

Emerging Images of the Asian Church

By

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The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men, of men who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onwards towards the kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a good message of salvation intended for all men. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history. (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1.)

Context: The Changing Faces of Today's Asia

When the Asian Bishops gathered together in Manila in 1970, they sought to look and ponder over the many faces of Asia. The first and obvious face of Asia is its being a continent of teeming masses, with its almost two billion people, making up close to two-thirds of the world's population.¹ Such a face is characterized by massive poverty, which is understood as being "deprived of access to a full sharing in human brotherhood"², chronic malnutrition and a fermenting social volcano, due to oppressive and unjust structures.

¹ABM/1970, 5, in *For all the Peoples of Asia* (henceforth abbreviated as FAPA), vol. I, p. 12.

²IMC/CPW, 1, in *Towards a New Age in Mission* (henceforth abbreviated as TNAM, Bk. I, (Quezon City, 1981, p. 46. Cf. FABC I/1974, 19, in FAPA, I, p. 31, for a fuller treatment on the assembly's meaning of poor: "Poor, not in human values, qualities, nor in human potential. But poor, in that they are deprived of access to material goods and resources which they need to create a truly human life for themselves. Deprived, because they live under oppression, that is, under social, economic and political structures which have injustice built into them."

Modern day Asia undergoes a turning-point in its history, marked by swift modernization and profound social transformation, accompanied by secularization and urbanization. Together with the beneficial fruits of industrialization comes the violent threat of the breakup of traditional, social values and customs.³ Models of economic development being utilized widen the gap between the few rich and the many poor, models protected by oppressive political and social structures. Specifically, the policies and activities of multi-national corporations operating in Asia "place so great a concentration of wealth, power and decision-making with regard to the lives of . . . people in the hands of a small group of men who are not responsible to . . . people in the use and exercise of the wealth of power, and in whose decisions . . . people are not enabled to participate."⁴

As a result, there has been an increase in slum areas as greed and oppressive structures blend to force the masses to live in sub-human conditions, wanting even in the most basic human rights.⁵

Along with its teeming masses, Asia is considered the continent of the young. More than half of its population belong to the age bracket below twenty-one: the world of the youth of mankind.⁶

Another important face of Asia takes the form of diverse cultures, histories and traditions. It can boast of immensely rich, ancient cultures that can still be tangibly felt even when the modernity of growing metropolises has commenced to shake these stable foundations of life. While there exists a great diversity in peace, color and creed, there are quite a number of values and aspirations that can be considered typically Asian. Among such values are close-knit family life, smooth interpersonal relationships, religiosity, deep respect for ancestors and the dead, etc. Aspiration shared by all are the restoration of equality in the economic sphere and active participation within small person-oriented communities.⁷ Most Asian states after achieving independence from their colonizers are still in search for a more participative political leadership, that is appropriate for both their history and culture.

A third face of the Asian continent makes it the cradle of the world's great ancient religions. Western Asia gave birth to the three monotheistic religions, namely, Christianity, Judaism and Islam; while Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Shintoism with their doctrines of cyclical return and rebirth arose in Eastern Asia. The deeply religious ambiance can be perceived in the various

³FABC I/1974, 4, pp. 19-20.

⁴FABC I/CPW V, in *His Gospel in Our Peoples* (henceforth abbreviated as HGP), Bk. II, edited by Digna Dacanay (Manila, 1976), p. 201.

⁵BISA I, p. 4.

⁶ACMC, 6, *FABC PAPERS*, No. 3, 1977, p. 2-3.

⁷*Ibid.*

temples, mosques and pagodas, along with the rich art, culture and traditions that pervade Asia.⁸

Paradoxically, Asia remains the least Christianized of the continents. The Christian Church accounts for less than 3% of the population, with almost 50% of the Catholics found in the Philippines alone.⁹ The Christian communities in India are generally small and poor, except for a few areas where the faith flourished, such as in Ranchi, Goa, Bombay and Kerala. While Kerala accounts for about 1.19% of land area, it already contains 37.5% of the Catholics, 60% of the priests and 77% of the sisters of all India, thereby highlighting the dearth of the Church's presence in the vast areas of the land. The Christians in Indonesia were wise enough to participate in the national movement, so much so that they were recognized as a constitutive part of the nation at its inception. Japanese Catholics made up only 0.3% of the population, and together with the other Christian groups accounted for 0.8% of the people.¹⁰

The Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church aptly summarised the Asian situational challenges to the Christian Church:¹¹

In religious matters: how to preach the good news of Jesus to our brethren so that the Church may be and appear to be the sacrament of salvation and a community of love.

In relation to the world religions: how to enrich its own Christian identity and life by opening itself to the great religious traditions of Asia in inter-religious dialogue; and together with them, how to practise religion and promote moral and religious values in a way that will contribute to the total human development of our peoples.

In economics: how to contribute to the eradication of stark poverty by an authentic dialogue of life with the poor of Asia without fostering materialism.

In social life: how to preserve the authentic values of personalism and family life in the face of urbanization and technological progress.

In political matters: how to help our people find an Asian style of authentic participative leadership in government at all levels.

In cultural matters: how to find their own national and Asian identity, by blending ancient and modern values and in face of the future ahead.

⁸Walbert Buhlmann, *The Coming of the Third Church*, trans. by Ralph Woodhall and A.N., Reprint Edition, (Manila, 1976), p. 160.

⁹ACMC, 11, p. 3.

¹⁰Buhlmann, p. 163.

¹¹ACMC, 12, pp. 3-4.

The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church describes the Church as the People of God.¹² Yet, the Church in Southeast Asia will come to realize itself as God's People to the extent that it has become the Church of the People.

This in turn infers that the Church in Asia must become an Asian Church - cognizant of the riches of Asian people and in constant dialogue with the gems of Asian traditions, cultures, and values. It also implies that it must be a Church of the Poor, not just a Church *for* the Poor, recognizing the state of poverty and oppression of the people and opting to take action in resolving the unjust situation, not just working for the poor but working with and being identified with their needs and aspirations.¹³

Various Images of the Asian Church

One prominent quality of the changing faces in Asia is its moment of reawakening, characterized by a new consciousness and a renewed self-image.¹⁴ The resurgence of the new consciousness in no way cuts off from tradition, yet it manifests a deeper conviction to make a more active part in shaping Asia's history. The poor masses, previously cowed into fatalistic passivity, begin to yearn for a better life, "for more rice on their tables, knowledge for their sons, their yearnings for greater freedom and dignity, recognition and acceptance, for a life more fully worthy of man".¹⁵ There has been a renewal in the appreciation of one's own cultural heritage among nations, especially after being freed from colonial powers. Eastern religions have made their way not only among the Orientals, but also have caught the enthusiasm of people in the West.¹⁶ Together they seem to suggest that the coming to birth of a new Asia needs to have a truly religious dimensions. The ancient religions and traditions continue as a major reality in the Asian consciousness and Asian society.

Faced with such an Asian reality, the Asian bishops cannot help but take pride in participating in the task of transformation in the continent of tomorrow. There is a deep yearning to integrate the Catholic communities more deeply within the larger communities, united with all men of good will among the nations in establishing societies responsive to the people's deepest yearnings and reflective

¹²LG, 9. It would be good to take note of the accompanying footnote, as it reaffirms the attitude taken by the Asian Bishops regarding the Church as People: "This title, solidly founded in Scripture, met a profound desire of the Council to put greater emphasis on the human and communal side of the Church, rather than on the institutional and hierarchical aspects which have sometimes been stressed in the past for polemical reasons. While everything said about the People of God as a whole is applicable to the laity, it should not be forgotten that the term "People of God" refers to the total community of the Church, including the pastors as well as the other faithful.

¹³BISA I, p. 1.

¹⁴ABM/1970, 8-9, p. 12.

¹⁵Ibid., 10, p. 13.

¹⁶Buhlmann, p. 245.

of the Gospel values: societies "grounded on truth, guided by justice, motivated by charity, realized in freedom, and flowering in peace."¹⁷

More deeply, the Asian Bishops perceive in the many faces of a changing Asia the "signs of the time"¹⁸, from which may be discerned the voice of the Spirit addressing the Churches of Asia. "It is a momentous hour, a decisive moment of grace (kairos) calling Asian Christians to contribute their faith-reflection towards the growth of Asian peoples to fuller personhood and a human community."¹⁹ To many faces of Asia, which is a reflective reading of the Asian realities, then become the background against which the Church reevaluates her pastoral practices. In the process, she becomes conscious of the various images of herself that she had been projecting. Somehow, what Pope Paul VI says in *Ecclesiam Suam* reverberates, in that "the mystery of the Church is not a truth to be confined to the realms of speculative theology. It must be lived, so that the faithful may have an intuitive experience of it, even before they come to understand it clearly."²⁰

It seems appropriate at this point to highlight the various images of the Asian Church, as contained in the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), reflecting its pastoral practices and concerns:

Church as Evangelizer

For the first Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences held in Taipei, Taiwan, on 22-27 April, 1974, the theme "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia" was chosen, reflecting the topic selected by Pope Paul VI for the 1974 Synod of Bishops in Rome. Evangelization is taken to mean the proclamation, by word and witness, of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is communicating primarily the experience of the Risen Lord, reminiscent of the words of John the Evangelist: "What we have heard, what we have seen, what our hands have touched . . ." (1 Jn 1:1). Such an encounter is experienced in our hearts, within his community, in faith and in the Spirit, and evokes faith also in those who hear His word proclaimed.²¹ At the very heart of mission is the proclamation of salvation to the whole man and to all mankind, not merely to proselytise converts to one's religion or adding membership to the institutional church. Its finality is to invite conservation to real human values, deepening it and finally finding its fulfillment in the

¹⁷John XXXIII, *Pacem et Terris*, cited in ABM/1970, 14, p. 14.

¹⁸ACMC, 10, p. 3. Also cf. FABC I/1974, 5, p. 28; FABC I/1974, 31, p. 33. In ACMC, 20-21, p. 6, the theme once more is mentioned and given theological explanation: "The Spirit urges them to renew their self-understanding and to project a new image, to read the signs of the times as signs addressed to them by the Lord Himself, to be discerned through the Spirit as the signs of His own active presence in the world and understood as part of His saving design, operative even today in our midst."

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, translated by Rev. H. E. Winestone (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1965), 37.

²¹FABC I/1974, 30, p. 25.

person of Jesus Christ.²² The coming together of believers brings to birth a community called His Church.

It is incumbent upon the Asian Church to preach an integral message of the Gospel, for its many dimensions, namely, the Father's all-encompassing love, the paschal mystery of Christ, the enduring presence of the Spirit, the People of God, are closely interwoven into a dynamic unity.²³ To treat one facet faithfully, one needs to take the others into consideration. Corollary to this, Pope Paul VI has noted in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*:

Any partial and fragmentary definition which attempts to render the reality of evangelization in all its richness, complexity and dynamism does so only at the risk of impoverishing it and even of distorting it. It is impossible to grasp the concept of evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements.²⁴

Just as the Father uttered the Incarnate Word by entering into human history in order to offer fullness of life to man, so too does man respond in obedience through the man Jesus. In Jesus Christ is the dialogue of life fulfilled, when God communicated Himself to man. The Church for her part prolongs this dialogical encounter by proclaiming through word and witness God's gracious offer to the world, as well as listening to what human history is saying, thereby enabling the Divine Word to incarnate in history, coming to its fullness at the end of time. "Dialogue thus understood is, then, intrinsic to the very life of the Church, and the essential mode of all evangelization."²⁵

This holistic approach to evangelization understands catechesis more than just instruction of a set of truths, as it enters into Christian life itself and subsequently developing a spirituality that transcends the cultic level of the religion. Thus, in considering the appropriate forms of evangelization based on the present Asian context, the promotion of integral human development and witness to justice in the societies presents itself as an urgent task.²⁶ To preach the good news to the Asian poor entails listening to their cry and becoming the voice of the voiceless millions. Gospel proclamation includes prophetic denunciation of unjust and oppressive structures, speaking out for the human rights of the underprivileged and powerless, and not being entangled with the status quo and the rich. However, the effort to struggle against injustice and for the promotion of human rights can effect radical changes only when complemented by social analysis and approach to structural change, under the guidance of the Gospel.²⁷

²²TMC/CPW IV, 3, P. 47.

²³Tbid., 16, p. 51.

²⁴EN 17.

²⁵BIRA I, 8-9, IN *FAPA*, I, p. 184.

²⁶BIMA II, 12, in *FAPA*, I, p. 165.

²⁷TMC/CPW IV, 15, p. 51. Also cf. BIMA III, II, in *FAPA*, I, p. 172.

This holistic process of realizing the Church's image as herald of good news reaffirms the Synod of Bishops, as it put together *Justice in the World* in that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."²⁸ Thus, it becomes clearer that the quest for holiness and the work for justice, evangelization and integral human liberation and development are different but not opposed or contradictory; rather they comprise an integral preaching of the Gospel, specifically in Asia.²⁹

Another integral part of evangelization is the interreligious dialogue. More than one billion people belong to great and ancient religious traditions, who have yet to hear of Jesus Christ preached to them. A sizeable number of people may have heard of Jesus name and may be drawn to his message, yet somehow do not perceive His presence in the Church or for some reasons are kept from membership in the faith-community. This is where interreligious dialogue can prove to be an important medium of the Church's evangelization. Since participants in this exchange are treated with equal importance as partners in the search for truth and salvation, it becomes a true expression of evangelization where the mystery of Christ is operative, inviting all to conversion to the One who is source and fullness of truth and salvation. The Church heralds the reality that while she is the sacrament of Christ's presence and His spirit in the world, He is also present in a mysterious way to other religions, which somehow relates these ancient religions to the mystery of the Church. It is hope that such sharing can extend beyond prayer encounters, and enter into joint efforts towards promoting human values and concerns.³⁰

Since majority of the teeming masses of Asia is composed of the poor, workers and the marginalized, it is to them that the proclamation of Jesus is to be directed. Such a preferential option is manifested through being present to them, opening our ears to their aspirations, enabling them to speak and pursue their quest for development and a more just society. This will best reveal to them Jesus' presence in their midst.

Likewise, with Asia considered as a young continent, the youth too must be addressed by the Church's proclamation. As the youth in this era grapples with life, seeking meaning and spiritual values, they need hearts that can listen and understand, especially in their own manner of expressions. They seek co-discoverers who can accompany them in their journey, as they evolve and put shape into the culture of societies.³¹ As the Church engages in a true dialogue of life with

²⁸1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* (Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1972), p. 34.

²⁹FABC I/1974, 23, P. 24.

³⁰BIMA II, 14, PP. 166-167.

³¹BIMA III, in *FAPA*, I, p. 172.

them, as well as with the given cultures and traditions, both the Church as messenger of the Gospel and the cultures and traditions of the peoples undergo purification, healing and transformation through the power of the Gospel.³²

Church as a Disciple in the Gospel

What seems an important facet of the Church's proclaiming the good news is that of the listening posture she takes, as she addresses herself, the peoples, their cultures and religious traditions. When the Asian Bishops first met as a body in 1970, the first thing they did was to look at the faces of Asia, and listen to what the situation was saying. To properly describe the Asian context as "signs of the time", it needs to be seen from the vantage point of faith.

It is from this listening posture that the Asian Church perceives herself as community of disciples:

- that it is assembled by the summons of the Gospel and the Spirit of Jesus into one Body,
- whose all-encompassing purpose is discipleship in the Gospel, ever proclaimed in its midst, whose imperatives are daily studied in mind and heart, and in whose light the realities of life and history which surround it are constantly discerned;
- whose life and activity are meant to be led by the guidance of the Spirit, earnestly and unceasingly sought in contemplation and prayerful discernment;
- ...

Immediately, the origin of the Church is put forward as being summoned. She did not arise from a sociological need, or from some spontaneous circumstances. A call was experienced from the Gospel and from the Spirit of Jesus, constituting the *ekklesia*. This then leads to the "fontal mystery of the Trinity"³³, as the source of the Church's coming together. Just as the Father sends His Son Jesus in the Spirit's power, the Church too receives the same mandate from Jesus Christ through His Spirit.

The formation of Catholics for the mission entails a total immersion into the Trinitarian mystery, so that the person is enveloped by God's mysterious plan of salvation, nurtured daily by prayer and contemplation. Jesus Christ becomes the absolute ground and sole determinant of a person's life, expressed in his attitudes and values, choices and concerns, hopes and loves.³⁴

³²FABC III/1982, 7.2 - 7.4, in *FAPA*, I, p. 93.

³³IMC/CPW VI, 4, in *TNAM*, I, p. 60.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 6.

It is interesting to note that after the Asian Bishops pinpointed the context that needed a response, and stressing evangelization as an urgent task in their First Plenary Assembly in 1974, the theme of Prayer takes their attention in the Second Plenary Assembly in 1978 (held in Calcutta, India). The image of prayer is that of a river of life, which nourishes and makes fruitful the entire life and the activities of a community. Christian prayer is specified as "the prayer of Jesus living on in the heart of His people."³⁵

As Jesus Himself continues to live in the very heart of His people, Christian prayer moulds persons into the likeness of the Lord, gradually shaping them into the fullness of sonship in the Son. Thus, the personal encounter with Christ takes them beyond themselves to become committed to an-Other, which leads them to a commitment to others, to the point of a total love and commitment to the Cross.

The Church then finds herself facing the realities of life and history, constantly seeking to be guided by the Spirit in her activities and endeavors. It is through the Spirit that the Church can arrive at integration, a necessary horizon that can keep her from "reductive temptations of limited relevance and absolutization of concrete concerns."³⁶

Discernment of the Spirit is the process by which the Church can be assured that it moves constantly towards greater and deeper integration into life. Concretely speaking, this means entering into dialogue with human history, while remaining attuned to the stirrings of the Spirit, so as to perceive events and movements as signposts of the Spirit's presence, as His voice bidding the Church to come and follow.

This dialogue with all men of good faith comes from the certitude of God's presence and universal salvific will at work through the whole of creation. Other religions are respected for their positive spiritual and ethical lessons and values, recognized for the wealth of religious experience they have afforded the forefathers of the nations, and continue to be a source of inspiration and guidance even for modern man. They contain true articulation of the deepest yearnings of hearts in search for the light of truth and the vision of life. In more ways than one, they have served in evolving the path of Asian history and cultures in their richness.³⁷

Hidden in the religious practices that guide peoples in their pilgrimage are the seeds of the Word of God³⁸, that can unfold before the participants in the interreligious dialogue. This can enable the Church to be in contact with the people's deepest values and beliefs, thus aiding her in discovering authentic

³⁵FABC II/1978, 4, In *FAPA*, I, p. 53.

³⁶IMC/CPW VI, II, in *TNAM*, I, p. 62.

³⁷FABC I, 14, p. 30.

³⁸Cf. Ag, 9.

lifestyles, which in turn can enrich the expression of the Christian faith. Many hidden treasures of the faith will unravel, due to the cross-fertilizing effect of the interchange among friends in the quest of God.³⁹ It becomes a revelation of what the Spirit has taught and how it has guided other religions to articulate in manifold ways, allowing greater understanding of God's ways through them.

Further more, Asian prayer has a lot to give to the development of Christian spirituality:

a richly-developed prayer of the whole person in unity of the body-psyche-spirit; contemplation of deep inferiority and immanence; venerable sacred books and writings; traditions of asceticism and renunciation; techniques of contemplation found in the ancient eastern religions; simplified prayer-forms and other popular expressions of faith and piety easily available even to simpler folk, whose hearts and minds so readily turn to God in their daily lives.⁴⁰

Given a more positive attitude and openness, in conjunction with deeper study and reflection, coupled with discerning what needs to be purified, healed and readily adopted, it will not be insurmountable to find a home for these indigenous riches in the local churches of Asia. Through Asia, the whole Church can also share in the benefits.⁴¹

Meanwhile, the Asian Church too has something unique to offer to the great religions - that of Christian intentionality. The deepest motivation of life is Christ and everything leads back to the Father by way of Christ through His Spirit. The fulfillment of all the deepest human longings is found in the person of Jesus.

Since the commitment to the person of Christ brings the disciple to a commitment to others, the Asian Church confronts the many harsh situations that block peoples from attaining fullness by making Christian discipleship significantly present and operative, whether in areas affecting integral human development, or for the promotion and protection of human rights, or any other pertinent sphere of life.⁴² The need for constant conversion of hearts, as well as transformation of oppressive structures, make the Church zealous in praying, to obtain the gift of Faith, Hope and Love, which the Lord graciously bestows on his disciples to liberate them from sin, together with its corresponding structural expressions in society. The Second Plenary Assembly of the Asian Bishops expresses the conviction that the Spirit is at work in the present era, guiding the Church "not to some dubious syncretism . . . , but to an integration - profound and organic in character - of all that is best in our traditional ways of prayer and worship, into the treasury of our Christian heritage."

³⁹FABC I/1974, 16, p. 61

⁴⁰Ibid., II/1978, 32, p. 61.

⁴¹Ibid., 33.

⁴²FABC III/1982, 8.2, p. 94.

Church as Servant

Inasmuch as discipleship in prayer roots and Church into the Trinitarian mystery, and leads her to commitment to the world, such a commitment is aptly expressed in her service to the human communities. It is a prayer of self-gift to others, creating freedom and joy in seeking Christ among the downtrodden and those in pain, among the "least of my brethren".

As the bishops tried to grapple with the task of becoming the "Church of the Poor", the need to be on the side of the many in the Asian continent meant sharing poverty in their very lifestyle. "The Church cannot set up islands of affluence in a sea of want and misery; our own personal lives must give witness to evangelical simplicity, and no man, no matter how lowly or poor, should find it hard to come to us and find in us their brothers."⁴³

Thirteen years later, addressing the sixth gathering of the Bishops Institute for Social Action (BISA VI), Stephen Cardinal Kim, Archbishop of Seoul, Korea, gave his reflection on the role of the bishop in modern society, social justice, human rights and evangelization, especially in Asia. He noted that he favored preaching about evangelical poverty, yet seemed not to share in the people's poverty, sorrows and sufferings, and always confronted with the temptation to choose to be "comfortably poor."⁴⁴

The bishops confronted the Asian situation under the inspiration and mandate of the papal encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which outlined the broad vision of total human development and peace.⁴⁵ From then, it has become imperative to participate, along with all men of good will, in the redirection of men's desires from selfish interests to co-responsibility, and reorientation of unjust and oppressive structures to those that will eventually realize the aspirations and expectations of the peoples, paving the way for a new Asia.⁴⁶

The Office for Human Development (OHD) was established by the Asian bishops in 1972, for the very purpose of putting into concrete actions the resolution of becoming more truly the Church of the Poor. The Office organized seven Bishops Institutes for Social Action (BISA) between 1974-86, to enable the bishops to enter into an ongoing and communitarian dialogue of life with the poor. Close to one-fourth of the bishops participated in those institutes.

The BISAs were set up so that the Vatican II document *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* can speak to the Asian reality. It is worth noting that

⁴³ABM/1970, 19, p. 15.

⁴⁴Stephen Cardinal Kim, "Reflection on Being a Bishop", *Challenges to Human Development in the 1980's: Response to the Church in Asia (BISA VI)*, (Kandy, 1983), pp. 1-3

⁴⁵ABM/1970, 26, p. 16, Cf. *Populorum Progressio*, esp. 13-21.

⁴⁶ABM/1970, 25-28, pp. 16-17. Cf. also IMC/CPW III, 4d, in TNAM, I, pp. 44.

the BISAs, like the Council document, take the context (here, specifically Asian), perceiving the "signs of the times", before arriving at the course of action and the form of service that must be undertaken.⁴⁷

The statements that resulted from the BISAs reveal a steady development in the understanding of the consequences and demands of becoming the Church of the Poor. BISAs I-III highlighted the magnitude of Asia's material poverty, as they reflected on the social dimension of the Gospel. The distressing situation by no means came about accidentally, much less could it be considered necessary; instead it could be attributed to gross injustice perpetuated by the socio-economic-political systems. The Church sought to find her place and her role in the great human drama of Asia through these institutes.

The methodology of BISAs I-III was to combine reflection, analysis and *some* praxis. The input sessions were composed of talks by economists, sociologists, social workers, journalists and theologians, to give a more well-rounded picture of the Asian situation. The interplay between tools of social sciences and theology, while it proved to be very enlightening and useful, was incomplete. It was the exposure to slum areas, labor leaders, and the poor themselves, limited as they might be, that provided the "gut conviction", manifesting it was after all the Lord's work, and giving life to the conscientization process. The world of the poor brought home the sense of urgency and importance, leading the participants to new insights and courses of action.⁴⁸

It became clear that Church programs in social apostolate must have the hopes and yearnings of the poor as their guiding principles, if it is to be responsive. Closer collaboration with the poor becomes an essential element, as can be seen in the final reflections of every BISA:

BISA I: We become the Church of the poor by opening a continuous dialogue with all people at every level.

BISA II: We are aware of our responsibility to react to different situations and search for ways of action according to the spirit of the Gospel.

BISA III: We will strive for a new society where all men may reach full human development; we commit ourselves to new and just society.⁴⁹

Thus, BISA I had health services, labor organization, youth and urban poor for its major concerns. BISA II felt the need for grassroot encounters and

⁴⁷Bishop Michael Banluan Mansap, "My Impressions of the BISAs" *FABC Papers*, No. 6 (Hongkong, 1978), pp. 9-10.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 10-14.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 14.

sharings,⁵⁰ integrating justice into the pastoral program,⁵¹ utilization of socio-political analysis,⁵² conscientization program at all levels in the Church. BISA III for its part stressed further commitment to conscientization, reviewing of Church pastoral work⁵³ and relations with Asian cultures and religions, reorientation for educational institutions, and recognizing the Asian youth as collaborators in the apostolate on justice and peace.

The theme chosen by BISAs IV-V gave more stress to exposure in its methodology, and minimised lecture inputs. During their discussions, the bishops noted similar basic patterns, in varying degrees, in the anomalous situations in different Asian countries. What was new was their seeing the causes of the distressing situation, namely, colonialism and feudalism and the introduction of Western classical capitalism.⁵⁴ Only the foreign companies and markets, along with a few local elites, gained in this system, depriving the poor masses of access to economic opportunities, social amenities, and even the protection of the law. Consciously or unconsciously, the Church institution somehow participated in this set-up.

As the decade of the 70s came to a close, the participants of BISA V engaged in an even more profound challenge founded on faith, as they viewed the colossal task of human development. Discerning the presence of the Lord of history at work among the poor, a deep challenge was felt, cutting through the very fibers of the Church's self-understanding as the People of God, and demanding a corresponding response "in faith, with faith." The one conclusion arrived the discernment process was: "we must strive to become truly the Church of the Poor."⁵⁵

But what does it mean to be the Church of the Poor? Is it not the Church for all men and women, for rich and poor, for saints and sinners?

⁵⁰BISA II, p. 1: "We felt too the need to live in contact with the close to the weak, to people in need, without waiting for them to come to us. In a word, we acknowledge the need to work at the grassroots level."

⁵¹Ibid., p. 2: "In line with this it was pointed out that poverty should be real and not "paper" poverty and that the Church should revise her own lifestyle and institutions in order to first realize within herself whatever she has to say about social justice."

⁵²Ibid.: "The need has been felt to analyze critically and technically the problems we are faced with. We cannot jump from our faith-experience to the concrete decisions of social action without due technical investigations and due account of the ideologies under whose influence we are living."

⁵³BISA III, p. 1: "With the help of our resource personnel, we have seen many of our Church institutions designed to help the poor, not only do not do so, but may, in fact, have unintended effects againsts their interests. They are caught as it were, in the unjust social systems and structures of our age."

⁵⁴BISA IV, 3-4, p. 1: "Because of colonialism and feudalism and the introduction of Western classical capitalism, the traditional economic texture of Asian society with its inbuilt balances has been disrupted. Often the economies of these countries are not geared primarily to satisfying the requirements of the nation but rather to responding to external markets, and, within the nation, not to the basic needs of people - food, housing, education, jobs - but to the demand of a consumer society."

⁵⁵BISA V, P. 2.

We found an answer in the way many churches of Asia are moving in the direction of greater and greater involvement with the life of their people; their simply being with the poor; their attempts at working out programs of human development - integral, respectful of the people's dignity, attuned to their cultures; their standing with them in their hard struggle for justice and self-empowerment; their insistence that the rich become themselves real members of the Church of the Poor by fulfilling their obligations in justice toward the poor. The Church of the Poor must do all this.

That is not all that the Church of the Poor means, certainly. But we see it does lead to movement in that direction. For it does indicate a preferential option and respect for the poor, expressing in practical terms Christ's own vision of his mission.

That Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore He has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord. (Lk 4:18-19)⁵⁶

After BISA V. an assessment of the BISAs was made by the Asian Social Institute (ASI), which noted a deeper grasp of Asian realities Institute(ASI), which noted a deeper grasp of Asian realities coupled with a more profound understanding of the Church's mission and evangelization. Such notional developments were manifested in these categories: a) The concept of man in all the regions of the respondents shifted from the traditional Hellenistic dichotomy of body and soul to a unitary concept. As a consequence, there arose an integration of human development and social justice issues into the pastoral and evangelization efforts. b) Among the South, East and Southeast Asians, the former "ghetto mentality" of the Church has widened to assimilate Asian realities - its unique culture and milieu, the ancient realities - its unique culture and milieu, the ancient religious traditions, the exigency of poverty, oppression and ignorance. c) Those from the Pacific islands who were not members of the federation, but nevertheless participated in the later BISAs, manifested a change from charity work to the needy with some intention to proselytise to social services and development works with the stress on integral human development. d) On the other hand, the Southeast, East and South Asian respondents even went further than social services and development projects and gave greater attention to conscientization, community organization, and militant collectiveaction, e) More specifically, the Philippine, Indian and Korean bishops discerned from the secular concerns the Christian values of reconciliation and non-violence in the whole struggle for liberation.⁵⁷ This last point was eminently manifested in the manner the Filipinos struggled for freedom last February, 1986 in the People's revolution. The dictatorial regime was brought

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁵⁷*The Church of Asia After the BISAs: An Exploratory - Assessment Study of BISA Bishop-Participants* (Manila, 1981, pp. 20-21.

down through active non-violence, with the people being inspired into militant action by faith and prayer. Reconciliation between the civilians and military as part of the process of the revolution was beautifully manifested when for the first time in history the unarmed populace protected the military reform group, resulting in an unbloody transition of government.

Looking into the effect of the conceptual changes vis-a-vis the concrete pastoral programs, the result does not seem to indicate a *significant change* in the stress. ASI offers some possible considerations: a) conscientization and community organization in the diocese was perceived as distinct projects, hence, it was not reported; b) prevailing conditions in the country or diocese slowed down the translation of the firm conviction in the new one-sided emphasis on conscientization as the proper approach; d) all three interpretations are valid, with each applicable to a different set of bishops.⁵⁸

When BISA VI was organized in 1983 to look at the new challenges and hindrances to human development in the decade of the 80's, it found a deterioration in the situation in the form of "increasing militarization of the continent, the militant resurgence of traditional non-christian religions like Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism and Asia's increased dependence on global economies."⁵⁹

As a response, the Church's social awareness program must go hand in hand with actual involvement in the lives and struggles of the poor. Macro-ethic, designed to have an impact on the decisions of centers of power, whether local, national, regional or international, are needed for the benefit of the poor. The Church needs to utilize her spiritual and moral power, not only to propagate essential values but also to form world opinion, so as to redirect funds for the arms race into integral human development. The task of evangelization in the field of human development must be suffused with spirituality, a spirituality that is not introspective, but rather leads into disponibility to serve humanity and creation towards the full realization of God's plan in Jesus Christ, THE SERVANT.⁶⁰

BISA VII continues the above thrust with the theme "Asia's religio-cultural heritage and human development", affirming that social analysis and contemplation are essential elements in grappling with reality. At the same time, integrating social analysis and religio-cultural reality, a hidden resource often enfleshed and lived among the Asian poor, deepens and enriches spirituality.⁶¹

Looking into the interlocking relationship between deep cultural wealth and massive economic poverty, Asian poverty is not solely an economic condition nor

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 50-51.

⁵⁹BISA VI, p. 2.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 4-5.

⁶¹BISA VII, p. 15.

is Asian religiosity just cultural. Together, they constitute the complex socio-political reality of Asia. The problem of poverty is not the absence of wealth but the problem of greed and selfishness, which makes wealth anti-religion.⁶²

The primary concern therefore, is not the eradication of poverty, but the struggle against Mammon, that undefinable force that organizes itself within every human being to make material wealth dehumanizing, irreligious, and oppressive. It is within this framework of understanding that genuine human development consists in voluntary poverty. For within the Asian system, the person who voluntarily renounces wealth, like the monk, is maintained by the wealth of the person who does not voluntarily renounce it. Wealth is at the service of poverty, and poverty is the condition for liberation from acquisitiveness and greed. Hence, according to Asian tradition, genuine human development is tempered by the ideal of non-acquisitiveness and sharing.⁶³

Herein is a new way by which the Servant Church of Asia attempts to live out the Beatitude "Blest are you poor; the reign of God is yours." (Lk 6:20) Poverty indeed becomes a liberating force for human development.

Church as Sacrament

As the Asian Church seeks out to be an agent of true liberation and integral human development, in the process she becomes a sign and instrument of God's salvific presence in the world. Such a concern for others, especially to the teeming masses who do not formally belong to the community, coupled with witnessing through lifestyle of joy and hope, effectively portray the very meaning of human existence as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. This is seen as a primary element of the Church's mission.⁶⁴

While it can be conceded that the image of Church as sacrament has not been articulated as often as the other images in the various documents of the Asian bishops, it remains an essential element of the Church's reality. In its basic reality, she re-presents God's loving self-revelation and at the same time the graced response of man as the new creation, in faith, hope and love.⁶⁵ It is a continuation in history of Christ's faithful response to the Father's bidding, feeble and imperfect though the quality of response may be.

The Church finds the center of her sacramental character in the celebration of the sacrament of Eucharist, which also happens to be the highpoint of the life of worship. It is in the Eucharist, where the prayer of Jesus is eminently enfleshed and expressed, where the Paschal Mystery is re-presented as life-giving food for

⁶²Ibid., p. 62.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴IMC/CPW I, 15, in *TNAM*, I, pp. 35-36.

⁶⁵FABC III/1982, 7.1, p. 93.

the world. The Church enters into the mystery and participates in the grace of Christ's self-gift, as she offers her own process of dying unto oneself and rising anew.⁶⁶

Realizing the mandate to be a credible sign, nevertheless the Church recognizes inconsistencies in the witness to what is preached. There are times she is not convincing enough to other religious traditions as a praying community, as a contemplative community, which inhibits them from perceiving God's presence in her midst. Yet, she continues to nurture the hope that, in her own little way, she can be a sign and instrument of God's offer of salvation to the world.

At the end of the FABCI deliberations, the humble and trusting prayer of the assembly addressed Christ as Head of the Body which is His Church, summoning His "little flock in this part of the world, to be for our Asian brothers the memory of His coming into our world, the sacrament of His presence in our midst, the sign of His shaping of the future of mankind."⁶⁷

While the prayer asks that the Church be for others a sacrament of God's presence in the world, there is a firm conviction of the Lords hidden way of guiding other cultures and religions to the right path. Their beliefs, values and aspirations that lead to truth are His biddings that Christians have still to discover. Thus they share His Life in their lives in a way yet unknown to the Church.⁶⁸

This conviction inspires the Church to dialogue with the cultures and with other religions in her milieu, in the same way as Christ brought across His message to every dimension of human living, if she is to be truly the sacrament of God's Word. The Great Religions of Asia have brought innumerable people of God from generation to generation, continually manifesting God's mercy. The very attitude of openness to dialogue precisely highlights the perception that the Lord of History is at work in all of creation, and at the same time the Church continues to be the sacramental manifestation of God's universal salvific will. Finally, Christ remains the unique mediator of man's salvation, even as the seeds of life are found in other religions.⁶⁹

Church as Community

On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son, the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and in the fellowship of the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too

⁶⁶FABC II/1978, 17, P. 56.

⁶⁷FABC III/1982, 3.6, p. 91.

⁶⁸FABC I/1974, 45. p. 36.

⁶⁹Ibid., 46, p. 37.

of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of the human salvation - a salvation which assumes and gives meaning to human freedom, earthly realities, and the course of this world's history.⁷⁰

The above quotation seems an appropriate nexus of all the previous images of the Asian Church, flowing into the last image that will be treated, namely, the Church as community. However, since this particular image has emerged as the ecclesiological model in the Third Plenary Assembly of FABC, it will be dealt with more thoroughly in the next chapter. Suffice it here to point that the image of community has received great attention in the various documents of the Asian bishops, insofar as the federation strives to develop its contextualized theology of the local church. Building up of a truly local church is the primary task of evangelization, were the community of disciples can truly discover its Trinitarian origins through its lived experience of the community. It is the same community that can be an effective agent of social transformation, as it dialogues with the peoples, cultures and religions, thereby manifesting itself as sacramental manifestation of God's self-communication to the nations, while at the same time, being confirmed of God's loving presence, actively at work in human history and the whole of creation. □

⁷⁰BIRA I, 7, p. 183. Also cf. FABC I/1974, 7, p. 5: "It is our belief that only in and through Christ and His Gospel, and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that these guests can come to realization. For Christ alone, we believe, is for every man 'the Way, the Truth and the Life,' (Jn 14:6) 'who enlightens every man who comes into the world' (Jn 1:9)."