

Seventh Plenary Assembly Workshop Discussion Guide

THE WITNESS OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN ASIA TODAYby
SR. JULMA C. NEO, DC**1. THE ASIAN CONTEXT**

Asia is a continent of teeming millions comprising about 2/3 of the world's population of 6 billion. Sixty per cent (60%) of Asians are below 21 years of age. It is a continent caught up in a web of dramatic changes that have created starkly contrasting realities, e.g., life-giving and death-dealing realities, lights and shadows (FABC 6, nos. 6-8), tradition and progress. These realities mark the whole of Asia. It is a continent replete with hope and challenges, filled with a sense of life and expectations.

Asia is home to 85% of the world's non-Christian religions and to a tremendous diversity of cultures. Within Asian countries, one finds diverse ethnic or tribal groups either living together in peace or locked in conflicts. Various forms of religious renewal exist side by side. Fundamentalism, often times seen as a reaction to massive social and cultural changes with which people are unable to cope, threatens the social and political stability of many countries.

The recent financial crisis that hit the region has provoked a questioning of the economic model underlying the "Asian miracle," its social costs and its relationship to Asian cultural values. The repercussions of this crisis on the political scene are still unfolding in several countries. Whatever their type of government democratic, socialist, governments in transition — all Asian countries are confronted with the same problems, e.g., an ever widening gap between the rich and the poor, social injustice, burgeoning of megacities (7 of 13 megacities in the world, i.e., with populations over 10 million

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are in Asia),¹ with its accompanying human and environmental pollution and cultural dislocation. A political consciousness that is less and less patient with authoritarianism is developing in some countries.

It is this context of plurality of religions and cultures, and a wide variety of socio-economic and political situations, that forms the locus for the life and mission of the Church and of consecrated life in Asia.

2. THE CHURCH AND CONSECRATED LIFE IN ASIA

2.1 A Time of Grace

For many Asian Churches, the present holds the promise of springtime. Notwithstanding religious persecutions in some countries, new signs of hope have emerged. The Christian population continues to grow. Christian communities have been started in new mission areas, e.g., Mongolia, Siberia, and the Church has been re-established in newly opened socialist countries. The foundation of six local "missionary institutes" in India, Thailand, Korea and the Philippines² is especially a sign of these Churches' coming of age, rendered more impressive by the fact that they, except for the Philippines, are "minority Churches." They are a beacon of hope for the rest of the Churches in Asia and in the world. Indeed, as John Paul II said in his homily at the opening session of the Special Assembly for Asia: "This is a time of grace when the Church in Asia is called to a fresh missionary outreach."

Underlying this fresh missionary outreach is a vision of herself that the Church in Asia has been consistently proclaiming. It is a vision born of her reflection on the realities of the continent in the light of the faith she has received. The Asian Church sees herself as a **Church of Communion** (FABC 3; no. 7; Asian Colloquium on Ministries, no. 27; FABC 5, no. 8.1; FABC 6, no. 14); a **Church of the Poor** (Asian Bishops Meeting, 1971, no. 19); and a **Servant Church** (FABC 4, no. 4.1; FABC 5, no. 6.3).³

Mission for the Asian Church is sharing through love and service the fullness of life that Jesus came to bring. "Our understanding of mission is

¹ John Naisbitt, *Megatrends Asia: Eight Asian Megatrends That Are Shaping Our World* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996), p. 158.

² Cf. Fr. Edward Malone's intervention during the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, as cited by James Kroeger, "Asia: Moving to Mission," *World Mission*, XI,3 (March 1999), 25-26.

³ A careful reading of FABC documents for the past 28 years bears this out. See also *Instrumentum Laboris*, nos. 34-39a.

that all may have life and have it abundantly (Jn. 10:10). Having its source in the Blessed Trinity, this life is communicated to us by Jesus, the Son of God, sent to save humankind from sin, evil and death, and bring us to the dignity and unity to which we are called by God" (Message of the Special Assembly, no. 5).

This evangelizing mission of the Asian Church covers a complex of realities. Given the fact that in the continent Christians are but a drop in an ocean of humanity with plurality of beliefs, such mission must necessarily include dialogue with other religions, human promotion, inculturation and fostering the values of the reign of God, like justice and peace, freedom, human dignity. These dimensions are imperative for mission in the continent. To neglect them would imperil the future of Christian mission in Asia. If mission is to be contextualized in Asia, there is no other way for it to be understood.

In continuity with previous FABC declarations, the Special Assembly reiterated this multifaceted mission in Asia. It emphasized the imperative for the Church to engage in the triple dialogue enunciated by the FABC in 1974, i.e., dialogue with Asian peoples, especially the poor, with their diverse cultures and with their ancient religious traditions (Message of the Special Assembly, no. 5).

This triple dialogue has been going on in many Asian countries, on various levels, and at different paces, for the past decades. Numerous initiatives along this line (e.g., inculturation in theology, liturgy, formation for the various ministries, arts) continue to be taken, notwithstanding difficulties, including those arising from within the Church herself. Centers for interreligious dialogues have been set up in several dioceses. The FABC plenary assemblies, and the regional meetings of its various offices, have played a significant role in sustaining the needed orientation for these initiatives.

In actualizing the Church's vision and mission, the Special Assembly for Asia identified certain areas of concern in line with previous FABC reflections: promotion of missionary spirituality, inculturation, integrity of creation, promotion of justice and peace, and confronting the challenges of globalization. Various sectors needing sustained attention are the laity, family, migrants, refugees, women and youth (Message of the Special Assembly, nos. 5-6). One can add to this list: indigenous peoples.

2.2 A Time of Growth

Simply looking at the rate of growth of vocations to consecrated life⁴

from 1986 to the present,⁵ (in proportion to the very small number of Catholics in the continent, i.e., 2.9% of the 3.5 billion Asians), one has reasons to be hopeful about the future.

There is not only an increase in the number of international congregations in the continent, especially within the past two decades, but also of diocesan or local institutes. This is generally seen as a positive sign, notwithstanding the new problems that accompany them.

The years after Vatican II have shown that consecrated persons in Asia, as in other continents, have been at the forefront of renewal in the Church. Frequently, efforts at contextualizing and radically reinterpreting their founders' charism have resulted in greater involvement of religious in social ministries. In some instances this has put not a few religious in a position of conflict with certain sectors in the Church and in society. In general, religious congregations have taken seriously the continuing renewal of their members, investing much time and resource to ensure it.

A new development in the history of consecrated life in Asia is the growth in the number of Asian religious missionaries being sent on mission outside the continent—to mission **ad gentes** and to dechristianized countries. (This latter does not include religious working with their compatriots in non-Asian countries.) There is likewise a marked growth in efforts towards being missionaries to other Asian countries.

On the continental level, there is a growing acceptance that consecrated persons are a "major force" for the growth and renewal of the Church. On the FABC level, women and non-bishop men religious have always been present in its plenary assemblies as special guests and resource persons. FABC 7 is the second plenary assembly—following FABC 6—to organize a workshop devoted particularly to consecrated life. These are signs that augur well for the future of consecrated life in the continent, and

⁴ Consecrated life will be employed in this text not in the strict sense as described in Canon Law. It will include Societies of Apostolic Life, and will be used interchangeably with religious life.

⁵ Compare these figures: 1986—religious priests (12,496), brothers (5,247), sisters (90,480); 1998—religious priests (16,180), brothers (7,078), sisters (124,091), as quoted in *Catholic International*, March 1995, p. 137, and *Catholic International*, July 1998, p. 30. These figures represent a much higher increase, proportionate to the Catholic population, than those in other parts of the world. These vocation data may not be true, however, of some more developed countries in East and Southeast Asia. In these places vocation numbers have taken a big dip in the recent past (a fact which has raised the question of a possible correlation between decline of religious vocations and the level of development or modernization attained by societies).

that underscore the significant role it is called upon to take in the Church and in society.

3. IMPACT OF ASIAN REALITIES ON CONSECRATED LIFE

Consecrated life, like other institutions in the continent, has not been immune to new developments taking place in the world. The degree to which it has been influenced varies with different congregations, depending in many instances on the receptivity to change of the particular Church and the society in which they are inserted.

Many parts of Asia have remained traditional, even as its big cities continue to look more and more like their counterparts in Europe and the Americas. This fact has resulted in the co-existence of traditional and "emergent" Asian cultures. "Emergent" in the sense that these cultures are a mixture of traditional and modern values/social structures.

3.1 Multiculturality

For centuries, diverse cultures, tribes and ethnic groups have lived side by side in many Asian countries with varying degrees of peace and acceptance of the "dominant cultures." The past few decades, however, have seen among the "minority cultures" a growing awareness of their cultures, their cultural or ethnic identity, and a corresponding claim for their recognition. Globalization, migration and the displacement of peoples due to wars and conflicts have further promoted this cultural consciousness. In some instances, geo-political conflicts, and the movements for integration, secession or autonomy that they engender complicate these multicultural situations.

More and more, religious find themselves working with various cultural and ethnic groups in their ministries. In many religious communities, there is an increasing number of members coming from "minority cultures," ethnic groups or tribes.

A major challenge posed by multiculturality within religious communities is the question of "unity in diversity" and a lived acceptance of its consequences. The first mental shift that has to be effected is to see diversity as a "desideratum," an enrichment rather than a threat, a given of human life that is compatible with unity. Even with this acceptance, however, the slow process towards its realization has to be worked through in terms of attitudinal and structural changes on the level of persons and institutions.

With the consciousness of multiculturality, religious in international congregations are beginning to see the inadequacy of a certain notion of

"internationality." They feel the need for an "intentional internationality" and for interculturality. The implications of this for ministry, community living, formation and governance, are many.

In ministry, multiculturalism poses a difficulty for inculturation. Anyone who engages seriously in the work of inculturation in the context of pluriform cultures will inevitably be confronted with this difficulty. "In view of the variety of religions and cultures in every country, it is difficult to make the right choices for inculturation, e.g., eastern and western spirituality, language, philosophy of life, dress, liturgy..."⁶

Societies in most parts of the world will be more and more multicultural in the next millennium. It is a reality that, most especially in Asia, religious cannot afford to ignore.

3.2 Poverty

While the "Asian miracle" may have transformed the skyline of some countries, it has not, however, altered the ugly face of poverty in many others. On the contrary, it has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The globalization of the market economy has given birth to "new victims" (e.g., the "new poor" created by the recent financial crisis, persons with AIDS/HIV, child prostitutes, street children, child laborers, undocumented migrants) and has further endangered the ecological balance in the region.

The poor and their life realities have been significantly affecting consecrated life in Asia, especially for the past two or three decades. For many congregations, the reality of the poor has become the optic for re-interpreting their charism, provoking a radical review and renewal of life. Often these efforts at congregational renewal started with more conscious attempts at greater exposure to and immersion among the poor. Reflected on in the light of the Gospel and their charism in renewal sessions or Chapter deliberations, this experience with the poor has led to revision of works, lifestyle, structures and formation programs. It has given rise to a "new spirituality" among those who opted for a more radical involvement with the poor. In the ministries, this "re-reading" of the charism through the "optic of the poor" has effected significant shifts: from working *for* the marginalized to being *with*, being evangelized *by*, receiving *from*, and working *with* them.

⁶ Unpublished manuscript "Report of the Bishops' Conferences and Religious of Asia," presented during the Pre-Synodal Consultation on Religious Life, held in Thailand, May 1994.

But for many congregations in Asia, particularly those who are heirs to a long history of traditions, the process has not been easy. Like the Church, they, too, have to struggle to break away from the burden of being associated for years with the rich — or at least the middle class — and foreign resources. "The vow of poverty has no more witnessing value in many countries. Our material possessions alienate us from the poor to whom we are called to announce the Good News".⁷

And even those who initially may have succeeded in reorienting themselves towards the poor have experienced difficulty in sustaining this commitment. A kind of "taming of the militant elements" among religious, or a cooling off of the "passion for the poor" that characterized the 70s and the early 80s, have been noted. "This decline in the social commitment of religious in countries that survived some very oppressive political regimes can be interpreted either as a weakening in the absence of a 'common enemy' to be opposed, or as a time for a better synthesis of faith and social involvement".⁸

This same trend has been remarked in other continents as well, e.g., Latin America. The victory of liberal democracy, signaled by the collapse of various socialist regimes, and the idealization of technology as having all the answers to the questions raised by social activists, are said to account for this phenomenon.

New forms of poverty will continue to be created in the wake of increased globalization, if the present trends are to be believed. Poverty is always dehumanizing. Hence, whatever its form, it will always pose a challenge to religious who are committed to a "mission of promoting fullness of life."

3.3 Technology, Media and Modernization

Of the "new" realities sweeping across the continent, technology and media seem to affect the life of religious congregations the most pervasively. Many congregational chapters and meetings have reflected continually on their adverse effects on the quality of community living, prayer and spirituality of their members. Particularly in industrialized countries and in the big cities of developing countries in Asia, one is a silent witness to the

⁷ Unpublished manuscript "Report of the Bishops' Conferences and Religious in Asia," presented during the Pre-Synodal Consultation on Religious Life, held in Thailand, May 1994.

⁸ Unpublished manuscript "Report of Workshop on Religious Life, A Service to Life in Asia," presented at FABC 6, held in Manila, January 1995.

progressive weakening of religious life values that are unable to resist the hedonism, materialism, individualism, the excessive stress on efficiency, that are part of modern culture.⁹

Without ignoring the benefits of technology and media for evangelization, it is their negative effects that provoke the most concern among serious-minded religious. The fragmentation and compartmentalization of life that they foster make integration, unity of life, very difficult.

Perhaps the most serious threat posed by technology and media is not simply the weakening of certain values of consecrated life, but rather the facile substitution of essential elements of the "culture of consecrated life" with those of an "alternative modern culture." The process is so subtle that religious can for the most part be unaware of it. The exaggeration of legitimate values, like efficiency, the individual, legitimate comfort and needs, practicality, personal talents, can make of them "idols" that gradually replace essential values of consecrated life, like common good, sacrifice, asceticism, poverty, service, obedience and community. (See also *Vita Consecrata* 38.)

Technology and media raise the absolute need for discernment vis-à-vis the values they offer. Between completely rejecting and totally accepting their use, there lies a third way — the way of discernment. The formation of discerning men and women will be a permanent challenge for consecrated life in the next millennium.

3.4 Plurality of Ancient Religions and Traditions

The existence of a great diversity of ancient religions and traditions in the continent is a special feature in Asia that makes for its deeply spiritual character.

It seems, however, that the consciousness of their deeper implications for mission and for consecrated life has not yet developed as much as it should among religious. There are reasons for this. The theology of mission held by many with regard to engagement with other religions may yet need renewal. The idea of interreligious dialogue as an integral dimension of mission in the Church in Asia still has to take root in their consciousness. They have taken for granted the fact that they are surrounded by millions of people of other religions for centuries. There are, moreover, the normal

⁹ Unpublished manuscript "Report of the Bishops' Conferences and Religious in Asia" presented during the Pre-Synodal Consultation on Religious Life, held in Thailand, May 1994.

blocks to dialogue, e.g., fears, insecurities, prejudices and complexes, that need to be overcome. Even as the Church in Asia admittedly suffers from a "minority complex," some religious at the same time exhibit a "superiority complex." Both complexes are of little help for interreligious dialogue.

Ninety-nine per cent (99%) of the people religious work with — outside the Philippines — profess religions other than Christianity. Hence, the possibilities for interreligious dialogue through "dialogue of life" and "dialogue of action" are immense. Several congregations have happily taken new initiatives to further this direction, e.g., through centers for interfaith ministries, interreligious spirituality and dialogue, or courses on them, as part of their formation programs. But the need for more deliberate attempts along this line remains, e.g., dialogue between religious men and women and their "counterparts" in the Asian religious traditions. For this, a new theological vision of religions, of the Reign of God, of the Church, and of religious life is needed.

Given the fact that only 17% of the world's population are Catholics, and 33% are Christians, a future without interreligious dialogue is unthinkable. "Interreligious dialogue is a dimension of life which is assuming greater and greater proportions in today's world. Religious plurality, globalization, justice and peace, and violence underscore its urgency. The followers of various religions have no choice but to come closer to one another... to strive to collaborate more for a better world. They have no choice but to promote dialogue."¹⁰ Many Asian religious need to awaken to this urgency.

3.5 Change

FABC 5 described Asia as a continent caught up in the ferment of change. "Change is the most constant factor in our societies" (FABC 5, no. 2.1.3). Asia is a sleeping giant that has been awakened. What this awakening fully entails remains to be seen in the next millennium. Already there are signs of it now.

The socio-cultural changes effected by modernization have resulted in painful identity crises among groups — youth, indigenous peoples, migrants — who suffer from fragmentation and dislocation, consequent to the contact between their own culture and a new dominant culture. Political changes and the violence they engender have generated a wave of insecurity and religious persecutions of Churches and of religious people. This has pro-

¹⁰ Cardinal Francis Arinze, "Interreligious Dialogue in the Third Millennium," *Catholic International*, IX, 9 (September 1998), pp. 419-422.

voked the emergence of fundamentalist sects and of conservative groups among the citizenry, and even in the Church. The more traditional groups who are ill prepared for change suffer the most.

These societal changes have affected congregations and individual religious in differing degrees and ways. In the same way that one can speak of traditional and emergent cultures in Asia, one can refer to religious sub-cultures in the same fashion. Some religious are more affected than others, e.g., those in the more industrialized countries and in the big cities, those more exposed to the West because of formation, studies or opportunities for travel.

Within congregations, different capacities for change have created tensions between groups — the conservatives and the progressives, the young and the old, the reformists and the radicals. Response to calls for renewal by Vatican II has been widely divergent. A good number of Churches and religious, particularly in countries emerging from socialist regimes, are still struggling to implement Vatican II.

The reality of change in Asia is putting to a serious test the capacity of religious for coping with it and alongside it, their capacity to survive in future. Even now, change has begun to affect the future both of congregations that have no vocations and those that have plenty. It has raised the questions: "Is consecrated life (the way it is lived) attracting the insecure, those fearful of change and the challenges it brings?" "Is it able to hold those who can cope with challenges and changes 'in the world'?" "Do religious communities communicate vitality, newness and freshness — indicators of their capacity to deal with change creatively?" The questions vary with different congregations and countries but they remain strong points for on-going reflection.

3.6 Globalization

The phenomenon of globalization — economic, socio-political, cultural — sweeping across the world has veritably reduced it to the size of a global village. The global outlook this has engendered is breaking down frontiers between nations and has linked continents in a way as never before. On the Asian and regional levels, there are the formation of alliances among nations, mergers among companies, and federations among organizations, to ensure their survival and their interests in a world grown highly competitive.

This globalization on different fronts has not been without opposing tendencies. The force towards one world is countered by pulls towards the assertion of cultural and ethnic identities. While one speaks of making the

planet a home for all, regardless of color, race, gender, one sees the continued marginalization of certain segments of the human family — women, children, migrants, indigenous peoples — and the ruthless destruction of the eco-system.

The globalization of mindsets is happening among religious in Asia, slowly and with difficulty, perhaps because of the vastness of the continent, the wide diversity of cultures, the absence of a common language in the continent and their traditional cultures.

There are movements towards intercongregational collaboration within countries, but on the level of the continent, much more can be done. Except for AMOR (Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious), and SEAMS (Southeast Asia Meeting of Superiors), intercongregational meetings of religious men and women (for leaders and members) take place largely on the country level.

The increased number of Asian religious going to non-Asian countries as missionaries or for studies, their regular participation in international gatherings, are signs of a growing global consciousness among Asian religious.

There is need for Asian religious to look more and more beyond the continent towards the whole world. Given their international network, international congregations are in a vantage position to promote this global outlook and solidarity without borders.

Conclusion: The history of consecrated life has consistently shown that religious have both influenced and been influenced by the societies in which they live.

Societal realities are definitely affecting Asian religious, though perhaps in a different way from what one finds in the West. Strictly speaking, one cannot yet speak of the challenge of a "modern or post-modern culture" — in the Western sense — to consecrated life in Asia. In the West, religious have been experiencing a crisis of identity for decades. Not only outsiders to religious life, but religious themselves, have questioned the meaningfulness, the *raison d'être*, and viability of consecrated life in the future. More recently, they have begun to speak of reconstructing a post-modern religious life identity, of rekindling the "fire in the ashes," and of refounding. They see the need to recover a corporate sense of mission, and a more visible community life that have been weakened by the individualism, that has come to characterize Western culture at its worst. Apparently, many

religious in the West seem to be emerging from a painful period of self-questioning. A "new springtime" is in the offing for them.¹¹

In Asia this is not the case — at least at the moment. The continued growth of vocations in many parts of the continent, except in the more industrialized countries, seems to be an indicator of this. Religious in Asia — except for some perhaps — are not preoccupied with a crisis of religious identity or with the survival of religious life in future. Asian religious still know their identity and believe in consecrated life. The question rather for them is how to live consecrated life in a way that will impact more on the lives of the billions of people around them. People who are deeply spiritual, from different cultural worlds, affected by modernity in varied ways, and whose survival is daily threatened by forces beyond their control. In a word, the vital question for Asian religious is WITNESSING.

Relative to their very small number, the influence of religious in the continent has been very significant, particularly through their works. But now Asian peoples are asking them for MORE. This is the challenge that imposes itself on Asian religious at the close of this century — a more authentic, a more credible, and a more "readable" witnessing.

4. WITNESS OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN ASIA TODAY: SOME CHALLENGES

John Paul II has called for a "new evangelization" for the next millennium. To situate consecrated life within the mainstream of this "new evangelization" in Asia, religious need to take seriously the challenges Asian peoples pose to them. To the extent that they do, their witnessing will be credible.

4.1 An Integral Missionary Spirituality

Witness is impossible without a renewed spirituality, nourished by a continuing experience of God. "We would have a message for Asia only when our Asian brothers and sisters see in us the marks of God-realized persons" (FABC 5, no. 9.2). Asians are more deeply impressed by what they see rather than by what they hear.

To respond to this challenge, religious need to become more and more "friends of Jesus," like Abraham who "spoke with God face to face." Then they can witness to "what they have seen, heard and touched." They can speak of God because they "know" him. They will strive to be transfigured

¹¹ A review of numerous books on religious life and articles that have appeared in magazines, like *Review for Religious*, *Human Development*, *Religious Life Review*, etc., for the past several years would show this trend.

more and more to his image and likeness through prayer, the Word in Scriptures and in daily life, the liturgy and the sacraments.

Asian peoples hope that religious will not simply be efficient administrators or competent professionals but first of all "spiritual guides," "holy ones" who show "the way." They want "humble, happy and prayerful religious rather than just achievers, specialists or professionals."¹² Their holiness, however, will not alienate them from deeply human concerns. On the contrary, it will witness to what is profoundly human. Otherwise, their God who became man would be utterly incomprehensible.

To be credible, this renewed spirituality must be missionary. One that is rooted in the "experience of Christ with special emphasis on compassion and harmony, detachment and self-emptying, solidarity with the poor and the suffering, and respect for the integrity of creation" (Message of the Special Assembly, no. 5). It is a spirituality that impels religious towards solidarity and commitment to the values of the reign of God — justice and peace, integrity of creation, human rights and freedom. Because such a solidarity is anchored in charity, in love for him who "lay down his life for his friends," then it becomes a silent witness to a "loving without counting the cost."

Such a missionary spirituality opens the way to dialogue with the Spirit present in the "seeds of the Word" in the various religions, cultures of Asia, in the signs of the times and in the "joy and hope, the grief and anguish" of Asian peoples, particularly the poor.

This missionary spirituality integrates the life of religious and resolves the dichotomy between faith and life, being and doing, love and action, between consecration, mission and community living. Without this renewed missionary spirituality, religious will fall far below the MORE that Asian peoples are expecting from them.

4.2 New Mode of Presence

In Asia, where religious are generally seen as an indispensable "work force" in many local Churches, the need for a different kind of presence for them to be credible witnesses can be easily overlooked. They need to move away from "images of exterior organization, power, or mere secular effectiveness to images of simplicity, humble presence, and service" (FABC 5, no. 9.5).

¹² Unpublished manuscript "*Report of the Bishops' Conferences and Religious in Asia*" presented at the Pre-Synodal Consultation on Religious Life held in Thailand, May 1994.

In societies fast becoming pragmatic and utilitarian, theirs must be a presence that communicates the value of "being," and not primarily of "doing." Theirs needs to be an evangelical presence that is attentive to persons, particularly the broken, the "little ones," and those who count for nothing.

This witness through presence requires proximity to people and participation in their life realities. It is a physical, psychological and spiritual presence that is nurtured in communities where members have learned to be present to one another in their day-to-day community living, and to the Eternal Presence in prolonged moments of contemplation.

This presence will, moreover, witness in an outstanding manner to some religious values that are at the same time deeply Asian values.

Harmony: Consecrated persons' witness to harmony is a witnessing to Jesus in whom the apparent paradoxes that confront human existence have been harmonized: "transcendence and immanence, emptiness and fullness, death and life, suffering and joy, the finite and the infinite, poverty and riches, the temporal and the eternal, the historical and the cosmic."¹³ Religious in Asia will be credible witnesses to the extent that they can harmonize being—doing, service—contemplation, theory—praxis, competence—spirituality, the personal—interpersonal—societal dimensions in their lives. To witness to harmony in their personal and communal lives is to be a striking counter-cultural witness in the midst of division and conflicts in Asian societies.

Compassion: To be compassionate is to witness to Jesus who is the "Compassion of the Father." Compassion is anchored in a passion for God and for his reign. Affective and effective compassion expresses itself in service to the victims of oppression and injustice, unmindful of the risks to one's security, status and reputation. The fruit of compassion is solidarity that reaches out to all who suffer, and that knows no boundaries of color, race, religion or gender. In a continent that has known oppression and injustice for centuries, compassion is a witness that speaks a language intelligible to all.

Dialogue: Asian religious should witness to this mode of mission preferred by the Churches in Asia¹⁴ in all their relationships: inter-

¹³ "Relatio Ante Disceptationem," *L'Osservatore Romano* (April 17-29, 1998), 9.

¹⁴ "Journeying Together Toward The Third Millennium," no. 4.2, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, eds. Gaudencio Rosales, D.D. and C.G. Arevalo, S.J. (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books, and Quezon City, Philippines, Claretian Publications 1992), p. 282.

personal, intra-congregational, intra-ecclesial, societal, inter-cultural and interreligious. Through dialogue, they witness to Jesus as Savior who by his incarnation, death and resurrection initiated a permanent dialogue of salvation with humanity. Witnessing to dialogue is possible when it is rooted in the spirituality of the Incarnation and of kenosis. To dialogue, religious need to empty themselves of whatever "minority" or "superiority" complex they have. In a continent that has constantly witnessed authoritarianism, manipulation and domination, the witness of dialogue becomes a powerful evangelical proclamation.

Communion: Vita Consecrata speaks of religious as "experts of communion." They are urged to foster a "spirituality of communion" that is born out of their communion with the Trinity. This spirituality is lived in their local communities, in their congregations, and extends to others in the Church and beyond. The life of communion that is fruit of such spirituality is "a sign for all the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ" (Vita Consecrata 46). Vis-à-vis a plurality of cultures and ethnic groups and a constant tendency towards narrow ethnocentrism, religious' witness to communion is an efficacious liberating force.

Peace: By radically and consistently living the values of consecrated life and the spirit of their founders, religious build up a "culture of peace." In making the following of Jesus, the "man of peace," their main life project, they create and live a counter culture that denounces whatever in Asian cultures falsifies Gospel values. In the face of a lack of peace of all kinds — poverty, injustice, violence and on-going tribal and ethnic conflicts, consecrated persons become "signposts" assuring the peoples of Asia that their quest for peace is not a utopian pursuit.

In fine, Asian peoples challenge religious to be present to them in a "new way" that exudes respect and equality, not domination, that persuades and does not impose, that evokes or clarifies deeper life questions rather than stifles and confuses. Theirs should be a presence that receives as much as gives, that is open to being enriched by the gift of persons, especially the poor, of cultures and religions. Such a presence will make people to exclaim: "Did not our hearts burn" (Lk. 24: 32) while they were with us? At the same time, it will be a presence that gently disturbs because it is the beatitudes radically lived.

4.3 New Forms of Ministry

There is need for creativity, inventiveness and risk taking if the ministries of religious have to respond to the real needs of Asian peoples.

A new vision of the poor and of their reality should underlie such ministries. The poor are the "image of Christ," our brothers and sisters who are "poor not in human values, qualities nor in human potentials, but because they have been deprived of access to material goods and resources, that they need for a truly human living, by unjust social structures" (FABC 1, no. 19). Notwithstanding this deprivation, the poor have much to share. They are capable of becoming partners with others in the process of their own promotion.

For religious' ministries to witness credibly in Asia today, they need to be animated by an inclusive vision that engenders a deep sense of interconnectedness with all of humanity and an at-home-ness with the whole of creation. Religious with such a vision will not be strangers to the events of history that unfold around them, for they firmly believe that it is for this "world" that God sent his Son to share the fullness of life.

Their ministries for the "new evangelization" will focus on the marginalized, e.g., women, youth, children, indigenous peoples, migrants and the "new victims" of globalization. This will entail revision of apostolic works so as not only to include assistance but also human promotion, advocacy, works for justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

A new way of relating will characterize these ministries — a partnership between women and men, with the poor, the laity, the clergy, bishops, and with people of other faiths and persuasions. This partnership in and for the mission is an option that has to be chosen together with its consequences.

The direction for the "new evangelization" in future is definitely towards more collaborative forms of ministry that address not just local (congregational or institutional) concerns but global ones. Solidarity beyond the frontiers of congregations, "spiritual families," and Church affiliations, in order to collaborate with others from different religious traditions, races or cultures, is a question of survival for the next millennium. Being a "tiny flock" in Asia gives it a greater sense of urgency.

4.4 Inculturated Consecrated Life

Inculturation of consecrated life is a process of dialogue and mutual transformation. By living very deeply their charism and the values of their consecrated life, religious transform cultures and societies of which they are part. This transformation is their "gift" to the Church and to the world.

On the other hand, inculturation demands that they, too, assume the values of their cultures/societies that are compatible with their life of conse-

cration. This presupposes discernment and implies their own subsequent transformation. This is the "gift" of various cultures to consecrated life and to the Church.

The charge of being Western/foreign rests heavy on the Church and religious in Asia. Inculturation makes religious life with a distinctive Asian face possible. It, however, implies a radical openness to receive from the richness of Asian cultures and traditions and from the poor. If taken seriously, inculturation will result in a dynamic renewal of life, works, spirituality, structures and governance.

In terms of inculturation of consecrated life, Asian religious congregations, particularly those of foreign origin, have a long way to go. Religious life in Asia is like the institutional Church. "The Church has remained foreign in its public image and expressions, in liturgy, art, architecture, mannerisms and presentation of doctrine and above all in patterns of life, especially those of her religious... This image remains very much a block to evangelization today."¹⁵ This lack of inculturation among religious congregations may partly account for the increasing number of local congregations in various parts of the continent.

Inculturation of consecrated life poses the challenge of discerning authentic values in the emergent cultures of Asia and assuming them, of holding on to still valid values both in the founders' charism and in traditional cultures, and re-expressing them in terms more understandable to contemporary Asians.

4.5 Witnessing Communities

Religious need to be convinced that in the sea of humanity that is Asia, the power of individual witnessing remains but it no longer suffices. The global reality of dominance by giant transnational corporations, mergers and conglomerates necessitates their communal witness. Fidelity to their identity as a "community of disciples" likewise demands it.

These witnessing communities need to be seen and experienced more and more as praying communities. They are "temples" where people can feel "a profound sense of the holy, a deep sense and awareness of God, of his presence and mystery" (FABC 5, no. 9.3), "oases" where they can refresh themselves from living waters.

¹⁵ Quoted in "Apostles and Martyrs: Consecrated Life at the Bishops' Synod for Asia," *Review for Religious*, LVIII, 1, p. 21. See also "*Instrumentum Laboris*," no. 13.

To witness credibly among Asians, there is need for new forms of community living where multiculturalism with all its consequences is not simply a given but is chosen and turned to an enrichment, rather than being a source of division and conflict.

Such communities built on communion are not only *for* the mission but they are themselves forms of mission. Their structures are flexible, entirely at the service of the growth of persons and the furtherance of the mission. Dialogue, faith sharing and hospitality are part of their way of life.

4.6 Witness of Consecrated Women

In a continent, where millions of women continue to struggle to liberate themselves from various forms of oppression and marginalization, the witness of Asian consecrated women is particularly crucial. Given the fact, too, that they number more than religious priests and brothers, the future of the new evangelization in the continent "is unthinkable without a renewed contribution from... consecrated women" (*Vita Consecrata*, 57). "For the Church cannot be a sign of the Kingdom and of the eschatological community if the gifts of the Spirit to women are not given due recognition" (FABC 4, no. 3.3.5).

Consecrated women in Asia are often regarded as more "fortunate" than their lay counterparts. Their state of life allegedly raises them "above" the level of other Asian women and offers them advantages otherwise inaccessible to them. Notwithstanding such "advantages," Asian religious women's struggle against forms of discrimination within their Churches, still seen as largely clerical institutions,¹⁶ and in Asian societies, generally hierarchical, remain.

By reclaiming their identity as women and their role in Church and society, consecrated women in Asia can open new possibilities for other women — whether Christians or not — and sustain the hopes of those who have started to walk the way of their own liberation.

By developing their feminine qualities of tenderness, compassion, sensitivity, receptivity, they can better mirror those qualities of God that Asian peoples need to experience today. Asian women religious can assist others in the Church towards a better understanding of the faith in all its expressions (*Vita Consecrata*, 58), help men reconsider their perspective, their place in history and its interpretation, as well as their organization of various aspects of life.

¹⁶ *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 13.

They can be protagonists in furthering the "new feminism" in the Church referred to by *Vita Consecrata* recently and enjoined by Asian Churches some years ago. "Their sharing in the decision-making processes of the Church will bring a new dimension to the life of the Church... Women must be recognized as full partners and their sharing in the ministry accepted as their duty and right."¹⁷ This "new feminism" will inevitably impact on Asian societies.

Feminism, before referring to activities, is first of all a consciousness and a vision that reject all forms of domination and exclusion, dualism and dichotomy. Thus understood, feminism can bring about wholeness in Asian societies divided by oppression, abuse of power and an overly stressed hierarchical order.

Through their ministries, their presence, and their congregational resources shared with other women, women religious in Asia can be a source of hope and support for other women in their common journey.

4.7 New Image of Consecrated Persons

Images from the past that linger on and that influence religious witnessing is one source of the difficulties experienced by many congregations in their renewal process. Religious in Asia urgently need a new image for the "new evangelization." In traditional Asian cultures, as well as in today's modern culture, the power of "images" and "symbols" is undisputed. An image that might appeal more to Asian peoples is that of religious as servants, who are at the same time mystics and prophets.

Servant

In a continent of great poverty that is not wanting in martyrs, the witness of a servant, of one who lovingly serves, gives himself/herself in total commitment even to the point of dying for others, will not fail to touch the hearts of Asian peoples. It is a powerful witness to the Lord who himself was a "suffering servant," who emptied himself so completely, living a life that was from beginning to end one given to and for others in a spirit of service.

Being servant implies that consecrated persons have discovered "power" in powerlessness, richness in divesting themselves of their complexes, in

¹⁷ "Asian Colloquium on Ministries," nos. 92-93, *For All Peoples of Asia*, eds. Gaudencio Rosales, D.D. and C.G. Arevalo, S.J. (Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis Books and Quezon City, Philippines, Claretian Publications 1992), pp. 83-84.

order to enter into dialogue with diverse cultures, religions, and with the poor. It entails putting the resources of their institutions at the service of the marginalized, at the risk of their own security. Or even of leaving some of them. "...some institutions are not truly at the service of the poorest... We are happy to see that some do not hesitate to get out of institutions to share the life of the most oppressed and to struggle with them to defend their rights" (Message of the Special Assembly, no. 7).

Prophet

Vis-à-vis globalization and the profound changes sweeping across the continent, consecrated life can be a powerful "prophetic statement" for Asian peoples. It will be so, when individual religious and institutions would have the courage to announce (through their lives, their words and deeds) the Good News, "in season and out of season," to discover and to proclaim the "seeds of the Word" present in different cultures and religions, and to denounce all that dehumanizes human persons and groups.

For consecrated persons to be truly prophetic in Asia, they need to experience a radical two-fold conversion: to the God-of-the-world and to the world-of-God. Only with such a conversion experience can they overcome whatever incongruence there is in their lives that weakens their prophetic impact.

Mystic

In a continent that is deeply spiritual, that is the cradle of the great religions of the world, being servants and prophets will not suffice unless religious are deeply rooted in God-experiences.

These experiences of God will reflect a quality of presence that can touch what is most profound in human beings, and that can, therefore, reach out to others of whatever religion and culture. If the deepest dimension of all cultures is a religious one, people of whatever culture will feel in the presence of religious the Mystery for whom they all search. The future of consecrated life in Asia may well lie in this capacity of religious to witness to this Mystery at work in their lives.

Service without mysticism risks being reduced to secular professionalism, drive for competence and efficiency. Prophecy divorced from a spirit of service and mysticism may be no more than social activism. Mysticism, detached from service of the people and prophecy, degenerates into an escape from life and a bodiless spiritualism.

All religious founders and foundresses were servants — prophets —

mystics. Their profound religious experiences, combined with their insight into the needs of their times, bore fruit in foundations that radically expressed God's love for his people, and in ways that were often-counter cultural in their time. In this sense, founders/foundresses were "revolutionaries."

In Asia today, any effort towards authentic witnessing implies a recovery of the mystical dimension of consecrated life, wedded to a profound commitment to people, especially the poor. This mysticism in action is Christianity's special contribution to Asian spirituality.

5. THE FUTURE

The future of religious life in Asia, first of all, depends in part on the questions religious allow their context to pose to them.

In a continent of more than 3.5 billion people, of whom only a little more than 100 million are Catholics (2.9%), religious are indeed a very tiny minority in Asia. This fact in itself needs to modify the questions they should be asking themselves. "How should we see our life and mission in relation to billions who are not Christians, and whose rich spiritual heritage antedates Christianity? Whose cultures are more ancient than the Christian cultures that saw the birth of religious life in the West? Whose poverty deprives them of basic material resources (to which we who vow poverty have access), even as they retain their rich human potentials?"

If the call to holiness, to a "transfigured existence," is at the heart of the religious vocation, how is this "holiness" to be conceived in a continent where Christians do not have a monopoly of saints? Foreigners continually come to Asia in search of holy monks and nuns, "sannyasins," "sufis," to teach them "the way."

Secondly, the future for religious in the continent will be shaped by the extent to which they have merged themselves into the stream of life of Asian peoples, and aligned themselves with the great concerns of the Asian Church.

As the latter enters into a new millennium, she is committed to living the triple dialogue she has reiterated again and again. This dialogue **ad extra**, however, must be accompanied by dialogue **ad intra**. Otherwise the Church risks losing her credibility as "Church of Communion." Unless the laity, religious, clergy and bishops, the different religious congregations and Church institutions, the expatriates and locals, men and women in the Church have learned to listen and to speak to one another, any talk of dialogue with other cultures, religions and the poor will sound like "a gong booming and a cymbal clashing" (1 Cor. 13: 1-2).

Even as globalization is blurring national frontiers, so, too, is the notion of "mission-sending" and "mission-receiving" Churches undergoing revision. A new chapter in the history of mission *ad gentes* is being written. Asian religious should look more and more at mission beyond their national confines to other countries and to other continents even, as needs of the local mission remain.

In the history of the Church, religious have always been at the cutting edge, blazing new trails in pursuit of a new vision. They were always a "minority group" that often unsettled the established order with their radical commitment and their prophetic lifestyle.

At the dawn of the new millennium, Asian religious need to ask themselves: "Have the joys and hopes, the grief and pains of our Asian peoples become truly our own? Where are we vis-à-vis the great projects of the Church in Asia? What steps have we initiated towards these directions? How much of our human and material resources have we put behind these initiatives? Are we once again trailblazers, opening untrodden paths, and living at the cutting edge, as we are meant to do?"

Like Abraham of old, religious in Asia today hear the same call loud and clear: "Leave your country... for a country which I will show you." And the same assurance: "Behold I make all things new." "I shall be with you till the end of time." Their response to this call will shape the new millennium for them.

GUIDE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Share regarding the role/contribution of religious in furthering the
 - dialogue with the poor
 - dialogue with other religions
 - dialogue with culturesin your diocese.
2. Identify existing structures in your diocese that promote
 - dialogue between religious and other sectors in the Church
 - participation of religious in decision-making on various levels.
3. How can bishops assist in promoting the "new feminism" enjoined by *Vita Consecrata*?
4. Partnership (between religious and the clergy, women and men religious, between religious and bishops) in and for the mission needs to be

promoted in the Church.

What factors help/hinder this partnership in your local Church?

5. How can bishops help religious renew their missionary spirituality?
6. What new forms of ministry have been initiated by religious in your diocese within the past few years? What has been their impact on the rest of the local Church?

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