

CHURCH OF ASIA AND ITS MISSION FOR THE FUTURE

Dr. Paul Hwang Kyung-hoon
Director of the Center for Asian Theology Solidarity (CATS) under WTI

Seoul, 14-24 June 2011

CHURCH OF ASIA AND ITS MISSION FOR THE FUTURE

Features of Asia and Asians

Asians constitute 54% of the world's population and the Christian population is just 2.3% which simply indicates a failure of the Asian Church in articulating and communicating the Christian faith with local cultures and people. There is another demographical datum needed to pay our attention: the number of the Islam followers in Asia.

In 2009, Islam has 1.57 billion adherents, or 23% of the world population, the world's second largest religion after Christianity. Some 2/3 Muslims in the world live in Asia. Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any nation single in the world, followed by Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

Less than 20% of Muslims in the world live in Arabic-speaking countries but many people consider Islam to be mainly an Arab religion.¹

It is a distinctive feature compared to other continents that Asia is the land of cultural and religious richness and plurality. But the land is stained by massive poverty which means such an extreme economic dependency and polarization called 'Global South and Global North'. Oppressive social systems still exist in number of countries in the continent featured by dalits (former 'untouchable' in India), sex tourism, 'bought wives' especially seen in Korea. There also a lot of political disturbance and militarization represented by numerous ethnic and religious conflicts in many countries, communist regimes, and military dictatorship especially in the case of Myanmar.²

Unfortunately, that's not all. With all rich cultural and religious traditions and legacy, people in Asia witness and experience themselves lots of *imbalances*. Demographically, for example, a variety of majority-minority relations between Christianity and Islam in the continent. To put it more closely, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh. Brunei, Central Asian countries stand on the Muslim major-and-Christian minor relationship. Reverse is exactly the case of the Philippines, that is, Christian major and Muslim minor. In Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Singapore, and China, both the two religions are minority. For Malaysia there seems no clear majority.

In the light of political and economic situation, Malaysia, Indonesia, central Asia control over their political system. But Christians are in a much stronger economic position in the countries. That causes such imbalance among the countries and that also

¹ Thomas Michael, "Christians and Muslims in Dialogue", (FABC Papers no. 103).

² Peter C. Phan, "The Mission of the Church in Asia Today", paper presented at the inter-religious dialogue on Jesus' Uniqueness in Asia organized by CATS in Seoul in 2008.

shows there is tension between the majority Islam and the minority Christianity.

There is an ethnic factor related to the imbalance. While Malays throughout Southeast Asia, or Maranao, Maguindanao and Tausug people of the Philippines see themselves as Muslim, Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilongo of the Philippines, or Florinese, Timorese of Indonesia think of themselves as Christian. But in the case of both Christian and Muslim as minority, their relation is fine. For instance, in the countries like Hindu India, Buddhist Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, or Confucian Singapore, the two minor religions have common ground like marginalization and persecution which bring them together.³

Significance of FABC for the Church of Asia

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)⁴ is a voluntary association of episcopal conferences in Asia, established with the approval of the Holy See in 1972.

The foundation for the FABC was laid at a historic meeting of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops in Manila for the first time during the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Philippines in November 1970.

The focus of the FABC is on *the new way of being Church* in Asia. This 'new way' is the triple dialogue: dialogue with the poor of Asia, dialogue with the religions of Asia and dialogue with Asia's diverse cultures.

The new way of being Church, which is its official ecclesiology and missiology, implies "de-centers the Church" to make the center of the Christian life not the Church but the Reign of God. was stressed in the third (Bangkok, 1982) and the fifth plenary assemblies (Bandung, 1990) respectively. Especially in the latter occasion, Basic Ecclesial Community (BEC) or Small Christian Communities (SCCs) was established as its ecclesiology and introduced or spread further to the Churches in Asia including Korean Church. The ecclesiology of FABC also sees Church as a ***communion of communities*** in which laity, religious and clergy accept each other brothers and sisters. This is the very spirit of the second Vatican council especially when it comes to ecclesiology. It also stresses on some aspects: participatory Church, Church proclaiming Christ through (threefold) dialogue and Church serving as prophetic sign.

The below is its plenary assemblies which have taken place every 4 years since its foundation.

1. Taipei 1974: **Evangelization** in Modern Day Asia.
2. Calcutta 1978: **Prayer-** the Life of the Church of Asia.

³ Michael, loc cit.

⁴ FABC offers two type of different membership, that is, full membership and associate membership. There are 15 full member Churches: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam. And 10 associate members are Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, Siberia (Russia), Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, East Timor. See its website (<http://www.fabc.org/>) for more information on its structure and function.

3. Bangkok 1982: The **Church**-a Community of Faith.
4. Tokyo 1986: The Vacation and **Mission of the Laity** in the Church and in the World of Asia.
5. Bandung 1990: Journeying Together toward the **Third Millennium**.
6. Manila 1995: **Christian Discipleship** in Asia Today: Service to Life.
7. Bangkok 2000, A **Renewed Church** in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service.
8. Daejeon 2005: The Asian **Family** Toward a Culture of Integral of Life.
9. Manila 2009: **Living the Eucharist** in Asia.
10. Ho Chi Mihn, Vietnam 2012: the 40th Anniversary of Foundation of FABC.

The FABC's threefold dialogue, namely, dialogue with the poor, culture and religions in Asia, was strengthened by the Vatican document *Dialogue and Proclamation*⁵, a remarkable document on interreligious dialogue. It recommends a fourfold dialogue which echoes the threefold one of FABC and is very much harmonious with it indeed as follows:

The *dialogue of life*, in which people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for liberation of people. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, in which specialists like scholars on religions seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and appreciate each other's spiritual values. Finally, the *dialogue of (religious or spiritual) experience*, where persons share their spiritual and religious experiences rooted in diverse religious traditions. This fourth dialogue model is the most significant but difficult one. In order to achieve the goal of this type of dialogue, the subject of dialogue need to exercise how to share spiritual richness through common prayer and other religious practices together.

As a matter of fact, interreligious dialogue is not easy but is rather quite difficult indeed partly because as we have seen above, especially Christianity is so minor that other major religions in the continent would not take it as counterpart for the dialogue. There is another reason which requires 'intra-religious' dialogue first. It means that we need to renew and change our religion first. It is because interreligious dialogue easily become an elitist exercise among religious leaders, scholars who are well-fed, well-educated, well-housed, well-placed. Thus, daily concerns of the poor could simply be ignored. From the reality of the poor should begin such dialogue.

Dialogue is to be oriented toward true human liberation. Christians should draw upon Christian prophetic tradition in such dialogue. In short, we should start dialogue within the Church for renewal and with other religions for cooperation and peace at the same time.

⁵ It was issued jointly in May, 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue(PCID) and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

Mission of the Past and for the Future

There are diverse types or models of mission for evangelization. In the past, the purpose of mission is to save souls and to expand the church, so that the beneficiaries of this type of mission are the 'pagans' whose souls are destined to damnation by the Church. Thus, the subject or agents of mission are the hierarchy, Religious and those especially appointed. Laity function as simple collaborators of mission who support the missionaries with 'prayers and money'. In the hierarchy-driven mission, the verbal proclamation of Jesus or the Gospel is the main method to achieve its goal.

However, the People of God have started to ask the fundamental question of mission after Vatican II like for example, for what is mission? to whom? Fortunately, many faithfuls involved in the Church today believe more and more that mission is not primarily for the benefit of Christians but the world. Therefore, the agents of mission should not be monopolized by the hierarchy but the People of God as a whole 'from everywhere to everywhere'.

His encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II affirms that the Holy Spirit is "the principal agent of mission." The Holy Spirit is said "to direct the mission of the church, to make" "the whole church missionary." (no.28)

In other words, mission should move toward the kingdom of God with all Catholics, each in his or her position in the church and the world with help from the Holy Spirit in every time and place through intra-interreligious and intercultural dialogue, the most effective method of evangelization.

Challenges Facing Asian Churches as a Whole

The 6th and 7th plenary assemblies of FABC take five areas as pastoral priority which could lead us to think and reflect on the way we should take for the future of "communion of community".

Those are family, women especially girl child, youth, ecology and the displaced or migrants.

First of all, Asian **family** nuclear of the society is bombarded on all sides by anti-family forces of dehumanization and disintegration, ranging from material and moral poverty to secularistic values and external pressures. Discipleship in Asia then has to denounce such anti-life and anti-family pressures, policies in accordance with God's law and the Church's teachings.

Secondly, the Church cannot effectively promote Christian vision of full life unless the Church as a communion of communities will try hard to eradicate practices that deny **women** and the girl child in Asia their dignity from God. An urgent pastoral concern is for women to exercise their right to corresponsibility and mutuality with men in society and in the Church.

Thirdly, FABC is pledged to share concern and alarm of **youth** in the face of misguided policies and structures that are already laying the foundations of their future.

Asian bishops commits themselves to accompany young people's life-giving movement in their aspiration to transform themselves and our societies towards fuller life.

Also, the Asian bishops emphasize **ecological crisis** in the world in general particularly Asia. They say that God, the Giver of Life, calls the bishops' discipleship in Asia into question on the time bomb issue of ecology. Choosing life requires the bishops and our discipleship to discern and act with other faiths and groups against the forces of ecological destruction.

Finally, special attention is given to **the displaced and marginalized** in our societies: political and ecological refugees and migrant workers. They are marginalized and exploited by the system, denied of their place in society and must go else where to seek a dignified life. In welcoming them we expose the causes of their displacement, work toward conditions for a more human living in community, experience the universal dimension of the Kingdom (Gal 3:28) and appreciate new opportunities for evangelization and intercultural dialogue.

The question, now, is, "does this five special pastoral areas also apply to those Religious congregations especially involved in media including Daughters of St. Paul in Asia-Pacific region? If so, what are we going to do with this and how?" To be honest, I am not in the position to give an answer to the questions. But at least I can give them a 'tip' to think that deeply in order for them to come up with concrete and valid results in relation to their apostolate or ministries in that field.

Asian way of thinking is holistic and integrated, experiencing reality as one and inter-dependent. We Asians normally use symbols to understand and seize reality imaginatively in its lived complexity. Unlike Western way of thinking normally using abstract concepts, symbols are earthy, plural, metaphorical and polyvalent. Along with such symbols, "narrative method is more suitable to speak about life than a logical network of concepts. The story also stays close to life in its complexity."⁶

I am finishing my speech by raising some questions rather than giving concrete answer to you. Like what Amaladoss say, narrative method is much efficient to capture the vivid and real lives of people in Asia. Would you let yourself tell stories of the poor women, youth, ecology, family, and the marginalized? Or Let you help them tell their stories themselves? If they start to tell their stories, then what will you do?

For this, more fundamentally, are you ready to immerse yourself in the reality of the poverty-conflict-ridden life of people in Asia? Are you really ready to open up the door of your congregation to let the wind of change in, so that you could be changed yourself too? Are you sure that you are willing to work together with laity not as assistants but partners to fulfill the job?

Thank you.

⁶ Michael Amaladoss, *Asian Theology for the Future*, a paper presented in an ecumenical and conference organized by CATS in Seoul on May 18, 2011.