

CONSULTATION ON CREATIVE MODELS OF EVANGELISATION IN ASIA

Hua Hin, Thailand, 8th – 12th July 2008

Inspired by the challenge of John Paul II that “the great question now facing the church in Asia is *how to share* with our Asian brothers and sisters what we treasure, the gift containing all gifts, namely the Good News of Jesus Christ”, and that “the church ... must be open to *new and surprising ways* in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia” (EA 19, 20), the FABC Office of Evangelisation gathered at Hua Hin, Thailand, (8th – 12th July, 2008) 36 bishops, sisters, laypeople and priests from a wide variety of Asian countries to exchange experiences on creative models of evangelisation in Asia. We witnessed the power of the Spirit generating fresh enthusiasm in us for proclaiming the Good News, creating a new bond of fellowship in mission, and renewing our commitment to evangelisation. In an atmosphere of prayer and fellowship, we strove to discern through sharing experiences of *missio ad gentes* the paths of evangelisation opening up before us that we might intensify such mission ventures.

Opening Horizons

“Put out into the deep ...” (Lk 5:4)

In his address Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, Apostolic Nuncio to Thailand, urged us to come face to face with Christ, and with Christ, readily opt for the poor in dialogue with cultures and faith traditions, and in this way give a witness that is authentically Asian. Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil, SBD, Chair of the FABC Office of Evangelisation, in his keynote presentation, appealed to us to search for new ways of evangelisation. He suggested that we learn from business ingenuity while living out the truth in love.

Stories to Inspire

“Know this: the kingdom of God has come near to you.” (Lk 10:11)

For three days we listened to 14 stories relating how barriers are being broken down and boundaries crossed in some of the most difficult and diverse parts of the continent. In Japan where the church is numerically minute dioceses can, nevertheless, decide to open up in service to the wider community in a lay-inspired and dynamic witnessing of faith in daily life. In Varanasi, India, at the spiritual heart of Hinduism, the phenomenon of the Khrist Bhakta (Devotees of Christ) movement is drawing thousands of people of other faiths to a culture of prayer and community, to a liberating faith in Jesus Christ. In Pakistan where religious boundaries seem impervious, ongoing outreach is still able to spread the faith among tribals in Sindh Province. In Taiwan traditional Catholic institutions are reaching out in innovative ways to fellow co-workers, students, families and members of the community from other religions by inviting them to meet Jesus Christ by means of church tours, holiday celebrations, advertising campaigns and cultural events. Asian missionaries in remoter parts of Cambodia have opened themselves up to the Word who enables them to live with the people in their utter simplicity. We were inspired by the systematically planned and lay-led church growth in Arunchal Pradesh, Northeast

India, for over three decades and the church's increasing influence on society. It was heartening to note that the Bible Schools have played a significant role in rooting the faith in the Word of God. We were encouraged by the minuscule presence of Christians in Muslim Uzbekistan who engage in inter-faith prayer and dialogue at the grassroots. We were delighted to hear how thousands of youth are returning to an active faith and who then evangelise other young people who uncover acceptance, love and understanding in the international Jesus Youth movement. We noted how the sacrament-centred mission programme of the Syro-Malabar Church in Chanda, India, was family-based. We heard how the lay-run Irish School of Evangelisation, one of an international network, announces the kerygma in direct and lively fashion in their biblical retreats and courses. We listened in solidarity to Indonesia where mission is reconciling antagonistic ethnic and religious groups through common witness at the very roots of people's life. We were awed to see how the seven thousand Catholics of Nepal are now rooting their church in local culture and open in dialogue with their 27 million Hindu and Buddhist compatriots. We were strengthened by the example of youth groups in Myanmar who are evangelising, like the original disciples, by walking from village to village. And we came face to face with Jesus of the gospels as we heard how the Thai Missionary Society has committed itself to the least and the lost among tribals and to a healing ministry with those living with HIV/AIDS in urban slums. All this awakened us to the missionary zeal at work in the Church and to the underlying kenotic spirituality that is indispensable for our evangelising mission.

Crossing Boundaries

"I must proclaim the good news of God's reign to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." (Lk.4:43)

It was, perhaps, not so much the *how* in the stories that was "new and surprising" as to the fact that bridges are being built and boundaries crossed in the most unlikely and unfriendly of places. However few the numbers and harsh the outside pressures, *missio ad gentes* is taking place. Such mission in "bold humility" is the fruit of evangelisers of past generations. As border crossing entails taking risks and raises concerns regarding syncretism, it needs both the understanding and support of church leadership today.

No story reduced the "how" of mission to a matter of skill or technique, but always highlighted the heart of mission: compassionate loving relationships that nurture trust. We noted that while most priests are busy with their parishioners, most of the laity's daily contacts are with neighbours and colleagues of the majority faith tradition. It is, therefore, vital to acknowledge and support the mission of the laity, the primary witnesses of Christ in society. Jesus and his proclamation of God's Reign and healing ministry are at the heart of mission. We baptise in order that the baptised embark on mission; the church is for the sake of mission rather than mission for the sake of the church.

A personal faith in Jesus enlivens, empowers, liberates and heals. Faith flourishes in an open community rooted in the Word of God where deep personal faith accompanies a sensitive social conscience, contemplation informs action, prayer attends social justice and personal and societal healing go together.

Challenging Situations

“Take courage; I have conquered the world!” (Jn 16:33)

As in apostolic times, mission today is being carried out in very challenging situations. In countries such as Uzbekistan no public witness is allowed, while other countries have restrictive laws. Many of our nations consist of hundreds of ethnic groups which makes for fragile social cohesion. Rapid social change has led to a hardening of religious and ethnic boundaries and to fanaticism that triggers inter-communal strife. Many Christians are leaving their homogeneous village culture to find work in the cities, often as cheap labour to international conglomerates; uprooted from their village culture, many discard large, anonymous parishes to embrace the warm fellowship of Pentecostal communities.

These challenging situations highlight our internal weaknesses. We are a highly institutionalised church in comparison with the flexibility of some evangelicals and Pentecostals. Most of our “mission personnel” are in fact fully engaged in pastoral work among fellow Catholics. We are not mobilising the laity who are our primary evangelical resource. In many places the biblical apostolate is still in its infancy. Our liturgical celebrations, in particular the Eucharist, are not joyful, Spirit-filled experiences. Our religiosity is often divorced from life and as minorities we tend to ignore the outside world. Church documents, including statements from the FABC, are rarely used as guides for thought and action. We seem too busy with time bound programmes to listen to the will of God as expressed in the scriptures and in our contemporary context. Formation in the faith can easily become a matter of formalities which substitute for depth.

Boundless Opportunities

And yet never before have so many possibilities been available to us. We can network almost instantaneously. Our schools and social institutions have a solid reputation. New Movements are full of dynamism; the laity has immense experience and alternative ministries are mushrooming. We can be inspired by the past. Strong in faith we can be happy without succumbing to consumerism. In Jesus we can reconcile conflict situations without any felt need to “win”. We can accept apparent failure knowing that it is not the last word for we are an Easter people. We have a newfound ability to stretch and adapt our Catholic practices and rites according to the rhythm of Asian cultures. As small minorities we can nourish our faith in family networks, Small Christian Communities and New Movements where prayer and Bible sharing have become central.

Disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis and cyclones bring us close to the people in compassionate service. The urgency of global warming urges us to live out environmental concern together with the majority community. Even ethnic tensions open up opportunities for conflict transformation and the building of inter-communal trust. Rooted in the life of the local community we can give practical witness as people confront crises in their personal and family life. Where we build trust and acceptance our churches, shrines and retreat centres are open to all. We also often pray together with adherents of other faith traditions. Many opportunities remain among indigenous peoples, if we willingly live close to them while patiently awaiting openings for the Gospel.

Urgent Responses

“I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full.” (Jn 10:10)

Our sharing brought out many insights. As in biblical times, today mission again emanates from a position of weakness, not of power. We see how persecution and obstacles imposed by governments prompt new evangelising ventures and directions. We see the importance of personalising the faith of people and for the need to focus upon prayer and God-experience. We acknowledge that we evangelise always as guests and that there is no evangelisation without a deep appreciation of the language and culture of the people, without understanding the collective psyche, religious earnestness and quest for harmony that prevail among our Asian brothers and sisters. We feel the need for more Asian missionaries sensitive to Asian cultures. We also see the importance of first investing in people rather than technology. While we must be professional, attitudes are just as important. We are aware of how indigenous people are open to the Gospel. We see the necessity of Small Christian Communities and New Movements as springboards for mission.

In response to these insights, we must open up our hearts to allow the Holy Spirit to enter. We discern the will of God through analysing the signs of the time in this fast-changing continent. We need to open more Bible schools which train evangelisers sensitive to Asian realities. Our encounter with the Lord in Word and Eucharist is source of life and mission. And so, we need to link our sacramental celebrations with similar rituals in the majority religious cultures, and involve youth in lively, powerful celebrations. Creative evangelisation programmes must be in all seminary, catechetical and pastoral programmes, highlighting the evangelising role of youth and children. Priority must be given to the training of lay evangelists for the front line of creative mission; they need to be empowered to work freely, each with her/his own charism. We can make increasing use of cyber media, particularly interactive programmes where youth and children can “chat” with the evangeliser as an equal. We need to train evangelists in sign language to work with the deaf. Networking is vital particularly where the church is miniscule. We need a central data-pool of basic information on evangelistic initiatives for the whole of Asia. Many mission models already exist; we need to enhance and more fully utilize them and so intensify our present work in the light of *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999) and the 2006 Asian Mission Congress.

We realize that in our divided world we should work ecumenically with members of other churches and inter-religiously with adherents of other faith traditions in view of bringing about harmony, peace and justice among people in our continent.

Conclusion

“The love of Christ urges us on.” (2 Cor 5:14)

In this Pauline year we ask for the grace to make the apostle’s words our own: “... *in everything we prove ourselves authentic servants of God; by resolute perseverance in times of hardships, difficulties and distress ... unknown and yet we are acknowledged;*

dying, and yet here we are alive ... in pain yet always full of joy; poor and yet making many people rich; having nothing, and yet owning everything.”(2 Cor 6:4-10 passim).

Consultation Participants