

## SYMPOSIUM ON “EVANGELIZATION IN THE LIGHT OF *ECCLESIA IN ASIA*”

### *Statement of the Symposium:*

#### **Introduction**

1. Four years after the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops and three years after Pope John Paul II issued his Post-synodal Exhortation we have come together from different parts of Asia to reflect on Evangelization in the Light of *Ecclesia in Asia*.<sup>1</sup>
2. In our sharing of pastoral experiences and reflection, we have truly felt the grace of the Holy Spirit calling us to a renewed commitment to the mission of evangelization. The words of Jesus at our opening Eucharistic Celebration stirred our hearts: “I must preach the Good News about the Kingdom of God in other towns also, because that is what God sent me to do” (Lk. 4:40).

These are the words that Jesus told the people who wanted him to stay on in

Capernaum. He had spent his time proclaiming the reign of God to them, curing the sick, and expelling demons who proclaimed him Son of God. These were signs that, indeed, the power of God’s reign had irrupted in his own humanity into our space and time. And his mission was to proclaim the Good News to everyone.

3. Today the Good News is being communicated in an environment more challenging and sometimes more open than in the past. A great religious revivalism, a sign of an even greater thirst for the divine, is taking place in various parts of Asia, Hinduism in India, Islam in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other Islamic countries. Economic crisis is on-going in Southeast Asia. The communist ideological movement is undergoing a crisis of relevance, and in many Asian countries there are ethnic, religious, and political tensions. To these situations the Word of God is relevant and in need of being listened to.

#### **Proclaiming and Sharing Jesus in Asia**

4. The Church in Asia is inspired by the Spirit to listen again and again to the Word incarnate in Jesus. We are impelled to proclaim the Good News of Jesus – *evangelium*. Deep in our hearts is the flame of the Word (cf. Jer. 20:9) and of our faith in and love of the eternal Word incarnate who is Jesus. We cannot hold this flame back. We have

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<sup>1</sup> About 50 lay people, priests, religious and Bishops from 17 countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, including a number from Rome and the United States participated in the Symposium.

to speak of Jesus to others, share him with others, love and serve others the way he did. As Church this is our identity, our reason for being, our inherent mission. We have to proclaim him as the Son of God, the unique Savior of the world, the One who beyond human dreams fulfills the deepest yearnings of the Asian heart. We are convinced that the Good News of Jesus that we bear is our most precious Gift to Asia. Jesus is infinitely more than just the meaning of all human existence, its sufferings, joys, and hopes. Indeed, to share him as gift is to help our brothers and sisters in Asia to respond to the perennial central concerns of humanity: sin, forgiveness, justice, truth, peace, freedom, integrity, love. But Jesus is even more. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn. 14:6). To share him with others is the ultimate reason for all our pastoral activity. This mission is a faith imperative. We shall do this in season and out of season as God wills (cf. 2 Tm. 4:2).

5. But let us present Christ as he really is. Let our hearers see Jesus as the Gospels portray him, his life, his words, his healings, his compassion and love, his acts of forgiveness, his dealings with others, the unique manner in which he gives up his life. We know that great persons of various religions who have read the Gospels have come to admire him and to regard him as a truly extraordinary human being who comes from God. There is no need to theologize about him in order to present him to others. The Gospels are enough. To convince the disciples of John the Baptist, Jesus simply said to them, “Come and see” (Jn. 1:39).

6. We are a small minority flock in Asia. Two millennia after the birth, work and death of Jesus on our continent, our smallness is truly humbling. Yet this reality keeps us in touch with our weakness, even our powerlessness. It reminds us that we are Gospel leaven in the gigantic dough of Asia and that we do share in the redemptive suffering of the One we proclaim, the crucified Christ, who is yet “the power and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23-24). We are convinced that the task of sharing Jesus with our brothers and sisters in Asia, though truly ours, is supremely God’s own task. We believe that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of evangelization and we are his instruments. We do not expect results as from human planning but after sowing the Word of God we only wait to reap in God’s own time. Everything is God’s own gift and grace after all and not the product of our human wisdom.

7. As we proclaim him to others we are aware of his presence among us, within us. Jesus is at the very center of our being and existence. In him we move and have our being. We believe in him as “the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” As Church we are his Body and He is the source of our life (Col. 1: 2). Because he promised, so we know that he is with us until the end of time (Mt. 28: 20). Therefore, we do not fear. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8: 31). Moreover, God has given us the Spirit “that does not make us timid” but fills us with power and love (see 2 Tm. 1:7).

### **A Progressive Proclamation**

8. But more than ever the social, political, cultural, and religious realities of Asia and its peoples make us realize how true it is that proclamation must be “joyful, patient, and progressive” (EA 2). We need to follow the pedagogy and revelation of God who in the Sacred Scriptures made use of the language and styles of thought of biblical peoples to gradually unfold the mystery of salvation in Jesus (see EA 20). This process

is nothing more than an Asian “evocative pedagogy” through concrete images and stories -- a method that deeply resonates with the Asian soul (*Loc. cit.*). Common wisdom might suggest a simple rule of thumb in evangelization: the manner and pace of evangelization must take seriously the concrete situation and culture, receptivity and ability of people to assimilate the mystery of our faith.

### ***Inculturation***

9. This fact already suggests to us the urgency of a broad yet profound inculturation of our faith, its proclamation and liturgical celebration. Inculturation, the Holy Father stated, is “the obligatory path for evangelizers in presenting the Christian faith and making it part of a people’s cultural heritage” (EA 21). Consequently our understanding of God, the human person, and world, our expressions of prayer and worship, our way of being and living as persons *of* God - our spirituality - as well as the formation of evangelizers would have to undergo the process of inculturation in accord with the way we as Asians think, value things and persons, relate with others and celebrate God and life. Finally, we should not forget that being rooted and immersed in local culture must necessarily influence the lifestyles of believers.

10. Inculturation is a journey of complementarity and harmony, where faith and its cultural expressions remain truly Christian while becoming truly Asian. It is in fact for us a matter of rediscovering and re-identifying with the “Asian roots of Christianity” (EA 4). When we do this we also realize that a mutual exchange of gifts, a cross-cultural sharing between faith and culture takes place. The integration of the two provides a new dimension to the Church’s catholicity or universality.

11. We do not wish here to say everything that has already been said by the Holy Father in *Redemptoris Missio* and *Ecclesia in Asia* about Inculturation and Dialogue. But we do wish to emphasize certain significant issues regarding these two central concerns.

12. We reiterate that inculturation is basically a community process, involving “the entire People of God” (EA 21). However, theologians and experts in the social sciences do play a great deal in the *what* and *how* of the process. Like the Synod Fathers in 1998 and the Holy Father in 1999 (see EA 22) we, therefore, encourage our Asian experts and theologians to continue their explorations in the area of Liturgy and in the “delicate work of developing an inculturated theology, especially in the area of Christology.... in faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Church’s Tradition, in sincere adherence to the Magisterium and with an awareness of pastoral realities (*Loc. cit.*; cf. *Propositio* 7; see also RM 54).

### ***Dialogue***

13. Concerning dialogue, we need to be always aware of the context of Asia, a world of great ethnicity, of ancient philosophies and religious traditions, of passionate and even violent political engagement. We are all co-pilgrims to the reign of God. Dialogue must, therefore, take place in such fields of human encounter as the political, economic, cultural and religious. It ranges from a simple dialogue of life and heart in grassroots communities to dialogue for mutual collaboration in human development, to the delicate professional dialogue in matters of faith.

14. Here we deal with dialogue at the level of faith. In many places in Asia we know that it is practically impossible, even forbidden, to proclaim Jesus explicitly. But we are convinced that the ways of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus are many “provided that the faith itself is respected in all its integrity in the process of appropriating and sharing it” (EA 23). All these approaches require a deep dialogue of the heart, a fundamental element in every serious and enduring human encounter. We are grateful to our Holy Father Pope John Paul II for stating that “*dialogue is a characteristic mode of the Church’s life in Asia*” (EA 3). It is, as he said, “an essential part of the Church’s mission because it has its origin in the Father’s loving dialogue of salvation with humanity through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit” (EA 29). Human dialogue, especially inter-religious, requires charity, honesty and sincerity, openness, respect for others, a sure and firm knowledge of one’s own beliefs and convictions, a willingness to listen, and humility (see also EA 30, 31). Taking all these into consideration, we do have to heed the words of St. Paul, a master of dialogue and inculturation, to “speak the truth in a spirit of love” (Eph. 4:15) just as Jesus spoke to the people of his time.
15. More people in Asia than is generally presumed seem to be open to the Gospel and are longing to know more about Christ. We need evangelizers who can patiently, discerningly and skillfully respond like Jesus to the needs of secret seekers such as Nicodemus (see Jn. 3), the needs of those who are not in touch with their deeper concerns but are honestly willing to be led by the Spirit into faith like the Samaritan woman at the well (see Jn. 4), or the needs of those who do have faith but do not have a religious understanding of it like the Roman centurion with his sick servant (Mt. 8:5-13). Contemplative depth in evangelizers has great relevance in relating to such seekers of faith.

#### ***Authentic Discipleship as Proclamation***

16. This interiority is one reason that again and again we were reminded at our Symposium how central and indispensable **the witness of life** is to true proclamation. In ordinary circumstances “the silent witness of life” (EA 23) is a clear and eloquent testimony to Christ. Even more powerfully is this so, when in many places in Asia “it remains the only way of proclaiming God’s Kingdom” (*Loc. cit.*).
17. The dialogue between the messenger of Jesus and the message of Jesus becomes communion when the message is transparent in the messenger’s life. This is *transparent discipleship*, a discipleship that truly overcomes the dichotomy, so tragically common, between faith and life, between the material and spiritual, between word and deed. It is the palpably God-ward life of the spiritual person that, without equivocation and conditionality, proclaims who Jesus is for the human condition. For ultimately what we communicate to others and share with others is not a theological understanding of the question “Who is Jesus?” but a profound heart-experience of who Jesus is in our personal lives. We who speak of Christ must embody in our lives the message that we proclaim (see EA 23). Is this not grounded in the apostolic witness itself about Jesus? “We write to you about the Word of life, which has existed from the very beginning. We have heard it, and we have seen it with our eyes; yes we have seen it, and our hands have touched it.... What we have seen and heard we announce to you

also, so that you will join with us in the fellowship that we have with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1: 1-3).

18. Discipleship to be transparent and to be effective proclamation has to be rooted constantly and firmly in Christ himself through prayer and contemplation, through sacramental encounter with Christ in the Church. We have to be more than professional evangelizers. We need to be men and women of God-experience, living icons of Christ’s love for people. We need to be utterly open to his Spirit who will lead us to communion with him. The contemplative quality of the Christian disciple-messenger resonates deeply with other Asians whose religious traditions are suffused with deep interiority.

### **Evangelization as Human Development.**

19. Authentic discipleship naturally flows into generous service of love for others. This is not foreign to evangelization. Evangelization has to be holistic and contextual. As Pope Paul VI has affirmed, evangelization calls for integral liberation, a liberation from sin most especially but also from everything else that oppresses the human person such as ignorance, sickness, and poverty. For this reason evangelization does not take place in a vacuum but interacts with the concrete context of Asia with its economic contradictions as well as its rich mosaic of varying religious traditions.

20. Therefore, we need to understand that the many forms of social service for human development that we as Church do with and for Asian peoples are integral to evangelization and are indispensable expressions of authentic discipleship. Forming a social conscience, denouncing injustices, collaborating with peoples of other religions in the work of justice, having a preferential option for the poor, caring for the integrity of the environment, caring for the sick, educating the youth, defending and promoting human rights, renewing social structures, etc. are integral dimensions of the proclamation of the Gospel. They transcend mere human philanthropic work, but only if they are grounded in and flow from our faith and love of the Lord. Social activism purely as a result of ideology to transform society that it may be more just and peaceful may be an admirable commitment but it falls short of the demands of Christian discipleship.

21. Asia being a continent of massive poverty, we emphasize most strongly that our social services must be imbued with a love of preference for the poor, the great majority of whom do not have any realistic access to social services. The socio-pastoral apostolate of the Church in Asia must reach out to them in a preferential way in the manner of Christ himself who lived with them and cared for them with special benevolent love.

22. We are greatly saddened then to observe the decline, albeit unintended, of the faith and contemplative dimension - God-ward dimension - of some of our social service institutions, particularly some of our educational and health institutions. Perhaps lured by competitiveness and the drive for excellence, good values in themselves, the faith-witness and missionary value of their services have perceptively dimmed as they gradually succumb to the market-driven economic system. This factor among others leads to uncaring impersonal relationships, elitism and a neglect of the poor and marginalized who should be the primary beneficiaries of the uniquely

Christian preferential option for the poor. A return to original goals of witnessing to Christ and announcing his message is sorely needed.

23. A materialist and secularist behavior, attitude, and orientation regarding ministry could also be true for some of our clergy and religious personnel – a possibility that should impel all of us as Church to re-examine and renew the quality of our faith and missionary commitment.

24. Today one of the great social concerns of the Church in Asia is the building of peace. Asia is an arena of intermittent violent ethnic, religious, and political conflict. The Church is often called to be a builder of peace in such situations even conflict is often attributed to religious differences and biases. But we as Church have to live and act in fidelity to Christ's Beatitude of Peace, "Happy are those who work for peace; God will call them his children!" (Mt. 5:9). We need to serve as a prophetic voice for peace in the midst of conflict. The road to peace is long and arduous. Pastoral efforts of formation and dialogue must aim at the building of a culture of peace among ourselves and others, based on integrity, respect, understanding and, ultimately, love.

### **Evangelization as Communication**

25. The social concern of evangelization led us to reflect on the truly Copernican revolution in the world of social communications. Without doubt, the rapid and mind-boggling advances of science and technology have made the process of globalization truly a pastoral challenge. Such advances affect the very nature of human life and death, human relationships, our relationship with creation and with the Creator. The ambiguous and ambivalent impact of social communications on Asian life and cultures poses grave challenges to our mission of evangelization.

26. On the hand we need to be positive since communication itself is a gift of God.

Communication is at the heart of God's relationship with us in the mysteries of Revelation, the Incarnation, Redemption, and ultimate Salvation. We see everywhere the traces of God's self-communication to us. Moreover, we also see the value and impact of our traditional Asian ways of communicating in "narrating his (Jesus) story as the Gospels do" with "word and life" (cf. EA 20). We have to "take the situation of the listener to heart" and in this way evangelize also the modern world of communication "in a way that appeals to the sensitivities of Asian peoples" (*Loc. cit.*). On other hand we see the negative features of mass media in the Asian landscape, the erosion of treasured Gospel values in the Asian individual, the family and society, the

onset of a global secular culture that has a new morality with hardly any reference to God.

27. The phenomenon calls us to explore ways by which we can evangelize the means of social communication, harness their incredible potential for evangelization, provide faith and spiritual formation for communicators, and place social communication at the service of all our pastoral programs. Pope John Paul II has raised the pastoral challenge himself (referring to the Internet): “From the galaxy of sight and sound will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard?” (*Message on World Communication Day 2002*).

### **Youth as Evangelizers**

28. The sector of the population most quickly influenced by social communications is the youth. The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences has consistently named the youth in the Church in Asia as a major pastoral priority. Not only do they constitute more than half of the population in many Asian countries but they are also the most idealistic and enthusiastic. They are at the vanguard of social and political change in Asia. In the mission to evangelize, they are deeply involved as catechists, social action workers, Bible leaders, community pastoral and liturgical formation leaders.

29. On the other hand, many young people can also quickly succumb to the problems that today beset many others in society such as political and ideological manipulation, substance addiction, and lack of direction in life. It is urgent that competent priests and religious accompany the youth closely, form them in committed faith, morality, and relevant spirituality, infuse them with a strong sense of mission, and entrust them with active participation in the Church. Clergy and religious need to walk with them in their journey of discipleship, encouraging, guiding, evangelizing them and evoking in them a lively sense of mission, while serving as witnesses and role models of Christian discipleship. A ministry of accompaniment would lead the youth to become committed and zealous evangelizers not only of their own peers but also of others.

### **Recommendations**

30. Although in our various workshops we came up with many recommendations, we have decided to spell out only three major pastoral recommendations:

30.1. That missionary animation programs, courses and retreats, on-going training and formation sessions for evangelization, and developing evangelizing skills be held

regularly and systematically for Bishops, priests, religious, seminarians and lay people at the regional and national levels;

30.2. That FABC hold a Continental Mission Congress within two to three years to promote prayer to the Holy Spirit for a new Pentecost in Asia and to keep the evangelizing mission of the Church at the forefront of its life and activity;

30.3. That a local *way* for evangelization along the lines of the mission spirit and recommendations of the FABC be developed by each Bishops' Conference and enacted at the diocesan level, so that the mission of the Church may be more systematically and organically pursued.

### **Conclusion**

31. Coming to the end of our Symposium on "Evangelization in the light of *Ecclesia in Asia*," the most emphatic conviction that has emerged, stated again and again, in the context of our continent of great and ancient religious traditions is the necessity of evangelizers to be men and women of God-experience, of deep spirituality and communion with Jesus, of joyful and transparent discipleship.

32. Toward a New Evangelization we pledge to strive to live authentic lives so that the message of Jesus Christ may penetrate every mind and heart in Asia and come to fellowship with us in the Spirit. We pledge to gain a better and more dynamic sense of mission and renew our commitment to mission. Even now a new consciousness of mission is emerging. God's invitation to us to become "a new way of being Church in Asia" is increasingly being heard and heeded. Deep in our hearts is a certain hope, a conviction, that the Third Christian Millennium will be God's *kairos* for the Church in Asia, a time of a *great awakening and manifestation of faith* (cf EA 1) in this vast home continent of the Lord.

33. We stand in deep gratitude to God for the most precious gift of Jesus. We are likewise grateful for all the men and women in the Church who, as a small flock, are in communion of mind and heart to realize God's eternal plan for the peoples of Asia.

34. Aware that the Holy Father has entrusted the Church in Asia to Mary, "model of all disciples and bright Star of Evangelization" (EA 51), we now fly to her patronage.

We beg you, O Virgin Mary, the Asian Woman par excellence, Mother of the Savior and our own Mother, to guide us in continuing your Son's mission of love and service. Teach us to be humble but never too timid to speak about of Jesus to our brothers and sisters in Asia. Before your Son, the Prince of Peace, intercede for peace to descend upon our troubled lands. With full and filial confidence we entrust ourselves to you. O Mother of Asia, pray for us, your children, now and always.

Pattaya, Thailand, September 7, 2002

