



“BECOMING THE CHURCH OF THE POOR AND THE MARGINALISED IN ASIA”

Message from the Bishops Institute of Social Action-BISA-VIII

(18 – 24 January, 2012, Camillian Pastoral Care Centre, Bangkok, Thailand)

(Response of the Church to the Challenges of Asia in the Light of CST)

1. Preamble

We, the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Religious Women and Men and Lay Sisters and Brothers (thirty seven participants) from seventeen countries gathered at Camillian Pastoral Care Centre, Bangkok, Thailand for the 8th Bishops’ Institute for Social Action (BISA VIII) tried to immerse ourselves in the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalised people, reflected over our experiences and deliberated upon a pastoral-theological programme of action in the light of CST.

Historically speaking, the BISA goes back to the first General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences in Taipei, Taiwan in 1974 when the Asian Bishops “resolved, first of all, to be more truly ‘The Church of the Poor’ ”. They said, “If we are to place ourselves at the side of the multitudes in our continent, we must in our way of life share something of their poverty. They Church cannot set up islands of affluence in a sea of want and misery; our own personal lives must give witness to evangelical simplicity, no man how lowly or poor, should find it hard to come to us, and find in us their brothers. The Office of Human Development of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences thus launched a series of programs to help the Church gradually become the Church of the Poor.

Seven Asian Institute For Social Action (AISAs) were held to see how the Bishops could implement the Social Teachings at the diocesan level. Five Faith Encounter in Social Action (FEISAs) programs brought the Catholic Church in direct contact with people of other Faiths. And spearheading these was a series of Bishops Institute for Social Action (BISAs).

The statements of the seven BISAs held between 1972 -1988 manifest a progression in the bishops’ understanding of the implications of becoming the Church of the Poor. BISAs I – III stressed the staggering extent of Asia’s material poverty while BISA IV to VII moved on to Collegiality of Bishops to implement the Catholic Social Thought of the Church. Now, 25 years after, the Office of Human Development of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference (FABC) is revisiting the BISA in response to the Struggles and Challenges of Asia today, responding to the struggles of the poor in the light of CST.

2.Objectives and Strategies

Keeping in mind the following areas of challenges and possibilities,

- 1) Where is BISA at this historical juncture?
- 2) Where does BISA want to go from here?
- 3) How do we reach there?
- 4) What are the factors and issues that need to be kept in mind in this process?

BISA VIII adopted the following strategies:

- ***Immersion into the Lives of the Vulnerable People:*** In small groups, we underwent exposure-immersion in pre-arranged areas of the poor and the marginalized – Migrants, Indigenous Peoples, HIV-affected people and trafficked women from 18th to 21st January, 2012.
- ***Reflection on the Immersion Programme:*** We reflected on our experiences of this exposure-immersion and drew lessons which we shared in the assembly. *The experience of living amidst the marginalised* – the Indigenous peoples, The Migrants, The victims of HIV/AIDS and Human Trafficking, brought us closer to our own similar people back at home.
- ***Inputs, Deliberations and Reflections:*** Reflections on the various issues of the people of Asia and the responses of the Church in the light of the Catholic Social Teachings. The methodology followed were: inputs on the themes: a) Labour and Rights of Labourers, b) Migrants and their Families, c) Indigenous Peoples, d) Women and Children, e) Conflicts and Peace Building, f) Eco-Just Society followed by reports from the Countries and Church Based Organisations, deliberations in the plenary, group workshops and action plans.

3. Pastoral- Theological Programme of Action

Through this pastoral-theological programme of action, we the participants want to share with the Church in Asia, the concerns of the marginalised and propose some recommendations towards action. These are applicable to all sectors. Our reflections and formulation of pastoral-theological programme of actions kept in mind the various sectors like the Parish/ BCCs, BECs, Diocese, Conferences, four Asian Zones (Central, South East, South and East) and Asia as a whole.

3.1. Proposals for OHD-FABC for the future BISA Series

1. We recommend that it would be appropriated and useful to organise BISA every year or at least once in two years. The long gap of 25 years between BISA VII and BISA VIII, denies the scope for reflecting together as an Asian family towards evolving common programmes of actions.
2. We recommend that BISA programme should identify emerging priority areas to be addressed through immersion and reflection along with the country reports for a deeper understanding of the Asian Reality for further action. The participants themselves could be the resource persons besides some from outside.
3. We hope that in future many new Bishops are to be encouraged to attend BISA IX. This would strengthen enhance the sense of collegiality and partnership with each other and within the conferences, zones etc.
4. We are very happy with the immersion programme which was well organised as it personally inspired us to strengthen our commitment. We propose that similar exposures be organised in our own conferences. We recommend that the outcome of this BISA be shared with all the Conferences, Dioceses, parishes and BCCs in all the communications.
5. Since BISA VIII was organised after a gap of 25 years, we recommend that the successful experience and reflections be shared in the FABC General Assembly in Nov. 2012 for an effective involvement of many more bishops in future.

3.2. The Pastoral- Theological Programme of Action for Asia

1. As we are all aware and speak about, Catholic Social Teachings continue to be the best kept secrets. *We make a resolve to disseminate CST in the form and manner our people can understand* and put into practice in our own places, that is, Parishes, Dioceses and Conferences. We further resolve, in the spirit of witness, to implement at least three directives of CST: i) just wages in our own parishes, institutions and organisations; ii) proper working conditions for our workers; and iii) representation and participation of the laity, both women and men in our deliberative and decision making bodies.
2. We realise that many times, we work in a compartmentalised manner. *We realise and resolve that all the efforts of human development should become an integral part of our pastoral policies,*

programmes and priorities. As one of the Bishops who participated in BISA VIII assured, “I shall report this experience with migrants and Indigenous Peoples to my Bishops Conference. I shall change the pastoral policy of my diocese based on the experience I had” we shall revisit the vision, mission, pastoral policies, programmes and priorities of our parishes/dioceses/conferences at regular intervals and reorient ourselves for greater apostolic efficacy.

3. *We resolve to educate the Church and society regarding the issues of these most marginalized and vulnerable communities and evolve programmes of action* to address their issues. Through the celebrations of Migrants Day, Refugee Day, Women’s Day, Indigenous Peoples’ Day, Minority Day etc.
4. *We resolve to network with like minded faith based and secular organisations* and engage in advocacy work with local, provincial, national, Regional Organisations and Governments.
5. The members of the Church in Asia have affirmed and reaffirmed the resolve to become the Church of the poor. We have taken commendable initiatives in this regard. But we also realize that we have not truly become the Church of the poor. Hence, *we resolve that all our parishes, institutions, dioceses and conferences strive towards becoming the Church of the poor.* We also realize that in many situations, the Church is the only voice of the poor and the vulnerable.
6. *We resolve that we would proactively become the voice of the poor concretely.* Further, we work towards enhancing the capacity of our people who themselves are able to voice their concerns and issues. Thus, we would move towards a participatory leadership that results in ensuring the lives, dignity and rights of the people of Asia, especially of the poor and the vulnerable.
7. In all our reflections, we realised time and again that *we need to get back to the pastoral cycle of immersion, reflection and action.* We also realised that there is an urgent need to work towards a spirituality of social commitment and action. All these do not happen with pious intensions but with spiritual commitment and openness to the Spirit of God, which moves us towards a programmed, personalised and institutionalised pastoral-theological programme of action. It is in this sense we share with you this message of BISA VIII.
8. We resolve to rededicate ourselves to work for the Reign of God and its values of Justice and Peace especially amidst the suffering millions in Asia. *We shall become agents of social change* by enabling the poor and the marginalized to claim their economic, social and cultural entitlements.

4. Way Forward

One message that repeatedly came up to us was, “Arise from your slumber”. All the participants also brought home to themselves that we have done well with regard to responding to the people of Asia. But we also realised that just being engaged in development work is not sufficient to ensure the lives, dignity and rights of vulnerable groups like the migrants, workers, indigenous people, Dalits, minorities, women, children, etc. *The Conferences and Dioceses should work out concrete policies and programmes of action to increase the opportunities for these people* by enhancing their social and cultural capital so that they are able to carry on their lives effectively.

As members of the Church, we resolve to carry forward this process and echoing the resolve of the bishops of the First General Assembly of the FABC: “*to have the courage to speak up for the rights of the disadvantaged and powerless, against all forms of injustice, no matter from what source such abuse may come*” we will strive to be truly a Church of the Poor and the marginalized of Asia.

- **Abp. Charles Bo, Chairman, OHD-FABC and all the Participants of BISA-VIII**