

THESES ON THE LOCAL CHURCH
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These "Theses on the Local Church" have been prepared by the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). The Commission is composed of members from all the bishops' conferences of FABC. This second joint presentation represents the work of study and consultation of the members of the Commission and of other theologians over a period of five years, finally approved in their meeting in Hong Kong, April 1990. The Theses are offered solely as a basis of a continuing discussion with the wider community of pastors and professional scholars. The members of the Theological Advisory Commission earnestly invite their readers to share with them their observations and criticisms in the interest of advancing the concerns of theological and pastoral reflection. Comments can be sent to FABC, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong.

A. INTRODUCTION

1. It has been said that the changes which have taken place in Asia in the last fifty years overshadow by far, in breadth and depth, the historical developments of the preceding 500 years. There may be some exaggeration in such a judgment, but it has a genuine core of truth.

2. The vast changes are only part of the historic shifts in mankind which are taking place in our time. For our sector of the world, we think back on the turbulent years of World War II and the ending of the colonial period which came in its wake, the coming-to-be of the "new nations" and the emergence of "Third World consciousness" (with which the name of Bandung is linked), the two "development decades" — the sixties and the seventies — and the contrasting movements of both suffering and hope which they quickened. Today, with growing evidence in its support, the "new world of Asia" is said to be taking shape as an increasingly significant area of the planet earth and of the increasingly interdependent human family. The question arises, to be asked again and again: Is not Asia already the locus of the new chapter in mankind's history?

3. Surely this "moving of the earth underneath our feet" could not have taken place and cannot continue without some "shaking of the foundations" also for the Christian Church in Asia and for the local Churches which together make up the People of God in this part of the world. If a "new world" is indeed emerging in Asia, surely the currents, both of turbulence and of promise, which flow into this new age also surge within the life of our Asian Christian communities. Surely too, they question the Gospel and the Church as we have come to know them. Christian reflection and theological study for us must find its locus here, where we encounter the "growing edge" of the histories of our peoples.

4. The various assemblies of the Asian bishops, beginning with the meeting of some 200 of them with Pope Paul VI on his first Asian journey in December 1970, through the foundation of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and its First Plenary Assembly in Taipei in 1974, through dozens of workshops and institutes which have slowly begun to shape a community of thought and concern — all have been like periodic "pulse-takings" of what the interface of these historic changes have been, with the life of the Church in its local Churches scattered throughout this region.

5. The concerns of Christians and the local Churches, in and through this history of massive transition — and even upheavals — have centered around the mission of the Church. All the other concerns: community and participation, ministry, social action and political concern, dialogue,

development and liberation, formation, lay empowerment — all these find in mission their *raison d'être* and context. Rightly so, for in a very profound sense, the Church is mission: bearer of God's mission in Christ within history, sacrament of Christ and his redeeming task in the world. This concern for mission made ecclesial self-reflection inevitable and imperative. The question which Pope Paul VI said was the primal question of the Second Vatican Council also became the core question for the Church in Asia: Church, what do you say of yourself? (*Ecclesia, quid dicis de teipsa?*)

FABC I's manifesto on evangelization articulated the effort to re-define the Church's mission in context, faced with "the quests in the hearts of our brothers and sisters" in Asia today. Perhaps its central affirmation may be found in those words:

To preach the Gospel today in Asia, we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples. The primary focus of our task of evangelization, then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local Church (FABC I, 9).

6. Increasingly, the local Churches of Asia realized that to ground the work of mission concretely, to engage in its contemporary tasks, there have to be local Churches as authentic subjects, active agents of evangelization — no longer "mere recipients" of a Western Christendom and/or Christianity in missionary expansion, no longer mere clones of the Church in Europe with its very concrete and historically-conditioned forms, tasks and theologies. "New Churches" have to arise and go forth into the milieux around them and in the process become really and truly Church in the intercross of time and place which constitutes this moment of history. The Church, which is for all peoples, has to become, in flesh-and-blood reality, for us, the Church of each one of our peoples. Otherwise, it cannot be part of what is coming to birth in our lands, within our nations, in this new world of Asia.

7. The "local Churches" are, as years are counted, not (at least many of them) really "young." What is new and young in them is a new consciousness, a new desire and will to become truly Church. But Church, alive in and for this moment of history, in the midst of these peoples, within the context of the swift-moving developments in life and culture taking place around them. The local communities reflect the emergence of "new hopes, new dreams, new creations" all around them. They know that these are being and will be realized, with success or failure, slowly or speedily, with or without the Gospel, with or without the participation of the Church. This is the hour of summons and challenge that is upon them, the *kairos* that is upon us all.

8. The Christian communities in this part of the world, taken together, do not make up more than 2% of the entire population of Asia. Except for the Philippines, of whose 60 million population 83% are Catholic and 89% Christian, Christians are minorities in every Asian nation. The Church in Asia is truly a little flock, *pusillus grex*, an infinitesimal minority in an ocean of people who profess other religious faiths or belong to other religious traditions. Hence, again and again, bishops and other pastoral leaders, theologians and observers in Asia have pointed out that in the post-colonial age this places the Church in a situation which is, for reasons of history, almost unintelligible to Church people in the Western nations.

9. Over and above this religious pluralism and closely linked with it, there is the vast diversity of cultures and religions all around us. Christian communities are often regarded as alien, because they are seen as implantations from abroad and because they differ from communities around them in religious belief and, in so many ways, culture also. Governments often look on them as foreign enclaves, with their ideologies transported from the West, their leaders taking directions from foreign powers, and their life-concerns patterned on models from the West. Co-nationals often think them largely uninvolved in the nationalist movements and concerns of their own countries. Often too, sincerely or not, they accuse Christians of not sharing the aspirations of nationalist causes and groups, or not being greatly concerned with the needs and sufferings, the oppression and exploitation of the non-Christian masses, because of their links with the agents of continuing economic colonization.

10. The Church in Asia and its local Churches, unlike the Christian communities of the West, do not have "the ages of Christendom" to look back to. For so many Asian Christians, the "Tradition" is largely the unknown history of the Church in the other continents, of other peoples, with little or no continuity with their experience and history, and the experience and history of their own people.

11. It is against the background just sketched above that we address ourselves to the theological reflection on the local Church in Asia today. The Second Vatican Council, except for a rough sketch of the "young Churches" (*ecclesiae novellae*) in *Ad Gentes*, did not develop this theme, since — at least in the 1960s — it did not appear as an urgent concern for the local Churches of the West.

12. For us, however, for the "young Churches" here in Asia, it is imperative that we reflect more deeply on this area of theological study, and for us this imperative is urgent. Bishops and theologians have for years now seen in this question one of the most urgent concerns for under-

standing in all our Christian communities. Those who do not grasp or feel this concern are only those people who are not in touch with the aspirations and hopes of our peoples and communities; they are truly "foreigners" among us.

13. The FABC itself has asked us, as a body of theologians, to give this study priority in our reflections. Thus it was the first theme that the Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC took up, in its very first session in the spring of 1986, at Hong Kong.

14. As our study progressed and assumed clearer focus over nearly five years (1986-1990), we began to see that the topic of local Church had to be looked at as coming to understand how a community of faith "realizes itself" as Church. To understand the local Church is to understand a process of ecclesio-genesis in a given time-place-and-culture.

We also realized that this project and process is another way of approaching the task of inculturation. In a true sense, for us in the local Churches in Asia, inculturation is another word for the local self-realization of the Church. Hence, our study incorporates this insight which we saw more clearly as our discussions progressed, an insight arrived at by studying realities historically situated, as grasped by our own experience. For we have tried, throughout the discussions of five years, to work from realities and experience, not merely to juggle concepts.

15. We present this text as our first attempt to formulate a theological study of "The Local Church in the Asian Context." We emphasize from the outset that our purpose here is merely to open a dialogue with those who share our concerns and aspirations. The formulation of the theology of the local Church is at its beginnings, not only in Asia, but in the Church all over the world. Theologians who have reflected and written on this theme are not many, and the bibliography on the subject, if we list only contributions of real merit, is not very long. Many of our bishops have asked us to begin this process of study and discussion. These theses are the first fruits of our labors. We can only hope that they challenge and stimulate others in our local Asian Churches to pursue our work, in the same spirit with which we have explored our subject — desiring only to search earnestly for the truth — as an act of joyous hope in its future in our lands and among our peoples.

B. THE THESES ON THE LOCAL CHURCH

I. CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

A local Church emerges from the encounter between a people and

the Gospel. A people is necessarily situated within a particular cultural context. This approach calls for, in the first place, a clarification of the basic terms involved, namely "Gospel," "Culture" and "Local Church."

1. GOSPEL

The term "Gospel" means "good news" (*evangelion*). This word was borrowed from the Old Testament by the New Testament language with the particular meaning which it already possessed: to announce salvation (Is 40:1f), liberation (Is 61:1f) and the coming of the Kingdom of God (Is 52:7).

Gospel of the Kingdom of Life

Jesus came preaching the Gospel of God saying: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:14-15). "He was anointed to preach the Gospel to the poor" (Lk 4:18f). The announcement of the birth of Jesus is referred to as a good news of salvation (Lk 2:10-11). The Gospel in the New Testament, therefore, is the good news of liberation, salvation and the Kingdom of God.

John does not make use of the term "Gospel." He substitutes the terms "Kingdom of God" and "salvation" with the term "life" (cf. Jn 3:16-17). Jesus said "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

Gospel of Jesus Christ

There is also an identification between the Gospel and Jesus himself. The very person of the messenger becomes the center of the good news. The Gospel is Jesus himself (Mk 1:1). With him the Kingdom of God becomes present (Mt 12:28). The man who abandons all for the sake of Jesus and for the sake of the Gospel receives a hundredfold in this life (Mt 10:30).

In the Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline Epistles this identification is further developed. The Gospel becomes "the good news of Jesus" (Acts 8:35; 17:18), "of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20; Rom 1:3f), "of the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12), "of Christ" (Rom 15:19f; 2 Cor 2:12), "of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4). The death and resurrection of Christ become the center of the Gospel (1 Cor 15:1-5).

Gospel Which is Word and Witness

In the Johannine writings this identification between the Gospel and

Jesus is expressed in terms of the "Word" and "witness." The experience of the Gospel is described as the experience of the "Word of Life" (1 Jn 1:1). Jesus himself came to 'bear witness' to the Truth (Word) (Jn 18:37), and the proclamation of the Word experienced by the believer takes place through "witnessing" (1 Jn 1:2).

Gospel as Grace, Spirit and Power

The Gospel in the early Christian community was experienced as the grace of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 3:26; 10:43; 13:38; 17:30). It is the salvific experience which is described as the good news of "peace" by Jesus Christ (Acts 10:36).

For Paul, the Gospel is the power of salvation. It is a power of God unto salvation, for all who believe (Rom 1:16). It is a salvific force let loose by God in the world of man for the salvation of those who believe. Therefore, it is proclaimed not only in words but with power and the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:15). It is universal in its appeal and application "for every man who believes — Jew or Greek" (Rom 1:16).

Gospel as Mystery

The Gospel is mystery (*mysterion*), namely, the divine plan of salvation, hidden from all eternity (1 Cor 2:7), revealed and realized in and through Jesus Christ (1 Cor 2:1-2). The full import of this mystery is that it is a plan affecting the entire cosmos for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and on earth (Eph 1:9). Hence, the proclamation of the Gospel should take a dialogic form, namely, an encounter between the historical embodiment of this mystery in the revelation given us in Christ and its presence in the rest of the cosmic revelation.

Church: Embodiment of the Gospel

This Gospel, or the power of God unto salvation, or the Kingdom of God, or the fullness of life, was at work in Jesus through the Spirit, initially during his public ministry of which the miracles were signs (Mt 12:28), and decisively in his death and resurrection. During his earthly life this Gospel was embodied in Jesus Christ and was manifested concretely in his preaching, life-style and commitments. Through his death and resurrection Jesus Christ became a living and life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15:45). Thus, the Gospel embodied in Christ became a power among all those who believe in values such as truth, freedom and justice, which all bear witness to the presence of the Kingdom. It is this Gospel, the power of God unto salvation, that is embodied in the Church, namely, the community of believers, through the Spirit of Christ (God). Hence, the Church today

becomes the historical embodiment of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Consequently, the Church becomes the "locus" of evangelization.

2. CULTURE

Hundreds of definitions have been formulated to say what culture is. And yet, not a single one of them has succeeded in giving a comprehensive idea of the complex reality culture is. Vatican II has preferred, therefore, to describe culture rather than to give any precise definition (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 53). In our document we are not adopting any particular definition of culture, but rather will understand it in the light of the description given in Vatican II and in present-day anthropological studies, from the following four perspectives. Taken together, they will give us an approximate idea of what culture is.

Culture as Cultivation of the Human Spirit

The word "culture" derives from *cultura* which originally meant cultivation, as the words "agriculture," "horticulture," etc., indicate. The classical understanding of culture referred to the inner process within man of tending or shaping the mind and other spiritual faculties, and therefore culture was seen as something related immediately to intellectual life, art, literature, humanities, etc. As is evident, culture in this respect is applied to elite and enlightened individuals, groups or people, in contrast to the uncultured, primitives, the unenlightened. It presupposes, further, some kind of universality and permanency; individuals and groups are to conform themselves to certain patterns and models considered as cultured. This concept of culture, which goes back to the European Enlightenment and Renaissance, was dominant for a long time. It is the same understanding of culture which also accompanied the missionary enterprise at the time of colonialism. Preaching the Gospel implied bringing culture to peoples and nations, and Christian mission itself was considered a "civilizing mission."

Empirical Understanding of Culture

Culture is not the privilege of a few individuals or peoples. There is no people without culture. It refers to the traditions, habits, customs and institutions of a people. The sciences of anthropology and sociology have highlighted the fact that culture is an empirical reality. It refers not only to the mind and its processes but also to external processes among a people. In this sense, culture is "that complex which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." This perspective of culture opens up to diversity and pluralism. The whole human race can be viewed

as a family of peoples, each one with its proper customs, traditions, beliefs, artistic creations, etc.

Symbolic Dimension of Culture

Culture consists not only of customs, traditions, behavioral patterns, etc., but also of symbols, ideas, values, language, meaning. The customs, traditions and institutions of a people carry or embody the values, ideas and conceptions of that people. Because of this, communication and deeper understanding within the group or people is possible. Seen from this perspective, culture “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions, expressed in symbolic forms by and of which human beings communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about, and their attitude towards life.”

In this aspect, culture is very intimately bound up with religion. This is particularly true of Asia where various cultural forms and expressions have religious vision, conceptions, and values and symbols as their basis and legitimating principle.

Understanding Society Itself as a Cultural Reality

Society itself can be viewed as a cultural system. For the way a society is organized and governed, the way its economy is promoted, the way communication is established among its members, etc., are normally results of the cultural ethos and genius of a people. Therefore, separating the economic development and political governance from the culture of a people has serious consequences, as has been attested by history and experience, especially in the Third World today. It has been proven that no effective and lasting change in society can take place without cultural change. Rightly then, in recent times, culture has become a central issue in all areas of societal life.

The above four perspectives and approaches to culture evidently complement each other. We can conclude that culture is ultimately the concrete way of being human among a determined people, group, or nation. While the common *humanum* underlying all cultures allows mutual encounter, every particular culture manifests the richness of the human in a unique way.

3. LOCAL CHURCH

Vatican II did not employ a consistent vocabulary referring to local realizations of the Church. The expression “particular Church” appears

twenty-four times — twelve times in reference to the diocese and other occurrences referring to organic groupings of Churches, as, for example, rites (see UR, 14, OE, 2-4, 10, 16, 17, 19). “Local Church” is used eight times to refer, variously, to the diocese, groupings of Churches, and even to the parish. “Particular” and “local” are both used, as if synonyms, in UR, 14 to refer to groupings of Oriental Churches, and most especially, the patriarchal Churches.

In the revised Code of Canon Law, “particular Church” invariably refers to a diocese. Neither the term “local Church” nor the term “universal Church” appear in the Code, which regularly speaks either of the “whole Church” (sometimes simply “the Church”) or of the “particular Church.” The Code also distinguishes between the “Latin Church” and other Churches, which it calls “Ritual Churches with their own law” (*ecclesiae sui iuris*), which some have proposed be translated as “autonomous Churches,” and define a “rite” as “the liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage, distinguished by the culture and historical circumstances of a people, which is expressed in the way of living the faith proper to each Church with its own law” (*Schema Codicis Juris Canonici Orientalis*, 1988 ed., C. 27,2).

This terminological inconsistency can cause some difficulties. Some theologians propose simply to follow the canonical terminology, and mean by “particular Church” the diocese, and employ the expression “local Church” to refer to all other realizations of the Church. Others argue that theologians need not be bound by the canonical neologism of “particular Church” and opt for the expression “local Church,” specifying, when necessary, whether it refers to a diocese, parish, small Christian community or some larger grouping of dioceses.

Behind this choice of terminology there lies an important theological question. To what extent do the social and cultural conditions enter into the theological definition of a local realization of the Church? Following Henri de Lubac and the new Code, the International Theological Commission argues that the criterion for the identity of a particular Church (i.e., a diocese) is “essentially theological,” while the criterion of a local Church (i.e., an organic group of particular Churches) is “primarily socio-cultural” (*L'unique Eglise du Christ*, Paris, Centurion, 1985, p. 33).

Two reservations may be expressed regarding this explanation. First, the counterpoising of the terms “theological” and “socio-cultural” would suggest that socio-cultural particularity is not theologically significant — an assumption which has grave implications for ecclesiology, and which can be called into question. Secondly, using regularly the term “particular Church” for the diocese in contrast to “universal Church” might give the

impression that the catholicity of the particular Church is located outside of it. Similarly, the expression "universal Church" as contrasted with "particular Church" might suggest a false idea of the universality of the Church as that of a multinational or international institution.

In the light of the above, we have chosen to use regularly the expression *local Church* in this document, specifying where necessary to what particular realization we are referring.

To indicate what have traditionally been known as "Rites," we follow the practice of the Indian Episcopal Conferences and their theologians, and employ the term *individual Churches*.

PRENOTE TO THE THESES

A word about the approach, structure and sequence of the theses which follow may be useful for the study of this document.

The text begins by laying down what may be considered the document's foundation stones, the basic biblical perspectives on the local Church (Theses 1-4).

The theses which then follow adopt an experiential and existential approach. Thus, the document does not begin by setting down a definition of the local Church and then applying this definition to the Churches found in various Asian contexts with their diverse cultures. Rather, it approaches the reality of the local Church as issuing from the encounter between the Gospel and the culture of a people (Theses 5-9).

The reflections on inculturation as a process patterned on the mystery of the Incarnation consider the encounter of the local Church with the total context in which it exists, a context which necessarily includes also socio-economic-political realities. Methodologically, the theses begin with experience which is reflected on, and move toward the understanding of what a local Church is.

Next, these theses take up the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, and attempt to formulate a theological understanding of the nature, constituents and characteristics of the local Church, its life and its mission (Theses 10-14).

To complete the exposition, a final thesis (Thesis 15) takes up the current and important issue of episcopal conferences.

The theological reflection which is to be found in this text was under-

taken, and these theses were constructed and written, with a preeminently pastoral intent. They are meant to help various sectors of the Church — bishops, priests, religious men and women, and the laity — to understand better, to live, bear witness to and transmit the mystery which is the local Church, in all its spiritual reality and in its very concrete “earthing” within its own milieu. They are meant to open up ways of actualizing the local Church in the context of all the realities wherein it must bear the Gospel and fulfill its mission in history. For this reason the text’s final section gives a set of pastoral corollaries and recommendations which, it is hoped, will help to translate these reflections into action and praxis.

II. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

THESIS 1

Though the local Churches of the New Testament are identified by means of a local reference, the emphasis is more on the people of God in a given place. The Church is the historical actualization of the mystery of God in Christ realized in every local Church. The local Churches of the New Testament are pluriform. The figure of the Body of Christ as applied to the Church illustrates the fact that the universal Church is the communion of the local Churches.

1.01 Though the Church is identified by means of a local reference in the Pauline letters and in the Acts of the Apostles (1 Cor 1:2, Gal 1:2, 1 Thess 1:1), the emphasis is more on *the people of God in a given place*. The formula found in the Epistle to the Galatians, “to the Churches of Galatia,” indicates that it is possible for more than one Church to exist in a given region and that some sort of interrelationship existed among the Churches of the area. Hence, it is not one Church that divides into many Churches, nor does the sum total of the Churches produce the Church.

1.02 The usual distinction that is made between “the universal Church” as the “Church of God” and the local Churches as local communities belonging (as parts or portions) to the Church of God is not supported by the New Testament. The expression “the Church of God” is attributed to the ecclesial communities both in the singular (1 Cor 1:2; 10:35; 15:9) and in the plural (1 Cor 11:16; 1 Thess 2:14). Hence, the NT texts allow us to say that the historical actualization of the mystery of God in Christ is realized in every local Church.

1.03 The concept of the local Church in the NT period is analogous rather than univocal. It can mean a local assembly of people, an urban foundation, area Churches, domestic Churches, etc. The local Churches of the New Testament era are therefore pluriform to such an extent that

one ought to analyze each of the New Testament books separately to know the type of Church present behind it.

1.04 The Church is the Body of Christ (Col 1:24; Eph 1:22). Christ and the Church are also mentioned in juxtaposition (Eph 3:21; 5:32). Thus, in a sense, Christ is identified with the Church. As the members of the Body of Christ, Christians stand in relation to one another (1 Cor 12:12-27). It is in Christ that this relation exists. Therefore, it is no mere human fellowship, but a fellowship brought out by means of one's incorporation into Christ through faith and baptism (Gal 3:26-28).

1.05 In this figure of the Body of Christ we can see the illustration of the relationship between the universal Church and the local Churches. Christ is identified with each local Church; hence every local Church is the Body of Christ. Saul who persecuted the Church in Judea, Galilee and Samaria persecuted Christ (Acts 9:1-6). As the mystery of Christ, so also the mystery of the Church is realized in all the local Churches. Each local Church is wholly the Church, but it is not the whole Church. The local Church realizes the mystery of the Church inasmuch as it is in communion with the Spirit of Jesus, rooted in the Gospel and in the common life of the one Body of Christ, remaining open to the other local Churches in the one Word and one Spirit. Every local Church is thus universal by virtue of the very realities which make it Church and communion. The universal Church, in its turn, is not universal except in and through the local Churches. The universal Church has no concrete existence outside the local Churches. Hence, the universal Church is the communion of the local Churches.

THESIS 2

Since evangelization is the deepest identity of the Church, the most decisive element in the emergence of the local Church is the proclamation of the Word (Christ-event). The Spirit, being the power behind the proclamation of the Word, becomes the principle of unity and difference, enabling the Church to take all cultures into its unity without cancelling out their differences and at the same time to keep a universality that is always concrete.

2.01 Luke, the theologian of the Church, gives the outline of his theology at the very outset of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:6-8). Here we have a description of the time of the Church as a time between the time of Christ and the End. The purpose of that time is to have the witness of Christ carried to the ends of the world by the community of disciples led by the apostles, and the power behind their witness is the Spirit. Hence, the Church is a community of disciples bearing witness to the Risen Lord and his Gospel. Therefore it is the process of evangelization that is the

raison d'être of the Church. "Evangelization" is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14).

2.02 In all the Gospels the missionary commissioning is connected with the living encounter of the Twelve with the Risen Christ. (Mk 16:14-16; Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:47-49; Jn 20:19-23). The most decisive element in the genesis of the local Church is, therefore, the sharing of this apostolic Christ-experience through the proclamation of the Word (1 Jn 1:1ff.). As soon as they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostles began to proclaim the Gospel of Christ (Acts 2:4). It was those who received their Word who were baptized and formed the local Church of Jerusalem (Acts 2:41). The main role of the apostles is to continue to be at the service of the Word (Acts 6:2-4). Every member of the Church proclaimed the Word when opportunity arose (Acts 4:34; 8:4). Hence, the Church lives by the Word and finds her identity in ministering to it.

2.03 It is the Spirit that is the power behind the service of the Word. In Jn 20:21-22 the sending of the apostles was accompanied by the giving of the Spirit. In Lk 24:49 Jesus asks the disciples to stay in the city until they are clothed with power from on high. It is the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost that marks the inauguration of the Church (Acts 2:1-47). The members of the Church are those who are born of water and Spirit (Jn 3:5). The Spirit is the mainstay of the Church and its animator.

2.04 The Pentecost experience foreshadows the real nature of the growing Church in which the Spirit becomes the principle of unity and difference. There we find "men from every nation under heaven" who gave thanks for the good news which "each of them heard in his own language" (Acts 2:5-12). It was the Spirit's call to all men to take all languages and cultures into his unity without destroying their individuality and differences. It is the same call that is realized in the history of the Church, giving birth to so many local Churches. This means that the Spirit gives the Church a unity which can absorb differences without obliterating them and a universality that is always concrete. Hence, an authentic growth of the Church is an organic growth in harmony with the particular expressions of faith inherited by each local Church and made relevant to the concrete situations and religious needs and aspirations of that particular people.

THESIS 3

In the Church the ministry of the Word is carried out through the apostolic teaching, the eucharistic celebration, the Spirit-filled life and activity and proclamation of salvation. Hence, these elements are generative and constitutive of the local Church. But they will be productive of the local

Church only as appropriated by concrete groups of men and women in response to the Word of God. The apostolic ministry is a constituent of the local Church, whose structures should be such as to foster the nature of the local Church as that community in which the Christocentric saving act of God is ever present.

3.01 The ministry of the Word is carried out in the Church mainly in four ways. It is the Word of apostolic teaching resulting in a believing community (Acts 2:41-42). It is the Word resounding in joy and praise resulting in a praying and worshipping community (Acts 2:41-42). It is the Word coming to new life in the Spirit-filled activity of the Church resulting in the sharing and serving community (Acts 2:43-45). Finally, it is the Word or the Gospel of Christ that is constantly being proclaimed by the Church exercising its redemptive mission in and to the world (Acts 2:47).

3.02 A local Church comes into existence only when the Word or the Christ-event is experienced through the apostolic ministry, the eucharist, the fellowship of love, the redemptive mission in and to the world and the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the local Church in Jerusalem came into existence when the Word proclaimed by the apostles continued to dwell in the community of the believers through the apostolic ministry with the grace and power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:37ff.)

3.03 These constituents make an authentic local Church only insofar as these are received and appropriated in the faith, hope, love and in the communion and mission of concrete groups of men and women living in a given time and place. "Those who received his Word were baptized and there were added that day about three thousand souls. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and prayers" (Acts 2:41-42). This introduces "locality" as a determinant factor of ecclesiality in the genesis of the Church. For the Word of God is productive of the Church only as appropriated and interpreted in response to the challenges posed by concrete places, times, cultures and situations.

3.04 There are passages in the Gospels which imply a community order among those who believed in Jesus. Jesus chooses the Twelve. He takes them aside to initiate them into the mystery of his passion, death and resurrection (Mt 20: 17). He teaches them how to exercise leadership by serving in humility and love (Mt 20:20-28). They are allowed to participate in the eucharist and are given the power to renew this mystery. In Jn 21:15-17, Peter is entrusted with pastoral care over the flock of Jesus.

3.05 Though the apostolic ministry is a constituent element of the Church, the New Testament presents a variety of ecclesial structures.

The Church of Jerusalem had a collegial structure centered around the apostles (Acts 2:42-43). In Acts 11:30, it was the elders who represent the leadership of the Church in Jerusalem, while in Acts 15:2, 4-6, it is both the elders and the apostles who do so. In Antioch there was a leadership of prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1-2). In Ephesus the Church was governed by elders (Acts 20:17); they were also called bishops (Acts 20:18). In the Pastoral Letters we find three offices: bishops, presbyters and deacons.

The apostolic ministry in the Church can, therefore, take on a variety of institutional structures. However, these structures should be such as to foster the reality and nature of the local Church as the Church of God in which the enduring reality of the saving act, which God accomplished in Jesus Christ, is present and operative in the Spirit.

THESIS 4

The Church is the assembly of believers whom God has called by the Gospel and who are baptized into Christ Jesus and live according to the Spirit. Christ is the head of this people of God in the new covenant. Gathered under the leadership of the successors of the apostles, the Church becomes the universal sacrament of the Kingdom of God, realizing in itself the mystery of God's will to unite in Christ all humanity and the whole universe.

4.01 The word *ekklesia* is the Greek term of the Hebrew *Qahal*, a term used to designate the community of Israel, who were liberated from slavery and conveyed by Yahweh in the desert to worship him. In the New Testament it designates the Church as the community of the believers whom God has called by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to reveal and realize his plan of salvation in the world (cf. Eph 1:19; Rom 16:25f; Eph 5:32).

4.02 Reacting against an overemphasis on the institutional aspects of the Church, the Second Vatican Council restored to their central place in ecclesiology the transcendent elements which distinguish the Church among all other human societies. This assembly of men and women owes its existence to the call of God, the Word of Christ, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. Men and women enter this community by being baptized into Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4), becoming "whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons," the Body into which they are baptized (1 Cor 12:13). It is the community which lives by the memory of Jesus of Nazareth handed down in the apostolic tradition, which proclaims and celebrates him as Lord and Savior in a fellowship presided over by the successors to the apostles, and awaits in hope his return in glory. Its eucharistic assembly is the paradigmatic realization of its inner life as

participation in the mystery of Christ, the people of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit: the Church from the Trinity (*Ecclesia de Trinitate*).

4.03 Christ and the Church belong together. The work of Christ for reconciliation and peace is brought about and completed through the Church (Col 1:15-23). The Church is a growing reality, growing into Christ who is the head and whose body is the Church (Eph 4:15-16). St. Paul used the image of the Body whose head is Christ (1 Cor 12; Rom 12:4-5). All the believers are “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2). They are also described as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved” (1 Cor 3:12). The Church is described, further, as “the temple of God” (1 Cor 3:16-17), where the Holy Spirit dwells (1 Cor 3:16). The Church is also the household of God “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).

4.04 Gathered under the leadership of the successors of the apostles, the Church becomes the universal sacrament, sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a mystery which is at once eschatological and a present reality. It is eschatological insofar as it foreshadows God’s definitive reign which begins at the end of time. The different parables of the Kingdom allude to this (Mt 13:1-23). On the other hand, the Kingdom of God has appeared with the coming of Jesus (Lk 17:20-21; Mt 11:4ff.). It is identified with Jesus Christ (Jn 3:3-5; Mt 19:29; Lk 18:29).

4.05 It is the baptism that initiates one into faith in Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. Hence, there is a kind of identification between the Church and the Kingdom. The mystery of the Kingdom of God is, however, greater than the Church in extension. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom; its purpose is to make God’s Kingdom sacramentally present as a salvific sign and instrument adapted to the time between Christ’s resurrection and his return.

4.06 The Kingdom of God embodied in the Church is spiritual in nature, devoid of all earthly and political pretensions (Jn 18:36-37). Jesus is a spiritual leader and the charter of the Kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount is primarily a call to perfection in love characteristic of God’s children, in imitation of their Heavenly Father (Mt 5:43-48). The condition for entering the Kingdom of God is spiritual: “to be converted and to become like children” (Mt 18:3), “to be born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:5). For this reason the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3).

4.07 But the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of God does not mean

that the Church is invisible. Nor does it mean that the Church has nothing to do with the human realities of this world. Rather, the power of the Kingdom of God that is operative in the Church is revolutionary, affecting all the areas of human existence on earth. The metaphors of the city on a mountain and the light of the world (Mt 5:14-16) clearly imply that the Church is visible and that it exists for the world.

4.08 Christ who is the head of the Church is also the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation, through whom and for whom all things were created (Col 1:15-18). The mystery of Christ is the mystery of God's will and his plan made known to us in all wisdom and insight (Eph 1:9). It is a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:10).

4.09 The salvific plan of God realizes itself in the history of all the peoples on the earth and moves towards the fullness of time, the *eschaton*. This is beautifully described by Paul when he says that "the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19) and that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Therefore, the historical reality of the Church as the realization of the mystery of Christ can never be properly understood except in the horizon of the anthropological and cosmic dimensions of this mystery.

III. THE BIRTH, LIFE AND MISSION OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

THESIS 5

A local Church comes into existence and is built up through a deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture and tradition. In current theological and magisterial language, this is known as inculturation. Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium, but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating them through the cultural resources of a people. As a result, the concrete shape of the local Church will be, on the one hand, conditioned by the culture, and, on the other hand, the culture will be evangelized by the life and witness of the local Church.

5.01 Inculturation is a must for the self-realization and growth of the Churches. In every part of the world, therefore, attempts are being made to contextualize the life and mission of the Church by bringing faith and culture into closer relationship. This is particularly evident in the developing countries. In fact, in their First FABC Plenary Assembly the Asian bishops described the local Church as "a Church incarnate in a people, a Church

indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, cultures, the religions — in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own” (12). For the Churches of Asia the task of inculturation is as challenging as it is urgent against the background of long centuries of cultural estrangement that marked their histories of mission during the colonial period, and in the context of contemporary cultural awakening among various Asian peoples.

5.02 In this task of inculturation we can derive much inspiration from the examples of Matteo Ricci in China and Roberto de Nobili in India, in spite of their limitations in the understanding of the relationship between the Gospel and culture. These great missionaries of Asia followed basically the method of adaptation which is an effort to transmit the Gospel and the truths of revelation by employing the language and concepts drawn from the culture of a people. Inculturation is something much deeper than adaptation. It implies *encounter* with the Gospel, and is much more *comprehensive*, for it defines the genesis and growth of the Church among a people.

5.03 Our efforts at building up authentic local Churches through inculturation are guided today by the vision, spirit and techniques of Vatican II, especially as found in *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes* and *Ad Gentes*. *Lumen Gentium* sees the relationship of the Church to cultures and traditions in the horizon of the unity of the whole of the human race (of which the Church is a sacrament), and of the universality of the Church in which each individual part with its different culture, heritage and riches is in communion with each other (LG, 13). *Gaudium et Spes*, on its part, far from confining itself to a narrow understanding of culture as cultivation of mind through education, study of humanities, etc., in contrast to uncivilized persons and “primitive peoples” (*Naturvoelker*), has included in its description of culture its historical, social and ethnological dimensions. These dimensions are of paramount importance in understanding the relationship between local Churches and cultures. Finally, the Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) has envisaged the local Churches as emerging from the encounter of God’s Word with the culture and traditions of peoples and has underlined the necessity of pursuing inculturation in various areas of Christian life and mission (AG, 19-22). Much attention has been given to the theme of inculturation by the various Roman synods of bishops, especially the one on evangelization, and by the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* that followed it. Through his various pastoral journeys particularly to Asia and Africa, and through his discourses on these occasions, Pope John Paul II has highlighted the necessity of inculturation of local

Churches as well as the evangelization of cultures.

5.04 Local Churches are born and are built up only when there is an encounter with the culture of a people. *Encounter means mutuality and reciprocity.* The various traditions, symbols, institutions, customs, manners, etc., of a people spring forth from the soul, the spirit of a people. The encounter of the Gospel with the culture takes place not simply by adopting the external forms and symbols but by reaching deeply into the spirit and soul of a people of which these are expressions and manifestations. Dialogue and encounter of the Gospel at the level of the spirit and in the "cave of the heart" of a people will enable the emergence of authentic local Churches. Such an encounter is also a meeting with the *world-view* of a people, which is the matrix for the various cultural forms. It is also through the worldview that the various parts of the culture are organically interlinked and exist as a whole. The worldview expresses itself in the local organization of the cultural group, its institutions, structures, etc.

5.05 To understand the relationship between the Gospel and culture in terms of *encounter* means that we acknowledge that culture has its legitimate autonomy and proper identity. For culture, as the product of the human spirit acting on nature and creating various instruments, institutions, social relationships, ways of living, etc., forms part of God's design of creation. Besides, the culture of every people has a vocation: to contribute, each one in a unique way, to the life and well-being of the one human family. Every culture manifests in a singular way the richness of the *humanum*. As such it should be respected and fostered.

5.06 In the light of what has been said, it should be clear that culture, which has its basis in God's creation of man and nature, should be respected in its inner purpose and goal and should not be viewed simply as a means for something else. Nor should individual elements of culture be isolated from the organic whole. Hence, inculturation cannot be a process in which particular elements of a culture are selected to serve as a garb for the Gospel. This will be a very external and superficial kind of inculturation since it does not respect the inner soul of the culture and its organic character.

5.07 Each culture not only provides us with a new approach to the human but also opens up new avenues for the understanding of the Gospel and its riches. When the Gospel encounters the tradition, experience and culture of a people, its hitherto undiscovered virtualities will surface; riches and meanings as yet hidden will emerge into the light. That is why it is so important to reinterpret the Gospel through the cultural resources of every people; this reinterpretation truly enriches the Christian Tradi-

tion. Seen in this light, the local Church itself may be viewed as a fresh and creative reactualization and reinterpretation of the Gospel and faith. Such a reinterpretation will not be a break with the Tradition, but will be in organic continuity with it, inasmuch as the past will be repossessed and reactivated in the present experience of a local Church. In turn, the Tradition and the heritage of the past, instead of being a hindrance, will support the present life of the local Church, where the Risen Lord and his Spirit are living and active.

5.08 A deeper encounter will take place only when the Gospel and faith themselves are experienced and understood through the cultural resources of a people. This is not only something desirable but also a necessity. For, given the historicity of human existence in a determined context and tradition, it is inescapable that our perception of truth, understanding and experiencing of reality — including the Gospel and faith — be bound up with a particular culture. In other words, true understanding of God's Word and the response of faith can take place among a people through the cultural resources they possess, which are the embodiment of their experiences and traditions. It is with reference to these that new experiences and events are interpreted, assimilated and absorbed. There takes place, in other words, an organization or rather reorganization, a restructuring of the new materials, events and experiences in terms of the cultural genius and specific ways of thinking of a group or people. All this is applicable also to the encounter of the Gospel with the culture of a group, nation or people.

5.09 If such is the encounter between the Gospel and culture, then, it follows that the concrete form of a local Church is conditioned by the culture of a people among whom it is rooted. The enfleshment of the local Church in the cultural body of a particular people distinguishes it and marks it off from other Churches. Each local Church, then, will bear the stamp of the culture where it is incarnated. Thus, according to the varieties of cultures there will be also diversity in the local Churches, in spite of the fact that they share the same Gospel, faith, eucharist and so on. Thus the universal communion of Churches is also a communion in the diversity of cultures and traditions. Pope John Paul II in an address on December 21, 1984 stated: "It is difficult to express oneself with greater clarity and depth. The universal Church is presented as a communion of (particular) Churches, and indirectly as a community of nations, languages, cultures...." (*Doc. Cath.* 1889 (1985), pp. 167-172).

5.10 In the self-realization of the local Church through a process of inculturation, the following two aspects should be held in mind. First, the Gospel is always found in inculturated form. Gospel is not an abstraction. It exists in the concrete as the faith of a people appropriated and expres-

sed in their cultural context. Hence, the encounter of a people with the Gospel, in practice, happens to be also a meeting with another culture animated by faith. Because of this fact, some authors prefer to speak of “interculturalization” than inculturation. But we adopt in our commentary consistently the term inculturation, including in its scope also implied meeting of cultures.

5.11 A second point to be noted is that the encounter of the Gospel need not always be with one homogeneous culture. It could be with a diversity of ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups living in the same locality. In fact, in some countries in Asia we have in the same local Church the presence of various ethnic and cultural groups. This mosaic of various languages, cultures and peoples is a great enrichment for the local Church. The process of inculturation must take into account this concrete situation as well as the evolution and growth which these diverse human groups undergo as part of a region or nation. In situations of conflict of ethnic or cultural identities, the local Church can serve as an agent of unity and reconciliation. It will foster the communion of various cultures and traditions and thereby shape its own specific identity as a local Church. In multiracial, multilingualistic and pluricultural situations the task of inculturation would involve also the promotion of harmony and communion.

5.12 If the local Church is the fruit of the interaction between the Gospel and culture, it is not enough to say that culture conditions the shape of the local Church. In the same breath we should also add that the Gospel too acts on the culture. As God’s Word it enhances and elevates the culture as well as challenges some of its values, institutions, customs, ways of life, etc. Cultures bear also the mark of human sinfulness. They can contain dehumanizing and enslaving elements. The evangelizing mission of the local Church should move today more in the direction of transforming the culture from within as a leaven. Pope Paul VI underlined the importance of evangelization of cultures when he stated in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: “What matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures, not in a purely decorative way, as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to the very roots. The split between the Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our times, just as in other times. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more concretely, of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel” (EN, 20).

5.13 The concrete manner in which this evangelization of cultures takes place is very important. Gospel can truly evangelize cultures to the extent it is lived and borne witness to by men and women who believe in it and who are guided by it. Further, such an evangelizing action should

be free of all kinds of triumphalism. It should be done as a humble service to culture, all the time being aware that the Gospel itself can receive, for its understanding and appropriation, much from culture. The Second Vatican Council has clearly recognized this.

THESIS 6

A local Church lives in an ongoing historical process of inculturation, since the Church is a community of faith in growth and the culture itself continues to evolve and change. Today a local Church realizes itself by effectively responding to the challenges of new historical forces, which give birth to the process of modernization and which affect all areas and aspects of the life of a people.

6.01 After speaking of the emergence of the local Church through encounter with culture, the present thesis views this encounter from a dynamic perspective, looking at culture as a constantly evolving reality in relation to the developments in society. In our considerations the process of modernization will be given particular attention, since it affects deeply both culture and society. All this has consequences for the self-understanding, life and mission of the local Churches of Asia.

6.02 Culture is not a static but a living reality. It continues to grow, evolve and change due to factors from within and without. Change takes place in every culture. The difference consists in the extent and speed of change. One significant force for change in a culture is its encounter with other cultures. When this process of transformation through encounter ceases to take place a culture is isolated and dies out, as has happened with many cultures and civilizations of the past. What is remarkable about the enduring cultures of Asia is not only their antiquity but also the fact that through the millenia and centuries they have evolved and absorbed new elements, responding to the manifold challenges and vicissitudes of history. Inculturation in Asia, as elsewhere, demands that the local Church grow by listening, perceiving and responding to the evolution of culture. If the Church considers inculturation as something to be achieved once and for all and fails to interact with the culture in its evolution, it is bound to be alienated and estranged from the hopes, aspirations and expectations of the people. This is what the experience of the Churches in various parts of the world teaches us.

6.03 What is striking about culture today is that the extent of its transformation is something unprecedented. This is very much accelerated by the process of modernization which has its own consequences. By modernization we mean the process of rapid transformation in society caused by modern science, technology, industrialization, modern means of com-

munication, urbanization, new educational, economic and political systems, which all have profoundly affected the traditional culture, institutions, way of life, etc. And even more deeply, the process of modernization has brought about transformations in attitudes, values, and in the consciousness of individuals and groups. These changes and transformations are immediately visible in our Asian cities which are growing at an alarmingly fast pace through mass-mobilization and urbanization.

6.04 The meeting of traditional cultures and modernization in Asia has produced wide varieties of situations and responses. In some Asian societies and in some areas of life, we find modernization juxtaposed to traditional cultures and ways of life. In such societies, Asians, accustomed as they are to living with contradictions, live with one foot in modernity and another in the traditional ways. Another response has been to try to discard the traditional culture — lock, stock and barrel — and to replace it with modernity. In yet other cases, we have staunch opposition to modernity and its values, coupled with defense of traditional culture, institutions, ways of life, etc. In some other situations, we have a transference of traditional attitudes and values onto modern systems, tools, etc. Or, reversely, superimposition of the modern onto the traditional. It is undeniable, however, that the mainline response in Asia has been a profound desire to reap the benefits of modern culture without losing the identity of one's traditional heritage and its long-cherished values and ideals.

6.05 The encounter between tradition and modernity presents an immense challenge to the Church (cf. GS, 56). In an address to the Pontifical Council for Culture, Pope John Paul II characterized the present situation of change and transformation in this way:

It is obvious that the emergence of new culture calls for courage and intelligence on the part of all believers and of everyone of goodwill. Social and cultural changes, political upheavals, ideological ferment, religious questioning, ethical probing, all show a world in gestation, in search of form and direction, organic wholeness, prophetic renewal (*L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, December 16, 1985).

All this is very true of the Asian situation. It is by responding to the complex situations in our Asian countries with their challenges that the Churches in this continent will become authentic local Churches.

6.06 In seeking to respond the Church should in the first place acknowledge and accept both the validity of tradition and of culture, as well as the important role being played by the process of modernization.

A defensive attitude towards them, evidently, will not contribute to the emergence of the local Church and the fulfilling of the mission to which God calls it today. The riches of Asian cultures and traditions are to be positively promoted because God and his Spirit have been active in the history of Asian peoples. Their variegated cultural expressions reflect his light, truth and beauty. Similarly, modernization is a process which manifests the continued presence of God in our contemporary history. The local Church should then manifest the great openness which Vatican II has shown both to the cultures of peoples and to the modern world and its developments.

6.07 One of the crucial problems faced in Asia and elsewhere has been articulated well by the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*: "How can the vitality and growth of a new culture be fostered without the loss of living fidelity to the heritage of tradition?" (GS, 56). To this concern and aspiration widespread in Asia, the Asian local Churches should respond. The response should take into account the fact that a deep and lasting change in a culture does not take place by simple superimposition of new elements from without or through a heterogenetic process. Change in a culture or society takes place when it proceeds from within, that is, when it is orthogenetic. The meeting of tradition and modernity must be such that the change in culture activated from within is able to respond creatively to modernity and make it its own through a new synthesis.

6.08 In order to contribute towards an harmonious blending of tradition and modernity, the Church in Asia needs to exercise critical discernment. For Asian cultures are ambiguous, in the sense that, along with many lofty ideals, visions and values, they contain also oppressive and anti-human elements, such as caste, which goes against the equality of all human beings, discrimination towards women, etc.

On the other hand, modernity, in spite of its great and marvelous contributions to humanization, contains profound contradictions. It is eroding some of the long-cherished values of Asian societies, causing commercialization of immorality, creating new, ruthless and large-scale exploitation of the poor and the weak. Modernization with its advanced industrialization is causing serious damage to the natural environment in Asian countries. It has victimized the poorest sections in our societies, like the tribals and fishermen who live on the natural resources of forest and sea. Modern industrialization weighs most heavily on the Asian women who are displaced, exploited and sexually commercialized.

6.09 It is in this context of the meeting of tradition and modernity that the local Church has to exercise a critical discernment by being aware of the

limitations and strengths both of tradition and of modernity. It should contribute to the evolution of a humanism that will be truly Asian; a humanism that will result from the encounter of the best elements of traditional culture and modernity. Thus, the active participation of the Church in the past and contemporary history of the peoples of Asia, critical identification with their tradition, culture, their present aspirations and hopes will make it truly Asian. The shape of the local Churches of Asia of tomorrow will depend upon the process of inculturation that takes place today in the context of the meeting of tradition and modernity in Asia.

THESIS 7

In Asia a local Church realizes itself by entering into new relationships with neighbors of other faiths and by involving itself in concerns of justice, human dignity and human rights, and in the concrete fulfillment of the preferential love for the poor.

7.01 Two areas which are particularly important to Asian local Churches for their self-realization in their own milieu are *dialogue* and *inculturation*; these two concerns (as the FABCI declaration so strongly affirmed) must form part and parcel of their life and mission. If the Church is a sacrament of communion with God and solidarity among men (LG, 1), then all local Churches in our part of the world must relate to our neighbors as they concretely experience that communion and that solidarity in their own religious traditions. *Dialogue with other religions* is intimately linked with the process of inculturation of our Asian Churches, because among many Asian peoples culture is animated by religious experience and religious belief and practice. Religion and culture are so closely linked together that to talk about one is necessarily to talk about the other. (We have addressed this and related issues in our *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*.)

7.02 Most of our Asian countries are characterized by massive poverty and misery, with millions of people deprived of the basic necessities of life: food, water, shelter. After the pattern of the Incarnation, our local Churches must, in a spirit of solidarity, truly share the lot of the poor, the marginalized and the exploited in the society wherein they live. Announcing the Good News to the poor (cf. Lk 4:18) demands that our local Churches become Churches of the poor. We note with joy the recent efforts undertaken to move toward an increasing solidarity with the poor and even, among some, to become identified with them. And yet we are so painfully aware that many of our institutions project an image of wealth and power, that often our schools, hospitals, etc., benefit mainly those who are affluent. The life-styles of some Church leaders, of some priests and religious, do not manifest an evangelical simplicity and de-

tachment.

7.03 FABCI in 1974 called upon our local Churches in Asia to engage in dialogue with the poor:

A local Church in dialogue with the people, in so many countries in Asia, means dialogue with the poor. This dialogue has to take shape in what has been called a "dialogue of life." This involves a genuine experience and understanding of this poverty ... of so many of our people. It is our belief that it is from the material deprivation of our peoples, as well as from their tremendous human potential and from their aspiration for a more fully human and brotherly world, that Christ is calling the Churches in Asia (FABCI, 19, 20, 22).

7.04 This kind of inculturation into the context of the life of the people opens up the local Church to the horizon of the Kingdom — the Kingdom which is larger than the Church and of which the Church itself is an instrument. It sets the local Church in an evangelizing dynamism and leads to its self-realization by bringing into the life of the poor and the oppressed true human dignity, justice and freedom. We recall the words of the Synod of Bishops in 1971, which stated: "Action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension in the preaching of the Gospel."

7.05 Culture is very much bound up with the social and political areas. We assist today at the central role culture is increasingly playing in the socio-political order. It is important, therefore, that the local Churches pay attention to the following two aspects in the process of their self-realization through inculturation. In many of our societies or nations there are generally two types of culture: that of the politically and economically powerful and that of the weak and powerless. (Cultural domination accompanies political and economic domination, and helps to sustain it. The culture of the poor and the marginalized is neglected, if not suppressed, by political and economic domination.) This "little tradition" of the poor and the powerless must become the object of special concern for the local Church that wants to be in "dialogue of life" with the poor of Asia. Inculturation should not be identified with the culture of the dominant and powerful groups but must become a process through which the local Church lives in solidarity with the poor, their traditions, customs, ways of life, patterns of thought, etc.

7.06 There is also a second point to be noted. The process of modernization should not become an exclusive concern of the powerful in society and pursued to their advantage. Modernization has to be filtered through the concern for the poor and the marginalized in the Asian

societies, so that it can be detoxicated of its dehumanizing effects and made to serve the goals of justice and freedom. Integral to the process of inculturation for us, then, must be this effort to address the challenges of modernization in dialogue with the multitudes of the poor and the powerless among us.

THESIS 8

The Christian community is the active subject of inculturation which takes place in all aspects of Christian life, witness and mission.

8.01 Inculturation is a task in which the whole Christian community must involve itself. This is so, because, in the first place, Church is a people. Hence, in all its activities all sectors of the people must participate in one way or another. Secondly, inculturation is something integral; it affects every aspect of the people's Christian life and mission. Thus, genuine inculturation cannot be effected merely through the work of an elite group or of experts.

8.02 By living within their particular context according to the "sense of faith aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth" (LG, 12), the faithful will learn to express their faith not only in fidelity to the apostolic tradition, but also in response to their cultural situations. This response is the responsibility of the whole community which discerns God's Word and Spirit in its culture and history. This responsibility is unique; it cannot be delegated or substituted. Since the context of one local Church differs from another, every local Church enjoys a legitimate autonomy, while maintaining the universal communion, to shape creatively its own life, structures and fulfill its God-given mission in its cultural environment: "In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us," said Paul VI in *Octogesima Adveniens*, "to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission. It is up to the Christian communities to analyze with objectivity the situation which is proper to their own country, to shed on it the light of the Gospel's unalterable words" (OA, 4). These words of Pope Paul VI acknowledging the responsibility of the local Church in relation to social questions can be applied to the task of inculturation as well.

8.03 A very important area of inculturation is the liturgy of the Christian community. Liturgy expresses the faith of the Church (*lex orandi lex credendi*). Liturgy must be the outcome of the faith-experience in a particular cultural environment. In turn, such liturgical experience should flower in a Christian life that is fully inculturated. Therefore, true liturgical inculturation of the Christian community cannot be done from without and introduced through an external and artificial process; it should

spontaneously spring forth from the life of the faith lived fully in the context of the culture and the life-realities of the people. Nevertheless, given the long estrangement of the liturgical life of Asian local Churches from their cultural traditions, at this stage of transition to a fully inculturated ecclesial life, certain liturgical experiments and models are very legitimate and necessary in order to facilitate the process of inculturation by the whole community. These experiments, however, should not reflect only the concerns of a few experts, but rather should be in dialogue with the whole Christian community.

8.04 Another area of inculturation is the faith-formation or catechesis which initiates the faithful into the life of faith and helps them to achieve maturity in it. In its content, method and terminology, catechesis must be attuned to the experience, pedagogical traditions, psychological make-up and linguistic genius of the people. As an integral part of the life of the local Church, faith-formation should reflect all the dimensions of its life and mission. While holding firmly to the truth of affirmations of faith, it should not be reduced to a set of doctrinal and catechetical formulations made out to be immutably valid for the appropriation and expression of belief, for all times and all cultures. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, himself insisted on this necessary process of inculturation in catechesis when, in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi tradendae*, he said:

The term “acculturation” or “inculturation” may be a neologism, but it expresses very well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation: We can say of catechesis, as well as evangelization in general, that it is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of cultures and its essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will respect their particular values and riches (53).

8.05 The life in the Spirit, which is spirituality, must be attuned to and reflect the experience of the Spirit by a people in their culture and tradition. For we know that the Spirit is present and active among peoples of Asia, in their histories, traditions, cultures and religions. Inculturation will be thus a meeting of the Spirit with the Spirit, fostering the bonds of spiritual communion and solidarity with the people among whom the local Church lives and grows. The spiritual riches and religious values by which the people of our continent have been nourished through millenia and centuries must flow into the life of the local Church to enrich it. Deep awareness of God, meditation, contemplation, interiority, ascetism, self-denial, simplicity of life, deep faith, silence, the spirit of surrender, sense of mystery, deep communion — these are some of the spiritual values highly prized and fostered in our traditions. The Second Plenary Assembly

of FABC, which dealt with the theme "Prayer: the Life of the Church of Asia," underlined the need to integrate into the life of the Asian local Churches the ways of prayer and worship of our peoples. The bishops stated:

We are daily more convinced that the Spirit is leading us in our time, not to some dubious syncretism, (which we all rightly reject), but to an integration — profound and organic in character — of all that is best in our traditional ways of prayer and worship, into the treasury of our Christian heritage ... These many indigenous riches will at last find a natural place in the prayer of our Churches in Asia and will greatly enrich the prayer-life of the Church throughout the world (31, 33).

8.06 There is no need to say that the Christian life and mission involvement of our local Churches in Asia must be accompanied by theological reflection which will be attentive and respond to the questions and problems arising from experience and praxis. Vatican II's Decree on Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, acknowledged the importance and necessity of such contextualized theological reflection.

Theological investigation must be necessarily stirred up in each major socio-cultural area, as it is called. In this way, under the tradition of the universal Church, a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been consigned to Sacred Scripture and which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and the teaching authority of the Church (22).

8.07 For a profound inculturation of theology it is important that new theological methods and ways of interpretation be devised which will reflect the culture and traditions, the mindsets and ways of thought of Asian peoples. In this regard we must single out the place of experience. All Asian philosophical traditions accord particular importance to experience and/or immediate relationship with reality. Thus, experience should provide the starting point for any genuine Asian theology. Conceptual elaboration should be firmly rooted in experience. Theological reflection, thus enrooted in experience and life, will help our local Churches to understand and interpret their faith and express it in authentically creative ways.

8.08 Another area which calls for a fuller "enrooting in the native soil of our Asian cultures and traditions" is religious life in our Churches. Religious life is meant to make more visible the significance of a way of living which is totally dedicated to the values of our Christian faith. Religious men and women should manifest in their worship and witness, in their common life and service, how the followers of Jesus incarnate his life

and mission in the heart of a people and a culture in the most authentic way.

In ways worthy of praise, many religious communities and individuals have been in the forefront of the efforts toward significant inculturation and solidarity with the poor. Unfortunately, however, there remain areas and situations where religious communities retain much that is foreign and alien in relation to the milieu surrounding them. This is seen in language and life-styles, in formation programs (often dominated by foreign members), in ongoing importation of frequently alienating culture-bound elements. For instance, sometimes psychological processes used in other cultures are uncritically imposed on Asian members. Sometimes adapting to these becomes a norm of acceptance. Not infrequently local members must put on Western ways if they wish "to belong." Decision-making centers are often located abroad, where decision-makers are incapable of discerning essentials of religious life from merely culturally-conditioned attitudes and practices. Thus, inculturation is hindered, or even blocked, in the name of a false universality, by superiors and others who cannot or do not resonate with the aspirations and needs of Asian members, or who even now (perhaps only half-consciously) bear within them attitudes of cultural superiority.

8.09 Formation programs, above all, must be immersed in the language and life-style of the poorer sectors in our countries. The preferential option for the poor, worked out in daily life, is often the best way of bringing about an authentic inculturation of religious life. An estrangement from the Christian piety of the poor and the humble is often the result of styles of formation which mistake what is current in Western societies (often highly secularized) as mandatory for all. This must be studiously prevented.

8.10 In the ongoing revision of religious life in our Asian local Churches — a revision still quite necessary in most countries — some aspects of the spiritual traditions found within local cultures, such as the ideals of *sannyasa* (life of renunciation) in Hinduism, or the monastic life in Buddhism, can offer much by way of inspiration, enrichment and example. A more earnest, more discerning inculturation in Asian religious life can lead the way to a more authentically evangelical witness and service among peoples.

THESIS 9

Basic ecclesial communities are especially significant “places” of inculturation and the building up of the local Church.

9.01 In many parts of Asia today Basic Ecclesial Communities (or small faith communities) have been proliferating in response to the needs of Christian life and mission. In these communities, through prayer centered on the Word of God and the eucharist, through meetings, mutual service and sharing, the Christian faithful experience what it is to be the Church. Here, too, where Christians know each other by name, they strengthen each other's faith; communion and participation become lived realities. And since they grapple with life-issues in the light of the Word of God, they are able to appropriate personally for themselves the meaning of the Word of God and recognize its concrete challenges and demands. While many BECs concentrate on the cultivation of community prayer and mutual help, others have sought to address and correct basic causes of underdevelopment and injustice, and bring about societal transformation.

Thus BECs become especially potent places and agents of the inculturation of the Gospel. In them the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes the Gospel of the people.

9.02 So that BECs may not become isolated and instrumentalized by ideologies, and so that they may preserve their ecclesial character, they must maintain their communion with the pastors of the Church. One very important means to this communion is the ongoing formation of the community leaders (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 58).

9.03 In many parts of our countries, where Christians are few and far between, they are often confronted, together with adherents of other faiths, by common problems. As they live and struggle together to face these problems Christians and those adherents of other faiths can be seen as basic human communities. In these human communities, the faith-life of the Christian members can grow as they engage in a dialogue of life with adherents of other faiths, and together with them confront life-issues, like the struggle against poverty, the struggle for justice and human rights and the efforts to build a world of peace in diversity. Basic human communities can be special places for experiencing and witnessing to the presence of the Spirit in the midst of persons of goodwill. They also provide opportunities for authentic Christian witness to peoples of other faiths. Further, in their interaction with these peoples of other faiths with whom they constitute these basic human communities, Christians can act as leaven for human and societal transformation.

THESIS 10

A local Church realizes itself through a process of inculturation by following the dynamic of Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and Pentecost.

10.01 In revealing himself to humankind and realizing his plan of salvation within history, God has suited himself to our human nature and its ways, has assumed our time and our situations, and shared our human destiny. God's Word was received and then communicated in human languages and cultures, transmitted through events of human history. In the history of Israel and the life of Jesus, God entered human history and took part in it. The history of Israel, we know, was a continuous process of encounter with all the life-realities of surrounding peoples and cultures.

10.02 This self-communication of God, definitively given to us in the Incarnation of his Son, is thus the paradigm of the saving presence and action of God in human history. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). The word *eskenosen* literally means "he pitched his tent in our midst." This recalls the presence of Yahweh in the midst of Israel in its journey through the desert and wilderness towards the Promised Land (Exod 40:34-38). The Letter to the Hebrews says of Jesus that "he was made like us in all things, save sin alone" (Hb 4,15). Thus was the Incarnate Son truly *Emmanuel*, God-with-us (Mt 1:23), who, in the patristic teaching, "made his own all that was ours, that he might give to us what was his own."

10.03 The Incarnation is thus the pattern and process, the motivation and the movement, of God's continuing and saving self-giving in "the time in-between," the time of the unfolding of human history until the parousia, the time of the Church. We must then seek to recognize in the history of all peoples, the working-out of this same law of the Incarnation. This process and pattern is worked out in the inculturation of Christian faith and Christian life in every local Church, and it is thus the historical actualization of the salvific presence and action of God in the midst of every people, as well as the historical response of that people and its culture to its vocation in his Body which is the Church. In this sense, each people is called to the task of inculturation as the realization of its vocation in salvation history, in the coming-to-be of the "fullness in unity" of the Church (*catholica unitas*).

10.04 Therefore, each local Church realizes itself in this process of inculturation, which follows the law or dynamic of Incarnation, Paschal Mystery and Pentecost, and the Recapitulation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10).

10.05 The Incarnation of the Word is the Son of God taking on the particularity of the human. The Son enters into a real human family and thus begins a human biography inserted in a particular place and culture, in a particular segment of history. The Church, coming into existence through the Word and the Spirit, and the work of the ministry, treads the same path of Incarnation and takes on all the human particularity consequent upon it. As it was thus through the Incarnation and from the beginnings in Jesus, so through the ages has the Church realized and does the Church realize itself in a given place and time and fulfills its saving task in the world.

10.06 The mystery of the Incarnation moves forward in Jesus' life to passion, death and resurrection. By his total self-giving and self-emptying in obedience and love, Jesus became the source, for all who believe in him, of the Spirit, of life and communion (2 Cor 3:17; Jn 7:37-38). This Paschal Mystery thus constitutes the law and meaning of the life and mission of the Church. The process of incarnation/inculturation thus calls for the process of death and resurrection, so that the Church, and the local Church in its own time and place, may become truly the sign and instrument (within the "new culture") of the life and communion in the Spirit which comes from the Crucified and Risen Lord.

10.07 First: This death and rising again which marks authentic inculturation calls for actualization in relation to every people and its culture. Only thus can it enter the way of Christian discipleship and assume the truth and life of the Gospel into its own being and life. The culture of any people, in its beliefs and values, customs and traditions, inevitably holds within it, due to human limitations and sinfulness, elements which go counter to the fulfillment of what is truly human within it, and of what the Gospel and the Spirit call the human to become. Thus all cultures must be purified, and what in them hinders or diminishes communion (with God and communion with other peoples and cultures) must undergo cleansing, stripping, even dying. What is authentically human and good must be strengthened and brought to perfection. We thus legitimately speak of death and resurrection in relation to every human culture, and all its realizations — as we do also in relation to what is human in the Church.

10.08 As *Gaudium et Spes* points out: "the Good News of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man; it combats and removes the error and evil which flow from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples. It takes the spiritual qualities and endowments of every age and nation and with supernatural riches it causes them to blossom, as it were, from within; it fortifies, completes and restores them in Christ" (GS, 58). It is thus the Gospel which becomes the point of reference in relation to which the

dying and purifying process of cultures takes place (cf. also *Ad Gentes*, 8).

10.09 Second: There is another process of death-and- resurrection, namely that of the Church itself, and more specifically of that Church as concretely embodied in the cultures of its past (e.g., the culture of the “sending Church” in a missionary situation). Authentic inculturation cannot begin and go forward unless the Church is willing to recognize its limitations, born from ignorance, error or the sinfulness of its members, and becomes ready to die to all that undermines its witness to the Gospel and hinders its appropriation by other cultures. The Church is not above God’s Word, but ever subject to it (cf. DV, 10). The Church’s limitation is manifested in its incapacity or inability to appropriate God’s Word in all its fullness. This limitation, so often evident in its life and action, also shows itself whenever it imposes as the Word of God even merely culturally-conditioned elements of its concrete embodiments. It manifests itself whenever the Church narrowly declares something as incompatible with the Christian faith merely because it seems to go counter to its present forms and ways. Thus does the Church often fail to discern the genuine “seeds of the Word” (*semina Verbi*) found in other cultures and peoples. The history of missionary activity in Asia during the period of colonialism amply illustrates this fact: how the concrete features of the “sending Church” have been simply equated with the substance of Christian faith and life, and how much what was humanly good and noble in the cultures of newly-evangelized peoples was often judged as pagan and contrary to Christianity. Thus, the Church herself must die to those aspects of its life and structures which prevent the understanding and reception of meanings and values in the cultures which are “new” to it, and to which new experience and openness give it access. Only thus will a fresh appropriation of the Gospel and the life of the Spirit be made possible for the process of inculturation, and thus will new expressions of Christian belief and life emerge creatively.

10.10 The miracle of Pentecost (Acts 2) provides biblical grounding for the task of inculturation. Pentecost manifests the Church’s unity in the midst of diversity which is Catholic fullness (*catholica unitas*). It grounds the authentic catholicity of the Church in the creative power of the Spirit. The Spirit alone enables the Church to be one amidst the diversity of peoples and races and amidst the multiplicity of human situations. For the mystery of the Church’s catholicity, as it is actualized in history, is ultimately rooted in the presence and action of the Spirit.

Human efforts to create a universal communion without God ends up either in the monolithic uniformity of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) or a chaotic heterogeneity and individualism to which history attests. Only in the power of the Word and the Spirit can a world of true human

communion be built up on our planet, bringing to fulfillment and fruition all the richness of human cultures and their realizations.

10.11 The Church is the sacrament of the communion of all men and all peoples among themselves and with God in Christ Jesus (LG, 1)). That unity will come to being through the creative processes of mutual encounter, exchange, communication and dialogue. Such a community of nations will be a reversal of Babel, for it shall be the gathering of all peoples in all their specificity and particularity, in all their manifold richness. Thus will the gifts of all nations be gathered together and shared in the reality of universal communion and brought at last to the feet of the Father.

10.12 The sacrament of this recapitulation of all humanity and all creation in Christ (Eph 1:10) is the *eucharist*. The eucharist builds up the Body of Christ on earth as foreshadowing of the fullness of communion in eternal life. The local Church and its efforts at inculturation move toward this universal communion which is to begin on earth and find its completion in the Kingdom of life and love which is finally God's free gift to us: that heavenly city towards which the people of God journey — the Trinitarian communion which is the term and fulfillment of all human history.

THESIS 11

Through the dynamic encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture, the one mystery of the Church is realized in the many local Churches. Each local Church is the Church in its full and integral reality, and the Church universal is the communion of local Churches, a "Church of Churches," a communion of communions.

11.01 The Third Plenary Assembly of the FABC (FABC III, Bangkok 1983) spoke of several "constants in the being and life of the Church": its communion in the Trinity, its dependence on the Gospel and the Spirit of Jesus, its purpose of discipleship, its guidance by the Spirit, its foundation and nourishment by the sacraments, the participation and coresponsibility of all its members, its unity with and under its apostolic ministers, its bonds with other communities of faith, its mission of reconciliation in and for the world (FABC III, 7). These elements describe the full reality meant by the word "Church," and wherever they are realized, the one and universal Church is realized in all its distinctive fullness. They thus constitute the one and universal image according to which any local Church is formed (LG, 23). Without any of them a community falls short of being the Church of Christ. Through all of them any local assembly of believers is in that time and place the one Church of Christ. "The Church

is in many places, yet there are not several Churches; the Church is entire in each one of its parts: One in many, mysteriously total in each" (Henri de Lubac, *Splendour of the Church*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956, p. 105).

11.02 The Council gave powerful expression to this truth when it taught that the one and universal Church exists in and out of the local Churches (LG, 23), a statement which must be taken in full seriousness if one is to avoid confusing the notion of catholicity with other models of unity and universality. As the International Theological Commission put it:

The *Catholic* universal must be distinguished from false images of the universal linked either with totalitarian doctrines or with materialist systems or with false ideologies of science and technology, or with imperialist strategies of whatever kind. Nor can it be confused with a uniformity which would destroy legitimate particularities or likened to a systematic claim of singularity which would threaten essential unity (*L'unique Eglise du Christ*, p. 35).

There is not first a universal Church and only later, by some process of administrative subdivision, local Churches. A local Church is not related to the universal Church as a state or province is related to a nation. Nor are there first local Churches and only later, by some process of confederation, a universal Church. The universal Church is not the mere sum of all local Churches. Local Churches are each the full and integral reality of communion in the mystery of Christ, and the universal Church is the communion of all such communions: a "Church of Churches."

11.03 The biblical paradigm of this mystery is the event of Pentecost. In the particular city of Jerusalem the Church was born as the Spirit descended upon the disciples and they began to tell of the wondrous acts of God. But as they spoke their one and common message, it was heard in all the languages of the world and believed in by representatives of all the nations. The Church was thus born at once local and universal and the rest of the Acts of the Apostles tells the story of how what was realized in mystery at the very beginnings of the Church came to be in all the other places to which the Gospel was brought, including especially, beyond the world of Judaism, the worlds of the Gentiles. The one Church remained one even as the many Churches multiplied.

THESIS 12

That the local Church comes to be through a process of inculturation means that the Church one and catholic is generated by the Word of Christ, the grace of the Spirit, and the apostolic ministry in a particular time, place and culture. The genesis of the one Catholic Church occurs only in and through the genesis of many Churches.

12.01 That the local Church comes to be through a process of inculturation, and that this involves a many-sided encounter between the Gospel and the realities and movements of culture and ongoing history, have been the themes developed in our preceding reflections. Now we return to an underlying theological understanding of the coming-to-be of the local Church as both gift and task: God's gift and our task.

12.02 We have already enumerated (cf. Thesis 3) the generative principles of the Church as the call of God, the Word of Christ, the grace of the Spirit, and the apostolic ministry. These are what constitute the Church as a distinct community in the world and what make the many Churches but one Church. They represent the principles by which the Church is God's achievement, *creatura Verbi, Ecclesia de Trinitate*, a gift which we receive in gratitude.

12.03 But this divine creation is only realized in specific communities of believers in whom God's grace enables the acts which make of them "a community of faith, hope and love" (LG, 8). The Church of the Trinity (*ecclesia de Trinitate*) exists only as the Church "realized" by men (*ecclesia ex hominibus*), the human achievement of a new and transcendent community made possible by God's Word and grace. What God gives in the constitutive generative principles of the Church is what human beings achieve in their free, receptive, active faith, hope and love.

12.04 For that reason an ecclesiology remains abstract if it does not consider the concrete events through which God's freedom encounters human freedom to produce the local Churches. The divine gifts alone do not effect the Church; they must be received and appropriated in specific communities of faith, hope, and love. And this never occurs in the abstract or on some universal level. It occurs when the Word of Christ is preached in specific situations, which it illuminates and corrects, confirms and enriches. It occurs when people, already touched and led by the Spirit, recognize in the preached Word a light to guide them and a promise in which to hope. It occurs when the experience of Christian communion, especially in the eucharistic assembly, heals instances of alienation and enriches already genuine experiences of community. It occurs when, within specific cultures and facing particular challenges, a community of

faith undertakes specific historical and social tasks guided by the memory and hope of Jesus Christ. This is how the Church is generated over and over again, from generation to generation, indeed every day. The Church Catholic is generated in and through the daily genesis of such local Churches.

12.05 This is in part why the eucharistic assembly has always been considered the paradigmatic realization of the Church. The eucharist is always celebrated in a particular time and place, by particular communities of believers. A preacher may be interpreting a scriptural text being read out at every assembly in the world on that day, but he unfolds this Word of God as the Bread of Life for this one congregation; and the community of faith is realized once again when the assembly receives the Word proclaimed and interpreted and joins in the free confession of the Creed. When the Bread of Life is then broken again for them in the great eucharistic prayer, they come together again in the great Amen and in receiving the one Bread and thereby, beyond their individuality and overcoming whatever alienation they may have experienced, become themselves the very Body of Christ. "The Church produces the eucharist," the ancient adage says, "and the eucharist produces the Church" (*Ecclesia facit eucharistiam; eucharistia facit ecclesiam*).

12.06 As the genesis of the one Church occurs only in and through the genesis of the many Churches, so the one Church accomplishes its saving mission only in the missions of the many local Churches. The Church is "the universal sacrament of salvation" (LG, 48) insofar as in their several local situations the local Churches assume the responsibility of "reading the signs of (their) times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (GS, 4). The International Theological Commission concluded its fine discussion of the relationship between the Church as mystery and as historical subject with a perceptive paragraph:

The new People of God is not, then, characterized by a mode of existence or by a mission which would substitute for an existence or for human projects already present. The memory and the expectation of Jesus Christ, on the contrary, are to convert or to transform from within the mode of existence and the human projects already being lived in a group of people. It might be said in this regard that the memory and the expectation of Jesus Christ by which the new People of God lives constitute what the Scholastics called the "formal" element which is to structure the concrete existence of men. The latter is somewhat like what they called the "matter," free and responsible, of course, which receives various determinations in order to constitute a way of life "according to the Holy Spirit." These ways of life do not exist a priori and cannot be determined in

advance. They display a great diversity and are thus always unpredictable, even if they can be related to the constant action of a single Holy Spirit. What is common and constant in these ways of life, instead, is that they express "in the ordinary conditions of family and social life in which human existence is woven" (LG, 31) the demands and the joys of the Gospel of Christ (*L'unique Eglise du Christ*, p. 25).

The one and catholic mystery of the Church becomes redemptively effective in the historical responsibility of the many local Churches.

12.07 The Council's recovery of this sense of concrete catholicity, especially after centuries of centralization and uniformity, has led throughout the entire Church to a renewed interest in two elements crucial for the generation of the one Church in and out of the many Churches. The *first* of these is *inculturation*, which has been dealt with in the preceding theses (Theses 5-9).

12.08 The *second* element is the renewed discovery and awareness of a *legitimate autonomy* on the part of local Churches. This can be seen in the statement of the 1985 Synod of Bishops: Because the Church is a communion, there must be participation and coresponsibility at all levels. In the generation and building up of the Church there should be no passive members (cf. *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 2). This is true at all levels, from the basic ecclesial communities (BECs, cf. Thesis 9, above) to the parish, from the parish to the diocese, from the diocese to regional groupings, from regional groupings to the universal communion around the Bishop of Rome. Where such participation and coresponsibility are denied or impeded, or refused appropriate structural expression, something will be lacking in the realization of concrete catholicity, and in that measure to the shining forth of genuine catholic unity, that *catholica unitas*, so much celebrated by the Fathers of the Church.

THESES 13

The culturally-diverse local Churches reflect the catholicity (or universality) of the one Church of God, the very nature of which is realized in its mission within and to the varieties of societies and cultures in which it exists.

13.01 The universality or the catholicity of the Church is far more than its simple geographical extension. As *Lumen Gentium* put it:

This character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic Church effectively

and ceaselessly strives to recapitulate all of humanity, with all of its goods, under Christ the Head, in the unity of his Spirit. In virtue of this catholicity, the individual parts bring their own gifts to the other parts and to the whole Church, so that the whole and the individual parts are increased by the mutual sharing of all and by the common effort towards fullness in unity (LG, 13).

Catholicity is this “fullness in unity.”

13.02 In celebrating one of the great examples in the Church’s history of this rich and concrete notion of catholicity, the work of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, Pope John Paul II recently expanded on the Council’s description:

The Church is catholic also because she is able to present the revealed truth, which she has preserved intact in its divine content, in every human context, in such a way as to bring it into contact with the lofty thoughts and just expectations of every individual and of every people. Moreover, the entire patrimony of good which every generation transmits to posterity, together with the priceless gift of life, forms as it were an immense and many-colored collection of tesserae that together make up the living mosaic of the Pantocrator, who will manifest himself in his total splendor only at the moment of the Parousia.

The Gospel does not lead to the impoverishment or extinction of those things which every individual people and nation and every culture throughout history recognizes and brings into being as goodness, truth and beauty. On the contrary, it strives to assimilate and to develop all those values, to live them with magnanimity and joy, and to perfect them by the mysterious and ennobling light of revelation.

The concrete dimension of catholicity, inscribed by Christ the Lord in the very make-up of the Church, is not something static, outside history and flatly uniform. In a certain sense it wells up and develops every day as something new from the unanimous faith of all those who believe in God, one and three, revealed by Jesus Christ and preached by the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. This dimension issues quite spontaneously from mutual respect — proper to fraternal love — for every nation, great or small, and from the honest acknowledgment of the qualities and rights of brothers in the faith (*Slavorum apostoli*, 18).

13.03 The principles of full catholicity are at once Christological, pneumatological and anthropological. The work of Christ not only reconciled sinners to God, it also achieved in principle the reconciliation of

alienated humanity. "In him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace through the blood of his cross" (Col 1:19-10). "Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. He came and preached peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near, for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph 2:13-17). In Christ, therefore, "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all" (Col 3:11). The catholicity of the Church is the means by which the Church becomes Christ's Body, "the fullness of him who fills all things in every way" (Eph 1:23).

13.04 At Pentecost, Peter recognized the fulfillment of God's promise that "it will come to pass in the last days that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17). Luke also described something like a second Pentecost, when "the circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God" (Acts 10:45-46). And if now "the Spirit of the Lord has filled the whole world" (Wis 1:7), it is not illegitimate to see the work of the Spirit anticipating the proclamation of the Gospel in those whom Paul addressed in Athens, leading them to "seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from anyone of us" (Acts 18:27). "Since Christ died for all," Vatican II said, "and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery" (GS, 22). Pope John Paul II builds upon this conciliar statement his teaching on the activity of the Spirit in the world, in individuals, in all those who through him "worship God in spirit and in truth, in those who work for the unity of all mankind, so that the Church is also the sacrament, the sign and instrument of the presence and action of the life-giving Spirit," wherever it is at work (*Dominum et vivificantem*, 53-54,64).

13.05 Anthropologically, catholicity is grounded in the work of creation, on which God looked and saw that the manifold work of the six days was "very good" (Gen 1:30). The divine injunction upon the man and the woman to "increase and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28) has borne fruit in the great works of human society and culture, in all their splendid variety. These achievements of human intelligence and free-

dom, genius and effort, the Council said, far from making man “a rival to the Creator,” are a sign of God’s greatness and a fulfillment of his mysterious design” (GS, 34). If human achievements need to be purified and healed of what is sinful and defective in them, nonetheless a genuinely Catholic instinct recognizes in this “fruit of the earth and work of human hands” elements which are not undone but transcendently fulfilled when they are taken up into the mystery of Christ ..., “which better promotes and expresses the unity of the human race the more it respects the peculiarities of different cultures” (GS, 54). The Council refused the idea that the Church “is tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any customary practices, ancient or modern” (GS, 58). “All individuals,” echoed Pope John Paul II, “all nations, cultures and civilizations have their own part to play and their own place in God’s mysterious plan and in the universal history of salvation” (*Slavorum Apostoli*, 29).

13.06 For all these reasons, difference and variety in the Church are not obstacles or threats to its unity, but essential elements of what the present Pope calls “the concrete dimension of Catholicity” and which he described poetically as “like a symphony of the various liturgies in all the world’s languages united in one single liturgy or a melodious chorus sustained by the voices of unnumbered multitudes rising in countless modulations, tones and harmonies for the praise of God from every part of the globe, at every moment of history” (*Slavorum Apostoli*, 17).

13.07 The Council gave several descriptions of this recovered sense of catholicity. It described it as the work of divine providence that “in the course of time, different Churches set up in various places by the apostles and their successors joined together in a multiplicity of organically united groups which, while safeguarding the unity of the faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage, and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony.” In a wonderful phrase, the Council said of these developments: “This variety of local Churches, in their common effort at unity (*Ecclesiarum localium in unum conspirans varietas*), shows all the more splendidly the catholicity of an undivided Church” (LG, 33). Later it echoed this confidence in its Decree on the Eastern Catholic Churches:

Between these Churches there is such a wonderful bond of unity that this variety of the universal Church, so far from diminishing its unity, rather serves to emphasize it. For the Catholic Church wishes the traditions of each particular Church or rite to remain whole and entire, and it likewise wishes to adapt its own way of life to the needs of different times and places (OE, 3).

The Council also repeated the point in the Decree on Ecumenism:

From the earliest times the Churches of the East followed their own disciplines, sanctioned by the holy Fathers, by Synods, and even by Ecumenical Councils. Far from being an obstacle to the Church's unity, such diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty and contributes greatly to carrying out her mission. ... To remove all shadow of doubt, then, this holy Synod solemnly declares that the Churches of the East, while keeping in mind the necessary unity of the whole Church, have the ability to govern themselves according to their own disciplines, since these are better suited to the character of their faithful and better adapted to foster the good of souls. The perfect observance of this traditional principle, which indeed has not always been observed, is a prerequisite for any restoration of unity (UR, 16).

13.08 This venerable tradition of catholic variety in the one Church also inspired the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, which might almost be described as a manual for the concrete catholicizing of the Church. The faithful are there exhorted to make sure that the Church does not remain an alien element within their cultures and societies (AG, 31).

In undertaking this role, Christians will be fulfilling the Catholic mystery of Christ:

The seed which is the Word of God grows out of good soil watered by the divine dew, it absorbs moisture, transforms it, and makes it part of itself, so that eventually it bears much fruit. So too indeed, just as happened in the economy of the Incarnation, the young Churches, which are rooted in Christ and built on the foundations of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance (cf. Ps 3:8). They borrow from the customs, traditions, wisdom, teaching, arts and sciences of their people everything which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Savior, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life (AG, 33).

13.09 It is no paradox, then, to say that the renewed interest since the Council in the theology of the local Church expresses Vatican II's recovery of the meaning of catholicity as "fullness in unity." For catholicity and locality are not opposites. Genuine locality — that is, rootedness in the rich variety of the manifoldly human — is the achievement, the realization of concrete catholicity. The one Church is only genuinely and concretely catholic in and because of the variety of local Churches, and the local Churches are only genuinely catholic in the fullness of the one

communion.

13.10 It is a mistake, then, to counterpoise the universal Church and the local Churches, as if these were opposed entities. There is no universal Church except in and out of the local Churches, and local communities are not Churches if they are not catholic. Where the two are counterpoised, some misunderstanding is at work. Either universality is being conceived, not as concrete catholicity, but as administrative, organizational, or political uniformity, or confederation, or locality is being conceived racially, nationally, or ethnocentrically. What is at stake is a recovery of the concrete meaning of catholicity, which, unlike universality, is not the opposite of particularity, but preserves particularity and raises and integrates it into a larger and fuller unity around the common center, which is Christ the Lord.

THESIS 14

Local Churches are catholic at their heart, that is, they are Churches insofar as they are constituted by communion in the mystery of Christ, who is the head of the whole Church. In Christ and in his Spirit, they are therefore joined, by bonds of spiritual and juridical communion with all other local Churches, into the one universal Church.

14.01 A local community of faith shares in the fullness of Christ and his Spirit. Christ's Lordship and the Spirit's power transcend all particularities and integrate them all into a fullness of unity. All of the Churches, then, are one Church because what Paul said to the Ephesians can be said to all the Churches: "one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." And it is because of this founding grace of unity, that they are bound to follow his injunction to "preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:4-53). What binds the local Church together as one Body in one Spirit, therefore, is precisely what binds it together with the other local Churches as the one Catholic Church. Catholicity, then, is not an external, secondary qualification of a local Church; it is integral to its existence as the Body of Christ.

14.02 If there is a danger that catholicity can be confused with a uniform universality, there is also a danger that it can be distorted into a divisive particularity, which would betray the unity of the catholic fullness. The existence of this latter danger in the local Churches themselves is already visible in the New Testament, where Paul must address divisions within the Churches in Corinth, Galatia and Ephesus and where the Fourth Gospel's passionate exhortations to unity may be a response to

threats of schism. The wider threat has been visible in almost all ages of the Church, schisms arising almost always because ethnic, cultural or national particularities have been stressed to the point of denial of catholic unity.

14.03 From the New Testament onwards, therefore, there arose within the Churches ministries of unity, responsible for keeping the communities bound together in the apostolic faith and in mutual love. The emergence of the episcopacy and of the special role of the Bishop of Rome is explained by the need to continue this unifying role of the founding apostles. This is why Vatican II called the bishops "the visible principle and foundation of unity in their own particular Churches," and the Bishop of Rome "the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the totality of the faith" (LG, 23). Their ministry is to be the visible servants of the unity of faith and love of which the Spirit is the invisible principle. It is a sign of the intimate relationship between the divine and the human principles of unity that at the eucharist, where the Church is never more local nor more catholic, prayers of communion are expressed for the local bishop and for the Bishop of Rome.

14.04 Vatican II sought in its doctrine of collegiality to give an expression to this responsibility for local and universal unity which would correspond to its recovery of genuinely concrete catholicity. The college of bishops, it taught, "insofar as it is composed of many members, expresses the variety and universality of the People of God, while insofar as it is assembled under one head, it expresses the unity of the flock of Christ" (LG, 22). "Each bishop," it went on, "represents his own Church, whereas all, together with the pope, represent the whole Church in a bond of peace, love and unity" (LG, 23). If the variety of local Churches is a splendid manifestation of the catholicity of an undivided Church, it is only because they have a common aspiration for unity (LG, 23). If there are local Churches which legitimately retain their own traditions, there is also "the Chair of Peter, which presides over the whole assembly of charity and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute to it" (LG, 13). As the Bishop of Rome's task includes the protection of the variety of the local Churches, so also the local bishops "have the duty to foster and safeguard the unity of the faith, to uphold the discipline which is common to the whole Church, and to school the faithful in a love of the whole Mystical Body of Christ" (LG, 23).

14.05 It is quite understandable that after centuries during which a centralizing uniformity threatened the concrete dimensions of catholicity, there should be tensions in the working out of the Council's recovered

sense of the Church's "fullness in unity." These have particularly been in evidence during almost all of the Synods of Bishops held since the close of the Council. In the light of the ecclesiology of the one Church in the many Churches which we have developed here on the basis especially of the Council's teaching, the most serious danger would be to conceive or to address these tensions in terms of a polar contrast between "the local Churches" and "the universal Church" and to assign responsibility for the former solely to the local bishops and for the latter solely to the Bishop of Rome. The Council's notion of catholic communion forbids the first contrast, since the whole Church exists only in and out of the local Churches and the local Churches are not Churches except in the universal communion. Only a variety which intends unity truly realizes genuine fullness in unity. At the same time, the Council's notion of collegiality prevents the second division of tasks, since the heads of local Churches represent not only their communities of faith but the whole Church and the head of the whole Church presides over a Church which is not fully one if it is not concretely catholic.

THESIS 15

The bonds of communion and solidarity among local Churches and their bishops are expressed in episcopal conferences. These conferences are historically and theologically rooted in developments of ecclesial structures in the early Church. They are particularly necessary and fruitful instruments for the furthering of the Church's mission in each country and region in Asia and for the realization of the concrete dimensions of catholicity.

15.01 The bonds of communion and solidarity among the local Churches require concrete expression in more stable structures of episcopal collaboration and solidarity. A contemporary form of such structures are episcopal conferences in a given nation, region or even continent.

15.02 These conferences have their historical and theological roots in developments of ecclesial structures in the early Church. At almost the same time that the monarchical episcopate was universally accepted in the Churches, bishops began to gather in regional synods in order to discuss and reach a consensus with regard to problems facing them. These synods thus arose out of a sense of ecclesial collaboration, solidarity and communion.

Moreover, as the Council taught:

by divine Providence it happened that, in the course of time, different Churches ... joined together in a multiplicity of organically

united groups which, while safeguarding the unity of the faith and the unique divine structure of the universal Church, have their own discipline, enjoy their own liturgical usage and inherit a theological and spiritual patrimony. Some of these, notably the ancient patriarchal Churches, as matrices of the faith, gave birth to other daughter Churches as it were, and down to our own days they are linked with these by bonds of a more intimate charity in what pertains to the sacramental life and in a mutual respect for rights and obligations. This variety of local Churches, united in a common effort, shows all the more splendidly the catholicity of an undivided Church (LG, 23).

15.03 Finally, there have been since ancient times individual Churches, that is Churches with their own liturgical, theological, spiritual and disciplinary heritage, distinguished by the culture and historical circumstances of a people, which is expressed in the way of living the faith proper to each Church with its own law (*Schema Codicis Iuris Canonici Orientalis*, 1988 ed., C.27,2). The Council praised "the wonderful bond of union" which exists in these Churches and expressed the hope that their traditions should remain "whole and entire" (OE, 2), and solemnly declared its desire that the traditional principle of respect for the autonomy of such Churches be observed more faithfully than it has been at times in the past (UR, 16).

15.04 No one of these ancient forms of regional communion among the Churches and of solidarity among their bishops exactly coincides with the modern institution of conferences of bishops. But they point in the direction in which a theological basis for the conferences can be found. Indeed, Vatican II related the conferences, first, to the ancient, providentially directed organic groupings of Churches: "In a like fashion the episcopal conferences at the present time are in a position to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit" (LG, 23). And in its Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, it introduced its recommendation for the formal recognition of episcopal conferences by recalling the examples of episcopal solidarity represented by particular synods (CD, 36-37).

15.05 In formulating the foundations of a theology of episcopal conferences, it will suffice here to set down a few points which seem theologically valid. First, theologians and canonists today speak of elements of the Church in fact bequeathed to us by Christ and the Apostles, which must in various times and circumstances receive diverse realizations. The examples of regional communion already noted above will illustrate this. In this perspective, using the traditional language of *de iure divino* and *de iure ecclesiastico*, episcopal conferences may be said to be of ecclesiastical

law, with foundations in divine law.

It must be noted that although distinctions between what is of divine law and what is of ecclesiastical law seem quite precise in the abstract, in the concrete it is often very difficult (at times perhaps impossible!) to distinguish within the actual life and structures of the Church, what within them is of divine law and what is of (merely) ecclesiastical law.

15.06 Secondly, regarding the authority and role of ECs as instances of collegiality, we must keep in mind that Vatican Council II has both a stricter and a broader understanding of the term and reality of collegiality. Collegiality in its more strict sense entails the activity of the entire College of Bishops throughout the world in communion with the Roman Pontiff. However, in the discussion of the topic (LG, 22-23), the Council enumerates many instances of episcopal collegiality understood in a wider sense, and thus in practice sees it as an analogous and in some measure a fluid concept, under which the institution which is the contemporary EC may rightfully be included.

15.07 With these premises (15.05-15.06) we may set down the broad lines of a theology of ECs:

The Church is genuinely and concretely catholic to the degree that its own self-constitution as the mystery of Christ is a response to an engagement with the needs and challenges of the societies and cultures in which it is generated by the Word of Christ and the grace of the Spirit. In this process, the Church makes its own, preserves, fosters, and integrates into the fullness of unity the social, historical, and cultural goods of the peoples among whom it arises. The natural solidarities of these communities and traditions are not dissolved but subsumed into the ecclesial communion. They in fact are largely the grounds for the ancient organic groupings of Churches of which the Council spoke so appreciatively. Within the one Church, then, there are not only the individual diocesan communion and the worldwide universal communion; there are also regional forms of communion, with natural, historical and cultural, (that is, "organic") bonds uniting them. It is in such historical and contemporary communions of individual Churches that the real theological basis of such forms of communion and collaboration as the episcopal conferences is to be found.

15.08 If the Council's teaching on concrete catholicity is to be taken seriously, it needs to be given appropriate forms of juridical expression. One of these surely is the episcopal conference, whose role in the Church was considerably expanded in the new Code of Canon Law precisely in order to give the local Churches of a particular region greater responsibility for the realization of the Church in their particular situations.

15.09 Episcopal conferences on national or regional levels — and it may be added, federations of episcopal conferences on wider regional and continental instances (e.g., FABC, CELAM, CCEE, SECAM, AMECEA, etc.) — both in theory and in practice are particularly useful and fruitful in our time. Pope John Paul II has spoken of ECs as “very necessary, useful and sometimes indispensable” inasmuch as they correspond to the needs of the times and show themselves to be an effective instrument in guaranteeing the necessary unity of action of the bishops” (Introduction to the document of the Congregation of Bishops, “Theological and Juridical Status of Episcopal Conferences”).

15.10 ECs make it possible for bishops as a collegial body to meet and study common problems and situations which their particular dioceses face, to enter into much wider and more informed consultation on them, and under the guidance of the Spirit, to arrive more surely and more rapidly at agreement as to what should be their common judgment and decision, and if possible and desired, their common action. While there are admittedly problems connected with their proper functioning, their undeniable benefits cannot be gainsaid.

15.11 In concluding this discussion of ECs, we turn to an evaluation arising from the lived experience of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences which the Third Plenary Assembly of the Federation (Bangkok-Sampran 1982) expressed in its Final Statement.

This evaluation enumerates among the benefits derived from the FABC:

- the growth of mutual knowledge and understanding, as well as the formation of friendships, the working-out of bonds of solidarity among the Asian bishops;
- the sharing of pastoral and missionary reflection and discernment regarding options, policies, programs, initiatives and sharing even of personnel, expertise and other resources;
- the meeting together of common problems and difficulties and a moving forward toward a greater community of vision, values and priorities;
- the contribution to the ongoing reflection, theological and pastoral discernment and choices in *Churches of other continents*, and to the thought and policies of the *Church’s central administrative offices*;
- and (with special emphasis!) a greater understanding and appreciation of the meaning and role of the See of Peter within the Church catholic and universal.

15.12 The FABC III statement ends with these words which reveal another, perhaps unexpected, service which episcopal conferences and their federations can render to the Church and to the world:

The message of the historic 1970 meeting of Asian bishops spoke of "helping to bind together the new world of Asia as a true family of nations in this part of the earth, linked not only by lines of geography, but by mutual understanding and respect, by the nobler bonds of brotherhood and love."

That the Church in Asia may in some small way be a sacrament — sign and instrument (LG, 1, GS, 40) — of this unity of our peoples is surely one of the hopes of FABC, and we believe that in the Lord's designs [these] years have not been without significance for the realization of this hope.

15.13 The Church does not exist for itself; it exists as servant of Christ's redeeming work in history, for the coming of the Kingdom of God which exists now as both present and yet-to-come. The local Church bears this same vocation and mission in the place and time where God has placed it: there it must "fill up the spaces" of hope and love; there it must gather the riches of its land and its people and, together with all the local Churches throughout the world, shape the communion of all peoples which grows in the heart of human history, as promise divinely given to the heart and hands of men and women of goodwill throughout the world.

C. CONCLUSION

1. The Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC wishes to offer the foregoing theses to the bishops and bishops' conferences, to theological schools and seminaries, and to theologians and students of theology, as *the beginning of a joint reflection on the local Church*, especially in the Asian context. We hope that a large number of Christian communities may be led, perhaps for the first time, to consider the meaning and significance of the local Church in the developing situations which the Church faces in our diverse countries. We repeat: it is not our intent to present these pages in any way as a "definitive formulation" of the questions studied and the positions taken. These are *lineamenta* for discussion, at best an *instrumentum laboris*. Our sincerest hope is that a true discussion may begin, and that it will further our understanding of local Churches in our own contexts and in this moment of our history.

2. As we introduced our study paper by indicating some of the signs of the times (GS, 4.44) in contemporary Asia, and by seeking to define the Church's mission today in the context of these developments, so now as we bring these reflections to their term, we turn to the same concerns.

3. Already, as we have noted, the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC spoke of building up of the local Church as the present focus of the Church's mission in Asia. That discernment remains valid today. Valid, too, remains the priority given to the threefold dialogue, with our people's cultures, with their religious traditions, with their situations of poverty and oppression. The same agenda seems to us even more pressing today than when it was first drawn up, more than fifteen years ago.

4. More and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church. More and more "the consciousness of being Church" must penetrate all sectors and levels of our Christian communities. More and more the building up of communion-and-participation, and the fostering of mission-and-service in the world must be seen as involving all the faithful people of God, but increasingly and in a special way laymen and laywomen. To seek and respond to the active and creative presence of the Word and the Spirit in the day-to-day life of our communities should be the never-ending effort not of the hierarchy alone, but of all of us.

5. This we must do, because the mission of the Church, in obedience to the Lord of history, demands this. In the years which made up the eighties, we have seen massive shifts in humanity which manifested themselves in events which only a few years ago seemed quite impossible. We see the emergence of the world of the Third Millenium already upon us, its aspirations for freedom and solidarity rising in fresh currents of human hope, its new structures still struggling to assume shape and definition. Whether the Gospel shall be present in this new age with its unpredictable turnings and its manifold diversity will depend greatly on whether local Churches fulfill their vocation in the historic moment which is now upon them. We grasp something of the significance of local Church and inculturation in this context; those who cannot understand this fail to resonate with the signs of our time, and the heartbeat of our peoples.

6. We must surely be grateful that we experience today the "rush of the Spirit" in our Churches. For it is a privileged moment for local theological reflection and discernment, for the gathering and spending of energies, for the upbuilding of authentic local Churches in our part of the world. It is a time for pastoral and missionary boldness which responds to Christ our Lord as he calls us to be with him now, now when he continues in so many creative ways to suit himself to our humanity and to shape the future of each of our nations.

7. We can only pray that we may listen and be obedient to the Spirit, that we may be guided by his creative power and be filled by the commitment and courage which are his gifts. Thus may the Third Millenium of

Christian history increasingly foreshadow the Kingdom of God among us and bring to realization a Church of all peoples in the service of that Kingdom. Thus may we participate in the hallowing of God's name on earth as in heaven, in that world of communion which — from the Father, Son and Spirit — grows within humanity as both gift and task for men and women of goodwill all over the face of the earth.

D. PASTORAL COROLLARIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that the theology of the local Church which we have here presented indicates some courses of action that are helpful and perhaps even necessary for the formation of truly local Churches. We beg to submit the following recommendations to the bishops and other pastoral agents.

I. The Biblical Apostolate

“The People of God finds its unity first of all through the Word of the living God” (P0, 4). There is a basic necessity of making the Word of God available to our people so that they can respond to it. It is only when the Word “germinates and grows” in its encounter with the genius and culture of a people that genuine inculturation takes place and the Churches become truly local. Hence:

1. We recommend that the Bible be brought within the financial reach of people of ordinary means, and even be given free to those who cannot afford them.
2. The Bible should be made available in the language(s) of the majority of people.
3. The faithful should be taught to appreciate the cultural context of the biblical message, and the distinction of the content of this message from its cultural expression. Thus, they will be led to see the errors of fundamentalist and literalistic approaches to the Bible.
4. The faithful should also be encouraged to express the biblical message through their local cultural media, especially through art forms. They should be taught different ways of reading, praying and sharing the Word of God.

II. Catechesis

The 1977 Synod of Bishops pointed out that “catechesis must without doubt have the first priority” (*Message of the Synod*). This is true especially in the formation of a local Church. Hence:

1. We recommend the promotion and development of a truly inculturated catechesis, i.e., a catechesis that uses the cultural medium of the people in the communication of the Christian message, and helps the faithful to assimilate the faith through their own cultural resources, i.e., their own images, symbols, language, songs, stories, etc.
 - a) A basic requirement here is the formulation of a national catechetical directory for each country.
 - b) Even with the coming publication of a universal catechism, the production of inculturated catechisms for the local Churches remains a necessity.
 - c) The Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) should be widely employed and adapted in the preparation of catechumens.
2. People must be educated through appropriate catechesis in the importance of inculturating the faith.
3. In catechetical institutes, inculturation should be fostered, and catechists carefully formed for an “inculturated catechesis.”

III. Theology

The theology of the local Church enters as a relatively new theme in Asian Churches. On the other hand, its understanding is very important for the promotion of the growth of truly local Churches. Hence:

1. We recommend that theological discussion on the local Church be promoted and supported. Specifically, we respectfully recommend the use of these theses in the ongoing formation of priests, in seminaries, religious houses, theologates and seminars, since they are the products of genuinely Asian theological reflection.
2. We recommend the use of the vernacular languages in the teaching of theology. The thought-patterns and mindsets to be developed among students of theology should be closer to the people's ways of thinking.
3. We also recommend the use of a theological methodology that moves from experience to reflection, and then returns to experience.
4. The development of narrative (“story-telling”) theology in relation to inculturation should be explored, especially in theological and catechetical centers.

IV. Pastoral Life

It is above all in the day-to-day pastoral activity of a local Church that it becomes a truly local Church. Hence:

1. While we acknowledge the usefulness of the present parish structure, we believe that in many places it is no longer adequate to meet the needs of the present-day faithful and the needs of the Church's mission. We need to foster the growth of the local Church by encouraging other complementary ways of being Church, like the basic ecclesial communities (BECs), charismatic communities and neo-catechumenal communities, provided that the ways and methods of forming and developing such communities be also inculturated.
2. We strongly urge the continued fostering of the maximum active participation of our lay faithful in the life of the local Church, so that Church leadership may respond more and more genuinely to the local Church's mission in its own milieu. We thus recommend that courses of theology, appropriately inculturated, be made increasingly available for our lay faithful, who (we know) increasingly desire relevant and significant theological formation.
3. In many of our dioceses the centrality of the eucharist in parishes and other communities is unrealizable within the presently-obtaining framework of ministries. Hence we must explore the possibility of restructuring this framework, in order to ensure that our Christian community life does in fact truly center around the eucharistic celebration in accordance with the patristic saying, "The Church makes the eucharist; *the eucharist makes the Church.*" Appropriate recommendations can thus be brought up to the competent instances in the Church.
4. We also propose that there be differentiated formation programs for candidates for the priestly ministry, well-adapted to the mission and needs of the local Churches.

V. Liturgy

The liturgy is the expression and celebration of the faith and is at the same time also the fountain of faith in the local Church. Hence:

1. We recommend more leeway be given in inculturating the liturgy. Responsible experiments in the liturgy with "control groups," accompanied and fostered by due catechesis, should be encouraged so that new inculturated liturgical expressions may be discovered and developed.

2. We urge the episcopal conferences eventually to approve and present for general use among their faithful some diverse inculturated liturgical expressions.

VI. Popular Piety

The common people express their faith in forms of worship and celebration which bind them together as a believing people — forms which popular customs and traditions have shaped through history.

We recommend a deeper study of popular religious piety and its various practices with a view to encouraging the use of those forms and practices that truly build up the local Church. Inauthentic practices of popular piety should be corrected or discouraged, after careful reflection and evaluation.

VII. Spirituality

The local Church is built up through the growth in the spiritual life of the faithful, within their community life. Hence:

1. The lay faithful should be formed to discover God's call in their family-life situations, occupations and professions. They should be helped to relate the Word of God to the events of their daily lives. The Sunday homily is a very important help to this.
2. An Asian spirituality and Asian ways of praying — drawing also from the religious and cultural heritage of the people — should be fostered among the lay faithful and in houses of priestly and religious formation and contemplation. Places of prayer and meditation should also be made available to the lay faithful.
3. Religious should especially be helped to cultivate an inculturated spirituality by being freed from foreign modes of speech, dressing, ways of acting and praying, and by being encouraged to integrate themselves into the life and mission of the local Church. The preferential option for the poor is a great help towards this integration.
4. We recommend that the Asian bishops take decisive and creative initiatives to provide greater inculturation in the formation of priests.

VIII. Diocesan Institutes

Because ongoing research is necessary for the furtherance of inculturation in a rapidly evolving world:

We recommend that dioceses or groups of dioceses set up institutes of culture and society to promote a growth in cultural awareness and to foster research on how to express Christian belief and values through the people's cultural media.

In these institutes, ways of working out the preferential option for the poor — which has profound consequences for inculturation and the building of a truly local Church — can be creatively devised.

IX. Mass Media

Aware as we are of the pervasive influence of the mass media, we recommend that the local Churches use them extensively and professionally to express Christian belief and values, and to make Christians aware of the importance of inculturation and of the local Church.

X. Social Apostolate

In Asian countries today, perhaps the most effective and most direct approach to inculturation of the local Church is the living out of the “preferential love for the poor.” Since we are surrounded by “the vast multitudes of the poor” in so many Asian countries, the incarnation of the Church in the midst of these multitudes inserts it profoundly and continuously in the “people's culture.” A local Church which truly shares the life and loss of the poor in the society in which it exists brings into being the Body of Christ within and amongst the poorer sectors, and fulfills the Gospel mandate of “the poor having the Good News preached to them.”

Thus, the formation of Basic Ecclesial Communities among the poor is an especially authentic way of fostering a process of inculturation which actualizes the Church's presence in the working-out of that human development and human liberation which is rooted in the life and message of Jesus. Hence, this is one of our most urgent recommendations.

XI. Bishops and Episcopal Conferences

The individual bishops and episcopal conferences should be the chief agents and promoters of inculturation and of the local Church. Hence, we recommend:

1. That episcopal conferences make efforts to study the meaning and significance of the local Church and of the episcopal conference itself;
2. That episcopal conferences take positive steps in inculturating priestly formation, catechesis and the liturgy;

3. That they should study how inculturation and the local Church are not a hindrance to, but rather an enhancement of the communion of local Churches, and how inculturation leads to a better appreciation of the Catholic communion of Churches;
4. That each episcopal conference set up a theological commission which will serve as an organ of theological reflection at the service of the local episcopate. Where such a theological commission is in place, the episcopal conferences should put them to use and engage in dialogue with them (cf. AG, no. 22).

* * *

We trust we have now completed the main work of the assignment given us by our bishops and episcopal conferences who have called on us to render them this service of formulating a theology of the local Church. The importance of this theme and its significance for an ecclesiology relevant to the Church in Asia has given us both inspiration and courage for our work. We hope that it will be of genuine service to the Church, of whose communion and mission we wish to be not wholly unprofitable servants.

We in the Theological Advisory Commission have in presenting our theses clearly indicated that they are being sent out for study and discussion by appropriate groups: theological centers and institutes, associations of theologians, individual theologians and catechetical experts, bishops and their advisers, and the like. We ask that feedback on these theses be sent to us,* if at all possible, by Ash Wednesday of 1991. This feedback will be most helpful, and even necessary, for further revision of the theses.

*Please send all communications to the Theological Advisory Commission, FABC Central Secretariat, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong (FAX 8453095). Kindly send your observations to this address by Ash Wednesday, February 13, 1991, so that the Commission may have them on time for its Spring 1991 meeting. Thank you! FABC – TAC.

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