

THIRD PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE

**SEMINARIES AND RELIGIOUS HOUSES AS CENTERS OF
FORMATION OF CHURCH AS COMMUNITY OF FAITH IN ASIA****I. INTRODUCTION**

“The Church has been divinely sent to all nations that she might be the universal sacrament of salvation” (*Ad Gentes*, 1; cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 48). God Himself “planned to assemble in the holy Church all those would believe in Christ” (*Lumen Gentium*, 2). The Church, then, is the community of believers, a community of faith. As “People of God,” “Body of Christ” and “Communion in the Spirit,” the Church as Community of Faith must be the sacrament of salvation for all peoples. Prolongation and extension of the mystery of the Incarnate Word who is “the light of all the nations” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). The Church must incarnate herself in all peoples and cultures, becoming intimately for each “light” and “salt” and “leaven” of salvation.

As such, to focus now on the reality of Asia, “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of the peoples of this vast continent, “especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are” — and must be — “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of the community of faith that is the Church in Asia (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

II. THE REALITY OF ASIA

Asia is a vast continent with a richly complex reality which is today in a process of evolution and growth. Harboring over two-fifths of the world's population, its many-textured conglomerate of nations and races, of ethnic groups and social classes, of castes and tribes and clans presents an extraordinary study in contrast.

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshop sessions of the Third Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), held at the Lux Mundi Seminary, in Sampran, Thailand, near Bangkok, 20th-27th October, 1982. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: “The Church — a Community of Faith in Asia.”

1. Religious Pluralism, Search for God, Growing Secularism

Birthplace of all the major religions of the world, with its three cultural spheres of West, South and East each giving rise to a distinct group of religions, Asia is today witnessing – together with its cultural renaissance – a remarkable revival and resurgence of these religions, marked even by a dynamic missionary thrust. Characterized by a traditional integration of religion, culture and community, the peoples of Asia have a basic religious orientation. Despite deviations and errors, this fundamentally religious character of the peoples of Asia in their centuries-long search for God and quest for interiority has been the single factor that has consistently inspired hope, solace, joy and zest for living in the midst of the many dehumanizing forces at work among and around them. This *sense of the divine* has down the ages been imbibed through men and women who in their close contact and communion with God, supported by a life of austere simplicity, have communicated their profound personal religious experience. Faith, then, whether expressed in theologico-philosophical terms or in codes of daily conduct, or again in the celebration of rites and festivals, has been born of and shaped by such *illuminating religious experience*.

Today, however, this traditional profound religious sense is facing the growing phenomenon of *secularization* that moves apace with the process of *modernization*. To this have contributed in no small measure science and technology, the insights of modern philosophy and the human sciences, the growth of social and cultural institutions, and the contemporary cross-fertilization of cultures or “inter-culturation” made possible by today’s powerful means of communication that have become planetary in scope. There is no denying the onslaught made today on the deep religious sensibilities of the peoples of Asia by growing materialism and Western consumerism, with all their consequent value systems and the range of their cultural-moral influences.

2. Massive Underdevelopment, Social Revolution, Youth Power

The Asian scene is stamped with the enormous poverty and stark underdevelopment of the vast masses of its peoples, who live almost cheek by jowl with tiny islands and enclaves of great wealth and opulence. Having been for long centuries the theater of colonization by Europe, the peoples of Asia still suffer continuing dependence and exploitation, both economic and cultural, from internal forces and external powers.

It is not surprising that all over the Asian continent there is a feverish ferment of socioeconomic development, with the socialist experiment being essayed by nearly half its population. Socioeconomic revolutions with their consequent hopes and fears are breeding all over Asia, in the frantic search for

a new social order to replace and transform the largely traditional feudal socioeconomic patterns in existence.

Though sheltering some of the most ancient peoples of the earth, Asia has paradoxically enough enormous masses of young people. Its youth power is being palpably felt precisely in the working out of the socioeconomic revolutions that are now gripping and shaping the future of the continent.

3. Cultural Wealth, Bonds of Community, Divisive Forces

Cradle of some of the world's oldest civilizations, Asia can rightly boast of possessing some of the richest cultural treasures of mankind — whether in history or literature, art or music, dance or drama. Steeped profoundly in the traditional integration of religion, culture and community so characteristic of the peoples of Asia, these superlative cultural values are at the same time profoundly religious and markedly communitarian. Far from creating or encouraging pockets of haughty insularity, Asian cultures have always been known for that spirit of assimilation, flexibility, openness and tolerance that is the mark of the religio-cultural temper of its peoples.

A notably common feature of Asian peoples is their strong sense of community evidenced in firm family bonds, whether these be expressed in tribal ties or feudal loyalties or simply in the very characteristic institution of the joint family. And yet, within these societies, militating against these very admirable bonds, there exist the insidious divisive forces of caste and class that threaten all unity and community.

III. THE CHURCH AS COMMUNITY OF FAITH IN ASIA

1. The Church as Community of Faith

“By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). The Church then is essentially a community of faith. Community in the Christian or religious sense is no mere unity of convenience to form strength, a coming together for reciprocal help, mutual encouragement, increased efficiency or even material economy. Christian community is no mere experience of pleasant camaraderie, not even to be assimilated to a mere striving for common goals by common means. Far from being an association of pragmatic values, the Church that is people of God, body of Christ, fellowship in the Spirit is of theological necessity communitarian. Integral to her mystery is the fact that being assembled by Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit as God's salvific people of the New Alliance, the Church will remain for all time, and beyond time, the community of worship and of love.

What is distinctive of the Church as community is that the power that assembles her as community is the power from above. If then she perseveres and grows ever more deeply as community, it is because, and in the measure that, her members draw on this power from above — or rather, respond in freedom to this never-failing divine initiative from above. In other words, the Church is essentially a community of faith. “The group of believers was one in mind and heart” (Acts 4, 32). “All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. . . Every day they continued to meet as a group in the temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating the food with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved” (Acts 2, 44. 46-47).

2. Asian Reality and the Church as Community of Faith

Now, what must the reality of Asia, such as we have briefly sketched it, mean to the Church as Community of Faith, and what in its turn must the latter mean to the reality of Asia?

We must acknowledge that in the Church faith has for long, and all too often, been expressed by the community of Christians principally as the acceptance of a certain number of distinctive doctrinal truths or beliefs and the submission to a moral code of conduct. If it had to be witnessed to and shared, it was mainly as apologetics and in terms of a high quality of efficient service. Besides, the Church has long tended to be somewhat “monological” in approach, not infrequently rather rigid, inflexible and intolerant in the name of orthodoxy, creating the impression of harboring a distinctive community alien to local cultural values and ideals, and marginal to the mainstream of local history and endeavour.

But now Asia challenges the community of the Church to give concrete witness in daily life and service primarily to its *experience of God in Christ* — a faith *experience*, which is certainly normed objectively and which then may well need to be translated into formulated doctrines, moral codes and social service, but always and only as a lively witnessing to, and mediating of, religious experience. Above all, Asia by its very reality pressingly calls and recalls the Church to the profound evangelical spirit and attitudes of *dialogue*. The Church in Asia stands challenged as a community of faith to learn ever more deeply in practice the values of humility and openness, of courtesy and respect for the opinions of others, of hospitality and the warmth of friendship, of the willingness to learn how to serve from those she seeks to serve. Only thus with her faith in Christ can she hope to dialogue in openness with the rich religious pluralism of Asia; only thus, as a committed community of believers, can she be inserted into the gigantic movement of social revolution and quest for a new social order of the masses of Asia; only thus can she

hope to be really at home among the peoples of Asia, expressing her unique faith experience in the rich cultural traditions and values of these lands.

Then, indeed, will the Church as Community of Faith be truly a sign and sacrament of salvation for the vast masses of the peoples of Asia. Elevating and integrating their age-old cultural values and traditions, the Church will by her very life and service give witness to Christ as the fulfilment of Asia's most cherished values and deepest aspirations. While positively inserted in a spirit of service into Asia's determined striving for development — whether in the social or economic fields, the scientific or educational — the community of believers in Christ will by its faith-witness forcefully remind the peoples of Asia that efficient service and social involvement do by no means exhaust the reality and quality of human living. For not only must this service carry the eschatological sign-value of spiritual freedom, detachment and renunciation, in its being selfless and disinterested, humble and dedicated; the service and action itself must stand out, in shining witness, as shot through with contemplation. Thus, even as the Church is decidedly engaged in earthly realities and human tasks, it will always be her primary mission as a community of faith — how eloquently she expresses this in the Eucharist! — to gather up these realities and tasks in a vast cosmic liturgy of consecration and worship to the King of ages and the Lord of history.

And, in a continent that today tends in her peoples to be woefully torn apart by divisive forces of every kind, what shall we say of the urgency and timeliness of the reconciling mission of the Church as Community of Faith, the Church that is “a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind” and “an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1)? To sum up in one terse concentrated phrase the role of the Church as Community of Faith in the midst of an increasingly secularized Asia that is straining every nerve for human development, one might say that the community of believers in Christ is to be inserted as a powerful leaven, lifted up as a forceful reminder and sign, giving ceaseless witness to the truth that man cannot be perfectly man — even as man — unless he be, in the brotherhood of other men, a son of God.

IV. SEMINARIES AND RELIGIOUS HOUSES AS CENTERS OF FORMATION OF CHURCH AS COMMUNITY OF FAITH IN ASIA

The Church as the community of believers in Christ is assembled, it is true, by the Father's initiative of love through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit. But, inasmuch as the Church is made up of human beings who are free to respond in faith to the divine initiative, the Church will grow and mature as community of faith in the measure in which these men and women respond ever more deeply and maturely, individually and as a community, to God's free gift. This poses the whole question of how men and women must

be taught and led pedagogically to such a response of faith; it raises the question of the formation or training of the members of the Church to be ever more truly the community of faith. We restrict ourselves here to reflecting on seminaries and religious houses of formation as training centers for the building up of the Church as Community of Faith in Asia.

1. Formation, Not Mere Information. Integrated Training

Formation, we know increasingly today, is not to be equated with mere information. It is not something static, never a finished process. It is essentially dynamic: it entails equipping the persons being formed with the necessary tools of analysis, reflection and assimilation that enable them to carry on the ongoing process of formation all through life. Besides, it is common knowledge that lifestyle and human development, intellectual and spiritual formation, and apostolic training, has each its own distinct contribution to make in the maturing and growth of a Christian or of a Christian community. What we are more and more aware of today is that all these are, and must be, only various dimensions of *one* harmonized or integrated training. It is worth noting that, if all modern theories of education today lay a heavy stress on this organically unified and integrated character of human formation, this has in fact been an age-old traditional insight of the great Asian religious teachers, rishis and sages.

2. Life and Thought. Contextualized Training

Another salient trait of Asian wisdom and of its training for wisdom is the intimate link that exists between life and thought. Simple living and high thinking are almost proverbially linked in an Asian context. Seminary and religious training in Asia, then, demands a “contextualization” of the whole style of life and living, as much in external atmosphere and details of daily life as in the inner virtues and values of living. Such “contextualization” must extend itself to the very content and manner of training. Not only must the material on which humanistic growth, spiritual formation, philosophico-theological reflection and pastoral training are based be the “contextualized” Asian reality of today; the very categories and methodology of reflection, formation and training must be increasingly native to the soil — drawn, that is, from the cultural riches and wealth of Asian nations and peoples. Thus, for example, the manner of training will have to draw inspiration from what is commonly held to be a peculiar mark of all Eastern — let us say, Asian — pedagogy: far from being either conceptualistic or gregarious, it is notably experience-based and person-oriented.

3. Accent on Human Formation in the Context of Faith

Generally speaking, the candidates coming to our seminaries and religious houses of formation in Asia come from backgrounds that are rich in cultural

traditions and values, but which are at the same time fairly strongly tradition-bound. Seminary and religious training in such a context must certainly strive to preserve and integrate all the positive values of these cultural backgrounds. One such specific and almost sacred value is the strong sense of family bonds and of community. However, these very sacred bonds in traditional societies tend to create a series of authoritarian taboos and a sense of narrow parochialism, of chauvinistic exclusivism that can eat at the very heart of Christian community. This is why the seminaries and religious houses of training in Asia must take particular care in helping their candidates to break free from the fetters of taboos, especially in the areas of authority, religion and sex; they must lay particular stress on the training for personal freedom and responsibility, for the values of openness and dialogue, always however in a faith context.

4. Training as an Experience of Faith

It is this experience of faith and its articulation that must be the very soul of the whole range of seminary and religious formation in the Asian context. Such formation should take serious account of, and strive to respond adequately to, the characteristic religious instinct and trait of the peoples of Asia. It should lead through prayer and worship, through philosophical-theological reflection on Asian reality, through community and apostolic experiences, and through their progressive evaluation in spiritual discernment to the building up of a true community of faith, that has a genuine faith impact on the human surroundings of both seminaries and religious houses of training. Thus all this formation will be geared to the gradual and full blossoming of that powerful impulse towards Christ-experience with which candidates come to our seminaries and religious houses of formation, but which unfortunately tends to be snuffed out by years of largely arid and conceptual training.

5. Pastoral and Apostolic Formation. Training for Community

In the Asian context the apostolic-pastoral dimension of seminary and religious training should take serious cognizance of the enormous apostolic power of lifestyle so that it can be realistically integrated into the formation program. Very emphatically the religious leader in Asia is one who shares the living conditions of the people, their simplicity of life, their lot of toil and struggle. Asian religious leaders unambiguously proclaim by their lives that simplicity is creative and productive; that while luxury and superfluity tend to deaden the spirit, sobriety elevates it; that, in any case, comfort and security, privilege and prestige woefully blunt the vigor of apostolic thrust.

In a very special way Asia's seminarians and candidates for religious life must be diligently taught all those personal values that enter into a solid training for community, and which are themselves of prime importance for

the pastoral and apostolic ministry: the deep values of openness and receptiveness to others, the practical knowledge of human nature so necessary for the art of dialogue, courtesy and humility, and teamwork. All this must be forged as a practical pedagogy inspired by faith, so that community-building takes place in concrete practice in the very context of the seminary and of the religious house of formation.

6. The Trainers' Training

Given the fact that in the Asian context the religious leader or trainer plays a determinant role and influence in all pedagogy, seminary and religious training in Asia will have in the last analysis to focus prominently on the person of the trainer. He must embody in his very person all those qualities and values that must eventually be transmitted to his trainees, if seminaries and religious houses of training are truly to play their role in the building up of the Church as Community of Faith in Asia. In a word, he should be an apostle who, as a man with true freedom and maturity of spirit, has grasped his peculiar priestly or religious apostolic vocation in a personal integrated manner through a deep experience of faith, who is "inserted" into the language, realities and general culture of the region where he lives and works and trains, and who remains open in temper and spirit, within the companionship of a team of trainers, to the wider values and realities of other regions, of the universal Church, indeed of the world at large.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How in the concrete are we to prepare our seminarians and religious candidates in their human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation for *dialogue* with:

- the *pluralism of faiths* in Asia?
- the *socio-economic problems and strivings* of Asian peoples?
- the rich *cultural elements and values* of Asian tradition?

2. What concrete means are to be used to build up the seminary of religious house of formation as a Community of Faith:

- in prayer and worship?
- in community experiences?
- in apostolic experiences and field work?

3. How concretely are we to help seminarians and religious trainees in the various regions of Asia to preserve their positive cultural values through all the years, and on all the levels, of formation? How help them purify and elevate these values in the light of Christian faith?

4. What qualities are required in, and what training should be given to, those who will be charged with the formation of seminarians and religious candidates in the various regions of Asia?