cit., pp. 60,83-84, 89-90, 99-100, 182-183.

Our fidelity to these orientations can reduce the gap between their proclamation and their living out and can transform us into the prophetic witnesses that our Asian peoples are looking for. In many places and in some local Churches in Asia the recognition of the role of women still leaves much to be desired.

G. Conclusion

The participants at FABC 7 committed themselves to “the emergence of the Asian-ness of the Church in Asia”.⁵⁶ Inculturating our religious charisms and building up the local Church as a truly inculturated Church is one small step towards realizing this commitment. The 1977 Asian Colloquium on Ministries said: “*if the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future*”.⁵⁷ We can say the same of Asian religious: If we Asian religious do not discover our own identity, we will have no future.

Today we have this great opportunity of helping usher in the universal Church a new era “that will make the Catholic Church for the first time really ‘Catholic’ by introducing into her life the riches of all nations, as the riches of some have been introduced into it in the past”.⁵⁸ Inculturating our charisms and building up truly Asian local Churches is to share with the universal Church and with the world the “riches of our Asian nations”. Let us not let this *kairos* pass us by.

IV. DIALOGUE: MINISTRY OF RELIGIOUS IN BUILDING THE LOCAL CHURCH - Fr. Soosai Arokiasamy, S.J.

A. Introduction

In the multi-religious, pluricultural situation of Asia, with its poor millions in the different countries of the continent, the Church understands itself as a Church of Dialogue and a Church in Dialogue with these realities and its peoples for the mission of witness and service. One important dimension of this reality of the continent is its religions. In this perspective the Church understands itself a church in dialogue with the great religions and its followers and the ‘little’ traditions of indigenous people. This self-understanding of the Church (ecclesiology) is essential to a theology of evangelization in the Asian context. FABC has frequently affirmed its evangelizing mission in terms of triple dialogue, which embraces the different dimensions of Asian reality. The triple dialogue with the poor, cultures and religions

⁵⁶ For All the Peoples of Asia 3, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD (Quezon City, 2002), p. 8.

⁵⁷ For All the Peoples of Asia, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 71, Instrumentum Laboris for the Synod on Asia # 50.

is the way the church understands its evangelizing mission. This means that the local church is to be rooted in these three dimensions of Asian reality and of Asian peoples. By being rooted and inculturated in these realities of Asia, the local church becomes a church of dialogue and a church in dialogue for its mission

Dialogue means building relations with people of our neighbourhood, our region, our country and our continent. This calls for communication and communion with people in mutual affirmation and trust, building bridges of understanding and reconciling relationships, promoting justice, freedom, peace and harmony between peoples. The Church proclaims the Gospel and shares its faith in dialogue. We can say that sharing of the Gospel in a dialogical way is the mark of evangelization in Asia. As the Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* says: Dialogue is the characteristic mode of being Church in Asia (n.3).

In this paper, I will briefly recall the theological perspectives of the local Church, which is the locus of religious for their contribution to building the local Church through the ministry of interreligious dialogue. The stress will be on FABC perspectives. This will be part I. In part II, I will touch on the theological perspectives of dialogue. In part III, I will point out the role and contribution religious given their gifts and charism can play and can make through the ministry of interreligious dialogue to building the local Church on mission.

The multi-religious context of Asia invites the Church for a dialogical presence, relation and action with the followers of other religions. The multicultural and pluri-religious context is the native milieu of most of the Christians in Asia. The Church in the pluri-religious situation of the continent understands itself essentially as a community of faith in dialogue with other faiths, one significant aspect of the triple dialogue of FABC.

With these preliminary observations, let us briefly go through the theological perspectives of the local Church, especially in the thinking of FABC.

B. Understanding of the Local Church in FABC perspective.

First we have to note that the understanding the nature of the local church is the fruit of regular and consistent reflection based on the experience of the faith communities of Asia and not mere academic and theoretical reflection. When we examine the documents that have emerged from the study and reflection of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) including its different offices in the last three decades of its existence, we discover creative insights on the theology of the local Church in the context of Asia.

We note that the historic pastoral visit of Pope Paul VI in 1970 to Manila gave the clear signal and impetus to the local Churches of Asia to begin to formulate a vision of Church for their mission responsive to the "new world being born" in Asia in the post-colonial era. The question before them was: How would the local churches of Asia as faith-communities actualize the graced Pentecostal event that the Second Vatican Council was? This implied the task of incarnating the Gospel in decisive way in Asia so that the Gospel becomes a message of love and salvation for all the peoples of Asia.⁵⁹

An Emerging Theology of the Local Church - FABC Plenary Assemblies I to VII

We can say that from the very beginning of FABC, the focus of theological and pastoral reflection of FABC has been on building the local Church for mission in Asia. In this context, we can speak of a developing theology of the local Church. This has enabled the FABC to articulate an overall vision for "being Church in Asia today" and what it truly means. In this process of reflection the Church in Asia was aware of the Spirit at work among the people and was speaking to the faith communities in Asia (cf Revelation, 3: 'Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches in Asia'). What is emerging from all this is that many ecclesiological insights and perspectives centre on "the meaning, theology, and lived experience of local Church" (Kroeger, p.31)

We can affirm that "the theological thematic of *local Church*" (Kroeger) has been serving as an appropriate, integrating center for the life of the faith-communities of Asia. This part of the paper is a sort of telling the story of local Church in Asian/FABC and its theological reflection -- with all its depth, richness, and inspiration. I quote passages from the various documents to highlight the insights and perspectives.

Let us start with the First Plenary of FABC. The Asian Churches through their bishops stated: "The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church. For the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time" (FABC I, 9-10).

⁵⁹ N.B. I have been helped by the article of James H. Kroeger in his book: *Becoming Local Church*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, 2003 and the essay in the book: "Theology of Local Church-FABC Perspectives". I have used texts from the final statements of FABC and those of the Offices of FABC and seminars, consultations and conferences organized under the auspices of FABC. The presentation may not cover all aspects of the local church but I believe it touches the significant areas.

At the same time: "It is not a community in isolation from other communities of the Church one and catholic. Rather it seeks communion with all of them. With them it professes the one faith, shares the one Spirit and the one sacramental life. In a special way it rejoices in its communion and filial oneness with the See of Peter, which presides over the universal Church in love" (FABC I, 11).

The following statements of FABC I present a concise theological summary of the local Church:

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

The Asian colloquium on ministries in the Church held in 1977 in Hong Kong spoke of the local church in the following way: "... the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia -- Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others. The consequences will be tremendous not only for the ministries the Asian Churches will have to perform but also for all aspects of their life (ACMC 14).

Again the same consultation says: *"Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls on the part of the Churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage"* (ACMC 26).

The Second FABC Plenary Assembly (Calcutta, India, 1978) had the theme: "Prayer -- The Life of the Church of Asia. The bishops focused on "the tasks which the carrying-out of the mission of the Church in Asia demands: commitment to the building up of Asian communities in the life of the Gospel, to inculturation of Christian faith and life, to the endeavor for total human development and authentic liberation of peoples in justice and love, to interreligious dialogue and to renewed missionary formation" (FABC II, 3).

IMC statement affirms: " Each local church has its own vocation in the one history of salvation, in the one Church of Christ. In each local church, each people's history, each people's culture, meanings and values, each people's traditions are taken up, not diminished nor destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled (as the Second Vatican Council teaches) in the life of the Spirit" (IMC 15). The ministry of interreligious dialogue will help the local Church realise these goals.

The Third FABC Plenary Assembly (Bangkok, Thailand, 1982). The theme of the Assembly was "The Church -- A Community of Faith in Asia". The final statement of FABC III succinctly notes: "We have seen ... how the local church must be a community of graced communion rooted in the life of the Trinity, a community of prayer and contemplation, and of sacramental celebration and life centered around the Eucharist. It must be defined by its life of faithful discipleship in the Gospel, patterned on the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, 'a community for others.' (FABC III, 15)

Theological Advisory *Committee* (TAC) of FABC brought about a document called: *Theses on the Local Church* (TLC), fruit of study and consultation over a period of five years. It highlights the centrality of the local Church in the theological-missiological thought in the Asian area. "Already, as we have noted, the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC spoke of building up of the local Church as the present focus of the Church's mission in Asia. That discernment remains valid today [1991]... More and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church" (TLC: C, 3-4).

"We see the emergence of the world of the Third Millennium already upon us.... Whether the Gospel shall be present in this new age with its unpredictable turnings and its manifold diversity will depend greatly on whether local Churches fulfill their vocation in the historic moment which is now upon them. We grasp something of the significance of local Church and inculturation in this context. Those who cannot understand this fail to resonate with the signs of our time, and the heartbeat of our peoples" (TLC: C, 5).

As we referred to the theological thematic of the local as the guiding focus of FABC reflections, we note that most of the documents of the FABC refer explicitly to the role of the local Church in mission and evangelization. The Fifth Plenary FABC Assembly held in Bandung, Indonesia (July 1990), with the theme "Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium," with a new clarity affirmed that the local church is "the acting subject of mission." Here we can make a comment. The local Church as the acting subject of mission is also the acting subject of interreligious dialogue.

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

"This local church, which is the acting subject of mission, is the people of God in a given milieu, the whole Christian community - laity, Religious and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic Ecclesial Community and other groups. Their time has come for Asia" (FABC V, 3.3.2).

The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly held in Manila, Philippines in 1995, which was the occasion of 25 years of FABC coinciding with the visit of Pope John Paul II for the World Youth Day. It summarised main themes of the Plenary Assemblies of the FABC during its 25 years of existence. Its final statement "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life" affirmed: "The overall thrust of activities in recent years has been to motivate the Churches of 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, 3). "It is the Spirit of Jesus that creates the [Church as a] disciple-community" (FABC VI, 14).

While there are many challenges of being an authentic local Church in Asia, Asian Catholics acknowledge that we are a minority, a little flock in Asia. : *"We may hesitate because we are a minority group. Indeed we are a little flock in Asia. But it is from this position of weakness that God's gift of divine life in Jesus Crucified, the power and wisdom of God, is most significant" (FABC VI, 14.3).* Most of the local churches in Asia live their identities as minorities in an evangelically dynamic way within their countries.

The Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly that took place in January of the Jubilee Year 2000 in Samphran, Thailand reflected on the theme: "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service." In this Assembly too the theology of the local church figured prominently in the final statement.

We read in the Introduction: "from the depths of Asia's hopes and anxieties, we hear the call of the Spirit to the local churches in Asia. It is a call to renewal, to a renewed mission of love and service. It is a call to the local churches to be faithful to Asian cultural, spiritual and social

values and thus to be truly inculturated local churches" (FABC VII).

The Assembly marked the 30-year existence of FABC: "The thirty-year history of the FABC has been a concerted series of movements toward a renewed Church." The statement speaks of eight movements of FABC during the 30-year existence. One of the significant movements has been the "movement toward a 'truly local Church,' toward a Church 'incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated.'" It makes a bold assertion: "This is the vision of a renewed Church that the FABC has developed over the past thirty years. It is still valid today" (FABC VII: 1-A) The eighth movement is stated as follows: "A Movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor and with the cultures, a church "in dialogue the great religious traditions of our peoples", in fact, a dialogue with all people, especially the poor". Here one should include dialogue with 'little traditions' of indigenous or tribal people.

Arevalo was asked in an interview responded: "On the local church, this I believe must be said again and again: the concrete, operative meaning of inculturation is the process of letting the local Church be the local Church, assuming responsibility, within the *koinonia* of all the churches in the *catholica*, to 'realize itself' in its own life and mission... Until the local Churches see their own self-realization as their duty and task, and strive to bring this about, they have not yet 'become Church' in the truest, fullest sense. Yet here in Asia, we are still a long way from that!" (Cf Kroeger, pp45-46).

Local Churches need to read the "signs of the times", respond to concrete social cultural, economic and political realities and foster inner life, which would include inculturated faith. They need to be equipped for ecumenical dialogue and for encounter with the followers of other faith traditions.

We thank the Lord that the pilgrim journey of the local churches of Asia has been a faith-journey full of excitement and inspiration. The Asian Churches as pilgrim disciples of Jesus are treading the pilgrim path under the guidance of the Spirit and are going through the birth-pangs and witnessing the birthing of a renewed local church for a continent that is getting rapidly transformed. In this process of renewal and birthing of the local churches, dialogue belongs to this ecclesial process.⁶⁰

Asian Synod 1998.

In this connection we cannot but mention the Asian Synod, which echoed FABC themes in its deliberations. Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-

⁶⁰ I am also indebted to the following FABC documents in preparing this paper: all three volumes of For All the Peoples of Asia edited by G. Rosales and Arevalo (Vol. 1) and Eilers (Vol. 2 and 3).

hawn of Korea greeting the Holy Father and the Synod participants in his opening address on April 20 spoke the realities of Asia which "is made up not of various nations but, one may say, many worlds..." and drew attention to the many endeavors and things achieved of the FABC "for the past 27 years" for building up a truly local Church in Asia. In this process there have been continual and quite serious efforts made "to listen to, learn from, and reflect and act upon today's lived Asian realities in faith and prayer. And, we have felt called to an ever renewed self-understanding of the Church and her mission, not so much from abstract thought, but in the face of given pastoral situations and their exigencies" (OR-EE: April 29, 1998:5).

Many interventions in the Synod pointed to the challenges of the FABC-inspired "new way of being Church." Bishop Pakiam of Malaysia spoke of the commitment to "be witnesses of the Gospel as a community of the local Church in a multiracial, multicultural, multilinguistic country"; which by the way is the reality of most Asian countries. Bishop Pakiam emphasised on the basis of directions of FABC that local Churches become "a communion of communities, a participatory Church, a dialoguing and prophetic Church" (OR-EE: June 17, 1998: 8).

In the concluding session the Synod on May 13, Cardinal Darmaatmadja of Indonesia said that all local Churches must struggle to be "a Church with an Asian 'face' [and an] Asian appearance" and they must sedulously avoid appearing "foreign to Asia's traditions and cultures" (OR-EE: June 17, 1998: 10-11). It is indeed a call to emerge as truly local Churches.

Ecclesia in Asia.

This apostolic exhortation reflects many themes of FABC. The Apostolic Exhortation promulgated by Pope John Paul II in New Delhi, India on November 6, 1999 resonates with the ecclesiology of the Asian Synod Fathers of the FABC region. Though the Exhortation develops the theme of communion, it contains many significant insights on the local Churches of Asia.

Ecclesia in Asia observes that "the Synod Fathers were well aware of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking" *20h). It is also clear that "each local Church should become what the Synod Fathers called a 'participatory Church', a Church, that is, in which all live their proper vocation and perform their proper role" (25b). The Exhortation refers to the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences by name and bestows praise on the Federation of Asian

Bishops' Conferences for its contribution and help "to foster union among the local Churches" and has "provided venues for cooperation in resolving pastoral problems" (26b).

In the same Exhortation the Pope recognises important tasks and responsibilities of the local Churches in Asia and affirms the mind of the Synod by saying: "where possible the local Churches in Asia should promote human rights activities on behalf of women" (34g); "local Churches, for their part, need to foster awareness of the ideal of the religious and consecrated life, and promote such vocations" (44c).

From all the statements on the local church in FABC perspective, we can see clearly that interreligious dialogue belongs to "being Church in Asia". Local Church is a church in dialogue. Now we shall briefly highlight the theological and pastoral perspectives, especially of FABC on dialogue in the context of Asia. The contribution of religious through the ministry of interreligious dialogue to the local Church supposes a good understanding of the theological, pastoral and missionary aspects of interreligious dialogue.

C. Understanding of Dialogue.

From *Ecclesia in Asia* (31): "In my Apostolic Letter Tertio Millennio Adveniente I indicated that the advent of a new millennium offers a great opportunity for interreligious dialogue and for meetings with the leaders of the great world religions". Contact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions is a task which the Second Vatican Council bequeathed to the whole Church as a duty and a challenge. The principles of this search for a positive relationship with other religious traditions are set out in the Council's Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated on 28 October 1965, the Magna Carta of interreligious dialogue for our times. From the Christian point of view, interreligious dialogue is more than a way of fostering mutual knowledge and enrichment; it is a part of the Church's evangelizing mission, an expression of the mission *ad gentes*.

Church's Dialogue with Religions

The Church's dialogue with the living religious traditions is one of those essential aspects of her mission to incarnate herself in a particular people. The Church accepts the significant and positive elements in other religions as they belong to the economy of salvation. The FABC has repeatedly affirmed that the Church recognizes and respects the spiritual and ethical meaning and values of other religions. The religious traditions have been and continue to be the authentic

expression of the noblest longings of people, and of their contemplation and prayer. They have shaped their history and cultures (Gaudencio & Arevalo 1970: 14).

So dialogue has been accepted as the way of life for the Church in Asia and her way of proclaiming the Gospel.

"We are more than ever convinced that the dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment is to other faiths is increasingly important. We also urge on all a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples, and express the hope that the catholicity of the Church, may serve to help Asians remain truly Asian, and yet become fully part of the modern world and the one family of mankind" (Gaudencio & Arevalo 1970: 6).

In general, one speaks of four expressions of interreligious encounter, namely: the dialogue of life, action, theological exchange and the sharing of religious experience. These four expressions or types of dialogue touch various dimensions of our life as Christians living with followers of other religions.

Dialogue is a way of life which involves daily encounter and interaction in our neighbourhood or places of work, where a dialogue of life takes place. Here "people live in an open neighbourly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations" (GC, 34)

In a dialogue of action, Christians and people of other faith come together to collaborate to work for the good of our neighbours and strive for integral human development and liberation.

In a dialogue of religious experience, Christians and people of other faith rooted in their own religious traditions, share mutually their religious and faith experiences, spirituality, especially in the area of prayer, meditation and contemplation and their ways of searching for the Divine or the Absolute.

In a dialogue of theological exchange, experts in Christian and other traditions engage in study and discussion of religious and theological questions and themes and seek to deepen their understanding of the respective faith heritages and learn to appreciate the spiritual insights of the different traditions and be enriched by them.

Here I quote a text relevant to the dialogue of theological exchange from G.C. 34 of the Jesuits: *"This dialogue of theological exchange can more easily be carried on with religions which have a written tradition. However, the dialogue with indigenous religions is equally important. These religions express a sense of the divine and the transcendent which must be approached with great sensitivity, on account of the spiritual and human values enshrined in them. They play an important role in*

creating ecological harmony and human equality and have developed a great variety of expressions and ways of communicating religious experience through devotional practices, ritual, dance, and song, which are a true source of blessings”.

We must see to it that in dialogical encounters, talking or discoursing doesn't dominate nor our relations with people of other faiths be restricted to formal occasions only. According to the Asian Bishops triple dialogue enters into the formation of a local Church.

In the dialogical approach of the Church in Asia, Christians think of themselves as inheritors of two traditions, namely the unique gift of Christian faith that we have received (Judeo-Christian tradition) and the other Asian religious traditions which are also our patrimony which we need to appreciate in all its valuable aspects as fruits of the Spirit and appropriate and integrate them into the Christian faith. Dialogue and inculturation suppose such a process of the formation of the local Church.

The Second Vatican Council has a positive approach to other religions. It exhorted the faithful 'prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and in collaboration with other religions, and in witness to the Christian faith and life, to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral good, as well as the socio-cultural values, found in them' (NA, n.2) (CBCI 1989: 9).

In view of the fact that India has nurtured several of the world's great religions, the Church in India is called upon to be an earnest pioneer of interreligious dialogue. It is the response of the Christian faith to God's saving presence in other religious traditions and the expression of the firm hope of their fulfilment in Christ. Done in a spirit of fraternal love, dialogue is a mutual communication and a sharing of religious experience, of spiritual and moral values enriching both the partners in a communion that seeks to foster unity among people and promotes the good things found among them (CBCI 1974: 140).

According to the document of the CBCI, *Guidelines for Interreligious Dialogue*, Interreligious dialogue, 'is both an attitude and an activity of committed followers of various religions who agree to meet and accept one another and work together for common ideals in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust' (CBCI 1989:34).

Quoting from the Nagpur Conference the document says, "*Religious dialogue, therefore, does not mean that two persons speak about their religious experience, but rather that they speak as religiously committed persons with their ultimate commitments and religious outlook, on subjects of common interest*" (CBCI 1989: 35).

The common interest becomes a source of collaboration for building a just and peaceful society. In this common endeavour, we learn to overcome our limitations and weaknesses and to journey together as co-pilgrims towards our ultimate destiny.

As the Document for *Dialogue and Proclamation* says: "The foundation of the church's commitment to dialogue is not merely anthropological but primarily theological. God in an age-long has offered and continues to offer salvation to humankind. In faithfulness to the divine initiative, the church too must enter into a dialogue of salvation with all men and women. Fr Jacob Parappally says: "The theological foundation for dialogue is also Pneumatological and Christological. The all-pervading presence of the Spirit of God invites all to be open to the Spirit's presence in everything genuinely human. Jesus' attitude of openness to accept the people of other faiths without any discrimination and to recognize in them 'a faith greater than that of Israel' inspires us to enter into dialogue with total openness to other religious traditions" ("Dialogue with Cultures and Religions" in *Sedos Bulletin*). Through sincere dialogue we can learn Hindu believers their deep awareness of and search for the Absolute and the ways (margas and sadhanas) for attaining union with God; in Christian-Muslim dialogue we learn the faith of surrender to the will of God, reverence for the greatness of God and courage to pray and profess one's faith in public; from Buddhists we can learn detachment and the radical meaning of liberation.

This can in no way mean that we use dialogue as a means for making converts. "The intention of Christians or Hindus or any other participants in a dialogue activity is not to convince the others of their own beliefs or to bring them over to their communities, but rather in sincerity and disinterested love to give witness to their own faith and to be enriched by the religious values found in others" (1989: 38). As *FABC* says, "Sincere and authentic dialogue does not have for its objective the conversion of the other. For conversion depends solely on God's internal call and the person's free decision" (Rosales & Arevalo 1992: 120).

There will be always some tension between dialogue and proclamation. In the Church's teaching both are essential components of mission. Both are paths of mission (cf *Redemptoris Missio*). The *CBCI Guidelines* says, "In whatever way one articulates one's understanding of dialogue and proclamation, the perspective should always be that of the Kingdom of God. We are all pilgrims towards that state where God will fully reign over all humanity" (*CBCI* 1989: 41).

The document continues: 'Dialogue cannot be an escape from and substitute for the task of proclaiming Christ. As far as Christians are concerned, a sincere dialogue with deep faith in Christ involves a witnessing to him, since it is a sincere sharing of one's faith characterised by all forms of truth. On the other hand, all evangelisation is just an offer made in a spirit of dialogue. The Good News cannot be imposed or imparted by any form of deceit or fraud. It can be shared by partners ready to receive it with joy. Any form of evangelisation which forgets this dialogical spirit is a betrayal of Jesus Christ who came to fulfill and not to abolish (CBCI 1989: 42).

Dialogue in the FABC documents figures prominently focused on the local Church, its mission in a multi-cultural and multi-religious continent of Asia.

The First Plenary Assembly in Taipei, 1974 in its final statement says, "To preach the Gospel in Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our people. The primary focus of our task of evangelisation then, at this time in our history, the building of a truly local Church." (Rosales & Arevalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol, 1, p.14). The same statement says further: "The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions- in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own".

The same Plenary Assembly Statement says "we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognise and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape the histories and cultures of our nations"(Gaudencio and Arevalo, 1974: 14). We are called to respect and honour them and discern and gratefully acknowledge the marvelous ways in which God has drawn our peoples to Himself through their valuable religious traditions.

The same Statement continues: "Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover the seeds of the Word of God (Ad Gentes, c.1, 9). This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways

of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and brotherhood (sisterhood) among His sons (and daughters)"(Ibidem, pp14-15). In this way we learn to share what we consider precious.

Theological Advisory Committee (Theses on the Local Church) stresses the importance of dialogue in the local church. Thesis 7 deals with our relationships with neighbours of other faiths. In this context it says that two areas are of particular importance to the local churches of Asia : dialogue and inculturation. They should become part and parcel of the local churches and their mission. We need to recognise that dialogue with other religions is intimately linked to inculturation of our Asian churches. In Asia since culture is animated by religious experience, belief and practice one cannot talk about dialogue without talking about inculturation. I would affirm that dialogue understood as participatory relationships, is an important dimension and requirement of inculturation.

Moreover in Asia dialogue and inculturation cannot be dissociated from the situation of massive poverty of millions struggling for basic needs and survival. This calls for dialogue with poor. The reality of the powerless millions enters as an inseparable concern of interreligious dialogue. Hence as we have noted FABC has consistently emphasised the triple dialogue with the poor, cultures and religions. Dialogue with the poor is a call to solidarity with and commitment to their liberation. In this commitment of dialogical solidarity, the local churches strive to become churches of the poor and learn to shed the image of wealth and power. In dialogue with cultures as part of triple dialogue, we may tend to favour the dominant cultures of powerful groups and forget the "little traditions" of the poor. The local churches need to give a preferential attention to these traditions of cultures, especially of the indigenous peoples and the powerless minorities.

Lessons we can learn about the ministry of dialogue from the legacy of John Paul II.

Pope John Paul II 's commitment to inter-religious dialogue was clear and articulate both in word and in deed. Hence he visited the Synagogue in Rome, the first visit made by any Pope. During his Asian journey in Thailand, he took the initiative to meet the Spiritual Head of the Buddhists, and when he visited Syria Pope John Paul II was the first Pope ever to step into a Mosque at Umayyad in Damascus, again the first one to be made by any pope.

We remember how he went out of his way to meet Jews seeking reconciliation of the Church with them and asked for forgiveness of Jews; Greek Orthodox; of Muslims and of all those who might have been hurt by atrocities committed by members of the Church in the past. Asking for forgiveness is a sign of genuine desire on the part of the church for reconciled and harmonious relations with people of other religions and determination to work together for justice and peace in the world.

His meeting with religious heads from all over the world in Assisi was perhaps the most significant. He invited them to pray for peace—an initiative in word and deed of his commitment to interreligious dialogue. People of faiths were part of his pastoral concern. This rooted in the faith that all humankind have the same origin and destiny and that all are united in God's love and saving plan.

In the very first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II invites the church "to grow through dialogue in an understanding and appreciation of the one with whom one wants to speak". He reminded the Church that the Vatican Council II saw the various religions as so many reflections of the one truth. "The roads may be different but the goal of the human spirit seeking the full meaning of life was the same" (Archbishop Henry, VJTR, May, 05; RH 11).

We note here that in 1988 Pope John Paul II made a significant change in the name of the Secretariat for Non-Christians and gave the more fitting and appropriate name of Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue. It is interesting to note that Pope John Paul devotes three chapters to Buddhism, Islam and Judaism in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. Similarly in *Redemptoris Missio*, while affirming the permanent missionary mandate, John Paul speaks of dialogue with brothers and sisters of other faiths in three paragraphs (RM, 55 & 57) and considers dialogue as one of the three paths of mission.

Dialogue, he says, "is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills. Through dialogue the Church seeks to uncover the "seeds of the word", "a ray of that truth which enlightens all men"; these are found in individuals and in the religious traditions of mankind" (RM no 56). At the same time he says, "that those engaged in dialogue, must be consistent with their own religious traditions and convictions... There must be no abandonment of principles nor false irenicism." (RM 56)

Pope John Paul II speaks of commitment to dialogue in his Apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, "two commitments should characterize in a special way the third preparatory year... meeting the challenge of secularism and dialogue with great religions" (TM no 52)

He stressed the need for greater effort for inter-religious dialogue in a particular way with Judaism and Islam. (TM no 53)

At the beginning of his visit to India, John Paul II said, "I have been longing to visit India, a land of many religions and of a rich cultural heritage... India is indeed the cradle of ancient religious traditions". At the airport on his arrival in Delhi he said, "As I begin, I take this occasion to express my sincere interest in all the religions of India - an interest marked by genuine respect, by an attention to what we have in common, by a desire to promote inter-religious dialogue and fruitful collaboration between people of different faiths".

Respect and appreciation of the truths contained in other religions makes dialogue possible. In his Chennai address, he said, "The Catholic Church recognizes the truths that are contained in the religious traditions of India. This recognition makes true dialogue possible... The Church's approach to other religions is one of genuine respect: with them she seeks mutual collaboration".

Then he outlined the purpose and fruits of dialogue: "*Dialogue between members of different religions increases and deepens mutual respect and paves the way for relationships that are crucial in solving the problems of human suffering. Dialogue that is respectful and open to opinions of others can promote union and a commitment to this noble cause*". He speaks of dialogue of action for cooperation between religions: "*As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the spheres of religious liberty, human brotherhood, education, culture, social welfare and civic order. Dialogue and collaboration are possible in all these great projects*".

Drawing on the Second Vatican Council, he says in his Chennai address: "*Modern man seeks dialogue as an apt means of establishing and developing mutual understanding, esteem and love, whether between individuals or groups. In this spirit of understanding the Council urges Christians to acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral values found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values*".

During his last visit to Delhi in Nov.1999, John Paul II during his meeting with the leaders of various religions at Vigyan Bhawan said, "*My presence here among you is meant as a further sign that the Catholic Church wants to enter ever more deeply into dialogue with the religions of the world. She sees this dialogue as an act of love which has its roots in God himself...It is a sign of hope that the religions of the world are becoming more aware of their shared responsibility for the well being of the human family. This is a crucial part of the globalization*

of solidarity which must come if the future of the world is to be secure". He also added: "Our encounter requires that we strive to discern and welcome whatever is good and holy in one another, so that together we can acknowledge and promote the spiritual and moral truths which alone guarantee the world's future".

John Paul II speaks of the spiritual fruit of dialogue: *"The fruit of dialogue is union between people and union of people with God, who is the source and revealer of all truth and whose Spirit guides them in freedom only when they meet one another in all honesty and love. 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. We should use the legitimate means of human friendliness, mutual understanding and interior persuasion. We should respect the personal and civic rights of the individual. As followers of different religions we should join together in promoting and defending common ideals in the sphere of religious liberty, human kinship, education, culture, social welfare and civic order. Dialogue and collaboration are possible in all these great projects".*

Reflecting on the process of dialogue in his Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, (1995), he says, *"Although the concept of dialogue might appear to give priority to the cognitive dimension (dia-logos), all dialogue implies a global, existential dimension. It involves the human subject in his or her entirety; dialogue between communities involves in a particular way the subjectivity of each".* On the dynamics of dialogue, he points to the criteria of dialogue, *"It is essential to pass from antagonism and conflict to a situation where each party recognizes the other as a partner and that when undertaking dialogue, each side must presuppose in the other a desire for reconciliation, for unity in truth".*

With this legacy of John Paul II, we can enter into the ministry of dialogue as a work of evangelisation and build the local church in dialogue for mission of witness and service.

Finally we need to acknowledge the substantial contribution made to the ministry of interreligious dialogue by the different Offices of FABC, especially the Office for Interreligious Dialogue and the series of meetings called BIRA organised by it for bishops. Here I don't need to elaborate on the excellent work of the Office. The fruits of its meetings have been widely disseminated. Besides this Office has been conducting training programmes for seminarians and other groups in the Church in the FABC region. Recently this Office published an anthology: *Resource Manual for Catholics in Asia on dialogue*. Many of you might have got it and probably have been using it for dialogue ministry.

D. The Charism and Role of Religious in Building the Local Church Through the Ministry of Interreligious Dialogue.

After reflecting on the theology of the local church, especially in the Asian context and theology of dialogue as it has been developed in the Church and in the FABC, we now reflect on the role and contribution of religious to the growth and mission of the local church through the ministry of interreligious dialogue. The theological perspectives on the local church and dialogue will help religious understand the nature, the method and the goals of interreligious dialogue in relation to the charism of consecrated life.

It is interesting to note that many religious congregations and orders have included the dialogue ministry in the renewed constitutions and institutes and have established secretariats for dialogue as part of their commitment to the evangelizing mission of the Church. (Jesuits in their General Congregation, 34, have a decree on interreligious dialogue).

In Asia we do not start our ministry of dialogue as if from a *tabula rasa* because Asian reality is part of us and people of different religions and cultures have been living as neighbours in daily life and in work places. This is the area of dialogue of life. In schools and colleges, in centres of health care, people of different religions are fellow students and fellow patients. The daily relatedness is part of Asian reality. Asian religious are part of this reality. The already given situation of relatedness with people of other faiths should not be taken for granted but needs to be gratefully accepted and then deliberately and purposefully chosen and strengthened. This will be our starting-point and an initial strength for the ministry of dialogue. This way we enter into other forms of dialogical living, action, theological exchange and sharing our interreligious encounter is always for the service of the Gospel for the life of the world.

Ecclesia in Asia (31) speaks of the specific contribution religious can bring to the church, especially to the local church:

“Men and women in the consecrated life can contribute very significantly to interreligious dialogue by witnessing to the vitality of the great Christian traditions of asceticism and mysticism”. This text speaks of the specifically valuable contribution religious can make to interreligious dialogue ministry. It is a dialogue through witness but religious do more than this.

Referring to the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* John Paul II emphasized the intimate connection between the consecrated life and mission. Under its three aspects of *confessio Trinitatis, signum fraternitatis and servitium caritatis*, the consecrated life shows forth God’s love in the world by its specific witness to the

saving mission which Jesus accomplished by his total consecration to the Father (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 44).

In this connection the Pope says: "the Church in Asia looks with profound respect and appreciation to the contemplative religious communities as a special source of strength and inspiration. Following the recommendations of the Synod Fathers, I strongly encourage the establishment of monastic and contemplative communities wherever possible" (E.A.44). In the continent of many religions, the Pope reminds us that "consecrated persons need to bear convincing prophetic witness to the primacy of God and to eternal life".

Again religious in Asia living their charism in contemplative way of life can make a specific contribution to the mission of the local church. This will eminently prepare them for dialogue with people of other traditions, especially at the level of dialogue of religious experiences and spirituality. The Pope invites religious to such a service: "All who have embraced the consecrated life are called to become leaders in the search for God, a search which has always stirred the human heart and which is particularly visible in Asia's many forms of spirituality and asceticism. In the numerous religious traditions of Asia, men and women dedicated to the contemplative and ascetical life enjoy great respect, and their witness has an especially persuasive power" (E.A. 41).

Moreover the Pope affirms what the religious can contribute to a powerful witness in the context of people of religious traditions: "Their silent example of poverty and abnegation, of purity and sincerity, of self-sacrifice in obedience, can become an eloquent witness capable of touching all people of good will and leading to a fruitful dialogue with surrounding cultures and religions" (ibidem). This is precisely what religious can do for the local church to engage and live in fruitful dialogue with cultures and religions among whom the local church in most of the counties in Asia live and thus promote the mission of the church.

Here we must draw attention to contemplative religious missionaries who have established dialogue in the area of religious experience, prayer and spirituality with other religious traditions in parts of Asia. In India we have had pioneers in interreligious dialogue with Hindu traditions like Abhishiktananda, Francis Acharya, Bede Griffiths (Benedictine monks), Ignatius Hirudayam and others in dialogue with Hindu tradition and persons like William Johnston, Hugo Enomiya Lassalle and Kakichi Kadowaki in Japan in dialogue with Buddhist and Zen traditions, so Fr Aloysius Pieris with Sri Lankan Buddhism. The list of such persons is extensive. Their contributions are the fruits of interreligious dialogue and encounter and have brought enrichment to Christian faith and spirituality. Here we have also monastic inter-

faith dialogue. These persons and many others belonging to different congregations like Sr. Sara Grant, Vandana Mataji have both promoted Hindu-Christian dialogue through their interreligious ashram in Pune and Uttarkashi in India. Such persons of the Spirit have contributed to the local churches in Asia. People from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries would know many dedicated religious promoting interreligious encounter in their own countries. In Asia we need such dialogue with Islamic tradition. There have been people engaged in Christian-Muslim Dialogue, in India Fr Paul Jackson (we know persons like Tom Michel) and other scholars have started a dialogue with Islamic and Sufi traditions besides promoting sound knowledge of Islam and Muslim communities among Christians through publication of articles, books and seminars and animating religious communities for dialogical way of life, mission and ministry.

The approaches of all these pioneers and others have in some way or other contributed to the true inculturation and integration of the local church into the spiritual traditions making the church truly Christian and truly Asian. Their example remains a challenge and invitation to religious for dialogue at the level of religious experience with Asian religious traditions.

Again we emphasise that the triple dialogue of FABC or the three paths of mission of *Redemptoris Missio*: proclamation, dialogue and human promotion are interrelated. One cannot exist without the other.

Earlier I mentioned the four expressions of dialogue. We need to appreciate the value and merit of each of these forms of dialogue and also their interrelatedness. Thus we see the dialogue of life Christians have in day to day life in their good neighbourliness with people of other faiths or in places of work (this could be extended to educational institutions), dialogue of cooperative action for the common good of a community (here one can mention religions coming together to promote peace, human rights and undertaking common projects for the good of the community or the poor), dialogue of sharing religious experiences and coming together to celebrate religious festivals (here we can include learning from the spiritual traditions of other religions regarding prayer and other spiritually enriching practices, always discerning the work of the Spirit in all of them) and dialogue in which exchange and discussions of religious traditions take place and discover the values and meanings of each other's traditions with a view to better understanding and building peace and harmony between believers. The different forms of dialogue would need different gifts. Religious can engage in these varied expressions of interreligious encounter

according to their charism and gifts. They can also help and train laity and youth for this way of Christian life in dialogue with people of other faiths.

In the above mentioned ways the religious through the gifts of the Spirit of their charism help the local church to become a church of witness to God's actions in the Spirit of Christ. They help to make the local church deeply rooted in the riches of the spiritual traditions and truly a church of dialogue.

Religious engaged in interreligious encounter learn to appreciate the specific values of different religious traditions and make the local communities of faith as communities of dialogue. Thus they will help them become truly communities of witness to the dialogue of salvation of God in Christ with all humanity. Her below we shall hear what the bishops of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei say on what we can learn from different religions in their response to *Lineamenta* for the Asian Synod:

1. From Muslims, the Church can learn about prayer, fasting and almsgiving.
2. From Hindus, the Church can learn about meditation and contemplation.
3. From Buddhists, the Church can learn about detachment from material goods and respect for life.
4. From Confucianism, the Church can learn about filial piety and respect for elders.
5. From Taoism, the Church can learn about simplicity and humility.
6. From Animists, the Church can learn about the reverence and respect for nature and gratitude for harvests.
7. The Church can learn from the rich symbolism and rites existing in their diversity of worship.
8. The Church can, like the Asian religions, learn to be more open, receptive, sensitive, tolerant, and forgiving in the midst of plurality of religions (Peter C. Phan, *The Asian Synod*, p. 36).

As I mentioned earlier, dialogue of life is our starting point and our initial strength. Asian bishops have given top priority for dialogue of life which should be practised by ordinary Christians who are not experts, in their day-today encounters and relations with the followers of other religions. This form of dialogue according to the bishops is "the most essential aspect of dialogue". Dialogue of life is the wide space open to majority of persons in the institutes of consecrated life to be involved.

In the thinking of Asian bishops, dialogue of life takes place when, "each gives witness to the other concerning the values they have found in their faith, and through the daily practice of brotherhood, helpfulness, open-heartedness and hospitality, each show themselves to be a God-fearing neighbor. The true Christian (and their neighbors of other faiths) offer to a busy world values arising from God's message when they revere the elderly, conscientiously rear the young, care for the sick and the poor in their midst, and work together for social justice, welfare, and human rights."(BIRA II, 1979, in For All the Peoples of Asia, vol.1., p.115).

This aspect of dialogue belongs to our being part of Asian peoples in the ordinariness of life. This is one area religious need to reflect on and find ways of strengthening and promoting it as part of their commitment to the ministry of dialogue.

According to the bishops the focus of dialogue should move away from dialogue as way of "talking or discussing" to a way of "living together" with focus on "sharing of life" and building relationships for promotion of just and peaceful society and fuller humanity of all. Pope John Paul II in *Redemptoris Missio* seems to echo this invitation, "Each member of the faithful and all Christian communities are called to practice dialogue, although not always to the same degree or in the same way."

The Areas for Dialogue

Today Islam more than ever has become a global religion. Its religious, political and economic power is something we have to reckon though centuries of conflict, rivalry and even war (the recent events of 9/11 and 7/7) may seem to have made interreligious dialogue with Islam more difficult, definitely in some countries based on Islamic law. The church (cf *Nostra Aetate*) has consistently promoted dialogue with Muslims. For the local churches of Asia, dialogue with Muslims is all the more important to build bridges of understanding and cordial relations for the common good of all and civil society. Here religious have an important contribution to make. It is necessary that religious who engage in dialogue with Islam and the Muslim communities need to approach with preparation, knowledge and respect for a fruitful dialogue. However, in some places religious have found it difficult to dialogue with Muslims, especially in states based on Islamic law. Those who work in these situations need strong faith and support from their communities.

Hinduism is a complex tradition. In general we find Hindus are open to dialogue and willingly cooperate. One can see in their religious way

of life an ardent sense of devotion, desire for and practice of meditation and concern for wellbeing of all. They have a vision of integrated life. They have a tradition and heritage of profound philosophical thought and mystical ways, besides great ethical values, ashrams as centres of spiritual guidance through their gurus, rich symbolism of popular religiosity and practices. They are all areas open to fruitful interreligious dialogue. As I mentioned earlier there have been many religious men and women who have been pioneers in Hindu-Christian dialogue. Religious, especially in South Asian countries have many avenues of creative interreligious dialogue. We are aware of the curse of the caste system and the "untouchables". In interreligious cooperation we have to fight against this curse and false ideologies of revivalism.

We know Buddhism is a widespread religious tradition in many Asian countries. The tradition is particularly strong in many South East Asian and East Asian countries besides Sri Lanka in South Asia. They follow the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of the Buddha. They follow also a way of ethical discipline, meditation and knowledge that leads to inner liberation and enlightenment. Buddhism invites them to practice compassion towards all living beings. This elicits universal appreciation. In Buddhist countries, religious together with Buddhists can face issues of justice, ecology, development and peace-building common to all. Besides it will help Christians to discover their own Christian roots of social compassion.

Today we are faced with an increasingly disturbing phenomenon of religious fundamentalism and revivalist movements. We need to recognise its presence in all religions. In the context of interreligious dialogue, religious dedicated to this ministry need to study its roots and understand the reaction nature of this phenomenon. In our approach we need to respond to the legitimate questions and hurt feelings of a community and its identity in the context of modern aggressive onslaught of one-sided secularism. This can prepare us for ways of dialogue, healing and reconciliation. This would lead us also to ask for forgiveness for our past attitudes of intolerance and injustices (here we recall the Christian gesture of asking for forgiveness for similar wrongs of the members of the church in the past by Pope John Paul II). This has to be done with apostolic discernment.

Recent attacks in London, Ayodhya, elsewhere, tells us that consistent and enduring dialogue in all four forms are necessary in our fractured world. Religious through their ministry of interreligious dialogue should make religions a source of enlightenment and a constructive force for peace-making and building social harmony between peoples, especially in situations of misguided religious

extremism, fundamentalism, communalism and sectarianism. This is the way religions become part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Interreligious involvement for justice and peace

We know that many women and men religious actively engaged in the different types of interreligious dialogue work for justice, human rights and peace. For them these works of human promotion are an interreligious project. We must note also that they do not function as individuals isolated from their other fellow religious or communities but with full support and encouragement of their communities and superiors. This is seen in the fact that many of these gatherings, meetings and planning take place in the houses of religious communities, which provide many facilities. All this is a hopeful sign.

Religious because of their consecration and vows carry a moral weight when they engage in works for justice and peace in collaboration with people of other faiths. There is presumption among these people that our involvement in these works is not motivated by personal ambition and vested interest. Sometimes religious involved in such works suffer and lose their life. The cost of genuine and serious commitment is martyrdom

In India when Graham Steines and his two sons were burnt alive by Hindu extremists, a group of Hindus, Christians including Catholic sisters went to the place where the cruel murder took place to express their solidarity with Mrs. Graham Steines and her daughter and made their visit into a pilgrimage for peace and solidarity. The visibility of religious in such engagements not only carries publicity value but also bears witness to our being people of faith.

Women religious have a special role to play for the promotion of gender justice. In many of our traditional societies, violation of gender justice is common because of the strongly patriarchal nature of society. This is the case in Islamic and Hindu societies. To support the cause of gender justice, women religious are better placed socially for free movement and easy contact with women and thus facilitate the work of conscientizing women for justice and dignity and accompanying them in their struggle. At the same time women religious should not restrict their dialogue ministry only to issues of gender justice but broaden the scope the ministry to include issues of social justice, ecological issues, peace-building and promotion of social harmony and peace. Though we emphasise the specific role women religious can and ought to play for the promotion of gender justice, we affirm that it is not an exclusive concern of and for women. It is a project for all including men religious.

Both men and women have to work collaboratively for gender justice.

Some pointers for concrete action in this ministry

1. We need to develop spirituality for dialogue characterised by a deep and respect for all the rich spiritual traditions of others as fruits of the Spirit who blows where it wills. We must be sensitive to people's search for meaning, yearnings for contemplative experience of the Divine and readiness for compassionate commitment to the poor who seek justice, dignity and freedom. We should be open to be "enriched by the spiritual experiences and ethical values, theological perspectives, and symbolic expressions of other religions"(G.C34).

2. It is vital that those who are engaged in the ministry of dialogue must be deeply rooted in Christian faith and committed to the Gospel way of life. This is important for genuine dialogue with people of other faiths. It requires also solid foundation in theology, careful study of the decrees of Vatican II and other documents of the Church and those of bishops' conferences and of FABC on the value, meaning and necessity of interreligious dialogue.

3. Another sector to be considered by way of preparation for a dialogical way of evangelisation is formation. During formation the young religious should become acquainted with the religious beliefs and practices of the followers of other religions, especially of those who are people of their ministry region or country. This can be done by special courses together with some involvement in the dialogue ministry in their pluralistic situation. With this kind of preparation, proclamation of the Gospel would be sensitive to the religious and cultural milieu of people of other faiths. This would demand also that religious become attentive to the Spirit at work in them.

Theologically, we need to dwell on the divine plan of salvation for all in Jesus Christ in relation to the religious traditions and experiences of others who find themselves spiritually nourished by their own traditions. This goes with a sound theology of religions and dialogue.

4. One aspect of the triple dialogue is dialogue with the poor. It calls for our commitment to justice for the poor with whom we work and in whose struggles we participate. The poor including indigenous people belonging to different religions. Together with them we work for a just, humane, peaceful society for all. In Asia, this means also building basic human communities inclusive of all, on the foundation of truth and love. In this work with the poor we denounce structures of injustice and collaborate to create a world of justice and peace.

5. Many of our congregations have social and cultural centres. It is important that they do not become purely secular centres without any

reference to the positive and liberative power of religions and cultures. Rather in their way of working, they need to include the liberative elements and dynamics of the religions of the people and their cultures for building a just world and equitable humane social order

6. Another area is our educational institutions. The vast majority of the clientele of our institutions belong to different religious traditions. We should consider them centres of dialogue for social transformation. They should foster positive attitudes on the part of students for interreligious living and social harmony. Both the institutions and students should become agents of social change.

7. In the pastoral field where men and women religious work is a vast area to educate Christians as to how to live their faith in a religiously plural context. Interreligious dialogue has to become part of catechesis and faith formation. We have already mentioned the dialogue of life as essential part of Christian living in our multireligious situation. Religious priests working in the pastoral field like parishes have a wide scope to extend their ministry to people of their faiths in their parish areas. Dialogue will help them to experience God's compassionate love and make them understand that all are children of God. This will help all to work together for peace and harmony for the benefit of all. We need to remember that we are on a pilgrimage and are journeying together with people of other faiths towards the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of peace and love. In this ministry, the Church will be the voice of the poor, express commitment to the young and women.

8. Different congregations need to encourage persons who can become experts for dialogue of theological exchange. Since this dialogue is becoming a global concern, planning this ministry should include interprovincial and even international exchange of persons and be done in collaboration with other groups. Those involved in dialogue of theological exchange have a double responsibility: 1. They have to engage in honest, respectful dialogue with experts in the other religious traditions. 2. They need to communicate the fruits of this dialogue with others and their fellow religious to help them understand and appreciate such dialogue. Being a new area, one shouldn't be surprised if there are misunderstandings and even mistakes. But in communities of dialogue, there is openness to correction and reorientation.

E. Conclusion.

Perfectae Caritatis states, "The manner of life, of prayer and of work should be suited to the physical and psychological conditions of today's religious. It should also...be in harmony with the demands of the apostolate, with the requirements of culture and with the social

and economic climate" (PC, 3). Today, interreligious life has become an imperative of evangelisation and not a mere pragmatic necessity of our pluralist societies. If we, as Consecrated Religious, are to work effectively for justice in those societies and to strive seriously to build both communal peace at the local level and peace among nations, we must involve ourselves in ongoing interreligious efforts and be ready to take part in new initiatives as the need arises in our continually evolving societies. This will certainly redound to the mission of the local church for witness and service.

V. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BISHOPS AND RELIGIOUS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH IN ASIA

- Prof. Sugawara Yuji, S.J.

A. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council affirms that religious must work for the good of the local Churches according to their particular charism (cf. *Christus Dominus* 33a), and Bishops, as persons responsible for local Churches, must coordinate all the apostolic works in the dioceses. The position of religious in the life of the diocese is described by Pope John Paul II as follows in an allocution held for the General Superiors in the first year of his pontificate: «Wherever you are in the world, you are with your mission "in a given local Church". Therefore your vocation for the universal Church is realized in the structures of the local Church. Every effort must be made in order that consecrated life may develop in the individual local Church, in order that it may contribute to their spiritual building up, in order that it may constitute their particular strength. Unity with the universal Church through the local Church, that is your way» (November 24, 1978).

This affirmation does not necessarily mean that all the apostolic activities of religious for the service for the universal Church are realized by means of their direct insertion in the local Churches. As for the apostolic activities of consecrated persons, the above-mentioned description is correct for the specific activities of individuals or of concrete houses and communities, but is not true for an Institute, especially that of pontifical right, which can receive a mission that goes beyond the boundary of a diocese. Nonetheless, the relationship between a local Church and consecrated life, in a special manner Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life, becomes more and more important for both of them in the Church today.

In the Synod of Bishops on the theme of Bishops (October 2001), one finds a «relatio» which shows a positive estimation to the consecrated life: «The consecrated life enriches our local Churches, making more evident in them the gift of holiness and of catholicity. Through many of their works and their presence in the places where institutionally they take care of people, in schools, or other places of education, hospitals etc, consecrated persons show and realize the presence of the Church in the world of health, of education and integral growth of persons» (cf. *Relatio post disceptationes* 26). Thus the Synod refers to the work and presence of consecrated persons in the local Churches.

In recent years in different continental Synods, we find that they give voice to local Churches of each continent, emphasizing the ideas of «contextualization» of the mission for evangelization (SAC 4d). They stress the value of territory, of culture and of history of peoples. Specific problems of each continent have acquired importance and such themes as inculturation, dialogue and the integral development of the human person and of peoples were discussed. The theme of the relation between Bishops and religious is, then, to be treated in such a territorial and historical contextualization.

Three other Synods of Bishops which treated different «states of life», that is, lay (1987), clerical (1990), and consecrated life (1994), indicate that there is a new type of ecclesial communion: «priests, religious and laity, far from ignoring each other or coming together only for a common activity, can once again find the just relationships of communion and a renewed experience of evangelical communion and mutual charismatic esteem resulting in a complementarity which respects the differences» (SAC 31d). One of the results of the teaching of «Church as communion», in recent years, is the awareness that in the Church various components can and must unite their strength in an attitude of collaboration and make an exchange of various gifts, in order that they may participate more efficaciously in the mission of the Church. Also in the continental Synods, having a clear and common object, that is, evangelization coming from diverse contexts, have declared that same pastoral principle; it invites the faithful to promote different vocations and ministries in the local Church and to promote communion through reciprocal knowledge and participation with a view to adequate pastoral coordination. The specific role of Bishops in this matter is crucial.

1. Presence of consecrated persons in the local Church

In the light of the conciliar and postconciliar documents it appears evident that the collaboration of consecrated persons with Bishops

shows an organic development in diocesan pastoral life. The charism of consecrated life can contribute much to the building up of charity in the particular Church (cf. VC 48a). The relationship between the local Church and consecrated persons in a concrete situation, however, is sometimes difficult because of various reasons. One seeks an apostolic creativity, while the other requires stability and local action. One appeals to the particular charism of foundation and the other appeals to apostolic authority and pastoral responsibility. Before the Synod on the consecrated life, its *Instrumentum laboris* indicated: «Several Episcopal Conferences express their regret over difficulties in involving men and women religious in the diocesan apostolate because they are too frequently changed by their Superiors. Others, however, mention that an excessive identification with such an apostolate, as happens in parishes entrusted to religious, can generate a loss of their own identity and fidelity to the spirituality of mission of their own Institute» (26d).

We see the continuous tension in the fact that on the one hand the activities of Religious Institutes dedicated to apostolic works have great importance for the whole internal life of the Institute, on the other hand such activities are often a participation in the ministry of the Bishop of a particular local Church. In a sense it is normal for Bishops and religious to encounter such a problem. At the same time, it means that both sides are continually invited to seek for better solutions.

1.1 Presence of consecrated persons as an apostolate

The Code of Canon Law, in c. 673, affirms: «The apostolate of all religious consists first of all in the witness of their consecrated life, which they are bound to foster by prayer and penance». The canon underlines the intrinsic value of the consecration of life of Religious rather than the external services they offer. This mission can be called that of being, of living the consecration according to the particular charism of foundation, rather than doing, even though in reality one cannot exist without the other. In his first apostolic exhortation in 1984, Pope John Paul II, speaking to consecrated persons, affirms: «Even though the many different apostolic works that you perform are extremely important, nevertheless the truly fundamental work of the apostolate remains always what (and at the same time who) you are in the Church» (*Redemptionis donum* 15c). His exhortation in 1996 reaffirms: «Consecrated persons will be missionaries above all by continually deepening their awareness of having been called and chosen by God, to whom they must therefore direct and offer everything that they are and have, freeing themselves from the obstacles which could hinder the totality of their response. In this way they will become true signs of Christ in the world» (*Vita consecrata* 25c).

The document on fraternal life in community highly esteems the presence itself of Religious in the local Church: «The missionary presence of a religious community is developed within the context of a particular Church, to which the members bring the richness of their consecration, of their fraternal life and of their charism. By its mere presence, not only does a religious community bear in itself the richness of Christian life but as a unit it constitutes a particularly effective announcement of the Christian message» (*Congregavit nos* 60). In the discussion in the Synod (2001), there was indicated the necessity of the care that the Bishop must take for this gift of the Spirit for the life of the Church; not only what apostolic and functional activities of consecrated persons mean in the local Church, but and above all, what the consecration itself of a Christian brings, and how it adorns the Church and make it grow (cf. *Relatio post disceptationes* 26).

From the point of view of the realization of apostolic presence, it seems more profitable when Religious are present institutionally even in a small unit, and not merely with a personal title in a local Church. In this sense only as exceptions are cases of religious who live alone to be permitted, for grave reasons or for the specific apostolic services foreseen in the Code of Canon Law (c. 665 § 1). A religious alone is not ideal. The Legislator desires that a religious community maintains and shows clearly the charism of the foundation of the Institute and its life and apostolic work should be that of community (cf. CN 65). In fact, from the canonical point of view, the title «The apostolate of Institutes» (Chapter V; cc. 673-683) itself underlines that it deals with the mission of «Institutes» rather than with the activities of the single religious. It is important to keep in mind that the Church entrusts the participation in the mission of Christ to the Institute as such. The presence of religious, even a simple one, can be more helpful when it exists as a religious body, family and group (cf. VC 92).

1.2 Fidelity to the charism of foundation

The postconciliar *magisterium* repeatedly stresses that consecrated persons must live their vocation with fidelity and bring the richness of their charism to the local Church (cf. PC 2). The apostolic exhortation *Vita consecrata* adds that such fidelity is to be «creative» (VC 37). To do so, consecrated persons will feel a continuous tension: even if it is right to say that the Institutes, because they were born for the good of the Church and the world, must make their works and services available for the concrete needs that are in front of them, it is all the same true that they cannot separate their apostolate from the original inspiration of their founders, even for the sake of satisfying occasional needs.

The official documents of the Church repeat that an Institute cannot take up works or activities that do not correspond to its particular charism of foundation (cf. MR 14; 17, 49-50; EE 28; CN 61). Not all the activities of religious are automatically to be considered a proper apostolate that derives from the particular charism of the foundation, but rather those approved by the competent authority. It can be helpful that the Constitutions or the General Chapter of the Institute state clearly the legitimacy to assume an external apostolic work, for example, pastoral care of the faithful in a parish church. If the charism can be harmonized with a specific apostolate, for example the parochial, members can maintain more easily their fidelity to the charism of the Institute (cf. c. 677 § 1), including fidelity to the exigencies of religious life such as prayer, fraternal life in common, observance of the vows. It is possible, even more, for the Institute to accept an apostolate which corresponds to the special charism, e.g. parish churches which are in more needy situations from the pastoral perspective, such as those in poor areas.

In the face of continuous tensions, it is helpful to remember the reason for the insistence on fidelity to the charism of foundation of the Institute. The exhortation VC affirms; «Consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church by the very fact that the manifold charisms of their respective Institutes are granted by the Holy Spirit for the good of the entire Mystical Body, whose upbuilding they must serve (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11)» (VC 47a). The ecclesiality of the gift of the Institutes of consecrated life is one of the very clear characteristics of the *magisterium* of Vatican II and afterwards. The exhortation continues: «The identity of each Institute is bound up with a particular spirituality and apostolate [...]. For this reason the Church is concerned that Institutes should grow and develop in accordance with the spirit of their founders [...], and their own sound traditions (cf. c. 576). Consequently, each Institute is recognized as having a rightful autonomy, enabling it to follow its own discipline and to keep intact its spiritual and apostolic patrimony. It is the responsibility of local Ordinaries to preserve and safeguard this autonomy (c. 586)» (VC 48bc).

The *magisterium* teaches and legislates that the charism of each Institute is given to the Church for the good of all, and to maintain this good, autonomy is recognized for all the Institutes. «It is helpful to recall that, in coordinating their service to the universal Church with their service to the particular Churches, Institutes may not invoke rightful autonomy, or even exemption [...] in order to justify choices which actually conflict with the demands of organic communion called for by a healthy ecclesial life» (VC 49b).

In concrete, if a parish priest adheres to an ecclesial movement and has the tendency to plan the whole life of the parish according to the spirit of this movement, forgetting that in the parish reality there are various faithful, various charisms and spirituality, to which it is always necessary to give rightful space and support, there will be big confusion in the parish life. An analogous problem can occur when the parish is submitted to an Institute of consecrated life. If the insistence of the autonomy leads an Institute to independence, if the requirement of living out the particular charism of foundation isolates the members from other components of the Church, such uniqueness becomes an idol in itself. The exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* affirms: «While maintaining respect for their specific charism, they should integrate themselves into the pastoral plan of the Diocese in which they work. The local Churches, for their part, need to foster awareness of the ideal of religious and consecrated life, and to promote such vocations» (EAs 44c).

The first service that consecrated life can offer to the local Church is that of charismatic presence and mission. In a Synod, some Bishops spoke of the duty of consecrated persons in service to the diocese, especially concerning religious priests. From the part of the Religious, however, the need of respecting the particular charismatic nature of the Institute was stressed. It is not the duty only of Bishops nor only of consecrated persons to find the balance between the concrete necessity of the diocese and the realization of the gift of the Spirit given for the good of the whole Church. It is the duty of both sides. Finally, regarding the apostolic presence of consecrated persons in the local Church, it is a serious responsibility of members of the Institutes not to disappoint the legitimate desires of the Bishops, of the diocesan clergy and of the laity, as well as the members' transparent fidelity to their consecration through profession of three evangelical counsels; the witness of fraternal communion and witness of their own goal in conformity with their own charism (cf. VC 74e).

2. Pastoral and canonical task of the Bishop

The *magisterium* clearly and continually teaches that the Bishop has pastoral care for persons of consecrated life present and working in his diocese. In addition to what was indicated in the Council (cf. CD 15-16), the document *Mutuae relationes* (1978), after having stated the responsibility of the Bishop to take care of the charism of religious (9.c), speaks of the importance of striving to understand what the Spirit wants to manifest: «In fact, it is his (Bishop's) specific office to defend consecrated life, to foster and animate the fidelity and authenticity of religious and to help them become part of the communion and

evangelising action of his Church, according to their distinctive nature» (52a). It is the task of the Bishop to discern and respect individual charisms and to promote and coordinate them.

MR goes on to say that religious should consider the Bishop not only as shepherd of the entire diocesan community, but also as «the one who guarantees fidelity to their vocation as they carry out their service for the good of the local Church» (MR 52b; cf. PGr 50a). The Bishop in this sense must take care that the rule and discipline of the Institute should be faithfully observed. Thus the Bishop is the guarantor of ecclesiastical discipline and of the will of the Church in each diocese regarding the fidelity of the Institutes to their own spiritual patrimony. The document then states: no reasons, even apostolic commitment itself done under the guidance of the Bishop «should be an occasion to deviate from one's vocation» (MR 46a. See also PI 97a).

2.1 Canonical right and duty of the Bishop

From the canonical point of view, there are some principles to pay attention to. First, the diocesan community usually has a common apostolic project. To its realization all the members of the dioceses have to cooperate, each in fidelity of his/her own identity. Second, excluded from the potestas of the diocesan Bishop is what belongs to the internal life of the Institute (cf. c. 586 § 1), that is government and discipline. Rather the Bishop has to urge the obligation of Religious to maintain fidelity to their discipline (c. 678 § 2). Third, the norms of cc. 678-683 on the apostolate of Religious Institutes are to be applied to all the Institutes, without any distinction; for those of solemn vows and those of simple vows, for Orders and Congregations, for those of pontifical right and diocesan right, both lay and clerical. The concept of «exemption» in the present Code (c. 591) is different from the traditional understanding held by the Orders.

C. 678 treats the matter of the subjection of religious to the power of diocesan Bishops and to his/her own Superior as regards the apostolate. The first duty of Religious is subjugation to the authority of the Bishop, to which they are bound to show respect and devotion. C. 678 § 1 specifies the full subjection of Religious to the diocesan Bishop in matters concerning the care of the souls, the public exercise of the divine worship, and other works of the apostolate (For the members of Societies of Apostolic Life, see c. 738 § 2.). The wording is very ample and general. The dependence on the Bishop concerning the care of souls and the public exercise of divine worship does not offer big problems of exegesis: the dependence is, and has to be, total. The public exercise of divine worship does not concern what is practised inside the oratories reserved to the members of the religious communities, but what open

to the public, to the people entrusted to the responsibility of the Bishop. The public exercise of divine worship in this sense includes the vast field of administration of the sacraments and sacramentals: funerals, the cult of saints, sacred places and sacred times, etc. (Book IV)

As regards other works, it primarily concerns the charitable activities of c. 676, but it is not easy to define exactly. As for the way and the spirit with which these works of apostolate are done by Religious, the authority of the Bishop is practised rather in cases of abuses. In such cases, the Bishop can (and should) intervene; in concrete, for the care of souls, in the liturgical field, in preaching, in the moral and religious education of believers, in catechetical education (cf. cc. 756 § 2, 758, 764, 772, 775 § 1, 780).

The autonomy of government (c. 586 § 1) of the Religious Institute cannot be understood only in terms of its internal life, because the government of an Institute dedicated to apostolic works is ordered to the faithful fulfilment of its own apostolic goal (cf. cc. 674-677). Religious discipline is not limited only to internal matters, but extends to apostolic activities, especially the way of realizing them. Apostolic activity of Religious cannot be separated from their spiritual life since they realize their vocation in the apostolate. The responsibility of the Superior also touches, therefore, the external apostolate (§ 2). Paragraph 3, then, states that diocesan Bishops must proceed by way of mutual consultation in directing the apostolic works of religious.

In addition, c. 681 treats the works, which the diocesan Bishop entrusts to religious (as Institutes) and c. 682 deals with the ecclesiastical office in a diocese conferred upon a member of a Religious Institute. The works of the diocese entrusted to a Religious Institute can be, for instance, a major or minor seminary, a school, a hospital, a specialized work, an action among a peculiar category of people; young, elderly, immigrants, etc. The distinctive character of these works is not the economic aspect but the diocesan character, therefore the title by which these works are developed. Also in engagement to non-proper works, the religious has to be free to do it according to the Institute's own spirit and method, always depending on his/her own community and on the legitimate Superior. Therefore in such a case the mutual agreement mentioned in c. 678 § 3 is not enough. Written agreement is to be stipulated between the diocesan Bishop and the competent Superior of the Institute.

One or more parishes can also be entrusted to a clerical Religious Institute or a clerical Society of Apostolic Life. In this case, it is necessary to take c. 520 into account, where the consent of the competent Superior is demanded and one of the members is to be named parish

priest, unless c. 517 § 1 is applied. The trust of a parish to a clerical Institute/Society is a competence exclusive to the diocesan Bishop (the diocesan administrator is excluded; c. 520). The expression of the Code «to entrust» to the Institute doesn't mean to leave the parish to a community, as group of religious, but to entrust it to the Institute as an Institute, represented by the legitimate Superior who has responsibility for the specific charism.

2.2 Special care of the Bishop for the Institutes of diocesan right

C. 594 entrusts to the diocesan Bishop a particular care for the Religious Institutes of diocesan right working in his diocese. It does not refer to the special care that the diocesan Bishop of the principle house of Institutes must show, but that of all the diocesan Bishops. The canon makes reference to c. 586, which affirms the legitimate autonomy of the Institutes. The special care required by the canon is a pastoral task, which means that the Bishop is to protect the Institute and, if necessary, should defend the Institute from spiritual deviation. The diocesan nature of such Institutes does not decrease its relationship with the universal Church. The diocesan Bishop, therefore, cannot hinder the growth of the Institute has arisen in his diocese to other dioceses; he has to encourage the living of the universal dimension of the vocation of the members of such Institutes.

For the Religious Institutes of diocesan right, the Code entrusts several cases to the interventions of the diocesan Bishops, for example: the election of the supreme Moderator (c. 625 § 2); the visit of the religious communities (c. 628 § 2, 2°); the economic administration of a religious house (c. 637); the indult of excommunication (c. 686 §§ 1 and 3); the indult for a professed member to leave the Institute (temporary professed; c. 688 § 2, perpetual professed; c. 691 § 2); the decree of dismissal from the Institute (c. 700).

C. 595 § 1 assigns to the Bishop of the principle house the approval of the Constitutions or the confirmation of the changes legitimately introduced into them (cf. c. 587 § 2). He also deals with major affairs, which exceed the power of the internal authority of the Institute (e.g. General chapter or the supreme Moderator with his/her Council). The principle house of an Institute of diocesan right is generally that in which the Institute was born. Nevertheless it may happen that the Institute transfers the principle house to another diocese. The term means the house where the supreme Moderator of the Institute has his/her domicile (cc. 102 and 103). It can be then different from the so-called motherhouse or *domus foundationis*.

C. 595 § 2 affirms that the diocesan Bishop, the Bishop of the diocese in which the Institute has its house, is able to grant a dispensation

from the Constitutions, but only in single cases. N.B. the canon doesn't say «the Bishop of the principle house». Because the canon does not set restraint, the Bishop can grant a dispensation from all the norms of the Constitutions in single cases. It is important, however, always to remember the principle given in cc. 586 and 594: the legitimate autonomy of the Institutes and the right and duty of the special care of the Bishop. The dispensation should, then, be given on the request of the legitimate internal Superior.

3. Collaboration at diverse levels in the diocese

3.1 Ordered collaboration in the diocese

Reading the traditional manuals before Vatican II, one almost has the impression that the religious vocation was seen as a private avenue to sanctity for the individual. Indeed the pursuit of personal perfection was so frequently stressed as to make religious life seem almost detached from the life of the Church. The Church, in so far as she had a role, was often consigned to recognising and legitimising this personal choice of the religious. In addition, in the epoch of the Second Vatican Council, especially in traditional Christian countries, religious were not always considered necessary collaborators for the local Churches. Today, on the contrary, most of the dioceses desire them as collaborators and in fact, consider them necessary. The scarcity of vocations has greatly changed their position among the diocesan priests and parishioners, and a more frank collaboration has become possible.

It is necessary to have coordination and cooperation of all the pastoral workers under the guidance of the diocesan Bishop (c. 394 § 1). The Council teaches that religious priests, even if they are not part of the diocesan clergy, belong to the presbyterate of the diocese as they live there or exercise there a stable function (CD 34a) and adds that all the religious must consider themselves as participants to the life of the diocese (CD 34b-35).

C. 680, taking the norm of c. 394, states a pastoral principle for religious: «Among the different Institutes and also between them and the secular clergy, there is to be fostered an ordered cooperation and a coordination under the direction of the diocesan Bishop of all the works and apostolic activities, with due respect to the character and purpose of each Institute and the laws of the foundation». According to the canon, while speaking of the importance of respect for the charisma of foundation of each Institute, it is necessary to provide cooperation among all Religious Institutes. It is also necessary to promote collaboration among the diocesan clergy and religious. The actual situation demands in many countries account be taken of the problem

of adequate distribution of religious ministers in the diocese. (Usually clerics of Secular Institutes are incardinated in the dioceses.) MR 59 spoke of the usefulness of associations of religious at the diocesan level. Can. 708 mentions appropriate coordination and cooperation as one of the purposes of the Conference of major Superiors, and the Conference of Bishops and also as concerning individual Bishops.

Naturally it is not easy to establish a balanced cooperation among all workers in the diocese. If an Institute, for example, draws back from a sector to engage in another apostolic activity, it is not always due to lack of personnel, but may result from a desire to live its own charism. A Superior general once related that, in the capital of a country, the Congregation gave back its hospital to the civil administration because there were able managers, doctors and nurses well prepared, and a competent directive committee to run it. The Congregation then moved to another diocese, in a more rural, poor zone without resources, and constructed a new hospital there. The decision in favour of the new mission had been taken for the cause of the Gospel. The Bishop, nevertheless, could not understand this motivation and consented to the withdrawal only on the grounds of lack of personnel, not for an evangelical motive. And so, this Mother general had to lie a bit when she was asked the reason.

As for the relationship between a diocesan Bishop and religious, first of all, it is necessary to note that the Bishop does not enjoy the same freedom with which a major Superior (supreme Moderator, Provincial) of a Religious Institute governs his/her Institute. Pastorally the Bishop must cover all the territory the Lord has entrusted to him. The major Superior discerns freely in the Spirit what the Lord asks him to choose as an apostolic priority, based on the charism of foundation of the Institute in a creative fidelity. Then, for example, seeing urgent apostolic needs, a Religious Institute can move from one region to another; the Bishop does not have such freedom, because he must assure the presence of the Church in his diocese. A Religious Institute can leave an institution of education or a hospital to dedicate itself to the abandoned youth on the street. The Bishop must give priority to the parish churches.

In such a situation, it is important to establish a clear, direct and personal communication at every level in the diocese, as much as possible, because at the base of many difficulties, there is often not sufficient and correct reciprocal knowledge and understanding; there is a certain ignorance on the part of consecrated persons about the exigencies of the local Church and of the responsibility of the Bishop in it. There is sometimes also ignorance of the meaning of consecrated

life on the part of Bishops and diocesan clergy. Today, in all the Church almost 25% of all Bishops are from Religious Institutes or from the Societies of Apostolic Life, but the mutual information seems not enough. To promote reciprocal knowledge, various documents offer directions. *Mutuae relationes* 29-30 says that Bishops and religious Superiors must promote knowledge of conciliar teaching and pontifical documents concerning the episcopate, religious life and the local Church. It insists at first to learn the teaching of the *magisterium* on different states in the Church.

Assuming the teaching of MR, *Congregavit nos* underlines the importance of the theology of each state in the process of formation: «It is earnestly recommended that all diocesan theological seminaries include a course specifically on the theology of consecrated life, including study of its dogmatic, juridical and pastoral aspects; religious should in turn receive adequate theological formation concerning the particular Church (cf. MR 30b, 47)» (60k). VC 50a adds «the theology and spirituality of consecrated life» to the theological preparation of diocesan priests, and «the theology of the particular Church the spirituality of the diocesan clergy» to the formation of consecrated persons. Finally PI 97b says that Bishops of particular Churches should at least be informed by major Superiors regarding current programs of formation in centres or regarding services for religious formation which are located within their pastoral territories. Many suggestions were made. But at which stage have we arrived?

There is also emphasis on cooperation in the pastoral field. Constant dialogue between Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and Bishops is most valuable in order to promote mutual understanding, which is the necessary precondition for effective cooperation, especially in pastoral matters (cf. VC 50a). By means of regular contacts of this kind, Superiors can inform Bishops about the apostolic undertakings that they are planning in their dioceses, in order to agree on the necessary practical arrangements. If there is adequate information, and reference to each other on the programs they prepare, there can be more harmony, and divergence and parallelism in pastoral activities can be avoided.

Many religious daily collaborate with priests in pastoral ministry. It is therefore essential to make use of initiatives which foster greater mutual knowledge and esteem. Vatican II affirms that lay religious life, both female and male, constitutes a complete state of profession of the evangelical counsels in itself (PC 10). But lay religious life in some places is not esteemed or understood correctly by other members of the people of God, being considered incomplete or of second order.

It is important that Bishops know the reality of lay consecrated life, and appreciate this original vocation that enriches the Church with a variety of gifts. In fact, 82% of all consecrated persons are lay (brothers, sisters). Bishops are to recognize lay Institutes as ecclesial bodies and facilitate their participation in the different organisms and councils both at diocesan and parish level. It is desired, in addition, in these years that the faithful learn not only about ministerial and consecrated life, but also about the vocation and mission of laity. Teaching on the relationship among different states, in recent years, points out and prepares a more participative and dynamic ecclesial life for the mission of evangelization.

It is important also that consecrated persons participate in different organizations and councils where they study and decide on the pastoral plan at the local level. The council of priests (cc. 495-502) and the pastoral council (cc. 512 and 536) can be good means for consecrated persons to participate in pastoral collaboration. Sometimes sisters complain that they are still kept in a position of total protection; they would like to be persons with whom all plans and programs and worries and hopes in the local community be shared. They rightly insist on studying together the situation of the local Church and seeking together solutions for the real problems. «Since the future of the new evangelization is unthinkable without the renewed contribution of women, especially women Religious (VC 57), it is urgent to promote their participation in the various areas of Church life, including decision-making processes, especially on issues which concern them directly (VC 58)» (*Ecclesia in America* 43b).

3.2 Positive collaboration instead of simple substitute

In the many changed situations in today's world, especially because of the lack of vocation, some Institutes and Societies are requested by others, for example, by Bishops, diocesan priests or even by other Institutes, to assume activities as supplementary ones. It sometimes, however, causes them to leave their own works or at least not to dedicate all their energy to the proper works. Such temporary work, in determined circumstances is necessary for the clergy, and therefore is «legitimate» (cf. CD 35/1), but in many cases it causes damage to the Institute. «Sometimes problems arise when parishes are entrusted to religious priests or members of Societies of apostolic life. In fact, they can feel that their pastoral effectiveness and identity is somewhat hampered if their presence in the parish is considered as something supplementary and not a pastoral application of their apostolic charism» (cf. *Instrumentum laboris* VC 77f). Even in so-called young Churches, it is possible that many missionaries are dedicating themselves primarily to the service

of Christians, while fewer missionaries are busy in the service to those people who are not evangelized yet or have never heard the Gospel of Christ. In fact, in many places, the lack of priests is absorbing many religious and missionaries in the pastoral work of the local Church, taking them away from specific missionary assignments.

Instead of demanding a simple supplementary post to cover a vacant pastoral work, a more positive consideration is necessary, that is, not tolerant acceptance from both parties, the diocese and the Religious, but positive collaboration in the diocese. To establish an apostolic work proper to a Religious Institute in a local Church is an expression of ecclesial communion. In fact sometimes even in recent years, collaboration was considered as a substitute because of the lack of vocations. But there is nowadays a tendency to show the desire to share responsibility on both sides. It becomes, then, more and more necessary to offer adequate formation of consecrated persons for an enriching collaboration. The local Church should consider the commitment of consecrated persons for pastoral activities as fully integrated in the diocesan pastoral program.

For example, a parish church entrusted to a Religious Institute can express the sense of the presence of the Institute in the pastoral activity of the diocese. Also in assuming a parish church, the Institute shows its own figure, which derives from the charism of the Institute. A parish church can show in a certain manner the typical presence of the Institute, if members of the community show a true spirit of religious life, fraternal community life, a community project, community prayer, a common interest for pastoral commitment, a common line of homily, assumption of group activities, etc.

Since the publication of the document *Mutuae relationes* (1978), many things have been written on the theme of mutual relationship between Bishops and Religious. Surely this document has contributed to the improvement of their relationship in the post-conciliar Church. In these years some have asked for a reformulated document on this subject, looking at the great changes occurring in the world. In the Synod on consecrated life (1994), a *Propositio* read: «It is desirable that this document (MR) be published in a new edition, which would contain the experiences up to today and would correspond to the changes in Canon Law and Canons of the Code of Oriental Churches» (n. 29: This was also the case in the Synod of Africa, 1995). But the exhortation *Vita consecrata* (1996) speaks of it only in a very general way: «In the spirit of the document *Mutuae relationes*, these contacts should be established on a stable basis, in order to provide for constant and timely coordination of initiatives as they come up» (53c). Also Pastores gregis

speaks simply; «due attention must be paid to the document *Mutuae Relationes* and all that concerns existing canon law» (50b).

Previously, the document MR indicated the way and manner of integrating consecrated persons in the diocesan ecclesial life (*Relatio post disputationes* 26). Now in recent continental Synods, it is provided that a voice be given to the local Churches of each continent, emphasizing the importance of contextualization in the mission. The values of territory, of culture and of the history of peoples are stressed, and the *magisterium* offers new theological reflections and orientation to arrive at a richly ordered ecclesial communion, as has been seen above. It is necessary, then, if a new document like MR is desired, that elements of contextualization should be strongly considered. In addition, it is indispensable to treat not only the relationship between Bishops and religious, but also that among different states of the Church - priest, laity and the consecrated. A big contribution must be asked of the Bishops' Conferences of each country.

B. Conclusion

One of the fruits of the teaching of the Church as communion, in recent years, is the ever growing awareness that her various components can and must unite their energy, in an attitude of collaboration and of exchange of gifts, so that they may participate more efficiently in the mission of the Church (cf. VC 54a). The vocation to the consecrated life can find afresh its specific identity of being a sign and a witness of communion. The harmony between the two principles established by the Council, that is, respect for the charism of the Institute and apostolic coordination of the diocese under the guidance of the Bishop, cannot be formulated easily in juridical terms. In such relationships that are not legally definable, it is to be entrusted to the ecclesial sense of both sides who, knowing their own obligations and limits, resolve the problems in a spirit of collaboration and organic communion. The coordination is first of all assured by personal contact and by mutual consultations. Only in such communion of spirit, will all the particular charisms get their own place in the Church and their full realization.

The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities. It is the reality of many members joined in a single body, the one Body of Christ (cf. 1Cor 12,12) (cf. NMI 46). *Magisterium* shows that the communion to which the consecrated are called to live goes far beyond their own community and Institute. Opening themselves with and toward others, they can enlarge the communion and live more clearly their own identity in the charismatic variety. Aspects such as autonomy, exemption, service of the Institutes

of Consecrated Life for the universal Church and their participation in the local Church, must be faced from a more community and missionary perspective based on the new ecclesiology indicated by recent Synods. The relationship among different states of life in the whole Christian community is now depicted more and more as an exchange of gifts in the reciprocity and complementarity of the ecclesial vocation (SAC 7b: cf. LG 13; VC 31). The Bishops are the persons supremely responsible in the local Church.

The document after the Asian Synod says: «The Synod Fathers chose to describe the Diocese as a communion of communities gathered around the Shepherd, where clergy, consecrated persons and the laity are engaged in a “dialogue of life and heart” sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit (*Communio notio* 3-10). [...] Ecclesial communion implies that each local Church should become what the Synod Fathers called a “participatory Church”, a Church, that is, in which all live their proper vocation and perform their proper role» (EAs 25b).

Abbreviations used:

- CD *Christus Dominus* (1665)
- CN *Congragavit nos* (1994)
- EAs *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999)
- EE Essential elements (1983)
- LG *Lumen gentium* (1964)
- MR *Mutuae relationes* (1978)
- PC *Perfectae caritatis* (1965)
- PGr *Pastores gregis* (2004)
- PI *Potissimum institutioni* (1990)
- RD *Redemptoris donum* (1984)
- SAC *Starting Afresh from Christ* (2002)
- VC *Vita consacrata* (1996)

VI. FINAL STATEMENT.

From 19th - 22nd July in the Year of the Eucharist 2005, we 15 Bishops, 53 Women Religious, 27 Men Religious and 7 Lay Persons coming from 20 countries of the Asian continent met at the Salesian Retreat Centre in Hua-Hin, Thailand for the Symposium on “The Role of Religious in the Building Up of the Local Church in Asia”, its first, organized by the FABC Office for Consecrated Life (OCL).

Inspired and challenged by the Holy Spirit at work among us at this Symposium, we commit ourselves to pursue the building of communities imbued with the spirituality of communion under the fraternal guidance of our Bishops so that we can become credible and

effective witnesses as well as courageous prophets in the building up of the Local Church in different situations of Asia.

Hence we resolve to:

- establish a clear, direct and personal communication at appropriate levels in the diocese in order to assure a participatory and collaborative Local Church;
- promote constant dialogue between Bishops and Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life;
- foster understanding and esteem among priests, religious and laity in the pastoral ministry;
- promote and incarnate values that sustain the human spirit and enable us to realize our call to holiness;
- enhance and strengthen greater knowledge, esteem and promotion of all forms of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, particularly that of Religious Sisters and Brothers;
- assume the attitude of continuous, humble, and loving dialogue with the poor, living traditions, cultures, religions and life-realities of the people;
- undertake positive, critical and dialogical discernment of cultures and religions in order to realize true inculturation of charisms;
- discover and identify the cultural, transcultural and countercultural elements⁶¹ particular to each Institute's charism in order to make a unique contribution to the Local Church;
- recognize and uphold Asian characteristics and values that are integral to the proclamation of the Gospel;
- put the Institutes' particular charism at the service of the Local Church;
- engage in a mutual "interchange of gifts"⁶² to foster greater collaboration and participation in the pastoral and missionary calling of the Local Church.

We pray that this reflection will help us understand more deeply the important and indispensable role that we play in communion with the Bishops, Diocesan Clergy and Laity in the Local Church. May we always be in profound communion with the chaste, poor, and obedient Christ. May we, like Mary, be ever open and attentive to the Holy Spirit who is our constant companion and guide in this challenging journey towards the building of the Kingdom of God.

⁶¹Charisms are cultural in that their externalization is always mediated by culture; they are transcultural in that they transcend cultures; they are countercultural in as much as they provide criteria against which cultures can be judged.

⁶²Relationships within the whole Christian community are improving with the mutual and complementary interchange of gifts among the various ecclesial vocations (cf. LG 13 and VC 31)

VII. APPENDIX.

1.1 Welcome Address by Bishop Joseph Prathan Sridarunsil, SDB

Dear Brother Bishops, Priests, Brothers and Sisters in the Religious Life and fellow Religious,

Welcome to Thailand and to our Diocese of Suratthani particularly here in Hua Hin where the Diocese started! My Diocese is very tall and thin and very beautiful". (Bishop Prathan then gave a short background of the Diocese with 7,000 Catholics, 7 Diocesan priests, 22 Salesians, 16 Stigmatines and a good number of Sisters).

I feel so happy to be among you and honored by your presence here because all of us are Religious... Witnesses of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

This Symposium is of utmost importance for our times here in Asia. Our most beloved Pope John Paul II has given us marching orders in his Encyclical "Ecclesia in Asia"...DUCIN ALTUM... Put out to the deep waters of Asia...the home of two thirds of humanity but where only 2% know Jesus. A home to 70% of the world's poor people... enslaved by every form of evil but at the same time the home of the cradle of the world's oldest religions and civilizations.

That is why we are here...obedient to the call...OPEN THE DOORS OF ASIA TO JESUS...our Redeemer. We wish to embark upon our mission as witnesses of Jesus...to build up the Local Church in Asia.

During these days, just like the Apostles, we are gathered in prayer, invoking the Holy Spirit to let His Breath of life hover over all of us. We ask for his light to be able to read the SIGNS of the TIMES in our beloved continent of Asia. This is a moment of Grace as we confront ourselves with the WORD of God, the LIVING PRESENCE OF JESUS AMONG US. He tells us "The Kingdom of God is in your midst". Indeed, for centuries the H H Holy Spirit has inspired humanity to search for God. Asia has already responded by her cry - WE WANT GOD! - a cry that has resounded for thousands of years in India - WE WANT GOD! - a cry for hope, for justice, for compassion among men.

The Lord hears the cry of the Poor, as the psalm says. That is why our Symposium is of utter relevance for the Church and for Asia. This cry and thirst for God impels us to give an answer, the answer of JESUS CHRIST.

WE ARE THE MEMORY OF JESUS - Jesus is of Asia. e He has given us His Spirit to be able to recognize HIM among our Asian brothers and sisters, especially the poor, the marginalized and oppressed. As all

of us come from different regions of this vast area of Asia, we enrich each other by our cultures, traditions, spiritual sensitivity to the ways GOD has touched our lives. We will bring our experience. Just like the two disciples of Emmaus, we have walked with Him along the way, we have touched Him. Our hearts are burning within us as He explains to us the WORD OF GOD. HE IS RISEN! HE IS WITH US!

My brothers and sisters, let us ask Our Blessed Mother, that just as she led and gathered the frightened apostles in the Cenacle, may she gather us here, in THIS PLACE, so as to experience the Gift of the Spirit, a Pentecost for all of us here so as to be able to respond to the call of our Asian brothers and sisters - a cry for God.

WE WANT GOD

WE WANT TO SEE GOD

WE WANT TO TOUCH GOD

WE WANT TO HEAR THE WORD OF GOD

May our Blessed Mother, in whom the WORD was made flesh, be with you. May her presence with us open our hearts to the Spirit. May her fidelity to her call, from her FIAT at the Annunciation till her STABAT at the foot of the Cross, enable all of us to be faithful religious in our difficult and painful task of being witnesses for Jesus in Asia. At the foot of the Cross, she accepted to be the Mother of Humanity. May we find in her a Mother for our Asian families, so much fragile and threatened by the impact of globalization and materialism.

May our Asian Saints, especially our martyrs of Asia, accompany us with their faith and intercede for us in all our undertakings these days.
GOD BLESS US ALL!"

1.2 Address of H.E. Most Rev. Salvatore Pennacchio, Apostolic Nuncio

Your Excellency Msgr. Paul Tan, Chairperson of FABC - Office for the Consecrated Life;

Your Excellencies Archbishops and Bishops,

Members of FABC - Office for the Consecrated Life;

Sr. Mary Walter, Executive Secretary;

Brothers and Sisters in the Lord.

On behalf of His Excellency Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, Apostolic Nuncio to the Kingdom of Thailand and several neighbouring countries, I wish to express sincere gratitude³ for the kind invitation, which was sent to him to address this Assembly. Unfortunately, he is out of the country but desirous to be part of this great event, he kindly

delegated me to represent him; and it is with great pleasure and honour that I read this address on his behalf:

1. My dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord, as the Representative of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. I have the honour to convey his cordial regards and best wishes to all of you. I met him on the 6th of this month in Rome, and among other things asked for his Apostolic blessing for each and everyone of you and in particular for the success of your Symposium. In his name I thank you for the praiseworthy works that your respective congregations and communities do in your various areas of apostolate.

I thank you too for your prayers and laudable initiatives on the occasion of the death of the great and beloved Pope John Paul II and at the election of his successor Benedict XVI. I have already done this on some other occasions but I want to repeat it at this gathering of bishops and religious from different countries. Indeed there is no better place than this to express these sentiments.

As the Psalmist says: "Our sorrow is turned into joy"; within a short space of time the infinitely merciful Father, after having consoled us on the days of mourning for the demise of the beloved John Paul II, overwhelmed us with his love in the election of XVI to the Cathedra of Peter, "a humble servant of God", as he described himself in his first address, proclaimed from the central balcony of Saint Peter, few minutes after his election.

2. Dear Brothers and Sisters, the theme of your Symposium is "**The Role of the Religious in Building the Local Church in Asia**", I think that this role could be summarized with the introductory canon of the Codex Iuris Canonici on the "Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life" which states that, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, the consecrated persons and members of the Societies of Apostolic Life are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, and to the building of his Church and the salvation of the world by a new and special title they strive for the perfection of charity in service to the Kingdom of God and become an outstanding sign in the Church cf. Codex Iuris Canonici, c. 573 S1).

This text shows that the role of the religious in building the Church whether in Asia or elsewhere in the world involves **what they do**, that is the type of service that they render, and **what they are**. The service implies to humbly and devotedly offer their work ad a^uctorem Dei Gloriam, as Christ who having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end". Although he was the master, while they were at supper, he got up from table and washed the feet of his disciples and wiped them with the towel, which he was wearing (cf. Jn 13:1-5). Commenting on

this episode in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul I wrote "In the washing of feet Jesus reveals the depth of God's love for humanity in Jesus. God places himself at the service of human beings! At the same time, he reveals the meaning of the Christian life and, even more, of the consecrated life which is a life of self-giving love, of practical and generous service..." (John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, n. 75).

3. The role of the Religious is a task of bearing witness for Christ. Talking about the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which he had presented few days earlier, the Holy Father at the Angelus of 3rd July last, reminded all of us, "how necessary it is that at the beginning of the third millennium the whole Christian community proclaim, teach and witness integrally, unanimously and in agreement, the truth of the Catholic faith, of the doctrine and of morality".

For now only the Italian version of the *Compendium* is available but certainly the English edition will also be out soon and hopefully will reach you as early as possible, so that you can present, spread and use it as a valuable instrument of catechesis. As Benedict XVI summarized during the Angelus, in the *Compendium*, as a dialogue between teacher and disciple, the broadest exposition of the Church's faith and of Catholic doctrine - contained in the *Catechism* published by Pope John Paul II in 1992 - is synthesized. The *Compendium* takes up its four parts well connected among themselves, allowing one to understand the extraordinary unity of the mystery of God, his plan of salvation for the whole of humanity, the central character of Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, made man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, who died and rose for us.

At one level, all the baptized, by the very grace of that Sacrament, are deputed to take part in continuing the saving mission of Christ. But on another level this common mission of the Church is accomplished through a variety of specific functions and charisms in the Church. The principal responsibility for the Church's mission has been entrusted by Christ to the Apostles and their successors. Associated with the Bishops (in the work of proclaiming the Gospel), priests are called upon at ordination to be shepherds of the flock, preachers of the good news of salvation and ministers of the sacraments (cf. John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Asia*, 6 November 1999, *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 43). But the religious - men and women - in a particular way show forth God's love in the world by their specific witness to the saving mission which Jesus accomplished by his total consecration to the Father (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 44). Over and above the charisms proper to those institutes which are devoted to the mission *ad gentes* or which are

engaged in ordinary apostolic activity, it can of course be said that the sense of mission is at the very heart of every form of consecrated life, to the extent that consecrated persons live a life completely devoted to the Father (cf. k 3:49, Jn 4:34), held fast by Christ (cf. Jn 15:16; Gal 1:15-16) and animated by the Spirit cf. k 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:4) (cf. Vita Consecrata, n. 25).

4. oHHowever, the vital role of the Religious for the mission of the Church in Asia and anywhere in the world is **“being a religious”**. Jesus called the 12 in the first place **to be** his disciples, afterwards he commissioned them to go out and bear fruits cf. Mt Jn 15:16; see also Mt 10:1-8). Although the various works done by the religious in the Church are of a very urgent importance, what they are is even of more importance to the life and mission of the Church because the first form of witness is the very life of the missionary (cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio, 7 December 1990, n. 42; Ecclesia in Asia, n. 42), everyone in accordance with his status and the religious is accordance with their life completely consecrated to the Lord. “Indeed, more than in external works” John Paul II writes in Vita Consecrata, “the mission consists in making Christ present to the world through personal witness. This is the challenge; this is the primary task of the consecrated life! The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all” (VC, n. 72).

It is indeed this being in Christ that gives the impulse to evangelize and helps us to do our daily activities as bishops, priests and religious. The two disciples of Emmaus, upon recognizing the Lord, ‘set out immediately’ (cf. Lk 24:33), in order to report what they had seen and heard. My dear brothers and sisters, in this Year of the Eucharist we cannot cease to make reference to this great sacrament, which Presbyterorum Ordinis describes as the source and the summit of all preaching and evangelization (Presbyterorum Ordinis n. 5). It is the encounter with Christ, constantly intensified and deepened in the Eucharist, which issues in the Church and in every Christian an urgent summons to testimony and evangelization (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter Mane Nobiscum Domine, 7 October 2004, n. 24). When two things come together the stronger takes possession of the weaker and in a way transforms it to itself. This is the way Christ takes possession of those who receive him in the Eucharist and transforms them into instruments in the building of his Church. Therefore, the priests and religious cannot help the Church and the people in Asia as merely social workers.

Christ, the true bread of eternal life, when eaten is assimilated into our body and gives us that which he has eternal life. So we identify with him and in a way are transformed into the person of Christ. As Pope Benedict XVI said during his homily at the Mass of the Solemnity of Corpus Christ. "The Risen One, present in the form of bread cannot be eaten as a simple piece of bread. To eat this bread is to commune, it is to enter into communion with the person of the living Lord. This communion, this act of 'eating' is really a meeting between two persons, it is to allow oneself to be penetrated by the life of the One who is Lord, who is my Creator and Redeemer. The purpose of this communion is the assimilation of my life with his, my transformation and configuration with the One who is living Love (at the Square of the Basilica of St. John Lateran, 26th May 2005). As the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand wrote in a recently published Pastoral Letter on the Year of the Eucharist and Vocations. "The Eucharist is the most precious treasure because it is the life of Christ which forever nourishes the life and mission of the Church" (17 April 2005).

John Paul II wrote again in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, "Consecrated persons will be missionaries above all by continually deepening their awareness of having been called and chosen by God to whom they must therefore direct and offer everything that they are and have... In this way they will become true signs of Christ in the world" (VC, n. 25). In fact they are called in every situation to bear clear witness that they belong to Christ and follow him more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. can. 573 S 1). This is why John Paul II presents Mary in the same Apostolic Exhortation as the "sublime example of perfect consecration, since she belongs completely to God and is totally devoted to him. Chosen by the Lord, who wished to accomplish in her the mystery of the incarnation, she reminds consecrated persons of the primacy of God's initiative. At the same time, having given her assent to the divine Word, made flesh in her, Mary is the model of the acceptance of grace by human creatures" (VC, np. 28).

In fact, this type of Genuine Christian witness, as John Paul emphasized in *Ecclesia in Asia*, is needed especially now because people today put more trust in witness than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. This is certainly true in the Asian context, where people are more persuaded by the holiness of life than by intellectual arguments. People in Asia need to see priests and religious not just as charity workers and institutional administrators but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:5). In a world in which the sense of God's presence

is often diminished, there is no witness more than bearing convincing prophetic witness to the primacy of God and eternal life. The silent example of consecrated men and women of poverty and abnegation, of purity and sincerity, of self-sacrifice in obedience, can become an eloquent witness capable of touching all people of good will and leading to a fruitful dialogue with surrounding cultures and religions, and with the poor and the defenseless. This makes the consecrated life a privileged means of effective evangelization (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia* nn. 42-44; *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 42; Paul VI, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 8 December 1975, n. 59).

I wish to note here that in October (18-22) next year, there will be the Asian Mission Congress in Bangkok, a great event indeed. As we prepare for that occasion, we pray that the Lord will accompany us with his infinite mercies so that it will be a great success in promoting the mission *ad gentes* in Asia.

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters, at this instant I wish to inform you that the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life has decided to organize a Symposium at the 40th anniversary of the publication of the Conciliar Document *Perfectae Caritatis*. This will be an occasion to re-visit the journey, which the Consecrated Life, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit has made in these years to look for signs and orientations capable of helping Holy Spirit has made in these years to look for signs and orientations capable of helping the consecrated persons to be, as the Holy Father Benedict XVI advised. "Witness of the transfiguring presence of God".

Entrusting all of you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, Woman of the Eucharist, I pray that her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ who gave us himself in the Most Holy Eucharist, will be always with you and make your reflections of these days to bear abundant fruits, and may He strengthen you in your consecration and in the service of his Church!

Thank you for your attention!

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Published December 2005

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