

Fifth Plenary Assembly: Position Paper

**DIALOGUE, DISCERNMENT, DEEDS:
AN APPROACH TO ASIAN CHALLENGES TODAY**

by
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INTRODUCTION

The socio-theological agenda chosen for the 1990 Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences is nothing short of awesome. A preparatory committee listed no less than twenty-eight imposing "trends" and "challenges" in Asia and the world to which we are to articulate appropriate "responses." Just to give an indication of the vast scope of the themes envisioned, the following aspects, among many others, of contemporary Asian and global society are to be investigated: modernization, secularization, pluralism, technology, humanization, democratization, glasnost, interdependence, fragmentation, multinationals, debt crisis, ecological destabilization, fundamentalism, militarization, inculturation ... the sweep is simply breath-stopping. Were anyone to claim an adequate or even just a satisfactory grasp of only one of these topics and announce possession of an apt or even just a reassuring answer to the difficulties involved, would one not be accused of presumption? How, then, can one begin to treat these themes at all? Is one condemned to either an intelligent silence or a superficial exposition?

I note with admiration how the author of the first position paper, Fr. Felix Wilfred, has found a way out of the dilemma by opting to give what one might call an overview of the socio-cultural trends and processes emerging in Asia at the turn of the century. He has identified five patterns, as it were, running through the length and breadth of the Asian socio-cultural phenomena: 1) conflict between the macro and the micro;

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2) passage from fragmentation to integration; 3) the process of modernization; 4) the progressive centrality of culture; and 5) the crisis of survival. Under these headings, Fr. Wilfred has dealt with a good number of the trends and challenges indicated for discussion in this assembly.

Within the framework of trends-challenges-responses my task is to develop the third part. I am supposed to explore from the theological perspective possible Christian responses to the Asian situation. This is a tall order. While one must hold fast to the conviction that the world of God has something to say to human history no matter how difficult or complicated, still the truth has been forcefully impressed upon the Church especially in these later times that the Spirit does not exempt us from the long and painful human effort to understand the world as it really is. The process of grasping the reality of the secular can be rather tedious and demanding; hence the temptation to cut the effort short and come out with premature declarations. Granted the validity of the fore-going observations, what path is left to follow for the poor theologian who must address himself to the complex realities of Asia of the 1990s?

There is a sense in which the approach to a response is more important than the response itself. Answers and solutions of necessity have to be particular and specific to corresponding questions and problems. Methodology and procedure, however, underlie a multitude of challenge-response situations. Pinpointing response to one challenge provides the key to one door; understanding the basic approach toward an answer is to come up with a way to open many doors.

In 1992 the FABC will have completed the second decade of its existence. In the years that have passed, the Federation has continually endeavored to reflect upon and to address the changing face and fortunes of Asia. Is there a discernible pattern of response to the various challenges? I did a careful review of the statements and declarations of the Plenary Assemblies and other official gatherings of the Asian bishops, and I thought there was a marked recurrence of the triad DIALOGUE-DISCERNMENT-DEEDS. An exposition of this approach constitutes the modest contribution of this position paper.

I. DIALOGUE

As early as the original Asian Bishops' meeting held in Manila in 1970, two years before the official Vatican approval of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, the theme of total and authentic sharing by the Church of the Asian experience of life (i.e., dialogue) was already sounded:

We look upon these many faces of Asia, we as bishops, together with those committed to our solicitude, with the deepest solidarity. We are proud to be part of this continent of tomorrow: for we Asian Catholics desire — as Catholic communities — to be increasingly integrated within the larger communities around us, culturally part of that Asia which is coming to slow but certain birth in the present moment.¹

Dialogue is first a fundamental attitude toward reality (of which reverence is a primary component), before it is an act of mutual communication. It denotes basic openness to the other who impinges upon the one who would engage in dialogue. Before any word is spoken, the predispositions of the partners in dialogue have long been exercising tremendous influence on the direction and possibilities of the whole process. Arguably the most important part of dialogue is the silence that precedes it.

FABC I (Taipei, 1974) spoke of a “dialogue of life,” primarily in reference to a sharing of the life of the Asian poor.² But this requisite of knowing the other’s concrete situation “from the inside” must be considered as essential to all dialogue of any significance. Thus understood, dialogue rises above the psycho-social level to the spiritual-theological. It then becomes equivalently a description of God’s way of relating to humankind. Dialogue is thus another name for that mystery we call the Incarnation, an initiative of divine generosity which St. Paul understood as a self-emptying: “Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”³ Humility and incarnation, humility and dialogue are, therefore, in the mind of Scripture linked in the closest manner possible.

The late Benedictine contemplative, John Main, suggested that humility “means to begin to acknowledge that there is a reality outside of ourselves that is greater than ourselves and that contains us ... (It) is simply learning to find our place within that greater reality ...”⁴ In this view, “contextualization,” locating one’s appropriate place within the greater whole, is the precondition for the virtue in question. God, presumably, is this first indispensable context. The reverential humility, however, that this contextualization in the Transcendent inspires, effects a change in one’s basic attitude toward all of reality.

Occasionally, reference has been made by important meetings held in Asia to the need of placing oneself in proper perspective if one is to have effective concern for the problems of the continent. Thus, the International Mission Congress (Manila, 1979) reminded itself:

Christian mission in Asia must begin with an awareness of two sobering facts, First, Christians are vastly outnumbered by millions of people who search for God through other living faiths and religious traditions. Second, the overwhelming majority of the peoples of Asia among whom the Christian communities live are poor. Such has been the context of evangelization in Asia for nearly two millennia now. It is not without theological significance. The Asian situation could well lead to a deeper understanding of revelation and of salvation history.⁵

In similar manner, the Asian bishops in their meeting of 1970 addressed the peoples of Asia:

Our brothers in Asia, we are small in numbers with little of human resources, with little — even — of human wisdom and power; with almost no influence, in our great continent, on the councils of the nations.⁶

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the pre-conceptual, pre-verbal self-image of the participant in dialogue. It has a decisive influence on the direction and character of the whole process. Since it belongs to the level of the pre-reflexive, the self-image is largely not brought to conscious awareness but functions rather as an underlying pre-orientation to all that follows. And although its presence is hardly adverted to or reflected on, its concrete effects are without a doubt considerable.

Intellectual presuppositions, whether secular or religious, constitute a part of that self-image. These presuppositions take the form of doctrines, ideologies and worldviews. It appears that they are an indispensable part of being human; people are free as to what kind to have, not as to whether they should have them or not. A mindset functions as a framework which approves or censors the various data impinging on the agent's perception. Its effects on openness or non-openness to dialogue are immense. If one takes into account the fact that emotional attitudes accompany and reinforce intellectual stances, one has good reason to say that the most crucial stage of dialogue is before the first word is spoken, before the first communication is made.

It is at this level of pre-verbal silence that the humility needed for authentic dialogue must begin. A *mea culpa* for sins of deed or omission with regard to evangelization would be much more effective if greater attention were paid to the root cause of such transgressions. Very often the problem lies at the deeper and subtler level of predispositions and presuppositions of which the faults and failures we rue are external manifestations.

The bishops of Asia have not been wanting in the sincere acknowledgment of shortcomings related to omission. The Asian Bishops' Meeting of 1970 passed the following resolution:

... We must acknowledge too, with regret, where we have been found wanting: where we have tended to foster only narrow and "domestic" interests; where we could have shown more compassion for the poor and have not been sufficiently vigorous in speaking out for justice and the defence of human rights; where we have not incarnated the Christian life and enfolded the Church in ways and patterns of our respective cultures, and thus kept it an alien in our lands; where we have not sought understanding of, reconciliation and collaboration with our brothers of other Christian Churches and of other faiths.⁷

For its part, FABC III (Bangkok, 1982) lamented:

How often too, our communities, especially among those more favored in life, have failed to grow in awareness of situations of social injustice, of the violation of human dignity and human rights massively present around them. How inadequate has been our proclamation of the Church's social teaching, and the formation and transformation of our social attitudes as Catholics in line with that doctrine. How indifferent and hesitant, only too often, has been our involvement in the concerns of human development and liberation; in issues where the rights of women, the poor and powerless are crushed; where the relationships and structures which perpetuate injustice and exploitation in society are extended and reinforced and where the proliferation of arms (including nuclear arms), oppressive militarization and established patterns of violence grow and spread.⁸

The third Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (Changhua, 1982) approved a "syllabus of missionary concerns" which included a paragraph urging a number of "musts" for the Church in Asia:

The Church must be willing to listen to the poor and marginalized, to discover their cultural values and expressions, and to stand together with them by supporting their just causes, in order to be truly a healing sign of God's love for them. In the light of the urbanization and industrialization which are sweeping east and southeast Asia, the Church today must give special attention to the plight of the urban workers, who are often uprooted from their traditional cultures and involved in a difficult struggle for life.⁹

One might observe that the faults repented of in the texts just quoted pertain largely to the demands of mission in the areas of inculturation,

liberation and interreligious relationships. In some cases they are shortcomings on the level of action. In others they are concerned with failures on the level of attitude. It is possible to view the negativities as stemming ultimately from one root cause: the insufficiency or absence of that basic incarnational humility needed for dialogue, the lack of that openness in the Spirit to hear and obey the often (to us) outrageous summons of the Lord of history. The gospels are quite clear on this point: religion itself can be the last bastion of intolerance and self-enclosure. The Lord who makes the rain fall upon the just and the unjust, who has incredible norms for what is clean and unclean, who makes the first last and the last first — it is the same Lord who calls his Church away from narrow self-assurance to that glorious freedom of authentic dialogue which is another name for mission.

It might be fruitful to examine ourselves on that quality of heart needed for dialogue as we approach the close of the second decade of the FABC. If, in spite of encouraging developments, we are still a long way from becoming a Church with an Asian face, could it be that deeply-rooted and unchallenged presuppositions about the meaning of universality have really made us essentially reluctant about embracing the culture of our people without a million reservations? This could lead us to accept the idea of inculturation without buying the more messy concrete decisions and applications that a true commitment to the local Church entails. And if, in spite of many heartening signs, we cannot with sincerity call ourselves a Church of the poor,¹⁰ could it be that the dignity of the person does not really occupy so central a place in our understanding of the Gospel, and that it is really possible (we believe) for God's Kingdom to come without much anxiety about social justice? Liberation theology (we remind ourselves) has had its hour of prominence, and it need not, after all, bother us now as much as it used to. If, finally, in spite of much progress in mutual understanding, we have not engaged in really meaningful collaboration with people of other faiths in "the search for a new humanity and a new human family,"¹¹ could it be that we are not really convinced in our heart of hearts that the Holy Spirit breathes where he will and "is operative in other religions as well,"¹² so that we fail to perceive his action and his presence in all initiatives and movements that may be discerned as leading to the Kingdom of God.¹³

May the third decade of the FABC, which will take us into the early years of the twenty-first century, see a radical reshaping of our hearts after the heart of God-become-man, toward a new age of dialogue and mission for the Church in Asia.

II. DISCERNMENT

The same humility and self-abnegation that must characterize dialogue are also necessary for discernment. Discernment, in its deepest meaning, is not just a method or process that we opt to follow when seeking clarity on a difficult question; it is the appropriate way of life for a community of faith which professes obedience to the will of God by attentiveness to the promptings of the Spirit. God's will, we assume, is neither impossible to discover nor is it found with effortless ease. It is, rather, discerned only with difficulty.

This creates problems for those who desire adequate clarity on every question encountered. All of us somehow share in this tendency to see all shadows cleared. But in most cases the discernor must learn to be content with the half-light of spiritual perception rather than the full illumination of pure insight. Very often, the situation on which discernment is brought to bear is difficult and complex. How then can one make clear statements about essentially complicated realities? If Asia is what previous FABC statements have described it to be, should we expect anything but a slow and painful reading of the signs of the times? FABC I spoke about the continent in the following manner:

Modern day Asia is marked today by swift and far-reaching transformation, a continent undergoing modernization and profound social change, along with secularization and the break up of traditional societies. Side by side with undeniable benefits and positive values, these processes have brought most serious problems. Industrialization and all that goes with it violently threatens our peoples with irreparable alienation and the disintegration of patterns of life and social relationships built up over the centuries. Stable meanings and values which have supported their lives are deeply shaken, and Asian peoples today are left in confusion and disorientation, even in despair and darkness of spirit.

We who make up the Church in Asia today are inextricably part of this new world, since we are bound to our peoples by a common history and a common destiny. With the light which God's Spirit and his Word provide us, we seek to read the signs of the times, and to discern with our peoples what, in their present situation, they must accept and foster, and what they must reject and refuse.¹⁴

Reading the signs of the times and knowing what to accept and what to reject require an attitude of respectful openness on the part of the discernor. The reality being discerned must be allowed to speak for itself and reveal its human meaning. This means that silence is the first com-

mandment for the discerner. It is the reverence born of silence which allows space for reality to uncover its true identity. God's word is spoken from within the heart of human reality and history; it is not pronounced from above with supernatural detachment. A rigid doctrinal and moral framework posted at the forefront of the discernment process can, therefore, be a major obstacle in the search for the divine intention in human affairs. FABC IV (Tokyo, 1986) speaks of the relationship between Asian realities and discernment in the following vein:

Discipleship in Asia is rooted in the realities of Asia. Christian spirituality must be incarnated. It grows and matures in the midst of continuous tensions and struggles with the destructive powers of sin and its consequences, of conflict and injustice. Christian spirituality must also be Christocentric and inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, the Liberator. It is a *living in the Spirit* of Jesus, urging us to be his disciples through a dynamic process of being incarnated into the realities of the times, as Jesus was, and of discerning in the Spirit those realities that lead to death and those that lead to life. Jesus was Spirit-led and full of the Spirit; so too should be the Christian. Our spirituality is one of discerning the movement of the Spirit who re-enacts in us the mysteries of Jesus Christ in the contextual realities of daily living and struggling. Here is seen the value of the contemplative dimension, of Asian peoples who discern the movement of God in mundane events and activities. Such a prayerful attitude is immersed in life.¹⁵

The "contemplative dimension" suggests that decision for one or the other side of an issue is only one part of discernment. It is important to realize that discernment has to do (and this is perhaps its major objective) with the articulation of an appropriate and relevant spirituality, personal as well as communal. The choices affirmed become elements in the formation of the discerner's spirituality, as well as expressions of a spirituality already formed and in process of completion. The seventh Bishops' Institute for Social Action (Hua Hin, Thailand, 1986) developed this aspect of discernment:

Contemplation is a heightened awareness that makes us discover God's presence and activity within social reality. Contemplation enables us to become aware of non-analyzable phenomena within reality and to be transformed by the gradual unfolding of the mystery of that reality. The mystery of God's preferential presence and activity among the poor is an unrecognized resource that only the contemplative dimension within us can discover. The poor provide us with an opportunity to be evangelized. They supply us with a new liberating potential for spirituality. We could discover in their ethos, cultural values and religious practices that make up the ele-

ments of the spirituality. But to recognize these elements in the spirituality of the poor, the bishops or other enablers should live in a contemplative spirituality themselves.¹⁶

BISA VII adds that the bishop is “the one who, in the Spirit, recognizes and affirms the reality of an authentic spiritual life both in groups of the poor and in the pastoral teams of workers”; he renders this service for “the entire ecclesial community among all its various sections — clergy, religious, laity.”¹⁷

“The Laity in the Church in Asia” was the chosen theme of FABC IV. The bishops made much of the laity’s share in the prophetic function of the Church. This recognition can be rightly be extended to the laity’s charism of discernment, insofar as this is intimately bound up with prophecy. The *sensus fidelium*, or faith instinct, of the People of God need not be restricted to matters of doctrine; it can be understood to refer also to a spiritual capacity for discerning the motions of the Spirit urging the Church to take certain paths and orientations at particular moments of history. According to FABC IV.

The prophetic function of the Church must not be limited to the teaching function of the hierarchy. It must be a witness and a service of the whole community to the saving truth of Christ and his Church. The *sensus fidelium*, or faith instinct, of the whole People of God is a gift of the Spirit to all as a body. It demands that the leadership should not overlook the spirit and the prophecy of the believing community. Due listening to and consultation of the People of God to discern the spirit and wisdom of God in the people must be undertaken, especially in matters relating to their life in the world and consequent problems.¹⁸

III. DEEDS

“Dialogue is communicated first as witness in being and in deeds,” so the second Bishop’s Institute for Interreligious Affairs declared.¹⁹ Thus are dialogue, discernment and deeds so intimately related. Just as deeds constituted the pre-eminent part of God’s revelation to humankind (as abundantly manifested in Scripture), so deeds proceeding from the Church must proclaim the continual presence of God among his people. It is commonplace to say that people are looking for witnesses more than preachers.

As far as the “track record” of the Church in Asia is concerned, various evaluations show both the acknowledgment of positive developments and the regret that more has not been done. At the end of the seventies, for instance, BISA V sounded a hopeful note regarding the situation:

... What does it mean to be the Church of the Poor? Is not the Church for all men and women, for rich and poor, for saints and sinners? We found an answer in the way many churches of Asia were moving in the direction of greater and greater involvement with the life of their people; their simply being with the poor; their attempts at working out programs of human development — integral, respectful of the people's dignity, attuned to their cultures, their standing with them in their hard struggle for justice and for self-empowerment; the insistence that the rich become themselves real members of the Church of the Poor by fulfilling their obligations in justice and charity toward the poor. The Church of the Poor must do all this.²⁰

Six months later, in December 1979, the International Congress on Mission held in Manila quoted the same BISA V statement, adding the following declaration:

Quite clearly, then, there is a definite path along which the Spirit has been leading the discernment of the Asian Church: the Church of Asia must become the Church of the Poor. There has been no lack of articulation regarding the sense or the implication of this discernment. To continue with more declarations would be a betrayal of God's People in Asia. From words to action: that seems to be the only theme worthy of our serious missionary responsibility.²¹

And how did the International Congress on Mission view the situation thus far? The participants made the following statement:

It is not that nothing has been achieved. In spite of our sinfulness and weakness much has been done, thank God, to make the Church of Asia resemble a little bit more the face of the poor Christ. We do not wish to deny rightful acknowledgment of admirable, often heroic, efforts of Christian communities and missionaries, both past and present, to bring the Good News to the poor.

And yet, after due recognition has been made of positive results, the overall judgment must be that there remains an unfortunate gap between words and action. The Church in Asia is not known by the multitudes of the poor to be passionately concerned for their rights and dignity as human beings, nor selflessly committed to their total liberation from social injustice and oppression.²²

Seven years later, in 1986, FABC IV made a positive assessment of the response of the Church to Asian realities:

In the past, the Church tended to limit itself mostly to the pro-

tection of its interests regarding religious freedom, the family and schools. But now the Church is becoming involved in a wider range of issues pertaining to fundamental human rights and freedom, to labor and business, health, women, the arms race, the international order and other issues of justice and peace that seriously affect the peoples of Asia and especially the poor and the down-trodden.²³

One might sum up the various assessments of the situation as an attempt to avoid undue pessimism on the one hand and unrealistic optimism on the other. It would be ingratitude not to recognize the very real, even is modest, harvest that the Church by the grace of God has been able to reap in Asia. It would be, on the other hand, self-complacency for the Church in Asia not to be aware of good only half-done, of projects unfinished, of needs untended, of opportunities lost, of challenges unmet. The Lord has been generous; we have done what we could; we could do much better. That "room for more" will surely be along the lines of the Servant Church that previous meetings of bishops, ministers and missionaries presented as the identity most worthy of emulation.

The Asian Bishops' Meeting of 1970 put it in the following terms:

We ask ourselves how we may more truly be at the service of our peoples. We ask how we may more fully engage ourselves in the common task wherein all men of good will must be joined, of building up within our nations societies which respond to the deepest aspirations of our peoples as well as to the demands of the Gospel: societies "grounded on truth, guided by justice, motivated by charity, realized in freedom, and flowering in peace."²⁴

The Asian Colloquium on Ministries (Hongkong, 1977) looked up to a new vision of the Church in Asia:

The development of varied forms of ministries heralds a new era in the life of the Church in Asia. More people will be reached. Their needs will be better met. More communities will be served ...

The world at large will see the Church more clearly as the *Servant Church*, a true, living, vibrant witness to Christ.

This hoped-for era brought on by the development of varied forms of ministries, as in all periods of growth and change, demands of the People of God an openness to new horizons, a flexibility to adopt new structures, a creativity to explore new avenues. It challenges every Christian, be he or she bishop, priest, religious sister or brother, lay woman or man, to look more closely and reflect more deeply on his or her personal identity, present role, status and function, relationship with the people he or she serves, indeed his or her very being a Christian.²⁵

There are many advantages to having a FABC Plenary Assembly every four years. For one thing, a regular channel of communication and exchange is established. One salient disadvantage that might be mentioned, however, is the need that is created to think up, to organize, to present and discuss new topics and themes each time the meeting comes around. This could prove to be a hindrance to the acceptability of an assembly wholly dedicated to a review of past insights and resolutions. In such an assembly we could ask what good has been forgotten, what lights have grown dim, what decisions have been conveniently pushed aside, what initiatives have been aborted, what projects have been discontinued, what promises have remained unfulfilled. Perhaps there is great wisdom in the advice given by that old spiritual father to a directee requesting new formulae for holiness: "How about applying the old prescriptions you learned long ago."

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1 (Manila: IMC Publications, 1984), p. 13
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 3 Phil 2:5-7.
- 4 *The Heart of Creation* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 9.
- 5 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, p. 236.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 10 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 2 (Manila: IMC Publications, 1987), p. 365.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 377.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 424.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 417.
- 14 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, pp. 27-28.
- 15 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 2, p. 337.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 391.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 390.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 333.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 374.
- 21 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, p. 238.
- 22 *Ibid.*, pp. 238-39.
- 23 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 2, p. 316.
- 24 *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, p. 14.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 145.