

FINAL STATEMENT

**Bishop as Father, Brother and Friend of Priests
Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand, May 16-21, 2011**

We, 45 bishops from eight (8) member countries of FABC, gathered for a seminar for bishops of Asia on "Bishop as Father, Brother and Friend of Priests" from 16th May to 21st May, 2011, at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. We are grateful to Bishop Vianney Fernando, Chairman of FABC Office of the Clergy and Fr. Lawrence Pinto, MSIJ, Executive Secretary, for organizing the seminar to the minutest details, with care and diligence. We found the theme relevant, inspiring and challenging for our ministry in our Asian context.

Objectives

The objectives of the seminar were:

1. To discuss and reflect deeply on the Ministry and Mission of the Bishop as the Shepherd of his flock, with the collaboration of priests.
2. To enhance his awareness of his own sanctity in order to be an example to his priests and the faithful of his diocese.
3. To help reflect deeply on his significant role as the Father, Brother and Friend of his priests as Servant Leader in Christ.

Challenges

During the seminar the following challenges and difficulties in the episcopal ministry were identified: pressure of work, loneliness, and inadequate material and non-material resources.

The tension between educated-alert laity vis-à-vis the less talented/educated clergy in some areas; the challenge of science and technology; inability to cope with the rapid pace of modern life.

The demands of inter-religious dialogue, fundamentalism, terrorism, etc. There are also difficulties met in efforts towards inculturation: local culture vis-à-vis monoculture/westernization, impact of materialism, consumerism, hedonism, ecology, media, hunger, poverty, and disease.

The Ministry of the Bishop

Anointed and appointed to serve and build up the Kingdom of God for the salvation of all, the Bishop's ministry should be in accord with the mind and heart of Mother Church. As minister of the Church, the bishop has his sacred authority,

received in the sacrament of the Holy Orders as a gift of grace, the Bishop is given the triple power to teach, sanctify and govern the diocese.

The bishop is to promote unity and equality in the diocese. In virtue of the ordination, the priests are the closest co-operators of the bishop in the diocese. There is a unique bond of communion between the bishop and his priests. In view of the vast challenges and tasks of the ministry, compounded by the complexities of modern society in the process of globalization, it is all the more necessary for the bishop to be a father, brother and friend to his priests.

The examples of our Popes tell us that particularly in the present times, we need to be alert, vigilant and effective in the exercise of our authority. The bishop in his authority will become authoritative if he is authentic, credible, human and humane, holy and competent, keeping before him the model of the Good Shepherd who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45).

For an effective and efficient administration of the diocese, in particular in carrying out the work of evangelization in the diocese, it is ideal that the bishop have a good personal and working relationship with his collaborators, the priests. This relationship is best manifested in the bishop being a “father, brother and friend” to his priests. If this kind of relationship is nourished and sustained, not only is unity (sense of communion) maintained and the demands of work in the apostolate lightened, but it becomes in itself a means of evangelization, then the gospel is actually preached by such living witness.

Along with the faith-understanding, the concept of the identity of the bishop is shaped by our own perception conditioned by our specific cultures. This challenges us to purify and renew our understanding of the identity of the bishop. A culturally conditioned understanding of the bishop chiefly as an authority figure of power and honor can make it difficult for us to be father, brother and friend to our priests.

Though our understanding of Episcopal authority can rightly be inculturated, it should be shaped by the triple ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing in imitation of the Good Shepherd. There are encouraging scenarios as well. The Asian culture which accords respect to elders and those in positions of authority, far from alienating the bishop from his people, serves to foster an atmosphere of mutual affection and congeniality.

Reflections and Insights

The bishop can truly be *Father, Brother and Friend* to his priests if he keeps his gaze ever fixed on Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep, loves them, is dedicated to them, and sacrifices himself for them in order to impart the fullness of life to them.

We thank and praise God for the priests in our dioceses. We joyfully appreciate the sacrifices, the dedication, and the faithfulness of our priests. The Church in Asia is what it is because of the generous and dedicated ministry of our priests.

We note, however, with sadness in our hearts that in spite of the generous love of God who calls the priests to the ministry of being preachers of the Word, celebrants of the sacraments and leaders of the community, a ministry to which the priests have freely and readily committed themselves, there are some of our brother priests who for various reasons feel they are the least, lost and last. As a good shepherd the bishop is called to reach out to these fellow workers in the diocese with special concern and love.

Accordingly, the bishop is to constantly accompany his priests in their moments of joy and sorrow as they strive to fulfill their mission.

The bishop will be careful and earnest to ensure that these priests are totally integrated into the *presbyterium* (priestly communion in the diocese). As a result, these suffering fellow-ministers will be able to make their full contribution to the building up of the community entrusted to them. In truth, no priest should be the least, lost and last. The bishop certainly has a decisive role to play in this important task.

Realizations

Though we need offices, institutions and structures, the diocese is meant to be a family. Therefore, a climate of trust, affection and informality should be sustained in the diocese. This will help to eliminate feelings of fear or being threatened. For making pastoral plans, policies and decisions, a process of interaction, dialogue and consultation should be the normal *modus procedendi*.

The bishop should, in love and concern for the priests and his faithful, guide and correct his priests when necessary. This can be done through spiritual direction, counseling, refresher courses, or alternative assignments.

Particularly in our Asian culture, the bishop should be a spiritual leader and teacher after the example of Jesus Christ. He should also be a man of prayer.

The bishop should be compassionate towards the priests especially in times of difficulties and crisis.

Based on the insights gained from the seminar, *we realize* that as part of our on-going formation (*Pastores Gregis*, n. 24):

1. We are to have a welcoming attitude and have to be hospitable.
2. We are to delegate our priests to do some of our functions.
3. We are to be transparent especially with regard to temporal matters.

4. If we have difficulties with our priests, we are to examine ourselves first rather than blame the priests.
 5. We are to be visible and available in the diocese.
 6. We are not to be too conscious of honorific titles.
 7. We are to pray for our priests and their families.
 8. We are to make it a point to remember important events in our priests' lives.
 9. We are to be in regular contact with our seminarians in order to know their dispositions towards the priestly vocation.
 10. We are to have regular meetings with the young priests to encourage them in their ministry.
 11. We are to lead a simple life.
 12. We are to be imbued with the spirit of humility.
 13. We are to attend courses on handling relationships, problems and conflicts in the diocese, in particular, with regard to priests.
 14. We are to adopt measures to help priests overcome difficulties through ongoing formation programs such as retreats and recollections, renewal courses, study leave, provision of assistance for their needs, and change of environment for priests with problems.
 15. We are to consider initiating an exchange program with other dioceses which will allow our priests to work in other dioceses where they could rediscover themselves and be provided with the opportunity to work with people without preconceived bias and prejudice.
4. All this will enable us bishops to be *Father, Brother and Friend* to our priests and thus, as explained by Blessed Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Gregis* (2003), emerge as a servant of the gospel for the hope of the world.