

Towards the Asian Mission Congress:
IN LOVE WITH ASIA . . .
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To open the windows of the Church was the first proposal of the newly elected Pope John XXIII on October 28, 1958 and he really did this not only with the announcement of the Second Vatican Council on January 25, 1959 but also in showing his special concern for the Church in the world and for Asia. It was under his pontificate that the initiative for an Asian bishops' meeting which began under his predecessor Pope Pius XII was realized: For the first time in history, the bishops of Asia and Oceania assembled at the Central Seminary of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila from December 10 to 16, 1958. Some 10 Papal representatives, 16 archbishops, and 79 bishops from Egypt to Australia assembled in Manila to discuss the situation of the Church in Asia where communism had expelled all missionaries from China and was rapidly spreading into other countries.

Radio Veritas Asia and the birth of FABC

It was at this occasion that the first proposal was made for a continental Catholic radio station like Vatican Radio to broadcast via short-wave especially into countries like China where Christians otherwise cannot be reached anymore. This was the first step in the creation of "Radio Veritas Asia" which, under the responsibility of the "Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences" (FABC) since almost 40 years, is broadcasting in 16 different languages.

John's successor, Pope Paul VI, in a special way showed his concern for Asia. He was called the "Pilgrim Pope" because he was the first to travel beyond Italy and Europe to support the local churches and thus, personally to tell and reflect the Story of Jesus in Asia and the world. Paul VI started his pilgrimages already in 1964 to the Holy Land and India.

In 1970, he visited several countries in Asia including the Philippines where he also visited the premises of Radio Veritas Asia. At this occasion, the Asian bishops assembled again in Manila and the FABC was born as the continental family of Asian bishops and bishops' conferences. The initiative received the Pope's special support and brought all the Asian countries together into one family to think and plan in a more systematic way how to tell and live the story of Jesus in Asia. Up till now, three volumes of documents from different meetings and deliberations of different FABC bodies since 1970 are published as a proof of the vitality of the Asian churches.

John Paul II

The support for Asia became especially obvious with Pope John Paul II and his many visits to Asian countries. In 1981, he visited the Philippines, Goa, Japan and Pakistan. In 1984, he was in South Korea and Thailand. In 1987, he thrilled Catholics in Bangladesh and Singapore. In 1989, he visited South Korea again, and came to Indonesia, East Timor and Mauritius. In 1995, the Pope came to Sri Lanka and again to the Philippines where he celebrated the Eucharist for World Youth Day with some 5 million participants, the biggest

crowd assembled for a Eucharistic celebration in all history. John Paul II also used the occasion to address the FABC and to celebrate 25 years of Radio Veritas Asia. In November 1999, he again came to Asia for the publication of the Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Asia.” In 2001 and 2002 respectively, he also visited the Central Asian States of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan.

All this shows how the mission and blessings of Christ in Asia are continuing through the presence of the successors in the chair of St Peter. Pope John Paul II in fact admitted in his Encyclical on Mission “Redemptoris Missio” (1990) that he learned about the importance of contemplation for missionary spirituality in a special way through his visits to Asia. (no. 91)

Asian Synod

Under Pope John Paul II, the Asian Synod was celebrated in Rome 1998 in preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000. The Pope made it a point to personally publish the conclusions and reflections on the Synod with a special trip to New Delhi, India in 1999. His Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Asia,” altogether with 51 sections, is based on the deliberations of the Asian bishops but also reveals John Paul II’s concern for the story of Jesus being alive in Asia. He in fact promotes story-telling as a form of teaching and sharing especially fitted and used in Asia. (no. 20)

In “Ecclesia in Asia,” the Pope describes Jesus Christ in an Asian perspective with different titles reflected in our cultures such as “teacher of wisdom, healer, liberator, spiritual guide, the enlightened one, the compassionate friend of the poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the obedient one.” Jesus could be presented, he writes, as “the Incarnate Wisdom of God whose grace brings to Christians the seeds of Divine Wisdom already present in the lives, religions and peoples of Asia.” (no. 20)

Pope John Paul II begins his document for and about the “Church in Asia” with the statement that Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in Asia. Thus, “a small portion of Western Asia became a land of promise and hope for all mankind. Jesus knew and loved this land, he made his own the history, sufferings and hopes of its people. He loved its people and embraced their Jewish traditions and heritage... And from this land, through the preaching of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church went forth to make “disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19).” (no. 1)

Millennium for Asia

Pope John Paul II repeats what he told the FABC already in 1995 in Manila that:

“Just as in the first millennium, the Cross was planted in the soil of Europe, and in the second in the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the third Christian millennium, a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent of Asia.” (no. 1)

The Pope concludes his document with the assurance that we should not be afraid and that “the peoples of Asia need Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Asia is thirsting for the living

water that Jesus alone can give. The servants of Christ in Asia must therefore, must be unstinting in the efforts to fulfill the mission they have received from the Lord who has promised to be with them till the end of the age. Trusting in the Lord who will not fail those whom he has called, the Church in Asia joyfully makes her pilgrim way into the Third Millennium. Her only joy is that which comes from sharing with a multitude of Asia's people the immense gift which she herself has received – the love of Jesus the Savior. Her one ambition is to continue his mission of service and love so that all Asians may have life and have it abundantly.” (no. 50)

This is exactly the purpose of the Asian Mission Congress we are going to celebrate in October this year in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

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