

Sixth Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide**RELIGIOUS LIFE: A SERVICE TO LIFE IN ASIA TODAY**

prepared by

VIRGINIA FABELLA AND QUIRICO PEDREGOSA**INTRODUCTION**

This workshop discussion guide is designed to have three major parts.

Part I and Part II are presented as background relevant material on the theme of the workshop. These are meant to be read and studied by the participants before coming to the actual workshop sessions.

Part III provides the guide questions for the workshop sessions. It is hoped that by the participants' common reflection, discussion and sharing on the questions, they are helped to make their respective plans of action in the light of their goal of enabling the religious realize their full potential as disciples of Christ, to become communities-in-mission in the service of the integrity and fullness of life in the local Churches.

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

PART I: THE ASIAN SITUATION

A. The Situation of Life and Death in Asia

The following of Christ by religious cannot but take place in an historical situation. The religious of Asia today can only find the meaning of their Christian discipleship in the realities of the Asian situation.

Asia is a vast region with many cultures and religious traditions, of varied and complex socio-economic-political contexts. Yet it can be said that change is the one common and pervading reality in Asia today. Change is the most constant factor of our societies (FABC V, 2.1.3). Changes are there, happening all over Asia today, supposedly in the service of Asian people's hopes and struggles for development or a better life. However, in many cases, this is far from true. Though some changes are clearly beneficial, others are of ambiguous value. For example, "there is new economic prosperity in many of our societies, but typically it has benefited mainly a tiny elite — old power structures remain substantially unchanged" (FABC V, 2.1.3):

Caught up in the throes and tensions of the ambivalent developments and changes, Asia finds itself consequently characterized by seemingly contrasting realities: life-giving realities, on one side, and death-dealing realities on the other side. From the Asian perspective, however, these realities are seen as parts of a greater whole, a greater process, an ever moving dance of a Divine Source that is at once Creator-Preserver-Destroyer.

1. Life-Giving Realities

- 1.1. Growing desire for participation in society, apparent in movements for democracy, people's organizations for autonomy, and sectoral groups planning their own future and agenda of development.
- 1.2. Concrete struggles and actions of the poor and marginalized to overcome situations and structures that undermine their human dignity and undercut the exercise of their human rights.
- 1.3. The recovery of liberating core-experience and insights by the poor and ethnic groups from their own religious and cultural heritage for the transformation of their oppressive and unjust conditions.
- 1.4. The emerging consciousness among an increasing segment of Asian women of patriarchal attitudes and structures in society and in the Church, that perpetuate the domination not only of women but of creation it-

self; the bonding among Asian women to promote just relationships among people; the growing recognition that women's ability to bring about life in this world is not confined to giving physical birth.

1.5. The desire for community seen in the growth of neighborhood groups, groups for the defense of human rights and the environment, BEC's, prayer or faith-sharing groups, etc.

1.6. Interreligious dialogue in the service of learning from one another, in search of better understanding of life's meaning, in view of working together for sustainable development and a just society.

1.7. The new consciousness of solidarity across international, ethnic and class boundaries, beyond boundaries of religion and sex, in the struggle for justice and peace, in the pursuit of human and spiritual values.

1.8. Growing awareness of the need for preserving and restoring the integrity of creation, the harmony of the cosmos.

1.9. The Church in Asia has become a mission-sending Church.

2. Death-Dealing Realities

2.1. The breaking down of important forms of democratic governance and the quality of politics flawed by numerous malpractices result not only in undemocratic forms of governance but alienate the majority of the people from participating in political life.

2.2. Asia is experiencing an upheaval of values and traditions. Practically all its peoples aspire to achieve industrialization at all costs. The basis of industrialization is secular, and this viewpoint destroys the environment and the human community. It reduces the human to an individual and creates a world in which all values and wisdom are determined by the market. But it is the mentality behind industrialization that is more insidious. In this mentality nature ceases to be sacred and is reduced to a commodity. The same happens to the human who is atomized and reduced to a consumer.

2.3. Because of a development model being exported to the South from the North, poverty continues to be the lot of the majority of Asians. This development model focuses on economic prosperity to the neglect of other human values; when it is pursued consistently by governments, it cannot but result in great human and ecological cost. Old patterns of discrimination and oppression against the poor, exploitation of women and children, militarization, graft and corruption, and

other violations of human rights are in force.

2.4. The traditional cultural and religious values of Asians are adversely affected by modernization and tourism through the counter-values they foster, such as secularism, materialism, consumerism, hedonism and individualism. These latter values and the culture of violence are propagated by mass media influenced by the First World countries.

2.5. While, on one hand, there are desires and efforts towards the values of community, dialogue and solidarity, there are, on the other hand, new social, political, ethnic, racial, cultural, religious conflicts erupting in many areas of Asia. Instead of promoting harmony in diversity of ethnic groups, races, cultures, and religions, self-interested groups or leaders, backed oftentimes by vested economic and political interests, exploit the ethnic, racial, cultural, or religious characteristic of one group, to the harm or exclusion of another, resulting in mutual prejudices, destruction of lives and properties, and violent confrontations.

2.6. The alarming pressure put on the population issue, the disregard for the integrity and harmony of creation, and the increasing exploitation and destruction of the natural resources of Asian countries, often determined by foreign investors and local counterparts, do not only destroy the human habitat and life-sources of the masses but also rob Asia of the natural beauty of its lands.

2.7. In many Asian societies, the majority of women continue to suffer under the traditional forms of subjugation, discrimination and oppression. They remain the main victims of sexual violence. Their situation is made worse by the new forms of exploitation brought along by the tourism industry, the processes of modernization, and the structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions.

It is in the midst of these historic opposing realities of life and death in Asia that religious struggle to be faithful in following Christ, who came that all may have life in abundance.

B. The Situation of Religious Life in Asia

The situation of religious in Asia today stands in the tension of what appears to be the inconsistency of the above realities of Asia: one that gives life and the other that deals death.¹ What occurs could be a jarring and confusing situation for the religious. Looking at the events and the developments that contributed to the form and shape of religious life in Asia, the following contrasting experiences come into focus:²

1. Life-Giving Experiences

- 1.1. Formation for both men and women training for religious life is contextualized and wholistic; There are updating efforts done in Scriptures, theology, liturgy, spirituality, etc.;
- 1.2. There is greater awareness among women religious regarding the woman question. Efforts have been made to promote the empowerment of women in leadership associations of women religious in such a way as the AMRSPW. More and more women religious as well as some men religious are rereading Scripture and Church documents from an inclusive perspective. There is an increasing interest among women religious to pursue studies to deepen their understanding of themselves, of relationships, both human and cosmic, and of God.
- 1.3. Emergence of intercongregational collaborations, sharing of personnel and resources in formation, ministries, retreats, and other activities. Networking among religious men and women on the diocesan, national, as well as Asian levels (e.g., SEAMS, AMOR, etc).
- 1.4. Renewed option for the poor; greater sensitivity to the growing number of marginalized in society; communities living among the poor.
- 1.5. The contextualization and reinterpretation of congregational charisms to revitalize the original inspiration and goals of the founders/foundresses, making more meaningful and relevant the following of Christ.
- 1.6. Growing awareness of ecological and environmental issues among the religious.
- 1.7. Notable contribution of religious in education, media, health care, socio-economic developmental work, and to liberative and conscientizing movements.
- 1.8. Greater sense of the need and importance of the value of community in the living out of Christian and religious life.

2. Death-Dealing Experiences

- 2.1. Image of the religious congregations as "business corporations"; religious seen as rich, powerful, elitist and upper class; tendency of

Church towards power, prestige and position:

- 2.2. Undue influence of secularism, materialism, consumerism, hedonism, and overdependence on entertainment media.
- 2.3. Lack of integration of faith (contemplation) and praxis (action), ministry and community, religious life values and culture (e.g., exaggerated involvement in family affairs, excessive dependence on authority, etc.).
- 2.4. Predominance of Western influence in religious life, and lack of inculturation of religious life.
- 2.5. Strong patriarchal elements in both ecclesiastical and congregational attitudes and practices manifested in:
 - inflexible and suffocating structures within the congregations
 - overbearing leadership styles
 - hierarchical models of governance, even among congregations of women religious
 - poor relationship between hierarchy and religious
 - conflict between congregational charisms and pastoral priorities of diocese
 - religious considered by bishops as "partners in mission" in words but oftentimes not in deeds
 - authoritarianism and dogmatism in bishops' attitudes towards religious and laity
 - lack of confidence in the laity on the part of both religious and clergy, thus blocking their genuine empowerment.
 - male-oriented liturgies and rituals;
 - Church teachings and Scriptural interpretations that continue to project women as the source of evil or as "temptresses;"
 - clericalism in the Church.
- 2.6. Involvement of religious with the poor, e.g., struggles for human rights, is regarded as a political or ideological stance by hierarchy as well as by some religious themselves.
- 2.7. Lack of prophetic witness: lack of credible witnessing to the vows, in particular, of poverty, a general lack of a justice and peace stance.
- 2.8. Lack of equality between men and women in the Church and in society; lack of women's participation in decision making in policies and practices that affect them; lack of proper understanding of women's role and mission in the Church; marginalization of women; women

religious considered as the Church's "cheap labor force."

2.9. Lack of understanding, recognition and support for the vocation of religious Brothers and their various ministries in the service of the Church.

2.10. Anthropomorphic concept of theology hinders religious from seeing environmental destruction as an urgent religious/moral issue.

PART II: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

A. Meaning of Religious Life in Asia

Given the complex situation of change in Asia and of religious life itself, with all its accompanying life-giving and death-dealing realities, religious cannot but question themselves on the meaning of their discipleship in Christ in such a situation. They are asked to reflect on this important question: What does it mean for religious to be authentic followers of Christ in the Asian situation today?

1. Religious Life: A Charism of Discipleship

Discipleship is shared by religious with all Christians. However, religious life is a special charism of discipleship (MR 10, 14). Religious are men and women who, in their desire to derive more and express more their baptismal consecration, make a personal decision, through religious profession, to make the following of Jesus Christ their way of life (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 5; *Lumen Gentium*, 44). In this light, religious life serves as a gift to the Church: as memory of its vocation of following Christ. Being disciples, religious are engaged in frontier situations where people are neglected, oppressed and even excluded. This concretizes the meaning of consecration in a conflictive situation.

Yet, it has to be quickly added, that there is pluriformity among the religious in their following of Christ. Each founder/foundress of any religious community, inspired by the Holy Spirit to respond to the needs of the Church and society of his/her time, has envisioned and effectively modeled a particular way of following Christ. This specification of the following of Christ pioneered by the founder/foundress constitutes a Spirit-inspired gift of life and service to the Church and society, a specific charism of religious life. When this is passed on to and is lived out critically and creatively by his/her followers in their own contexts, it becomes a congregational charism. Every generation of religious has to interpret the expression of their congregational charism in relation to their own particular situation.

2. Religious Life: Following Christ in His Mission of Proclaiming God's Reign

The existential meaning of the following of Christ by religious has to be interpreted in the service of the Reign of God within the context of the Church's faith-life and mission. In other words, as integral members of the Church, what does it mean for religious to be a community of followers of Christ in Asia today?

Living out discipleship in Asia today calls for a renewal of the sense of mission (FABC V, 3.1). This renewal of mission includes "being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Reign through presence, solidarity, sharing and world" (FABC V, 3.1.1). The religious living among the poor are being evangelized by them in the process. It is the poor who bring the religious to recognize Christ in an unfamiliar situation, thus discovering and seeing for themselves new faces of Christ.

The renewal of the sense of mission gives a new meaning in the following of Christ. It creates new venues for experiencing the following of Christ: the movements of people, as seen in solidarity with people's organizations and ecumenical groups and their joint activities. By working with different groups of people, the religious come to experience the lay people's search for spirituality. This experience can help deepen the religious' own spirituality.

This renewal of the sense of mission has to take into account the emerging spirituality of creation. "There is a mystical interrelatedness of all reality. Our destinies, the destinies of all people of the earth, and the forests are wrapped together. We are awakening to our lost sense of wonder and reverence for the miracles of life. A creation-centered spirituality emphasizes the need to live in harmony with all nature, and to honor creation, and the creator from which all creation stems" (*Asia Journal of Theology*, vol.7, No.1, April 1993, pp. 124-125).

The renewal of the sense of mission will, therefore, entail a development of a new spirituality of our times: "It is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia" (FABC V, 9.1).

This means that the religious community of disciples does not exist only for itself or its members. It exists for the world, sent on mission to proclaim the Good News of the Reign of God. In other words, the community of religious as disciples is in constant search not only to be for itself but

also to be part of society, both in its problems and in its struggles to find answers to the problems.

3. Religious Life: Service to Life

But what does it mean for a religious community of disciples to be sent by Christ in mission of proclaiming the Reign of God in Asia today?

Confronted with the situation of present-day Asia, the call to proclaim the Reign of God becomes imperative and urgent to all Christians. It is a call to renounce the culture of affluence, thus creating a counter culture. The religious are especially challenged to make alive Jesus' vision of the Reign of God — God's plan and God's dream for the life and transformation of the world, which can only be achieved by a new lifestyle and expression.

Indeed, Jesus has come to proclaim the Reign of God. In the Gospel according to John, the Reign of God is interpreted as "fullness of life." He substituted the terms "Reign of God" and "salvation" with the term "life." Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (*FABC Papers*, No. 60, p. 6).

Consequently, the proclamation of God's Reign takes the form of bringing forth the fullness of life of the whole humanity and creation.

In his teaching and ministry, Jesus himself showed a concern for persons and groups, of the poor and the sick, for women and children, for Jews and Gentiles. Jesus manifested a consistent concern for the poor. He frequently called upon those with possessions to use them to benefit the poor. He asked the disciples find ways and means to enable the poor to participate fully in the life of the community (*FABC Papers*, No. 63, p. 15).

Therefore, the proclamation of God's Reign in Asia today finds its meaning and realization in the service to life. Religious men and women are called to make their lives — vows, community, lifestyle, prayer and ministries — truly life-giving in the following of Christ, the Source and Giver of Life. In solidarity with all peoples, they work and struggle for the integrity and fullness of life. What we seek in both is not just life's meaning but "an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences of the purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being, and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive" (Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*).

B. Challenges for Religious in Asia

In the light of the preceding general meaning and challenge of religious life, what are the specific challenges faced by religious in Asia today?

1. Signification

The first challenge for religious is to become what they are called to be. In the light of their discipleship in Christ in Asia, they are called to be signs and givers of life. In the midst of death-dealing realities, they are called all the more to identify themselves with the poor and the oppressed and those who desire to go beyond barriers in order to bring about a better life.

What kind of presence and witness of life will enable the religious to be signs of life to others? What kind of candidates to the religious life are we seeking? What kind of formation do we need to be able to identify with the poor? What are the facilitating factors/hindrances to this type of formation?

2. Integration

Asians today suffer various forms of fragmentation, brought about by massive poverty and divisive conflicts afflicting them. Disintegration happens in many spheres of life: personal, family, gender, relations, social, cultural, ecological and political. Religious are challenged in their life and ministry to bring about integration in themselves and others.

What does it mean for religious to be fully human? How could they effectively integrate prayer and praxis, community life and ministry, communion and mission, religious life values and culture?

3. Prophecy

Religious are called to be prophets of the Reign of God. In the face of the breakdown of the traditional values of Asia and the emergence of the ambivalent values of the process of modernization, religious are called to witness to the values of God's Reign, e.g., truth, justice, love, peace. These are the values which will truly bring about the full meaning and realization of development and of the fullness of life. These very same values testify against structures and systems that are life-destroying.

Within the Church, the religious do not enter into its hierarchical structure but to its charismatic nature. They signify the freedom of the Spirit, who bestows the Church with gifts for the proclamation of the Reign of

God appropriate to the needs of the time and place. They belong to the prophetic wing of the Church. Hence, they are never quite "at ease" with the actual circumstances of the Church in which they live, which situation gives rise to their critical stances and mobility. On the other hand, the religious are asked to have an authentic understanding of and collaboration in the pastoral program of the local Church in which they find themselves.

How can the religious truly proclaim the values of the Reign of God in living out their vows, community life, ministries, spirituality? How can the religious exercise authentically their respective charisms within the context of the concrete needs of the local Church?

4. Interreligious Dialogue

Asia is home to the world's major religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. The Christians are a small minority in Asia. The religious are a small group in the Church. Apart from Christianity, other religions in Asia also have their own religious people: monks, nuns, sannyasis. In this situation, Christian religious are called to reach out to peoples and religious of other faiths. Dialogue is the key attitude and approach in their mission of proclaiming the Reign of God.

How far do the religious see and adopt dialogue as the preferred mode of their being and doing as missionaries of the reign of God of Asia?

5. Inculturation of Religious Life

Asia is a region of diverse and rich cultures. Religious life needs to be inculturated, that is to say, to be engaged in an on-going dialogical encounter and enrichment with the different cultures, wherever it finds itself.

What are the ways by which the religious can search for religious life, whose meaning and expressions "make sense" to Asian religious themselves and to their Asian brothers and sisters?

6. Solidarity

"There can be no progress towards the complete development of people without the simultaneous development of humanity in the spirit of solidarity... we must begin to work together to build the common future... We have obligations towards all..." (*Populorum Progressio*). The religious are challenged to take part in the increasing consciousness of solidarity among Asians. They are called to participate in the various movements of solidarity for the transformation of life on the levels of the human, social, religious, ecological, political, economic.

How committed are the religious in their call to work for solidarity in the promotion of life? In the empowerment of the poor?

7. Communion

The religious by their experience of communion with God and among themselves are called to be an effective leaven of communion in the local Church. It is a gift they are asked to share with their brothers and sisters who search for intimacy with God and oneness with others in a community of disciples, in a spirit of mutuality, unity, diversity and participation.

How could religious help bring about the empowerment of the laity, the rightful role and participation of women in the Church's life and mission, the collaborative and harmonious relationships between religious and priests and bishops in the local Church? How could the Church allow feminine energy and creation-centered spirituality emerge and contribute to the regeneration of life within the Church?

8. Spirituality

Religious men and women in Asia are called to a spirituality that is wholistic and life-generative, rather than dualistic and sterile. They are challenged to allow a new spirituality to be born, a spirituality that is at the service of all life; a spirituality ultimately concerned with the promotion of God's Reign. In the process of change and transformation in Asia, such a spirituality will involve struggle with the "powers and principalities" of the age, and even a possibility of martyrdom.

What new language, symbols and rituals are needed that are characterized by fidelity to tradition, while offering a creative challenge to culture? How can Asian religious rediscover and incorporate the richness of Asian religious and spiritual traditions in the emerging spirituality?

PART III: DISCUSSION GUIDE QUESTIONS

- A. Identify the life-giving situations in your diocese. What are the significant contributions of religious in these?
- B. Identify the death-dealing situations in your diocese. How do the religious respond to these situations?
- C. What do you see as the responsibilities of the bishops with regards to the following:

- a. inviting/admitting new congregations;
 - b. founding new religious congregations;
 - c. participation of the religious in the life and mission of the local Church;
 - d. participation of religious in decisions that affect all;
 - e. new forms of ministries leading to new forms of religious life?
- D. What could bishops do to promote relationships that truly reflect mutuality within the Church?
- E. How can bishops enable the religious to respond better to the challenges posed to them as disciples at the service of the fullness of life in Asia today?
- F. How can bishops enable/support a spirituality that is emerging among religious/lay, based on their experiences to and reflections on today's world situation?

FOOTNOTES:

1. In order to determine which situations are life-giving and which are life diminishing for women and men religious in Asia, we made use of the following critical principle: Whatever promotes respectful and mutual relationships in community for mission and enables women and men religious to live out their congregational charism without undue hindrance is seen as life-giving; Whatever fosters the contrary is construed as life-diminishing or death-dealing. To put it theologically, whatever promotes just relationships in community for the continuation of God's mission in the world comes from God and is willed by God as the author of all life; whatever obstructs this life-promoting effort cannot come from God.
2. Cf. "Consecrated Life: Its Role in the Church and in the World from the Asian Perspective," unpublished paper on the major issues for pre-Synodal discussion emerging from the reports of the Bishops' Conferences and the Religious in Asia; "Bishops and Religious — Partners in Mission," unpublished paper from the 1994 Pre-Synod Consultation of the FABC, Hua Hin, Thailand, May 9-14, 1994; Sebastian Karotemprel, SDB, "The Challenges Facing Religious Life," Shillong, India, FABC Office of Evangelization, 1994; M. Amaladoss, SJ, "The Religious in Mission," talk given at the International Congress of the Union of Superiors General (U.S.G.), Rome, November 22-27, 1993; "Global Trends and Challenges to Religious," documents of the Inaugural Session of The International Forum of Religious for Global Bolidarity, held in Tagaytay City, Philippines, August 21-31, published by the Centre for Society and Religion, 281, Deans Road, Colombo 10, Sri Lanka, as *Quest* 126, March 1994.

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- a. investigating new congregations
 - b. founding new religious congregations
 - c. participation of the religious in the life and mission of the local Church
 - d. participation of religious in decisions that affect all
 - e. new forms of ministries leading to new forms of religious life?
3. What could bishops do to promote relationships that truly reflect unity within the Church?
4. How can bishops enable the religious to respond better to the challenges posed to them as disciples at the service of the fulness of life in Asia today?
5. How can bishops enable support a spirituality that is emerging among religious, based on their experiences and reflections on today's world situation?

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