ENCOUNTERING THE EMERGING TRENDS AND CONTEXTS OF SOUTH ASIA

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INTRODUCTION

Inter-religious dialogue (IRD) is founded on the basic premise that all religions have something to offer, especially when their 'influences' can neither be denied or defied. More specifically, in the context of South Asia, IRD has an important role to offer. It begins with an acknowledgement that religions play a significant role in the *weltanschauung* of the peoples of South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Maldives, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka). Unlike in the West, they interface with other realities of social and personal lives as well. They mark their influence in culture, politics, economics, etc. They also acts as cohesive elements in community-building and identity formation. In some of the countries in South Asia, religious identities are valued high and treated sacred. Many of the great religions were 'born' here, along with millions of indigenous 'religions', each with its own philosophy (either oral or written). Major religions such as Hinduism, Islam Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Jainism, have their presence in almost all these countries, though the population size differs from region to region and relationship within the peoples of these religions differ from place to place. The world's largest populations of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains and Zoroastrians are in South Asia. Wikipedia reports that in 2022, South Asia alone accounts for 90.47% of Hindus, 95.5% of Sikhs, and 31% of Muslims worldwide, as well as 35 million Christians and 25 million Buddhists (Wikipedia).

IRD cannot be bracketed or put into a corner and placed either as an 'extra-fitting' thing, meant only for a 'select' few, as religions cannot isolate or ostracize themselves from the rest of human societies. Religions cannot be viewed in isolation- they are part of the entire fabric of human society that has other dimensions such as politics, social beliefs and structures, economics, leisure, customs, etc. Interactions are inevitable and social relationships

are inescapable. Dialoguing is part of human nature and IRD is an extension of this human nature, encountering almost everything, from sacred to the mundane. The word 'encounter' contains the meaning of unexpectedness too. Many of the situations that we are faced with today were not envisaged centuries ago when these religions were founded, and today many religions are caught unawares, and often the reactions are either one of denial or one of rejection. What we need today is a genuine acceptance of the present realities!

The purpose of this presentation is to 'know' these encounters- the encounter of humanity with one another, the encounter of religions with various social realities, the encounter of ideas, ideals, and ideologies with 'raw' realities of life, the encounter with 'dialogue' itself. Dialogue needs to be re-invented in the lines of these encounters for better effectiveness and greater fruitfulness. These encounters also suggest the various shifts that are taking place today. For purposes of space and time, this presentation focuses only on those encounters which are not helpful for human growth, which means that it completely acknowledges that there are many positive encounters as well. However, there is a gloom spreading all over because of many negative events dominating the scenario.

In order to re-invent, a renewed understanding of our current contexts is essential, and the following paragraphs would explain these contexts in four parts: a) the context of the socio-political world, b) the context of the religious world, c) the context of the Catholic world, d) the context of the dialogue world. The presentation of these contexts are partly phenomenological and partly analytical. They are not done country-wise, for the following paragraphs are general enough to fit in almost all country-contexts as well.

PART 1: THE CONTEXT OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL WORLD

1.   Human development

We are faced with VUCA in socio-cultural realities: volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The rapid changes in modernity, marked by remarkable changes in technology affect social structures, cultural patterns, and political dynamics. The uncertain health conditions caused by the recent Covid pandemic, and many political instabilities have caused disturbances all over. The complex nature of intertwined relationships between cultures, religions, social structures, economics, politics etc. also make it difficult for greater human development.

The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) measures the average achievement of a country in three basic dimensions – a long and healthy life, education, and a decent standard of living. It does this measurement using four indicators and annually releases the 'Human Development Index (HDI). The four indicators are life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling, and the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. According to HDI 2023, South Asia's average value is 0.508 and the world average is 0.465. These are the rankings (out of 191 countries): Afghanistan in 175th rank, Bangladesh in 129th rank, Bhutan in 127th rank, India in 132th rank, Nepal in 143rd rank, Maldives in 90th rank, Pakistan in 161st rank, and Sri Lanka in 73rd rank (Arora). Our reality is 'intersectional reality' and hence the ordinary person gets affected, pulled and pushed in all directions.

Epistemic injustice, as defined by Mirinda Fricker, as the consequence of the prejudice of powerful social agents to the knowledge of less powerful individuals and communities on the basis of their intersectional identity, can be witnessed in the indifferent attitude and weak commitment of the government towards education of the marginalized children of the society. Epistemic violence is not allowing or acknowledging knowledge

claims of indigenous people. Blocking them to exercise their knowledge is epistemic injustice (Cummings et al., 2023).

Drawing from the subtle tool of caste domination the political leaders have kept people away from knowledge especially the people of the lower strata of the society, the Dalits, Adivasis and women through cancellation and diversion of fund meant for the various educational policies of the government for the poor (Rai, 2020).

2. The major challenges of the world

According to Bernard Marr, there are five major global shifting trends: a) Climate change: There is an alarm ringing at the pace with which we have caused climate change with over exploitation of the earth's resources, and polluting it as well; b) Shifts in economic and political power: the combined economic powers of the E-7 economies of China, India, Mexico, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia, and Turkey will overtake the G7 economics by 2040; c) Political fragmentation, divergence, and polarization: Fragmentations are increasing, with examples such as Brexit, US withdrawing from Paris agreement on climate mitigation, technology trade war between US and China, Russia having its own internet, etc.; d) Shift in demographics: growing population, older population on the rise, people shifting to urban areas, (by 2030 there will be 43 megacities in the world); and e) Social cultural workplace shifts: new and younger people taking over, changing expectations and priorities, remote working, etc. (Marr 2021).

Along with these challenges, poverty continues to be one of the main challenges in all these countries and it affects the social ethos and growth of societies. While the poor experience hunger, sickness, and unemployment, the rich experience abundance! For example, in South Asia, India is considered to be one of the largest economies. Oxfam International reports:

- The top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth. 73% of the wealth generated in 2017 went to the richest 1%, while *670 million Indians who

comprise the poorest half of the population saw only a 1% increase in their wealth.

- Billionaires' fortunes increased by almost 10 times over a decade and their total wealth is higher than the entire Union budget of India for the fiscal year 2018-19, which was at INR 24422 billion.

- Many ordinary Indians are not able to access the health care they need. 63 million of them are pushed into poverty because of healthcare costs every year - almost two people every second.

- It would take 941 years for a minimum wage worker in rural India to earn what the top paid executive at a leading Indian garment company earns in a year.

- "What is particularly worrying in India's case is that economic inequality is being added to a society that is already fractured along the lines of caste, religion, region and gender."- Professor Himanshu, Jawaharlal Nehru University

What more, political philosopher Adela Cortina makes an assertion in her latest book *Aporophobia: Why We Reject the Poor Instead of Helping Them*, that the biggest problem in the world today is "aporophobia", meaning the rejection of the poor. The poor are excluded, stigmatized and humiliated and this happens cutting across all ethnic, caste, race and other prejudices. According to Cortina, there is a daily invisible attack on the poor, not because they are individuals, but because they belong to the group called 'poor' (Cortina 2022, p.18).

3.	Decline of public Intellectualism

Public intellectuals are those kind of intellectuals interested in public welfare and caring for the society they voice out their opinions in critical appreciation of social and political moves. They are trained enough to express their expert views on an array of social related issues and public policies. "The public intellectual serves a vital purpose in democratic discourse: exposing

shibboleths masquerading as accepted wisdom" (Dezner 2017). They are critics whose interventions are essential for the growth of societies.

Today, we notice that there is an attack (even physically) on public intellectuals. Many of them are threatened, silenced, or done away with. Secondly, there is an anti-intellectualism wave on the rise. Anti-intellectualism is the dismissal or truth, fact, and science. With social media on the rise and people falling prey to all 'fake news', there is a trend of being superficial, and even 'angry' at truths. Venomous ideas are injected into public consciousness for the sake of holding on to power. While in the 1970s the 'anti-intellectual wave' was infused by the idea that the intellectuals were elite who did not care for the other classes in the society, today it is the idea that public intellectuals are against the 'growth' of any society!

In the past, it has been used by authoritarian leaders and governments such as Hitler (Germany), Francisco Franco (Spain), Pinochet (Chile), Mugabe (Zimbabwe), etc. The shrewd political leaders of our countries spread 'populism' in order to block any intellectual search or critical thinking. They also use religion India to promote anti-intellectualism. Keeping people in the dark, focusing their attention on devotion, religious identities, and projecting their policies as saintly are some of the tactics of these people in power and politics.

4.   The silent spread of hopelessness and Care-lessness

According to Psychology Professors Anthony Scioli and Henry B. Biller, human hope is linked to these vital needs: a) attachment: a hope for physical proximity, intimacy and emotional bonding, and spiritual unity; b) Mastery: a hope for productivity and accomplishments; and c) Survival: a hope for overcoming physical challenges, anxiety, loss, and fear, and building resiliency. When these are not possible, nine types of hopelessness emerge, which can be categorized into three categories: Group 1: alienation, forsakenness, and lack of inspiration; Group 2: doom, helplessness, and captivity; and Group 3: powerlessness, oppression, and

limitedness (Boland 2009). When a particular condition of one of these extends over a period of time, hopelessness comes. In many of the South Asian countries, such hopelessness can be said to be slowly spreading, especially under various socio-political conditions, chiefly among minorities. Thankfully, a few religious minorities, such as the Christians, are able to desist hopelessness because of the various resilient factors built within their theologies. A strong belief in fatalism and *karma* theory also affects one's levels of hope!

Care-lessness is social apathy. Social apathy, according *to The Encyclopedia of World Problems & Human Potential* is the "lack of concern for social issues and the suffering of others that may occur on an individual or national level. It may also be reflected in hostility or indifference shown towards other social groups by a group formed to protect its own self-interest. Social apathy reinforces social injustice, inequality and conflict and may lead to social breakdown, anarchy or dictatorship." (Union of International Associations). A social indifference by the vast majority turns out to favour the power-authorities or the dominant classes (this includes religions, parties, groups, etc.) in a few South Asian countries.

There is also a growing 'casualness' attitude towards governance, social values, and the 'others'. With a culture of individualism growing stronger, a sense of community is becoming lesser and lesser in many places, especially among the middle class.

5.   Wrong politics and governance

There are five aspects of current politics and governance: a) Polarization, b) terrorization, c) denial, and d) violence, e) reverse revolutionaries. The basis of all this is a lack of love for its own people.

Polarization refers to the process of creating a division or separation between groups, often resulting in an "us versus them" mentality. In the context of religious symbols, polarization occurs when certain symbols are used to create a sense of identity and

belonging among one group while excluding or alienating others. Religious symbols can create polarization in several ways. For example, the use of certain symbols may be seen as exclusive to one particular group or religion, leading to a sense of division and separation between different communities. Additionally, the use of symbols may be seen as a way to assert dominance or superiority over others, further contributing to polarization. An example of this can be seen in the use of the term "Jai Shri Ram" in India. It is a Hindu slogan that is often used as a religious symbol to express devotion to Lord Rama. However, in recent years, the slogan has been increasingly used in political rallies and incidents of violence against Muslims and Christians. This use of the symbol has contributed to the polarization between Hindus and Muslims in India, with the slogan being seen as a way to assert Hindu dominance and exclude Muslims (Kingshuk Nag, 2018, pp. 78-79.) One of the dangers resulting from polarization is the shift from Liberal or Electoral Democracy to Electoral Autocracy.

Terrorization is a form of political repression. Anthony J. Nocella in his *The End of Prisons*, notes what Michel Foucault and others observed about control of people. They argue "who argue that the most powerful method to control a group of people is not by imprisoning them behind cement walls, barbed wire fences, and steel bars, but by instilling fear in them. A powerful method to instill fear is by stigmatizing a group of people as a threat and an enemy" (2013, p.13). In a few countries new laws are framed to make the minorities feel terrorized and make them feel vulnerable. The recent incidents in Manipur in India point to this element.

Denial of basic constitutional rights, freedom, etc. is another form of violence. The individuals are deprived of their individuality in the process. This 'de-individuation' is to make individuals and communities lose their sense of self-worth. Minorities are targeted and denied their basic rights, and this process is justified through presentation of them as 'threats'. The human rights records in several of South Asian countries is quite dismal. Human Rights watch's World report 2023, on India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka observes the following:

On India:

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government continued its systematic discrimination and stigmatization of religious and other minorities, particularly Muslims. BJP supporters increasingly committed violent attacks against targeted groups. The government's Hindu majoritarian ideology was reflected in bias in institutions, including the justice system and constitutional authorities like the National Human Rights Commission.

Authorities intensified efforts to silence civil society activists and independent journalists by using politically motivated criminal charges, including terrorism, to jail those exposing or criticizing government abuses. The government used foreign funding regulations and allegations of financial irregularities to harass rights groups, political opponents, and others.

On Nepal:

Violations by the police and army, including cases of alleged extrajudicial killings and custodial deaths resulting from torture, were rarely investigated, and alleged perpetrators are almost never held to account…. Members of marginalized communities, including Dalits, are disproportionately affected by sexual violence and have particular difficulty accessing justice.

On Sri Lanka:

Wickremesinghe launched a crackdown on dissent, using the security forces to attack and disperse peaceful protesters, carrying out dozens of arrests including under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Both the Rajapaksa and Wickremesinghe administrations blocked efforts at accountability for violations committed during and after Sri Lanka's civil war. The victims of past abuses, as well as human rights defenders and other civil society activists, faced harassment, intimidation, and surveillance by state security agencies.

The government opposed efforts to advance accountability for violations of international law committed during and after Sri Lanka's civil war, from 1983 to 2009, between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE).

Tirana Hassan, the Executive Director of Human Rights Watch noted that "human rights crises do not arise from nowhere. Governments that fail to live up to their legal obligations to protect human rights at home sow the seeds of discontent, instability, and ultimately crisis."

The violence of yesteryears in the South Asian belt was different from the violence of recent years. Anti-state revolts have been crushed, demobilized, or contained, and the use of power and terror have been enormous and the state in South Asia is ascendent. States use new technologies of surveillance, one of them being panopticism (the Panopticon theory holds that people can be controlled when they believe themselves to be under constant surveillance even if no one is watching. "Having knowledge over a certain individual or group of people means that you can exercise power over those people" (John 2019). Another technique is the use of coercive powers -using position of power to threaten punishment on subordinates or subjects), and encouraging localized mob and vigilante violence (Stainland 2020). This 'vigilante' type of violence is extremely harmful for any civilized society and it will soon destroy the ethos of a society. Stainland observes:

Crucially, however, this resurgence of state coercive power remains contested: while a new era of powerful states untroubled by internal competitors may have begun, there are reasons to be cautious. First, important insurgencies still continue in the region, even if they are diminished in intensity, while ideologies, inequalities, and forms of resistance persist that can be mobilized against state power. Suppressing violence is not necessarily the same as resolving conflict. Second, interstate politics are shifting in South Asia, opening the possibility of new dynamics of cross-border spillover, proxy warfare, and state sponsorship of armed groups. Third, forms of violence—especially mobs and

vigilantism—are on the rise that are dangerous in their own right and that can prove difficult to control even by colluding state and political party forces. Finally, instability in and political exclusion from regimes can foster rebellions, even after long periods of apparent stability.

The final aspect in this section is 'reverse revolutionaries. These are persons who want to 'restore society to a 'golden' state that had existed before. It is a sort of conservative approach. For instance, the '*hindutva*' model of governance proposes an alternative to modernity and considers that a return to the past will set things right. In political science such people are also called as reactionaries or reactionarists. A reactionary can be defined as "a person or entity holding political views that favor a return to a previous political state of society that they believe possessed characteristics that are negatively absent from the contemporary status quo of a society."(ECPS) When governments seek to be 'conservative' or 'reactionary', then it will quite often make them 'radical right'! This trend is something that we observe in a few South Asian states, including Afghanistan, India, etc.

PART 2: THE CONTEXT OF THE RELIGIOUS WORLD

6. Religious reductionism

When religions are considered *only as and nothing but* human constructs for social living, then there is reductionism, or when religion is considered as nothing but tools for exploitation by a dominant class, this is reductionism too. Recent remarks by Yogi Adiyanath, chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, one of the states in India can be considered as reductionism when he said, "Sanatana Dharma is the only religion, the rest are all sects and methods of worship. Sanatan is the religion of humanity and if it is attacked then there will be a crisis for humanity across the globe" (Srivastava 2023). Such comments reduce the uniqueness of all other religions. Yet another reductionism is the way religions are becoming politicised by vested interests in the South Asian region. This has led to religious violence, especially in India. Religion is being used for cultural nationalism and the masses have been led

to believe that this cultural nationalism is the same as Hinduism. Religious extremism and religious fundamentalism emerge from this fundamentally flawed idea of religion, ending up with 'religious reductionism'.

7.   Sacralized violence

Studies have been done on the reasons for religious violence and for the reasons how they are justified. In the current South Asian context, violence on other religions is justified chiefly through a feeling of having a divine command or a sanction from God. Perpetrating violence on other religions are given 'divine sanctions' and diabolize (change or alter) the other as evil, devilish, etc. Mathew Rowley has collected 300 causes of religious violence and he asks the readers to "alert to the fact that there are spoken and unspoken causes, motives, and justifications for violence" (Rowley 2014). Those who indulge in violence or those who perpetrate violence may 'use' religion partly to justify the need, but the real reasons or the real source of violence maybe elsewhere. Rowley concludes his article with these words: "violence in the name of God is an extremely complex phenomena and oversimplification further jeopardizes peace. Understanding this complexity is an important step towards diagnosing the problem and moving towards reconciliation."

8.   The abuse of Religious symbols

Religious symbols have always played a crucial and constructive role in South Asia's religious practice and understanding of religious diversity; but today, they are being used by divisive elements People are more and more projecting and parading their religious symbols not to manifest their faith and transformation but for more for self-assertion of their religions as against the other. Religious fanatics are inclined to parade their religious symbols for the show of strength. Hindu and Islamic fanatical groups are resorting to violence while parading their symbols. Politicians are resorting to religious identities and symbols to garner vote bank of a particular group of religious followers. In India, the present government has taken shelter in the

Hindutva ideology and exposing its Hindu identity through symbols and rituals which is the real exploitation of religion and religious symbols by the politicians (Vaishnav, 2019).

9. Nativism, isolationism, and protectionism

Nativism is the fear of foreigners. Though Islam and Christianity did not originate in South Asia, their entry into the native soil has been several centuries ago, and to still brand it as non-native only reveals the mind of those who fear others. As President Bush remarked, "nativism, or fear of foreigners, affects your soul. I don't think you can prosper if you're fearful of somebody else." It is an expression of hostility.

Isolationism happens when a particular community tries to isolate itself, again out of fear. What is happening in Afghanistan is an example of isolationism. The end result would that it would make the community insecure and incompetent too in the long run.

Protectionism is a word used to describe an economic policy of restraining trade between countries. It is a policy advocated by those who believe that startup industries need to be protected. The argument against economic protectionism is that this mentality actually hurts those it is meant to "protect" (Metzger 2015). Many religions, out of fear of being influenced, 'protect' themselves from others and build religious fortresses. Their faith is fear-based faith. It also ends up with repetitions of cliches and hierarchy based interpretations, with no freshness permitted. They take the sacred text seriously but in doing so do nothing but merely describe it. It is either an 'exegesis' or 'objective historical criticism'. And so nothing new comes out of such research.

10. Fossilized theologies

Theologies are meant to make the present life relevant in the presence of God and one another. Unfortunately, in many religions conservative idealogues refuse to understand the presence of God in today's realities. Furthermore, fidelity to the scripture and tradition overtake a genuine and authentic human progress, in the

light of modernity, science, technology, and values. A refusal to understand that our awareness of life, dignity, ethics, et al is evolving is the chief cause of having fossilized theologies. This is the cause of animosities, self-righteous attitudes, and stagnation in spiritual growth.

A few religions do not like to engage in any intellectual discourses, and this leads to a difficulty in making themselves rise to understand certain values like equality, justice, fraternity etc. Almost all religions face stagnation, and there is resistance often to create a new understanding of life and progress.

PART 3: THE CONTEXT OF THE CATHOLIC WORLD

11. Resistance to Renewal efforts in the Church

The global church has just started first global assembly of the synod on synodality in Rome from Oct 4 to 29, participated by Catholic bishops, priests, and lay women and men from all over the world.

The synodal process For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission was inaugurated on 10 Oct 2021 by Pope Francis during a Mass in St Peter's Square with local dioceses. Later, each parish had meetings collecting opinions. On 27 Oct 2022, a document titled *Enlarge the space of your Tent* was published. It was the synthesis of the synodal dialogues. From Jan to March 2023, 'Continental Assemblies' of Bishops and laypeople took place to produce their own documents reflecting on the synodal journey. In June 2023, *Instrumentum Laboris*, the working document for the first session was released. Just prior to the beginning of the first session, a weekend of prayer and vigil was organized and titled as 'Together 2023'. Representatives from other churches were also included in this vigil, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. The second session will take place in Oct 2024 and the Pope will release a final document.

There are also resistances. For instance, U.S. Cardinal Raymond L. Burke openly criticized the Pope's initiatives and said the Synod will foster 'confusion, error, and division' (Allen, 2023).

On 10 July 2023, five cardinals (German Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, American Cardinal Raymond Burke, Chinese Cardinal Zen Ze-Kiun, Mexican Cardinal Juan Sandoval Íñiguez, and Guinean Cardinal Robert Sarah sent a '*dubia'* (set of questions sent to Pope and his Vatican office for a simple 'yes' or 'no' response regarding disputed matters of Catholic teaching and practice. The Pope responded to them in detail the following day. But dissatisfied with these responses, the Cardinals have submitted again in August another set of *Dubia* to the Pope, to which he is yet to respond (Payne 2023).

12.   Silenced in Asia?

The Synodal Continental Assembly of Asia took place in Bangkok, Thailand from 23-27 February 2023. The final document was published by FABC. There are many important references in this document. One of the key elements mentioned in this document is:

> 72. ACAS: The voice of the Church has been silenced by oppressive regimes to an extent that it has not been possible for the Church to play its prophetic role. The silence has also led to passive complacency compounded by fear and sometimes even apathy. The need for Churches across Asia to support Churches under oppressive regimes in ways that do not threaten or jeopardise their existence. (FABC)

13.   A church that is affected

In *Instrumentum Laboris*, a collated perspective of our context is given in section 4 of the foreword. This comprehensive image reveals a church that is affected both from external and internal sources. Since this comes from the various churches, this section is quite revealing:

> 4. The journey so far, especially the continental stage, has made it possible to identify and share the particular situations experienced by the Church in different regions of the world. These include the reality of too many wars that stain our world with blood leading to a call for a renewed commitment

to building a just peace, the threat represented by climate change that implies a necessary priority of caring for the common home, the cry to oppose an economic system that produces exploitation, inequality and a throwaway culture, and the desire to resist the homogenising pressure of cultural colonialism that crushes minorities. Situations of persecution to the point of martyrdom and emigration that progressively hollow out communities, threatening their very survival are deeply lamented. The local Churches have spoken of their concern to be equipped to address urgent social realities, from the growing cultural pluralism that now marks the entire planet, to the experience of Christian communities that represent scattered minorities within the country in which they live, to the experience of coming to terms with an ever more advanced, and at times aggressive, secularisation that seems to consider religious experience irrelevant, but where there remains a thirst for the Good News of the Gospel. In many regions, the Churches are deeply affected by the crisis caused by various forms of abuse, including sexual abuse and the abuse of power, conscience and money. These are open wounds, the consequences of which have yet to be fully addressed. To the penitence it owes to victims and survivors for the suffering it has caused, the Church must add a growing and intensified commitment to conversion and reform in order to prevent similar situations from happening again in the future.

5. It is in this context, diverse but with common global features, that the synodal journey takes place. The Synodal Assembly of October 2023 will be asked to listen deeply to the situations in which the Church lives and carries out its mission. What it means to walk together gains its missionary urgency when this question is asked in a particular context with real people and situations in mind. What is at stake is the ability to proclaim the Gospel by walking together with the men and women of our time, wherever they are, and practising the catholicity that emerges from walking together

with the Churches that live in conditions of particular suffering (cf. LG 23).

14. Asian Tensions

The ACAS final document also contains a section on the various tensions in the Asian context. These 'tensions' are part and parcel of the Church here in Asia. These tensions are also found in the South Asian belt:

- *Tensions in Living Synodality*: a fraternal or friendly relationship between various groups within the church and outside of the church is missing.

  86. The Church is composed of people from all states of life (clergy, consecrated, and laity); yet there seems to be a kind of "divide" within the Church - between the clergy and laity, bishops and priests/religious congregations, ecclesial groups and movements, dioceses, and conferences and even outside – between the Church and political authorities and even between religions, as indicated in many of the reports. In the spirit of a participatory Church, the experience of leadership in the "servant model" needs greater attention for living synodality. (FABC)

- *Tensions in Decision-Making*: the feeling of being a participatory church does not seem to be coming forth.

  90. It was noted that in some places, collaborative responsibility in the discernment and decision-making process was lacking; often left to only priests or bishops. The voices of the minority and even the laity are not considered in this process. At times, there is superficial dialogue and lack of consultation even in those structures recommended or prescribed by the Canon Law like the pastoral council and the finance council. Some Churches consider this a form of clericalism because it is dominated by the clergy. (FABC)

- *Tensions in Priestly Vocations*: one of the important factors in the church is the need for more people to serve as steward-leaders,

and yet the witnessing value is not good enough to motivate young people to join the vocations.

> 93. It was also noted that the excessive critical view of the clergy has contributed to the decrease in vocations to the priesthood in some parts of Asia. There are areas in Asia where there is a growing need for priests to serve and for the faith to continually grow. The need for priests is real and for the spread of the Gospel. Scandals by priests and the unhealthy attitudes and behaviour displayed by the priests are also causing the decrease in vocations. (FABC)

- *Tensions in Women's Involvement*: A strong patriarchal mindset prevails, and it becomes so difficult to change this.

> 95. In some societies, their voices are hardly heard.
>
> 96. The role of women is considered secondary or simply discarded as being an assistant to men, this includes women in consecrated life. (FABC)

- *Tensions about the Youth*: As in other religions too, it is difficult to engage the youth spiritually. Instead of a blame game, it is time to deeply introspect and check why the youth are not attracted to the church. A creative and constructive use of the 'virtual world' is also essential.

> 99. Though the reports state the youth are missing in the Church, perhaps a point to ponder is that the youth are possibly saying that the Church is missing in their lives.(FABC)

- *Tensions of the Poor*: the people of the Asian churches are by and large poor. The document identifies several categories of poor and also seeks to be the voice of the poor.

> 104. The materially poor such as the minority ethnics, the migrant workers, urban slum dwellers, fleeing refugees, etc.; the socially poor, those often neglected by the Church and society, such as the uneducated, the indifferent youth, the persons with disabilities, persons deprived of liberty, those

from lower castes, divorced and remarried, single mothers, elderly and infirmed, HIV positive persons, substance dependents, persons who identify as LGBTQIA+, etc.

108. The Church must also be the voice of the poor. There are times when the Church remains silent about the plight and cry of the Dalits, tribals, indigenous people, and the poor. The tension of not wanting to cause trouble with the authorities or being silenced, the Church may have alienated these people and turned a deaf ear to the 'cry of the poor'. The voice of the Church must defend the voiceless and powerless.

- *Tensions of Religious Conflicts*: Life in some parts of Asia is really difficult as it faces persecutions of varied kinds.

  109. The politicisation of religions has made it difficult to practise the faith of minorities. Among the challenges include political oppression, dictatorial governments, corruption, and unjust laws.

- *Tensions of Clericalism*: There are two dimensions to be noted – abuses by clerics, and secondly, the sufferings of the clerics.

  114. Some root causes of clericalism were identified, e.g., the individual character or psychological immaturity, some hint at more systemic causes, and others point out the subculture of silence and impunity. Proper formation of bishops, clergy, and laity for a synodal Church may thus be among the primary responses to such abuses.

  115.On the other hand, the clergy feel overly criticised by the laity so much so that some feel lonely, isolated, and scrutinised all the time. This further leads to demotivation among the priests and apprehension among young men who might be considering and discerning a vocation to the priesthood. Some attribute the lack of vocation due to the unreasonable demands that are being made by the people (FABC).

15.   Shallowness of Christian spirituality

One important aspect of Christian living is its spirituality. Unfortunately, this spirituality seems to remain shallow, both in the clergy and in the people. A blame-game goes on often and people complain that the priests are not deep enough in their spirituality, while the clergy puts the onus on the people and say that it is they who want certain way of Christian worship. Whatever be the case, much is still wanted of us in our faith formation, expression of our love for Christ, etc.

119. It was also noted that in some places, Catholics were more engaged in popular devotions rather than reflecting on the word of God, spiritual discernment, or personal prayer. Overall, the need for liturgies to be more alive and relatable - text they can understand, the music they can sing, and rituals they can relate to, were expressed in a variety of ways in the reports.

PART 4: THE CONTEXT OF THE DIALOGUE WORLD

16.   Emerging need

The final document of Synodal Continental Assembly of Asia, published by FABC, has these points to offer:

75. The diversity of religions in Asia makes it almost compelling to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue as a way of building peace, reconciliation, and harmony. Many reports speak of fruitful engagement with other Christians and persons of other religions. Despite the diversity of religions and cultures across Asia, there are still limitations in matters concerning ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

76. In some places, this push for dialogue has been the initiative only of the Catholic Church and there are times when reciprocity is not forthcoming. It has also been seen as the "work" of the clergy rather than of the laity.

77. Some expressed reservations about these dialogues for various reasons including mistrust and suspicion regarding the motives for such dialogues. The Church plays a significant role in building bridges for peace, reconciliation, justice, and freedom.

17.   Satisfied with Tokenism

IRD is not an event. It is an important dimension of the culture of peace. Unfortunately, many consider these as stand-alone events and so end up with mere 'prayer sessions' or some high level stage-based meetings. True dialogue needs preparation and formation. Quite often we only have 'shared monologues' wherein we don't really 'dialogue' but have formal exchange of ideas and leave. Many engage in IRD either to satisfy a mandatory requirement or to make an 'impression' upon other communities. One can fake friendships, but faking cannot be done for a longer period of time. Dialogue should begin on a friendly note and should pave the way to become friends.

18.   Wide-spread ignorance

The fear of the unknown is strong. The other religion is fearsome because of ignorance of the 'outsider'. This is the case with many religions. Stereotypes, prejudices, and cognitive biases increase ignorance. In the 63rd General Assembly of the United Nations in 2008, ABDULKARIM AL-ERYANI, Special Advisor to the President of Yemen, highlighted this point. A paraphrase of his talk is given here:

Equality should exist between all men and women in the diversity of their cultures and beliefs. Respect for others, respect for the cultures of peoples, and respect for the freedom of peoples to govern themselves were found in all religions and cultural traditions. That common ground between religions and beliefs should serve as a platform to allow the international community to exchange information and knowledge, with an overall aim of building greater happiness in the world. However, to do so, the Western world must revise all of its concepts and notions concerning Muslims and

the Muslim world. "There must be mutual fertilization between civilizations", he said, and a "genuine dialogue in which everyone attempts to understand the other, without preconditions". A culture of peace based on dialogue was necessary now, more than ever before, and the existence of such a culture would represent a victory over ignorance, he said. Currently, there was a fear being propagated in the Western world with regard to a "new enemy" in Islam. But those fears were imagined fears, based on ignorance and on the false notion that there was necessarily, unavoidably a conflict between civilizations (UN, 2008).

19. Lack of institutional support

Many, even in the Catholic Church, do not consider IRD to be of significance. They consider it either as a futile exercise or a 'mission of the elite'. The church leadership is still unaware of the many documents that have come from Rome in support of IRD. The church has definitely sent strong waves of friendship to other religions. One concrete example was the signing of "*A document on Human fraternity for world peace and living together*", also known as Abu Dhabi Declaration or Abu Dhabi agreement, by Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, on 4 February 2019 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

In local dioceses, though there are offices meant for IRD, not much seems to be done, except in terms of common celebrations or occasional prayer meetings of heads. The Institutional support needed from the higher authorities does not seem to be forthcoming with greater impetus.

20. Lack of creative venture

One of the creative ways to let other religions know that we value them is to quote them in our circles. For instance, in *Laudate Si*, Pope Francis broke tradition and in the history of the Catholic Church, quoted one poetic verse in his footnote from another religious poet, Ali al-Khawas, a Muslim poet who wrote in the 16th century about perceiving God when "the wind blows, … flies

buzz, doors creak, birds sing, or in the sound of strings or flutes, the sighs of the sick, the groans of the afflicted."

Creativity is also linked with our mindset. In the South Asian context, if there is a minority and victim mindset among Christians, then this mindset would be a block to creativity. Building up trust, moving away from fear will help one to become creative and engage creatively. It is also essential to meet the other on equal footing. Inside, a 'hierarchy-based approach' needs to give way to a 'down-to-earth' approach. Each situation can call for different ways of dealing with issues. What is then needed is openness and willingness to listen to the Spirit.

CONCLUSION

"Dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as an openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity", reads the website of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. In fact, it is a mission of the Church to know what we encounter, and to respond fittingly 'reading the signs of the times.'

Encountering the contexts mentioned above, four levels of responses could be envisaged: a) intellectual level, b) spiritual level (mystical & prophetic), c) cultural level, and d) political level. If IRD can take into consideration these levels, it will make a holistic approach to the question of dialogue. IRD is a proactive, positive, and an uplifting mission that will create a new culture of engaging with each other for a better world of hospitality. It is not a smooth road ahead, but the end result after all struggles will be one of a world that Jesus invites us to - the Reign of God.

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