

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FABC

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## **I. MESSAGE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE FABC**

It was some 40 years ago, in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council that the Statutes of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) were approved by Pope Paul VI. In fact, His Holiness was present himself when the Asian Bishops representing all the Episcopal Conferences were assembled in their first ever meeting in Manila, the Philippines in 1970. Available historical records of that meeting in Manila indicate that the Pope was very visibly pleased as the Asian bishops expressed their desire to form a pan-Asian network of Asian Episcopacy. So, finally when the Pope approved the draft Statutes on a temporary basis for a period of two years, the long-awaited dream of the Asian bishops was fulfilled. In retrospect, today, 40 years later, we may also say that with the approval of the Statutes of the FABC, the Asian Churches too, embarked upon a new journey of communion and solidarity.

During the last 40 years, the many blessings that God showered on the Churches in Asia through the FABC are countless. To begin with, it has enhanced not only the communion among the local Asian Churches, but also the communion between Rome and the local Churches in Asia. The many FABC activities that were organized through the various Offices have not only re-juvenated the Asian Catholics in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, but they have also enabled many believers and non-believers in Asia, to know Jesus Christ and the basic values of his gospel better. The greater sense of brotherhood and friendship among the Asian bishops themselves that was made possible through the network of the FABC, is also a great treasure to be cherished. There are many other numerous blessings, all of which cannot be mentioned, unfortunately, within a brief message as this one. We, the FABC family, thank God for all of them, and pray that He continues through His Spirit to guide us to walk together in communion with the Universal Church. Although the FABC has accomplished so much of work to promote the gospel and its values in Asia within the past four decades, very little is known about the FABC among the Asian Churches and the wider world. Unfortunately, we have not had yet a properly documented history of the FABC. That is precisely why this present effort – on the request of the FABC Central Secretariat – to write a brief history of the FABC, by Fr. Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR (who has served as the Executive Secretary of the Office of Theological Concerns from 2002 to 2012), is very welcome. May it enjoy wider diffusion, and thus, enhance the knowledge and appreciation of the FABC and its activities, especially at

the grassroots levels in the Churches in Asia! May it also be a stiumlus for the next 40 years of the FABC!

Oswald Cardinal Gracias  
President, Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)  
Archbishop of Mumbai

## II. INTRODUCTION

Last year (2012) marked the 40th anniversary of the Vatican's approval of the Statutes of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* popularly known as the FABC. In order to mark this special occasion, a few months ago, the Central Secretariat of the FABC in Hong Kong appointed a committee to work towards bringing out an FABC History Volume. The committee consisted of Archbishop (now Cardinal) Luis Antonio Tagle [Archbishop of Manila and Bishop-Chairman of the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC], Frs. Raymond O'Toole [the then Assistant Secretary General of the FABC, and now the Secretary General], Raymond Ambroise [Executive Secretary of the Office of Social Communications of the FABC], Vimal Tirimanna [the then Executive Secretary of the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC] and James H. Kroeger [Professor at Ateneo di Manila, Philippines]. Cardinal Tagle was to function as the Chairman of the committee while Fr. Tirimanna was to be the Convener. After a few preliminary exchanges among the members via e-mail, the committee met during the 10<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the FABC at Xuan Loc, Vietnam, on 14th December 2012, to finalize the project on FABC history. It was decided unanimously to follow a two-fold approach in producing an FABC history of the past 40 years: to write a popular, reader-friendly but an all-comprehensive volume and to write an academically serious volume, concentrating mainly on the FABC theology as it has evolved all along the Final Statements of the ten successive Plenary Assemblies held thus far. Fr. Tirimanna was entrusted with the work of the first volume the purpose of which was to popularize FABC as a whole among all levels of the Asian Churches while Fr. Kroeger was entrusted with the second, the purpose of which was to provide an academically sound account of FABC theology.

Accordingly, what you have right now in your hands is the first volume of the History of the FABC. It consists mainly of the presentations made

at the very first session of the recent Plenary Assembly in Vietnam by His Eminence John Cardinal Tong of Hong Kong [based on the unique contribution of Bishop Francis Hsu, a pioneer of the FABC], His Excellency Archbishop Thomas de Souza of Calcutta [who read out a reminiscence of the FABC's beginnings written by the former FABC Secretary General Archbishop Henry de Souza of Calcutta], Fr. Raymond O'Toole [who has worked out a few important elements of the beginnings of the FABC based on material he gathered on two of the pioneers of the FABC: Stephen Cardinal Kim of Korea and on Bishop Hsu of Hong Kong], Fr. Raymond Ambrose [a summary of what the FABC is] and Fr. James Kroeger [a succinct theology that evolves from the Final Statements of the FABC Plenaries].

While I have compiled the main text of the history of the FABC that follows in this volume, using almost all the above first hand material, I also decided to attach two of those presentations in their entirety as appendices at the end: the first hand testimony of Archbishop Henry de Souza on the FABC and the theological account by Fr. Kroeger. This is because these two documents belong to a different genre of writing, and they deserve to be re-produced in their entirety. In addition to the above sources, I have also freely used Edmund Chia's fine article on the occasion of 30 years' of the FABC that appeared in the *FABC Papers* No: 106 and a few other works mentioned in the Bibliography. The reader needs to note that since this is a popular version of FABC history, I have refrained from giving the precise sources in the form of footnotes or references, except where it is really necessary.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude for all those who not only gave their permission to use their sources but also went out of their way to provide me with the first hand material they possessed.

Vimal Tirimanna, CSSR  
February 2013

### **III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FABC**

#### **The Origins**

It is commonly held that the foundation of the FABC goes back to the Second Vatican Council itself. It was during the sessions of the Council in Rome that many Asian bishops happened to meet one another for the first time. Their long spells of stay together in Rome for the Council enabled them to form closer relationships and friendships with one another. Actually, most of them realized that till then they have had better relationships with bishops from Europe, especially from Rome, than with their fellow bishops from Asia. It was precisely this realization that made them talk about the need for a structure which would enable them to have more interactions and cooperation among themselves across Asia.

Thus, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is the fulfilment of this long-standing dream of the Bishops of Asia. They had the remote preparation for it when they met together officially as a group for the first time in 1970 in Manila, Philippines, just a couple of years after the Vatican II. The papal visit of Pope Paul VI to Asia in November-December 1970 provided the proximate occasion for the Asian bishops to come together in Manila, once again, and to lay a firm foundation for the would-be-FABC. In his discourse to the assembled Asian Bishops, Paul VI called their gathering "a historical moment full of mystery".

#### **Asian Bishops' Meeting in Manila – 1970 (ABM)**

The historical nature of this meeting can be understood if one may rightfully realize that this particular episcopal gathering which brought some 180 bishops from all over Asia, the Asian Bishops' Meeting (ABM, as it was popularly known), as the moment when the very notion of a pan-Asian Episcopal organization was officially conceived, conceptualized and agreed upon. Never before had the Asian bishops come together in such numbers to exchange experiences, and to deliberate jointly on common questions and problems facing their vast and diverse continent. After a conference by Thomas Cardinal Coraray of Sri Lanka on the theme "Economic Problems of Asia and Their Solutions", Cardinal Darmajuwono of Indonesia launched the idea of

founding a Central Secretariat for the implementation of the proposals and resolutions that might emerge during that general meeting of the Asian Episcopate. That same afternoon, a group of Bishops, including Cardinal Kim of Korea, Cardinal Darmajuwono of Indonesia, Cardinal Gracias of India, Bishop Francis Hsu of Hong Kong, Bishop Mariano Gaviola of the Philippines, and the Filipino Jesuit Provincial Fr. Horacio de la Costa met together to try to give a more concrete and convincing profile to the proposal of establishing a permanent Asian Episcopal structure. The then Secretary of the Vatican's Congregation for Evangelization Archbishop Sergio Pignedoli himself made it known to the Bishops that he supported their initiative and in fact committed himself to back it up before the Pope if ever it were approved by the assembly. During the plenary discussions, Cardinal Darmajuwono made it very clear to the Bishops that the proposed Central Committee was not to become an authority above the national Episcopal Conferences, but was intended to be a structure as modest and flexible as possible. This was aimed above all at the reserve expressed by some Bishops who feared that such a structure might represent a further burden for the already small and overburdened local Churches of Asia. As a result of this clarification which also dispelled any fear on the part of the respective presidents of the national Episcopal Conferences that the proposed structure might invade into their own autonomy, the assembly as a whole reached a consensus. Thus, the very first resolution of the ABM was that a permanent structure be established linking the Bishops across Asia.

For the resolution to become official, however, the approval of the Pope was still necessary. The same resolution, therefore, was voted upon once again during the session held in the presence of Pope Paul VI on 28th November 1970. The Pope seemed favorable and so, the new approbation of the resolution seemed nothing more than a formality. The assembled Bishops also gave a mandate to hold a follow-up meeting in Hong Kong in March 1971, of all the Presidents of the Asian Episcopal Conferences, to pursue the matter of a permanent Asian Episcopal structure. Bishop Francis Hsu of Hong Kong was mandated to organize this meeting.

### **A Few Important Decisions of the ABM**

Some of the surviving pioneer theologians of the FABC, such as Fr. Arevalo of the Philippines, are of the opinion that Stephen Cardinal Kim

of Korea played a leading role in the formation of the FABC, and that the latter had been working on the idea long before the ABM meeting in Manila. From the available documents one notices that the very first resolution of the ABM read: “The General Assembly of this meeting adopts the following resolution; namely: (by show of hands)

*That the Episcopal Conference here represented are urged to authorize and support a permanent structure for the effective implementation of the decisions of this meeting.”*

In the draft no.4 of the resolutions which was finally presented to and adopted by the General Assembly of the ABM on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1970, one notices a broadening of this original idea to include continuing collaboration among the Episcopal Conferences of Asia. In view of this, a minutely formulated structure was presented to the Bishops assembled which included a Central Committee that consisted of the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences or their Episcopal representatives. This Central Committee, in turn, was to constitute what was called a “Standing Committee” consisting of three bishops from different geographical Regions of Asia, namely, South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia.<sup>1</sup> If the members of this Standing Committee were not already members of the Central Committee, then, they would automatically become *ex officio* of the Central Committee. The specific function envisioned of this Standing Committee was to provide direct guidance and support “to the principal instrument of coordination of Asian bishops, namely, a Central Secretariat”. One needs to notice in this original structure of the FABC (as envisioned by the pioneers) how it was emphasized that “the Central Secretariat is a service agency with no juridical competence to issue directives to, or in any way to infringe on the authority and autonomy of the Episcopal Conferences”.

It was clearly specified that “considering the limited resources of the Asian bishops, the Central Secretariat shall be a very modest affair to begin with, consisting of one Secretary General and a small clerical staff”. The Secretary General was to be appointed by the Central Committee for a term of two years. Among the specific functions attributed to the Central Secretariat were mainly matters to do with justice, development and peace.<sup>2</sup> Again, one needs to notice that the

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<sup>1</sup> Today, there are four such Regions, with the addition of Central Asia.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, no wonder that eventually the first Office of the FABC was the Office of Human Development (OHD) that was entrusted with all these tasks in its functioning.

creation of a post of the Secretary General at the helm of the would-be-permanent FABC (instead of having a President as in other such continental Episcopal bodies) was also meant to stress the non-judicial or non-binding nature of the decisions of the FABC on the member Episcopal Conferences of Asia.

The ABM also specified that the Central Secretariat shall be located in an Asian city “which is, as far as possible, geographically central to the region, and at the same time where the Secretary General will have easy access to the specialists and the international agencies upon whose collaboration he will depend”. Then, it went on to say that to the mind of the bishops gathered, the city that best met these specifications was Manila in the Philippines.

It is interesting to note how at the very beginning itself the bishops were talking of cooperation and solidarity, especially with regard to the running of this newly to-be-formed Asian Episcopate:

“The Episcopal Conference of Asia shall contribute yearly to the expenses of the Central Secretariat in the manner specified by the Central Committee. It is suggested that a fund of US \$30,000 for the first year is an absolute minimum with which to make a start. Because of the poverty of many Asian dioceses, donations from more affluent dioceses will be appreciated, and efforts should be made to seek other sources of funding.”

When one combs through all the above concrete decisions, it is obvious that the Asian bishops at their very first meeting itself were determined to set up their pan-Asian structure for solidarity and cooperation, with a far-reaching vision. At the end of the ABM, the Bishops adopted the following resolution: “The first meeting of the Central Committee of the Asian Bishops at which the structure described above shall be set up, will be held in March 1971 in Hong Kong”. The enthusiasm of the Asian bishops for a permanent structure was such that instead of the one meeting mandated by the ABM, as it turned out, three historic meetings were held in Hong Kong in March 1971, August 1972 and February 1973.



## **The First Historic Meeting in Hong Kong (March 1971)**

For the first meeting in March 1971 which was held at the Maryknoll House in Stanley, Hong Kong, there were 11 Presidents of the Asian Episcopal Conferences. Valerian Cardinal Gracias of Bombay, India, presided over at this meeting. The other representative Presidents were: Stephen Cardinal Kim of South Korea, Thomas Cardinal Cooray, OMI of Sri Lanka, Justinus Cardinal Darmojuwono of Indonesia, Archbishop Paul Y. Taguchi of Japan, Archbishop Teopisto V. Alberto of the Philippines, Archbishop Joseph Kuo, CDD of Taiwan, Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van Binh of Vietnam, Bishop E. Loosdregt, OMI of Laos & Cambodia, Bishop Anthony D. Galvin, MHM of Malaysia, and Bishop Robert R. Bamrungtrankul of Thailand.

It was at this meeting of the Asian Bishops that their dream of a permanent Asian Episcopal structure really took off the ground. To begin with, this structure was given the name "Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences" (FABC) at this meeting. An unexpected message, however, reached the participants of this meeting, via Bishop Edward Cassidy, the Vatican's representative in Taipei, to the effect that the Roman Curia had made negative and critical comments about the resolutions of the ABM and this was a serious concern for the Asian Bishops. Bishop Cassidy, however, sympathized with the Bishops and promised to defend their cause in the Roman Dicasteries. This assurance encouraged and enabled the group to go ahead with their agenda of the meeting.

One of the main agenda items of this first meeting of the Asian Episcopate in Hong Kong was the establishment of a Follow-up Committee to implement the resolutions of the ABM and to draft a set of Statutes for the new permanent structure. Elected to this Follow-up Committee were: Stephen Cardinal Kim of South Korea (Chairman), Bishop Francis Hsu (Secretary), Justin Cardinal Darmojuwono of Indonesia, Archbishop Teopisto Alberto of the Philippines and Bishop Patrick D'Souza of India. An Assistant Secretary was also appointed in the person of Fr. John Cioppa, MM, at this meeting in 1971 and in 1972 he resigned as he was elected Regional Superior of Maryknoll Hong Kong and was succeeded by Fr. Edward Malone, MM. This Committee was to serve as a provisional structure until a permanent body was established. As a matter of fact, most of this meeting was devoted to a preliminary consideration of possible Statutes for the newly formed

FABC which would be submitted to the respective Conferences later for study and revision, and then to be sent to Rome for approval.

In fact, the Bishops had originally decided to set up a provisional structure *ad experimentum* which was to be further developed later. However, the Vatican disapproved this move and asked that the Statutes be elaborated with the approval of each Episcopal Conference. This was a serious set back to the ever increasing enthusiasm of the Asian Bishops to form their pan-Asian Episcopal Structure, because this Vatican move meant a delaying of their dream of Asian Episcopal solidarity. The Bishops then wrote a letter to the Pope expressing their concern (See Appendix II)<sup>3</sup>.

### **The Second Historic Meeting in Hong Kong (August 1972)**

The second meeting of the Presidents of the Asian Episcopal Conferences took place from 24th to 25th August 1972 at the Lee Gardens Hotel. Ten Conferences were represented by Stephen Cardinal Kim of Korea, Thomas Cardinal Cooray, OMI of Sri Lanka, Archbishop Leo Soekoto, SJ of Indonesia, Archbishop Teopisto Alberto of the Philippines, Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van Binh of South Vietnam, Bishop Michael Rosario of Bangladesh, Bishop Patrick D'Souza of India, Bishop Etienne Loosdregt, OMI of Laos & Cambodia, Bishop Anthony Galvin, MHM of Malaysia & Singapore, and Bishop Mathew Kia of Taiwan. Also present were Bishop Francis Nguyen Van Tuan of South Vietnam and Bishop Julio Xavier Labayen of the Philippines. Representatives from Burma and Pakistan were absent. We need to note that the Episcopal Conferences of Japan and Thailand did not send their official representatives for this meeting. The Thai Bishops were not in favour of setting up a permanent Asian Episcopal structure while the Bishops of Japan did not agree with the draft of the would-be Statutes of such a structure. Subsequently, each Bishop was approached by Rome

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<sup>3</sup> In this important letter, any attentive reader ought to notice the eagerness and enthusiasm of those pioneer Asian bishops to begin the infra-structure of the FABC. They were ready even to appeal to the Holy Father directly to realise their noble dream. The letter also clearly indicates their original intent for establishing such an Episcopal organization in Asia. I have taken the contents of this letter directly from the presentation of His Eminence John Cardinal Tong of Hong Kong at the last Plenary Assembly in Xuan Loc, Vietnam. I am very grateful to him for lending a copy of the letter to me for the exact purpose of writing this Brief History of the FABC.

for their opinions, and the Japanese Bishops unanimously voted against the idea.

During the meeting, there was a serious concern as to whether the permanent structure would ever be realized. The Bishops were quite worried and disappointed that Rome did not support the idea of forming a 'Federation' of the Asian Conferences. It was feared that the proposed Asian organism, too, might develop along the lines of CELAM (the Latin American Episcopal Council) which was by then perceived as 'problematic' by the Vatican Curia. In addition to this, there were a few disagreements among a couple of Asian Conferences about the permanent structure and/or the modalities of its functioning. However, a second draft of the Statutes prepared by the Follow-up Committee was discussed and approved by 12 of the 14 Episcopal Conferences. Immediately after this meeting, three Asian Cardinals went straight to Rome to meet the Pope personally and present their case for establishing the permanent structure (FABC). They presented to the Pope the second draft of the Statutes, and to their great surprise, they also found out that the Pope was not informed at all of the first draft of the Statutes which they had sent earlier! A few months later, on 16th November, 1972, the second draft of the Statutes were approved *ad experimentum* for two years, by Pope Paul VI. This in fact, is the official starting point of the FABC, because this is the moment, the historical moment, when Rome officially recognized the FABC.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Third Historic Meeting in Hong Kong (November 1973)**

The third historic meeting in Hong Kong of the Asian Episcopate took place from 13th to 15th February 1973. This, in fact, was the first meeting of the by now officially established Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), under the provisionally approved Statutes. The representatives of the Asian Episcopal Conferences at this meeting were: Archbishop Simon Lourdasamy, the Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Stephen Cardinal Kim of South Korea, Thomas Cardinal Cooray, OMI of Sri Lanka, Archbishop Leo Soekoto of Indonesia, Archbishop Teopisto Alberto of the Philippines, Archbishop Stanislaus Loguang of Taiwan, Bishop

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<sup>4</sup> Hence the official 40th Year celebration of the approval of the FABC Statutes in December 2012 in Xuan Loc, Vietnam, during the 10th Plenary Assembly of the FABC.

Francis Hsu of Hong Kong, Bishop Patrick D'Souza of India, Bishop Etienne Loosdregt, OMI of Laos & Cambodia, Bishop Paul Tavares of Macau, Bishop Simon Pereira of Pakistan and Bishop Nguyen Van Tuan of South Vietnam. There were also five Consultants and Observers at this meeting: Archbishop Angelo Fernandes of India, Bishop Patna Bamrungtrakal of Thailand, Bishop Paul Yashuda of Japan, Bishop Julio Xavier Labayan of the Philippines and Msgr. Francis Colasuonno of the Apostolic Nunciature in Taiwan.

One of the first items on the agenda of this important meeting was the election of the first Secretary General of the FABC. Four names were proposed and Bishop Francis Hsu of Hong Kong was elected by a majority of votes and was duly declared FABC's first Secretary General. Then followed the election of the members of the Standing Committee. The following three were elected according to the regions: Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang (East Asia), Bishop Mariano Gaviola (South East Asia), and Bishop Oswald Gomis (South Asia). Two more Bishops were elected irrespective of region: Bishop Patrick D'Souza of India and Donatus Djagomi, SVD of Indonesia. Bishop Gaviola was later elected Chairman of the Standing Committee.

This meeting in Hong Kong was really historical for the fledgling FABC in another sense: it was at this meeting that the first Office of the FABC was confirmed, and the establishment of other Offices was planned. Accordingly, the Central Committee confirmed the establishment of the Office of Human Development, and eventually, this is the first Office of the FABC. The Office of Social Communication was to be confirmed by the Standing Committee soon. The establishment of other FABC Offices such as an Office of Ecumenism and Inter-religious Affairs, an Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy, and an Office of Missions, was also initiated at this meeting.

The first meeting of the newly constituted Standing Committee was fixed for 2nd to 4th May 1973 in Hong Kong. It was also unanimously agreed that the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC would take place in April or May of 1974. As the General Synod of Bishops was due to take place in Rome in October 1974, the Bishops decided to choose a theme similar to that of the Synod, i.e., "Evangelization in the Modern World". Accordingly, the Standing Committee later chose the theme "Evangelization in Modern Asia" as the theme for the first Plenary Assembly of the FABC.

**Note:** Hardly three months after his election as the first Secretary General of the FABC, Bishop Francis Hsu died suddenly, on 23rd May 1973. Needless to say that this was a big blow to the new fledgling FABC. Bishop Hsu, a graduate from Oxford University, was known for his brilliance and his pioneering spirit. With his sudden demise, his unique organizational skills were badly missed by the Asian Bishops. In fact, his leadership and insights along with those of Cardinal Kim of Korea at the Asian Bishops' Meeting in Manila prepared the groundwork and the foundational structure for the future FABC. Indeed, they were "the leaders among the leaders". With the first FABC Plenary Assembly less than a year away, Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang of Taiwan was appointed Acting Secretary General and Taipei was chosen as the venue.

### **Objectives of the FABC**

The main objectives of the FABC are spelt out in the Statutes article 2:

- to study ways and means to promote the missionary activity of the Churches in the light of the Council's vision, documents of the official Magisterium, and the needs of society;
- to promote and encourage a dynamic presence of the Church in the process of total development of the Asian peoples;
- to stimulate the systematic study of and joint reflection on problems of common interest, and to propose effective and coordinated solutions;
- to help communication and collaboration between the various Churches and between the bishops;
- to be of service to the Episcopal Conferences in their search for adequate ways to respond to the needs of the Christian communities;
- to help the harmonious development of Church movements and organizations on the international level;
- to establish communication and cooperation with other Christian Churches and other religions.

### **Membership of the FABC**

Asia being the largest continent on earth with more than half the world's population is immense and diverse, in every sense of those words. The

FABC membership does not yet (at the time of composing this history, i.e., March 2013) cover all of Asia. For example, Western Asian Episcopal Conferences are yet to be members of the FABC. It was only during the last decade or so that the “young” Churches of Central Asia (most of which were in former Soviet Union Republics) became members of the FABC. Right now, the FABC boasts of 19 full-members and 9 associate-members<sup>5</sup>.

### **The Full Member Conferences of the FABC**

- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Bangladesh (CBCB)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI)
- Conference of Catholic Bishops of India (CCBI) – *Latin Rite*
- Syro-Malabar Catholic Bishops’ Conference
- Syro-Malankara Catholic Bishops’ Conference
- Konferensi Waligereja Indonesia (KWI)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan (CBCJ)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Kazakhstan (KKEK)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea (CBCK)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Laos and Cambodia (CELAC)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei (CBCMSB)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Myanmar (CBCM)
- Pakistan Catholic Bishops’ Conference (PCBC)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Sri Lanka (CBCSL)
- Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference (CRBC)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Thailand (CBCT)
- Episcopal Conference of Timor Leste (CET)
- Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam (CBCV)

### **The Associate Members of the FABC**

- Hong Kong
- Macau

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<sup>5</sup> Only a Conference of Bishops can be a Full-member of the FABC. To be a ‘Conference’, there should be at least three dioceses in a given unit/country. Those which do not have three dioceses are accorded ‘Associate’ membership in the FABC.

- Mongolia
- Nepal
- Novosibirsk, Russia
- Kyrgyzstan
- Tajikistan
- Turkmenistan
- Uzbekistan

### **FABC Plenary Assemblies and their Final Statements**

The Plenary Assemblies of the FABC are the highest authority in the decision-making of the FABC's structure. They are normally held every four years or so. Till about the 7th Plenary Assembly in Korea in 2004, such Assemblies lasted for some ten days and were normally attended by about 200 participants from all over FABC parts of Asia of whom half were Bishop delegates. The last two Plenary Assemblies (since 2004), however, lasted for six days, and the participation at them was drastically reduced, and now the majority of the participants are Bishops. However, all along, it was only the official Bishop members of the Assemblies who had voting rights. While all the Presidents of member Episcopal Conferences are ex-ufficio members of the Assembly (in view of their membership in the Central Committee) along with the Bishops in the Standing Committee, each member Episcopal Conference now elects their representatives to the Plenary Assemblies, the number of such representatives being directly proportionate to the number of dioceses in a given Conference. The Bishop-Chairmen of the different Offices along with their Executive Secretaries also participate as non-voting observers. Some consultants to various Offices and other guests are also invited as observers. As Edmund Chia observes very correctly, "the Plenary Assemblies are occasions where the bishops can study a particular issue together, not only among themselves, but with input and interactions from the various sectors of the Church as well". Chia goes on to point out that "the Plenary Assemblies, far from being stoic academic sessions, are really occasions for living as 'Church' together, and with Church peoples from different ministerial sectors, and from different geographical regions". However, as already mentioned, only the official bishop-members of the Assemblies are eligible to vote.

A word about the Final Statements of these Plenary Assemblies may not be out of place. Till 2004, it was a special drafting Committee appointed by the participant Bishops who were responsible for drafting the would-be-Final Statements. In view of the discussions and responses of the participant Bishops, these drafts were revised and re-drafted, and finally put to vote. However, since 2004, a different methodology has been followed in formulating and approving the Final Statements of the last two Plenaries of the FABC, a methodology very similar to that being followed at the Roman Synods since Vatican II. Accordingly, a sort of a *Lineamenta* is circulated by the Central Secretariat among all the member-Episcopal Conferences and the Offices of the FABC. Once their feedback arrives, what may be called a “Working Document” (*Instrumentum Laboris*) is prepared and once again circulated among the member Conferences and the Offices. It is this Working Document that is finally taken up by the Assembly, and discussed, amended when and where necessary, and voted upon by the Bishops. Since it is the Bishop delegates of the member Conferences who have the final say in approving the Final Statements of the FABC, they are owned exclusively by the Asian Episcopate, and they can be rightly construed as the voice of the Asian Episcopate.

The theme for each Plenary Assembly is chosen in consultation with all the member-Conferences of the FABC, and is finally voted upon by the Bishops of the Central Committee. A careful glance at the various concerns which each FABC Plenary Assembly addressed will shed more light on the central theses and thrust of the FABC: *that the Lord Jesus and the Church are not only relevant but absolutely necessary for Asia and its peoples, but they have to be presented in somewhat a different mode, a mode that is understandable and palatable to Asians*. Given below is a list of the ten Plenary Assemblies and the Themes that were taken up by them; they are an indicator of the pastoral concerns of the Asian Episcopate<sup>6</sup>:

1. **The First Plenary Assembly** (Taipei, Taiwan, April 1974): “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia”
2. **The Second Plenary Assembly** (Calcutta, India, November 1978): “Prayer as Life of the Church”
3. **The Third Plenary Assembly** (Bangkok, Thailand, October 1982): “Church as Community of Faith”

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<sup>6</sup> A theological analysis of these Final Statements are to be found in Appendix III.



4. **The Fourth Plenary Assembly** (Tokyo, Japan, September 1986): “Vocation and Mission of the Laity”
5. **The Fifth Plenary Assembly** (Bandung, Indonesia, July 1990): “New Way of Being Church”
6. **The Sixth Plenary Assembly** (Manila, the Philippines, January 1995): “Discipleship as Service to Life”
7. **The Seventh Plenary Assembly** (Sampran, Thailand, January 2000): “Renewed Church – Mission of Love and Service”
8. **The Eighth Plenary Assembly** (Daejeon, South Korea, August 2004): “Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life”
9. **The Ninth Plenary Assembly** (Manila, the Philippines, August 2009): “Living the Eucharist in Asia”
10. **The Tenth Plenary Assembly** (Xuan Loc, Vietnam, December 2012): “FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia”

#### **List of Office-Bearers of the FABC To-date**

As already mentioned above, right from the beginning, the FABC’s supreme authority was the Central Committee which consisted mainly of the presidents of the member Episcopal Conferences. There had also been a Secretary General and an Assistant Secretary to oversee the functioning of the Central Secretariat in Hong Kong. The following have been the Secretaries General in the history of the FABC to-date:

1. Bishop Francis Xavier Hsu, Bishop of Hong Kong (February 1973 – May 1973)<sup>7</sup>
2. Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang, Archbishop of Taipei, Taiwan (May 1973 – April 1974)
3. Archbishop Mario Gaviola Y Garces, Archbishop of Lipa, the Philippines (1974 – 1983)
4. Archbishop Henry Sebastian D’Souza, Archbishop of Calcutta, India (1984 – 1993)
5. Archbishop Oscar V. Cruz, Archbishop of Lingayen-Dagupan, the Philippines (1994 – 1999)

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<sup>7</sup> Although Bishop Hsu was elected the first Secretary General, within three months, he died suddenly. Archbishop Lokuang of Taipei was appointed acting Secretary General as the first Plenary Assembly meeting was already scheduled to be held in Taipei, Taiwan.

6. Archbishop Oswald Thomas Coman Gomis, Archbishop of Colombo, Sri Lanka (2000 – 2005)
7. Archbishop Orlando Beltran Quevedo, OMI, Archbishop of Cotabato, the Philippines (2006 – 2011)
8. Oswald Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Mumbai, India (2011 – 2012) See \*

The above Secretaries General had been ably assisted by the following Assistant Secretaries General:

9. Fr. John Cioppa, MM (1971 – 1972)<sup>8</sup>
10. Fr. Edward Malone, MM (1972 – 2004)
11. Fr. Raymond L. O’Toole, SFM (2005 – 2012)

\* It should be noted that at the X FABC Plenary Assembly December 2012, amendments were made so that the Secretary General became the President and the Assistant Secretary General, Secretary General. The first President of the FABC is Oswald Cardinal Gracias (Jan. 2013 - ) and Secretary General, Fr. Raymond L. O’Toole, SFM (2013 - ).

### **The Offices of the FABC**

Although the FABC is exclusively to do with Asian Bishops, its ground-level functioning is through its Offices which are manned by experts on particular fields chosen from among the laity, religious and clergy. As already mentioned, it was at the third meeting of the Asian Bishops in Hong Kong that the official establishment of the Offices was done. Each Office normally consists of three to five Bishop-members from among whom a Bishop-Chairman is elected. Every Office also has an Executive Secretary appointed by the Central Committee. The only exception to this rule is the Office of Theological Concerns which in addition to the above-mentioned members, also has a theologian-representative nominated by each member Episcopal Conference of the FABC. Today, there are nine Offices of the FABC<sup>9</sup> which enable the Asian Bishops to realize the objectives of the FABC mentioned above. They are:

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<sup>8</sup> Fr. Cioppa was asked by Bp. Francis Hsu to help organize the first meetings in Hong Kong, but as he was elected the Regional Superior of the Maryknolls in 1972, he resigned as Assistant Secretary General and Fr. Edward Malone, MM succeeded him.

<sup>9</sup> There is also a recently established “Desk for Climate Change” which does not come under any of the nine Offices.

1. The Office of Human Development (OHD)
2. The Office of Social Communication (OSC)
3. The Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA)
4. The Office of Education and Faith Formation (OEFF)<sup>10</sup>
5. The Office of Evangelization (OE)<sup>11</sup>
6. The Office of Laity and Family (OLF)  
Women's Desk, AsIPA Desk and Youth Desk
7. The Office of Theological Concerns (OTC)<sup>12</sup>
8. The Office of Clergy (OC)
9. The Office of Consecrated Life (OCL)
10. Climate Change Desk
11. FABC Documentation Centre

All along its 40 years of existence, these Offices have endeavoured to animate Asian Churches by means of seminars, conferences, colloquia, retreats, workshops, immersion programs,..... etc. for Bishops as well as for priests, religious and laity. What have come to be known as “Bishops’ Institutes” which are organized by different FABC Offices have been a characteristic of FABC activities as a whole. As such, terms like BISA’s (Bishops’ Institute for Social Action), BIMA’s (Bishops’ Institute of Missionary Apostolate), BIBA’s (Bishops’ Institute for Biblical Apostolate), BIRA’s (Bishops’ Institute for Interreligious Dialogue), BILA’s (Bishops’ Institute for Lay Apostolate), BITA’s (Bishops’ Institute for Theological Animation), .....etc. are of common parlance of the FABC’s functioning. These “Bishops’ Institutes” are a form of seminars whose main scope is in the first place to conscientize the Asian Bishops about the respective issues/problems of social action, social communication, missionary activities, biblical apostolate, dialogue, catechesis, theological animation, formation of priests, religious and laity,.....etc. They are moments of dialogue, experience, sharing, common reflection, of reading the signs of the times, of seeing new theological horizons, of searching for more adequate pastoral

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<sup>10</sup> Earlier, this Office was known as the Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy.

<sup>11</sup> This Office has three desks attached to it: The Desks for Women, Youth and ASiPA.

<sup>12</sup> This Office was formerly known as the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC).

responses to the real and immediate needs of the Church and society, from the point of view of lived Asian reality. These Offices also serve other evangelizing-agents of Asia through their various programs and workshops.

### FABC Publications

In her 40 years of history, the FABC has produced a substantial corpus of material as a result of the meetings, reflections, and in-puts that had featured in the above mentioned activities of her Offices. Of course, the Final Statements of her ten Plenary Assemblies thus far, form the backbone of the FABC's thinking, functioning and theology. There have also been the Messages and Final Statements of various Bishops' Institutes and workshops (eg., BIRA, BILA, BIMA, BIBA, BITA, BISA,...etc.).<sup>13</sup> Different Offices too, have published some of their activities in the form of books and pamphlets. A significant contribution to this rich body of FABC literature is the special reflection papers of the Office of Theological Concerns.<sup>14</sup> In addition to these Final Statements and theological reflections, the rich corpus of FABC thought can also be found in what is known as the *FABC Papers* which are published by the Central Secretariat in Hong Kong. At the time of writing this history, there have been 137 such Papers published. On the authority of the FABC documents, Quatra has this to say:

...they are not all in the same way an expression of the Asian episcopal Magisterium. The highest degree of authority is without

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<sup>13</sup> The Final Statements of the Plenary Assemblies as well as most of the documents of the activities of various Offices are to be found in the series "For All the Peoples of Asia". Cfr., Gaudenzio B.Rosales and Catalino G.Arevalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents 1970-1991*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992; Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, Vol.2, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997; Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, Vol.3, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002; Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2002 to 2006*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> These reflection papers are gathered together in one volume in Vimal Tirimanna, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil: Collection of TAC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007. They can also be found in the series *FABC Papers*, published by the FABC Central Secretariat, Hong Kong.

doubt in the final declarations of the Plenary Assemblies. After these, there are the documents of the Bishops' Institutes and the other continental, regional or national meetings. The documents of the TAC enjoy an authority that might be called reflected, from the fact that it is an accredited instance of the Federation and of the Bishops' Conferences that chose its members.<sup>15</sup>

All these FABC publications are efforts of the Asian Episcopate to share their reflections on Jesus the Redeemer as understood and experienced in multi-cultural, multi-religious Asia, not only with the Asian peoples, but also with the wider universal Church and world. As a result, today, there is a growing interest not only in Asia but elsewhere too, to study the FABC literature. Already many doctoral dissertations have been written on the FABC's pastoral and theological thinking.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Miguel Marcelo Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2000, 23-24. Please note that TAC here connotes Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC which later evolved into the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC).

<sup>16</sup> James H. Kroeger, has documented in summary form some of the post-graduate studies done till the year 1998. Cfr., James H.Kroeger, *Theology from the Heart of Asia: FABC Doctoral Dissertations (1985-1998)*, Vols. I and II, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008.

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## APPENDIX – I

### FABC – Some Memories from 1984 to 1993

By Archbishop Henry D’Souza

[Former Secretary General of the FABC]

In 1984 I was elected the Secretary General of FABC. It came as a surprise. But I felt honoured. I had just completed my term as Secretary General of the CBCI and so I was free to accept.

This appointment turned out to be a very special blessing on my ministry in the Church. By its statutes FABC has no president. The top most official of FABC is the Secretary General. The reason given by the founding fathers was that no particular bishop can be the head, since the Conferences were all autonomous. The role of the Secretary General was that of a Facilitator and a Representative for the Bishops Conferences of Asia. He was expected to organize and arrange programs for the Conferences of Asia and for inter-Conference meetings. The mutual sharing and getting together would be very beneficial for all concerned. The diversities of Asia were great. There were marked differences between the 3 main regions. FABC would coordinate and facilitate meetings, getting together, colloquia, etc. and find the funds in order to finance these events. Fr. Ed Malone, Dy. Secretary General, did a marvelous job in this respect.

FABC began in 1973. In its first Plenary Assembly it spelt out the vision for the Church in Asia. It wanted to build a truly local Church “incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous and loving dialogue with the living traditions, cultures and religions.”

This foundational vision has been deepened and expanded across the years. The dialogue with culture (inculturation) with religions (inter-religious dialogue) and with poverty (human development) has been the effort of the bishops of Asia. The fruit has been a bonding amongst Asian bishops in spite of the wide diversities arising from regions,

religions and languages. Whereas in the past Asian bishops seemed to be left to fend for themselves, they now found an instrument through which they could chalk out programs and concrete forms of action.

OHD was perhaps in the forefront. BISAs were followed by BIRAs, AISAs and BIMAs. Bishops were brought together not only for inputs and study sessions, they were exposed to the social, economic and cultural realities of the Asian Continent. Exposure/Immersion became a regular feature. Bishops were willing to live in the homes of the peoples of other faiths, and in the small congested quarters of average families. The experience they gained was invaluable.

Soon “theologizing” became part and parcel of FABC. It was the inductive method of theology – using local realities to discern God’s presence and plans for the Church and the local human society.

FABC became thereby a very healthy and constructive tool for understanding the local Church. This fact was recognized by the Universal Church too. By the time I became Secretary General in 1984 I was privileged to be a recipient of ex officio FABC status in National and International gatherings.

Thus I was an invitee for the Synods held in Rome in 1984, 1986 and 1990. I was also an invitee for the colloquium on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation in Basil, Switzerland in 1990. In 1991 I went for the Latin American Conference at San Domingo on the occasion of 500 years of the discovery of America. In the same year in 1991 I represented FABC in the Synod of Europe.

Perhaps the most important representation that came to me was to be nominated a member of the 12 Bishops’ Commission for the Composition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I was the Asia’s representative. Cardinal (then Fr. Christopher) Schonborn was the Secretary, and Cardinal Ratzinger the President.

During the Synods in Rome I was immensely helped by Fr. Ed Malone. Before each Synod he called an FABC meeting. The Synodal bishops from Asia shared their concerns and their insights. They shared too their inputs for the floor so as to avoid repetition and to cover the many topics of the Synod. The FABC

Secretariat in Rome with the help of Fr. Malone helped for secretarial work and other needs of the Asian bishops.

When in 1985 Australia wanted to form a Federation for Australia and Oceania I was invited to Sydney to help with a talk and some inputs. Australian Catholic Relief Services was the host for that occasion.

Among the other events of note were the Eucharistic Congresses in Korea and in Japan. On both occasions I went as Secretary General of FABC and participated in the discussions.

Perhaps the most significant of all my representations were the visits to China. In 1984 a trip to China was planned by Fr. John Tong of Hong Kong. He later became Archbishop of Hong Kong. It was a visit to the Patriotic Church in China. Some ten bishops from Asia were in the delegation. Among them were the bishops from Malaysia, Philippines, Pakistan and so on. After we had further reflection in Taiwan, a second trip was planned in 1986. This time we included the Island of Sanchien, where St. Francis Xavier died. The purpose was always the same – to be a bridge between Rome and the Church in China.

The insights from these various representations in various parts of Asia and elsewhere are part of FABC history. Details would be available in the FABC records.

An important fruit of these representations, exposures, Synods, Colloquia, etc. was a number of valuable insights. The Office of Theological Affairs used these occasions to theologize on “the signs of the times”. Fr. Arevalo and Felix Wilfred were the key theologians along with Bishops Levada, Legaspie and Quevedo, Joe Rodricks, S.J. and others. They did help the Universal Church to understand the “structures of sin” and the urgency and necessity of “inculturation”. Cardinal Ratzinger in fact acknowledged these insights by calling an FABC meeting in Hong Kong for the Asian bishops and theologians. It was very successful. He spoke of inter-culturation and the osmosis that occurs when faith meets different cultures and beliefs. After the meeting he realized that the Indian theologians were in the fore front of these reflections. He therefore called another meeting of Indian bishops and theologians to discuss the same issues.



FABC has been a valuable pioneer for the advancement of Inter-Religious Dialogue and Interculturation. It has also been responsible for a deeper understanding of the “structures of sin” and its many dimensions.

I have lost touch with FABC after retirement in 2002 and so cannot speak about it with any confidence today. However the role of FABC has been unique. My memory today seems to play tricks and at times to coalesce the past, present and future. I accept the fact gratefully as time begins to move to the “eternal now” – which I await with hopeful confidence in God’s mercy.

## APPENDIX – II

### LETTER WRITTEN TO POPE PAUL VI BY THE BISHOPS ASSEMBLED AT THE ASIAN BISHOPS’ MEETING IN MARCH 1971

**Asian Bishops’ Meeting**

**CONVENOR**

**BISHOP FRANCIS HSU P.O. BOX 2984, HONG KONG.**

**CABLE: CATHOLIC HONG KONG**

Holy Father

We, the Presidents of eleven Bishops’ Conferences of Asian countries, are gathered here in Hong Kong to take counsel together for ways to implement the resolve of the Asian Bishops’ Meeting in Manila to bear more emphatic witness to the Gospel in Asia. We are mindful both of the grave apostolic responsibility that befalls us and also of the extraordinary concern of Your Holiness for our effort.

We have taken cognizance, with much gratitude, of the comments made by various dicasteries of the Holy See on the Message and Resolutions of the Manila Meeting. We shall refer to them in our efforts to implement these documents.

Many of the points were very well taken and sincerely appreciated. Other, however, surprised and even pained us, and, on the whole, we found the comments disappointing. They seemed to have left out of

account the general tenor and intent of the Manila Meeting. Furthermore, we feel that the comments taken by themselves might tend to cast doubts on the judgment of the Bishops of Asia.

To forestall any misunderstanding of the background of the Message and Resolutions of the Manila Meeting, we have affixed an Introduction to them which we have the honour of submitting for Your Holiness' reference.

This present meeting in Hong Kong was originally mandated by the Manila Bishops' Meeting for the purpose of establishing a permanent co-ordinating body among the Churches of Asia. We had intended to set up a provisional body with flexible guidelines that would later be formalised. The wish, however, of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, as conveyed to us by the Pro-Nuncio in China, was that formal statutes be drawn up and approved by the hierarchies concerned and the Holy See, prior to establishing even a provisional structure.

This has placed us seemingly in an impasse. For at this juncture, any sign of indication or further delay among the leaders of the Church in carrying out the Manila Resolutions would undermine the credibility of the Church and inflict wounds on many. We simply cannot afford to ignore the eager expectations aroused in part by the Manila Meeting both within and without the Church in Asia, where the great masses impatiently await witness authenticated through deeds more than through words.

As an alternative, we have elected a Follow-up Committee representing the major areas of East and South Asia. Its functions will be to prepare a draft of statutes for later approval, to facilitate the flow of information among the Conference, and to help implement the Manila Resolutions as approved by the Holy See.

Your Holiness, we are all too aware of the great burden of the mission entrusted to the See of Peter, and, should our words do more to make it heavier than relieve it, we most sincerely regret this and make humble apologies. The only reason before God that compels us to speak is our deep concern better to serve the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth as pastors in Asia.

Even as we most respectfully request Your Holiness' gracious consideration of the sentiments of these undersigned, we are confident that Your Holiness will continue to lend the Church in Asia unflinching guidance and assistance, and that our concerted missionary effort will, with God's grace, come to bear fruit in good time.

Assuring Your Holiness of our loyal homage, we implore your Apostolic Blessing on us and on the flock entrusted to us unworthy pastors.

We are, of Your Holiness, the most humble and obedient servants,

Signed:

Valerian Cardinal Gracias  
(India)

Thomas Cardinal Cooray, OMI  
(Ceylon)

Justinus Cardinal Darmojuwono  
(Indonesia)

Stephen Cardinal Kim  
(Korea)

Archbishop Joseph Kuo, CDD  
(China)

Archbishop Paul Y. Taguchi  
(Japan)

Archbishop Teopisto V. Alberto  
(Philippines)

Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van  
Binh  
(Vietnam)

Bishop E. Looadregt, OMI  
(Laos)

Bishop Anthony D. Galvin, MHM  
(Malaysia)

Bishop Robert R. Bamrungtrakul  
(Thailand)

20<sup>th</sup> March, 1971.

## APPENDIX – III

### FOUR DECADES OF FABC THEOLOGY

#### Pivotal Characteristics and Emphases

James H. Kroeger, M.M.

Many approaches are possible when one attempts to capture the growth and evolution of “FABC theologizing” since the historic meeting of Pope Paul VI with 180 Asian bishops in Manila in November 1970. One helpful attempt to present this corpus of material would be to chronicle the “ten FABC plenary assemblies” with their profound insights. A second approach would be to trace the “movements toward a renewed Church in Asia” as was done in the FABC VII final document [For All the Peoples of Asia (FAPA) III: 3-4]. Thirdly, various theologians have identified “pivotal themes”; see C. Arévalo and F. Wilfred [FAPA I: xv-xxii], S. Bevans [FABC Papers 78] and E. Chia [FABC Papers 106]. Fourthly, one could explore the numerous “doctoral dissertations” written on various FABC key themes in the 40-year “historical-theological-pastoral-missionary” FABC journey [Theology from the Heart of Asia: I-II; FABC Papers 125: 45-48]. Based on consultation with some “FABC Fathers,” this brief presentation highlights ten focuses that lie at the heart of FABC Theology. In a word, this paper employs “pivotal theological currents” to capture the forty-year FABC historical evolution.

#### **I. Inductive Approach and Pastoral Spiral Methodology.**

Generally, FABC theologizing begins in the concrete context, endeavoring to explore life’s realities as the locus of doing theology. In their 1970 meeting the Asian bishops noted their sincere efforts “to open our minds and hearts to the needs and aspirations of our peoples ... [and] to look upon the face of Asia” [FAPA I: 3]. The FABC Office of Theological Concerns issued its lengthy “Methodology: Asian Christian Theology (Doing Theology in Asia Today)” in 2000 [FAPA III: 329-419; FABC Papers 96]. BISA VII (1986) enunciated the “Pastoral Cycle,” (later renamed the “Pastoral Spiral”) which is comprised of four stages: first: exposure and immersion; second: social analysis and an examination of the “human impact” of life’s realities upon people; third: the contemplative dimension which seeks to “discover God’s presence and activity within social reality”; and, fourth: pastoral planning which “seeks to translate the previous three stages into actual, realizable plans” [FAPA I: 229-233]. The FABC has widely promoted the AsIPA method

(Asian Integral Pastoral Approach) as one way to foster the growth of a participatory and co-responsible Church through the development of basic ecclesial communities; an AsIPA Desk within the Office of Laity and Family was established in late 1993. The inductive theological approach was once again employed in the Tenth Plenary Assembly (2012) as it explored “mega-trends in Asia” as the best way of “responding to the challenges of Asia” and fostering a “new evangelization.”

## **II. Jesus’ Vision of the Reign of God within an Asian Context.**

For the Asian bishops, “seeking the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed is really to build it in the concrete experiences of the social, political, economic, religious and cultural world of Asia.... The struggle for fullness of life in Asia is a seeking of the Kingdom” [FAPA I: 196]. In a 1991 theological consultation sponsored by the FABC Office of Evangelization, it was noted: “The Kingdom of God is ... universally present and at work. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent divine mystery which impinges upon them and go out of themselves in love and service to fellow humans, there the Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church” [FAPA I: 341]. Again, it is asserted: “Therefore, we commit ourselves: ... To take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an ‘Asian face,’ using Asian cultural concepts, terms, and symbols; ... To present the Gospel message as humble servants of the Kingdom of God, always sensitive to the religious and cultural traditions of the people where the Spirit leads us to make Jesus known” [FAPA III: 206].

## **III. Local Church as Primary Actor.**

The First FABC Plenary Assembly (1974) 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.... 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....” [FABC I: 9-12; FAPA I: 14]. FABC V (1990) asserted 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 people of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local churches. This local church, which is the acting subject of mission, is the people of God in a given milieu, the whole Christian community—laity, Religious and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic Ecclesial Community and other groups. Their time has come for Asia" [FABC V: 3.3.1-2; FAPA I: 281].

**IV. Dialogue as the Mode of Presence in Asian Contexts.** Asia is a continent rich in diverse faith traditions; 85% of all the world's non-Christians live in Asia. Asia's bishops have a deep appreciation of the role of dialogue in the evangelization process; they hold: "Interreligious dialogue is another integral part of evangelization which in the situation of our Churches needs to become a primary concern. We live in the midst of millions of people belonging to the great religious traditions.... In this context we believe that interreligious dialogue is a true expression of the Church's evangelizing action in which the mystery of Jesus Christ is operative, calling us all to conversion" [FAPA I: 100-101]. "The Church, the sacrament of God's message in the world, continues Christ's work of dialogue.... The Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue" [FAPA I: 115]. "Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia: it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode [dialogue]" [FAPA I: 281]. FABC III (1982) sought to promote "a true and real 'dialogue of life' with one another" in the Asian context [FAPA I: 64]. "Dialogue does not call for giving up one's commitment, bracketing it or entering into easy compromise. On the contrary, for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith" [FAPA I: 309-310]. See also: "Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the Life of the Church in Asia," [FABC Papers 130].

**V. Interiority and Motivation for Mission.** FABC II (1978), with its theme "Prayer—The Life of the Church in Asia," [FAPA I: 27-48], focused on the need for deep spirituality in the Asian Church. There must be "contact with the living God"; "prayer commits us to the true liberation of persons. It binds us to solidarity with the poor and the powerless" [FAPA I: 31, 33]. FABC V (1990) enunciated an Asian perspective on "motivation for mission," seeking to answer the perennial question: Why should we evangelize? Five motives are noted:

“We evangelize, first of all, from a deep sense of gratitude to God.... Mission is above all else an overflow of this life from grateful hearts transformed by the grace of God.... Without a personal experience of this love received as gift and mercy, no sense of mission can flourish. But mission is also a mandate. We evangelize because we are sent into the whole world to make disciples of all nations.... We evangelize also because we believe in the Lord Jesus. We have received the gift of faith.... We evangelize also because we have been incorporated by baptism into the Church, which is missionary by its very nature.... And finally, we evangelize because the Gospel is leaven for liberation and for the transformation of society [FABC V: 3:2; FAPA I: 280-281]. FABC IX in Manila (2009) focused its entire attention on the Eucharist and its pivotal role in Christian life; see *Living the Eucharist in Asia* [FABC Papers 129].

**VI. Mission: Announcing the Person and Promises of Christ.** The Churches of Asia see a clear Christological component to evangelization; they assert: “While we are aware and sensitive to the fact that evangelization is a complex reality and has many essential aspects ... we affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity” [FAPA I: 292]. During FABC V (Bandung, 1990), Asia’s bishops stated: “We affirm ... that ‘the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization.’ ... But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through Christ-like deeds. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do this by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds—this is the first call to the Churches in Asia” [FAPA I: 281-282]. Thus, “the local Churches of Asia will proclaim Jesus Christ to their fellow humans in a dialogical manner” [FAPA I: 346].

**VII. Role of Laity in a “New Way of Being Church.”** FABC IV (Tokyo, 1986) focused on “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia” [FAPA I: 177- 198]. This FABC assembly explored the role of laity in such areas as politics, youth, women, family, education, mass media, health services, work and business, identifying these areas as “the signs of the times” which are to

“be discerned by Christians and the Church of Asia.” FABC VI asserted: “It is in the faith response we give these challenges that we will discern and discover the vocation and mission of the laity for the salvation of Asia.... Such a commitment by all Christians will make the Church a communion of committed disciples—be they clergy or laity—working for the liberation of Asia” [FAPA I: 191]. FABC VIII (Daejeon, Korea, 2004) reflected deeply on the Asian Family [FAPA IV: 1-61]. One may note that the FABC Office of Laity and Family has three specialized desks (women, AsIPA, and youth) linked into its wide areas of concern.

**VIII. Engagement with and the Evangelization of Cultures.** FABC I (Taipei, 1974) asserted that the Church in Asia must become “a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry—even its frailties 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” [FAPA I: 14]. In fact, the Asian Bishops’ Meeting in 1970 had already spoken of “the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia” which will flow from “a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples” [FAPA I: 6]. This dialogue with cultures forms one dimension of the famed FABC “triple dialogue.” An in-depth “faith-culture” dialogue is pivotal for understanding the challenges of the new evangelization!

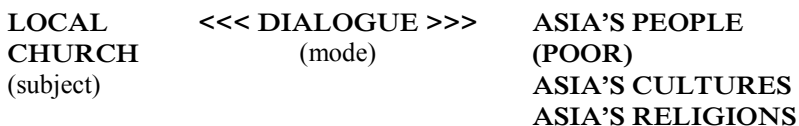
**IX. Faith-motivated Liberating Engagement in Society.** The Office of Human Development, considered to be the first FABC Office (1971), helped focus attention on the social needs of the majority of Asian people who are poor; its emphasis was heavily influenced by the 1970 visit of Paul VI and his *Populorum Progressio* (1967). The Asian Bishops (1970) noted: “It is our resolve, first of all, to be more truly ‘the Church of the poor’ [and to] place ourselves at the side of the multitudes in our continent” [FAPA I: 5]. The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly in Manila (1995—25 years after the 1970 gathering of the Asian Bishops with Pope Paul in Manila) explored the meaning of Christian



discipleship in Asia. The assembly identified “five concerns that require pastoral focus”: the Asian family, women and the girl-child, the youth, ecology, and the displaced (refugees and migrants) [FAPA II: 10-12].

**X. Promotion of Innovative Pastoral Ministries.** The FABC-sponsored “Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church” (1977) saw the need to create “new forms of ministries, alongside the existing ones ... [because] the servant Church can never adequately exercise her ministeriality through one uniform type of ministry” [FAPA I: 78]. The colloquium deepened the Church’s awareness that as she is lead by her servant Lord, she “has to discover time and again what ministries and ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfill her mission to offer to a human society the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ and to enable the members of that society to become what God intends them to be” [FAPA I: 72]. The assembly proceeded to identify over a dozen possible specialized ministries [FAPA I: 78-81]. These innovations will enable Asian Churches to “become truly Asian in all things” [FAPA I: 72].

**Synthesis:** Diagram of the FABC Paradigm of Evangelization. For four decades (1972-2012) Asia’s Christian communities have been striving to build an “evangelizing Church” in Asia (expressed in the following “triple dialogue” diagram):



This paradigm of missionary evangelization in Asia was initially enunciated in the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974. It struck a deep chord with Asia’s bishops and Christian communities, precisely because it captures the mind and mission of the local Churches, who struggle to be “in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people” [FAPA I: 14]. In FABC V (1990) the vision was reaffirmed: “Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions” [FAPA I: 280]. FABC VII (2000) again reaffirmed the “triple dialogue,” noting that “this is the vision of a renewed Church that the FABC has developed over the past thirty years. It is still valid today” [FAPA III: 4]. The Tenth FABC

Plenary Assembly (2012) once again in its final document (No. 11) noted the local Church must be “truly Asian, in triple dialogue with the religions, cultures and peoples of Asia, especially the poor.” FABC X also noted: “We thank the Lord for a challenging vision of Church in Asia.”

## APPENDIX –IV

### SOME SALIENT CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE FABC TO THE ASIAN CHURCHES DURING THE PAST 40 YEARS

Vimal Tirimanna, CSsR

#### Introduction

As the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) chalks up the 40<sup>th</sup> year of its fruitful existence this year (2012), perhaps it is opportune to take stock of its service to the Asian Churches. With this in mind, in this article, I intend to reflect briefly on the unique service rendered by the FABC to the Asian Churches<sup>17</sup> by highlighting a few salient characteristics of the FABC’s contribution to them, under the following sub-headings.

#### 1. Injecting ‘Asianness’ into the Churches in Asia

Although there is historical evidence to demonstrate traces of Christianity in Asia much before the advent of the European colonizers on the continent,<sup>18</sup> the roots of most of the Asian Churches in their present form do not go beyond the Colonial period of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of the Asian countries received the message of the gospel through the European missionaries who were often hand in glove with the European colonizers. Consequently, almost till the late 1960’s many Asian Churches were mere replicas of the European Churches to

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<sup>17</sup>In this essay, the term “Asian Churches” covers only the Episcopal Conferences that are members of the FABC, that is, countries in South Asia, South-East Asia and East Asia. The reader needs to note that a vast area of Asia (and the Churches therein) such as China and those countries in the Middle-East are, hence, excluded.

<sup>18</sup>Cfr., Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*, Vol.I, New York (Maryknoll): Orbis Books, 1998. Besides, some of the ancient Asian Churches, such as the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches in India, claim their roots to Apostolic times. See also, Felix Machado, “The Development of Theology from Vatican II to Our Days: A South Asian Perspective,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 8 (August 1999) 559.

which their respective missionaries belonged.<sup>19</sup> One of the lasting negative effects of this is that many Asian Churches were looked down by the rest of Asia as ‘foreign’ or ‘alien’ to Asian ethos.<sup>20</sup> That is why the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC could say: “From the Asian perspective, mission history from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century presents Christianity as intruding on Asian harmony or as the “period of Christianity conquering all the other religions and cultures for Christ.”<sup>21</sup>

This more than apparent ‘alienness’ (and the perceived anti-Asianness) of Asian Christianity may also be construed as one of the main reasons for the vast majority of Asian peoples not to be convinced by the message preached by the Churches in Asia though the founder of Christianity himself was born in Asia.<sup>22</sup> Although Asia boasts for nearly two thirds of world population, the Asian followers of Christ today are still an almost negligible tiny island in the vast ocean of the adherents of other great Asian religions, and this in spite of nearly five centuries of zealous missionary efforts to evangelize Asia.

These facts of appearing ‘alien’ and being a minority have been a thorn in the flesh for generations of Asian Christians, and even a sort of a ‘complex’ for some Church personnel all along. That is why the Asian Christians, especially the Catholics, welcomed with immense joy the teachings of the Second Vatican Council which encouraged inculturation in all spheres of Church life. Taking its main inspiration from the Council, the FABC from the time of its inauguration has

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<sup>19</sup>While acknowledging the many good and lasting works the European missionaries did in founding most of the Asian Churches, that too, amidst very trying conditions, we also need to mention that there were some negative effects of their missionary efforts which of course were performed in good faith. Moreover, though most of the Asian hierarchies were already predominantly native by the time the FABC was formed, the basic Church life was still non-Asian.

<sup>20</sup>Pope John Paul II himself acknowledges this fact. See *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), No. 9. (Hereafter, this document will be referred to, simply as EA). This suspicion of being ‘alien’ is cast mostly upon the Churches of the Roman Catholic communion because of its centralization in and dependence on Rome.

<sup>21</sup>Office of Theological Concerns, “Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony,” No. 1.5.1, as re-produced in Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil: Collection of TAC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007, 118. Hereafter, this work will be referred to, simply as *Sprouts*.

<sup>22</sup>Unfortunately, Christianity which was born in Asia, returned to Asia with the European Colonizers, in Western garments that were alien to the Asians.

endeavoured to foster inculturation in order to make Asian Churches truly rooted in the Asian soil, and thus, be genuinely Asian Churches. The Asian bishops gathered at the Special Synod for Asia in Rome in 1998 affirmed again and again (in their 191 interventions on the floor and in the small group discussions) that it is imperative that the Church in Asia be truly Asian; otherwise it will have no future, they insisted.<sup>23</sup> Their interventions were re-echoes of FABC-inspired sentiments, and they were expressed succinctly in Proposition no: 3 of the Synod which said: “the Churches must be immersed in the diverse contrasting and even conflicting realities of Asia. Only such immersion will help the Church define her mission to the people of Asia in an intelligible and acceptable manner.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the FABC has consistently taught that the “little flock” of Christ in Asia has a crucial role to play just as the tiny nation of Israel in the Old Testament days did in being God’s chosen people. The 4<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the FABC, for example, pointed out that the main mission of Asian Christians is to bear witness to the gospel and kingdom values. It further said:

Our minority status should not deter us from patiently working out in collaboration with Christians of other Churches and peoples of other religions and persuasions the steps needed to liberate our people from the bondage of sin and its societal manifestations, and to inscribe the values of the Kingdom in Asian society. For the Lord assures us: “Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased the Father to give you the Kingdom” (Lk 12:32).<sup>25</sup>

Later, at their 7<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly, the Asian bishops said:

We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the

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<sup>23</sup>Peter C.Phan, “Reception of Vatican II in Asia: Historical and Theological Analysis,” *Gregorianum* 83, 2 (2002) 284.

<sup>24</sup>As cited in Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, “A New Way of Being Church in Asia,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 12 (December 1999) 889. This growing sense of “being Asian,” according to Pope John Paul II “is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony.” Cfr., EA, No. 6.

<sup>25</sup>The Final Statement of the 5<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 4.6, as re-produced in Gaudencio Rosales and C.G.Arevalo (Eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 282. Hereafter, all citations from this main source of FABC documents will be referred to, simply as *FAPA - I*.

Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life. We are also convinced that only by the “inner authority” of authentic lives founded on a deep spirituality will we become credible instruments of transformation. This is important, because our contacts with those of other religious traditions have to be at the level of depth, rather than just the level of ideas or action. We are aware that this Asianness, founded on solid values, is a special gift the world is awaiting. For the whole world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life. In this task, together with all Asians, the Church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole Church in Asia.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the FABC has taken the apparent “inferiority complex” as a vibrating challenge to be immersed in Asian realities, and has changed the perceived “minority complex” into a spiritual strength, in their efforts to be truly Asian. In what follows too, the reader can easily notice the other FABC efforts to achieve the same goal.

## **2. Harmonious Living with Other Asian Realities**

If, as pointed out above, the FABC was instrumental in enabling the Asian Churches to wean themselves out of their “complexes”, it also played a similar role in paving the way for the same Churches to get rid of an equally disastrous “superiority complex”, too. A vast majority of Asian Catholics, following the teachings of their zealous missionary pioneers were taught to look down upon anything and everything that was not within the institutional Roman Catholic Church, as something negative. According to this exclusively pro-European/pro-Roman institutional Church vision, only the Roman Catholic Church possessed the truth, and consequently, all others, including other great religions, philosophies, cultures, civilizations, ... etc. of Asia, were in error.<sup>27</sup> Since the same ecclesiastical vision held that error has no rights, all those Asian realities were looked down upon not only as erroneous, but at times, even as the work of the devil which needed to be exorcised! In

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<sup>26</sup>The Introduction to Part III of the Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly in Sampran (2000), as cited in Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, Vol. 3, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002, 8-9.

<sup>27</sup>So much so, that till the Second Vatican Council, the Church literally taught: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“Outside the Church, there is no salvation”).

short, Asian Catholics were conditioned to be in an unrealistic ‘superiority complex’ that cut them off from their very Asian roots. Not seldom did such a vision provoke them to be in unnecessary polemics with their non-Christian Asian brothers and sisters with whom they had been living in harmony for centuries before the arrival of the Christian missionaries.

However, as Pope John Paul II himself wrote: “The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples who are heirs to ancient cultures, religions and traditions.”<sup>28</sup> Throughout history, Asian peoples have been known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and this is considered as a unique characteristic of Asia. This is mainly because the traditional Asian holistic approach to life necessarily demands the virtue of harmony, which has been practiced in almost all the cultures of Asia.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, opposites can exist side by side in daily life without necessarily being in conflict with each other. Neither is there any need to eliminate them, for in fact, they do complement each other in attaining fullness or completeness: “Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength.”<sup>30</sup> The East Asian concept of *yin and yang* illustrates this point well, according to which various dimensions of reality are not contradictory but complementary.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, according to the South Asian *Upanishads* and also in the thought of all the great Indian thinkers, the Supreme Being himself is the coincidence of opposites.<sup>32</sup> As the Sanskrit term *samanvaya* implies, similarities and disparities of our

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<sup>28</sup>EA, No. 6. In spite of its vastness and diversity, Asian theologians insist on a certain unity-in-diversity in lived Asian realities. See for example, Michael Amalados, “Is there an Asian Way of Doing Theology?,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 45, 1 (2008) 11-13.

<sup>29</sup>What is meant here is that Asian religious cultures are primarily cultures of harmony, though there are contemporary situations of life in Asian countries that are characterized by several tragic factors of acute disharmony.

<sup>30</sup>FABC – BIRA IV/11, No. 15, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 321.

<sup>31</sup>BIRA IV/11, No. 20 as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 322. See also, the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) document on “The Spirit at Work in Asia Today” as reproduced in *Sprouts*, 182-183.

<sup>32</sup>K.N. Mishra, “Harmony as Samanvaya: The Conjunction of Opposites,” *FABC Papers*, 76 (June 1996) 21. According to Mishra, the same thought is found in Isa 5, Katha 1.2.21, sveta 3.19,... etc. See also Machado, “The Development of Theology from Vatican II to Our Days,” 568.

human living need to exist together.<sup>33</sup> A non-Asian commentator seems to have succinctly captured the depth of this peculiarly Asian concept of harmony when he writes:

Asians are not as quick to divide large metaphysical concepts in two as traditional Western Aristotelian thought has done for millennia. Asians prefer to unite, not divide. Good and evil are less two sides of a coin than places on a large prism... the emphasis here is on achieving wholeness, mystical unity, Oneness.<sup>34</sup>

Rooting herself in this deep Asian ethos, the FABC firmly believes that “there is an Asian approach to reality, a world-view, wherein the whole is the sum-total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other, in a word, *harmony*, a word which resonates with all Asian cultures.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, at its Bandung Plenary, the FABC could say:

Mission in Asia will also seek through *dialogue* to serve the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures and socio-political structures. In an Asia marked by diversity and torn by conflicts, the Church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, the Fifth Plenary Assembly could say: “Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision.”<sup>37</sup> Thanks to the FABC’s inspiring vision of Asian realities, today, they are no longer seen as negative realities to be combated, but they are taken as spheres in and through which God has been active from ancient days, so much so, they now serve not only as Church’s partners of dialogue but also as “resources” of emerging Asian theology:<sup>38</sup> “The Holy Spirit is at

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<sup>33</sup>Mishra, “Harmony as Samanvaya...,” 568.

<sup>34</sup>Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 2002, 41.

<sup>35</sup>The OIC document on “Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony” as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 166. For further concrete descriptions of ‘harmony’ see *BIRA IV/1*, No. 13b and *BIRA IV/11*, No. 6, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 249 and 319, respectively.

<sup>36</sup>The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 4.2, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 282.

<sup>37</sup>The Final Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Tokyo, Japan, 1986, No. 3.1.10, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 181.

<sup>38</sup>Cfr., S. Arokiasamy, “Doing Theology with Asian Resources in the Context of FABC,” in Vimal Tirimanna, *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil*, Bangalore: Asian

work both in the Church and beyond its visible boundaries, since the Spirit acts in freedom and his action cannot be reduced to persons, traditions, institutions or problems of relationship.”<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, today, the vast majority of Asian bishops have extricated their Churches to a great extent from the earlier unrealistic triumphalistic vision and have inserted themselves in harmony with their teeming millions of Asian brothers and sisters.<sup>40</sup>

### **3. Highlighting two Specific Asian Ways of Evangelizing**

True to the prevalent spiritualities and theologies in which they were formed, one of the zealous preoccupations of missionary pioneers in Asia was to convert the whole of Asia to Christianity. Even at the turn of this millennium, there were a few Asian ecclesiastics themselves who (reminiscing their missionary pioneers) were still talking of converting the whole of Asia to Christianity so that they could present it as a gift to Jesus on his 2000<sup>th</sup> birthday! While insisting on the non-negotiable imperative of the Christian mission to proclaim Jesus Christ to Asia, the FABC has been much more contextually realistic in achieving this goal in and through a two-fold pastoral means: “Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia.”<sup>41</sup>

#### **3.1. Triple Dialogue**

It is precisely within the rich but peculiarly Asian concept of harmony that the Asian bishops at their very first meeting could dare to propose a triple-

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Trading Corporation, 2011, 1-20. Hereafter, this work will be referred to, simply as *Reaping*.

<sup>39</sup>BIRA IV/1, 1984, No. 10, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 249. The reader needs to note that this is also a conviction of Pope John Paul II, repeated in many of his writings using the well-known Johanine verse “The Spirit moves where he wills” (3:8), Cfr., *Dominus et Vivificantem* (1986), No. 53; *Redemptoris Missio* (1991) No.28.

<sup>40</sup>This is precisely what Pope John Paul II spoke in EA, No. 6 when he spoke of “the innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul; and it is the core around which a growing sense of being Asian is built. This ‘being Asian’ is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian Soul.”

<sup>41</sup>Final Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly in Bandung (1990) of the FABC, No. 4.1, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 282.



dialogue with the three main Asian realities of life as the concrete manifestation of the Church's evangelizing mission in Asia, namely, dialogues with the vibrant religious traditions (*inter-religious dialogue*), ancient cultures (*inculturation*) and teeming millions of Asian poor (*option for the poor*).<sup>42</sup> At the very base of this FABC concept of triple-dialogue is the presumption that people of other religions and cultures in Asia are not to be treated as mere "objects of Christian mission" but as co-subjects ("partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness").<sup>43</sup> This is because the Spirit of God has been present and active in those Asian realities even before the arrival of Christianity on the ancient continent.<sup>44</sup> The Asian bishops believe that the Asian Christians are "fellow-pilgrims on the way" with the believers of other religious traditions.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, in their insistence on a dialogue with the poor, one needs to notice the firm Asian Episcopal conviction of the real presence of Christ in and through the Asian poor. According to the Asian bishops, Christ is not only to be proclaimed in dialogue with these living realities, but he is also to be recognized in and through them, as a concrete means of evangelizing in Asia. For this very reason, the FABC through her Office of Human Development (OHD) has organized for Asian bishops, priests, religious and laity, down through the past 40 years, many immersion experiences in various contexts of the teeming millions of Asian poor.

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<sup>42</sup>Cfr., The Statement and Recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC, No. 12, 19 as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 14, 15. The call for a triple-dialogue is explicitly re-emphasized in both the Fifth and Sixth FABC Plenary Assemblies. Cfr., *FABC V*, No:3.1.2 in *FAPA-I*, 280; *FABC VI*, No. 3 in Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 2, 2. Hereafter this latter source will be referred to, simply as *FAPA-II*. For the FABC, these living realities of Asia also become "resources" of theologizing in Asia, along with the classical theological "sources". See *Sprouts*, 280-289.

<sup>43</sup>Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, "Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 55 (1991) 548.

<sup>44</sup>Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 32. Cfr., OTC document on "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 167-254. Also, see Vimal Tirimanna, "God's Active Presence Outside the Visible Institutional Church and a Few of Its Implications," in Patrick Gnanapragasam and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, ed., *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era - Essays in Honour of Prof. Felix Wilfred*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 356-378.

<sup>45</sup>See for example, *BIRA IV/6*, No. 6, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 304.

### 3.2. Witnessing through Deeds

St. Francis of Assisi is reported to have told his disciples: “Go and preach the gospel, use words only if necessary!” The same seems to be the conviction of the Asian bishops when they say:

Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode. We affirm, together with others, that “the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization” (Statement of the FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization, Suwon, South Korea, August 24-31, 1988). But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through Christ-like deeds. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia.<sup>46</sup>

As Cardinal Tagle points out, in Asia, emptying oneself as Christ emptied Himself (Phil 2:5-8), is the best form of not only being missionary but also being in solidarity with the teeming millions of Asian poor:

The kenosis of Christ means first and foremost emptying oneself of prerogatives. Although it is a minority in Asia, the Church still has so much of which to divest itself in terms of privileges and wealth, whether real or claimed. As Christ emptied himself taking the form of a humble hidden human existence, the Church in Asia must learn to choose it because it is the way of the Spirit-filled Jesus. It just cannot wait for circumstances and place to dictate it. It is edifying to see discipleship lived in the humblest of ways among the poor of Asia. When priests and religious are content to have as little food as the nearest neighbours even when they could use their influence to collect more, dialogue in self-emptying happens. When lay people renounce lucrative jobs to serve and live with the neglected poor, dialogue in self-emptying happens. When the leaders of the Church declare that the poor are the centre of gravity of the Church’s life and live by it, dialogue of self-emptying happens. The nobility of self-

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<sup>46</sup>The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 4.1, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 281-282.

emptying love simply radiates through these heroic Christians of Asia.<sup>47</sup>

Nothing can be truer than this with regard to evangelization in Asia. Pope John Paul II himself had already echoed this point when he wrote:

People in Asia need to see the clergy 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). The reverence which Asian peoples have for those in authority needs to be matched by a clear moral uprightness on the part of those with ministerial responsibilities in the Church. By their life of prayer, zealous service and exemplary conduct, the clergy witness powerfully to the Gospel in the communities in which they shepherd in the name of Christ.<sup>48</sup>

#### **4. Experiencing a Sense of Episcopal Solidarity**

In the immediate aftermath of the Vatican – II, when the Asian bishops first met in Manila in 1970, for the first time, they felt a unique sense of solidarity that led to the formation of the FABC within just a couple of years. Their enthusiasm was such that they had the very first Plenary Assembly of the FABC within the next two years in Taiwan in 1974. Having thus come together, they “were emboldened by one another, becoming collectively stronger than they would be alone.”<sup>49</sup> Fox describes the Asian Episcopal situation as follows:

To a greater or lesser degree, each of the bishops who came for the first FABC plenary, sometimes called FABC I, brought with him a complex bundle of historical, cultural, and social factors that had shaped his local church differently from others. Until Manila and Taiwan, each Asian bishop had lived in isolation, carrying these prejudices, vulnerabilities, and fears, cut off from others who might somehow understand. Yet each had been empowered by a faith that offered hope and a belief that they would prevail. For the first time, Manila and Taiwan were breaking down that sense of isolation. While individual circumstances might vary, each Asian bishop was

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<sup>47</sup>Antonio Luis Tagle, “The Mission of the Church in Asia: Living the Incarnation in Poverty and Plurality” in *Reaping*, 128-129. See also Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York (Maryknoll): Orbis Books, 1988, 35-50.

<sup>48</sup>EA, 43. What is said here explicitly on clergy is valid for all the baptized, too, with regard to witnessing.

<sup>49</sup>Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 21.

finding others sharing the same feelings, the same insecurities, the same hopes and aspirations.<sup>50</sup>

This sense of Asian Episcopal solidarity continues to be shared by the Asian bishops even today through the FABC network. Thanks to the FABC, many Asian bishops surely have come to know personally many of their counter-parts in Asia whom they would have never known otherwise. Through this Asian Episcopal network they have had the opportunity to share and evaluate among themselves their own diocesan pastoral programmes. During my 15 years of close involvement with the FABC, I have personally seen how this sense of solidarity, brotherhood and friendship among our Asian bishops have in turn inspired individual Asian bishops in their pastoral policies and also their activities in their respective dioceses and Episcopal conferences. In short, today, there is a unique sense of solidarity among many Asian bishops, which amounts to a genuine communion of Asian episcopate in concrete terms. Quatra sums up this unique FABC contribution as follows:

It had offered many occasions and stimuli to overcome the not infrequent minority complex that characterized them. It had gradually been forging a broader community of vision, discernment and action. It had stimulated and given directives for a contextual pastoral policy and a missionary activity in solidarity. It had guided the Churches to an active and creative involvement in the history of Asian peoples, and it had helped them to grow as *local* Churches, as *Asian* Churches, and as *universal* Church.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, FABC also has enabled many Asian bishops to speak in one voice of how they perceive new Evangelization in their own Asian continent. Some authors cite the example of how they courageously voiced their faith convictions springing from their very lived contexts, at the Synod for Asia in Rome in 1998 in spite of repeated, alleged “Vatican curial efforts to distract them from such convictions.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 31.

<sup>51</sup>Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 19.

<sup>52</sup>See for example, Edmund Chia, “The ‘Absence of Jesus’ in the VIIIth FABC Plenary Assembly,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 12 (December 1999) 892-899.

## 5. Realizing that the Kingdom is wider than the Institutional Church

In the pre-Vatican-II era, it was very common to identify the institutional Church with the Kingdom preached by Jesus, as we read in many of the Church's prayers, popular devotions, sermons,... etc. of this period. In many of the Asian Churches, too, the same mentality was prevalent. However, FABC teachings, following the lead given by Vatican-II, kept on insisting that the Kingdom preached by Jesus is a much wider reality than the visible, institutional Church.<sup>53</sup> The Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC, for example, wrote:

The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and building up the Church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is therefore wider than the Church. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, visibilizing it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it.<sup>54</sup>

Pope John Paul-II himself says:

Empowered by the Spirit to accomplish Christ's salvation on earth, the Church is the seed of the Kingdom of God and she looks eagerly for its final coming. Her identity and mission are inseparable from the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced and inaugurated in all that he said and did, above all in his death and resurrection. The Spirit reminds the Church that she is not an end unto herself: in all that she is and all that she does, she exists to serve Christ and the salvation of the world.<sup>55</sup>

Peter Phan elaborates this point in the Asian context when he says:

... instead of developing an "ecclesiocentric" or church-centered ecclesiology, Asian bishops and theologians have fostered what may be called a regnocentric or kingdom-centered way of being church. Their main concern is not so much to elaborate a theoretical ecclesiology as to implement ways of being church appropriate to the socio-political, cultural, and religious contexts of Asia. Their

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<sup>53</sup>Cfr., Michael Amaladoss, "The FABC's Theology of Religions," in *Reaping*, 59.

<sup>54</sup>The Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC, "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection," No. 6.3, as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 13. See also Amaladoss, 59-61.

<sup>55</sup>EA, No. 17.

ecclesiology, when it comes to be formulated, is born out of an attempt to practice an authentic way of being church.<sup>56</sup>

Phan goes on to say that such an ecclesiology is “a moving away from the church *ad intra* to the church *ad extra*, from self-preservation and self-expansion to mission and service to the world.” He concludes that ecclesiology, in the Asian perspective, must be essentially pastoral theology.<sup>57</sup>

The Christian tradition has customarily given a leading role to the Church’s hierarchy without negating the crucial role of the laity. However, with the ever-increasing centralization of Church leadership in the recent centuries, today, in many circles, the Church has come to be identified almost exclusively with the hierarchy. The FABC has tried its best to be faithful to the pre-dominant Vatican-II vision of the Church as the entire People of God:

The lay apostolate of our Churches still remains basically parish-oriented, inward-looking and priest-directed. The need of our Asian context and the thrust of Vatican II to make the apostolate world-oriented or Kingdom-oriented must be increasingly emphasized. The apostolate must involve more lay initiatives and the power of decision-making; and it must respond to the real needs of the people. The ordained leadership need not fear or be over-concerned about juridical problems in starting newer forms of lay apostolate or ministries relating to the contextual realities of their Churches. Instead, they should encourage and promote more vigorous, world-oriented forms, initiated and directed by the laity themselves. Such initiatives will help the laity to mature, and consequently make the whole Church more effective and relevant in its mission to Asia.<sup>58</sup>

Consequently, FABC has consistently insisted on the particular but crucially important role the laity ought to play in Asian Christianity, often taking into account the peculiar examples of Japan and Korea where evangelization was originally carried out not by missionary

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<sup>56</sup>Peter Phan, “A Prophetic Church in The Service of The Reign of God: Dimensions of An Asian Ecclesiology” in *Reaping*, 193.

<sup>57</sup>Peter Phan, “A Prophetic Church in The Service of The Reign of God, 195.

<sup>58</sup>The Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Tokyo (1986), No. 4.6.2, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 193-194.

priests and religious, but by the laity, under very trying circumstances.<sup>59</sup> The Fifth Plenary Assembly said:

The renewal of Asian society which the Lord bids us to accomplish in dialogue and collaboration with peoples of other religious traditions and persons of goodwill requires the effort of the whole Church. While bishops and priests should be active in the Christian formation of lay people (Pope John Paul II, Message to FABC V, Bandung), the lay faithful should take upon themselves as their specific responsibility the renewal of Asian society according to the values of the Gospel. They are the primary evangelizers of culture and of cultures, and of the whole fabric of life in society. Hence, there must not be in Catholics what Vatican II has described as a “pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on one hand and religious life on the other” (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 43).<sup>60</sup>

The Bandung Plenary in 1990 was a turning point in FABC’s ecclesiology geared towards pastoral action exercised by the whole People of God, that is, the hierarchy, religious and lay people. Having enumerated the contextual challenges the Asian Christians were facing, the Final Statement of this Asian Episcopal gathering stated in no uncertain terms the need to be a “new way of being and becoming Church in Asia”<sup>61</sup> in order to respond to those challenges effectively. First of all, the Statement reaffirmed that the acting subject of mission is the local Church living and acting in communion with the universal Church.<sup>62</sup> Then, it stated:

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

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<sup>59</sup>In this regard, it is also worth mentioning here that even in Sri Lanka, during the Dutch persecution of the Catholics in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was the Goan-born Oratorian priest, Blessed Joseph Vaz who along with a well-organized lay-network (“Muhuppu-Annavi”) that re-kindled and kept alive the flame of faith in the island.

<sup>60</sup>The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 5.1, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 282-283.

<sup>61</sup>The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 1.6, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 275.

<sup>62</sup>The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 3.3.1, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 281.

Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches.<sup>63</sup>

At the presentation of Pope John Paul II's post-Synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia* in New Delhi in 1999, one of the Presidents of the Synod, Cardinal Darmaatmadja of Indonesia had this to say in his memorable response:

What must become the new aspect regarding "our new way of being Church in Asia" is, first, that we continue our search for a fuller way for the Church to be rooted in Asia and grow more in Asian appearance. It means: we are searching for ways to make the particular Churches, fully and deeply present in the one Church of Christ shepherded by the Pope as the unifying factor in our one faith in Jesus Christ, but at the same time deeper and deeper rooted in our cultures and in our deepest inner aspirations as peoples of Asia. In saying this, what we have chiefly in mind is the opinion that within the Churches of Asia itself there is also the need for differences among them.<sup>64</sup>

The Cardinal also said: "The new way of being Church in Asia, therefore, is expected to become in a concrete way a Church 'with' and 'for' the people in order to achieve their integral human development, culminating in the fullness of life given by Our Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>65</sup>

The Asian bishops often repeat their conviction that the Asian Churches are called to be communities of dialogue with the living Asian realities: "This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church."<sup>66</sup> The Plenary that followed five years later in Manila, said: "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."<sup>67</sup>

Thus, in this peculiarly FABC concept of "new way of being and becoming the Church in Asia" one needs to notice the FABC's concern to empower all the baptized, especially the laity as evangelizers in their

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<sup>63</sup>The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 3.3.2, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 281.

<sup>64</sup>Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," 888.

<sup>65</sup>Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," 890.

<sup>66</sup>BIRA IV/12, 1991, No. 48, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 332.

<sup>67</sup>The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Manila (1995), No. 3, as re-produced in *FAPA-II*, 3.



pilgrimage of life with other peoples in Asia. This, in fact, is an antidote to the earlier prevalent exclusively institutional, hierarchical concept of the Church.

## 6. Putting Theology into Contextual Pastoral Practice

FABC theology is not to be found in one given text nor is it developed in a systematic series of documents. The FABC teachings are scattered in many of its statements.<sup>68</sup> The specific themes chosen for the FABC Plenary Assemblies, are a clear reflection of the mainly pastoral nature of the FABC's service to the Asian Churches.<sup>69</sup> As Chia points out, most of the FABC documents "are a potent force for change and transformation, not only of the Church but of the Asian society as well."<sup>70</sup> For many Asians, they have become not only the *locus theologicus* but also first-hand guides especially in the pastoral field.

Moreover, the Office of Theological Concerns (known as the OTC which consists of bishop-members and theologian-members appointed by the different member Episcopal Conferences of the FABC) has issued their own group reflections on various relevant theological/pastoral topics for Asia.<sup>71</sup> These are efforts to contextualise theology in and through the lived Asian realities. This is precisely what the Asian bishops intended at their very first Plenary: "Special priority must be given to Asian theological reflection. For this, living contact with the concrete realities of Asia is necessary."<sup>72</sup>

The predominantly pastoral methodology used in the FABC documents is also a unique characteristic to be noted. The documents normally begin with the lived pastoral reality, and then, using theology, magisterial teachings, Asian resources<sup>73</sup> and human sciences, an effort is

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<sup>68</sup>The proceedings and statements from the FABC Plenary Assemblies and the programs and workshops of various FABC Offices are published by the FABC Central Secretariat in Hong Kong as *FABC Papers*.

<sup>69</sup>Cfr., *FAPA-I, FAPA-II, FAPA-III*, and Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 4, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007.

<sup>70</sup>Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC," 16.

<sup>71</sup>Cfr., *Sprouts*. The latest OTC document which was published after the publication of this collection of documents, is entitled "Being Human in the Changing Contexts of Asia Today," Cfr., *FABC Papers*, 133 (2011).

<sup>72</sup>See "Briefer Statement of the Assembly" No. 23 as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 24.

<sup>73</sup>Cfr., Soosai Arokiasamy, "Doing Theology with Asian Resources in the Context of FABC" in *Reaping*, 1-20.

made to discern in Christian faith the pastoral challenges which those realities pose to the Asian Churches. Finally, pastoral recommendations are enumerated based on scripture, tradition and the magisterial teachings. In other words, the pastoral challenges spring forth from the pastoral contexts and they lead back to the pastoral context in the form of pastoral recommendations. Hence, it is a sort of a ‘spiral’, a pastoral spiral, to be precise.

In the last analysis then, FABC’s theology is not mere speculative theology, but down-to-earth, contextual pastoral theology.<sup>74</sup> It is precisely this pastoral character that gives it two of its principal characteristics: contextuality and relevance.<sup>75</sup> The starting point of the FABC’s contextual methodology is not the universal precepts of *lex aeterna* and *lex naturalis*, or abstract metaphysical principles pertaining exclusively to God, Revelation and the Christian Gospel, or even conciliar, papal or doctrinal pronouncements, but rather the life experiences of the Asian peoples.<sup>76</sup> This is very much in keeping line with the traditional Asian religious belief that concepts alone are not sufficient to grasp God fully.<sup>77</sup> Whereas traditional Western religious belief is deductive, emerging from abstract truths, Eastern belief is more inductive, stemming often from ancient texts or human experiences.<sup>78</sup> As one commentator says: “To explore these *FABC Papers* is to journey with the community of Churches in Asia and to witness the diverse concerns that FABC has addressed – all under the propitious guidance of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>79</sup> FABC, in short, has paved the way to have Catholic theology and living with an Asian face in the local Churches.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Cfr., Jonathan Yun-ka Tan, “Theologizing at the Service of Life: The Contextual Theological Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC),” *FABC Papers*, 108 (October 2003 – republished).

<sup>75</sup>Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 28.

<sup>76</sup>Tan, “Theologizing at the Service of Life,” 6.

<sup>77</sup>Of course, similar views are found also in many classical Western theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas. See for example, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.1,a.2, ad 2.

<sup>78</sup>Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 44.

<sup>79</sup>John H. Kroeger, “FABC Papers Comprehensive Index: Papers 1-100 (1976-2001),” *FABC Papers*, 100 (Pentecost 2001) 2.

<sup>80</sup>Cfr., S. Arokiasamy, “Synod For Asia: An Ecclesial Event of Communion and Shared Witness of Faith,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 62, 9 (September 1998) 670-673.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* or the working paper<sup>81</sup> for the forthcoming 10<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly of the FABC which is to be held in December this 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary year (2012), has as its theme “FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges in Asia.” This theme is a case in point that illustrates the overwhelming pastoral nature and pastoral concerns of the FABC. Moreover, the working paper’s main divisions substantiate this point: *Part one* is dedicated to remember with gratitude the numerous blessings of God showered on the Asian Churches through the FABC, and to give thanks for them. *Part two* makes an effort to discern the contemporary pastoral situation, and *the third Part* is a reflection in faith of these pastoral challenges, and *the fourth Part* provides pastoral responses to the contemporary Asian contexts.

## Conclusion

As we have seen above, the FABC has been the centre around which the Asian Episcopate rallied round in the immediate aftermath of the Vatican II, and it was the same FABC which served (and continues to serve) as the living link between the conciliar teachings and the lived realities of Asia. That is to say, it has been the link between the universal Church and the local Asian realities. The unique contribution of the FABC is that it was a serious, sincere and successful effort to realise some of the major teachings of the Vatican II in and through the Asian/local idiom, as taught by Pope Paul VI,<sup>82</sup> but always being in communion with the universal magisterial teachings. This is not easy, but the FABC has successfully managed to keep a very healthy balance in this regard. FABC teachings also can be called “Asian perspectives” of the universal Catholic faith.<sup>83</sup> They have enabled Churches *in* Asia also to be Churches *of* Asia.<sup>84</sup>

It is no exaggeration to say that without the FABC, the Asian Churches would have been poorer, and it would have been hard to imagine the ‘progress’ they would have made in the years following the Council. On the one hand, the FABC has been ‘innovative’ in the sense that it enabled the Asian Churches to be what they are today in contrast to what they were in the pre-Vatican II era. On the other hand, there is

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<sup>81</sup>This Working Paper is in the process of being drafted at the time of writing this essay.

<sup>82</sup>Cfr., Pope Paul VI, *Octagesima Adveniens* (1971), No. 4.

<sup>83</sup>Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, xi.

<sup>84</sup>Arokiasamy, “Synod For Asia,” 673.

nothing so drastically ‘innovative’ in the FABC in the sense that what it has done is simply to facilitate the Asian Churches to come closer to the dreams of the universal Church in the form of the Vatican II. The FABC, after all, is called by some authors “a continuation of Vatican II in Asia.”<sup>85</sup> Georg Evers opines that the FABC is “the most important fruit of Vatican II for the Churches in Asia.”<sup>86</sup> Peter Phan is of the opinion that the responses of the Asian Churches to the challenges of Vatican II “could not have been successfully carried out without the guidance and encouragement of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences whose establishment is certainly a landmark in the history of Christianity in Asia.”<sup>87</sup>

This year is also the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council. There have been many positive outcomes of the Council which are acknowledged not only by the Church membership, but also by the wider world outside the institutional Church. At the same time, there had also been a lot of question marks and doubts with regard to the interpretation and implementation of what was so overwhelmingly approved at that ecumenical Council by the Church’s hierarchy, that is, the 2,500 Bishops from all over the world. Anyone who probes meticulously into the documents of the FABC, and follows carefully the many pastoral activities performed by its nine Offices, will surely perceive a sincere and serious Asian ecclesial effort to make the Council teachings a reality. At a time when even some ecclesiastics try to read into the Vatican II teachings their own narrow interpretations which are acutely at variance with the way the very Fathers of the Council themselves interpreted them (in putting them into practice in their very dioceses) in the years immediately after the Council, the Asian Episcopate in and through the FABC, has a uniquely prophetic role to play in the coming years. May the FABC continue its prophetic, witnessing pastoral role not only on paper but also in the vast pastoral fields of Asia!

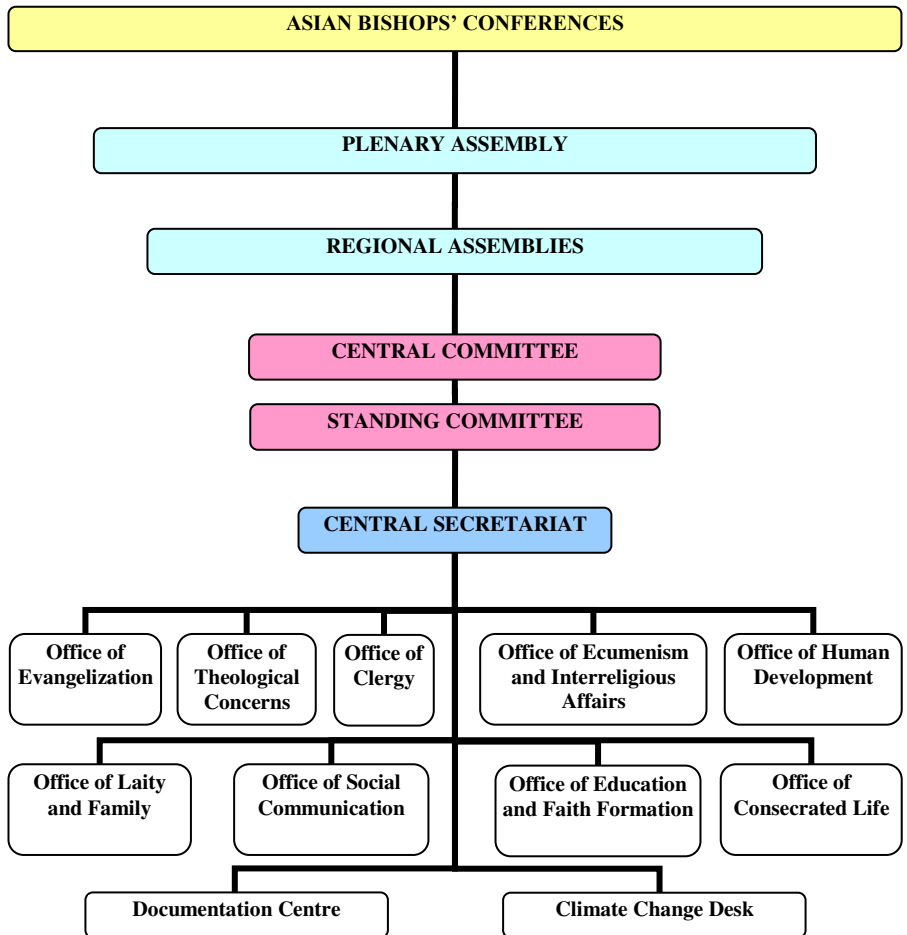
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<sup>85</sup>See, for example, the end of the Introduction in James H. Kroeger, *Theology from the Heart of Asia: FABC Doctoral Dissertations – I (1985-1998)*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008.

<sup>86</sup>Cfr., Georg Evers, “Challenges to the Churches in Asia Today,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 43, 2 (2006).

<sup>87</sup>Phan, “Reception of Vatican II in Asia: Historical and Theological Analysis,” 281.

**APPENDIX – V**  
**THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE FABC**



Published December 2013

## **FABC Papers:**

1. A Christian Alternative, by Alopen, 1976
2. Harmonious Approach of Christianity to Other Faiths, by Pedro S. de Achutegui, 1977
3. Conclusions of the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church, 1977
4. Pastoral Action in Tertiary Education, by the Secretariat of the Association of Catholic Universities of the Philippines, 1977
5. The Proclamation of the Christian Message in a Buddhist Environment, by Marcello Zago, 1977
6. The Bishops' Institutes for Social Action, by Bishop Julio X. Labayen, et al., 1978
7. The Encounter of the Gospel with Culture, by Parmananda R. Divarkar, et al., 1978
8. The Service of Faith in East Asia, by Robert Hardawiryana, 1978
9. In the Philippines Today: Christian Faith, Ideologies... Marxism, by Francisco Claver, et al., 1978
10. The Christian Contribution to the Life of Prayer in the Church of Asia, by Ichiro Okumura, 1978
11. Prayer in Asian Traditions, by Ignatius Hirudayam, 1978
- 12a Second Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Evangelization, Prayer, and Human Development, 1978
- 12b Second Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Christian Prayer and Interreligious Dialogue: Enrichment of Christian Prayer, 1978
- 12c Second Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Education for Prayer in the Catholic Schools of Asia, 1978
- 12d Second Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Seminaries and Religious Houses as Centers of Formation for Prayer in the Asian Context, 1978
- 12e Second Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Prayer as Witness in the Everyday Life of the Church of Asia, 1978
- 12f Second Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Prayer, Community Worship, and Inculturation, 1978
13. Prayer - the Life of the Church of Asia. The Final Statement and Recommendations of the Second Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1978
14. The Growing Church: Amid Various Religious and Cultural Traditions and Contemporary Ideologies, by Robert Hardawiryana, 1979
15. Gospel and Culture, by D.S. Amalorpavadass, 1979
16. The Church at the Service of the Kingdom of God, by the International Service of Reflection and Animation of the Movement for a Better World, 1979
17. The Church at the Service of the Kingdom of God (II), by the Movement for a Better World, 1979
18. Evangelizing in Today's World, Fraternity and Poverty: Ways of Evangelization. A Course in Missionary Animation, by the Movement for a Better World, 1979
19. The First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1979

20. Consecrated Religious Life in the Church of Contemporary Asia, by Yves E. Raguin and Sister Vandana, 1980
21. Interiority: The Foundation of Spiritual Authority in Asian Religious Traditions, by Francis Acharya and Yves Raguin, 1980
22. Church, Mission and the Kingdom of God, by Bishop Patrick D'Souza, with the Message of the Delegates of the International Mission Congress at Manila, 1980
23. Questions Muslims Ask Catholics, by a Tunis Study Group, 1980
24. The Collegiality of the Bishops for Human Development. The Fourth and Fifth Bishops' Institutes for Social Action, 1981
25. Reaching Out in Dialogue in Asia. The First and Second Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs, 1981
26. The Basic Christian Community in an Islamic Country. A Seminar in the Archdiocese of Kuala Lumpur, 1981
27. The Christian Community as the Bearer of the Good News, The Second Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate, 1981
28. Searching Out the Future for the Church in Asia. The Statements and Recommendations of the Three Pan-Asian Meetings of the Bishops of Asia, 1982
29. The Church as a Community of Faith - Some Points for Reflection at the Third Plenary Assembly, by C.G. Arevalo, 1982
30. The Church as a Community of Faith in the Asian Context, by D.S. Amalorpavadass, 1982
31. Muslim Perception of Christian Community, by Terence Farias, 1982
32. The Church - A Community of Faith in Asia. A Short Report on the Third Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1982
- 33a. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Church Organization in Asia Today, 1982
- 33b. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Forms of Christian Community Living in Asia, 1982
- 33c. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Diocese and Parish as Communities of Faith, 1982
- 33d. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Total Human Development and the Church as a Community of Faith in Asia, 1982
- 33e. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Dialogue of Communities of Faith in Asia, 1982
- 33f. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Is the Laity the "Marginalized Majority" in the Church? 1982
- 33g. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Role of Women in the Church as a Community of Faith in Asia, 1982
- 33h. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Seminaries and Religious Houses as Centers of Formation of Church as Community of Faith in Asia, 1982
- 33i. Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Consecrated Religious Life in Asia as Witness of Church as Community of Faith, 1982

- 33j Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Roman Catholic Church in Asia and the Media of Mass Communication - Press, Film, Radio and Television, 1982
- 33k Third Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Laity in the Church of Asia, 1982
34. Summons to Dialogue, by Archbishop Angelo Fernandes. A National Seminar on Dialogue and Evangelization, 1983
35. Challenges to Human Development in the 80s: Response of the Church in Asia. The Sixth Bishops' Institute for Social Action, 1983
36. Lead Me to the Real: The Hindu-Christian Dialogue. The Third Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, 1984
37. Our Quest for Justice. The Second Consultation on Justice and Peace, 1984
38. Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia. A Consultation on Inter-Religious Dialogue, 1985
39. Social Action Groups: Harbingers of Hope in Asia, by Felix Wilfred, 1985
40. Trusting, Entrusting the Laity. The First Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate, 1985
41. Building the Church of Christ in a Pluricultural Situation, by Robert Hardawiryan, 1985
42. Towards a Theology of Local Church, by Joseph Komonchak. The First Colloquium of the FABC Theological Advisory Committee, 1986
43. The "Abba Experience" of Jesus: the Model and Motive for Mission Today. A Project in Formation for Mission, 1986
44. Contemporary Catholic Thought on the Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World. A Position Paper for the Fourth Plenary Assembly, by S.J. Emmanuel, 1986
45. Sunset in the East? The Asian Reality Challenging the Church and its Laity Today. A Position Paper for the Fourth Plenary Assembly, by Felix Wilfred, July 1986
- 46a Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Role and Relationship of the Laity in the Church, September 1986
- 46b Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Lay Spirituality, September 1986
- 46c Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Towards a New Understanding of Women's Role, September 1986
- 46d Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Laity and Ministry to Youth, September 1986
- 46e Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Laity in the World of Education, September 1986
- 46f Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Asian Laity in the World of Health Services, September 1986
- 46g Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Laity in Mission, September 1986
- 46h Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Laity in Politics and Public Service, September 1986



- 46i Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Laity and the Family, September 1986
- 46j Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Laity in the World of Work, September 1986
- 46k Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Trusting, Entrusting the Laity in Media, September 1986
- 46l Fourth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Laity in the World of Business, September 1986
47. The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia. A Report of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1987
48. Theses on Interreligious Dialogue. An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection. The Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1987
49. Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths. An Ecumenical Consultation, December 1987
50. The Urgency of Mission. The All-Asian Conference on Evangelization, November 1988
51. Science, High Technology and Faith. A Seminar on the Role of the Catholic Scientist in Asia, March 1989
52. Becoming the Church of the Poor: with Industrial Workers. The First Asian Institute for Social Action, April 1989
53. The Impact of Tourism: Its Challenge to the Mission of the Church in Asia, November 1989
54. Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation. The Final Statement of the European Ecumenical Assembly. A Foundational Document for Ecumenical Co-operation in Asia, September 1989
55. Asia on the Threshold of the 1990s, by Felix Wilfred. A Position Paper for the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, May 1990
56. Dialogue, Discernment, Deeds: An Approach to Asian Challenges Today, by Antonio B. Lambino. A Position Paper for the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1990
- 57a Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Church before the Changing Asian Societies of the 1990s, by Robert Hardawiryana, 1990
- 57b Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Church in Asia and Mission in the 1990s, by C.G. Arevalo, 1990
- 57c Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: A Spiritual Journey through the Asia of the 1990s, by Adolfo Nicolas, 1990
- 57d Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Alternative Ways of Being Church in the Asia of the 1990s, by Oswald Hirmer, 1990
- 57e Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Church and Pluralism in the Asia of the 1990s, by Michael Amaladoss, 1990

- 57f Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: A Subject of Dignity and Rights: the Emerging Individual in Asia, by Ramon C. Reyes and Michael Masson, 1990
- 57g Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: Religious Fundamentalism and Revivalism, by Yvon Ambroise and John K. Locke, 1990
- 57h Fifth Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guides: The Church and the Quest for Peace in the Asia of the 1990s, by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan, July 1990
58. The Church in Asia and Politics, A Background Paper of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, by Bienvenido F. Nebres and Robert Hardawiryana, 1990
59. The Emerging Challenges to the Church in Asia in the 1990s: A Call to Respond. A Report of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, November 1990
60. Theses on the Local Church. The Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, January 1991
61. Mission Today. Contemporary Themes in Missiology, by James H. Kroeger, March 1991
62. Another Gospel for Asia? by Domenico Colombo, October 1991
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