

Sixth Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide

**CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP IN ASIA:
PROTECTING HUMAN LIFE**

by
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The two main papers already presented in plenary session define well for us the focus of our deliberations in this Plenary Assembly: (1) the Asian context of our service to life, and (2) the faith rationale for that service. The general subject, like Asia itself, is vast, and the sheer number and variety of workshops reflect the fact. Even our own workshop topic — the protection of human life — specific though it is, is still a broad one. The first thing I would like to do then is to try situating ourselves in the Assembly itself, see where we fit in its scheme of things, and doing so, we will delimit the scope of our subject to more manageable proportions.

WORKSHOPS

A look at the list of workshop topics tells us they deal with more specific aspects touched on in general fashion by the two position papers. These can be easily classified, into these three clusters:

The *first* develops the theological/spiritual perspective of the Plenary Assembly's theme further, delving deeper into the reasons and motivations of our involvement in the struggle for life. There are four workshops in this cluster, namely, those on:

Community of Life-giving Discipleship
Asian Spirituality
Integrity of Creation
Integral Human Development

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshops of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), convening at Manila, Philippines, January 10-19, 1995. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life."

This cluster will be concerned with the *why* of our disciple-service to life. The last two — Integrity of Creation and Integral Human Development — could well be included in the next cluster, but I thought they should be placed here anyway, because they have much to say about the principles of thought from which we proceed to action.

The *second* consists of workshops that look to the kind of action that flows from the theological/spiritual perspective of the first cluster. To my mind, these three belong together:

Formation of Christian Discipleship
Protection of Human Life
Dialogue at the Service of Life

The three will be about the *what* of our action in the service of life. They also touch on the *how* of it.

The *third* cluster will be of such workshops as have to do with the various kinds of people (in and out of the Church) who are the principal actors — in some instances, victims too — in the struggle for life in Asia. These are the workshops dealing with:

Asia Families and Children
Asian Youth
Asian Women
Consecrated Religious Living
The Media and Arts
Work and Professions

These workshops will be primarily of the *who* question, i.e., the people involved in the Church's service to life both as subjects and objects of its involvement.

Speaking parenthetically, I can't help observing how priests and bishops are not mentioned as particular workshop topics. The reason possibly is that this is a gathering of bishops and the real question here is about what the leadership in the Church should be doing vis-à-vis the problem of human life. Unmentioned too as a distinct subject for workshop discussions are the poor — and I would include among them ethnic minorities, migrant workers, refugees, the jobless, the handicapped, "untouchables," all kinds of disenfranchised and marginalized groups. But perhaps they are all more or less subsumed in the other workshops? In any case, the clustering is by no means airtight, the topics neither exhaustive nor exclusive. There are any number of ways of classifying them, of multiplying or reducing their number, depending on what particular logic one may choose to work from.

And they can be very different certainly from how we have done it here.

Still, the above is offered, simply as a way of defining better our particular task in this Assembly. If you agree, then, I suggest we orient our workshop towards *action*: what we should be doing as disciples committed to the service of life. To put it another way: We focus on what liberation theologians call *praxis* — action stemming from theology *and* steeped in theology.

Actually we have no choice on the matter — or, at least, I don't! The instruction I have is for me to develop our workshop topic "from the perspective of political life and social action in Asian countries," and to attempt — or rather, propose — answering this question:

What can Catholics, Christians, other men and women of good will, *now* do in their countries to preserve and protect [and enhance] human life?

"Enhance" was not in the original text, but I add it on anyway for reasons that I trust will become clearer below when we start talking of what actions to take in our service of life. If the question posed above is to be our workshop concern, there are a number of further clarifications I feel should be made.

PERSPECTIVES

Boldly stating the question — and the perspective too from which to answer it — will probably turn some of you off from the very start! As churchmen — not to say as Asians with our bias towards peaceful and harmonic social relations — we shy away from the conflictive. But the conflictive is precisely what our "perspective of political life and social action" tells us we must face up to, even be engaged in.

I will not try allaying the fears of those of you who may not be fully accepting of our workshop's stated perspective, for the quite simple reason that your fears are very real indeed and by no means not to be taken into account. Let me only say this: Twenty-five years ago on the occasion of the Asian Bishops' Meeting here in Manila (the very one that gave birth to the FABC), a statement was issued at its conclusion which included these rather remarkably forthright words:

We will fight injustice wherever, whenever, by whomsoever it is committed. We will free ourselves of any entangling ties with the rich and powerful.... We will be a Church of the poor.

Brave words, challenging words, these. And highly conflictive merely as words. But they were spoken for all the world to hear in 1970 and I do not know that they were ever taken back. On the contrary. Acting on this ringing declaration of purpose, the FABC set up the Office of Human Development, the instrumentality it mandated to promote what is now called in many an Asian Church "the apostolate of social action."

This particular apostolate has turned out to be the most conflictive of all our works, both within and without the Church. And necessarily so. For it is that part of our evangelizing mission that looks directly to the economic and political spheres of human life and seeks to do something about sin and disorder in those same spheres.

Whether or not in your respective Churches the social apostolate is defined in the same terms, whether or not it involves itself actively in economic and political problems, or whether or not there is such an apostolate at all — these are not, I believe, the questions to be bothered with here. But whether or not we recognize such works as are ordinarily included under the name social action — the promotion of justice, the defense of human rights, development, poverty alleviation, people's organizations, etc. — to be truly part of our overall evangelization work (even if we do not engage in them ourselves for various reasons), this, I'm afraid, is a question we will have to pose to ourselves in this workshop.

Let me express it another way: The social apostolate finds legitimation in the Church's social teaching as it is articulated in papal encyclicals and other Church documents (especially of the last thirty-some years) that deal with modern social problems. *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Populorum Progressio*, *Iustitia in Mundo*, *Octogesima Adventiens*, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, *Centesimus Annus* — these spring to mind readily and their sheer number and frequency mean only one thing to me: a strong urging for the whole Church to be concerned and involved with the pressing social questions of our day. We take that urging seriously?

The question needs asking. And answering affirmatively. For I take it, without such a reply, our workshop will be pointless. And if in our dioceses and Churches we do not have a well-defined or functioning social apostolate, we must at least recognize it as a legitimate work of evangelization. With that said, allow me to set forth a few more foundational premises that we will be presuming in regard to our workshop subject.

PRESUPPOSITIONS

There are three that I would like to present here for your consideration and acceptance: (1) population — the demographic problem; (2) development — the poverty problem; and (3) Church pronouncements on the above two.

Population. We cannot talk about human life these days without bringing into our conversation what more and more is being spoken of widely as *the* demographic problem of our times, namely, the explosive burgeoning of populations, especially in economically-undeveloped nations (such as many of us in Asia are). Whether we look at it as a problem or not, it is so considered by practically all governments, and rare is the country that is not undertaking population-control measures as a national priority of the first order. So when we speak of preserving, protecting, enhancing human life these days, I am afraid it is going to be, more often than not, in the context of government population-control programs and efforts.

Development. Closely connected with the population problem, in fact providing governments the *raison d'être* for making population control a priority, is the drive for economic development that practically every country in the Third World is obsessed with. Population increase is at its most acute in poverty-stricken areas, and it is not without reason that rapid population growth is often looked at as a, if not *the*, hindrance to the all-important goal of economic development. When we talk of our task of protecting life in Asia, therefore, we will have to take a hard look at what is called development, how it is defined, what is being done in its name; and this for two reasons at least: (1) Indispensable to the protection of human life is a modicum of economic well-being; and (2) the economic development policies and programs of many a government in Asia leave much to be desired when seen against the Church's social doctrine.

Church Pronouncements. Both the rationale and the theological framework for our taking on the task of preserving and protecting human life are laid out for us, we said, in the papal encyclicals and documents we cited above. To these must be added *Humanae Vitae* and *Veritatis Splendor*. These two continue to be sources of controversy — at least on some points they make about “artificial contraception” and the morality of its use. I'm not too sure anything will be gained by bringing into our deliberations here the clashes of opinion that they are still generating. I suggest we leave those clashes aside. We will instead concentrate on *what we can do within the limits set for us by the official Church magisterium*. Doing so, we will avoid what I'm afraid happens only too often: We teach and teach but do nothing substantive about what we teach. Problems will certainly arise from what we will try to do within those limits. But we leave them to tried and true

pastoral and moral traditions to solve. Or do we have to review those too?

Earlier I noted how no special workshop has been assigned the topic of the poor. And I gave as the probable reason for the omission their subsumption in other workshops. But from what has been said above in the three presuppositions we have just been considering, I wonder if you will agree that our own workshop should not merely subsume the subject of the poor but make itself the proper and principal one for it. The reason should be quite obvious: Any discussion of population and development has to take off from the problem of the poor, their sheer numbers, the enormity of their needs, the depressing failure everywhere, despite all sorts of development efforts, to get them out of the deep rut of poverty they are mired in. And as far as the Church's social doctrine is concerned, its core is in the Gospel's unequivocal option for the poor: "If you did it to the least of my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me" (Mt 25:25).

With all that said by way of a protracted introduction, we launch into the heart of our discussion. Let me do so in a series of step-by-step questions.

QUESTIONS

Given our focus on action and the wide diversity of situations we are coming from, the first thing we have to do is to try clarifying in our own minds where we stand on our workshop topic. Hence, the following questions:

1. Is population a problem or not in your country? In Asia? In the world? (The Demographic Question)
2. Is population growth or decline affecting the economy of your country adversely or not? Of Asia? Of the world? (The Economic Question)
3. Is life given due respect or not in your society? (The Cultural Question)
4. Is life protected or not by your government? (The Political Question)

The questions are so posed for the reason, as we have indicated above, that our situations are quite diverse — as are our cultural outlooks, possibly even our theological premises — and hence too, necessarily, will be our replies. And we must allow for holy plurality in this blessed workshop of ours! The questions are in the nature of a check list, requiring nothing more than a simple *yes* or *no* answer. And they are only preliminary to this further one:

5. According to how we answer the four questions above, what can we do by ourselves as Church to preserve, protect and enhance life in Asia? With others? With government? (The Ecclesial Question)

This last is really the essential question of our workshop. And if it is, deeper inquiry into it forces us to go into the following more particular and focused questions:

1. The Demographic Question

- (a) If population is a problem, what do we do to decelerate it within the limits set by current Church teaching?
- (b) If population is not a problem, how do we enhance human life, work to make it more human?

2. The Economic Question

- (a) If population growth or decline affects the economy adversely, what do we do to promote the economic well-being of our people?
- (b) If population growth or decline does not affect the economy adversely, what do we do to improve its performance (or at least its chances of continuing favorably)?

3. The Cultural Question

- (a) If respect for life is insufficient in our society, what do we do to change what anti-life tendencies we see in it?
- (b) If there is sufficient respect for life in our society, how do we safeguard and enhance it?

4. The Political Question

- (a) If life is not given due protection by government, what can we do to make it do so?
- (b) If life is given due protection by government, what kind of support can we give it for even more secure protection of life?

RESPONSES

Answering the above questions is going to be the main preoccupation of the workshop and I should end my presentation here. But since our pers-

pective is that of the social apostolate and its addressing of political and economic questions, a few leads from the experience of its practitioners may help nuance our discussions better, possibly even push us beyond what traditional social action work has been doing. Let me go through the various questions again with that purpose in view but attending only to what seem to be the main challenges facing us in our divergent answers.

1. **The Demographic Response.** A programmatic response targeted at population growth where its too rapid pace is seen as a serious problem must push in a massive way such "natural family planning" (NFP) methods as the Church presently approves of. We should not merely talk of NFP — we should propagate it as widely as possible. But that is not all we should do. Conscientizing people to broader problems like environmental degradation, improper land use, the inequitable distribution of wealth, the working of social systems that militate against the good of the poor, etc., is an even more basic and necessary action to take. Where population deceleration, on the other hand, is not called for in the perception that there is no such thing as a demographic problem, there will be no need for a special action and attention may well be directed to the general question of integral human development.

The demographic question is usually spoken of in terms of limiting population growth and a zero growth rate is talked up as the ideal. But when that ideal is attained and it ends up with a high ageing population and birth rates that fall even below replacement levels, this too is a demographic problem of no mean consequence. And if at the roots of such a situation is a moral rot worse than the physical evil of "too many people," the Church's task should be crystal clear.

2. **The Economic Response.** The creation of wealth has somehow not appealed to the Church (more correctly, its leaders?) as a fit and proper work of evangelization. But if hunger, disease, ignorance, etc. are evils which spring from dehumanizing poverty, producing the material means to combat them is something that must be seriously undertaken if the Church's charity is not going to be only in terms of palliatives and almsgiving. All sorts of initiatives like livelihood and income-generating projects, producer and consumer cooperatives, the improvement of farming/fishing methods, etc., readily come to mind. The means to actively pursue such initiatives may not be available to the Church itself. But the mere acceptance and promotion of wealth creation as an aspect of integral human development is in itself a big step forward. The improving of the economy and of its performance is the proper competence of economists and government. But active concern on the part of the Church for the economic good of the people, of the poorest among them especially, will be a positive help to its achievement by those primarily responsible for it.

Historically, the social apostolate's principal target, as far as economics is concerned, has been not so much the creation of wealth as its equitable sharing. This latter will continue to be a major objective as long as there is economic injustice and exploitation. As things stand, such evils are not just about to go away. Even where a nation's economy is judged healthy, all too often the criterion used by technocrats to assess it is its ability to produce more, not its capacity to share equitably the wealth it produces.

3. The Cultural Response. An anti-life tendency in a society means, in the generality of cases, if not a tolerance of, at least a do-nothing attitude towards, violence against life. Perhaps some societies are more violent than others. But the sad fact is violence against life seems to be on the rise everywhere and overflowing populations and unresponsive economies may have much to do with it. Respect for life where life is cheap is hardly possible. And why it should be cheap is not due only to demographic and economic factors but also, perhaps even mainly, to cultural ones. Making respect for life a prime cultural value where it is not such seems to be the only answer. But how? Especially where Christians are a minuscule minority?

Here we come up against the enormous problematic and task of culture change — in essence, change in mind-sets, values, attitudes. It is the hard problem of mass re-education, one that so far has proved recalcitrant to easy answers, as even the most benign dictators are finding out. But even so, there is much to learn from Churches that have gone strongly into works of social justice, defense of human rights, active non-violence as the way of pursuing justice and defending human rights, and all this through the full participation of the people, the poor in particular. Such works have a way of eliciting and fostering a deep commitment to human life and hence a strong valuation of it in people who do them. Where the value of human life does not seem to be high among a people, often the reason may be that there is a stronger stress put on another value (male power and dominance, for example). The countercultural effectivity of Churches that have had experience in pushing an ethic of active non-violence is well worth consulting for their insights into the real possibility of values-change in people in regard to the sanctity of human life.

4. The Political Response. Where governments are failing in their duty of protecting their citizenry against social violence and injustice, or where they actually foster a decidedly anti-life mentality in their policies and programs of population management, the Church willy-nilly is thrust into the political cauldron. And this, whether it actively speaks up in protest or keeps silent for fear, prudence, or whatever reason. The Church has a prophetic role to play in society and this role is usually taken to mean the former, that is, speaking out. But the latter — keeping silent — can be just as prophetic a

stance to take, but only so long as silence means not consenting acquiescence to an immoral act or situation but uncompromising disapproval of it. In either case, to be prophetic, the Church's message must be unambiguous. And it must also be patently and solidly founded on moral grounds, not on political expediency. This last idea cannot be emphasized enough for Churches and churchmen — for every Christian, for that matter — who get involved in the conflictive sphere of politics.

Lobbying for change in laws or government policies, making common cause against any form of violence to life with others (with majority religions, especially where Christians are a minority), working with POs (people organizations) and NGOs (non-government organizations) that are dedicated to development work, taking care of the victims of anti-life acts of society and governments — these are some of the things the Church can get into, or at least think of doing, in response to politically-inspired anti-life measures.

The suggestions for action just made are all geared towards making governments have and show a greater respect for life. This is all of a piece with the suggestions made above when we discussed our response to the cultural question about human life. There we said we must work to make respect for life become a prime cultural value. And we noted how it entailed a tremendous process of culture change. These two proposals bring to the fore a question that now and again social action workers in the field confront and often have no adequate answer for. Perhaps you have.

Let me put it simply: When we say we work to get societies and governments to act in accordance with proper values regarding human life, whose values are we talking about? Evidently, ours. And we believe they are the values of the Gospel. If they are congruent with those a culture has (but government is violating), there will be no problem pushing for their inclusion into a people's public morality. But if they are not? Then our preaching will have to be truly countercultural. But being countercultural carries with it a real danger that we impose our values on others who do not see things as we do. The danger is always there in any kind of preaching aimed at conversion, change, proselytizing, consciousness-raising, etc. And then the problem becomes for us one of style of transmitting our message about human life. We mentioned above in passing the active non-violence ethic of working for justice, an ethic of gentle and reasoning persuasion, not of brute force. I strongly suspect much of the answer to the difficulty raised here lies in that ethic. (In this connection, the workshops on dialogue and spirituality formation should have something to say on the matter.)

ASIAN FACE

Let me conclude with one last idea which I hope will be of help in further contextualizing our workshop and starting us thinking more concretely about its end product.

In many an Asian Church today, there is much ado about inculturation — the synthesizing of faith and culture into an integrated whole. At its deepest level, it is the integrating of cultural values and faith values. (When you come down to it, this has been all along what we have been talking about in this workshop — in the whole Assembly for that matter.) This integrating should be done in such a way that each set of values mutually enriches and energizes the other.

If this is so, I wonder if we shouldn't start our task with an Asian value that lends itself to easy integration with a key faith value. I have in mind our concept of *face* — and the high value we put on it. It is Asian through and through. At its most superficial manifestation, it is an exaggerated concern for appearances, for one's public image, often regardless of whether or not there is substance to back it up. But when there is real substance to it, *face* is nothing more, nothing less, than human dignity itself. It is at this level of meaning — *face* as human dignity and worth — that we can begin to work with other Asians in a very significant way: first, at coming to a common valuation of human life and respect for it at all times; and secondly, at working together as a community with others to protect human life and be at its genuine service.

Is this too abstract an approach? I don't think so. *Face* is a hard fact of Asian day-to-day living, *face is real*. We cannot do any better, then, than to start with something as real as *face* — and from the very beginning give our discussions (and I hope their results) a recognizably and truly Asian *face*.

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