

**THIRD PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE****CHURCH ORGANIZATION IN ASIA TODAY**

There is much talk today about inculturation in the Churches in Asia. Such talk about inculturation normally centers around theology, worship and proclamation. An area to which little attention is paid is Church organization. And yet this may be the most basic and important area. The Church is primarily a community. Theology, worship and proclamation are actions of the community. How the community is organized for action is an important concern.

Efficient organization of a community for action must take into account not only the goal of the action and the appropriate means to be adopted to achieve that goal, but also the community itself and the context in which the community is living and acting.

**Orientation**

The Church is an open community. It is not turned in on itself. It is for the world. It is in the world, not only announcing the Good News, but building up a new humanity. The whole community is involved in this task as servant and as leaven. Through inner transformation a new vision is built up, a new awareness is created and people are helped to organize themselves for creative action.

**Context: Asian**

The first characteristic that strikes one about Asia is its pluralism. There is hardly a country in Asia which does not consist of different ethnic — tribal and/or linguistic — cultural groups. The pluralism of religions and ideologies is too obvious to mention.

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Asia is made up mostly of developing countries where poverty is still a problem and needs to be eradicated. Poverty is seen to be the result of unjust structures and maldistribution of available resources, and some form of socialism is being tried everywhere. This means that there is some attempt to involve the people and to help them realize that they are makers of their own destiny.

Most countries in Asia again have only recently won political independence, though economically they are still very dependent. There is a desire for rediscovering one's cultural and national identity and for freedom. The Church as it is organized at present is seen as a foreign presence.

### **Context: Ecclesial**

Church organization, at least as perceived in Asia, is strongly centralized and vertical. The smallest unit is the parish, which is based on a territory and built around the parish priest, who has absolute powers, limited only by the even more absolute powers of the bishop. This organization had explicit or implicit political backing in colonial times. It still has economic support — thanks to the availability of foreign funds — from many sources, but channeled through the power structure.

The Second Vatican Council, however, has introduced some new perspectives that have not yet found adequate organizational expression. The Church is recognized as a community — the People of God. It is a priestly community with a mission to the world. It is at the service of this community that there is a ministry. This ministry has to be understood in terms of serving, facilitating and coordinating leadership rather than in terms of power. The lay people have their own autonomous responsibility and role in the Church. The Church is not a monolith, but a communion of local Churches. But there is still no clarity about the autonomy of a local church or its limits — nation, linguistic/cultural region, diocese. Coresponsibility and participation are words commonly used today.

### **A Clarification**

Organization must be distinguished from structure. Structure refers to relationships that belong to the very being of a community. Organization refers to concrete arrangement of roles and tasks in a particular context with reference to particular goals. The same basic structure may take on various organizational forms according to the context. To identify the structure with a given organizational form is a constant temptation.

A certain dialectical relationship between the community and collegial ministry belongs to the structure of the Church. But a look at various ritual/ecclesial traditions and at history will show a variety of organizational realizations of the basic structure. The temptation to claim divine right for a particular organizational form is not an imaginary proposition.

### **Community Organization in Asia**

With the broader background of the observations above, our reflection should start from the community.

What is a community? Is it a question of numbers? Is it determined by geographical boundaries? What is the criterion by which we can call a group of people a community? It is culture that characterizes a community. It is the ethos and the worldview particular to a culture and the language that knit people together into a community. Community is not a closed concept but an open one. A community may have subgroups based on economic status, political opinion, caste, religious belief, etc. A community may be linked with other communities to constitute a nation. In a rural setting a community may be living in the same geographical area. In an urban setting, especially among the elite, a secular ethos and culture may be the focus of identity. Secondly speaking, geographical togetherness or at least nearness, which makes normal interactions of community life possible, seems a necessary characteristic.

In any sort of organization of the people the community will be a natural unit. The ministry is oriented to the community and its goal should be to enable the community to function efficiently in view of its mission. The ministry should respect the organizational elements characteristic of the community unless it clashes either with the goal or with its own legitimate role. The community should also have a certain autonomy for efficient functioning.

### **Practical Proposals**

1. Except in the Philippines, in most of the countries of Asia Christian communities are diaspora communities, groups of people more or less small scattered among non-Christians. We must aim at making them integrated and self-sufficient. Integration means that they should become fully involved with the people around them at socioeconomic and political levels, working as leaven, keeping a certain identity and autonomy only at the religious level. Here they must be self-sufficient;

that is to say, they must normally have all the resources and ministries necessary for leading a full Christian life, which includes the Eucharist which is its source and summit. Possibilities of ordaining leaders of such communities, even if they are married, must be seriously envisaged. Ministry is for the community, not community for the ministry.

Self-sufficiency would also imply a certain financial autonomy. Any community must normally be able to support its self-expression at the religious level. Needed aid for development must be delinked from ecclesial organizations.

Such self-sufficiency seems particularly urgent in areas where Christian communities may not enjoy, for whatever reason, all civil liberties.

2. Cultural pluralism of Christian communities in a particular geographical area, whether the roots of such pluralism are linguistic, ethnic or ritual, must not only be tolerated, but respected. They must have a certain autonomy at the level of their self-expression in theology, worship and forms of Christian life and witness.

3. Self-sufficiency and pluralism does not mean anarchy. Coordination is possible and necessary, provided coordination does not imply uniformity, absolute authority and centralization, but really encourages subsidiarity and communion. This may demand radical rethinking of diocesan and parish organizational patterns.

4. One important element in such rethinking would be the promotion of responsible lay participation and leadership of the laity, not only in the community's mission to the world, but in the life of the community itself. The priest's role of leadership should normally be limited to the area of what is traditionally known as "faith and morals." While the leadership of the priest is not in question, its style and extent and its dialectical relation to the community will have to be clarified afresh. We should therefore take into serious account organizational patterns current in the community. Whatever may have been the situation in the past and whatever the reasons for it, the priest need no longer claim absolute powers over community property, material organization of Church festivals, social life, etc. This has been a source of tension in many communities in India, for example. While the Good News must be prophetic and critical and seek to correct abuses that will be found in any human organization, it does not offer a model proper to itself.

## **Conclusion—Implications**

We need stress only two points.

1. New concepts like communion, local church, People of God, coresponsibility, lay leadership, servant leadership should be given their full value in a radical rethinking of organizational patterns in the Church. We should not just play with them within the traditional organizational and juridical framework.

2. The Church in Asia has been noted for its service institutions in the field of education, health and development. Its priests have been known as organisers and administrators of these institutions. It is perhaps time that the Church's mission is also seen as a spiritual one, and priests are also seen as spiritual men (gurus) in the integral meaning of the term "spiritual."





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