

SECOND PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE

**PRAYER AS WITNESS
IN THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF THE CHURCH OF ASIA**

We have taken the title seriously and in order to do full justice to the topic assigned we have spelt it out under the six following aspects:

- 1) Asia Today and the need for Prayer Witness.
- 2) Prayer in the daily life of the Peoples of Asia and in their religions.
- 3) Prayer in the daily life of the Church of Asia.
- 4) Prayer as Witness and Service.
- 5) Genuine Encounter between the Church and the Asian Peoples at the level of God-experience.
- 6) The Prayer appealing to Asians and in keeping with Asian Tradition.

I. THE ASIA OF TODAY

1. Asia is a continent of ancient world religions which are today alive and renesant, and have a mass following. As such, religious practice and prayer are very common. Asia is also known for the primacy of spiritual values; relentless seeking after God; an unbroken tradition of contemplative prayer and mysticism; and for a variety of sadhanas and margas to realise man's deepest aspiration for full communion with God: God-experience.

The mentality and outlook of Asians are markedly otherworldly, spiritualistic, intuitive and mystical, rather than simply intellectualistic.

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshop sessions of the Second Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), held at the Morning Star Regional Seminary, in Barrackpore, India, near Calcutta, 19th-25th November 1978. The theme of the Plenary Assembly was: "Prayer—the Life of the Church of Asia."

Asians, in general, tend, by bent of nature and the pressure of historical and ancestral elements, to silence, interiority, and passivity, rather than to noise, action, and production. Their sense of God is more developed than their sense of man.

In Asian countries there is a climate favourable for prayer:

- proximity to the cycle of nature with changing seasons.
- awareness of the creative and provident presence of God.
- the lack of affluence and consumerism; hence there is a freedom from a false sense of security that does away with a dependence on and an openness to God.
- a certain religious sense, which gives a capacity to people of all faiths and conditions of life to be able to turn to God in humble seeking.
- a certain priority in life values.
- a genuine respect accorded to "holy men," of whatever faith they may be.
- a natural sense of "sacraments," a symbolic mediation of God's presence.
- an innate sense of music in all Asian peoples, so deeply imbedded in the very fabric of their being that they can spontaneously express their religious sentiments through singing.

All these serve as a basis for a meaningful liturgy in the broad sense, for a prayer that is more affective than intellectual.

It is to such an Asia, among others, that the Church of Asia has to bear witness of her mission, and that in the realm of prayer.

2. We witness today a thirst of people for contemplation, simplicity of life, and communion with nature.

This thirst is evident among the youth, particularly those of the West. Thousands of peoples come to Asia in search of peace and God-experience. They are attracted by Yoga, Zen, Ashram life, and, in short, by the prayer life of other religions.

Is the Church in Asia able and willing to provide and answer to this quest?

There is need to draw not only from the treasures of Christian tradition (occidental and orthodox), but also from Asian sources. But is the

Church of Asia familiar with them? Has she discovered these treasures? Has she herself drunk deep at these sources and refreshed herself with them?

3. Asia is reputed to be a continent of prayer, contemplation, and mystical experience and tradition.

Is this equally true of all regions and countries?

Even in these countries where people still continue to pray, do all pray?

Have not the peoples of Asia themselves to be led to prayer and con- abandoned prayer as irrelevant?

Even if they do pray, is it not merely a routine and superstitious practice, or mechanical recitation?

Hence is it not true to say as well that Asia itself is in need of prayer?

Have not the peoples of Asia themselves to be led to prayer and con- templative experience?

Is this not also part of the Church's mission to be fulfilled by her witness of prayer?

II. PRAYER IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE PEOPLES OF ASIA AND THEIR RELIGIONS

1) Are the followers of other religions clear and convinced about the synthesis, or dialectics, between prayer and life, work and contempla- tion? Or do these tend to remain separate?

Do the numerous rites practised by the common people really lead them to any genuine commitment to their neighbours, a commitment understood as an overflow of their committment to God? Does the spirituality of the Asian peoples, which generally includes meditation, ritual practice and celebration of feasts, and undertaking of pilgrimages, etc., lead them to social awareness? If the everyday life of the peoples of Asia is one permeated with poverty and malnutrition, ignorance and ill- literacy, exploitation and oppression, dependency and injustice, and if prayer has to be an authentic and meaningful witness in life, has not prayer to lead one—Christian or otherwise—to serve one's fellow men and to commit oneself to struggle for social justice and liberation?

2) At the juncture in the history of the Asian peoples, when they are attracted by Marxism and Communism, science and technology, and are subjected to the process of desacrilisation and secularisation, and the

pressures of modern life, is there not a need in Asia for people who are in deep communion with God and are equally concerned about their fellow men, and dedicated to their freedom and human development? Is there not a need for a prayer that is not merely ritualistic, but relevant to people's lives as giving meaning for the present and orientation for the future?

3) Do the Asian peoples see the connection between prayer and "political" life? Do the higher values held aloft and to be embodied in political life and prayer life enable one to exercise the function of critique towards all political systems? For example, the struggle of the Church in the Philippines, or the struggle of Mahatma Gandhi against the British rule?

4) Many Hindus do not see what a prayer in community adds to individual prayer. Or they do appreciate the importance and indispensable character of community prayer, which is so characteristic of Christian prayer. Are there trends in other religious groups to combine both community prayer and individual prayer?

5) Both in Buddhism and Hinduism there is an unreconciled tension between the contemplation of the absolute in oneself (thou art that: *advaita*), and the *bhakti* prayer, which is an I-thou relationship in the form of admiration, praise, gratitude (e.g., *bhajan*). Can Christian prayer be a model to show how one can reconcile these two orientations?

6) There is also tension between the individual *sadhana* as private prayer (contemplation or silent prayer), and public common prayer (of the *bhajan* type). Can Christianity here also undo this tension (prayer in the secrecy of the room and public liturgical prayer)?

7) The Buddhist background is less favourable than a Hindu one to a Christian inculturation, for it is centred on the impersonal *sunya*: void—though somewhat clearly or exclusively in Zen. This tendency is contrary to Hinduism, which especially in its Vedanta forms, is centred on the divine *Purna* (fullness). Is this latter not closer to Christian mysticism, though its incarnational dimension is equally to be stressed?

8) Is a man of God (a man/woman of prayer) in other religions different from the one in Christianity?

Does the prayer dimension tend to be obscured by an excessive ac-

tivism in the Christian? Inversely, in a Buddhist or Hindu man of God who separates himself from the world is the concern for the world and society obscured or forgotten? Has not a God-oriented person to be both a man of service and of prayer? Has not our prayer to combine the immanent and incarnational dimension with the transcendent and ultimate dimension?

III. PRAYER IN THE DAILY LIFE OF THE CHURCH OF ASIA

After posing the above questions on the prayer life of Asian peoples and other religions, we need to have a correct understanding and come to a realistic opinion about the prayer witness of the Churches of Asia.

The image of the Church is rarely that of a community of prayer, deeply engaged in worship and contemplation.

Christian prayer is witness to Christ and His message as it proclaims our faith, and thereby spreads among men Christ's message of universal call to salvation and communion with God.

The prayer of the Christian is a sharing in the prayer of Christ Himself. Like Christ, we Christians also speak to God as to our own Father, "Abba," "Daddy" (Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:14-17). It is Jesus Himself Who prays in the Christians, through the Spirit. The early Church was well aware of her mission to pray on behalf of all mankind. The figure of the "*orans*," such as we see in the 4th century fresco at the Catacomb of St. Callistus, was a familiar representation of the attitude that fitted well a disciple of Christ. The Church of Asia will do well to keep this in mind, and take to heart this duty of being a praying community, witnessing to the eschatological dimension of the Christian faith, and to the nature of men's final end. This is why from the early centuries the Spirit inspired men and women to give an unparalleled and striking witness to this dimension of the Church by embracing the life of solitary hermits, or cenobites, and later monks and religious of various types.

Against this background we can ask ourselves the following questions:

- 1) Though the Churches of Asia have been praying and have given a witness of prayer, what is the quality of their prayer? What is their sign value?

What has been the impact of their prayer witness on the peoples of Asia since the Second World War? Since the dominance of Communism over Asia? Since the Second Vatican Council?

2) Though the Church of Asia and Asian Christians have been praying and have many prayers and religious practices, especially on Sundays, has not the general impression been that Christians are good for efficiency, organisation and discipline, for education and social service and development, but not for prayer, interiority, silence, and much less for contemplative prayer? For all our efforts and preaching we are not considered (even by our own) as primarily "men of prayer." Perhaps religious women are more successful in witnessing to a life of prayer than are priests, who are usually seen to be "busy about many things." There seems to be a wide gulf between the prayer styles and aspirations of the religious and the laity at large.

3) Does prayer, as practised today by Christians, appeal to the people of Asia, and especially to the youth of today? Is not the widespread atheism among the youth indicative of its revolt against formal prayer, whether in our Church or in other religions of Asia?

4) What are the conditions conducive to genuine prayer? How can we create and maintain an atmosphere in which prayer becomes possible and easy. Is not life style a great contribution to the atmosphere and experience of prayer? Is not the attraction of youth to a simple and frugal life, proximity to and communion with nature, informality and spontaneity, connected with their thirst for prayer?

5) If prayer is not something which individual Christians do but something which the community (the Church) does, then the mystery of the Church will be evident, and its mission fulfilled, only when it is and appears as a praying worshipping community, as a ministering serving community, and as servant Church. If so, as a part of the pastoral ministry and as a priority of concern, do priests and bishops lead and encourage peoples to pray together, and gradually to become free and spontaneous, capable of sharing in small or large groups? One yearns for a day and a vision when bishops and priests will freely pray together in the midst of their communities; when Christians working together in the fields, offices, factories, when studying together in school and colleges, will pray together.

6) Is spontaneous community prayer possible? If it is possible, are

the people ready to live in mutual openness and acceptance with an ongoing repentance and reconciliation, with a loving and trusting relationship with the Lord and with one's brothers and sisters? Is not this reconciliation and relation conducive to the reception of the grace of prayer through the working of the Spirit?

7) Does not this working of the Spirit move one to live in total dedication to the Lord and to others? Is not such a total dedication the strongest witness that touches the soul of Asian peoples, and that will enable them to express the power of the Risen Lord and to be drawn irresistibly to Jesus Christ?

8) Many individual Catholic priests, religious, and laity do not yet give sufficient time to prayer. To inspire people to give this time faithfully, and day after day, is this not the first and most important pastoral step to be taken by priests? For such a renewal of prayer in the Church, is there not a need for a spiritual and pastoral leadership in the Church and of the whole Church?

9) What has been the contribution to prayer by the indigenisation of spirituality, of prayer forms, of meditation methods, and of liturgy?

10) What has been the impact of charismatic renewal in the prayer life of Asian Churches?

IV. PRAYER AS WITNESS AND SERVICE

With this understanding of Asia, and of the prayer life of Asian peoples and the Asian Church, we will now reflect on how prayer has a value as witness. Thereby, it becomes also a service to humanity.

1) Man and the world (the human society), in order to realise themselves and reach their destiny, need to transcend the present and themselves, and go beyond and become something more. This is wholeness, or humanisation, or self-realisation, or the new society, or the new heaven and new earth. In prayer, whether understood in terms of Western or Indian spirituality, we transcend ourselves, move towards the ultimate, and thereby witness to the transcendent by our very prayer.

2) Man finds that, of all form of slavery and oppression, the greatest is his personal alienation: lack of awareness of himself, not being

himself, and hence not capable of being and acting as a human person. Prayer liberates us from all forms of personal alienation by giving us an awareness (cit or vidya). This awareness is constitutive of our person and humanity, and it is the core of prayer. Thus, prayer humanises and personalises man. Growth in this awareness is the fulfilment of one of our human aspirations. It is also a service to be rendered to and by society.

3) Alienation is also from others; hence there are divisions, rivalry, hatred, fighting, and estrangement among individuals, families, and nations. Prayer, properly understood, should realise our integrity and wholeness. This is brought about by reconciliation and deepening of personal relationships. Man cannot pray and commune with God unless one becomes oneself; his integral personality is determined by his relationships. Community supposes prayer, or prayer builds up community. This is a basic witness and service.

4) If prayer is awareness of God's presence, then it makes us realise who God is: initiative, total openness and self-donation (grace). Our awareness of Him in prayer invites us respond to these gestures of God by total self-gift and surrender. And this, we feel, should be also our response towards all men. Thus, prayer creates an attitude of self-gift to others in various forms, self-sacrifice as indispensable; and this spirit and life of self-gift to others is capable of creating a society of justice and love.

5) Our horizon cannot be limited to our person or society alone, but must expand to the whole universe. Our wholeness cannot be total, unless we realise harmony with the whole of creation, which prayer brings about, especially Asian forms of prayer, or liturgical prayer. Our ecological problems and space concerns of today thus get interrelated with prayer.

6) Finally, the ultimate goal of man and the fullest dimension of his humanity is communion with God. This takes place on earth already by prayer. In prayer we go to the core of our person, the ground of our being, and the root of our self (radicality), as well as to the frontiers of ourselves (universality). The core and the all is God.

7) This realisation gives us a total language. This is silence and this is depth. Our modern society, more than any other, needs depth, calm, peace, and silence. It is from there that genuine joy can well up

and flow to others and make this world a happy place. It proclaims and witnesses to the blissful awareness of the ultimate and total Reality, which in India is the definition of God and prayer: Saccidananda.

V. GENUINE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN THE CHURCH IN ASIA AND THE ASIAN PEOPLES AT THE LEVEL OF GOD-EXPERIENCE

Witness supposes that the persons and groups for whom this witness is meant should be able to understand the signs, and recognise them as meaningful to their life. If so, under what conditions can the Peoples of Asia recognise the witness of the Church of Asia?

Asians, in general, and the Hindus, in particular, are not interested merely to learn something about God. What preoccupies a Hindu, above all, is to discover God; not to know something about Him, but to know God Himself, to experience the reality of God in his life. For the Hindu this experience is fundamental. All through the history of India, one finds this ardent desire to experience the reality of God in the depths of one's soul.

It is here that our Christian contact should finally take place. The encounter with the Hindu on the level of the liturgy, language, music, and arts is not so difficult. The encounter on the level of philosophy and theology is a difficult and prolonged task, but it is not impossible. But the meeting in the unknown depth of the soul, in the experience of God, this is the ultimate task of the Church, not only in India but in all the Orient.

This experience is common to Hinduism, to Buddhism, and to a large extent, also to Taoism. In fact, it goes through the whole of the Oriental tradition. In Asia, Truth is God and God is Truth. This Truth is Presence, and any one who has experienced this Presence in prayer will be accepted as a witness to the Beyond. The witness in prayer in the Asian context can only be to Him Who is "infinitely near and further than all, within all, outside all." "He is the fulness here and fulness there, fulness springs from fulness; once fulness has proceeded from fulness, fulness remains." Only the one who lives in this fulness in everyday life can be effective witness to the Beyond in Asia of today.

Renunciation is a "must" in prayer witness. The man of prayer is also a man of renunciation. He is a seeker. Asia is always in quest; he has always to leave behind many things. Asia will not see anyone to be a man of prayer if he is a man of acquisition and possession, a man of

self-sufficiency. What Asia needs and wants is not a man of having but a man of "being." The only meaningful way of enjoying all is by renouncing all. We need more and more centres of renunciation—prayer-life, more and more centres of this experience of the Beyond. We need the inspiration of persons of minimum needs in the pilgrimage of the Beyond. In the Asian context, prayer is being there in the all-embracing and all-enveloping Presence.

VI. PRAYER APPEALING TO ASIANS

The Church of Asia should, therefore, learn to think and speak of and practise prayer, not so much in the sense of meditation, in the form of reflection on the Gospel, etc., or as a prayer of petition, or as praise of thanksgiving, or even as adoration (though, of course, all these have their place), but in the sense of the practice of the presence of God. For the Oriental, whether Hindu or Buddhist, meditation (bhajan or zen) is a method of calming the senses and the mind, not exercising them as we do in meditation, until a deeper level of consciousness or awareness is reached, and one experiences an inner peace and calm and joy, together with insight into our condition and that of the world. This is what the Buddhists call "enlightenment," and the Hindus "Samadhi," and this is what we would call "contemplation."

It is of common gift of God but it comes to those who prepare themselves for it and seek it with their whole heart. We have to insist that contemplation in this sense is not a rare gift given to a few but the normal fulfilment of any serious life of prayer. This is passivity, active passivity, purest activity, an action that comes from God and not from ourselves.

Today many people, both in Asia and in the West, are seeking this kind of prayer. This is what young people in the West come to seek in Asia and what Asian Christians need to discover. It is of vital importance in every Asian spirituality, be it Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, Indian, and so forth.

It should be emphasised that this kind of prayer does not prevent an active life of engagement in the world. On the contrary, the more the person lives from this inner centre of his being, from a presence of God within, the more he is open to the service of others. But the service is no longer external but a recognition of the inner person, a presence of God in the others.

If this is so, we can surmise the urgency of presenting to the Asian peoples the contemplative face of Christ, of the Church, with which they are little familiar.

As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman: "The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:23f). All the Christian saints and mystics, from the earliest years of the Church to our own days, witness to these words of the divine Master. Christian prayer is a great, living, ineffable experience. Through prayer we enter into interpersonal relationship with God, we come to live in familiar and constant companionship with the Father, through Jesus Christ His Son, in the Holy Spirit (II Vatican Council, *Optatam Totius*, n.8).

The great mystical work of our contemplatives should be made available to the people of other religions. More, they must be integrated in the daily life of the Christians themselves. The relentless cry of the Eastern peoples for union with God will find a response in such a Christian witness to one of its essential aspects.

We may remark how the contemplative orders have a specific role to play in Asia. It is regrettable that the only aspect of the Church which Asia has come into contact with seems to be the active one. Its contemplative side is little known. In comparison with the many so-called "active" Orders and Congregations, there are few monastic and contemplative religious Institutes in the East. And yet their contribution is essential, as the recent Popes have often stressed.

While the Church highly esteems the active apostolate which is so prized in our day, nevertheless, even in this age of feverish activity, she attaches the greatest importance of all to that form of life which is consecrated to God and devoted to the contemplation of divine things (John XXIII, Apostolic Letter *Causa Praeclara*, 16th July, 1962).

If so, how can we promote the witness of contemplative orders in our Asian countries?

Do the existing contemplative houses bear a meaningful witness in this regard? Are they mere transplantations of Western monastic and

cultural traditions, or incultured expressions of Asian mystical traditions?

What measures should be devised to integrate the contemplative dimension in all our prayers, and in the prayer life of all the sectors of the Church?

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