

THIRD PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE

**CONSECRATED RELIGIOUS LIFE IN ASIA
AS WITNESS OF CHURCH AS COMMUNITY OF FAITH****Preface**

We all know that the Church in Asia is a Church of tiny minorities; it has to function as a minority Church. We also acknowledge that our Church still carries the image of an alien Church because of a lack of appropriate reflection upon and genuine efforts for its inculturation process.

There is a tendency in our Church to be an exclusive community of faith. Because of this it is restrained in the growth of its faith, which in turn hampers its growth as a community of faith. This, in turn, keeps it in a condition of alienation, which is also strengthened by imported spiritualities.

Of course, this greatly influences religious life in Asia which certainly receives its life from our Church here. Religious life has the tendency to be a witness of the Church as it is here and as it appears now. It takes up the present limitations of the Church into its religious community life so that it frequently becomes a witness of what is truly the Church only in a limited way. Consequently, it does not witness to the great potentialities our Church carries in itself as a community of faith here in Asia.

We try in this discussion guide to reflect on this situation; our reflections are based on experiences of consecrated religious persons in Asian countries who are involved in the mission of our Church here and now. Ours is a very simple reflection, for we are trying now to go into some *basic* problems about the Church and religious life in Asia, which, if understood, may help in the solution of other problems which are not covered here.

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 Lux Mundi Seminary, in Sampran, Thailand, near Bangkok, 20th-27th October, 1982. The theme of Plenary Assembly is: "The Church — a Community of Faith in Asia."

I. A Church of Appeal Which Provokes Genuine Religious Services in People's Communities

1. Undoubtedly there is going on among Asian religious a search for a vision:

- of being with people, who are rooted in the good they have;
- of being part of Christ's living Body, and of living from Christ in this Body with a very living function (1Cor12:14);
- of being rooted in the Church, living a life full of joy in the Lord, not being put into a strait-jacket of over-institutionalization;
- of being religious in the full sense — pure, poor, obedient — and yet free in the Lord because of Christ;
- of living a very personal and community dialogue of life;
- of a salvation which is incarnated in very human—Christian services; and
- of walking in the Asian human milieu with Christ and the Church as a community of people in Christ, who calls all Asian people to join it and puts them already on the way (*Redemptor Hominis*).

2. Particularly, that most human—divine characteristic in the Church of a dialogue of life, word and work is becoming gradually a special feature of religious life in Asia. This is true because dialogue is rooted in the dialogue which is the way and rhythm of life of "Asian peoples." In this way religious become more inculturated into the life of Asia's peoples, or are at least more aware of it. Precisely this attitude of dialogue — among themselves, with others in the Church or with anybody of good will — is developing, as Christ through his Church sets them free to do this because of their vows.

3. We connect this with the living mystery of the Church: its living communities of local Christian people, with local communities of religious rooted, integrated, inculturated in them. These basic Christian or ecclesial communities may be opposed by non-Christians but are at the same time needed by them. In a depth of faith these communities live in the joy of the Lord and are joyfully discovered by many. The Church in this way is wanted, because its communities are an appeal to many other Asians, who by initial faith given them by our Lord long for a better community to cope with situations of life which suppress and oppress them. Surprised at the extent our Lord is already at work in all Asian peoples through their human attitude towards a dialogue of life, many of our religious want to serve primarily in this depth of faith.

4. Many of our Asian religious are struggling to serve this arising faith towards people's communities of any kind. To be salt among our great peoples of Asia, searching for what is humanly good in them, witnessing to that faith which people already have and live of whatever religion they are, is the endeavor of us Asian Christians. For religious this search for a common bond or seeds of faith ends happily in the Lord when they discover it, and they are allowed to put down their roots with these peoples.

Religious must be right when they discern our Church to be a community of faith, as they are right when they discern the seeds of this same faith within their peoples, and choose to live with it, nurse it, accept it, as Christ did and always does. They accept Christ's calling to be sent by him to integrate this faith of their peoples into the faith of our community of faith, our Church.

5. Religious, therefore, may sometimes serve as a means of correction to the hierarchy through a positively critical attitude which is healthy for both. Such dialogue can foster a better understanding and living of faith along with people's faith in community. Religious sometimes should be indignant and show their displeasure with what is unjust or unworthy in our Church as institution when, for example, the institution is put before the Gospel and before the Church as community of faith. Too many Church-institutionalized persons have great difficulty in understanding this, because they excessively identify with the Church as an institution and do not primarily identify with the Church as a community of faith.

Religious, on the other hand, may not really discern in depth of faith what really hurts them, why it hurts, who is hurting them and in what way. This certainly happens with religious who cannot discern their indignation, cannot connect or integrate it in the Church as community of faith, and so end up giving the impression of attacking the Church in its faith. All of us can become so very much mixed up in our experiences of life, work and community. We must become together discoverers through dialogue in depth of faith how to discern, how to communicate, and how to develop together in this one Church, Christ's Body, which goes far beyond the institutional Church. It is not faith in the Church which is criticized but rather an attitude of unwillingness to discern what Asian peoples want from our Church. This comes often to the fore with regard to injustices in or around our Church as an institution, in our governments, in situations and conditions which Asian peoples experience as unjust and are not seen by the Church. The Church in Asia wants to be naturally, humanly and divinely rooted in Asian peoples and in their faith, and this can be attained only via dialogue.

II. Consecrated Religious Life in a Community Sent by Christ through His Church and Supported by the Church

1. We can say the FABC is a sort of community of faith. It guides the Asian people; it is becoming more Asian; and it has started to dialogue in the Asian way. This is highly appreciated by many Asian religious who have participated in its plenary sessions and different institutes. It is, almost necessarily, still weak in implementation. Comparably, most bishops too after the II Vatican Council had to grow into implementation with their people, inculturating the new inspirations of the Council in their dioceses. Asian religious want to serve here. Thus, it is not surprising that associations of religious at the national and regional level in Asia have developed, although not yet at the Asian level. They want to develop at the regional level first: South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia. This is still in process.

But all are already listening carefully to what the Asian bishops reflect on and to what they resolve. They know the growth of the Church in Asia as a community of faith will help them in their own growth to become better communities of faith.

2. We often reflect also on the growth of people's communities, Catholics together with people of other religions, to make sure our Christian—ecclesial basic communities do not become alienated from people who adhere to other religions. The bond among citizens of the Asian nations is very strong and possesses mutual, deep human—Asian values. They look to the Lord for protection, harmony and dependence, but a modern, more Western-oriented development tends to destroy this bond.

We discern that the human inner dynamics of Asian peoples are moved by the Spirit. This is why contemplation in apostolate is important in Asia. We all must grow into this.

A great help is the reflections of the Asian bishops regarding dialogue with other religions. This is attractive to Asian religious because it connects faith in us, which is the faith of the people of God, with the seeds of faith found in peoples of other religions. We search here for the common human—Asian element in all community life, the basis for all dialogue and cooperation, which is the aspect of faith.

3. Religious are called by Christ from among their people; they answer this call in Christ by consecrating their life to God, promising with Christ to be with him who appeals to them also through his people,

through his many poor in Asia, so downtrodden for long centuries. Actually, they are sent by Christ, are one with Christ in people, and are confirmed in this sending by the local and universal Church to be apostles among their people, by being with, working with, and living from within all people.

4. Again we find here the presence of an Asian contemplation in the apostolate. In order to support religious to live their vocation, the official Church and Church leaders, who are sent also to the people, can do much by understanding in faith this religious vocation, this consecrated religious life in community which is so directly related, connected with and rooted in Christ's universal community, his Church. The bishops have the missionary task to confirm, to strengthen and to support these religious who are one in faith, one in Christ, with them.

Could not the "Mutual Relations" document of the Holy See be more and better implemented in this reality of Christ at work in these mutual relations, so important for better service to Asian peoples?

III. What Do Religious Witness?

1. Religious life is consecrated to God who works in and among His people. Religious life is, consequently, also consecrated to people deeply loved by their Lord.

It is one commitment sustained by the Lord, supported by this Church; it is simply one consecration worked out through contemplative prayer in religious life and apostolate in community.

Our religious in and through their communities become witnesses in these two ways. Each of these ways are deeply connected in our Lord. (A witness is somebody who personally sees something, who observes it by personal presence and so can give testimony or evidence of what has seen, observed, experienced.)

2. First of all, religious witness to the Church as community of faith, and also witness to their own religious community of faith as part of the Church. They experience, observe, contemplate Christ at work in his and their Church, as well as in their own religious communities, all integral parts of the Church.

Religious also witness to the presence of Christ in people having their own communities of faith, who have Christ's seeds of faith in a community of popular religiosity.

It is essential that religious witness to the mutual relation between these two communities:

- The Church as a community of faith struggling towards people's community of faith; and
- People unconsciously, but also consciously, struggling within their communities towards the Kingdom of God with their own God-given faith or seeds of faith.

As a consequence, religious try to serve in, with and through Christ this fundamentally one faith in a two-way process, by connecting and bridging this grace of faith in the two communities, because in Christ the faith is one already, but often not realized to be one. Now the religious witness to their being one.

3. Living their vow of poverty nowadays, religious are more attracted to witness Christ at work among and from within the communities of the poor, effectively loved by our Lord, who himself witnessed clearly to their simple and yet great human values of sharing, mutual care, of living together, and of understanding and supporting one another. Christ saw clearly how he walked in the humanity of the poor, and worked from within them precisely in their struggle to maintain their human values, which are needed for their own survival as human beings in their human communities. In the Gospels we read the joy of Christ meeting his faith in the poor, not only in the Christian poor. Asian religious struggle for this one faith-vision as it was in Christ, for participation in Christ's faith, who generated this faith, for participation in the faithful, of whom our religious are a living part, for service, freed to do this by their consecrated religious life. This vision of faith is continued by Christ through his Church, through his people in his Church, through religious. They particularly are called to see with their eyes of faith Christ at work in all Asian peoples and how he works. Christ calls them in his Church to live a sensitive faith in order to discern Christ's gift of faith in all people. They are given a special charism of discernment in faith to do this simply and unobtrusively wherever they are among people. They participate in Christ's sensitivity of faith, as expressed in Mt 12:20 — Isaiah 42:1-4: "He will not break the crushed reed, not put out the smoldering wick." Everything rightly human is his: See also Mt 13:14-15; Isaiah 6:9-10; Those who do not see, hear, understand with their heart for fear to be converted and be healed by the Lord.

We feel this witnessing charism among our religious is needed today. It is a great gift of the Spirit, reaching deep into the religious themselves, and at the same time touching what is there in the depth of the heart of everybody, but ignored by many.

It inspires better service to the Church in its perpetual renewal to be a community of faith for and with the many.

4. This does not demand any violent action, brawling or shouting in the streets, but it is a way adapted to proclaiming the true faith to our Asian nations (Mt 12:18), who still hunger and strive for this true faith which already silently and enduringly moves within their hearts.

Religious become relevant again among people, and through the working of the Spirit serve the people in such a way that they enable the people themselves to lift up their hearts anew in *true faith*.

5. The Church has the holy task to witness its being a community of faith, that great and always relevant gift of God to and in his Church. At the same time the Church recognizes the Spirit in the People of God.

The People of God in community in Asia is the Church in Asia. Asians live a deep faith-life, full of trust that their Lord is with them and in them, and therefore they are bound together by their Lord.

The Church with all its leaders serving this faith becomes gradually a really Asian Church.

We recognize it is very difficult for the institutional Church to be a real *mother* of this faith-life of people in Christ. The Church is mother first: life-giving, nursing this faith-life of its people and these seeds of faith in others — all who need this loving care. The impression, however, is often different, because our Church in Asia is so very busy with institutional rules as soon as the traditional hierarchy feels itself attacked, menaced, not sufficiently honored. Then it can give the impression of being harsh, or “anonymous,” not being a life-giving and nursing mother.

6. All of us, hierarchy, religious, lay people, suffer from this, and it hampers our being nursing mothers, who are happy with any faith-life growth, discerning it in joy and serving it. This unique service cannot be taken over by a Church institution which often alienates itself from this faith or from the seeds of faith in any people.

Remember: it is very difficult for the institutional Church to dialogue with Asian peoples who live so freely, in many ways still happily uninstitutionalized.

But in a real dialogue of faith among people new inspirations and motivations arise, which are deeply needed in the just struggles of faith and justice. Religious participating in this Asian people's dialogue are in the right position to serve by supporting and confirming this dialogue.

IV. Stumbling Stones, Yet Dialogue?

1. Christ saw himself as the keystone, quoting David, Ps 118:22-24: "It was the stone rejected by the builders that proved to be the keystone; this is Yahweh's doing and it is wonderful to see. This is the day made memorable by Yahweh, what immense joy for us." This text is an almost daily experience of religious who follow Christ in this struggle for the acceptance of God's justice searched and struggled for by many voiceless Asian people.

Often these religious feel rejected somehow by our institutional Church, which is supposed to walk in the human Asian event, the people's struggle towards justice, which is God's gift too. Many religious feel there is not much understanding support for their sharing in the Asian people's search and struggle for this gift of God's justice. It is not just the hierarchy whom they request to understand them, but also those religious working in religious institutions, as well as the many Christians who work in government, business and other organizations.

There is not yet much understanding for this deeply incarnated spirituality of integral human development in community, this incarnated, inculturated faith for the development of justice among their people. There is a fear that this understanding support would jeopardize our Church because it might offend governments. But the Church certainly cannot agree with injustice done to Asian peoples by governments or those multinationals which co-operate with governments.

2. There is much complaining in our Church about consumerism, heavy techniques taking over simple people's small enterprises, the flow of profit money outside the country, low wages, etc. We all know the list. We know people suffer. We know the deepening gap between the rich and the poor. Yet we do not know what to do about it and do not see or discern what many people and religious already are doing in this line. We agree with our beloved Pope John Paul II who wants us to walk with people in this process of integral human development in community by Asian peoples, with our Asian religious serving them to keep roots in their own Asian human values.

We all hope to live up to our faith as members of the Church which is a community of faith. Many, however, have the painful problem of their personal and community faith seeming to be two kinds of faith, difficult to be integrated. The faith of the Church in itself as institution seems at times to overrule the faith of the Church as a community of faith. Perhaps the first is a kind of ideology, and the latter, the real faith, suffers from this ideology. We realize the Church must be some kind of an institution, perhaps even have some kind of ideology to support the institution. But surely this ideology should serve the Church as a community of faith, for which all nations hope. We are in the middle of the growing pains towards integration of what is institutionally needed in order to serve relevantly the growth of the Church as a community of faith. We see this to be very normal.

3. Our siding like Christ with the many poor in Asia is often seen by governments to be "subversive."

Asian peoples, with their wisdom for a non-violent process of development towards just Asian societies, know however how to cope with this problem. We should always learn from the Asian way of harmony in life. From Asian people who search to contribute to this harmony with their great spiritual insight of the divine in the human, of the divine growing and arising from the human in Asian people's communities.

The interreligious dialogue in Asia should be rooted in a personal dialogue, in a dialogue of living communities. We look for a dialogue of human interests, a dialogue of life, of Asian human life.

Here religious need to prove the value of their religious life in community, their life-truth, their relevance, their capability of serving people to lift up their hearts in the Lord, their capability for dialogue. Religious should be "masters" in this. But this often makes for "trouble."

4. Religious in the midst of situations of injustice want to be with Christ, to be like him. Let us listen a moment to Peter and Paul, who are of one heart and mind on this point. 1Peter 2:6-8: "As Scripture says: 'See how I lay in Zion a precious cornerstone that I have chosen and the man who rests his trust on it will not be disappointed. This means that for you who are believers, it is precious; but for unbelievers, the stone rejected by the builders has proved to be the keystone, a stone to stumble over, a rock to bring men down. They stumble over it because they do not believe in the word, it was the fate in store for them.'" And Romans

9:30-33: "From this follows that the pagans who were not looking for righteousness found it all the same, a righteousness that comes of faith, while Israel, looking for a righteousness derived from law failed to do what that law required. Why did they fail? Because they relied on good deeds instead of trusting in faith. In other words, they stumbled over the stumbling stone mentioned in scripture: See how I lay in Zion a stone to stumble over, a rock to trip men up — only those who believe in him will have no cause for shame."

What does this mean for us? Simply that Christ is still the keystone in the Church, and still can become a stumbling stone for our institutional Church. Could our religious who are with people in their struggle for justice in and through integral human development in community be stumbling stones, following Christ whom they also follow as the keystone?

5. This is difficult for those institutionalized religious leaders who are afraid of change. Certainly there has to be a wisdom on both sides which comes from our Lord and grows from honest dialogue in faith.

Can this happen with not too much pain on either side? Or, is it that this pain of misunderstanding one another is essentially Christian? Seemingly we have to live with it, but we must constantly do something about it through dialogue.

Do the so-called "leftists" among our religious and lay people have a point? How do we discern it? As soon as they are dominated by a ideology more than by faith, they will be an obstacle to the Church both as community of faith and as institution. Religious who live from faith will serve both in an integral way.

If there are such misunderstandings, these might be reduced to personality clashes but often it goes much deeper. In a depth of faith the right way for further dialogue can be discerned.

Always care must be given not to throw away stones that seem to be stumbling stones but which might be rooted in our keystone: Jesus Christ.

It is true that often there is anger in our institutions because of "radical" religious, so that these institutions feel endangered, menaced by such stumbling stones. There are often indignant feelings, personal "attacks," personal affronts, often imaginary, so that a real discernment in faith through honest dialogue becomes all the more difficult.

How far do we all grow in this dialogue of discernment? How far do we take this need seriously, responsibly and honestly? We may discover that the “radical” religious still have their roots in the Christ in people.

6. There is a wisdom in the Church giving some canonical exemption for religious. Is it so that the amazing prophetic thing in the Church may arise as soon as it starts to over-institutionalize itself?

Bishops, priests, religious or lay can have similar problems in their own communities. Suppressing them, the Church can lose them, because it is suppressing Christ working in them.

Can we really reflect about this problem? How do we integrate them, if not totally in the institution of the Church, then certainly in the community of faith? Do we believe that the institution may be rocked somewhat but that the Church as a community of people of faith may prosper? It would be a damage to the Church as a community of faith and as an institution if especially the very simple and humble among the religious who so easily relate to and serve people in their faith would become too much institutionalized. This specific kind of religious are the ones who precisely cannot serve in such a way.

Certainly the religious we are speaking about may have to be purified in their service. This purifying process can be there all the time through honest dialogue, to cleanse them of overpowering ideologies, of going their own lonely, individual way, of being disconnected from the Church as community of faith.

These different poles — the institutional and the charismatic — were there in the original Church. Solutions to problems were sought out well and properly, some times with indignation but always in a prayerful dialogue. They learned this from Christ.

This deep understanding in faith should be present on all sides: the individual religious, the official Church and the religious Congregations. Many misunderstandings could then be cleared up.

It presupposes a living our faith in Christ without fear, with a deep feeling for discernment in the Church, on the part of its leaders necessarily institutionalized to some degree and with the stumbling stones who can be discerned as rooting themselves in our keystone who is Christ, and who may often stumble because of their stumbling leaders.

How can we all get clear about this? There is a real danger and temptation to subordinate all these small stumbling stones under the institutional Church, not recognizing or appreciating them as having their place and function in a Church which is a community of faith. They are called to serve people who are poor, who are gentle and who mourn, but who yet hunger and thirst for justice, who want to be merciful, pure in heart and peacemakers, and who are persecuted in the cause of right (Mt 5:2-10). We never will understand our religious stumbling stones unless we take seriously the needs, aspirations and yearnings of our Asian people, meet them, go into them, take them up as *ours*, as *Gaudium et Spes* says.

It is our response to the groaning of the entire creation, expressed by Asian peoples together, who hope to be set free, and are helped by the Spirit in our weakness (Romans 8:18-27).

V. Insertion

1. We will never reflect enough on the yearnings of Asian people of whatever religion for the Kingdom of God — for justice and peace — in one way or other expressed in their beliefs.

A Church of people alive in communities of faith cannot *not* be alert to this. But what are our own priorities regarding these Asian peoples? We want to build a lot of buildings to serve them better, whereby we become too dependent on the Asian rich and on funding agencies from abroad. We want to build for our faithful. Buildings could then come before the community of faith. We cannot demand the humanly impossible from our faithful, but they themselves can do much in building communities of faith, guided, supported by and trusting in the Lord.

2. Religious, faithful and humble, want to insert themselves as religious in this building-up of people by people themselves. These religious become confused, then, when they are told that this is not their task. At the same time, however, many religious are asked to participate more in pastoral care, for the harvest is rich but the laborers are few. There is, of course, a pastoral dimension in all the apostolates religious do, and this is better understood now in depth of faith.

But their specific apostolate cannot be totally subordinated to diocesan pastoral plans. Many religious are willing to *integrate* themselves and their apostolates in pastoral plans as far as they can do so as religious.

However, our pastors need the religious as their counterparts, in order to be able to reach out to people beyond their specific pastoral work. Here religious are available — as well as many good lay people — who need this well-understood freedom to do what they already do: to serve the many, poor and rich, in their faith.

3. Lay people who are involved in these services need religious with them as animators in dialogue. But how can religious do this as long as they are not really allowed to be particularly with the poor?

Ways and means (as well as a specific spirituality of religious life) have to be searched for in order to make this possible, without losing any of the religious charism. We are already searching for an incarnated Asian spirituality in order to be of better service to our Asian people, their conditions and situations.

This service to the yearnings of the poor for faith and justice can really become a very normal dimension of faith and of the apostolate of our Church as a community of faith. Our pastors would then animate our lay people and religious to serve in this very normal evangelical work.

4. This promotion of human development in community does not need a specifically “Catholic” stamp, because this would not attract many people. Human promotion is not exclusively Catholic. Our experience is that there are many Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems and animists who have no problem working together in such promotion. But they are scared as soon as they see there the “Catholic” stamp. In many of them the Spirit speaks clearly that the dialogue of life and service in human promotion is a common human endeavor. In such a human way they are open to it and want to co-operate at the same level. We then should be open to them, also at the same level, and to be open to the Spirit working in them in their very human efforts.

All together we should co-operate with them in openness, without any discrimination or feelings of superiority and just serve the human need. A rediscovery of the human in depth is needed now, as has been admirably attempted by our Pope in his *Redemptor Hominis*.

5. Our religious, precisely because of their renewed spirituality, their community life and their vows, are spiritually well-equipped to give this animating service. They can invoke and appeal to an Asian spirituality moving in the humanity of Asian peoples under the guidance of the Spirit. So we believe.

By this insertion Asian people will discover at once their own human potentialities and those deep motivations of our religious which derive from their consecrated life and mission. It is the way of the New Covenant, itself being an ongoing dialogue of salvation with everybody of good will in Asia.

6. The question is not whether all religious and other Church personnel should become some kind of social workers. The point — much alive among many religious — is that in the depth of faith our Church as a community of faith will be judged by our Lord about its real service to the poor. All have to take this into account in all their apostolates, giving up nothing of what they do already, but all struggling together to build on this service of love of Christ in the poor, so that the many misunderstandings hovering around this basic question may at least decrease.

7. Let us remember the words of Karel Wojtyla, now our Pope, spoken in a retreat for the Vatican Curia:

In spite of all the many types of resistance offered by men, and in spite of all the successes registered by the various opponents of the Gospel, all human affairs are interwoven with strands of this divine activity, the economy of grace and salvation. And even though, to our eyes, it seems as if the very opposite of the future consummation is on the way, even if human affairs in some places look more like the work of the apocalyptic Beast (cf. Rev 13:14), nonetheless God's action — redemption, justification, sanctification — does penetrate through all these manifestations of the evil accumulated throughout history, and consequently does almost inevitably make all things tend towards final consummation in Christ." (*Sign of Contradiction*, "The Glory of God is Man Alive," Ch. XX, p. 175).

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