

**RESPONSES TO THE GUIDE DOCUMENT
FOR THE FABC 50 GENERAL CONFERENCE
29 November 2020**

*Theme: FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia
“...and they went a different way.” (Mt 2:12)*

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CENTRAL, EAST AND SOUTH ASIA**

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I. **INTRODUCTION TO FABC PAPER NO. 166, RESPONSES TO THE *GUIDE DOCUMENT* FOR THE FABC 50 GENERAL CONFERENCE**

The present FABC Paper No. 166 is part of the ongoing process as we journey towards the FABC 50 General Conference. With the FABC PAPER NO. 165, THE FABC 50 GENERAL CONFERENCE: *GUIDE DOCUMENT* being the point of reference, Episcopal Conferences were invited to reflect and provide their feedback to that original *Guide Document* that was sent to them in December 2020.

This FABC Paper No. 166 then is a compilation of the responses of the Episcopal Conferences / Countries of the FABC Central, East and South Asia Regions to that *Guide Document*, which should be read with that document in mind. This publication should also be read together with the next FABC Paper No. 167 which compiles the responses of the Episcopal Conferences / Countries of the FABC South-East Asia Region.

Just as we were pleased to present the original *Guide Document* as an FABC Paper in order to make it easily available to as many people as possible, we are now pleased to present, after having sought permission, the responses of the Episcopal Conferences / Countries in the area of the FABC.

As was mentioned, over the past number of years, the FABC decided to hold a General Conference to signify an important milestone as the Church in Asia. The overall objective of the General Conference was seen as an opportunity to reaffirm, renew and revitalize the Church. It was planned that this General Conference would coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the beginnings of the FABC in November 2020. But while we were preparing and organizing, we were overtaken by the Covid-19 pandemic which necessitated a significant postponement of the Conference. However, this also gave us time to widen our process of consultations.

The original *Guide Document* was envisioned to be a document that could act at a “spark” and “catalyst” that could guide us as the Church in Asia into our General Conference. This by no means is to be considered complete or a final document but only to be a basis for further discernment, reflection, and discussion. For this reason, it was

sent to the Conferences and others before the FABC 50 General Conference for consultation and feedback. Having received insightful and profound responses, we also intend to update and enrich the *Guide Document*.

This issue of the FABC Papers is intended to acknowledge the great effort that has been put it by many people, and also to allow conferences and others to widen this conversation by understanding better each other's landscape and narrative. As we record and publish these responses, it is our hope that their reflections and nuanced discernments will become not only part of our preparations and will also remain integral to our conversations at the General Conference.

May we continually reflect and discern on the emerging realities and challenges confronting Asia and the Church, along with the Church's presence, role, and mission in our Asian context.

The FABC 50 General Conference Core Group

II. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF KAZAKHSTAN

First of all, I want to congratulate those who help us with their reflections and work on this path, also through this guiding text. According to the Chinese proverb quoted at the end, this text should be "a small step to a great journey". I think that is the vocation of this text.

If I may, I would suggest a few small observations:

1. At the beginning, when a beautiful reference is made to the text of Matthew, the last sentence may appear a little confusing if we consider the evangelic text:

To envision new pathways of service and journeying together as peoples of Asia (... they returned to their own country by a different way-Mt 2:12)

The Gospel text places us before two alternatives: the path of encounter with those who want to kill the child, or another path following the insinuation of an Angel of the Lord. The "different way" cannot be in relation to possible ways that the Church in Asia has worked out during these years in the past, as if they were "bad ways". It is obvious

that the intention of the text is not that, but it may not be well reflected. Perhaps it would be better indicated that the “new ways”, if we adapt to the text of Matthew, are to come, as Pope Francis likes to say, after a *process of discernment* in the face of that “spirit of the world” that opposes what the spirit of God wants to say to our communities in Asia. A path of dialogue always requires the *spirit of discernment*, especially in our time.

2. In the beautiful second part of the guide document, perhaps it would be good to recall the text of Matthew and the indication of the beginning, in the sense that a culture of encounter that we are called to promote is possible after adoring the Child, as the three wise men. Discernment of the “image” of Jesus for Asia will not be a result of theological or sociological analysis. The dialogue of the encounter can be created as a testimony after the experience of the encounter with the Risen One, who lives among us in Asia. It is a “dialogue in the spirit”, rather than in official analyses and meetings.

3. One last suggestion. There is one phrase that could surely be avoided. In the first part, at the end of Number 10, the LGBT movement is referred.

Alarmingly, gender-based violence continues to exist and gender issues which includes shifting gender identities, are largely unacknowledged even as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) communities continue to make themselves heard in the midst of rejection in families, communities and society at large.

I think that we cannot suggest in our text that ideology as a model or reference in the defense of human dignity or the rights of certain social groups. We know that this ideology in some countries is precisely promoting laws against the rights of individuals and the freedom of the pastoral action of the Church.

III. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF JAPAN

PART ONE

We appreciate the reflection concerning the “emerging realities and trends of concern in Asia”. We think that it reflects the situation we are living today in Asia. Just a few comments from our Japanese perspective.

3. Climate Emergency.

The title could be changed to “Environmental Emergency” since it includes different types of environmental problems not limited to climate issue.

4. Digitalization

Second paragraph. 2nd line from the top. “challenges they impose” could be changed to “challenges caused by misuse of digital communication”. The reason for this is that the technology itself does not impose challenges, but it is the person behind who impose challenges.

5. Urbanization

Concerning “urbanization”, one more aspect can be introduced. This is the challenge to become what we could call the “soul of the cities”, offering spaces of silence, prayer, sharing and contemplation that will provide city dwellers with the possibility to satisfy their thirst for peace of mind and heart. This will also be an important contribution to the human and spiritual growth of persons who very often must fight with the stress that the urban life and their professional duties impose on them. At the same time, these spaces can become a place to provide the opportunity for many aged people who live alone to experience the warmth of being together with other people in a peaceful and joyful atmosphere.

6. Migrants and Refugees

Add following in the end of the 2nd paragraph. “Often irregular migrants receive no support other than from criminal groups, and such situation causes forced prostitution, organ trafficking and forced labor which women and children are particularly vulnerable.”

9. Youth

2nd line from the top of the 3rd paragraph. I do not think “online gaming” is something to be avoided. I propose to modify as follows. “being exposed to pornography and cybercrimes.”

10. Gender Issues

6th line of page 9. “areas of life throughout Asia.” I propose to make it “areas of life, including Catholic Church, throughout Asia.”

11. Family Values

Concerning family values, we observe an increasing number of divorces that, normally, have a negative impact in the children. A mentality that considers marriage as something not binding forever is taking more and more ground in our culture, especially among the young generations. Divorce may be unavoidable in some cases, but the basic attitude towards marriage should be a life commitment to journey together.

Together with this, we are shocked by the increasing cases of domestic violence (DV) that can have different roots: psychological, social, economic, etc. It is something that has been there for generations, also in Asia, but that a new awareness about human rights and the dignity of each person has made it come to light. It is a situation that must be confronted.

Christian couples are called to give witness to the sacredness of marriage and family life.

Add following in the end of the section 11. “In some parts of Asia, aging society is a clear trend and it is expected to continue for decades. There are many isolated elders who are lonely and abandoned.”

13. Human Dignity

In the 2nd sentence of the 2nd paragraph, “suicide” could be added.

15. Transforming Church

The “steady growth” of Catholicism in Asia is an encouraging news for us who are in Japan. Among us we cannot talk about an increase in numbers and, besides that, we foresee a difficult future for many Christian communities whose members are aging without new

people coming up. We see the need to stir up in our communities and its members (bishops, priests, religious, laypersons) the spirit that inspired and sustained the commitment of the first missionaries who came to our country. We want to be an “outreaching church”, but we feel the need to deepen the spiritual strength necessary for it.

PART TWO

1. Prophetic and Responsive Church

We find beautiful insights in this part of the document. Thank you very much.

We see four important aspects that should characterize the life of the Church in the Asian context:

- ① Learning. It is a prophetic sign that shows that we do believe that God has always been accompanying the journey of the peoples of Asia. Thankfully learning. It is even more important in a context of religious fundamentalism present in many parts of Asia.
- ② Sharing. Giving what we have received. It is a contribution to the spiritual and human growth of Asia. We will also grow in our experience of God.
- ③ Denouncing. It is a consequence of siding with the poor and marginalized as disciples of Jesus. Denouncing without any compromise with the powers to be, doing it with the freedom that experiences who trust the Lord and His love.
- ④ Building an inclusive society. Together with the people of goodwill at the service of the peoples of Asia, responding to the plan of God for His children.

2. Images of Jesus for Asia

In this part we appreciate the traits that are indicated. It is a beautiful part of the document that shows the spring from where it flows the water that nourishes the Christian communities of Asia and sustains their journey.

3. Images of the Church in the Asian Context

Two little observations.

1. There is an indication of the need to keep the commitment to the threefold dialogue the FABC indicated as the path of the Church in

Asia in its Plenary Meeting in Taipei in 1974: dialogue with the poor, with the religious traditions and with the cultures of Asia. It follows the indication of the need to add new areas of dialogue. This is true. However, we should be careful when we talk of dialogue “with the youth”, “with women”, “with those the church considers as sinners” (most probably there is need to reconsider this word; for instance, it could be “those who are marginalized in the Christian community” or some similar expression). This “dialogue with” can give the impression that we are in one side and them in the other. Would it not be better to talk about building up a church in which young people, women, etc. are truly respected and in which their voices are heard and considered? Young people, women, persons marginalized in the Christian community are also “Church”. They should contribute to shape the identity of the church in Asia.

2. Concerning the expression “Digital Church”, we are not really willing to become a “digital church”, but to become a relevant community that keeps its bounds and strengthens them also through the new communication means and that joints many other people in their search for truth, justice, fraternity being present in the digital continent.

We acknowledge that internet is not just a new instrument of communication. For many people, especially for the younger generations, it is a “new continent” in which they live, communicate, shape their value system, and try to find what they are looking for. The Church should be present in that new continent sharing the good news of the Gospel and inviting people to go beyond the digital world jumping into the reality in which they can and must encounter and relate with other persons that cannot be controlled by a “mouse”.

PART THREE

The Future of FABC

We appreciate the services of the FABC and we hope that we will be able to take more advantage of them. We see the importance of the activities and programs at the regional level that facilitate a better participation.

We do hope that the FABC becomes more and more a relevant voice in the context of Asia. The Catholic Church in Asia can have a big

impact through the many institutions she has and, principally, through the life and commitment of the laity in the different areas of society. The formation of the laity has been and continues to be an important issue for the Church of Asia.

IV. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF KOREA

PART ONE

The Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia.

1. Are the 15 Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia a reflection of the overarching situation in Asia? Are there points to be added?

Objective reflection on the past 50 years must be premised, and we hope that the future vision and comprehensive plan based on the results of scientific analysis of the results of that reflection to be added.

Changing trends seems to be summarized into 15 keywords. Since all trends and problems of the modern society are pointed out, it seems to cover all the problems of the modern society and not specifically the problems in Asia. We would like to give some suggestions as a reference.

- (1) Section 1 'Global Pandemic' should analyze and present the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Asia. Firstly, after the outbreak of COVID-19, hatred and discrimination against Asians have spread and became apparent in Western Europe and United States. It would be beneficial for the human rights of Asians if the FABC General Conference mention it. Secondly, due to the economic polarization caused by COVID-19, many of the poor and vulnerable in Asian countries faced crisis through severe pain and difficulty economically and socially. In the long-lasting COVID-19 pandemic, we have to turn our attention from the risk of disease to the cry of the poor in Asia, whose daily life is threatened by poverty. Thirdly, we have to look into the specific reality of various Asian countries where numerous confirmed cases of COVID-19 were reported. In particular, India has more than 10 million confirmed cases (10,701,193 as of Jan 29, 2021) and has the

second most confirmed cases in the world, just behind United States. Indonesia ranks 19th, Pakistan 30th, Bangladesh 31st, Philippines 32nd and Japan 37th. What is more serious is that not only these countries but also many other Asian countries are not complying with the COVID-19 prevention guidelines and appropriate treatment and support is not provided for the confirmed cases.

- (2) We hope that section 4 will be able to analyze not only the net function of 'Digitalization' but also the dysfunction and challenging aspects to the church. In addition to mentioning the digital divide, it is necessary to highlight aspects of 'digital immigration' (Refer to article 90 of *Christus Vivit*) or 'digital alienation' and express the church's identification and response to it. Furthermore, we need to look at the future aspects of Asia and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, represented by artificial intelligence and biotechnology (neurogenetics, genes, brain and soul).
- (3) Regarding section 5 'Urbanization', in 1968, Pope Paul VI has already advised to approach the matter very cautiously as it can lead to dehumanization of our society. We must look into how we can compensate for the destruction of village communities that have brought communication and cooperation in our society, caused by urbanization.
- (4) Regarding section 8 'Transformation of Cultures', the diversity of Asian culture is like a fertile field that enriches the world civilization. Therefore, cultural diversity should not be used as an object of discrimination and distinction, but as a driving force to develop each other's culture through harmony of diversity.
- (5) Regarding section 9 'Youth', serious efforts and investments are needed to provide an 'appealing and exciting' pastoral alternative that can emanate the ingenious and impulsive tendencies of adolescents that difficult for the older generation.
- (6) Problems against women are mentioned in section 10 'Discrimination', and oppression against women is very serious and has not been improved. We hope that issue related to women can be treated as an independent topic.

- (7) In section 11 'Family Values' description about values of family and today's form of family in Asia is confined to the traditional appearance maintained in certain countries. In developing countries in Asia nowadays, such as Singapore, Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong, the values and forms of family as a community are often damaged and dismantled.
- (8) In particular, we request a review for the following explanations below (①, ②). It says that marriage and childbirth are affected by the "governmental population control policy," but many countries in Asia are already facing challenges such as low birthrate and increasing non-marriage.
- ① "Many children in Asia grow with both parents in extended/joint families."
- ② "In areas with greater access to mass and social media, attitudes towards the family are slowly being transformed by cultural globalization (EA 39). Moreover, government population control policies also greatly impact attitudes towards marriage, childbearing, and childrearing."
- (9) The Church must understand the pain of the countries affected by Japanese invasion in the past, and strive for mutual harmony. In addition, it is necessary to add an analysis of the current political changes, especially the impact of the US-China conflict on Asia. Influence of the economy is also not described enough and needs to be supplemented. As political situation varies in each country and region with different cultural and economic situation, it will not be easy for the Catholic Church to respond. It is not easy to suggest or criticize the government at the local church level, however, we hope that FABC could present alternatives by speaking out against governments opposing to the universal values of mankind and the spirit of the gospel.
- (10) The economic polarization caused by COVID-19 is getting worse. We hope the Document to address poverty as a separate topic, which is the most serious issue in many Asian countries and one of the "triple dialogue" as well. In addition, several Asian countries are facing a serious aging issue. Pope Francis often emphasized the need to change the perspectives and approaches

to the 'elderly'.

- (11) Content of section 13 'Human Dignity' is very appropriate, but in Asian society, individual values and human rights are often ignored because they are subordinate to communities. Since individuals cannot be seen separately from larger communities, it is a natural value that human dignity should accept and respect the sacredness and autonomy inherent in humans. It is necessary to monitor the principle that the innate human rights of an individual cannot be constrained or compromised by the coercion of others without reasonable consent, and to continue to educate them to improve human right issues.
- (12) During the pandemic, the Church in Korea is experiencing the harm of "heresy" groups that advocate Christianity outwardly, but actually destroy other people's lives. We propose to take this opportunity to identify and respond to the problems of "heresy" in Asia, as well as to examine and reflect on our church. This can be linked to section 14 'Religions in Society'. In addition to the above, we would like to once again call attention to the basic posture of interreligious dialogue. Even if we cannot fully accept or agree with the doctrines or beliefs of our neighboring religions, we need to respect their important values.
- (13) Due to the regional diversity in Asia, the problems faced in Northeast Asia are rarely addressed and shallowly described. It is important to understand the changes, but the observation and analysis of how these changes affect actual pastoral ministry and evangelization movement are just as important. Observations and analysis in this field, however, are limited to section 15 'Transforming Church'.

Content of section 15 is very appropriate, but philosophical and theological reflection and alternatives are needed on how spirit of the gospel and official teachings of the Church can be indigenous (be incarnated), despite various differences of culture and tradition in each region. Above all, more detailed analytical study and consensus among local churches on how to solve common and regional problems of the Church in Asia will be needed.

2. What are the glaring gaps (if any) that need to be mentioned so as add value to this document?

- (1) Part 2 and 3 of this Document needs to be supplemented and reconstructed. The analysis of the reality and trends of the present day that challenge the church and the faith is too general. Reflecting new trends and realities in Asia by categorizing into 15 aspects in part 1 is to examine the Church's identification, theological and private insights, responses, and practical suggestions in part 2 and 3, however part 2 and 3 do not fully cover this aspect. We hope that key words and contents of part 2 and 3 to be clarified and select a structure that can deliver the message well.
- (2) In order to faithfully reflect another methodology, 'pastoral spiral approach', it needs to analyze how COVID-19, urbanization, globalization, and digital culture appear differently in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. These three regions are grouped together into Asia, but they have very different political, economic and cultural environments and must be approached differently, but there is no such attempt. The role of Christianity in how to form a culture of respect and consideration within regional diversity should be included, and it should reflect different realities and specificities.
- (3) It is not wrong to describe Asia as a multi-religious society, but the Guide Document does not describe how "cultural determination" affects daily life in the aforementioned three regions of Asia. Furthermore, while this Document cites various documents including Pope Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium*, it shows no interest in his representative ecclesiology of how the church can be implemented in Asia and aforementioned regions as a 'field hospital'. It seems necessary to consider this kind of evangelization and missionary work. For example, these three regions experience a lot of violence and conflict on a daily basis. We can look at this with human security or human development that must be realized every day, and make a practical suggestion to approach this with the problem of what the church needs to do.

PART TWO

The Church in the Asian Context

1. Does the section on Church in the Asian Context respond sufficiently to Emerging Realities and the Trends of Concern in Asia? If not, what other “models/images” may be required? In what ways could the Church in Asia respond to these Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia?

- (1) Section 1 ‘Aspects of Asian Culture for a Prophetic and Responsive Church’ talks about various aspects of Asian culture, we propose to select and explain certain main concepts, taking into account the overall direction of this document. For instance, in Asia, cultures of ‘listening’, ‘dialogue’, ‘caring’, ‘compassion’, and ‘cooperation/solidarity’ are important and they are in line with the signs of the present day, direction of the church, and pastoral response.
- (2) In section 2 ‘Images of Jesus for Asia’, the image of Jesus in the gospel is described comprehensively. It is natural to find sources from Jesus in the bible while referring to the interest in the poor, women, and neglected, but this is not new as FABC sought to do this for the last 50 years. In many images of Jesus, we propose to emphasize the image of Jesus calling us ‘friends’ (cf. Jn 15:14-15; Mt 20:13; 22:12; 26:50) and the ‘companions’ (cf. Lk 24:13-35) walking with us and empowering his disciples and sending them ‘to participate in the mission of evangelization’ (cf. Lk 10:1-12; Mt 28:16-20). This aspect is important as it is linked to the realization of a Synodality in theological and pastoral ways.
- (3) Regarding section 1, it is appropriate to assume the “digital Church” as one of the figures of the Church in relation to pandemic. It is necessary to present even a rough idea of what implications the arrival of digital culture (or untact culture), which was accelerated by the pandemic, has for Asia. It should also present how the continent of Asia, which has been influenced by Western modernity, could receive its ‘double task of acceptance and overcoming’, and what role Asian Christianity has been given in the transformation of that civilization, without just expressing it as ‘posing a challenge’. Section 4 of Chapter 3 also suggests a

path of “digital pastoral approach” as one of the possible “new pathway” initiatives for the Church in Asia. It would be good if a full-fledged and multi-faceted study on how the church will pastorally approach and serve God's people and a firm determination to solve the problem in an untact situation is included in the Document.

- (4) More specific comments on the unshakable prophetic voice on ‘Green, Eco Church’, sincere participation, presentation of symbols are needed.
- 2. What are your comments on the theological points in the guide document? Is this appropriate and adequate? Is there something lacking?**

- (1) In the theological approach in the content of part 2 and 3, we suggest to include ‘Synodality’ based on ecclesiology of communion by people of God as main concept and orientation. This will be the succession of FABC’s theology, especially the vision and practice of ecclesiology, and will also lead to a new leaps and developments.

Furthermore, in order to reflect on how ‘Synodal church’ relates to digital culture and digital church, it is necessary to reflect more openly about what ‘digital church’ means ecclesologically and theologically in terms of ‘religion and evolution’ and ‘religion and science’.

- (2) The capitalist way of thinking and lifestyle of the faithful, commonly observed in all Asian countries and cultures, can be analyzed with the keyword ‘*concupiscentia*’. We suggest to add theological reflection for this keyword. In addition, according to the Bible verse ‘Give them some food yourselves’ (Mk 6:37), we should not overlook the perspective that the Church’s greater participation in Asia, goal or motivation of the dialogue is a response to the reasons for the existence of the church, missionary orientation and evangelization.
- (3) In addition to the biblical commentary, it would be preferred to include supplementary materials such as Conciliar Documents, Pope’s encyclicals, or related theological papers.

PART THREE

Envisioning Possible “New Pathways” for the Church in Asia and the FABC

1. **What other “pathways” does the Church in Asia need to embark on for the future of Asia? Do you have suggestions for “new pathways”?**
 - (1) Through the ‘Synodality’, it should be a pathway for God’s people to participate vigorously in the Church’s life and evangelical mission, and this spirit and spirituality should be expanded to the level of the faithful and all Church. To this end, structural design and practical measures are needed to expand the participation of laymen, especially youth and women. The joint interest in seminary education presented in the document and the expansion of education and solidarity through developing digital technology are also important, but first, the expansion of education and exchanges that allow believers of individual national churches to be interested in other churches.
 - (2) The need to promote the FABC, strengthen exchange and cooperation is posed in this document. Basically, we hope that the reorganization of the FABC homepage, which has been discussed and promoted by the FABC for over five years, will be completed soon so that activities and data sharing will be more conveniently and efficiently.
 - (3) We hope that the appropriate number of laymen and representatives of monks and nuns can be included in the FABC General Assembly.
 - (4) The FABC reorganization plan is also presented in Part 3. We hope that the reorganization of FABC can proceed through a process of sufficient opinion collection, discussion and transparent procedure. If the FABC is developed with a more inclusive and participative structure, it will be a ‘new pathway’ that fits the sentiment of modern people living in the 21st century aiming for rationalization.
 - (5) The ‘triple dialogue’, which is said to be the theological-pastoral axis of the FABC, was also presented in the document, but it seems

that its contents need to be reviewed. This is because there is a huge difference between the situation 50 years ago and the current situation. It is true that “In Asia, dialogue is the mode of being for the Church.” (Part Three, Paragraph 1 of the Guide Document), but a changed approach and in-depth study about the dialogue partner and the content is required. In addition, it must be clearly revealed that we are pursuing new methods, new media, new pathways, new approaches, new tools, and new communications, while preaching the same Gospel, the same Good News, and the same Christ which are always immortal.

- (6) In order to seek and move on to another pathway, the target of evangelization should be the area of serious conflict. It will be possible to find a new pathway for the evangelization of Asia, among revealing the position of the church's solidarity and participation in conflict areas like South and North Korea, and actual striving for reconciliation and wound healing in conflict areas.

When working for solidarity by paying more attention to the situation of local churches in areas where there is an increased risk of triggering conflict, such as Myanmar, Hong Kong, South and North Korea, or local churches with ethnic sentiment, and emphasizing FABC's position for reconciliation and peace settlement, the Church in Asia will plant the image of Jesus Christ as the suffering servant of God, imprint the image of the church with the Asian people, and lay the roots for evangelization in Asia.

- (7) As mentioned in paragraph 7 of Part 3, “The New Pathway,” of the Guide Document for the General Conference, many churches in Asia have been built on the land of the dedication and martyrdom of numerous Western missionaries. We believe that all Church in Asia need priority and continuous interest in efforts to support and serve the poor and alienated people not only in Asia, but to all of those beyond Asia; also in preaching the Gospel, and working together to promote the common good in Asia. To this end, it is necessary to prepare a more effective educational system, such as variety of missionary training courses and a system that allows students to complete their studies in their own country without having to study abroad.

V. CHINESE REGIONAL BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

Responses which concern several Dioceses in Taiwan

PART ONE

Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia.

Q 1. Are the 15 *Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia* an accurate reflection of the overarching situation in Asia? Are there any points that need to be added?

Yes. The 15 Emerging Realities and Trends of Concerns in Asia are a reflection of the overarching situation in Asia.

However, we would like to suggest, if it is possible, to also highlight the emerging concerns about the following phenomenon:

- 1.a. *Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP)* as one of the major concern for discussion, consideration, and it should be given proper and appropriate prompt response.
- 1.b. *Marriage and Family Life*. We believe that the increasing number of inter-faith and cross-cultural marriages affecting child-rearing, cultural regeneration and faith initiation should be extensively considered as a crucial, emerging concern for both of the sending and receiving country Churches.
- 1.c. Same-sex marriage. It should be addressed with compassion without compromising the core of the Church's teaching.

Q. 2. Are there any glaring gaps that need to be mentioned so as to enrich the document?

On Migration (Permanent and Temporary Migration)

One of the by-products of globalization is contractual migration which promotes commodification of cheap human labor even without remuneration and salary scheme, unfair broker system, systematic segregation of migrant workers in dormitories without the possibility of local integration and no security of tenure.

Is it part of the integral human development plan of both the sending and receiving countries to see to the needs of the following migration sectors such as: factory workers, nursing home caregivers,

household service and care-workers, entertainers, teachers and educators (*with uncertain rights and welfare*), foreign students, foreign fishers and seafarers?

Highlighting the specific needs of and the concerns about the above-mentioned migration sectors will also lead the Churches' Commissions to define and renew their pastoral paradigm, directives, guidelines and responses to their needs and concerns.

PART TWO

On the Church in the Asian Context.

Q1. Does the section on *Church in the Asian Context* respond appropriately and adequately to the *Emerging Realities and the Trends of Concern in Asia*? Are there any other “models/images” that you like to present?

Yes. The section on *Church in the Asian Context* responds *substantially* (on the immediate responses) but not *sufficiently* (it should include long-term measures for a sustained ministry). We hope the Church in Asia in her inclusive sense of doing ministry will extensively consider an *integrated, consolidated* and *comprehensive* response to the Emerging Realities and the Trends of Concern in Asia.

In the Encyclical Letter of Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* paragraph 14, it states that, “*The development of peoples must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man*”. Thus, it clearly says that the solicitude of the Universal/Catholic Church is indeed for all.

Substantial and *sufficient* responses both mean that no one should be left behind in the pursuit of integral human development. We hope that the Church in Asia will remain steadfast in the pursuit of adhering to the thrust of the above-mentioned document (PP., 14) through an *integrated, consolidated* and *comprehensive* pastoral and social response that will realize the integral development for the lost, last, least, vulnerable, marginalized and displaced peoples of Asia.

a) *Integrated* in terms of collaboration. By this we mean to exhaust all possibilities or **exemplary** courses of action and enriched

adequate distribution of resources to facilitate relief action, alleviate crisis situation of the needy and offer specific redress and liberation to *anything oppressive*.

- b) *Consolidated* – to make efforts in synergy with other NGOs and social welfare organizations in collecting reliable database on well-researched information to be used as reference resources for education, for fund-raising and for the selection of any interested bodies, accrediting agencies or supportive partners for collaboration, networking and on-going or sustained mechanism.
- c) *Comprehensive* – to provide an appropriate response and pastoral programs which are contextually relevant, accredited and institutionalized so that, it will be self-sustaining.

Q2. What are your comments on the theological points in the Guide Document?

The theological points in the Guide Document are attuned with the context, reality and reading and interpretation of the signs of the times and in dialogue with the documents of the Church and the Scriptures. It focuses on the Church's ministry of pastoral care and compassion, and the journey of faith of the people in Asia.

However, it might also be good if more weight could be given to the reading and interpretation of the Gospel values in dialogue with the Asian religions and the social teaching of the Catholic Church which will bridge and forge a contextualized method of reaching out to Asian peoples as she offers care in an enriched, enhanced matrix of pastoral services congenial to Asian people and their cultural milieu.

PART THREE

On Envisioning Possible "New Pathways" for the Church in Asia and the FABC.

Q1. Are there any other "pathways" that the Church in Asia has to embark on for the future of Asia?

1. New Pathway of EVANGELIZATION through Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC)

Feeding of the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13-21)

In the Matthean Gospel narrative on Jesus' multiplication of the

loaves, everyone was fed, no one was left hungry. Everyone received what they needed and got fed because of the compassion of God and the generous sharing of others. There was nobody who did not receive a share. God's divine mercy is gratuitous and His Divine blessings come upon both the deserving and undeserving poor. This is what gratuitous grace and mercy of God means.

The story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand teaches that with God's grace, no matter how scarce the material resources it maybe, when it is put together and shared, it can multiply and have multiple effects. Furthermore, the story reflects and embodies the *communitarian spirit and charitable acts* which is *inclusive, mutual and reciprocal*. When all people, especially the poor, deprived, oppressed, exploited, marginalized, lost, last, least members in the community and society experience God's abundant grace amidst poverty and scarcity, powerlessness and hopelessness only then, the universal character of Jesus' mission, *Salvation for all*, is realized.

Inspired by the idea of a communitarian spirit characterized by an inclusive, mutual and reciprocal act of charity, we hope to translate into a broader and wider perspective the BEC's ministry of doing charitable acts. The way of strengthening BEC's ministry of charity will be through dialogue and collaboration particularly with the Taiwan Society's Movement *Building A Compassionate Community*. The BEC's ministry of compassion toward those who are in need cannot only be confined within the Church's communities but has to be extended to a larger community and society, and, it is by no means going to be sustainable, efficient and substantial if it will not consider dialoguing and collaborating with other social welfare organizations.

Considering the present context of Taiwan's ageing society, the ministry of compassion for the sick and the elderly becomes more urgent, relevant and demanding. The sick and the elderly can be considered as the modern-day face of the poor that needs care and attention.

2. Pathway on Migration

Church's ministry for the Asian People in the Diaspora is a valid concern. People on the move need accompaniment from receiving

and sending country Churches. Migration of Asian people is increasing each year and the ministry should also expand. Pastoral care ministry to the children of Catholic New Immigrants is truly urgent and relevant, like transmission of faith/catechism and preparation for the Sacraments, teaching their mother tongue, cultural revival and introduction to their own culture and tradition. They are object of evangelization and prospective evangelizers; source of vocation and Faith propagation.

VI. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF BANGLADESH

Around the world, women, men, and children are forced by violence, We agree and also find 15 Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia are present in Bangladesh too. All are not in same degree but these are affecting our life in the Church and shaping our future too. As a small tiny Church we are not able to address adequately all the emerging situation and reality. We are becoming more aware of the situation. About envisioning new pathways are indicated quite well. In the document it is rightly emphasized on dialogue, being close to the people and taking action to transform the reality. Our Church is used to the traditional way of living. We need to go out of our comfort zone. Due to globalization and urbanization new opportunities are emerging but new problems are arising. Our Church needs to address these problems and situation.

Situation in Bangladesh:

Bangladesh is predominantly a Muslim country, 88% profess Islam, 10% Hindu-Buddhists, 2% are different indigenous groups. The Christians are less than one percent. Christianity came here about 500 years ago but Islam was well established. In some parts people of other religions rarely met any Christian in their lives. Most of the places Christians live together in certain localities for security and unity. Being a minority group the Christians have a ghetto mentality, maintain a distance from the Muslims. In Bangladesh comparatively, the Muslims are moderate and tolerant of other religions. Most of the time we live in peace and harmony without major occurrences. Church has some good influence and impact on the people of other religions through education and health care services. The Caritas has a good

name for its dedication and good service towards all, irrespective of caste and creed. All the Dioceses are growing in numbers too.

The Government is powerful and making lots of efforts for development. This Government did lots of developmental works all over the country. The education rate went up and extreme poverty is under control. There are welfare works for the vulnerable people from the part of the government. It is democratically elected government but in reality it is one party rule. There is wide spread corruption all over the country hardly one can get any work done at the Government office without bribing. Election system is thoroughly ruined. One of the Election Commissioners, Mahbub Talukdar said that his impression is that polls want to go into exile (Daily Star, 16 February 2021). Due to manipulation of election people are losing their faith in voting and gross majority does not go for voting. Judicial system is also corrupted people do not get fair judgment because of interference of the Government and corrupt system. It seems that Court is not free. We hear that the Judges can be bribed. Opposition party is suppressed and persecuted. There is not much freedom of opinion and press. Media is controlled. Since there is no democracy Government cannot stand on its own. In order to remain in power at times Government try to please the Fundamental Islamic groups. Constitutionally freedom of religion/opinion is recognized but in reality it is restricted for other religions.

VII. CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF INDIA

The following 'Consolidated Report' is prepared collating the viewpoints expressed by the Members of the CCBI on the FABC 50 Guide Document.

PART ONE: Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia.

Q. 1. Are the 15 'Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern' in Asia an accurate reflection of the overarching situation in Asia? Are there any points that need to be added?

Our Comments:

Almost ALL the responses received say that this first 'Contextual' part, i.e. the "Realities and Concerns," is well spelt out and gives a good

overall picture of the Asian scene. However, here are some points that could be included under each heading:

1. Global Pandemic: The pandemic threw a challenge to the Church, since, on account of the Lockdowns and the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), the faithful could not physically attend religious services. However, through the use of Internet, on the one hand, the pastors could reach the faithful in their homes with spiritual help and, on the other hand, the lay faithful too had their spiritual needs somehow met, thanks to the information and communication technology.

1 a. On the positive side, the pandemic has made us realize our vulnerability and our need to totally depend on God, despite our boasts of advancements in medical science. The pandemic seems to have led the people to seriously consider the faith dimension of their life. Here the Church must: (i) draw up a plan to face such emergencies in the future, (ii) ensure that primary health care is available to all, and (iii) see that the vaccine is available especially to the poor in rural areas.

1 b. On the negative side, although all have suffered, the poor have suffered much more. This is not highlighted in this paragraph, v.g. what the FABC has already done in this regard and what more can it still do for the uplift of the poor.

2. Globalization: Privatization has its evil effects on the common good and on poor people, since the most basic necessities of life are controlled by a few and governments become “yes-men” to corporates. The issue of the farmers’ suicides and the current 100-day protest of Indian farmers could be mentioned, since it is garnering global attention. This would show the Church’s concern towards farmers and her interest in their problems. In the 2nd paragraph of this ‘Globalization’ subsection, mention can be made that multinationals influence the elections in countries thereby taking control. Finally, in the 3rd paragraph, mention can be made of the growing rift between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ which has reached scandalous proportions and goes against the Gospel.

3. Climate Emergency: There is need to emphasize that the victims of the climate change are always the ‘poorest of the poor’. This

could be mentioned in the paragraph which begins with: "Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'* (LS)..." by quoting, for instance, LS n.50 which insists that any approach may hear both "the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor." Moreover, where the Church owns agricultural land, it could be used to develop agriculture. The protection of the environment has to be viewed as a part of Christian faith, as it envisages the first article of faith: God is the creator of heaven and earth.

4. **Digitalization:** In this subsection, the 3rd and last paragraph mentions 'Artificial Intelligence' (AI) in a short, passing way. However, AI is a very serious concern around the world. There is need of a separate entry for AI; it should not be clubbed together with 'digitalization'. Companies like Facebook, Google, Amazon, etc., are potentially extremely dangerous because of the massive data that they collect and use to manipulate people and elections. Even democracy can be in danger in Asia because of AI.
5. **Urbanization:** It cannot be avoided. Just a note: In the 1st paragraph of this subsection, the "positive implications" of urbanization are mentioned, and that is a good thing. However, by suddenly reading in the 2nd short paragraph a biblical passage praising Jerusalem, namely, "The culmination of the Gospel is symbolically a city, the city of the New Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21-22)," one could get the impression that a city (and city life, by extension) is the "culmination of the Gospel" and thus superior to rural life in a village. Could that short passage be deleted? It is, in any case, the only place in Part I where a biblical quote suddenly appears. Secondly, it could be mentioned that the Church should have a mechanism to monitor the destruction of the environment in the name of development as well as to control the migration, which has long term consequences on traditional occupations in their original villages. This point of 'urbanization' leads to the next point on migrants and refugees.
6. **Migrants and Refugees:** In continuation with the above point (n.5), first, mention must be made that millions of people in Asia do not have a decent place to live. Several millions of Asians eke out miserable existences in inhuman, dehumanizing living conditions. Decent human living for all human beings could be stressed in the

document. Secondly, internal migrants or internally displaced persons (IDPs) find very little space in the document. There is one line about them in the 4th paragraph, but internal migration and issues affecting IDPs is a big problem that affects Asia. The document speaks of the problems faced by the 'in-migrants' in new places, new environment, new cultures, etc., but it has not adequately dealt with 'out-migration' and the problems it causes for the 'left-behind' place, people, etc. Thirdly, mass migrations of Asians going out of Asia lead to great changes in the demographic composition of countries—specially changes in the religious makeup. Fourthly, it could be said that the Church in Asia is found wanting in its mission for the welfare of migrants and refugees.

7. **Political Governance:** First, constitutional rights and freedoms in many Asian countries are either being crushed or manipulated by rigging elections or by the so-called 'electoral democracy.' Second, there is need to prepare the lay faithful to get more involved in the socio-political areas: this has to be highlighted. This could be done by encouraging, motivating and training Catholics through the educational ministry to become public servants in the administrative and political arena so as to bring change in ineffective or corrupt political systems. Third, ethnic clashes, caste conflicts and discrimination on the basis of colour, class and creed are rampant. These problems are aggravated for the local Church when the ecclesiastical hierarchy connives with those having political power for their own selfish and corrupt church projects. Church hierarchy and personnel should distance themselves from corruption, even if it means foregoing some benefits. The Church should follow the path of truth and justice.
8. **Transformation of Cultures:** Religious nationalism is playing havoc by its disrespect for other religions and cultures, since the dominant, majority religion and culture blatantly impose their 'one culture, one religion, one language, one people' majoritarian principle and agenda upon others. Likewise, colonization and western missionary methodologies of the past have caused original, ancient cultures to disappear. The church hierarchy ought to make a conscious and systematic effort to incarnate faith in the culture of the place and not resort to just implanting faith

wrapped in western terms and methods. The language of worship, music, architecture and interiors of new church structures should harmonize with the local culture.

9. **Youth:** Promotion of vocations to priesthood and religious life should be part of the youth activities. There should be well designed programmes so that the present youth can be leaders more in society at large, than in the Church.
10. **Gender Issues:** Women are not brought to the mainstream and due place is not given to them in the decision-making process of the various dioceses. The emerging role of women in society and in the Church in the Asian context could have been included. Also, discrimination against women and the girl child is a concern in the Asian context. The Church should be extremely clear about her stand on LGBTQs and how the pastors have to deal with LGBTQ persons. There could also be mention of the presence of paedophilia, homosexuality, abuse of women by priests and religious.
11. **Family Values:** It is true that the Church-run schools, colleges and universities make a significant contribution to the private education system. However, the Church ought to make necessary arrangements so that there are educational facilities for all, especially children in rural and poor areas. Besides, the Catholic schools need to impart all round values, give support for children from broken families, and create support systems for those suffering from addictions and substance abuse.
12. **Indigenous Peoples:** Missionaries and pastors should give much more respect to the indigenous peoples and their cultures. The “In Rome do as the Romans do” principle ought to guide the attitude of the missionaries, who should avoid celebrating and glorifying their original ‘home-birth culture’ with their own traditions, festivals and culture which are foreign to the indigenous people. Over and above mere respect, there is need to promote the culture and traditions of the indigenous peoples, an example of what was seen in Pope Francis’ attempts to convoke, conduct and complete the Amazon Synod which has listened to what the Amazonian peoples were saying.

13. Human Dignity: Millions of people in Asia are dehumanized and struggle to get even their basic food-shelter-clothing (*roti-kapada-makaan*) needs met. Decent human living for all human beings could be stressed more in the document. Besides lack of basic necessities, there are many problems that affect the 'poor,' which find a place in the 2nd paragraph of this subsection. Thus, first, the Asian Church must give special attention to human dignity and rights, beginning with its own treatment of women and the downtrodden. Second, since many organisations, NGOs, movements and activists do creditable work to respond to and resolve these problems, the Church ought to boldly support such groups/movements and campaign for human rights. Third, each diocese should set up a body with legal expertise to help those who suffer injustice, marginalization and abuse of their rights. By so doing, the Church will become a guiding light and inspire others.

14. Religions in Society: Moves are increasingly being made to suppress religious freedom, persecute minorities and promote religious nationalism benefiting only the majority religion. This is mentioned in the 3rd paragraph of this subsection, which ends with "can lead to conflictual situations and violence." So, first, this can be more forcefully stressed, since we have witnessed cases of genocide of those belonging to minority religions (in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Indonesia, etc). Second, the Church in Asia should strive to develop its stable self-identity, but always in close collaboration and dialogue with others, especially the majority religion.

15. Transforming Church: The Church needs a spiritual conversion from within to be an effective, witnessing Church. Although it is an institution, the Church ought to be more of a 'movement of witnessing disciples,' like the early Church. As a living and a vibrant communion of communities, the Church must be united from within at the parish, diocesan, regional, national and universal levels. The importance of the role of the lay faithful must be stressed; they should be given more training and opportunities in church life, while the 'servant' identity of the ordained ministers must be visibly seen and experienced. The Church should play a

leading role in upholding ethical and moral principles and in embodying the values of holistic human development, respect for nature and sanctity of life. Greater awareness should be there of the many 'churches' that are mushrooming all over, often due to the fact that they give personal attention to people and provide opportunities for the laity to pray, read the Bible, etc. However, caution should be exercised while collaborating with some (Pentecostal) churches that instil fear, stress mainly the role of the devil and of evil, promise easy miracles and seek to draw people away from the mainstream of social and political life.

Q.2 Are there any glaring gaps that need to be mentioned to enrich the Document?

Our Comments:

TWO points seem to have been left out and can be included, perhaps within the above schema of Part I, too. They are:

- 1. The problem of atheism.** Like what is seen in western countries, atheism is also on the rise in the Asian countries, especially among communities that are rich and have become consumerist and materialistic. The FABC could work with other episcopal conferences, to stem the tide of people leaving the Church to embrace atheism or other rationalist ideologies that dispense with God, religion, morals, etc. This point could come under subsection 14 above on 'Religions in Society'.
- 2. The tension with regard to different Rites:** The existence of Ritual Churches – as we have in India – sometimes creates divisions and tensions. Instead of being united and witnessing to Jesus Christ, insistence on liturgical details, adherence to traditions, etc., lead to divisions, ritualism and at times even suspicion and mistrust. This creates further divisions in the Asian Church which is already a minority in most countries. However, rather than treat this as a separate point, this could be mentioned in subsection 15 above on 'Transforming Church'.

PART TWO: The Church in the Asian Context

Q. 1. Does the section on Church in the Asian Context respond appropriately and adequately to the Emerging Realities and the Trends of Concern in Asia? Are there any other “models” or “images” that you like to present?

Our Comments:

For this question, too, there is a general satisfaction that the ‘Church in the Asian Context’ does respond appropriately and adequately to the ‘emerging realities and trends of concerns’ in Asia. The effort to seek a response from the Church to the emerging realities “that is well discerned, grounded in Scripture, tradition, magisterial teaching, and pastoral practice that promotes unity and sustainability” is commendable. However, the following points need to be considered:

1. The models that are presented in the Document focus on the Church *ad extra*, i.e., on what the Church is supposed to do and how it ought to be perceived by others. However, there is also the need to focus on what the Church is called to be, i.e., as a Church *ad intra*, namely, her rootedness, her life in the Spirit, her mystical depth, her spiritual growth, etc., because *nemo dat quod non habet*. Hence, there should be a section where the necessity and importance of the study of faith are discussed, with special reference to the ongoing formation of priests/religious and the faith formation/catechesis for lay adults. The triple aspect (prophet/priest/king) of the baptismal vocation needs to be systematically developed so that priests/religious/laity know what is the specificity of their vocation and mission as ministerial priests, as religious and as lay faithful.
2. Christianity is often perceived to be a western religion in Asia, since it was often introduced by the colonial powers who enforced their alien culture, languages and customs upon local and indigenous populations. Our images and statues are adorned with blue eyes, golden brown hair and an extremely fair complexion. The liturgy too relates to the religious history of Israel, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Rome, etc. The practices, rituals and liturgy cannot be readily grasped by the potential or first-generation Catholics. The westernized forms of addressing the clergy and the honorific

titles, stilted and archaic language in church teachings tend to distance the recipients of the communications to the point of instilling aversion. Mention could be made of changes needed in this regard. It seems that Christianity has often changed the 'lifestyles' of believers who tend to be 'alien' when compared to the followers of other religions; however, there is need for a change of 'life' in the imitation of the Master, Jesus, and in keeping with Gospel values.

3. As an offshoot of the previous point, it must be noted that, although Christians legally maintain that they are citizens of a particular country, there seems to be a mentality of being 'set apart' (a holier-than-thou attitude) because of the Christian Faith. This reality has to be dealt with so that Christian Faith is not understood as one that has been implanted in a certain place/culture/etc., from somewhere else. The Word of God must grow in the context of the particular place/culture/etc. The post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* tries to bring up these challenges faced by the Asian Church, but neither the Apostolic Exhortation nor the FABC/the local Bishops' Conferences have provided adequate or practical solutions. Perhaps the Apostolic Exhortation needs to be revisited and studied, so that the Church can become Asian holistically. The Catholicity of the Catholic Church has to be seriously studied and implemented in the Asian Context.
4. Without diluting the theological and canonical understanding of the intimate relationship between the Universal Church and the Local Church, the theological focus could move from: "the Church **in** Asia (India) to the Church **of** Asia (India)". Although the ministries of interreligious dialogue, inculturation, indigenization, etc., have made substantial contributions, these dimensions have remained reserved to the clerical, intellectual 'experts' and they have not percolated among the lay faithful.
5. While the characteristics of the Church are mentioned in passing in number 3 of Part Two, entitled: "Envisioning an Image of the Church in the Asian Context," the text can be more systematically arranged to facilitate easier reading by making the "*Images of Jesus for Asia*" (i.e., Christology) find their ecclesial counterpart as

“Images of Church in/of Asia” (i.e., Ecclesiology). Then a short paragraph can be given for each image, explaining how Jesus, his words, his works and the witness of his life become a model for the Church and for all Christians, especially for Asian Christians. For example:

- a. Jesus as the Incarnate Love of God (Jn 1:14; 3:16) → Church as House of Love (Jn 13:34ff), a Mother-Church
- b. Jesus as the Poor One (Lk 4:18) → Church as Poor Church for the Poor
- c. Jesus as the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) → Church as Caring for the Wounded and Christians as ‘neighbours’ to all
- d. Jesus as Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11-16) → Church as seeking out the lost and those who stray (Lk 15:4-7)
- e. Jesus as a Healer who restores people to the community (Mk 1:40-45) → Church as Healer and Reconciler (Mt 16:18-19; Mt 9:9-13)
- f. Jesus as a Servant who loves and serves (Jn 13:1-14; Mk 10:45) → Church as Servant (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35)
- g. Jesus, the Mystic, ever in communion with God (Mk 1:35) → A praying, mystic Church
- h. Jesus, the Spirit-filled Prophet [announcing the Good News of the Kingdom, denouncing sin, evil and injustice]
- i. Jesus, the Wise Teacher [teaching with authority, the Beatitudes]
- j. Jesus in Dialogue with Others [Samaritan Woman]
- k. Jesus, a Friend of Children (Mt 19:13-15)
- l. Jesus, the Persecuted, Crucified Saviour [Passion and Crucifixion]
- m. Jesus, the Risen One [Resurrection, Pentecost]

Other images can be added here depending on the images which are culturally rich and evocative for different Asian contexts. For instance, though ‘Good Shepherd’ might be evocative in Palestine and in rural contexts, it may not appeal to everyone.

Q.2. What are your comments on the ‘theological points’ in the Guide Document?

Our Comments:

1. The document is rich in its theology. However, it somehow fails to convey the idea that there is not just one, homogenous ‘Asian Theology’ as such, but various ‘Asian Theologies.’ These theologies are born from diverse contexts of poverty and pain (negative, on the one hand) and rich cultures and spiritualities (positive, on the other hand). These Asian Theologies – for instance, Dalit, Tribal, Minjung, etc. – have distinct methodologies that begin with “peoples’ experiences” and hence have an ‘incarnational’ dimension, which is very Christian. Through dialogue with other cultural and religious traditions – Chinese culture, Taoist tradition, Shintoism, Confucian and Buddhist traditions, Hinduism, Indian Islamic and Indonesian tradition and culture – Christianity is also spiritually enriched in the mystical realm.
2. The 15 ‘Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia’ in Part One of the Guide Document could be re-arranged. For example, the ‘Global Pandemic’ can come as a general, overarching reality, which can immediately be followed by the ‘*persons affected*’ (Youth, Women, Families, Migrants & Refugees, Indigenous Peoples, etc.) After analysing how the persons are affected in various ways, there can be a discussion on the ‘*processes involved*’ (Globalization, Digitalization, Urbanization, etc.). Of course, there is bound to be an overlap in the persons and the processes. In this regard, Human dignity or Family values placed at no. 13 & 11 could have come much earlier.
3. The importance of the *witness of life as witness of faith* has to be developed more. Less emphasis should be given to liturgical celebrations with huge gatherings, promotion of devotions, construction of magnificent church buildings in poor localities. The lifestyle of the hierarchy and the religious has to be one of *poverty*, both in the literary and spiritual sense. There is need of a paradigm shift from ‘practising Catholics’ to ‘living Catholics.’

4. The Theme: "FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia "...and they went a different way" (Mt 2:12) was placed at the start as a kind of 'Preface' or 'Prologue' and then put under the subtitle: "Objectives and Methodology." Subsequently, neither the gospel passage nor the theme has been sufficiently developed and thus it seems to hang in the air. No mention of it (or of its relevance) appears later in the Guide Document or even in the 'Conclusion.' The 'Conclusion' can, at least, mention that "the different way" that the Magi chose inspires us, in Asia, to embark upon the 'road less travelled' or to chart our own pathways, as Asians always keeping an eye on the local and the global.

PART THREE: Envisioning Possible 'New Pathways' for the Church in Asia and the FABC

Q. 1. Are there any other 'Pathways' that the Church in Asia has to embark on for the future of Asia?

Our Comments:

The 'Pathways' mentioned in Part Three are quite central and relevant. The following suggestions and additions could help to improve the Guide Document:

1. The FABC should have a strong advocacy group to fight for the minorities who are unjustly harassed and accused, even imprisoned by the members of the majority community in some Asian countries. Girls, particularly minor girls, from the minority communities are being forcefully converted and forcibly married to members of the majority religions.
2. The FABC in solidarity with the Episcopal Conference/Bishops of each Asian country must raise its prophetic voice to denounce the unjust and cruel killings and imprisonment of the people who are unjustly accused of being involved in some crimes or being falsely accused in their fight for the oppressed.
3. The traditional missionary model and methodology fail to give the desired results. Fearing the backlash of majority religion governments and organizations, the Church has tried to manifest a 'Social Christianity without Christ' through the educational,

social and health care ministry. By contrast, in his Encyclical Letter *'Fratelli Tutti'*, Pope Francis promotes the Gospel image of a 'compassionate missionary'. The FABC needs to devise missionary methodologies that do not project the Church as a 'social worker' but as a Family that follows the 'honey-bee methodology', so to say, meaning, to use the words of Pope Francis in EG, n.14: "It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but *'by attraction'*." Indeed, because of the witness of my/our/Church/Christian life, others ought to be attracted to Christ through me/us/Church, as it seems to happen among some of the non-baptized followers of Jesus Christ (like the *Kristbhakta* Movement in Varanasi, India).

In terms of more specific 'Pathways,' the following have been suggested:

1. A Pontifical University or a specific Institute could be envisaged and established, to study the specific signs and sciences of Asia.
2. A study could be made to assess the factors that harmed the faith of the people in God in Asia during the pandemic, resulting in the fallout of attendance due to restrictions.
3. The Asian Church needs an 'Asian Centre for Bioethics,' to address the increasing challenges she has to face in bioethical areas, from abortion to death penalty, suicides to euthanasia, basic healthcare to palliative care, besides medical profiteering and unethical practices. Details of data about social evils against children (abortion, child labour, sexual abuse, child marriages, rejection of right to education) available in the public domain are very alarming. These data inform us about the cruelty of human crimes meted out to the most vulnerable people of society. We need a specific section for the protection of children and minors.

General Conclusion

A general satisfaction with the FABC 50 Guide Document has been expressed by those who have responded to our request to offer comments, suggestions and modifications to the Document. The points mentioned above are to be taken into consideration to the extent that they are viable and seen as appropriate. None of these points is the

result of any 'general consensus' of the many ecclesiastical circumscriptions of the CCBI; they are rather 'individual responses' of bishops or of a group of theologians to whom the work had been entrusted by the diocesan pastors.

The following are offered by way of final suggestions:

1. After the General Conference, the FABC could promulgate an 'Official Document' for the Church in Asia. This Document should be accepted by the local churches as the *Magna Carta* for the Church in Asia today.
2. Since Asia is a kaleidoscope of cultures, traditions, spiritualities and religions, it would be advisable that each National Conference of Bishops tries to 'incarnate' or 'concretize' the document for the different contexts of their own Church in their countries and enrich it with practical suggestions for an effective implementation.
3. If required, in a huge country like India, the National Episcopal Conference or its Regional or Individual Bishops could evolve a 'Pastoral Plan,' after deeper discussion and discernment, based on the Document of the FABC. Periodical assessment will also be needed.

VIII. SYRO MALABAR CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

FABC has played a great role during the past 50 years of its existence by helping all Catholic Christians in Asia to 'journey together as peoples of Asia'. Its contributions in the past are commendable and must be appreciated, especially in promoting mutual support, helping the poor and the suffering, the martyr Churches, valuing Asian Culture in living the Christian faith in Asia and its possibilities in the process of evangelizing Asia and other continents.

We appreciate the openness of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) to invite suggestions from all Bishops Conferences for improving the quality of the Guide Document. We are happy to state that the document presented for discussion is thematically well-structured and praxis-oriented in its approach. However, we would

like to propose the following suggestions for the betterment of the Guide Document.

PART ONE

Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia

The 'Guide Document' has systematically emphasized the emerging realities and trends in Asia are Global Pandemic, Globalization, Climate Emergency, Digitalization, Urbanization, an explosion of Migrants and Refugees, changes in the political outlook in a global way. Cultural changes, ideologies of the Youth, Gender Issues, changes in the family values, life situations of the indigenous people, infiltrations into human dignity, presence of multi-religious context, the organic growth of the Church in these changing situations, etc. The document has highlighted the merits and demerits of these situations.

We would like to offer the following observations on the points in part one.

1. The document has well presented the fact that the pandemic had a great impact on all aspects of life. But there is just one sentence on how pandemic has affected the Church. This could be elaborated. Global Church has been a source of hope for the vulnerable during this pandemic period.
2. The first paragraph on globalization points out some positive aspects of it. More could have been said on Catholic Church as the first example of globalization in favour of the good of the people. Likewise there are some very valid insights in *Fratelli Tutti* for understanding globalization in a positive perspective. However, most of the remaining part is on negative impact of globalization. Christ's message of standing for the marginalized and the little ones of the society is very much relevant in this period. A 'going out Church spirit' is the need of the hour.
3. Climate emergency is convincingly presented in the light of *Laudato Si*. Yet the Christian theological vision of integral ecology which includes man and nature would make a good addition to this section. Besides, most Asian countries are more victims of climate crimes rather than cause and Asian Church has the responsibility to point it out to the entire world.

4. All major aspects of digitalization are clearly pointed out. This point could be further enriched by a paragraph on the presence of the Church in digital sphere and the new possibilities opened up by internet for evangelization and pastoral care. What is the extent of digitalization in Asian Church - in dioceses, parishes, in Church governance, pastoral outreach and evangelization. This area requires more study and systematic programs. Churches in Asia were leaders in propagating print technology and media in these countries, but Church presence and influence in digital media is negligible and Church does not have organized effort in this field. Digital platform is now systematically used by fundamentalist groups to defame Church and to confuse believers and for anti-Christian propaganda. FABC need to take note of this trend and adopt some counter measures to protect and proclaim Christian faith.
5. Family, youth and gender issues too are closely related and could be treated together. Importance of faith formation and prayer in families have become more evident in the context of the pandemic and from the deviations faced by the youth. The biblical foundation of family, gender equality and dignity of persons too need to be highlighted. God created humans male and female and they have their place and function in society. Industrialization and media culture has sabotaged major family values and has shattered the family. This needs attention from the part of the Church.
6. Youth have deep thirst for spiritual values. Holding outreach programs for the youth would certainly instil a missionary spirit in our children. Missionary family is something which is to be encouraged. Taking a small break from the hurried life and engaging in mission in a distant area would be an enriching experience for the family.
7. Though there is some improvement in terms of gender equality, Church has a great role to place both men and women equally. Couples living ideal Christian life may be engaged to accompany the newly married couple, they may be considered as co-shepherds in the family apostolate ministries.

8. In Asia a considerable number of families live scattered. Therefore, children and adolescents do not have the possibility to live with both the parents. Single parents may be supported by the Church as to bring up their children in faith and moral values. and for this the Church may seek the help from some ideal married couples at parish level.

II. Glaring Gaps in the Document

1. One point that needs to be added to the trends is agriculture. Along with growth of industrialization and urbanization, agriculture sector has suffered. Large numbers of Asians depend on agriculture and most of them are small farmers who depend on their land for livelihood, which is now challenged by new farm laws (like ones in India) corporate farming policies and genetically modified seeds. These have great impact on livelihood of many as well as a cause of grave ecological consequences. Increased urbanization too is due to the neglect of agricultural sector. What has Church in Asia done for the agricultural sector and for the farmers, who are mostly the poor and the marginalized?
2. Migration and refugees' crisis and the ensuing problems are amply highlighted. However, challenges and opportunities of Church in the pastoral care and missionary animation of migrants need mention. Millions of Catholics [from India and Philippines for example] are working in Gulf countries without proper pastoral and spiritual care. Their families left in homeland too need specialized pastoral care and support. Likewise many migrant Catholics within the countries in Asia too could be living anonymously. So FABC need to create effective and creative ways to ensure proper pastoral accompaniment of migrant Catholics. They can also be trained to be missionaries and witnesses of Christian faith.
3. Valid points are raised in the section on political governance and all major evil practices and tendencies are listed. More could be said on the decline of democracy and increasing tendency towards autocratic regimes, religious and ethnic polarizations. Systematic dilution of democratic and secular governance in some of the Asian

countries need to be mentioned and Church response to such situations need to be delineated. More laity should be encouraged to enter into civil and political service.

4. The priestly, religious and faith formation of children and youth too need to receive mention in the document. Current priestly formation in Asia is modelled on the Tridentine seminary and suited mainly to the developments in the sixteenth century Europe. Missionaries brought that system to Asia and it is being followed even today. Although some of the post-Vatican ideas were integrated into the seminary curriculum, seminary system remains largely Tridentine and incapable of forming priests to serve in the 21st century. Same is true also of formation of the religious. Many of the leading religious congregations in Asia are of western origin and spirit and not much has been imbibed from the Asian cultures. Even Asian born religious congregations too have adopted the western model.
5. Besides these, FABC could also consider: a) Ignorance about the individuality of Churches or the presence of Individual/Oriental Churches in Asia. b) Diaspora of many of the Individual Churches from many of the Near East Countries and lack of Christian presence in many of the places where Christianity originated, c) Threats from the part of religious fundamentalism, especially the organized persecution by Muslim and Hindu fundamentalism.

PART TWO

The Church in the Asian Context.

The guide document explains in Part II, the Context of Church in Asia. While the threefold foundation proposed here, namely aspects of Asian culture, images of Jesus and images of Church, forms a firm basis for reflections, the treatment of the themes is limited to the present. Being a general conference of FABC on its 50 years of existence and action, this section should be dedicated to an analysis of the effectiveness and contributions of FABC during these past 50 years.

I. The Elements to be Considered

1. Together with the different religious and cultural contexts - which are explained in the document - the Asian Church has a Monastic tradition/life style and a firm foundation on the teachings of the Fathers of the Church.
2. The presence of non-Catholic Churches and their role in the Evangelization of Asia and of other Continents, especially where the members of these Churches are significantly present.
3. Together with the intercultural elements, diversity of theology, liturgy, spirituality and ecclesial discipline are also to be recognized.
4. While explaining the persecution from the political powers and other religious groups FABC must acknowledge the lack of proper freedom enjoyed by the Individual Churches within the Catholic Church which hinders the evangelization process.
5. To share the love and peace of Jesus, a good pastoral activity and a zeal for the salvation of souls should be fostered among the clergy. As Pope Francis says, the pastor should have 'the smell of the sheep'. They should go out from their presbytery to the ground level where the common man lives and suffers. 'Seeing' them. The pastors have to 'feel compassion' (Mt 9:36).

II. Comments on the Theological Points in the Guide Document

1. It seems that the guide document is influenced by the wrong idea that the Asian Church emerged after 15th Century as a result of the Western Christian Missionary activities (this idea is repeated at least three times in the document). Asia is the cradle of Christianity and we have the presence of the Churches of Apostolic origin in Asia from the first century itself. This reality is to be highlighted.
2. FABC is requested to make sincere efforts to acknowledge the presence of Individual Churches - especially the presence of Oriental Churches, both Catholic and non-Catholic. The Church is, above all else, the communion of Individual Churches (*Sui Iuris* Churches). The understanding that the Church is a conglomeration of the faithful from different continents is only secondary. So, even when we speak about the Church of Asia, think of it as a communion of different Churches in the Asian continent. This will

give a solid theological foundation to any talk. So the Confederation and co-operation of Bishops in Asia must underline the co-existence and communion of Individual Churches and their possibilities in witnessing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

3. All Rites (*Sui Iuris* Churches) are of equal status in the Church and none of them is superior to the others because of its rite (*Orientalium Ecclesiarum* 3). This ecclesial principle is to be respected in the missionary activities.
4. Primary Concern of the Church is faith in Jesus Christ. The Individual Churches in Asia must seriously think and ponder on how these changing realities affect the real faith of the Church. It does not mean that the Church should not participate in the social activities to eradicate the inequalities in the society as well as the atrocities the common people face in their life situations. The Church has to do it; but the primary concern of the Church is to foster the faith of the faithful in Jesus Christ and to spread His Gospel, where darkness still remains.

PART THREE

Envisioning Possible 'New Pathways' for the Church in Asia & the FABC

While explaining the 'Possible New Pathways' for the Church in Asia and FABC, it could consider the following.

1. There is no alternative for direct evangelization. Indirect evangelization may seem to be secure and prudent. It will certainly preserve us from persecution and martyrdom. But we have to think seriously and respond sincerely to the question: Can a Church that is afraid of persecution and martyrdom be the Church of Christ?
2. Asia being the cradle of different religions, the role of FABC to promote religious harmony is to be re-ensured and plans are to be made for further developments. Right from its inception, FABC takes dialogue as the mode of being for the Church in Asia. This Guide Document reiterates this perception. Perhaps, it is high time we also ask ourselves about the ends of dialogue. Has dialogue been an effective tool in our missionary outreach? Is dialogue the only

way for proclamation? An open and critical study of the concept, practice, and outcome of dialogue is necessary.

3. Church in Asia as the fastest growing Church has a duty towards the Church in the West. Many priests and religious from Asia are rendering pastoral service in Europe and America. FABC shall find ways and means to connect with them to encourage and support them in their apostolic work and seek their contributions to make the Church in Asia fulfil her missionary calling. The West has an unending appetite for the Eastern spirituality and worldviews and many of them find spiritual solace in eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism. FABC shall look for ways to promote Eastern spirituality and theology in order to share it with the western seekers within the Catholic faith.
4. The relevance and possibilities of Ecumenism, since Asia has the presence of more non-Catholic, but Apostolic and traditional Churches. With this purpose FABC must acknowledge the Apostolicity of Church in Asia.
5. Promote the role of Individual Churches in view of Evangelization in Asia and in other Continents where there are people from Asian Churches.
6. The Catholic view on migration, as clarified in *Fratelli Tutti*, is that a country of origin is supposed to provide adequate conditions of living and flourishing so that its people don't migrate, and that migrants must be welcomed until their countries of origin can provide them with possibilities of decent living. This means that the end of migration is not endless migration, but settlement. The document describes Asian people as people on move! The reality of migration must alert us not only about the right to migrate but also about development that leads to settlement.
7. Greater collaboration and coordination of FABC would necessitate greater use of digital networks and resources. FABC shall strengthen its presence in the cyberspace through dynamic websites, social media and mobile applications. This requires a large team of experts in media and for this cooperation of the laity must be

enlisted and encouraged. Production and sharing of pastoral and missionary digital resources is an important priority.

8. Webinars and online conferences offer possibilities for greater collaboration and sharing of resources among theological colleges and faculties in Asia. More interaction among seminarians studying in various seminaries should be made possible. It is highly desirable to set up an online digital library of theological resources for all the seminaries in Asia. Theology students in European and American universities have access to all digital resources worldwide through university subscriptions to JSTOR and similar digital libraries and journals. Because of the high costs Asian seminaries are not digitally connected to the rich pool of subscription resources. FABC can find a way to create a complete pool of digital resources through collective subscriptions or with its own digital library with all possible resources.
9. Online communication and social media has once again made Catholic apologetics necessary. There are many ideologies promoted by various groups that pose a real challenge to Catholic faith. There is an organized propaganda against Catholic Church and Catholic values by non-Catholic and non-Christian persons and groups, some of them being fanatics and fundamentalist groups. Many Catholics, especially youth, are confused and / or are lured into other groups, sects and ideologies. A systematic Catholic apologetics, based on the principle of open dialogue is highly necessary and FABC and national bishops conferences need to set up expert teams for the same. Asia needs a missionary apologetics that will show the beauty of the Catholic faith to all non-Christian brethren in Asia who have a right to know Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Apologetics should also become part of seminary formation as well as the media strategy of the Church in Asia.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the Catholic Church, especially with the Second Vatican council, has made a new era of dialogue. In an era of multicultural and multi-religious contexts a hegemonic claim of one religion over the others is impractical; it will have the risk of producing

clashes, violence and other disorders. But at the same time, we have to be attentive to what Pope Benedict XVI on December 9, 2008 said to Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Culture that "it must avoid falling into relativism and syncretism" and be animated by sincere respect for other.

Without fear of damaging interreligious dialogue we have to proclaim that Jesus is the incarnated eternal son of God. Jesus of Nazareth is forever the son of God. It has to be underscored that the uniqueness and universality of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of humankind represent the absoluteness of the Christian religion, which is not the work of men but God, it is the religion willed by God for all men. However, proper attention should be given to the *Nostra Aetate* No.2: "the Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions. She considers them with sincere respect...". As Saint Pope John Paul II teaches, "He is the only saviour of all, the one who alone is able to reveal God and lead to God" (*Redemptoris Missiono.* 5). Nevertheless, the Church is obliged to announce that the Christ is The Way, The Truth and The Life (Jn. 14:6) in whom there is fullness of life.

IX. PAKISTAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

PART ONE

Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia.

1. *Are the 15 Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia an accurate reflection of the overarching situation in Asia? Are there any points that need to be added?*

The 15 Emerging Realities and Trends of concern in Asia to a great extent cover the situation of Asia well that are equally true for Pakistan. However if we still reflect on the situation in Pakistan then the following points come to our mind:

- a. An inferior complex among our Christian Youth in Pakistan leading to drugs and alcohol or fleeing the country.
- b. The misuse of Blasphemy law to get at Christians.
- c. The breakup of family and marriages and the rising trend of divorce and separation.
- d. Forced conversion of Christian Girls.

- e. Hate material in curriculum and text books of Schools and Colleges.
2. *Are there any glaring gaps that need to be mentioned so as to enrich the Document?*

The 15 points does cover up the general situation in Asia. However, in the context of Church in Asia, may be the point of priestly and religious vocations and formation can be added.

PART TWO

Church in the Asian Context.

1. Does the section on Church in the Asian Context respond appropriately and adequately to the Emerging Realities and the Trends of Concern in Asia? Are there any other "models/images" that you like to present?

Yes, the section on the *Church in the Asian Context* responds adequately to the concerns and trends in Asian Church, especially the second part, which deals with the images of Jesus for Asia, shows very well how Jesus helps us to respond to the emerging trends in the Asian context like:

- a. Jesus shows us the Face of God: The Good Samaritan, the Good shepherd, the forgiving Father in the Prodigal Son.
- b. Jesus takes the option of the poor, supports the marginalized and widows, touches the unclean.
- c. Jesus gives us a new respect for women.

In Asia, we find diversity and there cannot be one solution that is fitting to all, therefore, we are to continue to search solutions to our changing realities.

2. What are your comments on the theological points in the guide document?

We find that the theological points are rich and easy to comprehend and are in line with the Church in Asia, especially where it speaks of the Church as compassionate, humble, respectful and filled with merciful deeds. The Church is of the poor, a servant Church. However, there is the need for envisioning a greater pastoral role of women in the Church and the Church of the Young.

PART THREE

Envisioning Possible “New Pathways”

1. Are there any other “pathways” that the Church in Asia has to embark on for the future of Asia?

- The foundational vision of the FABC, which consist of the “triple dialogue” with the poor, with cultures and with religions, has importance even today but, in recent times, the faith that had been brought by the missionaries to Asia is now bearing fruit and now missionaries are travelling from Asia to other parts of the world. So this new pathway of Missionary dimension of Asia is to be reflected and encouraged.
- The formation of the clergy according to the new patterns in the Church will strengthen the Church in Asia. Moreover, the material and teachings of FABC should be more stressed and available in formation houses so that we may be more familiar with the realities of our Asian Church.
- We are to use means of social communications for our work of Evangelization and are to have digital pastoral approach to spread the good news in the Church in Asia in this modern era.

X. CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF SRI LANKA

Catholic Church in Sri Lanka

Response to the FABC Guide Document

General Overview of Sri Lanka

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka was known in ancient times by various names such as Taprobane, Serendip and until 1972 as Ceylon. Sri Lanka, an island nation in the Indian Ocean, with a population of about 21 million is multi ethnic, multi lingual and multi religious. According to the last census conducted in Sri Lanka in 2012, the majority Sinhalese form 74.9%, Tamils, who are mainly concentrated in the North and the East of the island, while the largest ethnic minority comprises 15.4%, Muslims 9.2% and others 0.5% of the total population. Buddhism is the religion of the majority with 70.2% and Hindus make up 12.6%, Islamists 9.7%, Christian 7.4 of which 6.4% are Catholics, of the total population.

In order to understand the present situation of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, it is of paramount importance, at least briefly, to look at the socio-cultural, political, economic and religious context in which we find ourselves today.

Political & Economic Situation

Sri Lanka is classified by the World Bank as a middle-income-group country (World Bank, 2020). Sri Lanka is a Democratic Republic and a Unitary State which is governed by a presidential system, with a mixture of a presidential system and a parliamentary system. The President of Sri Lanka is the head of State and head of Government, and is popularly elected for a five-year term. The Parliament of Sri Lanka is a unicameral 225-member legislature with 196 members elected in multi-seat constituencies and 29 elected by proportional representation. Members are elected by universal suffrage for a five-year term. Sri Lanka is divided into 9 provinces for easy and better administration. Each Province has a Governor appointed by the President and team of Ministers headed by a Chief Minister who are elected by the people.

The political situation in Sri Lanka has deteriorated since independence in 1948 to a great extent due to various factors, mainly three decades of civil war that severely disrupted the cordial relationship that existed for centuries among different ethnic groups. The Tamils, who were mainly concentrated in the North and the East of the country, wanted a wider devolution of power which unfortunately led to an ethnic conflict resulting in the loss of life of a great number of people. The effects of civil conflict on economic growth and development over the past 30 years have been enormous. The successive governments had failed to remedy the situation and give adequate solutions to the aspirations of the people.

The local Catholic Church has always maintained a good rapport with government irrespective of the political party that come to power. The Catholic Church is highly respected and recognized with high esteem by the State. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka does not get involved in party politics in any circumstances, but it has never been reluctant to raise its voice for the good of the country and welfare of its people. It has always upheld the importance of having genuine, sincere and

committed leaders at the helm of authority for good governance. In this regard the Catholic Bishops' Conference in Sri Lanka (CBCSL) has been issuing strong statements on various occasions especially during election times urging the voters to elect wise, honest and selfless candidates who are genuinely interested in the development of the country and the promotion of unity and harmony among various ethnic and religious communities in Sri Lanka.

Religion and Culture

Religion plays a very significant part in the life and culture of Sri Lankan people. Buddhism has been given the foremost place in the Constitution and it is to be protected and fostered by the State. There is a special Ministry of Religious Affairs to look into the matters relating to all religions.

There are evidences of the presence of Christianity in Sri Lanka as early as 5th century. However large communities of Christians were founded only after the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505. According to the latest statistics, the percentage of Christians in Sri Lanka is about 7.6%. Roman Catholicism constitutes approximately 83.5% of the Christian population as of census in 2012. From the inception of Christianity in Sri Lanka, the Christians have been living in peaceful co-existence with the followers of other religions. As a community the Christians rarely had threats against them.

Ecclesiastically, Sri Lanka has one Archdiocese and eleven other dioceses. Most of the Catholics live in the western and north western parts of the country with pockets of Christians in the central highlands, around the east coast and in the northern peninsula. Non-Catholic Christians constitutes 1.2% of the Christians in Sri Lanka. Among the other Christians, the Church of Ceylon (Anglicans), Methodists, Baptists, Dutch Reformed Church and Salvation Army form the major Denominations. Among them the Anglicans are the majority. The fundamentalist sects have taken away some of their followers. There is a National Christian Council comprising of members from all these religious groups and some of the fundamentalist Evangelical and Pentecostal sects.

Although a minority, living among people of other faiths, the presence of the Catholics in the society is very visible and significant seen

through their lives of witnessing and service they render to the nation with utmost commitment in the spirit of service. The Catholic Church plays an important role in the Sri Lankan society by offering its services in various fields especially in the field of Education. The Schools and higher education institutes run by the Catholic Church are in great demand even among the non-Catholics for the discipline and formation they provide. There are also technical and job oriented training institutes managed by the Church to equip the youth with necessary skills for various professions. The Catholic Church is also engaged in various charitable activities in the Dioceses through its social arm, the CARITAS.

Though religious freedom is guaranteed in the Constitution, there are subtle restrictions and discriminations especially against Catholics when it comes to erection of new churches and expansion of already existing Churches in some dioceses, and also in the appointment of Catholics to public sector jobs.

Easter Sunday Bomb Attacks

Easter Sunday is the most important day for the Christians. Since it is the holiest day, the Church attendance in Sri Lanka is very high on that day. The tragic and heart rendering attack in two Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Colombo, one evangelical church in Batticaloa, and three Tourist Hotels in Colombo on Easter Sunday in 2019 was a shocking unexpected tragedy in the wildest of our dreams. The suicide bombers killed 269 people including 30 foreigners. About 230 were brutally killed while were participating in the Easter Sunday services and nearly 500 were injured by some suicide bombers belonging to an Islamic extremist group. It has severely affected the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka and no doubt left a lasting impact on her. His Eminence, Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, the Archbishop of Colombo and the other Bishops of the Local Catholic Church played a very decisive role from the day one onwards in containing the probable reactionary violence against the Muslims by appealing to all to stay calm and follow the true spirit of Christian forgiveness and peace.

With the help of local and foreign donors, the Archdiocese of Colombo immediately established a fund to cater to spiritual, psychological, social and economic needs of the affected families. Immediate attention

was paid to a dignified burial of the deceased and to attend to the medical needs of the injured. The Catholic Church organized various Spiritual programmes under the leadership of the Faith Animation Team of the Archdiocese of Colombo to provide spiritual nourishment to the bereaved families. A team of psychologists, counselors and therapists have been working tirelessly to help the trauma victims. Programmes for adults, youth and children are being currently conducted to bring them back to normalcy. There are many families in which the bread winner of the family was killed or injured so is not able to attend to his employment. The social arm of the church attends to their material needs and the education of their children by providing scholarships.

Two years have lapsed since the tragedy occurred but still there are people who have not got over the traumatic experience they had on that day and all are awaiting an unbiased investigation and justice. His Eminence Malcolm Cardinal Ranjith, the Archbishop of Colombo, in whose Archdiocese most of the affected people lived, has been in the fore front with all the other Bishops asking the government and other responsible authorities to investigate into all the aspects of the attack to ensure that truth is revealed and justice meted out. The Catholic Bishops' Conference has been urging again and again since that day for an impartial immediate inquiry into this dastardly terrorist attack. The CBCSL has been issuing strong statements and meeting political leaders, security and intelligence officials and urging all concerned to mete out justice to the victims by implementing the recommendations of the Presidential Commission of Inquiry appointed by the former President and the perpetrators be brought before the law without delay.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19, pandemic which has spread globally, discovered one and half years ago in Sri Lanka, is facing its third wave. The country's economy, social, cultural and religious life have been affected considerably.

Almost in all the Dioceses the Churches have been closed time and again. We have been doing our utmost best to cater to the spiritual as well as material needs of our people through various means, while

observing the health guidelines given by the health authorities. Liturgical celebrations are being broadcast and telecast on radio, television channels and through social media. We have taken steps to support the poor who are affected by this calamity by distributing dry rations through the Caritas, the social arm of the Bishops' Conference in Sri Lanka. The Catholic Church has initiated various measures to support the government health sector by providing medical equipments and other facilities. Due to the closure of our Churches, Shrines and other institutes from where most of our income is generated, the Church economy is heavily affected.

Threat of Evangelical Sects

The presence of various evangelical sects has disrupted the good rapport the Catholic Church had maintained for decades with other Religious leaders especially with the Buddhists. These sects have penetrated some distant rural villages and started an aggressive campaign of unethical conversions which has caused an uneasy tension between the Catholic Church and some Buddhist Prelates due to misunderstandings. In the recent past some extreme Buddhist elements also have come into the scene to make it worse.

We are very much aware that in our multi- religious context, the inter-Religious dialogue plays a vital role. Therefore various programmes are being organized by the Catholic National Commission for Inter-Religious Dialogue and Ecumenism to promote understanding, unity and harmony among religions in Sri Lanka. At the national level The Congress of Religions has been formed comprising of high ranking religious dignitaries who come together to discuss matters of importance particularly relating to religions and vital issues relating to the country at large. The post Easter attack period witnessed the great concern and support of non-Christian religious leaders and their followers.

Small Christian Communities (SCCs)

In its pastoral approach in the present context, the Church in Sri Lanka is concentrating on building up of Small Christian Communities (SCC) and in this regard the CBCSL has declared 2021 as the Year of Small Christian Communities to mark the 25th year of the introduction of the SCCs to Sri Lanka. In keeping with the great example of St. Joseph Vaz,

the Apostle of Sri Lanka, we are engaged in forming and strengthening Basic Christian Communities centered around the Word of God and the Sacraments.

Priestly Formation

As a Priority, the CBCSL has taken up the responsibility of the formation of candidates for the Priesthood who would be ready to take up the challenges in the priestly ministry in the local context. In this light a new concept namely “Accompaniment in Priestly Formation” has been introduced to the formation process and in this system a Formator will accompany and co-journey with a particular batch of seminarians during their formation in the Major Seminary.

Conclusion

Whenever moral issues are discussed either in the Parliament or in the public forum the Church makes her teaching and position clear both to the legislature and the public. The questions of abortion, death penalty and capital punishment, destruction of nature and environment are issues in the recent past in addition to the issues of social justice. Religiosity of the people in general characterizes the Catholics and there is a marked improvement in lay participation now. Even though Christians are a minority the Catholics bear witness to Jesus, His way of life and teachings and render great service to the Sri Lankan Society which many others admire. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka is very much aware of its specific responsibility towards its followers and the nation and has made her contribution to culture, education, sports, discipline and peaceful living.

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