

**REACHING OUT IN DIALOGUE IN ASIA**

THE FIRST AND SECOND BISHOPS' INSTITUTES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS  
AFFAIRS OF THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES

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**I. FORWARD**

by Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang

The two Bishops' Institutes organized by the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA) of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) took place successively on 11th – 19th October and 13th – 21st November, 1979. They were designed to assist the bishops of Asia in discovering and implementing the interreligious aspects of the Church's mission in Asia, especially with regard to the relations of the Church with Buddhists and Muslims.

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The immediate results of these Institutes allow us to say that both events — long overdue, indeed — were positive steps within the Church towards promoting concretely the dialogue of the Church with the other living religions and religious traditions in Asia. It is now our earnest hope that we may continue the work which has been initiated.

In order to make this work known to all the bishops of Asia and to all those especially concerned with the development of interreligious dialogue in Asia, we have prepared this *FABC PAPER*. It includes, along with the final statements and the list of participants, a report of what led up to our meetings and what happened in the two Institutes. May this Paper serve in some small measure the great task of assisting and strengthening — and unceasingly pushing forward — interreligious dialogue in our Asian countries.

## II. THE BACKGROUND

Interreligious dialogue in Asia has a long history. The combined efforts of many scholars and study centers have done much to putting it on firm and expanding ground. Obviously, a short presentation of what led up to the First and Second Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA I and BIRA II) cannot make mention of all the studies, meetings and other initiatives which in one way or another brought about the two Institutes. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the only undertakings to be mentioned here are those that took place under the sponsorship of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).

The dialogue with the Great Religions of Asia quickly surfaced as one of the main subjects of concern for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences from its foundation less than ten years ago. Its importance was strongly asserted during the historic gathering which would result in the establishment of the FABC — the meeting of 180 bishops of Asia with the Holy Father, Pope Paul VI, in Manila.

In the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia there have been hesitations and mistakes in the past, but we are more than ever convinced that dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment to other faiths is increasingly important. ("Message of Asian Bishops," November 29, 1970, No. 24).... We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn



from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually, and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development ("Resolution," No. 12).

The Final Statement of the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC, held in Taipei in 1974, dedicates seven paragraphs and one recommendation to this dialogue, which is presented as a way the local church, precisely because it is local, must express itself.

The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions — in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst the local church has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language ...

In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples...(13).

Dialogue with the Great Religions of Asia is founded on a positive outlook towards these religions:

In this dialogue, we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries, they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God had drawn our peoples to Himself through them? (14, 15).

This dialogue is a sharing in friendship of man's quest for God:

Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God (*Ad Gentes*, c.I.9). This dialogue

will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons. Finally, this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God's Word (16, 17).

On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son, the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and in the fellowship of the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation — a salvation which assumes and gives meaning to human freedom, earthly realities, and the course of this world's history (18).

Such a dialogue should be actively promoted. Concretely, the Plenary Assembly recommends:

That the FABC, in collaboration with the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Secretariates:

- a) evolve a working concept of evangelization that embraces, as integral to that concept, genuine dialogue with the great religions of Asia and other deep-rooted forms of belief, such as animism;
- b) be of service to local Churches in their efforts to prepare their members to engage in deeper and more active dialogue with men of other religions and beliefs, and also with non-believers;
- c) promote organized efforts, including scholarship arrangements, to explore the deeper relationship between the Christian faith and the Asian religions and beliefs in order to discover all its implications for a truer integration of spiritual values, and to disseminate the findings of such studies ("Recommendations," No. 3).



This conviction of the First Plenary Assembly was deepened and given moving expression in the many interventions of the bishop-delegates from Asia to the 1974 World Synod of Bishops on Evangelization. Their interventions contributed to a special paragraph of the final declaration of the Synod:

Confident in the Holy Spirit's action which overflows the bounds of the Christian community, we wish to further dialogue with other religions which are non-Christian, thus to achieve a deeper understanding of the Gospel's newness and of the fullness of Revelation, and to be able to show them thereby the salvific truth of God's love which fulfills itself in Christ (11).

In 1977, the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church of Asia, held in Hong Kong under the sponsorship of the FABC, emphasized once again one of the most important challenges of the Christian Church in Asia:

(The Asian Churches) have now to resume the dialogue with the world religions that was broken off once Christianity became the majority religion of the Old World. Now that Christianity has again become a minority religion both in the former "Christian countries" and in the world at large, to begin this dialogue anew will be the great call of the Lord to the Churches in Asia. We must now start collecting again the "seminal reasons" (*logoi spermatikoi*) in modern man's old and new religions and integrate them into a new synthesis of the Gospel as it is experienced by today's man. This will lead to a new era of theological reflection, liturgical creativity and forms of religious life — a new era that will make the Catholic Church for the first time really "Catholic" by introducing into its life the riches of all nations, as the riches of some have been introduced into it in the past. No doubt this will not take place without hesitation and danger, insecurity. But this was always the price the Church had to pay in its greatest hours when a new age was being ushered in. It should not deter us in any way from going ahead ("Conclusions," No. 19).

These thoughts were further elaborated during the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate of the FABC (BIMA I), held in Baguio City in July, 1978. From the discussions emerged the persuasion that Christians in Asia, with their lived experience of contact with

the great Oriental religious traditions, have a special contribution to make to the fullness of Christ in the Church. They are in a privileged position and living at a privileged point in time, which place on them a serious responsibility. In taking up this responsibility, they must first realize that dialogue is not with abstract systems, but with persons, on terms of personal equality and in a common search for God:

Religious dialogue is not just a substitute for or a mere preliminary to the proclamation of Christ, but should be the ideal form of evangelization, where in humility and mutual support we seek together with our brothers and sisters that fullness of Christ which is God's plan for the whole of creation, in its entirety and its great and wonderful diversity ("Letter from the participants to the Bishops of Asia," paragraph 8, No. 2).

As they tried to penetrate the meaning of the uniqueness of Christ in their own inner experience, in their contact with others, in the very plan of God to bring all things to fulfilment in Christ as Head, the participants of BIMA I realized how long a way they had to go:

There is still much to be discovered, and much that is already discovered but not sufficiently integrated in our lives and in our missionary effort; our actual presentation of Christ does not correspond to what we have learned about the divine economy of salvation. There is also much in the Church that must change — in ways of thinking and in structures — to make room for Christ to expand to the full dimensions envisaged by St. Paul. We feel that the Christian experience in contact with the age-old religious experience of Asia has much to contribute to the growth and the transformation in outlook and appearance of the Universal Church ("Letter," paragraph 9).

They also felt intensely how much had to be done to push forward interreligious dialogue in a very concrete manner.

Concentrating more particularly on the practical aspects of inculturation and dialogue, we recognized the efforts that are being made everywhere, but felt that there is a need for further study and experiment; that a vast variety of constantly changing situations had to be taken into account and boldly ventured into; that all over our enormous continent, local groups must be activated, for on them depends the initiative in many spheres. In other words, there is much to be



done so that all bishops and many leaders can be involved ("Letter," paragraph 10).

It was in his inaugural address to the Second Plenary Assembly of the FABC, held in Calcutta in November, 1978, that Archbishop D. Simon Lourdasamy, Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, placed true interreligious dialogue within an exchange of "spiritual experiences."

Today the Spirit and the Church are directing us towards a dialogue with non-Christian religions. And we believe that this dialogue finds in the life of prayer, especially in that of Christian and non-Christian monasteries, its most adequate search for truth, for the Absolute which manifests itself in the different forms of prayer. This fact opens the door to an encounter, to an exchange of "spiritual experiences," to a true dialogue. We are aware that dialogue in the field of what we might call intellectual "notions" or concepts is not only difficult, it is somewhat far off and hazy as well. And while spiritual experience in itself seems incommunicable, its manifestations, through the language of prayer, render it the object of mutual dialogue. And this encounter and dialogue should be characterized by a careful analysis, and a kind of "second moment," by a spiritual discernment (II, c).

The Final Statement of the Second Plenary Assembly underlined the importance for dialogue of such an exchange of spiritual experiences and insisted upon the basic attitudes that interreligious dialogue would therefore require:

Dialogue with other Asian religious traditions was already given special importance by our First Plenary Assembly in its discussions and final statement. We reaffirm even more pointedly what was urged there with regard to interreligious dialogue (34).

The spirituality characteristic of the religions of our continent stresses a deeper awareness of God and the whole self in recollection, silence and prayer, flowering in openness to others, in compassion, non-violence, generosity. Through these and other gifts, it can contribute much to our spirituality which, while remaining truly Christian, can yet be greatly enriched. Sustained and reflective dialogue with them in prayer (as shall be found possible, helpful and wise in different situations) will reveal to us what the Holy Spirit has taught others to express in a marvelous variety of ways. These are

different perhaps from our own, but through them we too may hear His voice, calling us to lift our hearts to the Father (35).

We thus further encourage this dialogue. It must be undertaken in all seriousness, accompanied constantly by discernment in the Spirit, fostered and safeguarded by those attitudes which lead to its deepening and its patient, loving growth. These are: openness and sensitivity, honesty and humility of spirit, a sincere disinterestedness and that fraternal love which holds in reverence the feelings of the other and seeks to enter into his heart (36).

At Tokyo, in March of 1979, the Third Assembly of the East Asian Region of the FABC reaffirmed the preceding statements of the FABC and stressed the urgency of the dialogue:

The urgency to promote this dialogue is felt as we, the people of Asia, search for realization of those human values and ways of life that through the centuries have been presented and handed down by these great traditional religions. We feel this even more as we see the corrosive influence of belief in the omnipotence of science, Marxism, nihilism, egoism, consumer mentality, and the consequent indifference to transcendental values and religion and the decay of traditional moral values and practices. Therefore, we renew the call of the Church to our priests, religious and lay people to understand the purpose of interreligious dialogue, to promote it wherever the Spirit of God opens a door, and to become personally involved. The ecumenical and interreligious dialogue is an integral part of the Church's mission, especially in East Asia.

In June 1979, five months before BIRA I, the Fifth Bishops' Institute for Social Action of the FABC (BISA V) made a point of facilitating a further dialogue through a service of faith and life in Asia:

We wish to facilitate a further dialogue with the Great Religions about the meaning of faith and service in daily life. All mankind is rooted in the Christ-event; this anthropology is operative even in those who do not know Christ. Our main point of contact is a search for a new humanity and a new human family ("Final Statement," last section, paragraph 2).



The "Conclusions" of the first Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA I) convinced the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs (OEIA) of the FABC that new steps should be taken as soon as possible to implement the mandate given it by the Bishops' Conferences of Asia to assist and strengthen interreligious activities in Asia.

Less than two weeks after BIMA, a meeting of OEIA's Executive Committee was held in Hong Kong, and during this meeting the first plans were made towards the organization of the Bishop' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA). The proposal was to bring together representative bishops from the three regions of Asia — according to regional religious traditions and affinities — so that they might search out and recommend to their Conferences practical areas of ecumenical and interreligious activity which could enter into their pastoral planning for the next five years. The immediate time-frame of five years was suggested in order to keep the resolutions of the Institutes as concrete and realistic as possible. It was tentatively decided that the Institutes take place not later than the spring of 1979, so that their conclusions might also contribute to the deliberations of the International Mission Congress scheduled for December, 1979, in Manila.

With a view towards facilitating the preparation for the Institutes, the Executive Committee of OEIA also decided to draw up and distribute to all the bishops of Asia a questionnaire on the present state of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue in each diocese.

The distribution of the questionnaire began in October of 1978. Two months later, 80 very encouraging replies, coming from almost all the countries of Asia, had reached OEIA. The content of these replies, and the recommendations which had come from the Second Plenary Assembly of the FABC (Calcutta, November, 1978), pushed OEIA to intensify its planning for the Bishops' Institutes.

Early in January, 1979, it was decided that two Institutes would be organized before the International Mission Congress, one for the bishops working in countries of major Buddhist influence, and the other for the bishops working in countries or regions of major Muslim influence.

Many unexpected difficulties came up during the preliminary arrangements for the Institutes. As a consequence, it was only in June that the places and the dates were definitely settled: BIRA I to be held in October at Sampran, near Bangkok, and BIRA II in November in Kuala Lumpur.

By June, 1979, the number of replies to the questionnaire had reached 136. A preliminary analysis of these answers showed that even though the dialogue was in many places acknowledged to be important by the leadership of the Church, the respondents noted everywhere, especially at the grassroots level, a real lack of interest. This apathy was explained by the bishops in different ways: insufficient theological motivation, few significant contacts, a lack of guidelines for interreligious dialogue, and — most of all — the lack of competent personnel engaged full-time in this particular Church activity.

It was then apparent that the two BIRA's should be thoroughly pastoral in focus and, in order to respond to actual needs, should provide concrete pastoral suggestions very clearly joined with and flowing from a theological reflection based on the contemporary teaching of the Church, especially the decisions of Vatican II and the recent pronouncements of the bishops of Asia. Two main questions were to be addressed in these Institutes: 1) What should be the pastoral position of the Catholic Church in the particular situations of each country regarding the dialogue with Buddhists and Muslims? 2) What concrete steps should we take during the next five years in our pastoral activity to push forward the interreligious dimension of the Church's life?

The official invitations to the Institutes were sent to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences and to the Chairmen of the National Commissions for Interreligious Affairs, on June 13, 1979. The affirmative responses to this invitation were very heartening. OEIA also received the encouragement of the Pontifical Secretariat for Non-Christians:

Thank you for sending us the tentative programs for the two BIRA's. We consider this initiative of the FABC to be of great significance for the future of the Church's work in Asia and wish to assist in any way open to us... It is the earnest hope of all of us here that the links of the Secretariat with the Episcopal Conferences in Asia will be strengthened by these Institutes.

### **III. THE FIRST BISHOPS' INSTITUTE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS**

BIRA I began on October 11, 1979. The place chosen for the Institute was the Salesianum, one of the students' hostels of the National Seminary of Thailand, at Sampran, 25 kilometers west of Bangkok. A few days before the arrival of the participants, the students had left for



their mid-year vacation. However, six of them had remained with their superior, Father Francisco Cais, and formed a team whose hospitality and spirit of service were to impress deeply all of their guests.

For the first time bishops from areas of Theravada Buddhism (Thailand, Sri Lanka) and Mahayana Buddhism (Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao) were meeting together for a week-long reflection on Christian-Buddhist relations in Asia. Their coming together was all the more meaningful since this was meant to be the springboard for many later efforts by the Asian bishops in developing interreligious dialogue in their countries.

Archbishop Michai Kitbunchu's cordial welcome had a tone of strong encouragement:

Welcome to Thailand, welcome to BIRA I. Welcome to a sharing of friendship and religious experience. Welcome to a dialogue among ourselves who today come together to listen to each other, to learn from each other what our Lord expects from our relationships with other religions in our continent, in our countries, in our local churches.

Father Alessandro d'Errico, Acting Chargé d'Affaires of the Apostolic Nunciature in Bangkok, brought to the participants the greetings of Archbishop Silvio Luoni, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio, who had wished to be present but was at that time tied up by other commitments abroad. One of the points stressed by Father d'Errico in his talk was that Thailand was the right place for BIRA I:

The Apostolic Nunciature feels that you have appropriately chosen Thailand for this Institute. Thailand is mostly a Buddhist country, and when Vatican II has stimulated the dialogue with Buddhists, praiseworthy efforts have been made here to "conscientize" the Catholics to it. The dialogue has been more and more acutely felt as a necessity of the apostolate, and at least this important result has been obtained: by now, everybody feels that no real and lasting progress is possible without knowing both Buddhism and Buddhists and opening a frank and loyal dialogue with them.

In his introductory address Father John Chang, representative of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, stressed the importance of BIRA I:

Recent years have seen deepening theological thought on what bearing the Great Religions of Asia have on Christianity, and vice-versa. Surely, we must now go beyond the stage of merely asking whether other religions are an aid or an obstacle to proselytism or whether they contain redeemable elements compatible with Christianity. More and more, probing questions revolve around what these religions do mean in the overall economy of salvation. How do they intrinsically relate to the grace of Christ? How is the divine election of the few from among the many to be understood? What do the times "before," "concomitant to," and "after" Christ mean in terms of personal existential encounter with that saving grace under various guises? How does the Church — the community of those explicitly believing in and witnessing this grace in Christ — relate to other authentic, profound religious experiences, expressions and traditions of mankind?

These and many more questions certainly merit serious meditation, not only by theologians, but by pastors and faithful alike.

Father Chang also reminded the participants that they had come together not only to reflect on the meaning of Christian-Buddhist relations but also to search for practical ways of rendering these relations more meaningful:

No less vital than theological understanding is the matter of life authentically lived. For, surely, that is the touchstone to test the ultimate validity of such reflection. And that is why, I surmise, the pastoral perspective has been proposed as the basic tenor of this Institute. How concretely is the truth of the Gospel to be lived out in today's Asian context in order to be perceived as the truth of life for all Asians?...

Let us hope that this promising first effort "among us" will mature, step by step, not only to dialogue "about" or "to" the Great Religions, but eventually "with" them in full fellowship.

As a first task the participants analyzed the actual situation and the problems related to dialogue in their respective countries. They agreed that relations between Christians and Buddhists are improving; the mutual distrust of the past is disappearing; attitudes are more friendly and there is greater openness; easier contacts are to be observed everywhere.

Moreover, dialogue and collaboration are becoming more frequent. In many places there are individuals and groups engaged in dialogue and they are increasingly sensitive to its importance. Very good work is being



done, especially in Japan and Sri Lanka, by research institutes and other centers specializing in Asian religions. However, those signs of hope are often overshadowed by the fact that the Christians represent a very small minority and do not have, in general, the cultural and theological preparation necessary for a humble and authentic dialogue.

Major obstacles to dialogue on the Christian side were noted: the colonial heritage, the insufficient inculturation of the Church, the foreignness attributed to Christianity, an ignorance of the basic differences and similarities between Christianity and Buddhism, a religious superiority-complex, an indifference to the dialogue, and the lack of specialists and of authoritative guidelines for dialogue. It was also remarked that many of those who take the dialogue to heart often flounder about in a state of doctrinal and practical uncertainty amidst the delicate problems they meet.

At the end of two days spent in reviewing the present state of the dialogue, all the participants were aware that it was obvious the Church in Asia has still a long way to go along the road of the dialogue. Much of the anxiety they were experiencing, they recognized, came from the need of a sound missiological reflection which would bring new light on the situations they had just analyzed.

Early Sunday morning, the third day of the Institute, a solemn Eucharist was celebrated in the cathedral of Bangkok. People had come from all the parishes of Bangkok to meet the bishops and to pray with them. Archbishop Michai Kitbunchu presided at the concelebration and in his homily explained to the faithful what BIRA I could mean for the Church. After the mass there was a short and warm exchange of good wishes between the bishops and the representatives of parishes and lay organizations. In simple words they said that the deepest wish of their hearts was that through dialogue a new vision of God's work outside the visible boundaries of the Church would help the local churches in Asia to become more incarnate in their own cultures, and so continue to grow as truly Asian Churches through a real encounter between the message of Christ and the world they lived in.

From the cathedral the group went to the Royal Grand Palace and spent some time in the Royal Chapel which enshrines the famous Emerald Buddha. They also visited the Temple of the Reclining Buddha, renowned for its colossal statue of Buddha entering nirvana. Then early in the afternoon the group went away from Bangkok, to Nakorn Pathom,

the oldest Buddhist center in Thailand. While listening to the explanations given by the guides and observing with interest the large number of faithful absorbed in their devotions, each of the participants could not but become more appreciative of the spiritual impact of the teaching he saw being lived out around him.

As evening fell, the group arrived at the small city of Banpong where Father John Ulliana had arranged a meeting with the abbot and monks of a large Buddhist community with whom he was closely acquainted. The place was visibly poor and the conditions of life austere, but a great spiritual richness could be observed in the tranquil and smiling faces of all the monks — the young novices and their leaders. The visitors were impressed by the monks' dedication to spiritual values, their radical detachment and simplicity of life, their service of others made possible by an interior and exterior freedom from all things, and their obvious well-rooted and all-embracing compassionate benevolence.

They knew this to be an "experience" of dialogue. Everyone there felt close to each other, open to what the other was saying and witnessing, and ready to receive and ready to give. The Catholics were convinced that they were seeing once again the saving action of Christ finding faithful witness among their Buddhist brothers. They understood that the Spirit of Christ was moving them as Catholics to open themselves in love to Buddhists in new ways, so that each might help the other to grow together to the fullness of their total reality.

Back to Sampran, and the participants were made aware that new endeavors for a greater openness of the local churches to Buddhists would not be an easy ask. First, they had to find how to help Christian communities realize the importance of dialogue without running the risk of leading them into confusion, religious indifference, syncretism or, at the other extreme, of their using dialogue simply as a tactic for getting Buddhists into the Church.

In the discussion which followed the visits to Bangkok, Nakorn Pathom and Banpong, two different pastoral approaches were discernible. Some of the participants were eager to have a printed directory which would set down very specific guidelines for those occasions of life when Christians and Buddhists come together, especially at weddings, funerals, liturgical celebrations, prayers, etc. Others felt that their people were not ready for such guidelines, would not understand them, and probably would not accept them. They insisted on the need of taking first steps to overcome ignorance, to clarify for all the faithful what other religions mean in the economy of salvation — and how they should stand



as Christians in relation to them — to encourage the clergy and faithful to learn the basic teachings and principal practices of Buddhism, and to promote additional areas of friendly cooperation, together with a deeper reflection on this important matter of interreligious dialogue.

As the second approach was discussed, further questions arose: How do we explain the role of the Oriental religions in the history of salvation? What is the exact nature of the relationships between Christianity and the various non-Christian religions? How do we define the relationships between interreligious dialogue and evangelization? Is it possible to come to a common understanding, at least among ourselves, about the Church's mission and its compatibility with dialogue? Our resource persons were requested to speak to these questions.

Father Ernest Piryns developed the dialogical aspect of all evangelization and explained how explicit interreligious dialogue is a necessary dimension of evangelization. Christ's message about the Kingdom of God has to sink deeply into the total situation of man, into his total culture, in order to take roots and then in turn to re-unfold from within the culture's basic layers. Only then is this message of the Gospel able to be a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforms and remakes it to bring about a new creation. In this way it permeates and transforms man himself in his own total situation, and thus enables him to attain a salvation that is total. Interreligious dialogue is one of the instrumentalities through which the Kingdom of God is being realized within this world.

As a religion, Buddhism — like the other great religions of Asia — emerges from a creative center embedded deep in the hearts of Asian peoples. This creative center can be called the Asian religious consciousness. Hence, interreligious dialogue should first focus its attention at the level of this basic religious consciousness, and later at the level of Buddhism, seen specifically as a religion or one thematization of man's basic religious experience. It is in this sense that we can speak of dialogue as one with men of other faiths and not simply with the faiths themselves.

In such a dialogue we can recognize the values found in each other's faith and religion, and also acknowledge the areas of conflict. We accept each other's religion as a way of salvation. For the Christian the fullness of salvation for all is to be found in Christ; it is from him that salvation is unfolding itself towards completion at the end of time. When in all

humility the Christian offers to his partner Christ as the fullness, he offers also the Judeo-Christian values of the message (e.g. particular notions of person, time, history, future, a view on world, community), and meanwhile receives something of his partner's attitudes and values. Through such a dialogue the Christian discovers new dimensions or rediscovers forgotten dimensions of God's revelation to man. He knows that Christ goes all the way along with him and his partner, and he hopes that both of them will be drawn nearer to Christ.

In the discussion that followed, it appeared that there was a reluctance to see interreligious dialogue as one of the dimensions of evangelization. Some of the participants were more inclined to see dialogue as an end in itself, clearly distinct from evangelization. They asked: If there is a suspicion that the Catholic partner in dialogue intends to evangelize the other partner and to "convert" him to the Church, can a real dialogue be possible? It would seem that a true dialogue must rest upon a sincerely disinterested manifestation of one's own religious convictions. It was rightly said that dialogue may not be used or manipulated in any way for the purpose of ecclesial conversion. Dialogue must not degenerate into a tactic of proselytism.

The extended exchange of opinion led the participants to appreciate that theologically and psychologically the Catholic cannot exclude from his intention the hope and possibility of the ecclesial conversion of his partner in dialogue. By reason of his own Christian experience he must wish to share Christ with his Buddhist brother, and he must wish his Buddhist brother to share in the Church as well.

However, to have hope is very different from pursuing an objective. The Catholic partner has to keep in mind that the conversion of his partner to the Church need not and, indeed, cannot be set up as a objective of dialogue. To be a member of the Church is a gift of God, and such grace falls solely within the mystery of God's special election. Fully respectful of this mystery, the Catholic can approach the dialogue with personal disinterestedness and without any hidden purpose. Dialogue remains a process of talking and listening, of giving and receiving, of searching and studying, for the deepening of one another's faith and understanding. Through this process of mutual sharing and mutual growth, the full meaning of the Divine Word becomes incarnate in history, maturing into fullness till the end of time. Dialogue thus understood is, then, intrinsic to the very life of the Church and an essential mode of all evangelization.



Father Marcello Zago offered a theological reflection on the evolution of the understanding of man and religion and the pastoral consequences of this evolution. He showed how recent documents of the Church, especially *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptor Hominis*, underline and develop the vision of Vatican II about the religious identity of all men — each man — in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ. He spoke also of the great spiritual values of the non-Christian religions. He made it clear that to know the non-Christian religions deeply, and to enter into dialogue with their followers, is a missionary priority for the life of the Church. This missionary priority was also stressed in Father Michael Rodrigo's talk on Buddhist virtues and values today.

The sharing of ideas was as rich as had been the sharing of experiences which took place at the beginning of the Institute. The participants were now ready to come to some pastoral conclusions. During the last two days much time was given to personal prayer and reflection. The Thai bishops met together; the participants from Sri Lanka, those from Japan, and those from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau did the same. The result of these small meetings was a four-page document setting forth the pastoral perspectives of the participants and their suggestions for pastoral planning for dialogue in their respective countries. Further precisions were added during the discussion which followed the study of this document by the whole group.

It was then easier to reach a consensus about the pastoral orientations and recommendations of BIRA I. The recommendations were purposely limited to what the bishops could do as "animators of dialogue" and to what the participants thought could realistically be implemented. It was felt that these practical conclusions would prove to be the real achievement of BIRA I.

#### **THE STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FIRST BISHOPS' INSTITUTE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (BIRA I) OF THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES**

##### **INTRODUCTION**

The participants from the Episcopal Conferences of Japan, Korea, the Republic of China, Sri Lanka, Thailand and from Hong Kong and Macau, came together, 11-18 October, 1979, in the Salesianum at Sampran, Thailand, in the first Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

The purpose of this week was to deepen our understanding of and commitment to dialogue with Buddhists. The intention of our meeting was pastoral.

We addressed ourselves principally to two questions:

- 1) What should be the pastoral position of the Catholic Church for our dialogue in the particular situations of each country?
- 2) What concrete steps should we take for the near future in our pastoral activity to advance the dialogue?

## I. THE STATE OF THE DIALOGUE

1) In our countries Buddhism expresses itself in a great variety of ways and its impact differs from country to country and within society itself. Everywhere its influence has molded our cultures and our personal values. The Church, too, is present, with its differences in size and expression. In all these countries, however, she remains a minority, living in a milieu predominantly Buddhist.

2) Relations between Catholics and Buddhists are improving. A change in attitudes is evident on both sides; we note that there exist greater openness, easier contacts, more positive appreciation. Collaboration and dialogue are becoming more frequent. There are individuals and groups who are more engaged in dialogue and are increasingly sensitive to its importance. New centers have been started for a deeper study of other religions for better understanding and greater collaboration. Many kinds of initiatives are being undertaken by private individuals and by groups, as well as by religious or political authorities.

3) We rejoice in noting these improvements. At the same time we recognize that only a minority of our Churches is involved in the dialogue. We recognize the existence of difficulties and obstacles to the dialogue: the connection of the Church with the colonialism of the past, inadequate inculturation, foreignness attributed to Christianity, mutual attitudes of religious and cultural superiority, lack of meaningful contacts and guidelines for religious cooperation, the limited number of knowledgeable persons, negative and insufficient motivations for dialogue.



4) There are also many contemporary challenges for dialogue: the needs of our people, a desire for a more just and human society, a better educated and more concerned laity, wider information, more frequent contacts, a willingness to keep cultural identity and to return to cultural roots, a new atmosphere created by Vatican II, a desire for a greater incarnation of the Church in its worship, in its theology, in its lifestyle, in its structures by being truly local Church.

## **II. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DIALOGUE**

### **1) MOTIVATIONS**

We feel the urgency for dialogue because of the promptings of the Spirit of Christ, moving us in love to open ourselves to Buddhists in new ways, respecting them so that we may help one another to grow together to the fullness of our total reality. Many Buddhists, too, because of their deeply-rooted, all-embracing compassionate benevolence, wish to enter into dialogue with us and so grow together.

We recognize in the personal lives of the Buddhists, as well as in their total religious life, the activity of the Spirit. We have firm faith that God in His mercy wills all men to be saved and to have full share in His own life. Since God's will unfailingly bears fruit, we also believe that God gives to every man in history sufficient means to be saved and to partake of His divine life.

But, as there is no salvation except by the saving grace of God, all salvation attained by men is the fruit of the gift of Christ. This we believe to be particularly true of the Great Religions of Asia that led countless people to God throughout the ages. Fully respectful of this mystery of mercy, we, who are of the Church, are mindful of our election as the sacramental manifestation of this salvific will of God, and see our relationship to other religions and religionists in the light of this mystery.

### **2) DIALOGUE AND EVANGELIZATION**

As the Incarnate Word was spoken into human history, so also does the Church's witnessing word have a bearing on the hearer, and vice-versa. It is in this incessant, mutual encounter of the speaker and the hearer that the full meaning of the Divine Word becomes incarnate in history, maturing into fullness till the end of time.

Dialogue thus understood is, then, intrinsic to the very life of the Church, and the essential mode of all evangelization.

Although endowed with ways proper to it, its true import excludes it as a tactic in proselytism.

### **3) NATURE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DIALOGUE**

It is a process of talking and listening, of giving and receiving, of searching and studying, for the deepening and enriching of one another's faith and understanding.

We enter as equal partners into the dialogue in a mutuality of sharing and enrichment contributing to mutual growth. It excludes any sense of competition. Rather, it centers on each other's values. All the partners in dialogue participate in their own culture, history and time. Hence, dialogue brings the partners more deeply into their own cultures and bears the characteristics of inculturation.

Dialogue itself contributes to a deeper rooting of the Christian faith and to the unfolding of the local Church.

Dialogue takes place in any kind of friendly contacts between people of different religions. It is kept alive and strengthened especially by means of collaboration in educational, social and moral fields.

### **4) FORMS OF DIALOGUE**

There is the dialogue to promote mutual understanding and harmony.

There is the dialogue of life where people join together to promote whatever leads to unity, love, truth, justice and peace.

There is the dialogue of prayer and religious experience sharing the riches of our spiritual heritages.

## **III. PASTORAL ORIENTATIONS**

Any dialogical enterprise requires certain basic attitudes, as exemplified in Christ:

-a spirit of humility, openness, receptivity, and especially love for Buddhists, and for what God wishes to tell us through them.



-a witnessing to the saving grace of Christ, not so much by the proclaimed word but through love in the Christian community, so that its universal validity is seen and felt as such.

-a placing of priority on fellowship with Buddhists, so that we are led spontaneously and naturally to deeper religious dialogue.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

During this week we considered what the bishops could do as animators of dialogue.

-encourage and participate in public activities involving dialogue.

-establish and strengthen a national office of interreligious dialogue.

-support individuals and centers for the study of religion and the promotion of inculturation.

-establish guidelines and issue a directory for dialogue, for mutual collaboration, participation in religious activities, e.g., in the area of rituals.

-issue statements for guidance in special circumstances and on specific subjects in collaboration with leaders of other religions.

-establish a team to promote dialogue.

-include formation for dialogue in programs of priestly training in seminaries, catechetical institutes, and organize seminars for bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders.

-include the interreligious dimension in catechisms, catechetical publications and programs of religious education among the young, among university and student groups.

-promote cooperation among Christian centers and other similar institutions, both secular and religious, especially in areas of social welfare and in the educational, business, legal and medical professions.

-promote cooperation with Major Religious Superiors' Conferences for personnel and other activities for dialogue.

-use the mass media for promoting dialogue and giving information about efforts being made in other countries.

-encourage dialogue as a component of parish life; promote friendship and collaboration in community-building in harmonious ways.

### **PRAYER**

At the end of this colloquium, in gratitude to the loving Father of mankind, whose Befriending Spirit has been present and active in us during these days, we ask our Risen Lord, by the power of his Cross and Resurrection, and through his Mother, to bless our pastoral recommendations and to grant us the courage and perseverance to carry out our personal commitment to a continuing dialogue with our Buddhist brothers and sisters.

We pray also for our brothers of the Churches of Burma, Kampuchea, Laos and Vietnam who were not able to be with us, as we assure them of our presence to them in the living Christ. Together with them, we work to bring peoples of all faiths and of good will to a communion of love, peace and unity.

### **IV. THE SECOND BISHOPS' INSTITUTE FOR INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS**

BIRA II was held from November 13 to November 21, 1979, at the Residence of the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, in the center of the Federal Capital of Malaysia. The participants had come from West and East Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Bangladesh, India, South Philippines, South Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Archbishop Dominic Vendargon extended to all a hearty welcome. His insistence on the importance for dialogue of friendship, mutual understanding and true love gave a direction that perdured during the entire Institute:

You have come to do a holy work... It (dialogue) is not merely a question of study, but of being friends and understanding one another. You will find that those who really know us love us, and the more we know them, we will love them. The more we love and understand them, the more our life of faith will grow.



The Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Silvio Luoni, who had come from Bangkok to attend the Institute, said how much he was pleased to welcome the participants and to share with them his hopes about BIRA II.

I am extremely pleased to be with you for this meeting, and to welcome you. As you know, I could not attend BIRA I. Let my presence here prove the keen interest that the Pontifical Representation takes in these initiatives of the Office of Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs of the FABC.

In Bangkok, the Pontifical Representation lives in a Buddhist environment, but we know enough the problems of Malaysia and Singapore to appreciate the advisability, — even the necessity — of two different meetings, for clearly the dialogue with Islam differs much from that with Buddhism.

With regard to Islam, the mass media, many meetings, congresses and seminars have helped in overcoming many prejudices: the Muslims come to know the Christians, and vice-versa. They all feel the need to understand each other more deeply and with greater sympathy, to explore the living traditions of the two faiths, to give primary consideration to what they have in common and to what promotes among them an identification of interest. Truly a dialogue is opened that demands also practical orientations and directives. Your discussions will not fail to bring out these concrete realities and to draw practical conclusions.

Monsignor Peter Coughlan, Special Representative of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, placed BIRA II in its proper context:

As we begin BIRA II, it would surely be right to acknowledge the importance of the initiative of the FABC in organizing these Bishops' Institutes for Interreligious Affairs. They reflect a new emphasis in the Church's self-understanding of her role vis-à-vis living faiths and ideologies, reflecting Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Freedom and the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions, as also Pope Paul VI's great Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*. Far from being a fringe activity, the development of reciprocal understanding, respect and good will between religions in Asia is a framework within which the Church's activity takes place; it is furthermore in full fidelity to the Church's vocation to give witness to the universal

love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. By sharing what she has with the religions among which she lives, the local Church will surely find her own spirituality enriched by what she receives from other religious traditions, and herself become more deeply rooted in the cultural setting of which those religions form a part....

Interreligious dialogue is no more an end in itself than is any other activity of the Church. The ultimate end to which it looks is always the mystery of God Himself, and dialogue can help both partners to come to a greater awareness of His ways and of His call. BIRA II can be of great help in promoting dialogue between Christians and Muslims as they seek to know the will of the one true God and to embrace this will. To be effective, it will need to be followed through and concrete pastoral decisions will need to be made. Let us ask God who has begun the work to bring it to a good conclusion.

The presence of Bishop Yap Kim Hao, Secretary General of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) — who had been especially invited to attend BIRA II as an observer — was a sign of the solidarity and common concern that the FABC and the CCA share in their search for a greater Christian service and an effective response to the challenges of the changing societies of Asia. Four months before BIRA II, a consultation held by the CCA in Singapore had already strongly emphasized the urgency of Christian-Muslim dialogue and the common responsibility of all Christians.

As the participants began their work — the analysis of the concrete situation of Christian-Muslim dialogue in each of their countries — they could not but feel the inadequacy of a small gathering like theirs when placed before the immensity of the Muslim reality in Asia and in the world of today. They were encouraged by the results of BIRA I and were confident that their efforts could help in promoting a genuine dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Asia.

The introductory analysis of the current situation of the dialogue brought to light three factors that everywhere encourage — or should encourage — dialogue between Christians and Muslims: a common eagerness to serve the one God, a common concern to establish a more just and human social order, and a religious renewal in both religions through which Christians and Muslims are challenging themselves to center their attention on the divine revelation at the heart of their respective faiths. The participants acknowledged the encouraging results of many



endeavors already undertaken by Christian individuals and groups to promote mutual understanding, mutual respect, a sharing of ideas and experiences, cooperation. They pointed out especially India, Bangladesh and Mindanao in the Philippines.

Among the negative attitudes that inhibit or even preclude dialogue the participants noted first the fears which characterize most Christian-Muslim relations: "fear of a minority group towards a majority, of the politically or economically disadvantaged towards those in the position of strength, fear of being proselytized, as well as nameless and irrational fears based on centuries of strife, prejudices and ignorance of the other's religion." They also cited the ignorance of Christians about Islam, and of Muslims about Christianity, the triumphalist attitude still present on both sides, and the very visible political implications of religious problems in many Asian countries.

Other difficulties were mentioned: for many Christians, an inadequate perception of the mystery of the Church, lack of understanding of the relationship between dialogue and evangelization, a ghetto existence or mentality; and on the Muslim side, a lack of official structures to initiate contacts for the implementation of dialogue, and the erroneous opinion, common among Muslims, that the irreconcilable theological difficulties which would be, indeed, real obstacles to conversion are also insurmountable obstacles to dialogue.

Two questions suggested to facilitate the exchange of views in the workshops were: What is your own attitude? What are your own anxieties and preoccupations with regard to dialogue with Muslims? Most of the participants unambiguously asserted their attitude was positive but acknowledged that they were finding it very difficult to dialogue with Muslims and to foster such dialogue. Some of their remarks have been recorded in the workshop reports: "We accept the dialogue in principle, but do we live it? Do we really believe, or just say we do, that we are all equal? How do we dialogue if we feel that we have the truth? The dialogue is often carried out by individuals who meet tremendous opposition from some of their own Christian groups. How is it possible to persevere in this work? What kinds of motivation and incentives can sustain this perseverance? Since the Muslims are usually in the majority position and view with suspicion any approach we make, are we not wasting our time?"

When the question was asked: What do you personally think is the role dialogue has in evangelization?, some did not hesitate to answer "very weak," and even "nil." With this question a note of caution crept

into the discussion. Is dialogue a betrayal of mission? How does dialogue relate to evangelization? What is meant by dialogue? What ways of dialogue are opened to us all? The notion that evangelization necessarily involves dialogue was accepted, but not always its consequences.

On the third day, new questions were suggested with a view to deepening this part of the theological reflection. One of these questions was: How would you — and your priests and people — react to the thesis “Christians should not try to convert Muslims?” The participants recognized that this question involves doctrinal and theological components of great depth and complexity. Any answer they could offer had also to respect multiple sensitivities.

Some felt that such a thesis would seem to be theologically and psychologically impossible. How could a Christian truly love his Muslim brother without trying to help him realize how the Qur'an and all the good things in Islam lead him to the true gospel of Christ; in other words, without trying to bring him from Islam to Christianity with its fullness of truth?

Others insisted that the conversion to the Church must be left in the hands of God, that it is never the work of man. Islam is the usual means through which God saves Muslims. Love for Muslims means a humble meeting of believers, seekers, ready to come to each other's aid when asked, open to deepening each other's faith through mutual sharing, prepared to admit past and present failings, striving to greater understanding and cooperation, committed to discussing their common mission to the world. Christians are called to enter into dialogue with Muslims, to discover the presence and work of the Spirit within them, to learn from them, and to present the Christian faith in a way that Muslims are also enriched in our own lives and experience. Christians and Muslims are both called to constant personal conversion.

It was also said that when Jesus announces God's Kingdom and man's conversion to it, this means man's conversion to his true vocation as manifested in Jesus's life. Conversion means, first of all, conversion to the values of the Kingdom, which are also present in Islam. In this way the Christian and the Muslim live together as agents of conversion to each other of the true human vocation in God's Kingdom. The Christian has trust and faith enough that Christ goes all the way with him and his partner, and hopes that both of them will be drawn nearer to Christ, the Christian becoming a better Christian, and the Muslim a better Muslim.



They participants were not so much divided as they were hesitant to appear to give a final answer to what struck them as the core of the whole problematic of dialogue.

At this stage of the discussion there emerged a new proposal for their consideration. It was suggested as a thesis that Christians and Muslims can be seen as "partners in mission." Such a view could bring into the dialogue a reason for viewing each other as equals and so lead to a deeper and more intense dialogue. From the Catholic side it would mean that Catholics could regard Islam as the vehicle of God's grace not only for individuals on their way to personal salvation but also as a community of grace willed by God for the service of His Kingdom. The discussants could not, of course, settle this question with theological finality — the whole of the theology of religions is much controverted.

The idea that a full evangelization demands a process of dialogue was developed by Father Piryns, as he did during the first Institute. Once again the question of "conversion" came into the discussion. Father Piryns explained that conversion means first of all conversion to the values of the Kingdom. Such values are also present in Islam. Christian and Muslim enter together into this process of conversion, and they are drawn together to the Kingdom. The tension felt at this point by the group was seen as a call for deeper reflection.

Bishop Nicholas Geise spoke about the thorny issues which serious dialogue with Muslims cannot overlook: the Prophethood of Muhammad, the Holy Trinity, Inspiration and Revelation, the Divinity of Christ. He explained Muslim teaching and made it clear that an authentic dialogue calls not only for an exact understanding of each partner's deepest convictions but also demanded of both partners' serious efforts to explain themselves to each other with mutual respect and in such a way that each one feels encouraged to learn more about the other's faith. Bishop Geise insisted that we should never try to convince our Muslim partner through polemics; confrontations at only an intellectual and dialectical level have always brought more harm than good to the dialogue.

Father Thomas Michel commented on various attitudes of Christians towards Islam as a religion. He dismissed as antithetical to Christianity the attitude of those Christians for whom the Muslim is only and always the "enemy." He spoke of others for whom Islam is a preparation for the Gospel; and, finally, of those for whom Islam is the usual

means through which God saves Muslims. He proposed for discussion three challenging questions: How do you personally regard Islam? What understanding of Islam is that taught by our Christian faith? What can we, as leaders and shepherds, do to bring our people to a better understanding of Islam as a religion?

BIRA II participants will not forget the cordial encounters which took place after their many days of discussions. On the fourth day of the Institute, they were received first by Datuk Nasir, the Malaysian Deputy Minister for Islamic Affairs. Journalists and television reporters also saw this as an unusual and newsworthy occasion. There was a relaxed exchange of views about the common religious heritage of Muslims and Christians, their common religious renewal and their common search for a solution to the pressing needs of our nations and our world. Both sides stressed the importance of dialogue, mutual openness and trust.

The same day there was a visit to the new National Mosque and its library. The group was received by the Imam. After a short talk about the tenets and the mission of Islam, he expressed his willingness to answer the questions of the bishops, provided that these questions would not be of a political nature. The dialogue was of great benefit to all.

Also impressive and rewarding was a two-hour fraternal sharing with several of Archbishop Vengalil's Muslim friends at the Archbishop's residence. The warmth and sincerity with which these Muslim leaders spoke and later answered questions helped the participants realize that all authentic religious experience bears the stamp of Christ's love and saving grace, though this relationship may be manifested and explained in different ways. Both religions have the conviction that man is great to the extent that he is enlightened by God's light and that God's will is his strength. It was felt that Christians and Muslims who so sincerely seek the will of God should spontaneously move to a "dialogue of life," which is truly a dialogue of love. The main themes of this sharing were the need for God in our lives, the importance of family life, the basic elements of truth in each religion, the difficult problems of the secular state versus the religious state, the need for sharing our faith.

Some Malaysian bishops remarked that meetings like these which had just taken place would not have been possible only a couple of years ago. For them, therefore, this was a breakthrough.



Another meaningful sharing of ideas, experiences and hopes took place on Saturday evening. Eucharistic celebrations, attended by the participants, two by two, were held in twelve parishes of Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. Parish priests, sisters, catechists, and thousands of faithful had a chance to hear directly from the bishops about the work of BIRA II and to express their own expectations.

From Sunday to Tuesday, the last days of the Institute, the participants worked hard to elaborate concrete pastoral orientations for dialogue with Muslims. While BIRA I participants had mainly considered what the bishops could do to foster the dialogue, BIRA II participants preferred to underline the main areas in which priests, sisters, catechists, educators and other lay leaders should, under the guidance of the bishops and following their example, especially intensify their endeavors so that dialogue may bear its fruits. They agreed to put their final recommendations under six headlines: dialogue of life — “the most essential aspect of dialogue,” — formal dialogue, theological dialogue, education for dialogue, the role of the bishops, and the ecumenical dimension of dialogue.

Much was said about the concrete steps to be taken towards fostering education for dialogue at all levels (families, schools, universities, seminaries, parishes, dioceses, regions). The urgency of special training for future animators of dialogue was stressed. It was suggested that a mobile team of specialists in Islam be set up at the Asian level and made available to the bishops for training programs.

Finally, BIRA II participants addressed themselves to all Catholics in Asia, inviting them to let their lives be guided by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, to strive sincerely for mutual understanding among Christians and Muslims, and to commit themselves with their Muslim brethren to their common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom.

## **THE STATEMENT OF THE SECOND BISHOPS' INSTITUTE FOR INTER-RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS (BIRA II) OF THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

1. The participants from the Episcopal Conferences of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand came

together, 13-20 November, 1979, at the Residence of the Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, in the Second Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA II), sponsored by the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

2. The purpose of this colloquium was to deepen our understanding of and commitment to dialogue with Muslims. The intention of our meeting was pastoral. We approached our subject in three steps:

1. A reading of the situation — reports on the dialogue with Muslims in the various countries represented and the difficulties encountered.
2. Theological reflection on the nature and role of dialogue in Christian life.
3. Pastoral orientations and specific recommendations.

#### A READING OF THE SITUATION

3. Since the Second Vatican Council's call for Catholics to dialogue with Muslims, we see a picture of multiple openings and considerable advance, side by side with frustrations and failures. Certain shared attitudes towards life in our modern world have encouraged dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

4. Christians and Muslims share an eagerness to serve the one God, await His judgment and hope in His eternal reward. Both search for true moral values in the midst of a fast-changing world, and endeavor to apply them to the complex demands of daily life. Both are committed to the establishment of a more just and human social order. Christians and Muslims can see one another as servants of God striving to bear witness to His sovereignty and to carry out His will for men in the midst of modern forms of idolatry (consumerism, egoism) and godlessness (materialism, atheistic ideologies).

5. A further encouragement for dialogue between Christians and Muslims is that both are involved in a religious renewal of their own, by which they hope to realize more deeply the divine message in which they believe. This renewal process may help them overcome the enmity and suspicion that have often existed between them. Christians and Muslims today are challenging themselves to center their attention on the divine message at the heart of their faith. Those who sincerely seek the will of God should come closer in love to one another.



6. Despite these factors which bring Christians and Muslims closer together, both groups must be aware of negative attitudes and situations which inhibit and present obstacles to dialogue. Predominant among these is fear — fear of a minority group towards a majority, of the politically or economically disadvantaged towards those in the position of strength, fear of being proselytized, as well as nameless and irrational fears based on centuries of strife, prejudice and ignorance of the other's religion.

7. A second factor inhibiting dialogue is a triumphalist attitude still present on both sides. Many Christians and Muslims consider themselves superior to all others and feel that they have nothing to learn from any partners in dialogue. Such an attitude makes impossible any true dialogue, which presupposes attitudes of humility, openness and equality as persons, without sacrificing one's religious identity.

8. The political implications of religious questions hinder dialogue in many Asian countries. Islam and Christianity have a genuine interest in influencing every aspect of man's life. Neither of them can ignore the political, economic and social surroundings in which man lives. Only in an atmosphere of mutual trust can the participants in dialogue find the patience and forbearance necessary to continue their exchange in the face of political issues which often arise.

9. In spite of these obstacles, there is a growing awareness on the part of Christians for the necessity of dialogue as an activity intrinsic to the Christian response to God's message.

#### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

10. From all eternity God has spoken His message to mankind, to make the power of His word rule over the individual and social life of man. This eternal message of God became incarnate in Jesus, who announced the Good News of God's reign in this world.

11. The Church, the sacrament of God's message in the world, continues Christ's work of dialogue. Her duty is always to proclaim the reign of God, to bring the proclamation of this message into every aspect of human life, and to seek the fulfilment of all things in Christ. The Church is particularly concerned with man's religious experience, the motivating and leavening agent in his culture. This means that the Church must constantly be involved in dialogue with men of other religions.<sup>1</sup> The Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

12. Christians believe that God's saving will is at work, in many different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council,<sup>3</sup> that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church.<sup>4</sup> God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace.

13. The purpose of the Church's proclaiming the message of Christ — which is its central mission — is to call man to the values of the Kingdom of God. We find such values also present in Islam. In dialogue, therefore, a Christian hopes that both he and his Muslim brother will turn anew to God's Kingdom, their own faiths richer by their mutual interchange, their mission to the world more fruitful by their shared insights and commitments.

#### **PASTORAL ORIENTATIONS**

##### **Dialogue with Muslims**

14. **Dialogue of Life.** Christians living among Muslims should recognize the importance of dialogue with their Muslim brethren. For most Christians this means what can be called a dialogue of life. This is the most essential aspect of dialogue, and it is accomplished by Christians and Muslims living together in peace. Each gives witness to the other concerning the values he has found in his faith, and through the daily practice of brotherhood, helpfulness, open-heartedness and hospitality, each shows himself to be a God-fearing neighbor. The true Christian and Muslim offer to a busy world values arising from God's message when they revere the elderly, conscientiously rear the young, care for the sick and the poor in their midst, and work together for social justice, welfare and human rights. We encourage Christians to be ever more deeply involved in this dialogue of life.

15. **Formal Dialogue.** This also has its place in the relationship between Christians and Muslims. When they come together for this purpose they must do so in attitudes of humility and openness. They should direct their attention to the issues that confront believers who have a special mission to their societies, and share the experiences that arise from their own religious heritage. From such common roots, Christians and Muslims can search together for solutions to the pressing needs of our nations and our world.



16. **Theological Dialogue.** Scholarly dialogue also has a special role. In this work the real differences which exist between Christianity and Islam must be acknowledged, but these differences must not be exaggerated or distorted. This attempt to clarify misunderstandings and to delineate the areas of convergence and divergence between Christianity and Islam is a goal of formal, theological dialogue. Irreconcilable theological differences need never be an obstacle to dialogue.

17. **Education for Dialogue.** Many Christians feel they know very little about Islam, and thus find it difficult to understand the practices and ideals of Muslims. Christian parents, catechists and educators should teach their children about God's love for Muslims and about the many good and holy values in the Islamic religion. Basic knowledge about the beliefs and practices of Muslims, taken from reliable and objective sources, should form a part of Catholic catechetical training. Education about Islam should give an unbiased presentation of the religion of Muslims, while at the same time avoiding any tendencies towards indifferentism. While firm in their commitment to Christ, Christians must respect the beliefs and practices of Muslims.

18. **The Role of Bishops.** Bishops living in areas where there are Muslims should try to present an example to their people by their knowledge of the teachings of Islam and by fostering cordial and open relations with Muslim leaders. Bishops are urged to provide training for priests, brother and sisters, and lay leaders so that they have understanding and respect for Islam. Bishops' Conferences should also send individuals for specialized training at established institutes, with a view towards their working as animators in their respective countries.

19. **Ecumenical Dimensions.** Catholics must not forget the ecumenical aspect of this dialogue. In a number of countries, Christians of other denominations have preceded Catholics in the area of dialogue with Islam. Catholics are encouraged to co-operate with other Christians in common projects and in sharing resources. Catholic Bishops' Conferences could give leadership to Catholics in this matter by working together with national Councils of Churches.

## CONCLUSION

20. What the participants of BIRA II are calling for is dialogue. This means a change of attitude towards Islam. In the past, the attitude of Christians towards Muslims has not always followed the example of love given by their teacher and savior, Jesus Christ. We exhort Catholics

in Asia to let their lives be guided by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.<sup>5</sup>

“Although in the course of the centuries many quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this most sacred Synod urges all to forget the past and to strive sincerely for mutual understanding. On behalf of all mankind, let them make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace, and freedom.”

The Participants of BIRA II wish God's blessings upon their Muslim brethren on this first day of the new Islamic century.

21 November, 1979/1 Muharram 1400

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *Nostra Aetate*, 2.
2. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 13.
3. St. Justin Martyr attributed all truths in non-Christian religions to the Word of God (Christ). St. Gregory Nazianzen, at the funeral oration of his father who was converted just before his death, said: “Even before he entered our fold, he was one of us. Just as many of our own are not with us because their lives alienate them from the common body of the faithful, in like manner many of those outside are with us, insofar as by their way of life they anticipate the faith and only lack in name what they possess in attitude.”

Vatican Council II, in line with Scripture and Tradition, teaches:

“We ought to believe that the Holy Spirit, in a manner known only to God, offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this Paschal Mystery” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). In *Lumen Gentium*, 16, the Council Fathers say: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Muslims....”

4. *Redemptor Hominis*, 6.
5. *Nostra Aetate*, 3.

#### V. A NOTE OF HOPE

BIRA I ended on Thursday evening, 18th October, and BIRA II on Tuesday evening, 20th November. During the thanksgiving celebrations presided over by Archbishop Michai Kitbunchu at Sampran and by Archbishop Peter Chung in Kuala Lumpur, the predominant note in both was one of hope.

The participants were aware of the many shortcomings which could and should have been avoided, aware also of many limitations which could not but be accepted with realism and humility. They knew that, if



something had been achieved by the Institutes, it would still be very little when compared with what is actually needed. Nevertheless, they were confident that their own internal dialogue which had taken place among them would continue to mature, would help them persevere in their new personal commitments and eventually would contribute to new and important developments of interreligious dialogue in Asia.

They had clearly faced up to the many contemporary challenges of interreligious dialogue and to its urgency in Asia. Through their joint reflection they had come to a deeper understanding of the nature and role of the dialogue. Their sharing of experiences with Buddhists and Muslims had confirmed them in their conviction that Christians and non-Christians in dialogue help each other to grow, that all salvation attained by man is the gift of Christ, and that the Church's duty is to manifest this gift in every aspect of human life. In prayerful discernment they had become more aware of what should be done in each country during the next five years in order to push forward this interreligious dimension of the Church's life. Thus, they had been strengthened in their hope that together with Buddhists and Muslims they would achieve more for the promotion of peace, social justice, moral values and the true freedom of man. Without doubt, new steps had been taken towards implementing concretely the determination of the FABC to promote the dialogue with other living religions and religious traditions in Asia.

"I believe," one of the participants wrote after BIRA II, "that the two Institutes were providential for the Church in Asia, both for the content and also for the time at which they have finally been realized. In both Institutes the present reality of the Church's mission was truly faced up to through the very practical reports of the member Conferences and the comments of the participants from their personal experiences. Within the context of the theology of mission the participants moved on to ask the "hard questions," those elements which demand the dialogue and those difficulties which hinder it. And this exchange was done in a competent and courteous manner. The participants also acknowledged by their tentative solutions for the pastoral action of the Church that we are now in a period in which the theology of salvation and the theology of the Church are both expanding to incorporate many of the insights of the post-Vatican II Church. Perhaps the most immediate result of the Institutes was that we recognized more clearly the "questions," that we saw glimmers of light at the end of the dark tunnel of present-day inquiry, and that we returned home with some "indications" that would help us in our renewed commitment to dialogue. I also believe that the

Institutes precisely represented 'where we are at' in this moment of our searchings in Asia. I certainly suggest that the Institutes continue...."

Dialogue has to be developed despite the difficulties arising from the fact that many people are not yet prepared for it, but without denying or overlooking these difficulties. As was often said during the Institutes, the more Christians are convinced of the urgency of the dialogue and at the same time aware of its difficulties, the better will they be able to develop it along the lines proper to it, thus avoiding vain hopes and early disappointments. In his endeavors to promote dialogue each one is called to discover day after day that he is not alone. Another of the participants of BIRA II wrote: "I was not expecting much from Kuala Lumpur.... A meeting like this can be only inspirational. But I returned home confirmed in my commitment, happy that I could pick up a few very enriching personal relations, and with the feeling of belonging now to a group of persons who too are committed to this one pilgrimage of hope in Asia. I am deeply rewarded. Thanks!"

The follow-up to the Institutes is now going on in each country of Asia and new initiatives are being undertaken everywhere. At the Asian level other BIRA's will be held and they will be better prepared. A Seminar for Interreligious Affairs is already in preparation and will be held in November of 1980 with a view to hastening the formation of mobile teams of experts in Buddhism and Islam — teams to be made available to the bishops for courses, seminars and other training programs related to education for interreligious dialogue. The existing links of consultation, coordination and cooperation are being strengthened and new contacts are being made.

With God's grace, the concern for dialogue, which already unites all those who took part in the two BIRA's, will grow deeper and help to awaken in Asia a new interest and broader involvement in this dialogue to which today's world is challenging all believers.



## VI. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

**BIRA I, Sampran, Bangkok, Thailand — 11th – 18th October, 1979.**

### **China**

Most Rev. Matthew Kia  
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### **Japan**

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### **Korea**

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### **Macau**

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### **Sri Lanka**

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**BIRA II, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia — 13th – 20th November, 1979.**

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FABC PAPERS is a project of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), designed to bring the thinking of Asian experts to a wider audience and to develop critical analysis of the problems facing the Church in Asia from people on the scene. The opinions expressed are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent the official policies of the FABC or its member Episcopal Conferences. Manuscripts are always welcome and may be sent to: FABC, G.P.O. Box 2984, Hong Kong.

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