

Seventh Plenary Assembly: Workshop Discussion Guide

**INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE
IN PURSUIT OF FULLNESS OF LIFE IN ASIA**

by
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**FROM THE SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR ASIA OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS
TO FABC VII**

The Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences promises to be no ordinary event in the history of the Church in Asia. Aside from the fact that it will be held in the early hours of the Third Millennium, it also will be the first time a significant number of bishops from Asia gather for discussions and discernment following the last major event, viz., the Synod of Bishops' Special Assembly for Asia, held in Rome in April-May, 1998. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the theme for the Plenary Assembly is "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service." If it sounds familiar, it is because every attempt has been made to ensure a continuity with the Synod's theme, "Jesus Christ the Savior and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia: "...that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).

Needless to say, there is still a lot of "unfinished business" to work on as a result of the powerful and rich experience of many bishops during the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod. Thus, the present workshop paper will take off from where the Special Assembly for Asia left off. However, in view of the fact that the Synod's Apostolic Exhortation is still yet to be released as of this time of writing the present paper, severe limitations adhere. For lack of the final and official output of the Synod of Bishops, the present paper relies heavily on what are unofficial sources and, especially on the *Synodus Episcoporum* Bulletins released by the Holy See Press Office, as well as on the *Lineamenta*, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, and the press reports of the Special Assembly process.

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshops of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), convening, January 3-12, 2000, at "BAAN PHU WAAN," the pastoral formation center of the Archdiocese of Bangkok, Sampran, Thailand, on the theme: "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service."

That the Plenary Assembly is being held just as the world enters a new Millennium is also of paramount significance. In a way, it symbolizes the preparedness of the Church in Asia to take stock and look at herself before journeying further into the new Millennium. More importantly, however, is the conviction on the part of the Church in Asia to be "renewed," and to set out a program which will enable her to be of "love and service" to the rest of the Asian world, as she strives to "remain faithful to the love of Christ, who called and appointed you as his disciples that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should last" (Jn. 15:16).¹ Implied in this desire on the part of the Church in Asia for renewal is the readiness to confess her sins of the past, to be cleansed of the demons which bind her to these sinful ways, and to resolve, in the words of Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja of Indonesia, to "approach the Third Millennium in Christ's name with a renewed spirit."²

The present paper begins then by looking at the Asian realities explored during the Assembly, pointing out areas which are still in need of "fullness of life." It will also look at Asian realities in connection with the theme of interreligious dialogue, and the conflict which ensued during the Synodal process on the role of dialogue in the evangelizing mission of the Church. This will then be followed by an exploration of the teachings of the Church on interreligious dialogue. Understandably, the documents of Vatican II will feature prominently.

Subsequently, the paper will explore the implications of the dialogue mandate given at Vatican II, and the theological tension which ensues on account of the mandate. Finally, the paper will look at how the Church in Asia has responded in the light of these tensions, and how it ought to move from where Vatican II and Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod left off.

Asian Realities

An appropriate place to begin the exploration of the issues of concern for the bishops at the Assembly is to look at the *Relatio Ante Disceptationem* (Presentation Before the Discussion, by the General Relator) of Cardinal Paul Shan of Taiwan. Informing that the topic of the Assembly was selected by the Holy Father himself, Cardinal Shan reminded that the Assembly "obviously focuses on Jesus Christ as the core of the Church's life in Asia, her missionary and pastoral concerns, and her service to Asia's peoples, so as to offer them the fullness of life promised to all who follow Christ as

¹ Pope John Paul II, last sentence from "Solemn Closing of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia," Synod for Asia, 14 May, 1998.

² Cardinal Julius Riyadi Darmaatmadja, last sentence from the "Closing remarks by the President Delegate," Synod for Asia, 13 May, 1998.

Lord and Savior" (p. 2). The Cardinal then went on to assert that "the mission of Jesus Christ is to give the fullness of life to all peoples," and that "wherever life is diminished, threatened or destroyed in whatever forms, Jesus comes with his message of pardon, which brings the hope of fullness of life" (p. 2). "This is particularly true of the Asian situation," he continued, "where there has always been a hunger for God, a hunger for the fullness of life, a hunger for communion with the Absolute, a hunger for the divine, a hunger for freedom from the transient, the impermanent, or the merely apparent" (p. 2)

Elaborating on what he means by the "mission of Jesus Christ," Cardinal Shan spelt it out as "one of love and service to life in all its fullness" (p. 3). Likewise, the Cardinal surmises, "the mission of the Church is to be at the service of life in the way Jesus understood it and carried it out" (p. 3). "The Church's mission of love and service to life will take varied forms," the Cardinal appends, and then specifically declares that this mission will "imply a genuine regard and respect for all the peoples of Asia, their religions and cultures" (p. 3). And how is this love to be actualized? It is to be "put into action in concrete forms of service in alleviating suffering and inhuman poverty, and in removing illiteracy and many other social evils which keep the poor in Asia in continued slavery" (p. 3), the Cardinal responds.

The last sentence is significant. It represents more or less what ought to shape the deliberations of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly. In a nutshell, Cardinal Shan seems to have captured the essence of what ought to constitute the program of the "Renewed Church in Asia" for the Third Millennium. The "concrete forms of service" are the ingredients of the "Mission of Love and Service" of the Church in Asia. Fulfilling this "mission of love and service" is fulfilling the mission of Jesus, whose ultimate aim is that "they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn. 10:10).

Elaborating more concretely on the contexts in which these "concrete forms of service" the future mission of the Church in Asia have to address, the Cardinal pointed to the "social evils such as the caste and feudal systems, internal and external colonization, vested national and international interests which resist social change, land ownership systems, state socialism, concentration of wealth and means of production in the hands of a few, corruption, and political instability" (p. 4). He also added to the list the rapid changes and hurts brought about by "the phenomenon of urbanization, the emergence of several 'megapoloi' with all their social and moral problems, internal and external migration, construction of megaindustries, nuclear plants, globalization of the economy, without sufficient regard for global ethics and global solidarity, the heavy burden of foreign debt which caused the great economic crisis in Asia, the rights of the evicted, displaced

persons, expansion of slum areas, leading to organized crime, terrorism, prostitution, child abuse, pedophilia, and exploitation of weaker sections of society" (p. 4). As if that was not enough, the Cardinal continued to say that "Asia has to deal with the problems of economic migrants, political refugees, asylum seekers, forced demographic changes, religious fundamentalism, child-labor, bonded-labor, oppression of ethnic and cultural minorities, indigenous or tribal peoples all across Asia, sometimes by governments, at other times by dominant cultural, religious or ideological majorities" (p. 4). Commenting on the growth and expansion of the mass media and informatics, Cardinal Shan also pointed to the "unbridled spread of pornography, an exploitative amoral, and even anti-moral, entertainment industry, which tends towards the exaltation of violence, free sex, hedonism in every form, individualism, materialism; and that an exclusively secularist outlook upon life which strikes at the roots of Asian religious and cultural values in family and society" (p. 4). Not forgetting ecological concerns, Cardinal Shan added to the list of "evils which threaten life in Asia" the "unscrupulous destruction of natural resources and the sources of life in land, ocean and atmosphere," which "leads to the destruction of ecosystems" (p. 4). He also suggest that there are "growing threats to life in Asia through drug trafficking, drug addiction, the spread of AIDS, the neglect of basic health-care systems, etc." (p. 4).

All of the above, Cardinal Shan asserts "call for a renewed awareness in the Church" (p. 4). More importantly, "they also need to be considered in new missionary and pastoral plans, as well as in the formation of new 'apostles' capable of meeting these new situations in a new evangelization" (p. 4). Above all, in such a context, "the Church has to manifest her preferential love for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed" (p.4). Such is the agenda for the future mission of the Church in Asia, and such might well be the agenda for the Seventh Plenary Assembly of FABC.

Interreligious Dialogue as an Asian Reality

But where does the topic of "interreligious dialogue" come in? What have the bishops of Asia to say about its import? Is it an aspect of Asian reality at all? What did the Special Assembly say in that regard, and to what extent did it feature in the deliberations in Rome of April 1998? To be sure, it was the most talked about issue on the agenda of the Special Assembly for Asia. Of the 191 interventions at the beginning of the Assembly, 43 dealt on the theme.³ No other theme had more interventions. In fact, even before the Assembly began, the issue of interreligious dialogue was already

³ John Prior, "A Tale of Two Synods: Observations on the Special Assembly for Asia," *Vidyajyoti*, (Vol. 62, 1998), 654-665.

a pressing and controversial topic.

To begin with, the *Lineamenta* focused the Assembly on the proclamation of Jesus by declaring that "the church in Asia has and wants to proclaim Jesus Christ to her brothers and sisters on the continent" (21). It went on to suggest, in a whole chapter entitled "Jesus Christ: God's Good News of Salvation to all," that Jesus Christ is "The Church's Gift to Asia" (Chap. IV). Some opined that this seemed to suggest that the Church possessed Jesus, or that Jesus is given by some agent outside Asia to Asia. The *Lineamenta* also unequivocally asserted the reasons "why the Church wants to proclaim Jesus Christ to the world: because she believes that in him human salvation finds its fulfillment and through him salvation comes to all" (24). Moreover, in a sub-section entitled "Jesus Christ: One and Only Savior," the *Lineamenta* turned to the Scriptures and repeated that "Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life"; and thus "all salvation is through him and in him," for "he alone mediates" (23).

The *Lineamenta* concluded by offering a number of questions, which, according to the *preface* by the Assembly's general secretary, Cardinal Schotte, "have been deliberately chosen to serve as a guide in structuring the reflection on the topic of the Special Assembly for Asia" (p. iv); and which the Church in Asia was invited to respond to.

Needless to say, its focus on its agenda was clear. For instance, in a question which asked the churches in Asia to "describe ways in which the Church can maintain the centrality of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in very difficult political, social and cultural situations." And then to elaborate on it by responding to the question, "In what ways can the Church present Jesus Christ as the one only Savior, as well as the universality of salvation in him?" (p. 59).

The response of the bishops of Asia was that "dialogue with other religions comes first, and that it is the means to effective proclamation" (*National Catholic Reporter*, April 10, 1998). This is the Asian reality which many bishops' conferences pointed out. For example, the response to the *lineamenta* of the Bishops' Conference of Japan minced no words when it said: "If we stress too much that 'Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior,' we can have no dialogue, common living or solidarity with other religions" (as quoted in NCR, April 17, 1998).⁴ The bishops of India went so far as to declare that: "To be religious itself means to be interreligious" (NCR, 10 April, 1998). In the context of India, they cautioned, the expression that Jesus Christ is the one and only Savior needs to be understood "in a way

⁴ NCR: National Catholic Reporter.

that takes seriously into account the multicultural and multireligious situations of our country" (NCR, April 17, 1998). They suggested that: "In the light of the universal salvific will and design of God, so emphatically affirmed in the New Testament witness, the Indian Christological approach seeks to avoid negative and exclusivistic expressions... We cannot, then, deny, a priori, a salvific role for these non-Christian religions" (NCR, April 17, 1998). The bishops of Thailand asserted that: "Evangelization must establish good relationships with other religions through respect and acceptance of each other's values... Evangelization must recognize the traditions of other religions as friends, or even relatives living together" (NCR April 10, 1998). These, and many such sentiments, were the response of the bishops of Asia to the *Lineamenta's* insistence on Jesus as the one and only Savior. It is clear that from their own lived experience of dialogue with other religions, the bishops of Asia cannot but continue to insist that the evangelizing mission of the Church has to acknowledge interreligious dialogue.

It came as no surprise, then, that the contents and theology of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the Assembly working document prepared by the office of the Synod of Bishops, after receiving the responses to the *Lineamenta* from the Church in Asia, took into account the feedback of the Asian bishops. In fact, comparing the later *Instrumentum Laboris* with the *Lineamenta*, one can say that it certainly began to look more Asian, having taken cognizance of Asian realities, especially the importance of dialogue with other religions. That said, it was a surprise, however, to see that some themes on Jesus, expressed in a very narrow and exclusivistic sense, still crept in. For instance, the *Instrumentum Laboris* even suggested that "many responses mention that Christ is not simply one of many 'Savior' figures among the many Asian religions and philosophies, but the 'one and only' Savior" (27). It also spoke of the "new evangelization in Asia" as dependent on "how people come to recognize Jesus so as to respond to the perennial invitation to experience fullness of life in him through participation in the communion of the Church, his Body" (25).

Such was the shape of the battle which seemed to be going on, and the issue of interreligious dialogue was perhaps the main point of contention. On one side is the Synod's general secretariat and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, who were mainly responsible for the formal agenda which appeared in the *Lineamenta* and in much of the *Instrumentum Laboris*, most of the reports to the plenary sessions, the discussion questions, and the methodology of the Synod. Their agenda was doctrinal: a reaffirmation of Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior.⁵ On the other side is

⁵ Prior, John. (cited above)

the majority of the bishops from Asia. They had with them their personal and lived experience as Asian Christians as their primary. Their agenda was pastoral: How to ensure the Church in Asia is faithful to Christ, while at the same time be in harmonious relationships with the many great and living religions of Asia?

Thus, when the bishops of Asia eventually came to Rome for the Synod, many seized the opportunity to express their views on the issue. For example, Indonesian Archbishop Ignatius Suharyo, in elucidating the "Asian Way" of evangelization, stressed the need for a "dialogue of life," where "we discover what the Spirit of God has been doing in [the peoples of other faiths] for ages before we encounter them" (SEB, 24 April, 1998).⁶ Cardinal Michai Kitbunchu of Thailand confirmed this by adding that "the dialogue of life plays an important role for the Church in Asia." He then reminded the Synod Fathers that: "All the faithful and every Christian community is called upon to practice dialogue" (SEB, April 25, 1998).

Spelling out how this practice of dialogue might be actualized. Bishop Johannes Liku Ada of Indonesia identified the need for a "missionary spirituality in an Asian context;" and that it effectively means a "readiness and ability to find what is true, good and beautiful in other people of non-Christian religions." He went on to reiterate that "based on the vision of evangelization in an Asian context," such a spirituality "should be a spirituality of sincere tolerance and dialogue, harmony and sisterhood/brotherhood"; or, in other words, our evangelization in Asia ought to be "by witness and dialogue rather than by direct preaching" (SEB, April 23, 1998).

Archbishop Jacques Ishaq of the Chaldeans gave an illustration of what this means in actual terms. Speaking from his experience in Iraq, he said that "Christians are tied to Muslims and the followers of other religions by the bonds of friendship and collaboration and solidarity, on occasions of joy and suffering, where they exchange visits and help in different ways" (SEB, April 24, 1998).

The Synod Secretariat which directed the Synod process responded to the concerns raised by the Asian bishops by bringing the centrality of Christ as Savior back to center stage again (NCR, 29 May, 1998). The mid-Synod report, which was to reflect the key issues raised by the bishops through their interventions, drew widespread criticism as sounding defensive and out of step with the thinking of the bishops of Asia (NCR, 15 May, 1998). There was thus criticism that the report had watered down the concerns of the bishops of Asia. Instead, the report seemed to have reinforced the origi-

⁶ SEB = Synodal Episcoporum-Bulletin

nal agenda of the *Lineamenta*. Basically, it is that evangelization must begin with Jesus and his unique role of salvation for the peoples of Asia. The task of "proclamation" was reasserted as the essence of the faith and of the Church's evangelical mission (NCR, 29 May, 1998). The Asian bishops, on the other hand, were insistent that in Asia evangelization is through what FABC has called the "triple dialogue," with the poor, the religions and the cultures. Archbishop Orlando Quevedo of the Philippines described this "triple dialogue" as the Church being the voice of the poor, and that dialogue is the path to effective evangelization, and that the diverse cultures of Asia must be respected (NCR, 8 May, 1998). With the interreligious agenda being the ball of contention, the discussion ensued during the rest of the Synod. Through it all, the bishops of Asia were persistent, always respectful, patient and resigned (NCR, 29 May, 1998).

The Second Vatican Council

Perhaps every Catholic acknowledges that the Second Vatican Council is the single most significant event in the history of the Church since the Protestant Reformation. It also ushered in what Karl Rahner has suggested as the "third historical moment" of the Church.⁸ Since its inception, the Church has had two major historical theological moments. The first was its *Jewish moment*, with a Jewish Christianity centered in Jerusalem. The second was its *culturally-determined moment*, with a Church of Hellenism, of Europe, of North America, etc.. The third moment is the movement from a Church of cultural confinement to a genuine *World Church*, where the Church incarnates and reassesses herself within new cultures and enters into dialogue with the other religions.⁹ Hence, Vatican II, which inaugurated this third moment, is the very first time ever that the Church's magisterium has spoken positively about religions other than Christianity. In fact, Church documents through the centuries hardly pronounce on religions as such, much less did they do so in a positive manner.¹⁰

Thus, when the 1965 document *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, declared that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions" (NA2), it was indeed a signal that the Church was entering a new era, a new

⁷ Asia Focus, 3 September, 1999.

⁸ See McBrien, Richard, 1981. *Catholicism*. USA: Winston Press, p. 606-607.

⁹ Knitter, Paul. 1985. *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*. USA: Orbis. p.20.

¹⁰ Dupuis, Jacques, 1997. *Toward Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. Orbis, New York, p.159. (A significant portion of the analysis which follows relies heavily on this particular work.)

moment, a *kairos*. Compare that statement with the Cyprianian axiom of old, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church); or the attitude of Christian missionaries who "often adopted the attitude that non-Christian religions were simply the work of Satan and the missionaries' task was to convert from error to knowledge of the truth."¹¹ And one will conclude that *Nostra Aetate* 2 sounds much like a theological revolution. The document then went on to declare that the Church "looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all [people]" (NA2). Again, another powerful statement, for the Church is now going one step beyond acknowledging that the religions are not wrong to the fact that they are indeed worthy of the Church's "sincere respect." The statement also acknowledges pluralism, and most of all, accepts that the religions "reflect a ray of that Truth." Even if it be just "a ray," the acknowledgement that other religions have "that Truth" is theologically revolutionary enough. However, all of these advances are then brought to a kind of anti-climax when in the very next sentence *Nostra Aetate* asserts that, "Indeed, she proclaims and must ever proclaim Christ, 'the way, the truth, and the life' (Jn. 14:6), in whom [human beings] find the fullness of religious life, and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself (cf. 2 Cor. 5:18-19)."

The above statements of Vatican II are also significant in that the Church is now not merely talking about the possibility or impossibility of salvation of *persons* of other religions. The *Nostra Aetate*'s statement was a declaration about the religions. Thus, for the very first time in conciliar history the Church was asserting something about the religions as such.¹² With regard to whether individuals can find salvation outside the Church or not, what Vatican II proclaimed is not altogether new, as the Council of Trent had already spoken about "baptism of desire," and thus implied the possibility of salvation outside the Church. But, what was new in Vatican II's proclamation was that the *possibility* had now become a *certainty*, and assurance also found in the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, that "God in ways known to himself *can* lead those inculpably ignorant of the gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6)" (AG 7) (emphasis added).¹³ The other issue is the more significant, as it concerns a proclamation about the value of the religions as such. However, in order to appreciate the essence of the statements of *Nostra Aetate*, other texts of Vatican II also need to be consulted.

¹¹ A footnote, as found in *Nostra Aetate* 2.

¹² Dupuis, p. 160.

¹³ Dupuis, p. 161.

Of significance is *Lumen Gentium* 16, (promulgated a year earlier, in 1964), which speaks about how "those who have not yet received the gospel" are in relationship with the Church. Specifically, it affirms that "those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church," and that Providence will never "deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God." However, the text goes on to assert that: "Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the gospel." As can be seen from the preceding statements, the Church has no problems acknowledging the individual's disposition and the "goodness or truth found among them," but stops short of acknowledging the same for the religions. Such a theology, of course, continues to maintain the importance of the "proclamation of the gospel," for through it the Church "prepares her hearers to receive and profess the faith, disposes them for baptism," for the purpose of snatching "them from the slavery of error" (17). However, the *Lumen Gentium* text then goes on to state that "*whatever good* is in the minds and hearts of [people], *whatever good* lies latent in the *religious practices* and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also healed, ennobled, and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil, and the happiness of [people] through the efforts of the Church" (17) (emphasis added). Even as the above statement remains condescending, it, nevertheless, does acknowledge the "good," (albeit described in a hesitating manner by the use of the adjective "whatever") which lies "latent" (not explicit) in the "religious practices." Against the backdrop of the centuries-old negativism, such an acknowledgement can be regarded revolutionary.

Let us compare the 1964 *Lumen Gentium* with that of *Ad Gentes*, promulgated just over a month after *Nostra Aetate*, in December 1965, and we have more or less something similar. For *Ad Gentes* states that "This universal design of God for the salvation of the human race is not carried out exclusively in the soul of a [person], with a kind of secrecy. Nor is it achieved merely through those multiple endeavours, including *religious ones*, by which [human beings] search for God..." (3) (emphasis added). Again, there is here a bold acknowledgement of the place of the religious endeavors in search for God which are other than Christian ones. And again, the document then goes on to subsume these religious endeavors under the umbrella of the Christian endeavors by stating that "these attempts need to be *enlightened and purified*, even though, through the kindly workings of Divine Providence, they may sometimes serve as a guidance course toward the true God, or as a *preparation for the gospel*" (3) (emphasis added). Similiar sentiments are found in yet another *Ad Gentes* text justifying the relevance of preaching the gospel to all nations: "But *whatever truth and grace* are found among the nations, as a sort of *secret presence of God*, this activity

frees from all *taint of evil* and restores to Christ its maker, who overthrows the devil's domain and wards off the manifold malice and vice. And so, *whatever good* is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of [people], or in the *rites and cultures* peculiar to various peoples, is not lost" (9) (emphasis added). Again here, while on the one hand there is acknowledgement of "truth" and "grace" and of "God's presence" (albeit merely "secret" ones and "tainted" at that) and of "good" in the "rites and cultures" (meaning religious activities), on the other hand, the spreading of the gospel is deemed necessary as, "missionary activity tends toward the fulfillment which will come at the end of time" (9). Yet another text which expresses similar sentiments is *Ad Gentes* 11, in which it exhorts Christians to "be familiar with their national and *religious* traditions, gladly and reverently laying bare the *seeds of the Word* which lie *hidden* in them (the religions)" (emphasis added). Whatever one may think of the language used, what is important is that there is the acknowledgement of the "good" in the other religions, even if they are merely "seeds of the Word" or "secret presences." While they may still appear condescending, one would be more appreciative of them, knowing that such revolutionary texts could never have been agreed upon during the years before Vatican II.

Hence, *Nostra Aetate* 2, which had as its antecedent *Lumen Gentium* 16-17, and which was then followed by the *Ad Gentes* texts, was not really out of place. If the *Lumen Gentium* texts sounded hesitant and feeble in their assertion about the good in other religions, *Nostra Aetate* 2 came on very forcefully and with greater clarity. That the Church "rejects nothing which is true and holy"; and that she views with "sincere respect" those "rules and teachings" (meaning the beliefs and practices or the dogmas and morals), which "often (there is no ambiguity or doubt expressed here) reflect a ray of that Truth," are assertions made with no hesitation and with absolute certainty. Put another way, if the *Lumen Gentium* texts had expressed the Church's views about other religions rather *cautiously*, *Nostra Aetate* 2 has definitely expressed the same rather *consciously*. It was deliberate and intentional in its clarity, declaring the Church's official position with regard to other religions. That said, when it came to promulgating *Ad Gentes*, the confident posture receded a little and the proclamation about the value of other religions once again carried with it a tone of hesitation and ambiguity. Such is the back-and-forth which also characterized the process at Vatican II.

The Dialogue Mandate

With that as basis, *Nostra Aetate* then exhorts all Catholics to "prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, *acknowledge, preserve, and promote* the spiritual and moral goods found among these

[people], as well as the values in their society and culture" (NA 2, *emphaiss* added). Now, herein lies the confirmation that the Church is not merely speaking about peaceful tolerance and polite co-existence, but asserting the importance of active engagement during which Catholics have the responsibility not only to preserve and promote what is dear to them, but also to do likewise to what is dear and holy to their neighbours of other faiths. If the other religions were merely to be tolerated until such a time when they would be obliterated by Christianity, there would be no need to "acknowledge" them, much less "preserve," or "promote" their "goods." Therefore, it is significant that the Church has actually mandated "dialogue" and "collaboration." Such a mandate reinforces the view that there is indeed a radical shift in orientation of the Church's perception of the other religions.

If she perceives the other religions as demonic and in error or false, hers would be an attitude which seeks to conquer, dominate and replace. Such a Church would be oriented towards the "conquest" mode. If, however, she perceives the other religions as true, but only partially and without the fullness of that Truth, then hers would be an attitude which seeks to heal, fulfill, perfect, enlighten, purify, and ennoble. The Church would then be oriented towards the "fulfillment" mode. But, if she perceives the other religions as genuine in their own right, and as true, just as the Church herself is true, and would like others to acknowledge Christianity as true, then hers would be an attitude which seeks to cooperate, collaborate, and to be in partnership with. The Church would then be oriented towards the "partnership" mode.

It is obvious that the Church has for the most part of her history been guided by the conquest mode. This reached its apex during the Middle Ages, and provided much of the theological and moral justification during the missionary phase for the conquest of lands to bring about the salvation of the pagans and the heathens. The question of dialogue with the other religions is not even considered, since there is really nothing to dialogue about, if they are in the first place in error. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that the word "dialogue" was never ever used in any Church documents prior to Vatican II. With Vatican II and its theology, however, the Church seems to have shifted out of the conquest mode and has moved into the fulfillment mode. Such an orientation sees the role of the Church as fulfilling and perfecting the other religions, which she believes have only "rays of that Truth," or "seeds of the Word," or the "secret presence of God." Dialogue is an acceptable activity here as the Church would then be able to learn more about the religions in order to discover exactly where they lack that completion and perfection, so that the gospel may be proclaimed to bring about their fulfillment. In a sense, dialogue here is instrumentalized, and becomes a tool for the preparation of the gospel. It is strategic dialogue, where the Church comes to the dialogue table convinced that she has all the

answers, and that other religions are subordinate to Christianity, which is the "one and only way." its aim is eventually to have all the religions absorbed into Christianity.

Moving beyond the fulfillment mode into the partnership mode calls for a radical transformation of the Church's attitude to the extent she no longer need to claim superiority, or the fullness of religious life. Or, if she does make such claims, she should also concede the same to the other religions, so that the other also shares in this fullness of religious life.

In such a case, the role of the Church is not only to fulfill the other religions but also to allow them to fulfill her in turn. It will be mutual fulfillment, mutual purification, mutual enlightenment, mutual ennobling, and mutual perfecting. True dialogue will then be able to take place since there will be a "two-way street" exchange, where each has its turn to speak as well as to listen, to teach as well as to learn.

Dialogue, in this case, is viewed as not only possible, but as an imperative. It would only be through dialogue and collaboration that the Church and the other religions can grow together as partners and co-pilgrims, converting each other, not so much to each other's religion, but to a closer approximation of the will and command of the Divine.

Creative Theological Tensions

As can be seen from the above analysis, Vatican II, which has surely brought the Church beyond the conquest mode to the fulfillment mode, has also at the same time called the Church into dialogue. As pointed out, it probably looks more like a dialogue with a hidden agenda. Its agenda is that the religions will eventually find their fulfillment within the Catholic Church. To be sure, many other religions also operate from the same mode, each secretly believing that the other will eventually come to see the light and embrace the one true religion, viz. their own.

On the other hand, the assertion of *Nostra Aetate* 2 seems to suggest an inclination on the part of the Church to move beyond the fulfillment mode into the partnership mode, which seeks to "collaborate" with the other religions, and to even exhort Christians to "acknowledge," "preserve" and "promote" the spiritual and moral goods of the other religions.

In fact, the rest of the *Nostra Aetate* document then goes on to spell out the positive values in each of the religions, specifically Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism (NA 2-4). That in itself is also another very significant gesture, for it represents the first time ever an official document of

the Church singles out and praises the other religions.¹⁴ There is, therefore, a kind of creative tension brought about by the bold assestion of the *Nostra Aetate* texts, which seem more inclined towards a genuine partnership mode, and the other texts of Vatican II, which seem more inclined towards the fulfillment mode.

At the root of these tensions is ambiguity which stems from the tension between the doctrine of God's love and God's will of salvation for all peoples and the doctrine that the Church is necessary for salvation.¹⁵ Thus, on one end of the spectrum is the conquest mode which emphasizes the necessity of the Church for salvation. On the other hand, is the partnership mode which emphasizes Gods love, and that salvation is available to all.

The fulfillment mode tries to integrate the two, and holds on to both doctrines at once, albeit in an adapted fashion. For instance, it advocates that Christ (not so much the Church) is necessary for salvation, and it at the same time also acknowledges the possibility of salvation for all peoples, even if they are not Christians.

The conquest mode is described as being ecclesiocentric in orientation, with a basically exclusivistic perspective. It's guiding post is the age-old axiom: *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* (outside the Church no salvation). The goal of mission, therefore, is to bring everyone to salvation, which can only mean bringing all into the Church. It excludes all other possibilities for salvation.

The fulfillment mode is described as being Christocentric in orientation, with a basically inclusivistic perspective. It focuses not so much on the Church but on Christ, who is much larger than the Church. And so, because Christ operates beyond the Church, the "truth and grace" or "seeds of the Word" in other religions are believed to be really Christ operating in a hidden manner there. All of these will eventually lead to Christ, and the religions as such are, therefore, a "preparation for the gospel." A variation of this is that the salvation of believers of other religions is actually through Christ, even as they themselves do not know it, thus giving rise to the phenomenon of "anonymous Christians." The other religions are, therefore, affirmed for what they are, but with a view that they will eventually be absorbed and included into Christianity by Christ.

The partnership mode is described as being theocentric in orientation, with a basically pluralistic perspective. It regards the inclusivistic position

¹⁴Knitter, (cited above), p. 124 (the analysis which follows derives largely from this book)

¹⁵Ibid.

as a form of imperialism, or crypto-colonialism. It holds that even, if for Christians Jesus is the path to God and salvation, it is God, not Jesus, who occupies the center of the universe of salvation. Thus, it proposes that the Mystery of God can well be encountered by a variety of means and ways, and through a variety of mediations and saviour figures. Other religions, therefore, are acknowledged as co-pilgrims or partners, and no religion can rightly claim to be superior to another.

One of the criticisms of the theocentric model is that it presupposes that all religions are oriented towards God. Moreover, this notion of God differs from one religion to another. To be sure, the understanding of the Ultimate Reality across religious traditions is as varied as the religions themselves. Responding to these criticisms, theologians have proposed an adapted version of the partnership mode, which is also of the pluralist model, but described as Regnocentric in orientation, or *Reign or Kingdom-centered*.¹⁶ This model presupposes that all religions have one thing in common, viz., the way with which they look at suffering in the world. It, therefore, proposes that all religions have a message of salvation, or human liberation, in the light of these sufferings. Moreover, it is the liberation of these sufferings which will usher in the Reign or Kingdom of God. The criterion with which the religions ought to be judged, therefore, is the degree to which they actually contribute to the liberation of peoples from the sufferings of the here-and-now. "In specifically Christian parlance this means that all religions are destined to be visible signs of the presence in the world of the Reign of God; all can and ought to contribute on different counts to the growth of God's Reign among persons and peoples."¹⁷ The Reign, or Kingdom-centered, model, therefore, has effectively shifted the preoccupation of theologies of religion from the degree to which the Church or Christ is necessary for salvation to the degrees to which the religions actually bring about the salvation of peoples on earth.

Towards Building God's Kingdom

The above analysis seems to suggest that, while the documents of Vatican II allow theologies to move up to a Christocentric inclusivist approach, certain quarters in the Church, especially amongst theologians of

¹⁶ Among the chief proponents of this model is Paul Knitter, whose 1995 book *One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility*. NY: Orbis Books, and its companion volume, the 1996 book *Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility*. NY: Orbis Books, offer a comprehensive overview of Regnocentrism.

¹⁷ Dupuis, (cited above), p. 194

religions, are advocating a shift towards the theocentric or regnocentric pluralist approach. To be sure, numerous Asian theologians¹⁸ have written on the subject, and Aloysius Pieris' recent book, *God's Reign for God's Poor: Return to the Jesus Formula*,¹⁹ has expounded on the theme with extreme and great clarity. For Pieris, the principal doctrine which should concern mission and theologies is the doctrine of the Love of God, who is salvation, and who is at the same time the Word of Promise, inviting us to express our Hope in Action. Since God's Word is Jesus, therefore, God's Word to us is Jesus eliciting our love for God and neighbour. Specifically, Jesus is God's Word in "Conflict with Mammon," and at the same time, God's Word of "Promise to the Poor." The Christian's task in the building up of God's Kingdom, therefore, is to stand on the side of the little ones (the Poor), and at the same time to stand against every usurper (Mammon) of God's Kingdom. Such Kingdom-centered approach can only serve to facilitate greater inter-religious dialogue and collaboration, and can only be welcomed as one which is thoroughly Asian, and truly relevant to the realities of Asia.

Besides the theologians, the bishops of Asia too, through their many FABC plenary assemblies and bishops' institutes, have often advocated a Kingdom-centered approach for evangelization and the mission of the Church. To be sure, even as early as 1970, at the very Asian Bishops' Meeting in Manila, one of the resolutions of the bishops was: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may *learn from one another* how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to *work more effectively together* on our common task of total human development."²⁰ (emphasis added).

And then, at the very first FABC Plenary Assembly, held in Taipei, in 1974, in elucidating the theme of "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," the bishops went on to declare:

In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue *we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation*. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values... How then can we not give them

¹⁸ Among some of the more renowned, are persons such as Michael Amaladoss, Felix Wilfred, Samuel Rayan, Stanley Samartha, and Tissa Balasuriya.

¹⁹ Pieris, Aloysius. 1999. *God's Reign for God's Poor: Return to the Jesus Formula*. Sri Lanka, Kelaniya.

²⁰ Rosales, G. & Arevalo, C.G. (eds.). 1997. *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1970 to 1991*. Philippines: Claretian. p.9.

the reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to himself through them?²¹ (emphasis added).

Suffice to say, the last quarter century has seen many more such declarations by the Asian bishops expressing their desire for more effective dialogue and collaboration with our neighbours of other faiths, as well as urging the Church to participate more concretely in the building of God's Kingdom. A recent book published by the FABC's Office of Human Development, entitled, *Your Kingdom Come in the Context of Asia: Teachings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, effectively captures the various statements of the many Bishops' Institutes (the BIRAs and BIMAs and BISAs and FIESAs, etc.) which embrace a Kingdom-centered approach.

In a sense then, the tension felt in the Special Assembly for Asia revolves around this same tension. On the one hand, some seemed to advocating adherence to the teachings of Vatican II, which limited themselves to an ecclesiocentric or Christocentric paradigm; on the other, some bishops of Asia were suggesting that we move on and develop from where Vatican II left off, and move towards a concern for the Reign of God.

Put another way, many Synodal Fathers were more concerned about their own present-day Asian Realities, very adequately spelt out in Cardinal Shan's initial speech at the beginning of the Synod, while others were more concerned about a faithfulness to positions formulated in Vatican II.

Obviously, Asia's directions were not so much about insisting on Jesus being the one and only saviour, as with its preoccupation, in the context of its socio-cultural-economic-politico realities, with discovering how the Church can synergize with the other religions to help towards building the Kingdom of God. Thus, because questions about the centrality of Christ or the uniqueness of the Church are really questions arising from an ecclesiocentric or a Christocentric paradigm, these did not seem pressing to some of Asia who were in the main operating from a Regnocentric paradigm.

Thus, when those outside Asia insist that the bishops of Asia address the issue of Jesus as the "one and only savior," it is like Asian bishops insisting that the Church in Europe address the issue of ancestor worship amongst European Catholics, or asking that the American bishops address the problem of caste system or the dalit problem in their parishes.

²¹Ibid., p. 14.

The issues are simply not to the forefront, and the other Churches will probably also protest. Likewise, for the bishops of Asia, the Christological issues which arise from ecclesiocentric or Christocentric paradigms are simply not pressing pastorally. They are not the immediate concerns of the Church in Asia. The more urgent concerns are the alleviation of suffering, and for that to be actualized, the Church has to and must collaborate with peoples of other religions. The Church cannot and must not attempt to do it alone,²² and neither can any one religion, for that matter. Collaboration between all peoples of good will is essential, for the power of Mammon cannot be underestimated.

Moving On

In a way, the call, therefore, is for the Church in Asia to move on from where Vatican II left off, and also to move on from where the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops left off. Vatican II is but the starting point of an *aggiornamento* which is an on-going process of renewal, characterized by growth and development. Contemporary theology can only begin from Vatican II; it is the point of departure. And the Church in Asia, on account of its privileged access to the poor, the religions and the cultures, and in view of its commitment to the "triple dialogue," can be looked upon as ordained by God to help lead the Church universal to a more adequate understanding of the Church's mission in God's Kingdom.

Moving on from the Special Assembly the Church in Asia will do well to take heed of the call of Synodal Father Bishop Gratian Mundadan of India, speaking for a change in the image of the Church to that which will be a "new way of being Church," which effectively means, "following the way of Christ of loving and self-giving service." In simple terms, it also "means a return to the Source," and this is what "Jubilee 2000 means," Bishop Mundadan adds (SEB, 27 April, 1998). The way proposed by Bishop Joseph Vianney of Sri Lanka is that the Church embrace a "profound spirituality based on *kenosis* rooted in the Asian religious values of asceticism, renunciation, evangelical poverty and detachment" (SEB, 24 April, 1998).

²²In a paper, entitled "Interreligious Dialogue for Human Promotion and Human Rights" presented at the Consultation on Human Promotion and Human Rights in the Third Millennium, organized by FABC's Office of Human Development from February 8-13 1999, and held in Pattaya, Thailand, the present author expounded on the importance of inter-religious collaboration especially in works of justice and peace, lest they invite suspicion. The examples of Christian missionary activities which turned them into instruments of proselytism are sufficient cause to provide caution to present-day Christian missionary activities which are exclusively Christian. The anti-Christian reactions by Hindu extremists in India in the recent past are instructive here.

Above all, the Church must keep in mind the timely reminder of Archbishop Ivan Dias of Mumbai; "We must never forget that the task of evangelization is a mission entrusted to the Holy Spirit. [The Holy Spirit] is the prime mover and blows where [the Spirit] wills. We share in [the Spirit's] mission not as managers, but as stewards in the service of the Holy Spirit" (SEB 25 April, 1998).

Thus, moving on from Vatican II and the Special Assembly for Asia, the FABC Plenary Assembly of 2000 will have to listen to the voice of the Spirit speaking in and through the realities which present themselves in the peoples and cultures of Asia. More so, she will also have to listen to the Spirit through the voice of her co-pilgrims, the other religions, and not fall into the sin which Bishop John Manat Chuabsamai of Thailand warns against: "If we, as Christians, are to continue on our spiritual journey living in isolation from the 99 percent of the followers of other religions, then something is not right." For, Bishop Manat adds, "the clearest sign of a truly spiritual person is in his or her ability to love." Bishop Manat continues, "Therefore, in our evangelizing mission as Christians in Asia, our greatest priority has to be the witness to this power of love."²³

Hence, if the Church is to be a sign and sacrament of the Kingdom, she will have to be an authentic witness to this power of love, and this love has to extend to peoples of all religions. With the power of this love, dialogue and collaboration will be facilitated, and together the Church and the other religions can then, as partners and allies, focus their energies on the Conflict with Mammon. This partnership will help in the realization of the Promise to the Poor, as the Kingdom of God is slowly ushered in.

Only then, will the Church be on its way to becoming a truly World Church, and only then, will she be truly a "Renewed Church." The Church would then have come of age in her "third moment," and be of genuine "love and service to Asia," where all peoples will enjoy the beginnings of the "fullness of life."

²³ Asia Focus, 23 July, 1999.

FOR WORKSHOP DISCUSSION

* Depending on the size of the workshop group, it is suggested that the group spend, say, one or two hours on each of the workshop items below:

Item One

In October 1986, Pope John Paul II assembled 200 leaders of the world's great religions in Assisi for the World Day of Prayer for Peace. On that day, the pope joined a circle with the Dalai Lama, Orthodox bishops, Hindu, swamis and a Crow Indian medicine man in full-feathered headdress, saying little but offering a powerful symbol of solidarity. Some expressed reservations on what went on. Later, the Pope explained that the event was but a prolongation and concrete application of the teachings of Vatican II. The Pope also pointed to the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the religious life of the members of other religious traditions. A similar gathering is being planned for October, 1999.

- Q1. Discuss the theological and pastoral implications of the above event.**
- Q2. In concrete terms, how can this be translated into the various levels of the Church: Episcopal Conference, Diocese, Parish, Basic Christian Community, etc.?**

Item Two

A 1984 document published by the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians (presently named Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) entitled, "Dialogue and Mission," lists five principal elements of the simple but complex and articulated reality of the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Mission is already constituted by the simple presence and living witness of the Christian life, although it must be recognized that "we bear this treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7).) Thus, the difference between the way the Christian appears existentially and that which he declares himself to be is never fully overcome. There is also the concrete commitment to the service of humankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it. Also, there is liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation, eloquent testimonies to a living and liberating relationship with the active and true God who calls us to God's Kingdom and to God's glory (cf. Acts 2:42). There is, as well, the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together towards truth and to work together in projects of com-

mon concern. Finally, there is announcing and catechesis in which the Good News of the Gospel is proclaimed and its consequences for life and culture are analysed. The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements (DM 13).

- Q1. In the light of the theological tensions discussed in this paper, what are some points which strike you about this passage from a Post-Conciliar document?**
- Q2. What practical strategies can you suggest for the strengthening of areas of the evangelizing mission of the Church which are still weak?**

Item Three

FABC constituted a Theological Advisory Commission (presently called the Office of Theological Concerns) to engage in in-depth study into particular themes which are of concern to the Asian Church. At the end of the "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue," several recommendations were made to the local churches in Asia. Among them are:

- i. We need to be conscientized and helped to free ourselves from prejudices, attitudes of self-defense, and of seeking merely our own benefit, by becoming open to the positive values in other religions, and ready to learn from them.

Q1. Give examples of our negative attitudes and also give examples of the positive values in other religions which we can learn from.

- ii. With regard to interreligious dialogue an updated theology and catechesis must be incorporated in the programs for seminaries, houses of formation and pastoral centers.

Q2. To what extent is this a reality? What are factors which promote this, and what hinders this? What can be further done to ensure that this theological updating reaches to the different levels of the Church: parish priests, seminary professors, religious, youth leaders, catechists, liturgical team members, charismatic members, and the ordinary lay person?

- iii. A week of prayer and fellowship with people of other religions could be organized at the diocesan and parochial level. Could we make this an annual practice throughout the FABC region, perhaps in relation with the CCA Asia Sunday?

Q3. How successful has this been? What structures might be useful in order to ensure that this proposal is better implemented?

Item Four

"What if she fell? What if someone knocked her down?," she asked rhetorically. "But, that was all I allowed myself to do," she continued. "I had dutifully brought her there, but I knew it would be wrong for me to walk into the temple, especially since I just got baptized last Easter," she explained. "But, then, I've been in and out this temple ever since I was a child," the other side of Virimala protested. "Is it wrong for me now to accompany my 87-year old mother to worship her Hindu deity?," she asked. Virimala was talking about her struggles as a newly-baptized at the post-baptismal Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults' (RCIA) class. She then went on to ask: "What should I do?," to which the RCIA facilitator responded, "You must engage in a dialogue with your mother. You must explain to her that now you are a Christian, and so..."

- Q1. What are some key issues which we can draw from this anecdote?**
- Q2. What needs to change and how do you think that can happen?**
- Q3. Relate another incident which has bearing on interreligious relations and discuss what needs to change.**

Published January, 2000

* FABC PAPERS is a project of the Federation of Asian Bish- *
* ops' Conferences (FABC), designed to bring the thinking of Asian *
* experts to a wider audience and to develop critical analysis of the *
* problems facing the Church in Asia from people on the scene. *
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