

## FIRST ASIAN MISSION CONGRESS

### *THE STORY OF JESUS IN ASIA: A CELEBRATION OF FAITH AND LIFE*

*Fr. Saturnino Dias*

“The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (AG 2). Having received the mandate from the risen Lord, the Church is “convinced that all men and women have the right to encounter Christ the Redeemer through her ministry”. The missionary mandate is universal - the Apostles are sent to “all nations” (Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47); “into the whole world and... to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15); “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). They are not alone in this challenging task; they are assisted and strengthened by the presence and power of the Spirit and the help of Jesus himself (cf RM 23).

“The Church’s universal mission is *born of faith* in Jesus Christ as is stated in our Trinitarian profession of faith.... It is *only in faith* that the Church’s mission *can be understood* and *only in faith* that it finds its basis” (RM 4). Faith is the human response to the Word.

The essential element of the missionary mandate is the *proclamation of the Word*. In fact, the Apostles considered the “ministry of the Word” as the most important of all the apostolic services (cf Acts 6:2-4). The mission *ad gentes* is characterized as the work of proclaiming Christ and his Gospel, the building up of the local Church, and the promotion of Kingdom values.

Seen in the same light of faith, the only commandment of Jesus, to love one another, also has a strong missionary character. His followers are to live together in love and unity, so that the world may believe (cf Jn 17:21-23). The ultimate purpose of mission is to enable people to share in the communion, which exists between the Father and the Son, so that the world may know and believe (cf Jn 17:21-23). Therefore “we are missionaries above all because of what we are as a Church whose innermost life is unity and love, even before we become missionaries in word and deed” (RM 23). The community is thus sent by Jesus to witness to him through their communion, even as he lived in communion with the Father and the Spirit. In fact, in the early Church communion within led to growth without (cf Acts 2:45-47). Therefore, *witness of life* is an essential component of the proclamation of the Word.

The mandate of Christ to proclaim the Good News is being fulfilled in and through the local Churches in communion with the universal Church. They are the living and active subject of mission *ad gentes*. Local Church is the entire Christian Community of a given socio-cultural and religious milieu – Bishop, Priests, Religious and Laity. Concretely it is the diocese with each of its parishes, associations and institutions that is called to fulfill the mandate of Christ to proclaim the Good News.

Every year we celebrate the *Mission Sunday* which gives us an opportunity to renew our own commitment and dedication to the cause of mission besides offering our support of prayers and funds for those engaged actually in the field work of mission *ad gentes*.

This year there are added reasons not just to renew our commitment but to *review and renew our commitment to mission at all levels*: Bishops-Priests-Religious-Laity-Associations-Movements-Institutions.

This year we celebrate the fifth centenary of the birth of St Francis Xavier, patron of mission and missionaries, who was instrumental to spread the Faith in various countries of Asia. We also celebrate the third centenary of the approval of the Oratory of St Philip Neri in Goa, the first

indigenous Society of Apostolic Life in Asia, founded by Blessed Joseph Vaz, the model missionary *of Asia for Asia*, and the Apostle of Sri Lanka and North Kanara.

Another important reason and indeed motivating drive should be the First Asian Mission Congress that the Office of Evangelization of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is organizing at Chiang Mai, Thailand from 18-22 October 2006 on the theme: *The Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life*.

The general purpose of a Missionary Congress at continental level is to generate missionary awareness among Christians by helping to deepen their faith, acknowledge their right and duty towards mission work, and to create awareness of mission needs. It also provides an opportunity to give witness of Christian faith and to proclaim Christ to the world around.

The specific purpose of this Congress is spelt out in the Rationale and Basic Text: "*The Story of Jesus in Asia*", given separately in this Website.

Therefore, we appeal to all our Bishops, Parish Priests as well as Heads of religious communities and diocesan and religious institutions, especially the SCCs and other Associations and Movements to ensure that information about the Congress, its Rationale and Basic Text reaches all our faithful, and the Church in Asia is fully involved in the Congress and through discussion and reflection on the Basic Text deepens its awareness of the Mission of the Church and one's own role in that Mission celebrating what the theme of the Congress says: *The Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life*.

Similarly we request all our Bishops to make the Prayer for the Asian Mission Congress available in regional languages and ask all our Institutions and faithful to recite it at the end of daily Mass and/or Rosary. Printed in the last page of the previous issue of *PROCLAIM*, it has been named simply **ASIAN MISSION PRAYER** (see the link in this Website) so that it can be used even after the Congress.

A thousand delegates from all over Asia representing all sections of the Church are expected to participate in the Congress at Chiang Mai; it is also expected that there will be diocesan and/or national Mission Congresses either before or after the Asian Mission Congress in the Countries of Asia.

Following the example of the early disciples, the Christian communities in Asia are called upon to continue recounting the Story of Jesus, with an "Asian countenance" (EA 20). This is "the greatest gift which the Church can offer to Asia" (EA 10). Even in the midst of persecutions, the Asian Churches continue to give this witness. The newness of life brought by Christ affects and, as it were, upsets certain criteria of judgment, determining values and models of life (EN 19). Thus Christian mission has contributed in no small measure to the uplift of the tribals and dalits, to the education and status of women, to the care of the marginalized especially lepers and Aids patients.

The FABC has, over the years, reflected deeply on this privileged mission. The Asian context suggests an Asian way of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ, to be done in "continuous, humble and loving dialogue" with Asia's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions, recognizing the complementarity (*ying yang*) which exists between peoples, cultures, religious traditions and world-visions, "with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word". (Rosales Gaudencio & Arevalo C. G., SJ (eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 1, Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines, 1992, p. 280, 3.1.2).

"A Church that stands with sisters and brothers of other faiths in confronting issues of life and death will necessarily be transformed in the process. In other words, it will become *inculturated* – at

a level which includes but goes deeper than changes in ritual and symbol.” (EA 21-22). The Church in Asia needs to make all out efforts to know, assimilate and live up to all compatible elements of Asian cultures: in daily life, in liturgy and entertainment.

In the Asian context, people are more persuaded by the witness of life than by intellectual argument (EA 42). They look for the transformation wrought in the life of those who announce the Story of Jesus Christ, like Mother Teresa: personal experience and detachment. Asians are called upon to witness to Christ, also in situations of migration, whether within Asia or outside Asia. We must encourage our Christian emigrants who remain true to their faith in “situations which are difficult economically, culturally and morally” (cf. EA 7).

The Christian communities in almost all Asian countries are a *‘little flock’*. Far from withdrawing into a ghetto, in spite of persecutions and opposition, they are challenged to be leaven and salt in society.

Like the two disciples, after their encounter with Jesus at Emmaus, they must tell “what had happened on the road, and how He was known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Lk 24:35). There will also be those who will be told by Jesus: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and how He has had mercy on you” (Mk 5:19). We need to listen to their testimony and celebrate together our faith and life in Christ.

We note with joy that the Church in Thailand, small though it is in terms of its Catholic population (291,720 Catholics or 0.45% of its total population), has drawn all its resources, people, institutions and funds to prepare herself for this great event in the life of the Church in Asia, organizing Mission Congresses in all its 10 dioceses and a National Mission Congress from 11 to 12 August 2006 culminating in the Asian Mission Congress from 18 to 22 October 2006.

It is a challenge to the entire Church in Asia to emulate the enthusiasm and the commitment of this sister Church and do likewise in every country of Asia, as preparation for and follow up of the Asian Mission Congress.

### **First Asian Mission Congress at Chiang Mai, Thailand**

The preparations for the First Asian Mission Congress to be held at Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 18-22 October 2006 are going on in full swing, with the names of official delegates coming in from various countries of Asia, together with many delegates from other countries, especially Europe, who want to come as “observers” because they nurture especial love for the people of Asia having worked as missionaries in various countries of Asia. It is very heartening to note the enthusiasm of the delegates and also the call given by many countries to promote this Congress.

There are, however, a few countries of Asia who have yet to send the names of their delegates, which should reach us at the very earliest so as to enable us to facilitate the process of finalizing the list of official delegates.

### **Final Preparatory Meeting in August**

Our next meeting of the Executive Committee of the Asian Mission Congress, which will be the last meeting before the Congress, will be held at the FABC Documentation Centre at St Louis Hospital, Bangkok on 13 and 14 August 2006, following the Thai National Mission Congress. The meeting will take stock of the work done by the various Committees of the AMC and will finalize the Program and other matters needing attention of the organizers.