

FINAL STATEMENT OF THE SEMINAR ON

‘Paradigm Shift in the Mission and Ministry of the Priest in Asia’

Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

May 10-15, 2010

1. Introduction

We, 90 priests along with 6 Archbishops/Bishops from 10 countries, India, Indonesia, Macau, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, gathered together for a Seminar titled ‘*Paradigm Shift in the Mission and Ministry of the Priest in Asia*’ from May 10-15, 2010 at the Suvarnabhumi Campus of the Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand. It was indeed a time of grace for us to live together, pray together, sing and worship together and share with each other our priestly joys and hopes with a deep sense of priestly solidarity.

This Seminar was a gift to us by the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) through its Office of the Clergy (FABC-OC) for organizing this Seminar in this Year for Priests. The various resource persons helped us to become aware of our priestly calling as *alter Christus*, ‘another Christ’ in the authentic and true sense of the word and challenged us to align ourselves to *the paradigm* of Christ.

2. The Challenges to Priestly Life and Ministry Today

In a world of globalization and secularization, affecting also Asia, the priest in Asia is challenged at various levels in his life and ministry. The history of priestly identity, life and ministry shows that at various times in the past, it has taken on various identities, touching on the priestly (cultic), prophetic and the kingly identity of priestly life and ministry. From a predominantly cultic identity of the past, it has taken, at other time, a prophetic identity or a kingly identity due to the self-image of a priest in a particular situation based on his image of Jesus Christ, the High Priest and the model of priesthood, a view of Jesus as the preacher of the Kingdom, or as a sacrificial and saving victim of the Paschal Mystery or of a Jesus as the Good Shepherd who loves and serves the flock and who offers his very life for them.

Asia is no exception to this global phenomenon. Asia is a multi-religious, multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-faceted reality of our enormous continent of Asia. While on the one hand the countries of Asia are developing at a terrific speed, on the other hand the gap between the rich and the poor is ever more widening, the corruption is eating into the very fabric of our society, sexual exploitation, communalism, human trafficking, political unrest, civil wars and a frightful thirst for profit and money is raising the spectrum of a terrible catastrophe in our families, societies and countries. In such an Asia, many a priest is wondering whether he and his ministry, especially among our young people who are asking fundamental and life-affecting questions, are still relevant, meaningful and attractive to the people of our age.

The *prophetic* role of the priest in such a globalized world is challenged by a rejection of the Word of God and God’s story in the scriptures and tradition, by post-modernity relativizing the truth in a ‘supermarket religion’, by a demise of the absolute leading to a dichotomy between faith and life. The challenge to the *priestly* role of the priest is seen in a diminishing awareness of the sacred as a result of secularism and due to fast changing cultural factors. The

challenge to the *kingly* (shepherding) role of the priest is seen in a refusal to listen and dialogue, in a failure to enable and empower participatory leadership among the peoples. There is then the challenge to the *spiritual renewal* and *credibility* of a priest in a world devoid of respect for a life that is “holy and acceptable sacrifice” to God (Eph. 5, 2).

3. The Priest as the Sacrament of Christ, the Priest

Jesus Christ is the High Priest *par excellence* as presented in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb.5, 1-10). Our priesthood is a grace to participate in His priesthood. In baptism Christians become members of the Body of Christ, ...”like living stones....built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt. 2, 5). In some way therefore, one can say that the Church is to have no priest other than Jesus Christ. Hence, priests through the Sacrament of Orders are ordained to live out the very priesthood of Christ, to act in the person of Christ, the Head, so as to build up primarily the Body, the Church. In this understanding of Jesus’ own priesthood and our participation in His priesthood, we are inspired to reclaim the authentic understanding of our ministerial priesthood as a Sacrament of the High Priesthood of Christ Himself.

In such a vision, priests are called to act in the name and person of Christ (*agere in persona Christi*). Jesus assures us, “whoever welcomes you, welcomes me and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me” (Mt. 10, 40), for, “it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you” (Mt. 10, 20). Hence, the life and ministry of their priests, our people, the people of Asia, need to see and experience once again a renewed fire of faith, religion and Church and something very beautiful with which to fall in love and a person worth living and dying for, Him and not us!

4. Two Authentic Examples of Priestly Life and Ministry: St. John Mary Vianney and Blessed Joseph Vaz

Our reflection on the various models of priestly spirituality led us to two simple priests and missionaries whose life and work have got a renewed memory and focus in our times: St. John Mary Vianney, Patron of Pastors, and Blessed Joseph Vaz, the Apostle of Sri Lanka. They were truly men of God, who lived for the Lord, worked for the Lord and died for the Lord in and through their very pastoral life and ministry spent in the service of the people entrusted to their care.

St. John Mary Vianney, the Cure’ of Ars, was a simple man in his call to be a priest of Jesus with a single-minded devotion to his people. Sent to a tiny village called Ars in France to minister to about 250 souls, who had become cold in faith, this humble priest of Jesus Christ, with only God as his weapon and support, transformed his little flock and made them the real ‘flock of Christ’. Likewise Blessed Joseph Vaz, Apostle of Sri Lanka, was another model of a priest, who taught us through his life that a single-minded attachment to the Lord and to the priestly call, one can work miracles that seem impossible. At a time when the Catholic faith was forbidden to be lived in the open, this son of Goa in India took upon himself, after prayer and fasting, the responsibility to keep the flame of faith burning in the land of Sri Lanka. Long forgotten in Church history, this Apostle of Sri Lanka, was recognized, in God’s providence, for his heroism and missionary zeal that providence that he was beatified in our living memory as a true Asian missionary and model of a priest.

These two holy priests, one a pastor while the other a missionary; teach us that an authentic priestly ministry is still possible in the Asia of today. We became aware of the promise of long

ago by God; “I will give you shepherds after my own heart” (Jer. 3, 15) is and will indeed be realized by God in his Church in Asia. Not without reason that St. Paul proclaimed unhesitatingly that “we are Christ’s co-workers” (2 Cor. 6, 1). As Jesus could describe the reality of his own ministry by saying that “the Father works and I also work” (Jn. 5, 17), so too we, priests of Asia, can say in humble confidence: ‘Jesus works and we also work’. Such is the sublime nature of our calling as co-workers of Jesus Christ himself.

5. A Call to Renewal of Pastoral Charity

a. Priest as Servant-Leader

Priests are called to be servant-leaders. The qualities of a servant-leader, based on the scriptures, are a faithful, attentive, obedient, devoted, trouble-enduring, ready-to-serve and claim-nothing-in-return service of our people. Servant-leaders are called to provide a vision, to inspire others, to be creative, to acquire competence to serve better, to pay attention to team building and to reach out to the weak and the lost. The qualities a servant-leader in Asia must acquire are simplicity in life style, availability to people in times of sorrows and difficulties, openness to the Spirit, a burning loving heart and total dedication to serve God and His people. In addition he is also required to learn communication skills, the ability to use wisely modern means of communication, the ability to address different issues, to speak the truth, to learn team building and empowering skills, especially of those who are weak, helpless, poor and marginalized.

b. Wholeness as Holiness

As we reflected further on our life and ministry, we realized that all these challenges are not possible to be faced if a priest lacks the wholeness of his life. We realized that to be effective priests of Asia, we need to be, first and above all, fully human, wholesome and holistic in our life. Only a healthy humanity can give rise to a healthy spirituality. A priest must grow continuously to become a humanly and spiritually good priest. The call to priesthood is, in the final analysis, the work of Divine Grace but it necessarily requires our full and authentic human cooperation as late Pope John Paul II said in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “It is important that the priest should mould his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus” (PDV 43).

In this vision, priesthood is a call, not a career, a redefinition of self and not just a new ministry, a way of life and not just a job, a state of being and not just a function, a permanent lifelong commitment and not a temporary style of service, in the final analysis, an identity and not just a role. Priests are called to become integral, mature in their sexuality, convinced and happy as celibates, who steadfastly grow in healthy and altruistic relationships. Only this way, aided by regular prayer and a deep faith, can we truly live and be priests of Asia today.

We also rediscovered in this Seminar a deeper conviction that priests are called to live as a true *Presbyterium*, as a source of true sacramental brotherhood seeking moments to find lasting friendships, managing our resources for the building of the Kingdom, recognizing diverse talents for the service of the Church and experiencing a synergy in a living dialogue with the society and its environment in the vast and beautiful continent of Asia.

6. Our Recommendations

- 1) We need to train priests towards a wholeness of life

- 2) We need to strengthen the *Presbyterium* to make it more effective and brotherly
- 3) We need to learn human skills, especially communication skills, to face difficult human situations in our ministry
- 4) We need to be men of prayer, close to Christ with God's work as our priority
- 5) We need to promote spiritual companionship through Recollections, Retreats, Spiritual Exercises and Cenacles
- 6) We need a culture of sharing resources and talents to support each other's ministry
- 7) We need sincere, supportive and fraternal correction among the priests
- 8) We need to promote true brotherhood, especially in times of difficulties, sickness, loneliness and personal tragedies among priests
- 9) We need to appreciate each other in life and ministry
- 10) We need to promote participatory decision-making in our dioceses
- 11) We need to revamp the seminary formation for the future priests
- 12) We need to care specially the young people in our parishes and communities
- 13) We need to strive for priestly vocations among our young people
- 14) We need to care for different age groups among the priests for solidarity and interaction
- 15) We need to have more regular meetings, diocesan and zonal, to build up our priestly fraternity

7. Conclusion: a Paradigm Shift to the authentic sources of Priesthood

As we ended our *Seminar*, we experienced a renewed understanding of our own priesthood, a renewed vision of our discipleship, a deeper awareness of our priestly ministry, a deeper felt-need to be wholesome human persons so that we can become truly holy priests in the various Churches of Asia. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Likewise, with him as our Lord, Master, Model, Guide and Friend, we are called to be the same Christ-like priests yesterday, today and tomorrow. Times may change, situations may change, people may change, knowledge and formation may change, but the promise of the Lord that he would be with us until the end of ages will never change (Mt. 28, 20).

Our reflections and all that we learnt through these days of living together and listening to one another made us convinced more than ever before that Jesus' teaching on discipleship and of Christ as the High Priest is and will always remain the paradigm of priestly life and ministry for ever. We are called to be the sacrament of Jesus the High priest in our own life and ministry. This is our calling today, in our Churches and communities, in our institutions and places of work, in our everyday tasks and responsibilities and in our very existence as priests of Asia. May we be so today and for the rest of our lives through the intercession of St. John Mary Vianney and Blessed Joseph Vaz, our models, and in a special way of Mother Mary, the Mother of Priests.