

VOCATION IN ASIA: FORMATION TO RADICALITY

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A Cry for Help from Asia to Asians

“Do you find it meaningful for Asian countries to form missionaries for other Asian countries?” As one of the first questions we addressed, this question was really a plaintive cry for help, a cry from Asians to fellow Asians.

We had come to Thailand from different parts of Asia¹ to pray, reflect, and share with one another on the challenges that vocations to priestly and religious life in Asia confront. The question posed to us underlines one of the major aspects of the Asian context of vocation – the need for missionaries in many countries of Asia, especially in regions that enjoy great economic development and advanced scientific technology. This shortage of priests seems to contradict the global statistics. For, indeed, in contrast to other continents suffering a general decline in vocations, Asia together with Africa represents a fertile seedbed of vocations. In 26 years, from 1978 to 2004, candidates to the priesthood in Asia rose in number by 153.28% from 11,536 to 29,220².

Catholics in our vast continent of Asia are only 3% of the total population. We are but a tiny minority, truly a small flock of the

¹ About 150 bishops, clergy, religious sisters and brothers, and lay faithful from 16 countries attended the First Asian Vocation Symposium.

² From 1978 to 2004 the number of priests in Asia increased by 74% from 27,700 to 48,000 priests. At the same time the number of Religious Brothers increased by 38.72% from 6,508 to 9,205. The number of Professed Women Religious likewise increased by 64.49% from 91,585 to 150,736 [See *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* of 2004 as reported by L'Osservatore Romano, Weekly Edition in English, 14 July 2004, p. 5].

Lord. Hence the words of Jesus continue to challenge us: “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, so ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers to his harvest” (Mt. 9:37).

This challenge takes on greater significance when we consider major dimensions of the Asian context that impact heavily on families and on vocations. Among these are massive poverty, a multicultural and multi-religious environment frequently in tension and even conflict, and the certain but subtle intrusion of an alien materialist and secular culture into the deeply religious cultures of Asia. Such an emerging global culture fosters individualism, self-assertion, and ambitioning for higher social status while perpetuating cultural-religious biases and prejudices.

In this social context the values of the Gospel, often radically counter cultural, have to be inculcated into the hearts and minds of those whom God calls to the priesthood and to the religious life.

Vocation: God’s Call to Radical Following of Christ

Vocation is fundamentally the following of Jesus in his radical way of life unto the Cross, in his total self-abnegation and self-sacrifice – in the use of freedom that is totally *for the other* – which is nothing else than pure *self-giving love*³.

For this reason vocational discernment and formation would have to center on the potential of the individual to respond honestly and generously to the call to radicality, to what Jesus has himself described as non-conformity to the values of this world (see Jn. 17:11, 16). We should dream not so much for the greatest number of vocations, but for suitable persons, no matter how few, who can be a creative minority genuinely responding to the call to radicality and sacrifice. By so doing they assume a lifestyle so totally free, so emptied of worldly attachments, *because so totally enamored by the Lord Jesus*.

In a very real sense, the call to radicality and sacrifice is – to use a phrase that might appeal to young men and women -- a call to “adventures in freedom to do the impossible” in the manner of Jesus. At the heart of

³ See Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, nos.6 and 12.

every vocation are the Gospel values of self-emptying, of loving service, of humility and simplicity, of willingness to suffer for the sake of the Lord. Today these are qualities that are not appreciated or valued by the individualist, competitive and assertive post-modern spirit. Indeed, “Many are called but few are chosen” (Mt. 22:14).

The Family – Seedbed of Vocation

It is within the heart of the family that the call to a radical following of Jesus is frequently heard. There the mystery of vocation, of God-calling-individuals for consecration and mission, is born, fostered and encouraged, nourished and guided. Within the family values and motivations begin to be formed. Vocation begins to be imbued with a deep Christian identity and mission. In the family the Kingdom-of-God-orientation of moral character starts. In sum the quality of family life, of relationships within the family, either nourishes and fosters vocation or weakens and destroys it.

For this reason the family as a “domestic church” is to be taken seriously and *become what it is*. Where lay people, especially families, are faithful and active regarding their responsibilities, vocations would flourish, as attested by the history of the Church in Korea.

If according to the 8th Plenary Assembly of the FABC, the family is to be the “focal point of evangelization,” so the family in Asia has to be the “focal seedbed of vocation.”

Discernment and Screening of Vocation

In the light of all the above, wise and prudent vocational recruitment, discernment and formation are absolutely necessary⁴. This would mean, as the Church has often encouraged, making proper use of medical and psychological tools in the screening of candidates to the priestly and religious life. It is, of course, imperative that psychological assistance has to be based on a Christian anthropology that is consonant with Church teachings.

⁴ Here the general guidelines given by various Church documents would be necessary. See for instance, *Pastores Dabo Vobis, Presbyterorum Ordinis, The Directory of the Life and Ministry of Priests, Perfectae Caritatis, Renovacionis Causam, Evangelica Testificatio, Vita Consecrata*.

Screening should involve formal psychological testing, in depth-interview based on the behavioral patterns of the candidate, a review of the candidate's personal history, family background and relationships, even an initial exploration of conscious and unconscious motivations, etc.

The purpose of these screening procedures is to ascertain as far as possible the candidate's functional ability, availability for formation and suitability for priestly and religious life. Screening procedures are meant to verify the *capabilities* of the candidate to be humanly healthy, psychologically whole and be committed to Christian discipleship. Candidates are not expected to be completely mature at the beginning of their formation. This is a demand expected of the entire process of priestly and religious formation, initial and on-going.

Formation to Maturity and Radicality in Christ

In our reflection and sharing, we focused on contextualized and holistic formation of vocation. In their own cultural matrix, candidates to the priesthood and to religious life are to be formed integrally, with all the aspects of formation, e.g., human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, weaving in and out of each other, flowing from and building on each other.

Integration of all the aspects in a continuum of formation from one stage to the next prevents disintegration or compartmentalism and reductionism. Compartmentalizing the different aspects of formation could result in a dichotomous priestly or religious life, while excessively emphasizing any one aspect could lead to a neglect of the others. All these could result in a deformed vocation with disastrous results to self and to mission.

We believe that the overarching goal of vocation formation is the integral maturity of a candidate formed in the pattern of Christ's own authentic humanity so that the candidate might participate in Christ's mission of salvation through self-sacrificing love. Integral human formation necessarily involves self-transcendence and mission. This apostolic and

pastoral goal, including *missio ad exteros*⁵ is a fundamental dimension of vocation and its formation.

For the formation process the community-context – a context of *communion* - is imperative. That is why the Eucharist, the builder of communion is central to formation. At the same time the community-context requires the collaborative effort of the whole community of formators, of Bishops and Superiors, Priests and Religious, families and parents, communities of the poor where candidates have pastoral experiences.

Above all there is the active enlivening, integrating and uniting work of the Holy Spirit, the giver of charisms and vocations. It is the Holy Spirit as the principal formator who enables all other formators to help form candidates to the priesthood and religious life not simply by teaching and exhortation but by the *sine qua non* of human formation -- the witness of authentic discipleship, of radicality and sacrifice.

Recommendations

In the light of the above reflections, we conclude with the following recommendations:

1. That national mission sending societies in Asia as well as missionary religious societies of priests respond to the dearth of priests in certain areas of Asia and plan a missionary training program with the receiving countries for this purpose;
2. That all seminaries and religious houses of formation explicitly foster and cultivate (e.g., through a program of mission study, regular prayer for the missions, mission awareness days/month) a deep missionary consciousness among all candidates so as to prepare them better for ministry;
3. That diocesan seminaries and religious houses of formation regularly collaborate in vocation awareness programs for young people in parish and school settings;

⁵ see John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 44.

4. That vocation directors regularly visit the families of candidates to the priesthood or religious life not only to become familiar with the candidates' family background but also to make the family aware of the mystery of vocation and the necessity of encouragement and support;
5. That the diocesan/parish vocation ministry and family-related lay people's organizations and movements, such as Serra International, Couples for Christ, Marriage Encounter Movement, collaborate with the catechetical and family ministry of the diocese/parish in forming the family as a seedbed of vocation through such means as:
 - family renewal programs, family catechesis
 - family prayer groups, family Masses, para-liturgies and rituals
 - training altar servers
 - families-helping-families
 - Basic Ecclesial Community building
 - Media education
 - Bible sharing and study for lay people
 - Organization of youth groups
6. That formation, in the light of an emerging post-modern culture, emphasize through teaching, spiritual direction, and pastoral exposure the values of zeal, preferential option for the poor, simplicity of life and joyful personal sacrifice in serving the people in the pattern of Christ;
7. That a more systematic and culturally-sensitive program for psycho-sexual maturity and integration be drawn up in seminaries and houses of formation;
8. That formators take psychological testing so as to accompany candidates more effectively and more patiently, with greater pastoral charity.
9. That diocesan and parish pastoral programs, while acknowledging the key role of the laity in promoting priestly and religious vocations, ensure their active participation in the whole process of recruitment, discernment, and formation.