

ANOTHER GOSPEL FOR ASIA?

by

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It is only natural to hold ceremonial celebrations marking the twenty-five years since Vatican II. Two recent happenings are of great significance for the universal mission of the Church.

Two Important Roman Documents

The first is the document "Dialogue and Proclamation," published by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). The Pope himself spoke of it on April 26, 1989, while addressing the participants in the plenary meeting of the same body. The English version of the papal address that appeared in *L'Osservatore Romano* the following day may have escaped the attention of many. This year the PCID (previously it was a secretariat) celebrates five good years of its existence, and twenty-five years of the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on the Church's relations with non-Christian religions. The new document is bound to cause a sensation because it appears only six years after "Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission," which highlighted the need of a more precise and accurate study of "the relations between the dialogue with members of other religions, and the mandate given by Christ himself of proclaiming the Good News of the Father's salvific events," as the Holy Father observes.¹

The second is an encyclical of John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, "The Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate," intended to relaunch the mission *ad gentes* twenty-five years after the promulgation of the conciliar decree "On the Church's Missionary Activity," which bears the title *Ad Gentes*. Some journals have made mention of it, seizing on indiscreet voices, adding unwarranted and provocative comments, e.g., the Pope is beginning to fear that dialogue is overwhelming the proclamation of Christ. In fact, John Paul II is very concerned about the "new evangelization" and the "permanent mission of carrying the Gospel to the millions and millions

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of men and women still ignorant of Christ, the Redeemer of man." At the same time he is, and he has always been, right from the start of his pontificate, an ardent promoter and protagonist of both interreligious dialogue and Gospel proclamation, considering them clearly inseparable tasks of the evangelizing mission of the Church.

This does not take away the fact that it remains difficult to put dialogue and proclamation together. We have already dealt with this elsewhere.² The very topic calls up grave and thorny problems, which are far from being thoroughly examined. The Pope himself recalled this in the address mentioned above:

A more careful theological investigation is still to be made concerning the relation between the Church and other religions. The question of how God effects the salvation, through the one mediation of Christ of all those who invoke him is one of those questions which demand the continuous attention of the Church; as, for example, the action of the Spirit of Christ in the members of other religions.

This said, it has to be immediately added that the Pontiff has again stressed the importance of an ever deeper and authentic dialogue with other religions, not so much as an idea to be studied but as a way of living with others.

It is within this same line and with this same spirit that I return to the theme of dialogue and proclamation, this time with a particular reference to Asia. It is precisely there that a distinct sensitiveness for and involvement with dialogue are found and, I think, it is precisely there again that one risks putting proclamation on the sideline. And that occurs not so much at the level of practical attempts of confronting particular concrete situations, as at the level of certain theories which tend to support a vision and model of evangelization which seem to ignore or place in crisis fundamental points of faith and Christian life which are basic to the same mission of the Church. Certainly, evangelization needs a new approach to suit times and places, but it also has immutable principles, contents and criteria.

I. THE COPERNICAN REVOLUTION OF THE MISSION

The "different" evangelization claimed today by some for Asia favors, even to making it absolute, the so-called "Kingdom-centered" model of mission. They say that the duty of the Church in the contemporary Asian continent is not so much to proclaim Christ, or even to baptize, or to found new Christian communities, but, above all, to promote justice, love, unity and peace, together with all men, and particularly with members of the various religions.

As Indian theologian Jacob Kavunkal writes: "What is urgently needed is not so much making Indians Christians, as Christianizing India in the sense of transforming the Indian society at large through the Gospel values ... That is to say, we have to reverse the shift not only from Church to Christ, but also from Christ to the Kingdom he proclaimed."³ And theologian S.J. Emmanuel of Sri Lanka adds: "It is now time for a sincere and committed review of our faith, of the form (formula) and content of our belief and to confront the consequences of such a renewed faith for Asian Churches moving towards God's Kingdom."⁴

These statements are not the exception. The writings of many Asian theologians and missiologists clearly show that there is under way a deep and general transformation of the understanding of evangelization. It is not a question of this or that particular point about evangelization but it is, rather, a matter of an overall program in which the very "Kingdom-centered" model — which it is meant to derive from evangelization — makes evangelization itself not easy to understand. Michael Amaladoss speaks of a "Copernican revolution" which embraces all: "Under the impact of a positive experience of other religions, the center of the framework is shifting from the Church to the Kingdom. This change is making us look in a new way at Christ, at the Church, at salvation and at the missions."⁵ Here we are at the nerve centers of this revolution.

In the Beginning, the Dialogue

Indeed, evangelization in Asia is seen as a complex reality. The fact that the Christian and Catholic communities are more or less small minorities constitutes a crucial factor in the continent, which numbers more than 60% of the world's population and boasts of very ancient, rich and vital cultures and religions. Moreover, there is the distressing drama of enormous poor masses, the presence of the most diverse forms of oppression — often interwoven with domination by the Christian West — a diversity of situations among the countries, peoples, local traditions, and a still greater diversity between the East and the West. All this is enough to understand the difficulty facing an evangelizing mission coming from the First World.

Therefore, our authors agree that for Asia the situation requires an all-embracing concept of mission which knows how to incorporate dialogue, liberation, inculturation, proclamation, etc. To think that any one of these elements would be the sum and ideal of evangelization would also be an error according to them. However, it is clear from what they say that the dialogue has a priority, so much so that it often seems to exclude the others and to sum up in itself all the others. This is due to the fact that dialogue, as they understand it, concerns itself with religions, cultures, poverty and oppression. Dialogue is interreligious, intercultural and liberationist, and, in

this sense, is the road to the building up of the Kingdom.

J. Kavunkal has written a book on evangelization in India today, in which he maintains that in the Indian nation, divided as it is in many aspects (races, cultures, religions, castes, languages, etc.), the Church's duty is to unite Christians and non-Christians in building up, through social transformation and dialogue, the human community in relation to the Kingdom. To speak of the growth of the Church, of conversions and baptisms in such a context sounds problematic and embarrassing. In short, the Church in India is called upon to be a catalyst for a new community of God, by means of a dialogue of life with members of other religions. In a multireligious society, such as that of India, Christians must rid themselves of every claim to exclusiveness, such as that of being the only people of God. The Christian uniqueness is to be a sacrament of unity and reconciliation. Unlike other non-Christian countries, India has a great respect for Christ and is not opposed to the values of Jesus and the Kingdom. As for the Church's expansion, this is simply religious colonialism rather than authentic spiritual activity.⁶

Centered more directly on dialogue, Father S.J. Emmanuel's discourse is developed in a series of theses. He considers that the time has come for a shifting from a praxis of good religious neighborliness to a more basic and challenging relationship. The interreligious dialogue in Asia is being undertaken and articulated not through prefabricated institutions and a priori directives of authority but by way of basic experiences orientated to a theology of praxis. In this way, "Asian Churches will no more be self-centered institutions for uprooting people from their native religions and cultures and transplanting them within their boundaries (no more proselytism!). They will be 'other-centered' communities striving to contribute as 'light of the nations' in dispelling the evil and darkness which inhibit our society."⁷

These are the experiences of dialogue "at the base," undergone by radical Christians, which provide the raw material for new Christologies and ecclesiologies. In fact, for Emmanuel, dialogue is at a crucial turning point. Now Asian Christians are called upon no longer to consider how other religions stand in relation to Christianity, but rather how Christianity situates itself in the midst of other religions and cultures. This is a search which is not in opposition to the authentic Christian faith, nor is it intimidated by false fears of syncretism, but rather believes that the Jewish-Christian revelation does not exhaust all the divine revelations, that the religio-cultural pluralism is a fact which unveils "the whole divine plan" for humanity. And this obliges us to rethink and look again at the absolutist and exclusivist claims of traditional Christology and ecclesiology, in order to give them a liberating dimension.

Proclamation and Conversion under Suspicion

In such a complete and radical dialogue what is not acceptable is the proclamation of Christ the Lord and Redeemer, conversions sealed by baptism, and the establishment of new Christian communities. Certainly, it is admitted that all these are parts of a comprehensive view of evangelization and are valid, and can be a duty, but they are not the needs of the times. In fact, they seem negative and counter-productive in the actual Asian context, so much so, that for these writers such elements are charged with hostile connotations for historical and existential reasons.

A careful and subtle theologian like M. Amaladoss thinks that proclamation, at a quick glance, is not distinct from dialogue, liberation and inculturation, but is instead one dimension of these activities, which constitute "proclamation done in various ways according to the requirements of the situation."⁸ However, is not a concrete gesture of openness to others or a witness of life worth much more than a message? Moreover, proclamation, when not seen in the context of the reality of believers of other religions, does not appear to be a theological problem.⁸ Amaladoss affirms explicitly that he does not wish to abolish proclamation and reduce it to dialogue. Like the other Asian theologians, he considers them as two poles of a dialectic. However, he does not see the importance of proclamation but prefers to speak about witness, which has a relevance to life.

In reality, proclamation is suspect, because it arouses in members of the other religions the notion that one is looking to convert, to make proselytes and to enlarge the Christian community. J. Kavunkal has written much on what Hindus think about converting to other beliefs. In a country where different religious communities are governed by different "personal laws," converting to another religion involves unavoidable political and social consequences. It is not seen as a spiritual event, but as a renunciation of one's own community in favor of others; and one has to admit that it is a complicated and crucial affair. However, the major scandal is found on the religious level, and in this sense it is too much for a communal society such as that of India.

Religious conversion is the result of Western chauvinism and intolerance, jeopardizing peace and harmony. The conversion motive inevitably springs from a sense of one's religion as superior to another, whereas no one religion has a monopoly of the truth. Knowledge of God belongs to all religious traditions. Feelings of superiority create tensions and hatred among the followers of different faiths... If a Christian were to approach a Hindu Guru for spiritual guidance the Guru would not ask his Christian pupil to discard his allegiance to Christ but would tell him that his idea of Christ was not adequate and would lead him to the

knowledge of the real Christ, the non-bodily Supreme.⁹

Furthermore, add our writers, is not the biblical conversion demanded by Christ in the context of the Kingdom? Along this line, Kavunkal and others spell out a conversion inherent in dialogue and its great value. Dialogue calls for "a spiritual process of change, a more generous submission to the Divine. It gives rise to a type of mutual incorporation, an experience of growth in a tighter communion," without aiming at changing religion. It assures a deepening of one's own faith and an openness to others. It is a challenge and a risk. A religious person enters a dialogue as a pilgrim, ready to be converted to the truth. But it is more of a conversion of life than of doctrine, a greater readiness to imitate Christ rather than theologize about Christ. In conclusion:

The conversion that dialogue brings about is a vertical movement to God and a genuine renewal of life without necessarily implying a horizontal movement from one group or community to another, causing destabilization from cultural or religious displacement. As far as India is concerned, at a time when so many dividing forces like language, caste and religion are working against national integration, and when religions are rousing deep passions leading to violence and destruction, to press for religious conversions may be equivalent of joining the forces against the values of the Kingdom.¹⁰

These are Kavunkal's final observations. Christianity has failed in Asia because of its crusade against religions. Now we are aware that the coming of the Kingdom is not a question of increasing the number of Christians until all enter the Church. Therefore, the conversion effected by dialogue assumes a greater significance. It expresses the salvific value of the various religious traditions. It corrects the tendency to narrow the divine plan by limiting the call to conversion only to those groups disposed to such. It gives rise to conversions both within and outside the Church, and perhaps today there is more need of conversion *from within* than *from without*.

The Church and its Mission

To ask questions about the Church and her mission would lead to answers already well known, but, nevertheless, this must be done here, for it represents another step in understanding evangelization's "Copernican revolution," which we are describing. What then is to be said about the Church and her role?

After abstruse and ambiguous remarks on dialogue and conversion, Kavunkal takes pains to conclude:

However, what we have been saying does not cancel the need for having a community of disciples, the Church, that has experienced the all-inclusive love of the Father in Jesus and commits itself to continue his mission. Hence it is natural that the Church will always be open to receive new members who want to bind themselves to this community through baptism.¹¹

Kavunkal has expressed his thought more fully elsewhere. In contrast with the priority that missionary activity gave in the past to baptism, he stresses that Jesus called people to conversion in view of the Kingdom, proclaimed by him as a full and clear expression, and a realization of his experience of the Father, "the Abba experience." Jesus communicated this unique experience of his to the disciples; through himself, he made them share in the communion with the Father and in his sonship, and he sends them, as the Father had sent him, to make all men participate in this experience. This is, then, the mission of the Church: to reveal that God, in whom many already believe, is a loving Father, a Father of all men and women, caring for all his sons and daughters. To accept this God implies acceptance of equality and fraternity. The Church must challenge all men to decide for or against this Father and his will, which is "love-justice."

The Church is sent to arouse conversion from sin and egoism to love and justice. She does not despise religious traditions, which Christ did not come to abolish, but she seeks dialogue and collaboration, witnessing to the love of God which calls all to turn to the Father. Being a humble servant of the Kingdom, her mission is to help it be realized to an ever greater extent within history, which implies enabling the followers of other religions to be better followers.¹²

The position of M. Amaladoss is more elaborate. He observes that the Church can be considered under many aspects: as a visible institution with her creed, her rites, her organization — in this sense she is one religion among others; as mystical Body of Christ — but under the mystical aspect she is not relevant in the context of other religions and of history; as a religion — we cannot attribute to her the uniqueness and universality we give to Christ. Often one imagines salvation history in terms of a growth of the Church up to the point of embracing the whole world, while Scripture speaks instead of a remnant, of a persecuted community. "I think that the image of the Church as servant, proclaiming the mystery of God's Kingdom, ready to offer its life as a witness, may be more authentic than the one of a triumphalistic army."¹³

In what does the Church's mission consist?

Its service is precisely that of helping the unification of all humankind

by promoting a human community of dialogue and collaboration. Its task is to proclaim Jesus and his mystery, more in action than in words, so that others too are challenged by him and turn to God — are “converted.” Some may be called to join the community of his disciples. Others may undergo real change while remaining in their own religions. The concrete way in which the transformation and unification will take place is a mystery that is known to God alone. All we can do is to be faithful witnesses in action, not only of the mystery of God’s love, but of its self-sacrificing manifestation in Jesus.¹⁴

Elsewhere he tries to link this type of service to the world with the building of a Church truly and fully local — a very keen concern of the Church in Asia. His answer is quite simple: “We can therefore specify the task of mission as twofold: building up the Kingdom of God and, in its service, building the Church.”¹⁵

New Ecclesiologies and Christologies

Dogmatizing the concept of a “Kingdom-centered” mission, it is necessary to find new ecclesiologies and Christologies. What does this mean and how can it be done? S.J. Emmanuel offers some general affirmations, which are, however, a synthesis of widespread convictions and research. According to him, the ecclesiology and Christology imported from the West are not up to responding to the needs of Asian pluralism because of their monopolist and exclusivist absolutism. On the other hand, Asia is not devoid of “the necessary religio-cultural and socio-economic categories that can grasp and express belief in Jesus Christ and his Church. Hence we are faced with the obligation to rediscover Jesus the Christ from the biblical sources through Asian categories and allow an Asian Christology to evolve in history.” The same applies to ecclesiology, which is called to rediscover the constitutive elements of the first Christian communities, in order that the present Christian communities may walk towards a new ecclesiogenesis.

The Sri Lankan theologian then offers concrete directives. It is necessary to develop thoroughly the conciliar orientations against “the absolutist and exclusivist stance of the Church with regard to itself,” and to overcome the ecclesiology of the Counter-Reformation. The difficulty of harmonizing traditional Christian teaching with the religious and local cultures, as perceived by the Council, must drive us to new investigations of the faith. Only God is absolutely “absolute”; religions, Christianity included, may enjoy “a limited absoluteness,” which can be reconciled with religious pluralism, with salvific values in other religions, and even salvation in the other religions. Every religion has a “relative absoluteness” which differs from God’s absoluteness. “Religious beliefs and their practices are only experiences of an Absolute Reality far beyond their limits.”

For Emmanuel, the same applies to Christology, though in a different way. The heresies of the first centuries have driven the universal Church to a Christology which "gradually reduced the functional claims of Jesus as Christ and increased an ontological absolutism about his being and nature." Hence, an exaggerated Christocentrism at the cost of theocentrism. The unquestioned acceptance of the dogma of Chalcedon defining the unity of the person of Christ has led us "to overlook an important distinction between the historical Jesus and his Christological titles and has helped to identify totally Jesus as Christ and Christ as Jesus." Now, it is not a question of opening the door to heresies but to take up the objection of those who see "an important and necessary distinction between the once and for all definitive event of the historical Jesus and the Christological titles given to him later by particular beliefs and cultures that accepted him."¹⁶

It is, indeed, along this line that several attempts at the new Christologies in Asia run. Emmanuel mentions A. Pieris, another Sri Lankan theologian, a scholar of Asian cultures and religions, one of the major protagonists of the efforts to create a Christology (and ultimately a theology) incarnated in the religio-cultural and socio-economic realities of Asia. He holds that in the last phase of the New Testament the concept of God underwent gradual changes, when Christianity met with the non-Jewish cultures. Consequently, God gradually ceased to be the proper name of the Father and became so elastic a term as to be able to be applied also to Jesus. Since Revelation is expressed through cultural paradigms, one cannot make absolute the Chalcedonian model, or oblige Asia to make a simple version of it. Asia can and must reformulate the faith in its own categories.

For Pieris, then, what causes problems is not the uniqueness (every person is "unique" in a way) but the absoluteness, by which Christians say that Christ is the Son of God, and Buddhists call Gautama *Dharma* ("Saving Truth") or *Buddha* ("Enlightened One"). Pieris also thinks that, in both cases, they have ended up by totally identifying the concrete person with the titles given him by the believing community. Christology consists in interpreting Jesus as the exclusive means of salvation for all. But what saves is neither the interpretation nor the titles, which are human categories limited to a given culture. "What saves is the very reality which mediates, in whatever manner it may be recognized or named." Besides, it is the praxis which matters, and here every religion has something to teach. Christology and Buddhology complement each other. In dialogue the Christians learn from the Buddhists "gnostic detachment" (voluntary poverty), and the Buddhists learn from Christians "fraternal commitment" (struggle against imposed poverty).¹⁷

Religious Pluralism and the Trinity

The views of A. Pieris are found in various works of Asian theologians

and students of religion. An Indian Jesuit, Ishanand Vempeny, has recently published a large volume on Krishna and Christ. It is a kind of very scholarly encyclopedia which illustrates, with a dialogical method, the two great religious figures, in the light of some concepts and fundamental themes of Hinduism and Christianity, in particular, as found in the Bhagavad Gita on the one hand, and in the New Testament on the other. It is a colossal study of comparative religion, the result of which is that the author upholds a complementarity of the two beliefs, in the sense that they are equal in acquitting their own functions well and that they can enrich each other. Thus Vempeny can speak of an exclusivism in every tradition at the level of historical data, and at the same time of an "enlightened inclusivism" at the level of values. One can say that a devotee of Krishna is an anonymous devotee of Christ, and vice-versa.

A confirmation of this is found in the life of Hindu and Christian saints. Studying them, Vempeny is convinced that deep down the realization of Krishna is not very different from that of Christ. Rama Krishna Paramahansa, a spiritual Hindu, explains the fact in this way:

It is one and the same *Avatara* (descent, incarnation) that, having plunged into the ocean of life, rises up in one place and is known as Krishna, and dividing again rises in another place and is known as Christ.

Vempeny admits it is difficult for a Christian to accept this, but it is not so, perhaps, for the mystics. To confirm this, he quotes a phrase of R. Panikkar, a famous Spanish-Indian priest, a scholar and great protagonist of interreligious dialogue, who affirms:

I would say that there is a primordial theandric fact, which appears in a certain fullness in Jesus, but which is manifested and at work everywhere. This is the Mystery which exists since the beginning of time and which will only appear in the end of time in its "capital" fullness. It is in my opinion a disheartening "microdoxy" to monopolize that Mystery and make of it the private property of Christians only.¹⁸

Obviously, not all Asian authors express themselves in the same way, but Panikkar has a following. M. Amaladoss asks himself: "What is Christ's significance in religious pluralism?" Today, on the Christian side, the various responses to this question are commonly classified into three categories: the *exclusivists* who for salvation demand an explicit faith in Christ as the Redeemer. For them the Church is the only way to salvation. The *inclusivists*, who consider the various religions as capable of mediating salvation for their members, but it is always and only a matter of salvation in Jesus Christ, for whom these believers are "anonymous" Christians and linked in some way to the Church. Christ is the fulfilment of the religions and the center of salvation

history. The *pluralists*, who hold that inclusivism still savors of paternalism and condescension, and therefore see in the religions true and proper paths toward the Ultimate, the Absolute, each in its own way: Christ is the way for Christians, Buddha for the Buddhists, Krishna or Rama for the Hindus, etc. They opt for a "theocentrism" which has no place for "Christocentrism."

However, Amaladoss evaluates these paradigms as insufficient and aprioristic, if taken integrally and in isolation. One needs to take into greater account the fact that the relation between God and man is lived in a context of a culture and of a history, and therefore embraces a dual aspect: absolute, insofar as it is a commitment to faith; relative, inasmuch as it is conditioned by culture and by history. It is always God who saves, but in and through religion and not because of it. In fact, God is always present and active in creation and in history, in various ways, according to his sovereign liberty, which are, however, related to one another. Here arises the question of Jesus Christ.

Certainly, says Amaladoss, Jesus is the Christ. But "Christ" can indicate distinct realities: the Word, the Word incarnate, the Risen Christ, the eschatological Christ They are not to be separated, since Christ is only one person, but they are to be distinguished. Thus, the historical Jesus is limited by his humanity, culture and history. The universality of Christ is not obtained by universalizing his particularity, but by putting it in the context of the universal action of the Word, which includes all God's manifestations in history, and not just that expressed in Jesus. So he reaches his conclusion: Jesus is the Christ, but Christ is more than Jesus. He is that Mystery which includes all the divine manifestations.

At this point the discussion about Christ gets mixed in with that about the Spirit, which Amaladoss does not develop much but which is particularly dear to Asian theologians. Amaladoss himself speaks of many theologians who differentiate God's manifestations in Christ from those in the Spirit and speak of the universality of the Mystery of Christ thanks to the universality of the Spirit, which is present and operates everywhere, even where Christ is not acknowledged. But it is known that some theologians tend to describe the activity of the Spirit as detached from that of Christ, also in reaction to those who reduce the action of the Spirit to that of Jesus Christ. In any case, in the Spirit present and working everywhere, many find another reason to affirm the salvific value of the different religions.

In the last analysis, for Amaladoss, "the profound meaning of affirming that Christ is the universal Savior is that God is really the Savior of all people." He is not a God limited to a particular people whose action is restricted to a given historical and cultural tradition. Christ and the Spirit are active everywhere:

Our task is not to carry Christ where he is not present, but rather to discover him where he is, sometimes in mysterious ways unknown to us.¹⁹

II. VOICES OF THE ASIAN CHURCHES

After having listened to some Asian theologians and scholars of religions — a few names, but representing widespread ideas — let us look at the Asian Church expressing herself with reference to the evangelization of their continent today. We limit ourselves here naturally to the particular perspective of our subject and to those voices that seem more significant in the ecclesial context. So let us now develop in detail the reflections found in the organisms and events of ecclesial relevance.

Evangelization in the Plenary Assemblies of FABC

We turn in a special way to the assemblies of the FABC (Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences), an organism set up definitively in 1972. Since then, it has held five plenary assemblies: Taipei (1974), on evangelization in Asia today; Calcutta (1978), on prayer and the life of the Church in Asia; Bangkok (1982), on the Church as a community of faith; Tokyo (1986), on the vocation and the mission of the laity; and Bandung (Indonesia) in 1990, on some of the challenges to evangelization of Asia. However, already in 1970 the Asian bishops had met for the first time in Manila, with Paul VI; and in 1979, again at Manila, at the International Missionary Congress of Asia, specifically organized by the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples to review the Church's mission.

Referring to the texts published on these occasions, of which we have already made a particular study,²⁰ we can say that the great preoccupation of the Asian Church, right from the inception of FABC, has been to put itself on the path towards becoming a Church "truly local and missionary." At Taipei, the bishops declared:

The primary focus of our task of evangelization, then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local Church. For the local Church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time ... The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with living traditions, the cultures, the religions ...²¹

In these texts one perceives the fulness and foundational aspect given to the meaning of the local Church and to the dynamism towards its realization, which in turn assigns a primary role to dialogue, broadly understood. From it is derived a concept of an all-embracing and dynamic evangelization, in

line with the Synod of Bishops of 1974, and the subsequent Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The obligation of proclaiming the Gospel is strictly bound up here with the other elements of mission: inculturation, interreligious dialogue, promotion of integral development, of justice, fraternity, peace. The Missionary Congress of Manila deepens this viewpoint and gives its seal of approval. The message and the work of its nine study groups all outline a series of priorities, needs, directives, which are not always easy to bring together. Many questions remain unanswered, but some points have been settled.

The conversion of Asia to Christ is a great challenge, as many Asians feel attracted to Christ and to his Gospel but not to the Church. The Christian communities are exhorted to be converted, to live the Gospel they profess, to adopt an Asian spirit and face, to enter into dialogue in order to discover the universal love of God and to promote justice and peace together with everyone. For this:

Every local Church is sent by Christ and by the Father to bring the Gospel to her surroundings and also to the whole world... In every local Church, the history of each people, the culture, the meanings, the values, the traditions must be taken up, not subdued and destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if necessary, and brought to fulfilment (as the Council teaches in *Ad Gentes*) in the life of the Spirit.

It is, then, a vision of mission that obliges *ad intra* and *ad extra*. From within, by a growth of the interior vitality of the Christian community, which must live by prayer and faith. The FABC plenary assembly of Calcutta, while affirming the tasks of mission, strictly links them to the praying dimension of the Church, stimulating the community to renew itself by drawing also from the experiences of the Asian religions. The plenary assembly of Bangkok denounces the insufficient interiorization of faith and adhesion to the criteria of the Gospel and traces the ways for a personal and communal renewal, interior and concrete in all spheres of existence. In Tokyo, there are outlined the missionary obligations of the laity in the Church and in the world.

The task *ad extra* is recalled but this remains rather muted in the plenary assemblies after the first one. It is the merit of the Missionary Congress of 1979 to have relaunched it, and it will be kept alive, until its forceful re-emergence very recently through the agency set up by FABC for that express task, as we shall see.

For a Church of the Poor

Within this all-embracing meaning of evangelization the Church of Asia has established some objectives of great importance, which have been

followed up through the work of suitable commissions for reflection and study. Here we find three areas which interest us above all in our present study: social action, dialogue and the missionary apostolate.²³

The Office of Human Development, set up in 1972 at the beginning of FABC, has held seven BISA (Bishops' Institute for Social Action) meetings from 1974 to 1986. In 1987 there took place also the first Asian Institute for Social Action (AISA), which formulated a three-year program to prepare for the BISA VII of 1990-1991. But aside from these structures and activities, we must describe those points that touch on the meaning and the task of a Church of the poor in Asia.

Above all, there is the conviction of being called personally to a cause. Already in Manila in 1970 the bishops asserted:

It is our resolve, first of all, to be more truly "the Church of the poor." If we are to place ourselves at the side of the multitudes in our continent, we must in our way of life share something of their poverty. The Church cannot set up islands of affluence in a sea of want and misery.²⁴

From now on, the Church in Asia assumes the courageous stance of denouncing every form of injustice, and at the same time becomes directly involved in integral development. The option for the poor, seen as an option of faith, becomes the model to follow in daily practice. The Tokyo assembly describes the mission in a "messianic" key, that is, as a commitment to liberation incumbent upon all Christians, clergy and laity.

In the same line, a direct and experiential contact with poverty is to be sought. The various BISA meetings instituted what is called a program of "immersion-exposure," in order to allow for the bishops to live, even if briefly, in the most diverse situations of poverty, to be able to see, judge and decide, after having had personal experience. After the phase of experience there follows a social analysis of the realities, and finally, a reflection which is linked to the cultural-religious inheritance of Asia, and which through contemplation strives to read the action of God in history and in life.

The following are some of the ideas subscribed to by BISA VII (1986) on the theme: "The Religio-Cultural Inheritance of Asia and Human Development":

— Cultures, religions and societies are interdependent; they interact and reciprocally transform one another. In Asia culture and religion are integrated, and religion is the dynamic element of culture. Together they form the cultural-religious system, which in its own turn interacts with the socio-economic-political system of society. For this reason, poverty in Asia is

not something purely of economics, nor has religiosity an aspect purely cultural. Both intermix in the Asian ethos and together seem to determine the specific character of Asia. In this totality of life, but especially in the struggle of the poor, the bishops have sought to discern the creative impulses of the liberating Spirit of God as a struggle for the poor to shake off oppression and create an authentic communion between people and nations. From this view, the bishop has the role of spiritual guide and animator, not that of organizer or co-ordinator.²⁵

— All this, however, is only one side of the coin. With regard to the problem of the poor and poverty in Asia, theorizing is rather recent, and confined to elite groups. The Church as such occupies herself more in laying stress on a certain lifestyle in everyday living. And here, the “basic communities” have a primary role, the preferred instrument of “conscientization” and action among the common people. This is repeatedly described as the “dialogue of life” that yields understanding, sharing and service for and with the poor. There prevails, contemporaneously, an urge to judge situations and find solutions in the light of faith and the Gospel. A praying and believing community will always root its commitment to development and liberation in the message of Christ, seeking to actualize it within itself, and with the various Churches operating in collaboration with all men of good will, while living the contemplative dimension of social action.²⁶

In our opinion, the theological reflection of Asia, with its sharp distinction — and almost an antithesis — between a Christology “from above” and Christology “from below,” raises no small number of questions at the doctrinal and practical levels. It runs the risk of creating a rift where there exists, instead, a complementarity, by formulating certain affirmations in a very sharp and ultimately questionable fashion.

But what ecclesial value should be given to this reflection, with its provisory nature and offered for assistance for further research? It is more than anything else a working paper.

Some Misgivings about the Dialogue

For the Church of Asia “dialogue” is not just a major concern, but a category so vast and so significant as to be capable of describing the mission all by itself, as one can see from certain citations made above. But here we refer specifically to “interreligious dialogue” which, closely connected with cultural dialogue, holds a privileged place in the Asian Church. This prominence is at the level of ideas, because in practice the journey remains slow and laborious.²⁷

The topic already emerges with striking clarity and sensitivity in the

first plenary assembly. The bishops say they accept the other religious traditions "as important and positive elements" in the economy of salvation and recognize in them "profound ideals and spiritual and ethical values." If many Asians have drawn from them light and strength, contemplation and prayer, "why not acknowledge that through them God has drawn our people to himself?" Dialogue, therefore, has a role and, if well conducted, will be fruitful for knowing the religions and their adherents better; for discovering and expressing better the very riches of the Christian faith; and "for offering all that we believe, the only thing the Church has the duty and joy to give to them and to all mankind"; and in this way realizing "a friendly participation in the search for God and for a fraternity among his children."²⁸

The subsequent assemblies concentrated on particular aspects of dialogue: Calcutta: how much Christian prayer can give to and receive from Asia; Bangkok: an appeal to Christians "to listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith," and to "accompany these others 'in a common pilgrimage' toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute"²⁹; Tokyo: a call to all the Church, and especially to the laity, to meet the current challenges in Asia through a dialogue of life with the millions of people of other religions.

Since 1979, the FABC office for the promotion of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue has been organizing meetings (BIRA: Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs) according to regions and religions. In 1984 BIRA IV inaugurated a new phase of deepening the relationship between dialogue and mission, prompted by the corresponding document from the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christians, and it has launched a broad program to reach a good number of Asian bishops, by bringing together several dozens of them at a time to deal with specific aspects of dialogue in a richer and more complete, but also at times arguable, way. Let us look at some examples.

BIRA IV/3 (Hong Kong, 1986) was occupied with the theme of discerning the Spirit operating within and outside the Church in Asia. In fact, it is "the same Spirit which has operated in the Incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, which was active among all peoples before the Incarnation, and is active today among the nations, the religions and the peoples of Asia." From this fact the statement draws motives and directions for a greater understanding of the Spirit's action. Particular importance is given to some interior attitudes which help better to detect such action: faith, the gifts of the same Spirit, love, a thorough knowledge of the different religions and ideologies, a critical theological reflection about them, and especially the disposition to recognize the different ways of the Spirit's action.

While observing that "every reception of the Spirit is related to the memory of the Church and the interpretation of the reality of Jesus Christ,"³⁰

an attitude of "receptive pluralism" is encouraged regarding the promptings of the Spirit.

For our purposes, the BIRA IV/10-11 institutes, celebrated in Indonesia in 1988, are noteworthy for their study of the "theology of harmony," which constitutes a central theme of interreligious dialogue in Asia.

It is especially relevant theologically to consider the "theses" on interreligious dialogue drawn up in 1987 by the FABC Theological Advisory Commission. Dialogue is seen as an integral dimension of the mission of the Church, a requirement of the Trinitarian faith.

The unique and definitive action of the Father to save all peoples, who have him as their origin and goal, is leading all of us to unity. Christ in whom God is reconciling all things to himself is urging the Church to be the servant of this communion. The universal presence and action of the Spirit is calling everyone to the realization of the oneness of the Kingdom.

Having indicated the modes and levels of dialogue, Thesis VI affirms: "Dialogue and proclamation are integral albeit dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church's mission of evangelization. Authentic dialogue includes a witness to one's total Christian faith, which is open to a similar witness of the other religious believers."³¹

We think that the "theses" themselves do offer a good working tool, substantial and accurate in the formulations of principles, but perhaps less so in some of the commentaries which follow them. So in Thesis VI we find again the idea, held also by M. Amaladoss, which assigns three dimensions to evangelization: inculturation, interreligious dialogue and liberation, and sees proclamation as only an aspect of these, and whose value is above all expressed in terms of witness. In short, explicit proclamation is marginalized. The "theses" do not touch on — and this is stated openly — difficult but necessary basic questions, such as the uniqueness of Christ, the absoluteness of the commitment of faith, the epistemology of the Absolute and the relative concerning truth, the normative value of Christian revelation, etc.

We draw attention, finally, to the joint meeting which brought together representatives from the CCA (Christian Conference of Asia, composed of many Christian confessions) and FABC at Singapore, in July 1987, on the theme "Living and Working together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths." The final declaration of the meeting repeats things we have already seen regarding the relation between dialogue and mission: that they are elements which are distinct but correlated; that dialogue is not to be made an instrument of mission but has its influence in the manner of perceiving and practising mission; that mission is a call to participate "in God's continuing

activity through the Spirit to mend a broken creation, to overcome the fragmentation of humanity, and to heal the rift between nature, humanity and God."³²

Obviously, these and other such texts are rich in pastoral orientations, but we shall not spend time on these aspects since they are outside our present scope. The theological reflection does not always appear clear or convincing, for which reason one must also keep in mind the sources of the various texts and so, what authority they would have.

The Emerging Awareness of the Important of Proclamation

Taking Asian Church documents as a whole, I think the mandate to proclaim the Gospel ends up being rather submerged by the emphasis given to inculturation, dialogue and liberation. The Bangkok assembly, listing the shortcomings and weaknesses of the Christian communities, reports in the end: "Finally how insufficient for the most part has been our missionary consciousness and responsibility. We have so frequently forgotten that the summons and challenge to make known the person and message of Jesus Christ to those who do not know him is a mandate addressed to even the youngest Christian community."³³

The BIMA (Bishops' Institute for Missionary Animation) meetings (1978, 1980, 1982) have to their credit reawakened the sense and urgency of the first evangelization. In particular, BIMA III spoke of the need to face again "the immense challenge of proclaiming the Name and the Good News of Jesus to ... the more than two billion Asians (who) have never really heard his message"; and expresses the conviction that "the necessity of the first proclamation has not lost any more of its urgency in Asia, where Christians constitute a very small minority." Therefore, in its list of concerns it places at the top, "the urgency, within the total mission of the Church in Asia, of the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, without intending to diminish the value of other vital aspects of the Church's evangelizing task."³⁴

This concern has had an echo in the preparatory work of the plenary assembly on the laity. Perennial and urgent needs reappear: "More than half of the world's population is in Asia and needs to hear about Christ to become a completely renewed humanity." At the same time the perennial problem remains: "Most Asians are allergic to the idea of organized proselytism. Hence, the role that the clergy can play in bringing Christ to the Asian people is minimal. But a more articulate and committed laity by their witness and missionary involvement can better bring Christ to them."³⁵ The assembly has therefore put forward guidelines for action, proposing among other things selected groups of evangelizers for different categories of persons.³⁶

Yet it has been only very recent that the proclamation of the Gospel has been brought to the forefront by the Pan-Asian Conference on Evangelization (Korea 1988), the last of the six BIMAs. Remaining within the framework of the full meaning of mission, they are challenged to "understand the signs of the times and seek new ways for announcing and sharing the Good News of the Kingdom of God in Jesus Christ with all our brothers and sisters of Asia," as the final document relates. It goes even further:

While, on one hand, we are aware and sensitive to the fact that evangelization is a complex reality and has many essential aspects — for example, the witness to the Gospel, work towards the promotion of Gospel values, a common struggle of all those looking for justice and peace, dialogue, sharing, inculturation, mutual enrichment with other Christians and followers of other religions — on the other hand we affirm that there can never be a true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Further on, the statement clarifies itself significantly in these terms:

The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization, without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and vitality. In the same way, evangelization unites the community of believers, the Church, through faith and baptism. In the Church all men can find grace, reconciliation and new life, and through the Church we share this reality with others.³⁷

III. CHRIST IS THE GOOD NEWS

Going over the statements of theologians and the Churches of Asia on evangelization, one finds it easy to notice concerns basically alike, and to observe reflections and orientations held in common, but also notable differences, silences and critical rebukes. So how do things stand now? What evaluation can one form?

We believe we can affirm that today in Asia there exists regarding the evangelizing mission of the Church a general picture of motivations, aims, principles and modes of procedure that are largely shared. At the same time, in various sectors and on different occasions, notions and practices quite different — even opposed and irreconcilable — are being upheld. Beneath almost identical expressions and formulae are hidden very different meanings and applications.

The Salvation Dialogue

It is undoubtedly a good thing that the Churches in Asia give great im-

portance to the necessity and significance of dialogue as an indispensable instrument for breaking down the fortress of the Christian community and opening her up to the surrounding world of poverty, cultures and different religions. It can also be appreciated that this dialogue has involved a three-fold dimension right from the beginning, social, cultural and religious, retaining the dialogical aspect even when these respective sectors have taken on their own features and activities.

In this way — and this is a third beneficial factor — dialogue in Asia began from within mission, not alongside it or in opposition to it. How can we forget that the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (Paul VI, 1964) — as Bishop Rossano has recently emphasized — understood dialogue in relation to salvation as a modern name for the “very same mission” mandated by Christ to the Apostles?³⁸

Seen as an integral part of mission, interreligious dialogue in Asia has a decisive importance which is quite understandable in the local context. This has enabled us to discuss in depth the meaning, demands and ways of its being realized. In this regard the texts of the FABC plenary assemblies and of the various BIRA meetings are valuable also because generally one sees in them concerns for a sound balance and a critical discernment. We appreciate the legitimate and beneficial challenges of an authentic dialogue as a stimulus to a still greater “conversion to God.” We understand also the overall inclusiveness which in Asia, more than anywhere else, is given to the dialogue in terms of service to reconciliation, harmony and solidarity. It is precisely this last aspect that John Paul II stresses in his address to the members of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, mentioned at the beginning of the article. He says: “Peoples who at first would never have been able to meet and know one another must now discover how to build up a harmonious and peaceful life in societies which are racially, ethnically, linguistically and religiously pluralist in their composition.”³⁹

Questions arise when the dialogue, in practice and especially in theory, risks becoming the whole of evangelization and swallows up its goal; or being considered so pressing and urgent in relation to everything else in mission so as to be proposed as the only valid and sensible course of action. This is manifested in many ways, such as by keeping silent about or downgrading the importance of proclamation, sometimes with statements obviously exaggerating or deliberately antithetical. One example:

J. Kavunkal says: “In this context (of a diversified and pluralist situation) we may also say that the Church in India need not share the anxiety of some Western strategists over the destiny of the so-called ‘unreached’ billions, most of whom, unlike the “no-more Christians,” are believers in one or the other religion!” And further: “In a multireligious country like India, to make the

planting of the Church the ultimate aim of evangelization, with no concern for the religious sentiments of others, is to be sectarian and thus to contribute to the disintegration of society; the very opposite of the values of the Kingdom.”⁴⁰

It is even more serious to demand that Christianity be mute or hide certain of its “claims” because they may not fit in with dialogue. This is in contradiction with what these same authors affirm about the authenticity of dialogue, which does not require putting aside one’s own faith, but rather requires acting in open and perfect coherence with it. “If the Church cannot accept the other religions of India as equal, if not superior, to Christianity, then the positive attitude of the Church towards the non-Christian religions is bound to be suspect.” So says A. Pushparajan, who adds: “So the essential question before the Church today is: can she accept the equality of religions?”⁴¹ We beg to disagree. Here one is confusing faithfulness to one’s religion with sentiments which have nothing to do with it. A Christian who accepts and gives witness to the “claims” of his faith cannot but be a disciple of the meek and humble Christ.

Rereading the addresses of John Paul II in Asia, including those given in India, one will see how the Pope manages to hold together the recognition, esteem and openness to enrichment in encountering different religions, with an integral witnessing to Christ. It is not by diluting Christianity but rather by reviving it, purifying it, living it in its fulness that Christians will be ever more capable of true dialogue.

Now there are theologians, and not only in Asia, who, as much as they stress interreligious dialogue as a component of Christian mission, would just as much shield it from any influence of the faith that the Christian professes, as if there could be a neutral dialogue, conducted *in vitro*, as if they feared harm would be inflicted upon the other participants.

In the Christian concept of dialogue, even when taken in the strict sense of interreligious dialogue, such dialogue, while keeping to its own means and ends, still fixes itself within the context of that abundant life which Christ came to bring. It cannot be self-sufficient, or dedicate itself only to secular purposes, to terrestrial utopias, but must always remain a dialogue of salvation. Otherwise, how can it be an integral part of the evangelizing mission of the Church? It is presupposed that one is dealing with a dialogue within a “Christian vision.”

The Word of Faith

Now we come to proclamation, and its relation to dialogue. Let us review again some words of John Paul II spoken on April 28, 1987 to the members of the then Secretariat for Non-Christians, about to start the study on the

document "Dialogue and Proclamation." The Pope declared:

Your assembly must therefore reaffirm the commitment of the Catholic Church both to dialogue and to the proclamation of the Gospel. There cannot be a question of choosing one and ignoring or rejecting the other. Even in situations in which the proclamation of our faith is difficult, we must have the courage to speak about God, who is the foundation of this faith, the reason for our hope and the source of our love. It is indeed true that in those circumstances in which the proclamation of the Gospel brings more fruit, we should not forget that dialogue with others is a Christian task desired by God.⁴²

And after having recalled that during his journeys he has always been engaged in fulfilling the "apostolic and pastoral duty of both dialogue and proclamation" (citing expressly India and Morocco), he leaves to the Vatican body to deepen and spell out more clearly these tasks and related questions.

Here are the pressing points which seem to emerge in the perspective of our considerations: the meaning and urgency of proclamation, and the role of proclamation in the evangelizing mission with relation to dialogue.

In a certain Asian theology of mission, the proclamation of the Gospel seems to be undergoing a reshaping in different ways. It is either reduced to a part of other ecclesial activities — as if it did not have an identity and consistency of its own. Or it is identified with a witness of life, on the pretext that the proclamation of a message aims at bringing about assent, but for this, a concrete act is worth more than a speech; and a conversion witnessed to in life is more authentic than an intellectual assent. Or, finally, it is easily labelled as propaganda and proselytism.⁴³

This way of speaking is, we think, confused and filled with ambiguities, and is especially unmindful that the proclamation we are talking about is what Paul has in mind when he affirms that "the Gospel is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe" (Rom 1:16); and what he makes an indispensable and obligatory means for the faith, because "it comes from preaching and the preaching itself comes through the word of Christ" (Rom 10:17).

From this arises the urgency of the proclamation, which is objectively second to no other activity of the evangelizing mission. It has, beyond doubt, a priority in its very self, even if particular circumstances may advise postponing it for a time. There is indeed a divine and ecclesial pedagogy of proclamation but that is different from human prudence. One thinks of the famous *parresia* ("boldness") which characterizes the evangelizer moved by the Spirit. Or the "word of the Cross" of St. Paul (cf. 1Cor 1:18-23).

Krishna's flute or Buddha's smile can similarly be found to contradict rather than complement the cross of Christ.

Equally, to set aside proclamation because it may cause conversions and baptisms, which certain quarters consider factors harmful to social peace; or to extol the "conversion" promoted by dialogue, and undervalue joining the Church by indicting it as proselytism, is not convincing. Especially, if one peppers the argument with statements only seemingly serious, as when it is said that Jesus brought salvation to Zaccheus (and to others), while leaving him in his own religion; or that the story of the conversion of Cornelius (this time we are talking about entrance into the Church) is also the story of the conversion of Peter.⁴⁴

One cannot repeal the missionary mandate of Christ, or reduce it, or demand it go only in one way. In 1989, while meeting various groups of Indian bishops for their *ad limina* visit, the Pope gave them discourses which were exemplary for their clarity and deftness of treatment, pointing out indeed how one can and should fulfil the evangelizing mission in all its fulness, even in difficult concrete situations. The whole style of the Church is marked by the requirement of a humble and loving service. She is the promoter of human solidarity, assisting reconciliation among groups and individuals. In a multicultural and multireligious environment she is called upon to carry out an honest dialogue. But she also has an urgent task of evangelization: "the proclamation of God's saving love, which is realized in the Paschal Mystery of our redemption and made efficacious in the total service of abnegation, rendered to the human family by the ecclesial community."⁴⁵

The word of faith becomes the praxis of charity. Everything is inseparably united. We like that very felicitous expression used by the FABC Pan-Asian Conference on Evangelization, which makes the proclamation of Jesus Christ "the center and primary element" of mission, that which gives "cohesion and validity to all the other elements." It is perfectly in line with note number 27 of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.⁴⁶ It would be difficult to grasp the various elements of the evangelizing mission were they separate entities, correlated yes, but without a unifying value. In fact, there is a risk that everything would be completely changed. Now this unifying element, holding to the teaching of Paul VI (EN 27), is the proclamation of the kerygma. It does not matter if it may not always be possible to preach the Gospel; it furnishes meaning and power to everything (cf. also *Gaudium et Spes* 22).

The Name and the Face of the Kingdom

We have said several times that the Asian theologians mentioned above have a concept of a "Kingdom-centered" mission, understood indeed in an absolutized sense. But there is also an acceptable "Kingdom-centered"

vision; we find it in the various ecclesiastical documents indicated above, and this is widely circulated today in the Christian (not just Catholic) world. And rightly so for at least two reasons.

The Kingdom of God is a central point in the salvific design of God and in the mission of Christ and of the Church. It is not for naught that we pray: "Your Kingdom come."

Indeed, it cannot be denied that in the past there was a yielding to the temptation of an ecclesiocentrism — which had no justification, since the Church is not an end in itself; and it is enough, for our purposes here, to demonstrate this from the universal missionary mandate that the Church has received from her Founder.

The matter of our discussion, then, turns on the meaning which is given to "Kingdom," and in the relationship established among the Kingdom, Christ and the Church.

Some speak about "the Kingdom" as an earthly utopia, the fruit of a never ending and inexhaustible human progress; but this Kingdom, which is completely earthly, can certainly not merit the name "Kingdom of God." These theologians mean to refer for the most part to the values for which Christ himself has been made spokesman and promoter, and which the Church is expected by her vocation to promote: justice, peace, brotherhood, solidarity, liberation from egoism and any kind of oppression, in view of a full realization of man and society.

A. Fernando, a theologian of Sri Lanka, has written: "Jesus was an extremely unself-centered person. He never made himself a center in any form when he preached to ordinary farmers and shepherds. If a center is to be found in his teaching, the one that would come closest is the reign of God idea of Kingdom of God." Jesus, continues the author, had also emphasized life in the Spirit as well as healing. He concludes, "When I take these realities together — the 'Reign,' the 'Spirit,' the 'healing' — I get the feeling that to Jesus, 'Christianity' is really (to use a rather secular term) 'human-liberation-centered.'"⁴⁷

Perhaps A. Fernando represents one extreme point of view — but not by much.⁴⁸ In fact, not a few Asian theologians see the Kingdom in Jesus' teaching and work, insofar as they express the action of God in temporal realities, as an action which goes beyond the mission of the Church, and takes the form of a kind of socio-politico-historical planning and production. The innate religious sense of the Asian world allows a keeping of everything open to the divine Absolute. In any case, this Kingdom tends to become a "thing," or a "utopia," which Jesus himself preached, lived and died for. Thus, the

deeper and more specific meaning of the Kingdom is lost or reduced. This meaning is Christ himself, and more precisely, his Paschal Mystery.

In fact, our authors set up a certain division between the Kingdom and Christ, even while they affirm that Christ proclaimed and actuated the Kingdom, and are easily astonished by the fact that the Church has passed from the proclamation of the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus to the proclamation of Christ. Rather, "the identification of Jesus with the Kingdom will be found in the tradition of the Church: the Son of God is the *autobasileia*, the Kingdom of God in person," as well as in Scripture itself, just as Fr. Ignace De la Potterie illustrates.⁴⁹

L. Newbigin, the well-known leader of missions and of ecumenism within the Anglican and Protestant world, points out that in the 19th century it was already common to accuse Paul of having misinterpreted Jesus, because Jesus had preached the Kingdom of God, while Paul went about proclaiming Jesus. There was thus a call to a return to the original message of the Kingdom. However, as Newbigin observes, with Christ "the Kingdom of God, his kingly rule, now has a human face and a human name: the name and the face of Jesus of Nazareth."⁵⁰ How can one then raise a hue and cry to the four winds proclaiming the Kingdom, at the same time leaving out Christ? I myself was present at Melbourne (Australia) in 1980 for the World Conference of Commissions for Mission and Evangelization (CME) of the World Council of Churches, and while we were engaged in examining the prayer theme, "May your Kingdom come," I heard more than one speaker ask how it came about that so much was being said about the Kingdom without mentioning the King!

Nor (for them) has the Church anything to do with the Kingdom. These Asian theologians readily speak of the Church as the "sacrament of the Kingdom": an affirmation which, we believe, has its source in the thought of the Council, although the Council prefers to describe the Church as a universal sacrament of salvation, a sign and instrument of union with God, and relates it to the Kingdom as its "seed and beginning," with the duty "to announce and establish among all the people, the Kingdom of Christ and of God" (LG 5). The Church is, indeed, distinguished from the Kingdom and not identified with it. However, her ties with the Kingdom are very tight, like the singular links that she has with Christ and with the Spirit. In any case, trying to deprive the Church of her most sublime aspects, for example, that of being the Mystical Body of Christ, on the grounds that it is irrelevant to non-Christians, is unjustly to repress what the Church really is. Furthermore, the work of the Church, which, according to the will of Christ, is not to be put on a level of one religion among others.

Let us hear from L. Newbigin again:

Do not let us set "Kingdom against "Church," and "Church" against "Kingdom." The Church is not an end in itself. "Church growth" is not an end in itself. The Church is only true to its calling when it is a sign, an instrument, a foretaste of the Kingdom. But, on the other hand, talk about the Kingdom is mere ideology, if it is not tied to the name of Jesus in whom the Kingdom is present and if it does not invite men and women to recognize that presence, to do the U-turn, to become a part of the company that (sinful as it has always been) acknowledges Jesus as the one in whom God's Kingdom is present, and so seeks to honor him, to serve him, to follow him.⁵¹

Christ is the Lord

If the Kingdom-Christ relationship is difficult for our theologians, it is because Christ, much more than the Kingdom, is the problem. What does one understand by Christ? This is a question which seems difficult to respond to today without bringing in very many distinctions. Many things would have to be taken into account. The Christology of the New Testament and its development in the early centuries of the Church remains a fundamental datum. But our Asian theologians observe that the New Testament already reveals a pluralism of Christologies (and here they agree with Western studies), and that the subsequent doctrinal evolution was spoiled by an apologetic that contributed to an ontological absolutism, which, combined with the exigencies of the inculturation of Christianity in the pagan world, made Christ into someone called God.

It must be remembered then that other religions also claim to reach the Absolute, through their own mediations, analogous to that of Christ. And thus they too participate in the "mystery of Christ" in a certain sense, without it being necessary for them to pass by way of the historical Jesus. Besides, God is at work in many ways in creation and history, and the action of the Word and of the Spirit, of which the Scripture speaks, testifies to this. From all this one can affirm, without failing in faith, that Jesus is the Christ, but Christ is more than Jesus, because "Christ" includes all the divine manifestations, without the need of relating Jesus to everything.

We have already quoted some approaches along this line. Now we do not claim to tackle all these problems, but something simple and basic must be said. First of all, we must keep in mind the appeal of Paul VI, who in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 53 mentions similar "complex and delicate questions which need study in the light of Christian Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church, which open to the missionaries of today and tomorrow new horizons in their contact with non-Christian religions." This concern is indeed reasonable and actual. However, to respond to the question of who is Jesus Christ, in the encounter with religions, is a question too great and

too grave to be left to the mercy of individual inquiry alone and, worse, to fanciful hypotheses.

A very open theologian and one with long experience of Asia, Father J. Dupuis, of the Gregorian University in Rome, tackling our problem in the context of the thought of Panikkar, asserts:

But Panikkar makes a dangerous distinction between the Mystery and the Jesus myth — that is, the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history. He surely seems to separate them as objects of faith and belief, respectively. Is a reduction of the Jesus myth to an object of belief as distinct from faith compatible with the Christian profession of faith in the person from Nazareth? And as if by backlash, is not the content of faith reduced to a vague, neutral relationship to a transcendence, empty in its turn, and as without an object? Is it not itself reduced to a myth, an abstraction?

And further on, after citing St. John and St. Paul, Dupuis concludes:

One may not separate, then, in the divine plan, the anticipated activity of the *Logos* from the Jesus Christ event in which this plan is accomplished. The *Logos* destined to become incarnate and the *Logos* incarnate are one and indivisible. Jesus Christ, Word incarnate, remains, at the center of the divine plan, the mystery of salvation.⁵²

In Dupuis' work we seem to find an answer also to the theologians more attentive to the Christian faith and yet also attracted by the formula that Christ is more than Jesus. Dupuis says:

Christ is transhistorical; nothing could be more true. But it is Jesus who became the transhistorical Christ, in virtue of the real transformation of his raised human existence. While Jesus is the Christ, there is, conversely, no Christ who is not Jesus himself, raised, transformed, transfigured, and as such, transhistorical.⁵³

There remains, however, as Smet reminds us, the scandal of a God who becomes human history. "India is not prepared to believe in a spatiotemporally situated Divine."⁵⁴

Reflecting on A. Pieris' thinking, already mentioned above, about the problem of names attributed to Christ, M. Fedou offers a similar answer. He says that Pieris and other Asians are right to reject the Greco-Latin models of inculturation, and in the Asian context to keep religion and culture united. Basing oneself on the diversity of Christological titles, one may hold that God has numerous names, in the sense that "the mystery of the 'multiform Wisdom' is known according to the diverse paths of human experience,"

provided this does not lead "to questioning the radical uniqueness of the divine manifestation in Jesus of Nazareth."

The same discernment is necessary when one affirms that:

The universal Christ is not reduced to the Jesus of history. This formula cannot be accepted if, in the name of a legitimate and traditional distinction between Jesus and the Word, it leads to ignoring that God himself (whatever be the diversity of the epiphanies in the religious history of humanity) has communicated himself to the world, giving it at a given time his only Son, the sole mediator, because he is the Absolute who manifests himself in this man, met once in the streets of Galilee.⁵⁵

In a recent study, B. Maggioni shows how even the underlying structure of the Christological event is trinitarian. Thus, the confession of faith, "Jesus the Lord," is not so much a proclamation of resurrection as of revelation.

(It) affirms that Jesus is the Lord, not one master among others (1 Cor 8:6). But this lordship of Jesus is certainly not pictured as being independent from God, nor as outside of him. The first Christians certainly did not think of one Lord, by the side of another Lord, but of the Lord Jesus as a mirror of the one lordship of God. The risen Lord can be proclaimed Lord only in as far as he is the perfect mirror, unsurpassed, of the only Lordship of God.⁵⁶

By deepening the uniqueness and the absoluteness of the divine manifestations in Jesus, one will find a just and rightful space for the multiform expressions and figures of the divine Wisdom, for the various possible mediators, which do not prejudice but presuppose the Mediator. In such a way, Christocentrism is not contrary to but inseparably united to theocentrism.

The "Spirit" of Dialogue and Proclamation

For a more adequate treatment we cannot pass over the Holy Spirit whose role is rightly, firmly and frequently emphasized in interreligious dialogue, especially in Asia.

It is well known that it was the Council, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*, which stressed the action of the Spirit in creation and history, in the heart of every man, in the religious traditions of the world, and, in general, in all the efforts of human activity aimed at the good, the true and the divine. It is a theme which moves through the pages of Scripture. The Old Testament already speaks of man created in the image and likeness of God with the breath of the Spirit, and reveals the multiform effusions of Wisdom among

peoples. The New Testament attributes the incarnation of Christ, his mission, the work of redemption, the birth and growth of the Church, all to the action of the Spirit. Recent Church teaching, in particular of John Paul II, has dealt at length with the mystery of the presence and the work of the Spirit, drawing rich insights for interreligious dialogue.⁵⁷

In the texts of the Asian Churches on dialogue we have seen the importance given to the Spirit. Notable for vigor and clarity is the document of BIRA IV/3. The same can be said of other writings of individuals and groups. The "theses" of the Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC deal frequently with the presence and universal action of the Spirit: the Spirit calls each one to make real the unity of the Kingdom; the Spirit appears in the meeting of believers of the various religions; the Spirit leads to an ever deeper communion without any harm, nay, to the advantage of the respective religious experiences of each community, etc... The impression remains, however, that all this is taken for granted, that it has a theological life of its own, and lacks sufficient indications of discernment, of critical reflection. The paradigm of the Kingdom seems to support everything without needing any additional clarifications. Once again, we find a concept of an all-embracing dialogue presented as the only way of achieving the goal, that is, the Kingdom, understood again as universal harmony.

There is no lack of theologians who, insistent on the presence and universal action of the Spirit and inclined to profess the existence of a "mystery" of Christ which surpasses the "historical" Jesus, find that it is the Spirit who bridges the difference between the two realities. Thus, they tend to say that all the values of the religions, or rather, the religious traditions themselves, as a whole, find in the Spirit their direct link with God, without bothering about Jesus of Nazareth. The question then arises whether this Spirit is still the Spirit of God and of the Christ of Christian revelation, or some other reality. All the more because this Spirit seems to move only in the broad paths of creation and history in general, and not along the way of Christ's incarnation and redemption, and of the Church's mission. With this, there is completely ignored the witness of the Spirit on behalf of Jesus and against that "world," which is guilty because it rejects him and wants to justify and save itself.

B. Maggioni in his study (cited above) on the Trinity in the New Testament, brings out that St. Paul "continually fought against any possible separation between the Spirit and the cross." For St. John it is only the gift of the Spirit which enables one to understand Jesus and his word and enter into communion with the Father. In more detail, with regard to the relations among Father, Son and Spirit:

In St. John's texts on the Paraclete, the Spirit is simultaneously from the Father and from Jesus, or from Jesus and from the Father. One can parallel the relation between Jesus and the Father, and the relation between the Spirit and the Father: as Jesus is given, sent and proceeds from the Father, so the Spirit is given, sent and proceeds from the Father. However, even in this parallel there is a difference: Jesus is sent only by the Father, but the Spirit is sent by the Father but also by Jesus and always in operation with Jesus.⁵⁸

If such is the case, we have to be more alert not to separate the Spirit from Christ and not to detach the various effects produced by the same Spirit. Pentecost teaches us, as Fr. Hans Urs Von Balthasar underlines, that the Spirit manifests himself at Pentecost as an event of prayer, dialogue and mission. And it is the Spirit who makes us speak in our capacity as sons of God the word *Abba* (Father) "which is a prayer in God's language." In these words with God, the Spirit becomes a spirit of the dialogue with men, giving the Church the gift of languages through which he makes himself understood by all. And in the same gift, the Spirit, sent by the Father and by Christ, becomes the Spirit of mission or, if you like, of proclamation.⁵⁹ How can we fail to recall here the 1986 Assisi event as an obvious expression of the presence of the Spirit of prayer? And how can we not believe that in him the dialogue is called upon to grow and to spread, and the proclamation is called to be strengthened, so as to proclaim to all that the Good News is Christ?

All of which can be fittingly confirmed in a well-known text of the Council ⁶⁰:

For since Christ died for all, and since all men 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).

FOOTNOTES:

1. *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 27, 1990, p.4.
2. D. Colombo, "Missionari senza Cristo," *Mondo e Missione*, 1988, pp. 315-334.
3. J. Kavunkal, "Ring in the Divine Reign," *Vidyajyoti*, 1988, pp. 547-582, *cit.*, p. 579. Cf. critical reactions, *Vidyajyoti*, 1989, pp. 95, 264, 514.
4. S.J. Emmanuel, "Interreligious Dialogue at a turning Point," *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 1989, pp. 350-364, *cit.*, 357.
5. M. Amaladoss, "Dialogue and Mission: Conflict or Convergence?," *Vidyajyoti*, 1986, pp. 62-86, *cit.*, 63.

6. J. Kavunkal, *To gather them into one*, Steyler Verlag, Nettetal, 1985: cf. also *art. cit.*
7. Emmanuel, *art. cit.*, p. 353.
8. M. Amaladoss, *Mission Today*, Rome 1989, pp. 25, 27. Cf. also "Evangelization in Asia: a New Focus," *Vidyajyoti*, 1987, pp. 7-28.
9. J. Kavunkal, "Dialogue and Conversion," *Vidyajyoti*, 1990, pp. 177-187, *cit.*, p. 189.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
12. J. Kavunkal, "The Abba Experience of Jesus: The Model and Motive for Mission Today," *FABC Papers*, No. 43, pp. 9-15.
13. M. Amaladoss, "The Pluralism of Religions and the Significance of Christ," *Vidyajyoti*, 1989, pp. 401-420, *cit.*, p. 415. Cf. critical reactions, *Vidyajyoti*, 1989, pp. 537, 538; with respect to Amaladoss, *ibid.*, p. 672.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 415.
15. Amaladoss, *Mission Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
16. Emmanuel, *art. cit.*, pp. 360-363.
17. A. Pieris, "Christology in Asia. A Reply to Felipe Gomes," *Christologies in Encounter, Voices from the Third World*, Dec. 1989, pp. 115-172; *Love Meets Wisdom. A Christian Experience of Buddhism*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1988, especially pp. 110-135; cf. also *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, 1988.
18. I. Vempeny, *Krishna and Christ. In the Light of Some of the Fundamental Concepts and Themes of the Bhagavad Gita and the New Testament*, Ishvani Kendra, Pune 1988, *cit.*, pp. 352, 372. For the thinking of R. Panikkar, cf. *Il dialogo interreligioso*, Cittadella ed., Assisi 1988, with quotation made by Vempeny, p. 372.
19. M. Amaladoss, *The Pluralism ...*, *art. cit.*, pp. 417, 419.
20. Unedited Study. Cf. as general bibliography: D. Colombo in *I Semi del Vangelo*, EMI, Bologna, 1975; *For All the Peoples of Asia. The Church in Asia: Asian Bishops' Statements on Mission, Community and Ministry, 1970-1983. Volume One: Texts and Documents*, IMC Publications, Manila 1984; *Toward a New Age in Mission*, International Congress on Mission, 2-7 December 1979, Books One and Two, Official Report, Book Three, Position Papers, IMC Publications, Manila 1981; M. Zago, *La Chiesa in Asia oggi. Situazioni e prospettive*, EMI, Bologna, 1983; *FABC Papers*, 1976 ff.
21. *I Semi ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18; *For All, the Peoples of Asia*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
22. *La Chiesa d'Asia ripensa la sua missione*. Documenti del 1° Congresso Missionario Internazionale dell'Asia, Dec. 1979, *I quaderni d'Infor-PIME* n. 18, 8.
23. The titles of the respective organisms are: BISA, BIRA, BIMA, corresponding in English to: Bishops' Institute for Social Action, Interreligious Affairs, Missionary Apostolate. Add BILA, for the Apostolate of the Laity.

24. *For All ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
25. Cf. *FABC Papers*, N. 52, p.7.
26. Cf. D. Colombo, "Preghiera: L'Asia interroga la Chiesa," *Mondo e Missione*, 1979, pp. 451-475; the Contemplative Dimension of Social Action, AISA 1987, *FABC Papers*, N. 52, pp. 55-58.
27. For an updating on interreligious dialogue in the various countries of Asia, *Bulletin*, "Pontificium Consilium pro Dialogo Inter Religiones", n.71, 1989 - XXIV/2.
28. *I Semi*, ..., *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.
29. *For All ...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.
30. *Asia News*, 1987, n.1, pp.24-28, *cit.*, n.3, Pastoral Directives.
31. "Theses On Interreligious Dialogue," *FABC Papers*, N.48.
32. "Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths," *FABC Papers*, N. 49, especially pp. 57ff., *cit.*, p. 58.
33. *For All ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 97, n.9.9.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 171, 175.
35. *FABC Papers*, N. 46g, p. 10.
36. *FABC Papers*, N. 47.
37. *Asia News*, n. 35., pp. 394-397, *cit.*, nn.5-6. Cf. also *FABC Papers*, N. 50, "The Urgency of Christian Mission."
38. P. Rossano, "Il cammino del dialogo interreligioso dalla Nostra Aetate ad Oggi," discourse of April 4, 1990, typewritten text.
39. *L'Osservatore Romano*, April 27, 1990, p.4.
40. Kavunkal, *Ring ...*, *art. cit.*, pp. 578, 582.
41. A. Pushparajan, "Reflections on the Pope's Visit from the View-Point of Interreligious Dialogue," *Vidyajyoti*, 1986, pp. 185-197, *cit.*, pp. 192-193.
42. *Bulletin*, Secretariat pro non-Christianis, 1987, p. 224, n.3.
43. cf. Amalados, *Mission Today*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
44. Kavunkal, *Ring ...*, *art. cit.*, pp. 578; *Dialogue ...*, *art. cit.*, p. 181, 1983.
45. John Paul II to the Bishops of India on *ad limina* visit, April 6 and 13, 1989, *Traccia*, 1989, pp. 320-322, pp. 342-344, *cit.*, p. 342.
46. *EN* 27 says: "Evangelization will also always contain — as the foundation, center and at the same time summit of its dynamism — a clear proclamation that, in Jesus Christ, the

Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God's grace and mercy."

47. A. Fernando, "A Tale of Two Theologies," *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion*, Leonard Swidler, ed., pp. 112-117, *cit.*, p. 115; cf. also A.M. Pernia, "The Theology of Spirituality of Mission," in the Documents of the S.V.D. 13th General Chapter, *Verbum*, SVD, 1989, pp. 367-384.
48. cf. Colombo, *Missionari*, ..., *art. cit.*, pp. 321-322.
49. I. de la Potterie, *Il mistero del Cuore trafitto*, ed. Bologna, 1988, p. 12.
50. L. Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way, a Gift, a Command, An Assurance*, WCC Publications, Geneva 1988, pp. 6-7; cf. also Id., *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, WCC Publications, 1989, especially chap. 13 "No Other Name."
51. Id. *Mission* ..., *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
52. Jacques Dupuis, *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions*, tr. Robert R. Barr, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1991, p. 187, 189. Cf. also W. Kasper, "Il ruolo soteriologico della Chiesa e i sacramenti della salvezza," *Euntes Docete*, 1988, pp. 398-420.
53. Dupuis, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
55. M. Fedou, La Théologie des religions à l'heure du pluralisme, *Etudes*, 1988/I, pp. 821-830, *cit.*, pp. 828-829. Cf. also H. Staffner, *The Significance of Jesus Christ in Asia*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakas, Anand 1985; Id.: *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakas, Anand, 1988.
56. B. Maggioni, La Trinità nel N.T., *La Scuola Cattolica*, 1990, pp. 7-30, *cit.* pp. 12-13.
57. cf. Dupuis, *op. cit.*, chap. VII; P. Rossano, "Sulla Presenza e Attività dello Spirito nelle Religioni e nelle Culture non Cristiane," *Prospettive di missiologia oggi*, AA. VV., Gregoriana, Rome, 1982, pp. 59-71.
58. Maggioni, *art. cit.*, pp. 24, 27.
59. Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Il rosario*, Jaca Book, Milan 1978, pp. 87-91.
60. On the Paschal Mystery of Christ as "focus" of the mission, cf. the study of J. Gorski, *Is World Mission Still Urgent Today?*, Omnis Terra, ed. English, 1988, pp. 184-215.

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