

**MEETING OF THE PRESIDENTS OF DOCTRINAL
COMMISSIONS UNDER THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN
BISHOPS' CONFERENCES AND THE CONGREGATION FOR
THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH (CDF)**

15 - 18 January 2019

**Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Centre, Bangkok, Thailand
by
FABC Office of Theological Concerns and Central Secretariat**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) called for a meeting in Bangkok, Thailand at the Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Centre with the Bishop Chairmen of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) or the representative of a conference.

The CDF also met with the Bishop Members and the theologians of the Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC. The meeting with the Office of Theological Concerns was on January 15, 2019. The meeting with the Bishops of the Conferences was on January 16 until the morning of the 18th.

The Delegation of the CDF consisted of Cardinal Luis F. Ladaria, SJ, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia, OP, Adjunct Secretary, Fr. Hermann Geissler, FSO, Head of the Doctrinal Section, and Fathers Walter Oxley and John Peter Jeromiyas, Officials of the Doctrinal Section.

Archbishop Paul Tschang In-Nam, the Apostolic Nuncio of the Holy See in Thailand, accompanied by Fr. Dario Pavisa, Secretary of the Apostolic Nunciature, also were present on the first day of the meetings.

The FABC Bishops' Conferences were represented by Cardinal Oswald Gracias, the President Emeritus of the FABC, Cardinal Charles Bo, the President of the FABC, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, President of the FABC Office of Theological Concerns, Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun (Laos Cambodia) and Cardinal Orlando Quevedo (Philippines); as well as by Archbishops Peter Liu Chen-Chung (Taiwan), Hyginus Kim Hee-joong (Korea) and Felix Machado (India); and by Bishops Bejoy D'Cruze, OMI (Bangladesh), Benny Travas (Pakistan), John Baptist Lee Keh-mien (Taiwan), Joseph Abella (Japan), Adrianus Sunarko, OFM (Indonesia), Valence Mendis (Sri Lanka), John Do Van Ngan (Vietnam), Virgilio do Carmo da Silva, SDB (Timor Leste), Joseph Chusak Sirisut (Thailand), Felix Lian Khen Thang (Myanmar) and Joseph Guo Jincai (China); and Fathers William LaRousse (Assistant Secretary General of the FABC), Clarence Devadass (Executive Secretary of the FABC Office of

Theological Concerns), Paul Nguyen Thanh Sang (Vietnam), Antony Mariyan Pereira (Taiwan) and Zhang Qiu Lin (China).

The meeting provided an opportunity to develop the collaboration and cooperation between the FABC Conferences Doctrinal Commissions, the FABC Office of Theological Concerns and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This gathering also offered an occasion to foster the cooperation among the FABC Doctrinal Commissions themselves and to strengthen one another in the faith.

The following sections of this FABC Paper include the Message of the Holy Father and the presentations given at the meetings in Bangkok.

II. MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER



To the Participants in the
Meeting of the Doctrinal Commissions of the
Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

Dear Brother Bishops,

On the occasion of the meeting of the Presidents of Doctrinal Commissions of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, taking place in Bangkok from 15 to 18 January 2019 with the participation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, I cordially send you my fraternal greetings.

You gather together from across this vast continent that is marked by religious, linguistic and cultural diversity, in order to reaffirm our common responsibility for the unity and integrity of the Catholic faith and to explore new ways and methods of bearing witness to the Gospel amid the challenges of our contemporary world.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, I invited the whole Church "to go forth". I am pleased that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is actively supporting the important work of the Episcopal Conferences and especially of their Doctrinal Commissions, as they assist and foster the effective and fraternal cooperation among the Pastors of the Church in Asia.

Praying that this meeting may offer an opportunity to address the concerns of the Gospel that are specific and relevant to Asia, to all those to all those taking part I gladly impart my blessing.

From the Vatican, 10 January 2019

Francis

III. THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF DOCTRINAL COMMISSIONS

- Luis F. Cardinal Ladaria, S.J., Prefect of the CDF

My dear brother Bishops,

It is a distinct honor and pleasure to be present here with you my brother Bishops on the great continent of Asia, where the diverse countries comprise nearly 60% percent of the total population of the world. As a cradle of ancient civilization, an intense search for the meaning of human life, has given birth to several religions. With its rich diversity of language, culture, race and religion, Asia has remained an outstanding illustration for the coexistence of different peoples for centuries. It is in this context that we, as Pastors of the Catholic Church, are gathered here to reflect upon our commitment to the task of proclaiming Jesus Christ who is “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith desires that this precious occasion may be an opportunity to renew our resolve as Bishops, successors of Apostles, to strengthen each other in the faith.

I. Introduction

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, as one of the departments of the Roman Curia, is at the service of the Roman Pontiff and the universal Church. The Congregation has the specific mission “to promote and safeguard the doctrine on faith and morals in the whole Catholic world; so it has competence in things that touch this matter in any way” (John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, 48). The primary responsibility of the Congregation is not to condemn those who are not faithful to the sound teaching; but to render service to the Truth through protecting the right of the faithful to receive the Gospel message in its purity and entirety. Sometimes, of course, it remains necessary to correct theologians if he or she is not willing to change an unacceptable opinion. Promoting and safeguarding the Catholic doctrine is also a fundamental task of all the Pastors in their local Churches.

In line with the Council’s emphasis on the need for collegial efforts, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has ushered in a new mode of functioning through collaboration and cooperation with the

Pastors of the Church throughout the world. In its mission of promoting and safeguarding the authentic teaching of the Church in a world of constant changes, the Congregation invited the Episcopal Conferences to be active participants in its efforts. This call for an active involvement was made a reality through the efforts towards the establishment of a Doctrinal Commission, if possible, under each Episcopal Conference.

Taking into account the challenges involved in promoting and protecting the authentic doctrine amidst complex situations in different parts of the world, the Congregation has been organizing periodical meetings of the Presidents of Doctrinal Commissions at the continental level to evaluate and encourage their efforts through discussing experiences and questions pertaining to their specific context. Such meetings have been conducted so far at Bogotá in 1984 (Latin America), Kinshasa in 1987 (Africa), Vienna in 1989 (Europe), Hong-Kong in 1993 (Asia), Guadalajara in 1999 (Latin America), Dar es Salaam in 2009 (Africa) and Esztergom in 2015 (Europe). Thus, our meeting is the second of its kind on the Continent of Asia.

Through four documents over the years, the Congregation has established guidelines regarding the role and functions of Doctrinal Commissions. The first one, published on 23 February 1967 carried instruction on the need for the establishment of Doctrinal Commissions in Episcopal Conferences. Just a year later, with a letter on 10 July 1968, the Congregation wrote to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences suggesting means to enhance the service of Doctrinal Commissions. Almost twenty years later, the Congregation came out with a detailed letter to the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences defining more precisely the role and functions of Doctrinal Commissions on 25 November 1990. The fourth document was written on 24 April 2018 reminding the Presidents of Episcopal Conferences of the need and benefit of Doctrinal Commissions, so to be mutually engaged in the exercise of the *munus docendi* throughout the universal Church. In the light of these documents and the experience acquired through the collaboration with Doctrinal Commissions in different parts of the world over the decades, we can try to understand its role and function in the particular context of Asia.

II. Role of Doctrinal Commissions

Let us first reflect on the relationship of the Doctrinal Commissions with the Episcopal Conferences.

- 1) The invitation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed to the Episcopal Conferences to constitute Doctrinal Commissions is an expression of the collegial character of ecclesial ministry aimed at preaching the Gospel in its purity and integrity. Doctrinal Commissions should help to “promote the communication of the teaching of the faith” at the level of the Episcopal Conference and thus in the Church at large.
- 2) A Doctrinal Commission is accountable to the Episcopal Conference from which it receives its mandate. It is a consultative body whose objective is to assist both the Episcopal Conference and individual bishops, “in their solicitude for the teaching of the faith”. As successors of the apostles who are called to exercise the *munus docendi* as one of their principal responsibilities, the Bishops are teachers of the Catholic faith. Therefore, a Doctrinal Commission, while placing itself at the service of the Bishops united as a Conference, should be disposed to render assistance to the needs of the individual Bishops as well.
- 3) It is highly recommended that Episcopal Conferences have a Doctrinal Commission to deal with doctrinal issues. The establishment of a Doctrinal Commission, of course, is not always an easy task. Some Episcopal Conferences are small and may not be able to constitute a proper Doctrinal Commission, especially in Asian countries where Christians are a minority. In such cases the Congregation proposes two options: Either a) another Commission can be given the additional charge to deal with issues related to doctrine, or (b) an individual Bishop can pay special attention “to doctrinal problems in the name and service of the whole Conference”.
- 4) Only Bishops can be chosen as members of the Doctrinal Commission. Theologians and Experts may help with their particular expertise, but they may not be members. The reason is that it is the task of the Bishops to preach the Gospel of God to all men and to preserve God’s people from defections.

Theologians assist in explaining the faith and are helpful in confronting new challenges, but their role is different from that of the Bishops. Once a Doctrinal Commission is established, the names of the Chairperson and the members should be communicated to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

- 5) A Doctrinal Commission, as a consultative body, is not entitled to make public statements on behalf of the Episcopal Conference without the explicit authorisation to do so. Moreover, there should always be harmony between the Doctrinal Commission and the Episcopal Conference and individual Bishops. This harmony is essential for the unity of God's people.
- 6) Even though the documents do not mention this, the President of a Doctrinal Commission should be elected for three years. He can be reelected for another period. It is important to bear in mind that the mandate of all members is not terminated at the same time so that the continuity of the activities of the Commission does not suffer. As a matter of principle, a Doctrinal Commission should adhere to and respect the decisions of the preceding Commissions. The reason for this is clear insofar as the Christian faith remains the same throughout time. Even when there may be progress in doctrine, the progress must always remain a progress and renewal in continuity, and not a rupture from the teaching of our fathers in faith.

III. Functions of Doctrinal Commissions

Let us now mention the main functions of Doctrinal Commissions, as they have been presented in the documents of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

1. Translation and Explanation of the Documents of the Holy See

For addressing doctrinal questions emerging from the concrete needs of our time, a Doctrinal Commission should avail itself of the documents of the Holy See, especially those of the Holy Father and of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. As you know, numerous documents have been published by the Holy See over the last fifty years which respond to concrete

problems and challenges. These documents are already translated into the most important languages and are made available to the faithful through the Vatican web-site. The most important documents should be translated, insofar as possible, into local languages. Through such efforts, a Doctrinal Commission can help the Episcopal Conference to make known the teachings and instructions of the Holy See. It would also be important to publish comments on the most significant documents of the Holy See to make them understandable for the people of different cultures.

2. Relationship with Theologians

A Doctrinal Commission has the mission of promoting Catholic theology. Therefore, it should foster good rapport among Bishops and Theologians, especially teachers in universities and seminaries and experts in the ecclesiastical disciplines. In other words, a Doctrinal Commission has to make every effort to facilitate a healthy rapport between the *Magisterium* and Theologians. It may be useful to recall the Congregation's *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian* (24 May 1990), where this relationship is explained at length. The Doctrinal Commission should also follow the activities of the theological associations in the region and keep the Bishops informed of their developments. Moreover, it should assist the Bishops, when, as per the requirement of Canon #229, §2 and #812, they must grant a *mandatum* for a Theologian to teach theology either in theological faculties, seminaries, or other Catholic institutions.

3. Vigilance Over Books

A Doctrinal Commission has the mission to assist the Bishops to monitor the authenticity of matters pertaining to the doctrine of faith and morals, which includes vigilance over forms of social communication in general, and of books in particular. The *Instruction of the Congregation on Some Aspects of The Use of The Instruments of Social Communication in Promoting The Doctrine of The Faith* (30 March 1992) delineates ways and means for a Doctrinal Commission to assist the Bishops in their

responsibility. Obviously, the Catholic publishing houses offer a great opportunity for communicating the faith in a particular area. At the same time, we cannot be indifferent to the threat they pose to the communication of authentic faith if they are unmonitored. In the absence of a proper vigilance over books on Catholic doctrine, the people of God face the risk of inadvertently acquiring books from Catholic publishers who are not loyal to the teaching of the Church. Therefore, a Doctrinal Commission should assist the Bishops in the evaluation of books before granting the *imprimatur*.

In this way, a Doctrinal Commission not only assists the Bishops of the particular territory, but also helps the Congregation by reducing the need for its intervention on works of erroneous and ambiguous affirmations. To this end, the Doctrinal Commission should prepare a list of censors for the Bishops.

4. Correction of Problematic Publications

Handling questions regarding books of Catholic theologians that are not in harmony with sound doctrine is a delicate issue. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has a proper procedure of examination to be followed in such cases (cf. *Regulation's for Doctrinal Examination*, 29/June/1997). The Congregation, however, is of the opinion that problems of this kind should first be addressed with a dialogue on the local level by the Bishops, or if the issues are more serious, by the Doctrinal Commission. Sincere and constructive dialogue can help to resolve many problems, as the experience of the Congregation has shown. Sometimes, however, theologians are not willing to clarify doctrinal errors and ambiguities. In such a case, the Doctrinal Commission could prepare a Notification for the Episcopal Conference, stating the problems of a certain theologian, and thus defending the faith of the simple people.

Sharing the same faith is the fundamental factor for unity in the Church. It is through the common faith that unity is achieved and nurtured in the Church, and we as successors of the Apostles, have a special responsibility for that unity. Pope Francis declares that the apostolic succession, granted as a

precious gift by the Lord to the Church, is aimed at the “service to the unity of faith and its integral transmission” (*Lumen Fidei*, 46).

5. Cooperation with Other Episcopal Commissions

The competence of a Doctrinal Commission in the area of faith renders imperative the cooperation with other Commissions under the Episcopal Conference. This cooperation is necessary especially with those Commissions that are responsible in the fields of education (i.e. seminaries, universities and schools), catechetics, liturgy, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue. A Doctrinal Commission ensures that the academic endeavours in the seminaries, Catholic universities and schools are attentive to the correct teaching of the Church. Likewise, a Doctrinal Commission, in collaboration with the Commission for Liturgy, must make certain that all institutions of people preserve doctrinal loyalty to the liturgical traditions. Together with other competent Commissions, a Doctrinal Commission should help to foster the publishing of textbooks written by authors who are known for their “scholarship and their steadfast fidelity to the Church’s Magisterium” and compile a list of such books authorized for catechetical teaching. It must help both the Commission for Ecumenical Dialogue and the Commission for Interreligious Dialogue to promote dialogues that offer mutual understanding without compromising fundamental truths of the faith. A Doctrinal Commission has the responsibility to assess the undertakings of all other Commissions of the Episcopal Conference. These Commissions, before publishing any documents of doctrinal relevance, are required to avail themselves of the benefit of the judgement of Doctrinal Commission.

6. Collaboration with other Doctrinal Commissions

Doctrinal Commissions of different countries who share common geography and language find expeditious means for enhancing collaboration and exchanging information, and they can enrich each other. This is particularly important for small Episcopal Conferences. In fact, our gathering today here can also be an opportunity to give rise to such kinds of exchanges

among those Doctrinal Commissions, or individual Bishops, that share a common geographical, cultural and linguistic heritage. Sometimes, a document prepared by the Doctrinal Commission of a given Episcopal Conference may be a helpful resource also for other Conferences of Bishops. Such sharing can contribute to the collegial cooperation of Episcopal Conferences worldwide.

7. Cooperation with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

As stated in the circular letter of 2018, it would be of great help to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith if the President of every Doctrinal Commission would send a report once every three years. The information furnished by Doctrinal Commissions about the doctrinal questions encountered in particular countries, along with suggestions on possible ways and means to handle them, can be useful to the Holy See to address similar questions in other parts of the world. Such periodical reports can effectively favour the collaboration between the Holy See and Doctrinal Commissions worldwide.

8. Doctrinal Competence of Episcopal Conference

Finally, I feel that it is useful to briefly reflect upon the doctrinal competence of the Episcopal Conferences presenting some elements of the *Motu proprio Apostolos Suos* of Pope John Paul II (21 May 1998). The *Motu proprio* affirms that, “the Bishops, assembled in Episcopal Conference, must take special care to follow the Magisterium of the universal Church and to communicate it opportunely to the people entrusted to them” (*Apostolos Suos*, 21). This affirmation is immediately followed by a clarification, which can be termed as the original contribution of this document: “When the doctrinal declarations of Episcopal Conferences are approved unanimously, they may certainly be issued in the name of the Conferences themselves, and the faithful are obliged to adhere with a sense of religious respect to that authentic Magisterium of their own Bishops” (*Apostolos Suos*, 22). At the same time, when there is no unanimity, they must receive the *recognitio* of the Holy See, and the Holy See will only give it if there is a

substantial majority requesting it. In such an instance, the *recognitio* of the Holy See serves to guarantee that, in dealing with new questions posed by the accelerated cultural and social changes characteristic of present times, the doctrinal response will favour communion and not harm it (cf. *Apostolos Suos*, 22).

In the introduction to the same *Motu proprio*, Pope John Paul II states, “without prejudice to the power which each Bishop enjoys by divine institution in his own particular Church, the consciousness of being part of an undivided body has caused Bishops throughout the Church’s history to employ, in the fulfilment of their mission, means, structures and ways of communicating which express their communion and solicitude for all the Churches, and prolong the very life of the College of the Apostles: pastoral cooperation, consultation, mutual assistance, etc.” (*Apostolos Suos*, 3).

In this line, Pope Francis emphasizes the importance of Episcopal Conferences, stating that they are in a position “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit” (II Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 36). According the above-mentioned principles, Episcopal Conferences have doctrinal authority and may contribute to promote the Church’s life and her missionary outreach (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 32).

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* states: “We need to distinguish clearly what might be a fruit of the kingdom from what runs counter to God’s plan. This involves not only recognizing and discerning spirits, but also - and this is decisive - choosing movements of the spirit of good and rejecting those of the spirit of evil” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 51). These words from our Holy Father greatly assist us in our responsibility to protect and transmit the faith. As Bishops, we must be men of deep prayer, and of reliance upon the Holy Spirit to guide us in the spirit of truth. We are called to be vigilant discerners, of the spirit of good and the spirit of evil, thus fulfilling our vocation as good shepherds

of the sheep in a period in history where our voices, and especially the voice of Jesus Christ, is needed more than ever.

IV. THE MEANING OF CHRISTIAN SALVATION IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE MESSAGE OF *PLACUIT DEO*

- Archbishop J. Augustine Di Noia, OP
Adjunct Secretary, CDF

What are the distinctive elements of the Christian understanding of salvation, and how can these be effectively articulated and communicated in the particular cultural circumstances in which the Church finds herself at the beginning of the 21st century?

I

These are the principal questions which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith endeavors to address in its recent document, *Placuit Deo*, a Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation. The Letter's opening passage quotes the words of *Dei Verbum* to express the distinctive element of Christian salvation: "In his goodness and wisdom God chose [*placuit Deo*] to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will (cf. Eph 1:9) by which, through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (cf. Eph 2:18; 2 Pt 1:4)." ¹ In this passage, *Dei Verbum* gives voice to the unanimous witness of the Christian tradition that the triune God desires to share the communion of trinitarian life with persons who are not God. This is the great truth of the Christmas festivities which have only just concluded. God sent his only begotten Son who takes our nature in order to share his nature with us. Assuming our humanity unto himself and sharing his divinity with us, Christ makes it possible for us to participate by adoption in the divine life that belongs to him, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, by nature. "Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word of God, of his boundless love became what we are that he might make us what he himself is."²

¹ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, 2.

² St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, preface.

Only the sinfulness of the human race could block the participation in the divine life that God desires for us. Christ our Savior, who is without sin, allows himself to be regarded as a sinner in order to free us from sin and death. He removes all that would block us from participation of the life of the all holy God.

As *Placuit Deo* affirms, the Christian faith proclaims the “salvific work of the Son incarnate...without ever separating the healing dimension of salvation, by which Christ redeems us from sin, from the elevating dimension, by which He makes us sons and daughters of the God, participants in his divine nature (cf. 2 Pt 1:4).”³

But, according to *Placuit Deo*, two recent cultural changes make it difficult for people to understand certain aspects of Christian salvation: first, the rise of individualism “centered on the autonomous subject tends to see the human person as a being whose sole fulfilment depends only on his or her strength;” and secondly, “a merely interior vision of salvation...marked by a strong personal conviction or feeling of being united to God [that] does not take into account the need to accept, heal and renew our relationships with others and with the created world.”⁴

These developments, though they appear in a markedly modern profile, resemble the two ancient heresies of Pelagianism and Gnosticism. In noting these resemblances, *Placuit Deo* follows Pope Francis who, “in his ordinary magisterium, often has made reference to these tendencies.” In neo-Pelagian individualism, “salvation depends on the strength of the individual or on purely human structures,” while “a new form of Gnosticism puts forward a model of salvation that is merely interior.”⁵ Against these distortions of the understanding of Christian salvation, *Placuit Deo* reaffirms “that salvation consists in our union with Christ, who, by his Incarnation, death and Resurrection has brought about a new order of relationships with the Father and among human persons, and has introduced us into this order, thanks to the gift of his Spirit, so that we care able to unite ourselves to the Father as sons of the Son, and become one body in the ‘firstborn among many brothers’ (Rom

³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Placuit Deo*, § 9.

⁴ *Placuit Deo*, § 2.

⁵ *Ibid.* § 3.

8:29).⁶ Moreover, “both the individualistic and the merely interior visions of salvation contradict the sacramental economy through which God willed to save the human person. The participation, in the Church, in the new order of relationships begun by Jesus occurs by means of the sacraments, of which Baptism is the door, and the Eucharist is the source and the summit.”⁷

II

The final paragraph of *Placuit Deo* begins by affirming that “the awareness of the fullness of life into which Christ the Savior introduces us propels Christians onward in the mission of announcing to all the joy and light of the Gospel. In this work, Christians must also be prepared to establish a sincere and constructive dialogue with believers of other religions, confident that God can lead ‘all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way’ [*Gaudium et Spes*, 22] towards salvation.”⁸ For very good reasons, *Placuit Deo* refrained from a discussion of the alternative doctrines of “salvation” – or all-encompassing aims of life – as they occur in other religions. But, in secularized western countries and certainly here in Asia, in addition to the challenges posed by neo-Pelagianism and neo-Gnosticism, Christian communities must also face fully realized alternative *religious* accounts of the ultimate aim of human life and the means to pursue it. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, in all of their cultural and geographic diversity, have a great deal to say about these matters. This is the situation that you, as bishops and theologians on this great continent, face every day.

The “sincere and constructive” dialogue about the nature of salvation that *Placuit Deo* commends to the Church poses significant and distinctive challenges. It is one thing to encounter people who have only an implicit or ill-developed understanding of the meaning of life and the direction it should take, but something else entirely to encounter communities with sophisticated and well articulated religious views on these issues. In the past the Christian mission met with most of its success among peoples of indigenous religions (in the Americas, in Africa and in parts of Asia). But as its focus shifts

⁶ *Ibid.* § 4.

⁷ *Ibid.* § 5.

⁸ *Ibid.* § 15.

increasingly to the adherents of major religious traditions, the context of mission alters dramatically.

Many years ago I was struck by a passage in an essay by the English theologian John Milbank: “every major religion is *already* the result of confronting the fact of religious differences and an attempt to subsume such differences. By comparison, genuinely local [indigenous] religions....may scarcely have had to confront the question of whether their beliefs and practices are relevant beyond the confines of their own society; this is presumably why they are so liable to conversion by or accommodation with the terms of a major religion, which is in part the result of such a confrontation. The major religions are notoriously not so susceptible to conversion or accommodation, precisely because they already embody a more abstract, universal, deterritorialized cultural framework, although they do not usually succumb to the temptation of trying to found this universality in a reason independent of all particularized memory.”⁹

Milbank’s observation captures precisely the reality that the Church faces every day here in Asia and elsewhere, whether the topic under consideration is the Christian faith in salvation, or the doctrine of the Trinity, or the principles of the moral life. The implication is that it is only through interreligious dialogue that Christians can relate to the major religions and in this way realize the Church’s evangelizing mission in the context of societies within their ambits—India (Hinduism) or Malaysia (Islam) or Sri Lanka (Buddhism), for example. What is more, interreligious dialogue is different from the forms of dialogue with which Christians have become familiar in the West—ecumenical dialogue or dialogue with non-religious people. In interreligious dialogue, the Church encounters, not disagreements about a shared Christian faith or about common philosophical assumptions, but massive and enduring bodies of religious wisdom and highly ramified systems of doctrines derived from ancient scriptural canons.¹⁰

⁹ John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue,” in G. D’Costa, ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 180.

¹⁰ See J. A. Di Noia, *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992).

III

How to communicate the Christian faith in salvation in this situation is a challenge you face daily in your preaching, teaching, and research. The Congregation hopes that *Placuit Deo* will be of some assistance in this task. To that end, allow me to suggest one way in particular that it might be.

Placuit Deo affirms that “every person, in his or her own way, searches for happiness and attempts to obtain it by making recourse to the resources one has available.”¹¹ Thus it is clear, in the first place, that our faith in Christ’s unique role in human salvation does not entail a devaluation of the world’s religions. The religions of the world are monuments to the human search for God and salvation.

As such, they are worthy of respect and study because of the immense cultural richness of their witness to the desire for God planted in every human heart. But the Christian faith attests not only to the human search for God, but principally to God’s search for us.

As *Placuit Deo* has reaffirmed, what God wants to share with us is nothing less than a communion of life, a share or participation in the divine trinitarian life. It is at this point that *Placuit Deo* can be of great assistance. For it is precisely with this distinctive understanding of Christian salvation in view that we can grasp the unique role of Jesus Christ in the salvation of the human race. For the idea that God wants to share the communion of his life with persons who are not God cannot come from anyone but God himself. The initiative here comes from God’s side, both to reconcile us because of sin and to make possible a kind of life that would not only be impossible for us but unthinkable as well.

Salvation in this comprehensive sense is not something that can be arranged or organized by human beings. It is not within the power of human abilities or interiority to accomplish, as neo-Pelagians and neo-Gnostics seem to suppose. Nor is salvation something that one creature can achieve for another, as is supposed by neo-Arians (to mention another ancient heresy that is very much alive). The created order by itself has neither the resources to achieve nor the imagination to conceive such a destiny for human persons.

¹¹ *Placuit Deo*, §5.

Given that salvation in the Christian sense of the term involves both reconciliation of sinners and the elevation of creaturely persons to a new kind of life, it cannot come from within this world. Saviors are a dime a dozen when one fails to grasp what's really at stake. We need to be delivered not just from error, or suffering, or desire, or injustice, or poverty. To understand what the Christian faith means and promises by salvation, we must grasp the true peril of the human condition as well as the glory that is human destiny in the economy of salvation. God desires nothing less than to share his life with us. If the salvation that the triune God wills for the entire human race entails communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, then the creaturely and sinful obstacles to this communion must be overcome.

Without embarking upon a comparative study of competing religious doctrines about the ultimate aim of life, I think we can say with some assurance that it has never been claimed of anyone but Jesus Christ that he could and did overcome these obstacles, and that he could and did make us sharers in his divine life. Through him we are both healed of sin and raised to an adoptive participation in the life of the Blessed Trinity—and nothing less. The obstacles to this participation are either overcome or not. If they are not overcome, then Christians have nothing for which to hope, for themselves or for others. In that case, they will hawk an empty universal salvation on the highways of the world. If Christians abandon the proclamation of Christ's unique mediatorship as the divine, only-begotten Son of the Father, they will have no other mediatorship with which to replace it. We need the Savior who is not just any savior.

How persons who are not now explicit believers in Christ can actually come to share in the salvation that God desires for the human race and that Christ alone makes possible is a topic for another day. But surely it must be evident that if Christians—in the wholly admirable desire to be respectful of non-believers and optimistic about their chances of salvation—no longer confess Christ's unique mediatorship in making ultimate communion with the Blessed Trinity a real possibility for created persons, then the problem of how non-Christians can share in it is not resolved: it simply evaporates. For Christians to have a truly universal hope and confidence in the salvation of persons who are not Christians, they have to affirm the

unique role of Christ in bringing this salvation about, not just for themselves but for others as well. By stressing the distinctiveness of the Christian doctrine of salvation, *Placuit Deo* helps us to make this point forcefully. “Christ is Savior inasmuch as He assumed the entirety of our humanity and live a fully human life in communion with his Father and others. Salvation, then, consists in our incorporation into his life, receiving his Spirit (cf. I Jn 4:13). He became, ‘in a particular way, the origin of all grace according to his humanity.’ He is at the same time Savior and Salvation.”¹²

V. OUTLINE: CHRISTIAN SALVATION

- *His Eminence Luis Antonio G. Cardinal Tagle*

- I. The presentation on the letter *Placuit Deo* of CDF to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation, published on 22 February 2018, was given by Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, OP, Adjunct Secretary of CDF.
- II. Some Elements of Asian Contexts that impact of the question of Christian Salvation (not exhaustive but simply indicative):
 - a. What we consider the “search for salvation or for a savior” arises from concrete life situations and questions, especially in Asia where people begin with life or experience. Some examples: sickness, the death of innocent people especially children, threats to stability, conflicts, poverty, hunger, forced displacement, ecological disasters, endemic corruption, discrimination, etc. How can these situations be remedied? How can we get out of the mess? Can someone greater than us really do this? How can a crucified or defeated Jesus save? How does his resurrection make a difference? In what sense is he Savior, according to Christians?
 - b. Many Asians are driven to work and to achieve success: Self-made men and women that become competitive. Technology, science, artificial intelligence, robotics, etc. can save us. Can they? Many feel harassed, disappointed, alone, and suicidal.

¹² Ibid. § 11.

- c. The major “organized” religions in Asia have articulated concepts and practices about “salvation” or the good and meaningful life that we are looking for. Aside from the indispensable Christian articulation of the content of our faith, in Asia the compelling testimony or witness of life of Christians often are the articulation of Christian salvation that draw non-Christians to ask about Jesus.

III. Some Biblical Models of Christian Salvation [based on Richard Clifford, SJ and Khaled Anatalios, “Christian Salvation: Biblical and Theological Perspectives”, *Theological Studies*, 66 (2005)].

Three biblical models, each representing an emphasis within a comprehensive experience of Israel and the Church of salvation and encounter with the Saving Lord. They are not autonomous and mutually exclusive.

- a. “The prophetic model emphasizes God’s sovereign and saving involvement in human history; God is actively involved in human history in ways that constantly open up a future that leads to salvation.”
- b. “The liturgical model emphasizes the indwelling of God’s life-giving and redeeming holiness and the acknowledgement and celebration of such indwelling through the cultic life of Israel and the Church.”
- c. “The sapiential model emphasizes divine self-revelation as a salvific category: God makes his ways known to humanity and the reception and enactment of this knowledge is salvation.”
- d. “The interrelation between the various models is both textual and logical. In the OT, the prophetic model looks to a future in which the integrity of Israel’s cultic life will be restored [see Isaiah 66:18-22]; the liturgical model finds its foundation in the historical inbreaking of God’s indwelling presence In the Exodus traditions; and the sapiential model incorporates both Exodus and Zion traditions, i.e. knowledge of God is mediated by divine intervention in human history and is maintained by authentic worship (Psalms 46-48). In the NT these models

find their unity in the person and work of Christ. He represents the climax of God's saving intervention in human history, the way in which humanity has full access to the heavenly throne, and the medium of God's self-disclosure in human form."

- e. "In contemporary appropriation of the meaning of Christian salvation, the task is not simply to choose one of these models but to distinguish distinct emphases in order to unite them."

IV. Christian Understanding of Sacrifice

- a. Pope John Paul II, "salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace, which while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of his sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit." (*Redemptoris mission* 10, quoted in *Dominus Iesus* 20, The Church and the Other Religions in Relation to Salvation).
- b. The need for an authentic Christian understanding of Sacrifice, which is Trinitarian [based on Robert Daly, "New Developments in the Theology of Sacrifice," *Liturgical Ministry*, 18 (2009)].
 - i. The self-offering of the Father. "Christian sacrifice, as the ultimate personal/interpersonal event, begins not just with the initiative of the Father but with the self-offering initiative of the Father in the gift-sending of the Son to and for us. It is not something that the Father imposes on the Son, does to the Son, or demands from the Son...Authentic Christian sacrifice in its inchoative human realizations is never something that someone does to or demands of someone else...the paradoxical tensions between self-sacrifice as 'the loss of self and the transcending fulfillment of genuinely free self-giving as 'the gift of self.'

- ii. The self-offering 'response' of the Son. "The 'response' of the Son to the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit, takes place in his humanity - in the human living of Jesus, his life, works, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit - as, so Aquinas, the instrumental cause of our salvation...The 'material' of this sacrifice is the perfectly free, responsive, self-giving, self-communicating en-Spirited love of the Son to/with/in the Father, as well as to and for us...What is primary in the historical sacrifice is the saving action of God entering into human history through the instrumentality of the human living, dying and rising of Jesus. What is primary ritually in the eucharistic celebration is the action of the Church...actualizing both eschatologically and anticipatorily that most intimate relationship with her divine partner of which the Church is capable, that is, beginning to enter into that event in which the self-offering initiative of the Father in the gift of the his Son is, in the Spirit, responded to in the mutually self-communicating love of the Son... No *thing* is being offered. For what is *happening* in Christian sacrifice is that *persons*, in full freedom are giving/communicating themselves to each other. In other words, Christian sacrifice is, in God, in Jesus and (at least inchoatively) in us, a participation in the perichoretic life of the Blessed Trinity...What is taking place is nothing less than the transformation of the participants into ever more active and participatory members of the Body of Christ; it is the divinization or *theosis* of which the Greek Fathers spoke.
- iii. The self-offering of believers. "Beginning from and responding to God's initiative, authentic Christian sacrificial activity is thus a responsive, interpersonal, human activity that Christians are enabled to make only in the power of the same Holy Spirit that was in Jesus, the same Spirit and Power that empowered his loving 'response' to the Father. While it may be ritually symbolized in the sacrifice of the Mass, it is

only proleptically realized there. For it does not begin to be actively real in our lives apart from our loving service to our brothers and sisters whom we do see with our bodily eyes.”

- iv. Authentic Christian sacrifice as the path of personal self-giving response to one’s personal experiences of receiving self-giving love from others is “known” by most ordinary people. Recipients of self-giving love are changed, become “decent” human beings. “All acts of self-giving love, to the extent that they are indeed self-giving, and regardless of whether they are performed by Christians, are acts that are participations in the self-giving love of God. They are acts that, in the first place, have been empowered by, and function as invitations to enter into, that process of divinization that, in its first ‘moment’ begins with the self-offering of the Father in the gift-sending of the Son. Good people all over the world already ‘know’ this, not of course in the technical terms that the theologian is struggling to find, but at least virtually, implicitly, and instinctively. It is the task of the preacher and teacher, the spiritual director, or whoever is trying to ‘explain’ it to them to bring this knowledge and experience to the surface, to invite people to become aware of and empowered by the ultimately reality of Christian sacrifice that is already at work in their lives.”

V. Other Suggestions:

- a. Explore Christ’s descent into Hell for Christian Salvation and other Religions [e.g. Wouter Biesbrouck, “*Extra Ecdesiam nulla salus, sed extra mundum nulla damantio, Reappropriating Christ’s Descent into Hell for Theology of Religions,*” *Louvain Studies*, 37 [2013)]
- b. Explore Asian cultural values [e.g. Wenifredo Padilla, OP and Clarence Marquez, OP, “Towards a Soteriological Significance of *Pakikiramay* as an Inculturated Model for Understanding Salvation,” *Philippiniana Sacra* (2010)]

- c. Study in a systematic fashion how 'salvation in Jesus' factors in why Catholics leave the Church to join other religions and why followers of other religions join the Church.

VI. LIVING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IN AN INTERRELIGIOUS AND MULTI-CULTURAL CONTEXT

- Archbishop Felix Machado, Vasai, India

Introduction

In spite of the widely observed danger of religious fanaticism in the world, religions in general, by the content of their essential teaching, do lend themselves to openness and dialogue. Religions do not exist in vacuum. In professing religion, a believer expresses his deepest aspirations and develops what is most profoundly his own: his interiority, the sanctuary of his being upon which no one can encroach. Religious believers live alongside those who belong to different religious traditions which, therefore, are part of human society. Interreligious dialogue, as well as moral dialogue with the non-religious, is thus an important responsibility of the Christian faithful (Clergy, Religious and Laity). Since millions of people find in their respective religious tradition, animation and guidance for their lives and because their religious belief gives them meaning to their lives, religions exert a strong impact on every political and social community. Adherents of all religious traditions need to be together in order to take part in the life of civil society and, motivated by the respective religious teachings, they can fruitfully work for the common good of all citizens.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) exhorted and encouraged all Christians to enter into positive and constructive dialogue with all religious believers and to make every effort in order to build peace in society and in the world by forging bonds of respect and love with one and all. It cannot be emphasized enough that the edifice of peace is in jeopardy without serious commitment of all people of good will to interreligious dialogue.

May I immediately add here, dear brother bishops, that interreligious dialogue is not perhaps the easiest or, sometimes even happy part of our pastoral commitment, especially in the present

circumstances of 'our times'. I believe that firm conviction and irreversible commitment on our part to interreligious dialogue demands patience when seen in the light of the mystery of the Cross which our Master and Savior embraced.

Principal Motive for interreligious Dialogue

The principal motive for engaging in dialogue with people of other religions is the respect for the innate free nature of the human being. Believing is a free act. The dignity of the human person is "a transcendent value, always recognized as such by those who sincerely search for the truth". Failure to respect this dignity leads to the various and often tragic forms of discrimination, exploitation, social unrest and national and international conflicts; respect for human dignity finds one of its expressions in religious freedom which, "if it means the right to choose one's beliefs about the meaning and purpose of life, is a fundamental freedom, arguably the most important human right of all".

The Church has always advocated this freedom which must always be able to find a place within the framework of a country's legislation and practice. Freedom of Religion is also a condition for minority religious groups who consider themselves full citizens of the State; thus, Freedom of Religion encourages them to take full part in the development of the nation. This happens especially when believers of different religions come together and commit themselves to live in mutual respect through friendship and dialogue (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 73, 76, 92).

How should we understand interreligious dialogue?

Without wanting to oversimplify, I would state that interreligious dialogue means making every effort to relate to people across religious boundaries in order to collaborate and promote peace in society and the world. While presenting the declaration, *Nostra Aetate (NA)*, to the Council Fathers, Cardinal Bea stated: "This declaration is meant to join the mission, which the Supreme Pontiff has assumed himself through the Encyclical, through his allocutions and through his gestures, the mission of which the Scriptures say, 'Happy are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons (and daughters) of God' (Mt 5:9). It is the mission to which the Prince of

Peace gave himself for, which made Jews and the Gentiles, by his Cross, new creatures, establishing thus peace, and becoming our peace". In building peace, not only should Christians solicit collaboration of others but when called to do so by others, they should prudently but willingly extend their hand to one and all, in order to confront challenges and difficulties our world is facing.

Interreligious dialogue is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church in a single but complex, interrelated, articulated and thus a diversified reality. In other words, one should avoid simplistic division of the religious world by putting them into blocks of 'Christian' and 'non-Christian'. Thus, personal witness, promotion of human dignity, inculturation (efforts to have the Faith of the Church penetrated), amicable relations among believers of different religions, the proclamation of the Gospel through all forms and activities and proposing to peoples the discipleship of Jesus through baptism, are the elements of the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Nostra Aetate (NA) spells out some pastoral guidelines for the faithful to engage in dialogue with people of other religions. The *Nostra Aetate* recognizes and accepts the objective reality of religious traditions, with esteem and respect, the reality which goes beyond individual religious believers. Obviously, the declaration (NA) must be understood within the total teaching of the Church which is expressed in other documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Dialogue is situated within the very vocation of the Church: "By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). The word, dialogue itself can be seen rooted in the Christian concept of revelation; indeed Christians confess that God, in order to reveal himself to man, entered into dialogical relationship with humanity which the Bible calls the history of "covenant"; this history of salvation culminates in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made flesh and dwelt among us corporally with total fullness of divinity (Col 2:9). St Pope Paul VI liked to call it "dialogue of salvation". God who is fully and definitively revealed in Jesus Christ does not divide but he unites. That is why openness to others can never be separated from fidelity to Christ. Being open to dialogue means being absolutely consistent with one's own religious tradition. This unconditional adherence to Christ does not prevent

Christians from conversing with the exponents of other religions. Indeed, this absolute fidelity to Christ becomes a solid starting point for meeting people and appreciating those riches which - as the Second Vatican Council says - God in his munificence has distributed to the peoples (*Ad Gentes* n. 11). We should not fear that it will be considered an offence to the identity of others what is rather the joyful proclamation of a gift meant for all, and to be offered to all with the greatest respect for the freedom of each one: the gift of the revelation of the God who is Love incarnate. Far from encouraging withdrawal into self, acceptance of Christ is a crucial incentive to meet and accept all people. Dialogue thus becomes the path of the Church.

What is asked of us is attitudinal change towards people of other religious traditions in order to relate to them in positive, constructive, fraternal and friendly relations. Dialogue is not primarily a cerebral discussion on the subject of religions, but rather it is the building up of mutual relationships: "In her task of fostering unity and love among men, and even among nations, the Church gives primary consideration to what human beings have in common and to what promotes fellowship among them" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1). The objectives of *Nostra Aetate* are not to enter into polemics and create a debate or a futile discussion between adherents of different religions; through dialogue the Church wishes to enter into the very depth of the life of all people. Therefore what is asked is the attitude of prudence and charity; interreligious dialogue is presented by *Nostra Aetate* as an apostolate with a vast field of activities for the progress of all humanity to which all faithful can and must make their specific contribution.

The Church wishes to create a climate of cordiality and trust between Christians and followers of other religions, so that all people may be able to dissipate mutual prejudice and ignorance and establish fruitful contact among them in order to collaborate on the questions of common concerns.

Obviously, as a result of mutual relationships clarity will help believers, as to how one understands oneself and the other as well, so that through greater collaboration among themselves believers of different religions may work for the common good in a given concrete context. As it is repeatedly said, all faithful are invited

to build bridges of friendship across religious boundaries so that in good times and bad we keep on meeting for the good of society and for establishing peace in the world at large. Thus, dialogue must take place on all levels and forms of life.

Interreligious dialogue presumes honesty and truthfulness on the part of those who practice their respective religious traditions. Dialogue demands that believers keep compromises, political confrontations or business type negotiations completely out when they relate to believers of other religions. However, identity of one's own religious tradition must never become motive to hate, denigrate or be indifferent toward the other.

Discovering the deeper message of Vatican II

The Church is sent to all people without exception. *Ad Gentes* (AG) forcefully states that while the proclamation of Christ to the world as the unique Savior of all people is unequivocally clear and firm, so should the religious affiliation and cultural belonging of people be respected seriously. The conciliar decree, *Ad Gentes*, asks Christians to "be familiar with their national and religious traditions, gladly and reverently laying bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in them" (*Ad Gentes*, n. 11).

Differences among Religions are not obstacles to overcome but opportunities to transcend

Nostra Aetate stresses the fundamental unity of the human race: "All men form but one community". What is this unity? We need to have a clear idea of "being together" or "living together" in mutual respect, harmony and peace. Confused and incorrect approach to being together can do more harm than good, especially when the religious dimension of the human person is involved. For example, 'juxtaposition' of various religions, by simply placing the differences or commonalities of one religion next to those of the other, will encourage indifference; while "equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content ...the Church rules out, in a radical way, (the) mentality of indifferentism (which is) characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the

belief that ‘one religion is as good as another’” (*Dominus Jesus*, 22).

Here is an example from Christian-Hindu dialogue which holds true also for some other religions in Asia (such as Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Sikhism). A Hindu friend, who considers differences between religions as obstacles to coming together, said to me that he sees little success in interfaith dialogue because believers fail to resolve differences; and partners in dialogue are not able to resolve differences because those involved in dialogue do not have a common “anchor” or touchstone on which to evaluate the different viewpoints which, according to my friend, partners in dialogue simply need to accept and understand. Instead, so concludes my Hindu friend, people talk superficially, agree superficially, and in their hearts they continue to hate the others or try to vanquish them politically.

When efforts are made by people of different religions to come together by choosing the least common denominator, thus compromising one’s own religious belief, religions are reduced to some selected and apparently common ideas. This destroys the very essence of the religious traditions. Wanting to be together at all cost, some believers choose to put their fundamental religious essence into bracket, thereby denying the essential particularity of one’s own religious tradition. As a result the cause of genuine dialogue is betrayed.

Dialogue originates from a sincere and insatiable desire to know the Truth

In authentic practice of interreligious dialogue, we affirm hope because dialogue is born out of deep respect for the human person. Dialogue does not reduce ‘the other’ to one’s own *a priori* idea. Through dialogue believers communicate in order to bridge the gulf of mutual ignorance and misunderstanding. By allowing the ‘other’ to speak out from one’s own insight, religious language or idiom one lays bare one’s own assumptions and those of others, thereby becoming solidly grounded in what one holds to be true, because dialogue originates from a sincere and insatiable desire to know the Truth more and more. Dialogue does not aim at shaking the convictions of the other, but rather aims at challenging the other more vividly with the Truth which one seeks and once found,

adheres to it; *Ad Gentes* rightly warns Christians of a danger that while speaking about truth and grace found in other religions, these “need to be enlightened and purified” (*Ad Gentes*, n. 3).

The practice of dialogue should be consistent, uninterrupted and constant despite challenges and difficulties. One must never give up dialogue, however impossible the situation might seem; there is no alternative to dialogue. We are often impatient because we feel betrayed of our trust or want to see the fruits instantly of the labor we put in. There is a need to always begin anew to build relationships in good times as well as bad because it helps partners in dialogue heal painful memories in our delicate journey of building relationships. An encounter in depth, at the core of their respective faiths, not superficial meeting, can make the believers involved in dialogue, confident that not only what they have in common, but also those things in which they differ, can provide a motive for coming together. It is also true that the ecumenical spirit in the work of interreligious dialogue is recommended because encounters with other believers become credible and effective when Christian witness is given together by all Christians.

Faith is always proposed and never imposed

Dialogue with people and their religious traditions, has over the last fifty years, been given much greater importance in the life of the Church in the Asian continent which is quite sensitive particularly to the question of ‘religious conversions’. The Gospel is to be proposed to all but will be imposed to none. While affirming the Church’s right to proclaim the Gospel to all people *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH) makes it very clear that the faith of the Church cannot be imposed on anyone; neither can its free acceptance be hindered by anyone. In other words, there is no freedom worthy of its name if it does not respect the freedom of the other. *Dignitatis Humanae* states double meaning of freedom from coercion: that no one should be forced to act contrary to her/his conscience and that no one should be restrained from acting in accordance with her/his conscience. The Declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*, warns followers of all religions in no uncertain terms: “...in spreading religious faith and in introducing religious practices, everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of action which might seem to carry a hint of coercion or a

kind of persuasion that would be dishonorable or unworthy, especially when dealing with poor or uneducated people. Such a manner of action would have to be considered an abuse of one's own right and a violation of the right of others" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, n. 4). The Declaration, *Dignitatis Humanae*, also emphatically adds that religious freedom is not only the right of the individual human person but also of the community of persons as well.

Interreligious dialogue is embedded in the Asian spirit

The Church in Asia has always encouraged interreligious dialogue. Moreover, the religious spirit of Asians excels in this ancient practice. Gathered in Manila in 1970 on the occasion of the visit of St Pope Paul VI the Bishops from Asia declared: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere and continuing dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development". In 1974 the bishops of Asia, preparing for the Synod of Bishops on Evangelization stated that the local Church is a Church incarnate in a people and called the Church (in Asia) to be "indigenous and inculturated" (Taipei, 1974). Inculturation is "the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures - and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church". Belonging to the very core of evangelization, inculturation brings the Gospel into the heart of people in their concrete life-situation, in order to transform standards of judgment, reigning values, interests, patterns of thinking, motives and ideals.

A sound Christian theology as the basis for fruitful dialogue

A sound Christian theology is the firm foundation for constructive and fruitful interreligious dialogue. Theologians need to be at the service of the Church in order to help the faithful (clergy, religious and laity) to uncompromisingly live their Christian faith in an interreligious and multi-cultural context in Asia. Theologians have already been asking questions: How does the awareness of the plurality of religions produce a significant change in reformulating the content and revising the method of theology? In other words, what issues are raised for the theology and the practice of mission as we face challenge of religious plurality? Or, how does our life with

people of other faiths affect the content of our theology and its methodology? Though the Christian tradition from its inception has always been lived in a religiously pluralistic context, there are new perceptions of the pluralistic setting today. For example, according to an Asian theologian, “the vast majority of God’s poor in Asia perceive their ultimate concern and symbolize their struggle for liberation in the idiom of non-Christian religions and cultures” (*CTC Bulletin*, Vol. XI, nn. 2 and 3). The theologian concludes that this reality of the pluralistic context forces us to face more decisively questions about the converging and diverging values by which we live in relationship to the vital human issues of our time.

The question which becomes more fundamental to the whole discussion in the context of theology is: How is religious plurality to be positively understood in the plan of God who wishes to save all people? The Church acknowledges the ‘rays of Truth and goodness’ outside Christianity as God has not left the nations without his witnesses and the soul of every human person is naturally attracted to one True God.

When theology is not rooted in the Trinitarian mystery of God our mission misses the spirit of genuine dialogue. It is in the climate of dialogue, lived in reciprocity of the Spirit that friendship translates into service for the common good. The Trinitarian vision of God opens up and creates new space for some new convergence in the understanding of religious plurality. The Bishops of India had declared: “The other religions are not walls that we should attack and destroy. The other religions are homes of the Spirit which we have not visited; they are receivers of the Word of God whom we have chosen to ignore” (“Final Declaration” of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, Plenary Assembly, Nagpur, India, 1969).

The Church, on the national or regional level like India or Asia, must give attention to questions which are raised in actual dialogue to the Faith of the Church so that tools which are capable of helping the pastoral action can be proposed. Institutes of higher learning could be entrusted with these concerns. In France, there are Institutes of Science and Theology of Religions (ISTR) which are promoted by dioceses or ecclesiastical regions. Committing to an evangelical path in which dialogue and friendship between believers of different religions takes place, can bring about a striking and

demanding experience of faith which is lived concretely. Attention also needs to be given to the political dimension of interreligious dialogue and make believers aware of their historical responsibility. Not only is it important to have occasional meetings and numerous collaborative actions, but it is also useful to bring together the resources of political theology at the service of interreligious relations.

New challenges and difficulties in “our time”

The contexts and equations in interactions among people in society have changed in “our times”. As a consequence, fears, apprehensions and legitimate questions which are raised out of these new situations cannot be ignored or seen only negatively. Concern for the question of migrants and refugees, so eloquently proposed by our Holy Father, must be reflected upon seriously and vigorously among interreligious circles. This means that it is the pastoral task of our local Churches to have an honest evaluation of the practice of interreligious dialogue, gathering of spiritual and theological fruits, without ignoring failures, impasse or other necessary interrogations which must be made in order to bring concrete contributions to the light of the day.

It is also necessary that people be formed for dialogue. Young people could be motivated to render service to the poor and needy without discrimination of religious affiliation thus sewing networks across religious boundaries whereby they will learn to live encounters with others in the most authentic manner. These encounters of concrete cooperation between believers of different religions, as Holy Father Pope Francis says, will bring out the potentials of the social doctrine of the Church in order to face and resolve the principal problems of our contemporary society.

Dialogical awareness in the context of interreligious situation could be called a new kind of element in theological endeavor in Asia. This kind of awareness is said to acknowledge the plurality of languages and cultures and enrich our understanding of God’s mission in the world. The dialogical approach is thought to contribute to the reciprocal growth of the dialoguing partners. Such an approach not only means uncompromisingly believing that salvation comes in Jesus Christ but it also means to assess how

Christians can speak more positively about the religious life and faith of other believers and how Christians would reinterpret their faith in the light of a much more positive understanding of what God is doing among people of other religious traditions. Theologians in Asia propose that in this way they better understand how the Spirit of God is also at work in the religious traditions of their neighbor: “We do not ask any longer about the relationship of the Church to other cultures and religions; we are rather searching for the place and the role of the Church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world” (Documents of *Theological Advisory Committee*, FABC, 1994). These are genuine but delicate concerns and the Church in Asia needs to move in communion with the universal Church because the Magisterium is charged with the responsibility of preserving the ‘deposit of faith’; “The Church is fully aware that when interreligious dialogue is actually undertaken it does raise profound and fundamental theological questions” (*Dominus Jesus*, n. 3). Moreover, a dialogue without foundations would be destined to degenerate into empty wordiness. In other words, interreligious dialogue has its possibilities but also limits.

It is also necessary for us leaders in the Church to distinguish between what the Magisterium officially teaches and what the intellectuals freely discuss and how they form their personal opinions which often reach the faithful who might be ignorant of the magisterial teaching. There is a large corpus of the Church’s official teaching on interreligious dialogue. Uncompromising fidelity to the Faith of the Church, on the one hand, and genuine and deep respect for ‘the other’, on the other hand, are two poles of the same commitment to interreligious dialogue. Ultimately, love manifested on the Cross impels us to reach out to all people. Justin Martyr encouragingly reminds us, “the seeds of the Word are sown in the entire human race ... we can find the divine image in all even though it may be in an obscured and disfigured manner” (2 *Apol.* 8.1)¹³. In

¹³ The Fathers of the Church worked within the framework of the unifying principle of the cosmos or creation, namely, the logical implications of *the Mystery of the Logos*. The core idea was that what is offered in Christ, the Word, is the only reality in which all truth may be both sought and discovered. In the first part of the third century Justin speaks about the ‘seeds’ sown by the *Logos* in the religious traditions of the world. Through the incarnation the manifestation of the *Logos* becomes complete (1 *Apol.* 46, 1-4; 2 *Apol.* 8,1; 10:1-3: 13:4-6). For the Fathers of the Church “prior to and outside the Christian dispensation, God has

other words, the mystery of the Logos (Word) is neither alien nor opposed to the groping search of humanity for God.

However, the Bishops at the Synod for Asia (1998) clearly stated: "Only Christians who are deeply immersed in the mystery of Christ and who are happy with their faith community can without undue risk and with hope of positive fruit engage in interreligious dialogue...Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 31). St. Pope John Paul II, on the eve of the Jubilee of the Year 2000, declared: "The task before us therefore is to promote a culture of dialogue; individually and together, we must show how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice and upholds liberty" (*Culture of Dialogue*, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 2001, pp. 13-14).

Limits and Possibilities of interreligious dialogue

The confession of Peter, "there is salvation in no one else" (*Acts* 4:12), does not deny salvation to one who is not a Christian but points to its ultimate source in Christ, in whom man and God are united. God gives light to all in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation, granting them salvific grace in ways known to himself (*Dominus Jesus*, VI, nn. 20-21). Vatican II has made several statements, explicit and implicit, regarding ways of salvation of people of other religions; but all statements always affirm the unique plan of salvation God has in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As they live their Christian Faith in an interreligious and multi-cultural context, Christians must bear in mind three objectives:

1. To develop a deep respect for people of other religions and their respective traditions without any discrimination.
2. To safeguard the integrity of the Christian faith.
3. To continue to do the *missio Dei* because, understood as a method and means to mutual knowledge and enrichment,

already, in an incomplete way, manifested himself. This manifestation of the *Logos* is an adumbration of the full revelation in Jesus Christ to which it points" (DP, n. 24).

dialogue is not in opposition to the mission *ad gentes*; indeed it has special links with that mission and is one of its expressions. This mission, in fact, is addressed to those who do not know Christ and his gospel, and who belong for the most part to other religions (*Redemptoris Missio*, nn. 55-57).

Interreligious dialogue does not originate from tactical concerns or self interest, but is an activity with its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 56).

I wish to draw your attention to an important document, "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct" (2011), which is jointly published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Holy See), World Council of Churches (Geneva) and the World Evangelical Alliance (Germany). It spells out and offers in clear, concrete and simple terms how a Christian is invited to live his/her faith in an Interreligious and Multi-Cultural context. The 'iter' of the document began as a study over the uncritical assumption by many, particularly in India, that conversions to Christianity are increasing by leaps and bounds and that this is because Christians are forcing their faith on others, etc. It is the first ever document which is endorsed and owned by majority of Christians (Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Evangelicals and Pentecostals). I wish to conclude by presenting the main points of the document:

Christians who lack appreciation and respect for other believers and their religious traditions are ill prepared to proclaim the Gospel to them (PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, n. 73).

The qualities needed by every Christian in doing mission are: 1) that they be respectful of the presence and action of the Spirit of God in the hearts of those who listen to the message (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 75); 2) that they be dialogical, for in the proclamation of the Word of God every hearer is not expected to be a passive listener; 3) and that they be deeply inserted (according to the magisterial teaching on inculturation) in the culture and the spiritual tradition of those addressed, so that the message proclaimed is not only intelligible to the hearers but it is also conceived as responding to

their deepest aspirations as truly the Good News, which in the depth of their hearts, they have been longing for (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nn. 20, 62).

No Christian should engage in inappropriate methods of exercising mission by resorting to deception and coercive means. Not by “proselytizing but by attraction”, to use the expression of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and our Holy Father, Pope Francis, Christians must not betray the Good News of Jesus and cause suffering to others. Mission is done by loving as God loves us, living Christian values, such as integrity, charity, compassion and humility, overcoming all arrogance, condescension and disparagement.

Christians are exhorted to engage in acts of selfless service and justice, never exploiting situations of poverty and need, refraining from all allurements in acts of service, never to engage in violence, overtly or covertly, for violence can never be justified in one’s religious life, by denouncing any instrumentalization of religion for vested interests by political, economic or ideological powers. Christians are invited to extend the hand of collaboration to people of all religions and of no religion, in order to promote the common good of all, to listen and understand the religious beliefs and practices of others and appreciate what is true, good, holy and beautiful in their religious traditions. Christians should never shy from helping through discernment, anyone who freely expresses to become a disciple of Jesus Christ desiring the sacrament of baptism; this means sufficient time for adequate reflection and preparation, through a process ensuring full personal freedom. At all times, but especially when relationships across religious boundaries are good, Christians must build friendship and mutual respect with all so that understanding, reconciliation and cooperation for the common good is promoted in society.

Christians are called to resolve conflicts, restore justice and heal memories at all times because these eventually lead to reconciliation and peace-building. It is also important that the Christians deepen and strengthen their essential religious identity and faith while getting to know the essence and practices of different religions. Christians must readily cooperate with believers of other religions when the dignity of any person is trampled upon in situations of conflict. Above all, Christians are exhorted to pray for

the well-being of their neighbors of all religions and also of no religion.

Published March 2019

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