

MISSION IN ASIA: TELLING THE STORY OF JESUS

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The Asian Mission Congress is an occasion to celebrate the calling of the Church to be missionary. It recalls with gratitude the missionary paths the Church has already taken in Asia. It rejoices at the continuing efforts at mission, with testimonies of valor, faith and love. It invites us to commit ourselves once again to the perennial bidding of Jesus Christ that we bring the Good News of the Reign of God to all the earth. It urges us to seek new ways of understanding and doing mission, faithful to the Church's rich Tradition but responsive to the realities faced by the peoples of Asia.

It can be said that the history of the Church is the history of mission. This multi-layered and multi-colored history, dating from New Testament times, testifies to the many ways by which the Church has understood and practiced mission. We can add the fact that while the one Church is universal it exists in local Churches that have quite unique histories and situations, and therefore quite unique experiences and notions of mission. Pope John Paul II affirms in *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) a basic insight of *Ad Gentes* (AG)^{1[1]} that mission, a single but complex reality, is developed in a variety of ways.^{2[2]} In continuity with the Church's dynamic search for ways of doing mission appropriate to specific times and places our congress proposes an understanding and practice of mission focused on the Story of Jesus in Asia.

A story is never just a story. A story is truly a story when told or narrated, and hopefully listened to. Nowadays, one of the names of story telling is sharing. In *Ecclesia in Asia* (EAs), Pope John Paul II describes mission as sharing the light of faith in Jesus, a gift received and a gift to be shared to the peoples of Asia.^{3[3]} That sharing can take the form of telling the story of Jesus. I believe that story telling provides a creative framework for understanding mission in Asia, a continent whose cultures and religions are rooted in great stories or epics. Pope John Paul II also recognizes the narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms as a preferred way of proclaiming Jesus in Asia (EAs 20).

Understanding 'Story' and Telling Story

Human life is unimaginable without stories. Life itself has a narrative structure. Story mediates life and its meaning. Telling stories comes so naturally to us that we do not reflect sufficiently on its significance for our lives. In recent years, scholars have been rediscovering the role of narrative in their respective disciplines. Theology and spirituality have benefited from this "turn to the story."^{4[4]} Mission can equally be

^{1[1]} Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes* 6.

^{2[2]} Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* 41.

^{3[3]} Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 10.

^{4[4]} An example among many is Michael L. Cook, S.J., *Christology as Narrative Quest* (Collegeville, MN: 1997).

enriched. Let us devote some time to reflect on story and storytelling. My presentation will be far from exhaustive. As an invitation to further reflection and discussion, this paper will dwell only on those aspects that might have a bearing on understanding mission as telling the story of Jesus.

1. Good stories are based on experience. There are good stories and bad ones. But the difference does not always depend on the style of the narrator or the ending of the story. Ultimately we want a credible story, a story that is believable because it is true. The strongest basis of truth is the first hand experience of the narrator. While credible reporters of somebody else' experience can be believed in, nothing matches the story of someone who actually was there when an incident happened, for the event is now a part of the person. We tell our best stories when they are about our experience. Our best stories are about who we are.

2. Stories reveal personal identity and people and events that shaped that identity. Stories reveal who we are, the flow and sense of our lives and where we are going. My story is my autobiography, my identity in the great scheme of things.^{5[5]} As I tell my little stories, my fundamental life story is revealed not only to the listener but also and primarily to me, the narrator. I make sense of myself. But I realize in the process that the story is not simply about me. It is also always about other people, my family and friends, society, culture, the economy, or what we call 'the times'. My story is not developed in a vacuum. I am what I am because I am immersed in other people's stories and the stories of my time. If I neglect or deny them, I have no personal story to tell. In telling my story, I make sense also of the world I inhabit.

3. Stories are dynamic, open to reinterpretation and re-telling, and transformative. Personal identity is shaped by interaction with the world put into memory. Remembrance is vital if we want to grow in self-knowledge. But we remember by telling stories.^{6[6]} Memory is made of stories rather than mere chronology and stories bring experience back to mind.^{7[7]} By remembering, we realize that the past is not at all static. It continues to mold us. It can also be seen in a new light from the optic provided by new experiences. In fact we tell the same story in different fashions. Stories reveal what made us what we are now while differentiating us from what we were before and opening possibilities for the future. Through stories we get in touch with the dynamism of transformation of personal identity: how much we have changed and how much more we have to change..

4. Stories are the ground for understanding spiritual, doctrinal and ethical symbols. Stories disclose personal identity by surfacing the values, moral norms and priorities of a person. The spirituality of a person emerges in his/her story. Ethical, spiritual and doctrinal symbols precious to a person are derived from that person's life stories. Those profound living symbols are understood only when the story is known and heard.^{8[8]} Stories are indispensable to the meaning of a person's faith and moral symbols.

^{5[5]} Cf. Richard Woods, O.P., "Good News: The Story Teller as Evangelist," *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 206.

^{6[6]} Ibid. p. 205.

^{7[7]} Cf. Richard Bayuk, C.P.P.S., "Preaching and the Imagination," *Bible Today* 38 (2000): 289, 292.

^{8[8]} Cf. Cook, p. 31.

5. Stories form community. What we have said so far about story and personal identity is also true of the identity of a community. Common experience and memories bind unique individuals into a cohesive body. The narrative privileged by a community becomes the nucleus of its values, ethics and spirituality.^{9[9]} A community's distinguishing beliefs, rituals, celebrations, customs and lifestyle will make sense to us only if we go back to the stories that the members of that community hold and cherish in common.

6. Stories when received can transform the listener. Important experiences are named and told in stories.^{10[10]} When we experience something positively or negatively significant, we cannot wait to tell it to someone. This dynamic tells us that story begs for a listener, for someone with whom to share. One's story can awaken memories of similar experiences in a listener, open new meanings, create wonder and shake from slumber. The engagement and response from the listener begins when the narrator concludes.^{11[11]} The narrator's story is woven with the listener's story to produce new stories. Usually a good listener will become a good storyteller. The one who has experienced weaving other person's stories into one's own by listening will be secure enough to share one's story as a thread in someone else's story.

7. Stories can be told in a variety of ways. A story can be told in many ways, even when not literally telling a story. Oral narration is still the most common. But stories can be told through writing letters, novels or poems. Photographs and video productions are technologically inspired ways of telling stories. A person's gestures, mannerisms, tone of voice, facial contortions, and body postures are as present as any character in a story. A person's silence can be a powerful way of telling a story. By extension, a person's attitudes, lifestyle and relationships tell stories and generate new stories. A community's dances, music, art, architecture, and food are essential elements of its story. Stories are so richly textured that they are open to many ways of being narrated.

8. Stories can be suppressed. Even if telling stories comes spontaneously to us, some factors can suppress storytelling. The pain brought about by a traumatic memory, shame or guilt can prevent a victim from telling his/her full story. In order to preserve a bit of dignity after a harrowing experience, a victim can deny that a story is part of his/her personal identity and memory. Dictators forbid stories of corruption, oppression, killings and destruction from being told, lest their regime be put into jeopardy. They bribe media people and threaten those who want to expose the truth. They impose an official national history that erases memories that would put them in a bad light. Some stories are too dangerous to tell, for listeners might hear the call for transformation. The fiercest battles being waged daily are over stories. But healing is possible. Where victims are allowed to tell their stories to friends, counselors or professionals who show compassion and understanding, their self-worth slowly comes back. Where communities reclaim their true story, they reclaim too their power for societal change.

^{9[9]} Cf. Jose Mario C. Francisco, S.J., "The Mediating Role of Narrative in Inter Religious Dialogue: Implications and Illustrations from the Philippine Context," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 41 (2004): 164.

^{10[10]} Cf. Bayuk, p. 289.

^{11[11]} *Ibid.*, p. 290.

We spent time reflecting on story and storytelling to uncover its potentials for the understanding and practice of mission.

Mission as Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia

At the outset, we affirm with *Ad Gentes* of Vatican II that the pilgrim Church is missionary by nature because it takes its origin from the mission of Jesus Christ and the mission of the Holy Spirit in accordance with the saving will of the Father (AG 2). So that what Jesus has accomplished for the salvation of all may come in time to achieve its effect in all, He sent the Holy Spirit from the Father to carry out His saving work inwardly and in the Church (AG 3-4). It is therefore just fitting to call the Holy Spirit the principal agent of Mission, as Pope John Paul II does (cf. RM, chapter III). It is the Holy Spirit that enables the Church to accomplish the mission entrusted to it (EAs 43).

From this perspective, the missions of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit can be considered God's own story. God is the "teller of the tale".^{12[12]} The Holy Spirit will tell the story of Jesus to the Church. Jesus promised, "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). The three persons of the Trinity are even depicted by Jesus as "telling stories" to one another. "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak...He will glorify me for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you." (Jn 16:13-15). The Church's mission is a fruit of the Story that the Holy Spirit declares to it from Jesus and the Father. The origin of the Church's mission is the Great Storyteller, the Holy Spirit, to whom it must listen so it can share what it has heard. The Church is God's Storyteller of Jesus Christ as it listens to the Holy Spirit.

That the Church should tell the story of Jesus goes without saying. The great question for Asia is *how* to share the story, as Pope John Paul II accurately points out (EAs 19). The 'how' aspect of the mission has been the concern of many Asian theologians, like Michael Amaladoss, S.J.^{13[13]} Using some of our reflections on the understanding of story, let us look at mission as telling the story of Jesus under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

1. The Church tells the story of Jesus from its experience of Jesus. Telling the story of Jesus in Asia is more effective if it springs from the experience of the storyteller. Pope Paul VI's observation in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*^{14[14]} that people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers is universally true but more so in Asia where cultures put particular emphasis on the experientially verified truthfulness of the witness. The earliest apostles, who were Asians, spoke of their experience – what they have heard, they have seen with their eyes, they have looked upon and touched with their hands concerning the Word of Life (I Jn 1:1-4). There cannot be any other way for the

^{12[12]} Cook, p. 39.

^{13[13]} See the following works of Michael Amaladoss, S.J., "Images of Jesus in India," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 31 (1994): 6-20 and "'Who Do You Say that I Am?'" Speaking of Jesus in India Today," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 34 (1997): 211-224.

^{14[14]} Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 41.

contemporary Church in Asia. Without a deep experience of Jesus as Savior, how I can tell his story convincingly as part of my personal story? The experience of St. Paul is truly the root of mission when he says, “it is not longer I who live but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). Telling the story of Jesus in Asia requires the Church’s living encounter with Jesus in prayer, worship, interaction with people, especially the poor, and events that constitute the “signs of the times.”

2. The story of Jesus manifests the identity of the Church among the poor, cultures and religions of Asia. Just as a story reveals personal identity, a story of faith in Jesus reveals also the identity of the narrator as a believer. A witness who tells his/her story of encountering Jesus cannot and should not hide his/her identity as a disciple of the Savior. But just as a web of relationships with people, culture, and societal currents form a personal story or identity, so is Christian storytelling in Asia to be done in relationship with others. The Christian identity and story in Asia is always with and not apart from those of other cultures and religions. The story of Jesus is to be told by Asian Christians who are with and among the poor, the diverse cultures and the various religions of Asia that partly determine their identities and stories as Asians. This reality of Asia has prompted Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan to propose that *missio ad* (towards) *gentes* should be understood now according to the new paradigm of *missio inter* (among or with) *gentes*.^{15[15]} But I hold that *missio ad gentes* should not be eliminated but should rather be done *inter gentes*. There can never be a genuine mission *towards* people without it being at the same time mission *with* people. And genuine mission *with* people encourages mission *towards* people. With and among the poor, cultures and religions, Asian Christians are *Asian*. To and for the poor, cultures and religions, Asian Christians are *Christian*. The blending of these stories, I believe, can enrich the numerous reflections of the FABC on mission as dialogue with the poor, cultures and religions of Asia.^{16[16]}

3. The Church keeps the memory of Jesus dynamically alive. Among and for other Asians, the Church tells the story of Jesus in the mode of keeping the memory of Jesus alive. Keeping the memory of Jesus does not mean locking it up in some untouchable realm of existence. It is kept when re-appropriated and shared. Trusting in the Holy Spirit and faithful to the memory guaranteed in the Tradition of the Universal Church, the Church in Asia should have the courage to rediscover new ways of telling the story of Jesus, retrieving its vitality and freeing its potentials for the renewal of the Asian realities. The story of Jesus, when guarded as a museum piece, fails to be life giving. In *Ecclesia in Asia* (EAs 19-20, 22) Pope John Paul II poses the challenge of finding the pedagogy that would make the story of Jesus closer to Asian sensibilities, especially to theologians. He is confident that the same story could be told in new perspectives and in the light of new circumstances.

4. The Story of Jesus provides meaning to the Church’s symbols of faith. We said that stories contain the meaning of the spirituality, ethics and convictions embraced by a

^{15[15]} Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan, *Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the FABC*, FABC Papers No. 109.

^{16[16]} The fundamental document is FABC I (1974), “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia”, especially # 12, 14, 20, G. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, editors, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Volume I (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), pp. 11-25. Many plenary assemblies and institutes of the FABC are further elucidations of the basic insight of FABC I in changing circumstances.

person. It can happen that the Church can be so identified with some “standardized” or stereotyped symbols of doctrine, ethic and worship that the story that gives impetus to them is forgotten. Then the symbols themselves lose their power to touch people. The symbols of faith must be rooted back to the foundational story of Jesus. For example the breaking of bread at the Eucharist should be seen in many stories of sharing, caring and communion, without which the ritual is deprived of significance. A bishop’s ring should spring from a living story of service to the community, without which the ring is reduced to a piece of jewelry. A priest’s symbolism as Jesus’ presence should spring from a living story of availability to people, without which the priesthood becomes a status rather than a vocation. The symbols of faith must be traceable to the foundational story of Jesus. A return to the story of Jesus would also enable the Church in Asia to correct the impressions of foreign-ness attached to its doctrine, rituals and symbols (EAs 20). Detached from the originating story of Jesus, the symbols of the Church might tell of a story foreign to Jesus Himself.

5. The Story of Jesus generates the Church. Stories also form a community, as we have already stated. In common experience and memory communities find cohesion and common value. The common memory of the story of Jesus generated by the Holy Spirit should be the fundamental source of unity and identity in faith of the Church in Asia. The Scriptures, the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the doctrines, the rituals and the whole Tradition are ways of constantly telling the story of Jesus so as to keep His memory the core of the Christian community. But this sense of community is not an excuse to isolate the Church so that it could preserve its identity. The story of Jesus that makes it a Christian community is the same story that the whole community must share. In the paradigm of storytelling, the Church loses its identity if it fails to tell the story that is its very identity. “For whoever would preserve his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it,” Jesus says (Mk 8:35-36). It has been the conviction of the FABC that it is the whole Church that is called to mission.^{17[17]} The local Churches need to discern and develop the many gifts inspired by the Holy Spirit so that they could contribute to the telling of Jesus’ story. The whole Church, the fruit of the story of Jesus, becomes its narrator.

6. A listening Church tells the Story of Jesus. Stories find their completion in the listener. But stories that are imposed are not listened to. The Church in Asia must trust in the vitality of the story it offers, without any thought of forcing it on others. It is already a beautiful story that will surely touch those who have even a bit of openness. Pope John Paul II tells us in *Ecclesia in Asia* that we share the gift of Jesus not to proselytize but out of obedience to the Lord and as an act of service to the peoples of Asia (EAs 20). Let the story speak and touch. Let the Holy Spirit open the hearts and memories of the listeners and invite them to transformation. The multitudes of poor peoples of Asia can find compassion and hope in Jesus’ story. The cultures of Asia will resonate with the disturbing challenge to true freedom in Jesus’ story. The various religions of Asia will marvel at the respect and appreciation towards those seeking God and genuine holiness in Jesus’ story. The Church in Asia is called to humbly allow the Spirit to touch its listeners. As a storyteller of the Holy Spirit, the Church in Asia is to enter the worlds and languages of its listeners and from within

^{17[17]} See BIMA III (Third Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate, 1982), #5, *Ibid.* p. 104.

them to tell Jesus' story just like at Pentecost.^{18[18]} But that means the Church in Asia must be a good listener to the Spirit and to the poor, cultures and religions if it is to speak meaningfully at all. A storytelling Church must be a listening Church.^{19[19]}

7. The Church tells the Story of Jesus in a multiplicity of ways. Stories can be told in a variety of ways. So can the story of Jesus. The Church in Asia, with its rich heritage of storytelling acquired from Asian homes, neighborhoods, religions and traditional wisdoms, can be creative in telling the story of Jesus. The witness of a holy, ethical and upright life is still the best story about Jesus in Asia.^{20[20]} The lives of holy men and women and martyrs show how the story of Jesus is inscribed in persons and communities.^{21[21]} Men and women who have dedicated themselves to service of neighbor, like Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, are living stories that Asian peoples love to hear. Defense of the poor, work for justice, promotion of life, caring for the sick, educating children and the youth, peacemaking, alleviation of foreign debt and stewardship of creation are some ways of retelling Jesus' story in Asia today.^{22[22]} But the Church must also be ready to accept the Holy Spirit's surprising ways of retelling the story of Jesus.

8. The Church is the voice of suppressed stories. It is a scandal that suppression of stories is a daily occurrence in many parts of Asia. The poor, the girl-child, women, refugees, migrants, the minorities, the indigenous peoples, the victims of different types of domestic, political, ethnic violence and the environment are but a few of those whose stories are suppressed. Many are afraid of the stories they will tell. Or are they afraid to hear the truth and its demands? The Church tells the story of Jesus whose words often fell on deaf ears and who was executed so that he could be prevented from telling His story. So in Asia the Church pays tribute to Him by allowing itself to be the storyteller of the voiceless so that Jesus' voice may be heard in their suppressed stories.

Conclusion

Mission as telling of the story of Jesus is already taking place in Asia. We celebrate the many storytellers of the Holy Spirit whose stories, though hidden, have generated new stories in the lives of many Asian brothers and sisters.

I close by turning to Jesus, the Logos or Story of God and master storyteller of the Reign of God. Let us behold Him. Let us listen to Him. Let us learn from Him. Let us open ourselves to His story and His storytelling. His story is about the Abba He has experienced and the fullness of life Abba offers. His life and identity were rooted in this constant union with Abba. Yet he lived like an ordinary Jew, an ordinary Asian, with family, friends, women, children, foreigners, temple officials, the teachers of the

^{18[18]} Cf. BIRA IV/12, (Twelfth Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue, 1991) # 42-47, *Ibid.*, p. 332.

^{19[19]} Cf. BIRA I (First Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs, 1979), # 11-14, *Ibid.*, p. 111.

^{20[20]} Cf. BIMA III (Third Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate, 1982) # 10, *Ibid.*, p. 105.

^{21[21]} Cf. Francisco, p. 167.

^{22[22]} Cf. EAs # 33-41.

law, the poor, the sick, the friendless, the sinners and enemies. They were all part of who He was. He gathered a community, a new family of those who would listen to God's word and act on it. He told them stories of Abba and life in Abba. He used their language. His parables were simple yet disarming. He told them about Abba through his meals, healing, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, and critique of false religiosity. His story leads him to a supper where he was food and where he washed the feet of his friends. Nothing could stop him from telling his story, even on the cross. His humiliating death should have been the end of His story. But Abba had something more to say, "My Son - He is truly risen." Pouring his gift of the Holy Spirit into our hearts, Jesus entrusts His story to us. I hear Him saying, "Listen to my story. Go and tell my story again and again where it all began – in my home, in my beloved Asia!"
