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Sixth "Bishops' Institute for Social Communication" (BISCOM VI) "Converging Communications for Ministry in Asia: Modern Communication Technologies for the Church"

Bangkok, Thailand May 28-June 2007

SPECIAL REPORT :

26 bishops from 9 different Asian countries and another 25 professionals and communication secretaries from bishops' conferences attended a study week on "Converging Communications for Ministry in Asia, Modern Communication Technologies for the Church" at Assumption University (AU), Bang Na Campus in Bangkok, Thailand.

The 6th "Bishops' Institute for Social Communication" (BISCOM) from May 28 to June 2 was organized by the "Office of Social Communication" (OSC) of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC).

From a general overview about information and communication technologies (ICT), the presentations went into consequences and use of ICT for pastoral communication.

The possibilities of ICT for catechesis and Church administration were presented along with the ethical implications of ICT and challenges for moral theology and ministry.

'INFO' CHANGES DELIVERY SCHEME

The Communication INFO will be available online via the FABC website <www.fabc.org> Only subscribers who will request for a hard copy of the newsletter till the end of July 2007 will continue receiving it. Otherwise, please logon to the website for your personal copy and printout. Simply click "Newsletter" in the "Office of Social Communication" section under "Offices" in the homepage.

Half the participants joined a computer training course with hands-on exercises facilitated by ICT experts. The participants learned blogging, online chatting and practical uses of Internet for pastoral ministry.

Below is the full text of BISCOM VI's "Orientations and Recommendations."

ORIENTATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The bishops and participants of the *second* "Bishops' Institute for Social Communication" (BISCOM II, 1999) on "Modern Communication Technologies: Challenges for the Church in Asia" stated that "*New Communication Technologies* are emerging tools for processing and disseminating of Information." Today, these new converging communication technologies are rapidly moving the world towards wireless, non-stop connectivity, through multiple devices capable of delivering voice, video and data through the Internet.

The Internet itself continues to move into a new phase, from a static into an increasingly dynamic Web, offering users an interactivity sans frontiers. New developments of the Web enable users not only to "consume" what the Internet offers in terms of voice, video and data, but also to contribute to its content through new means of social communication like websites which are becoming hugely popular among different age groups and those with shared interests, but especially the young. This is one of the most profound shifts in cyberspace since the advent of the Internet.

Religion is an important part of cyberspace now. Individual religions have established themselves in various forms in cyberspace. Scholars divide religion on the Internet into a) *Religion Online* offering information about religion and religious practices online and b) *Online Religion* offering participatory spiritual experience online – "liturgy, prayer, rituals, meditation and homiletics coming together and functioning within the electronic space as church, temple, synagogue, and mosque."

Also Christianity and Christian religious expressions have multiplied and increased on the Web several hundred-fold over the years.

Orientations

We, the 26 Asian bishops together with another 25 experts and communication secretaries from Bishops' Conferences explored various aspects of "Converging Communication for Ministry in Asia" in our BISCOM VI gathering at Assumption University's Bang Na Campus, Bangkok in Thailand, from May 28 to June 2, 2007. The basic questions we explored, beside others, were:

- Where is the Church in Asia in this new marketplace, *Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31. cf. Redemptoris Missio 37c)*?
- Can we work out a pastoral communications plan to integrate our dioceses and link them into the modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)?

Experts from different disciplines urge us to look at the opportunities of the new media environment with new eyes: the more we are present in cyberspace, the more we are challenged to extend our 'parish'! Thus there is, for example, a need for new means of online catechesis. The Church should also integrate Information and Communication Technology into its administrative and pastoral activities and work towards an electronically SMART Church that is Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent.

The situation of the Church in Asia is far from ideal for the integration of ICTs. Except for a few countries, many bishops are working among the poor and marginalized with lack of electricity, poor financial resources and inadequate access or exposure to modern technology. They might not be able yet to fully benefit from the modern means of communication. But technology is moving forward relentlessly, bringing down costs and making new communication tools affordable and accessible to increasing numbers of people, especially the young.

On the other hand, "we should not forget that it is people who matter most" (BISCOM II) despite the high tech developments we are witnessing. Thus, traditional means of face-to-face communication, the use of folk media and radio are still of widest reach and importance at lowest cost. Printed materials are still valid and often the most affordable means of strengthening and propagating our faith. The role of Radio Veritas Asia from Manila which is in the FABC responsibility is a good example.

Recommendations

With the daunting challenges which the Church faces in Asia, with the possibilities and impact of modern ICTs, there is an urgent need to be present and make use of these new means wherever possible and feasible. Therefore the following recommendations are made:

1. There should be a *collaborative* approach towards the new media:
 - Plan along with the priests of the diocese and lay people with expertise in ICT, to create a 'think tank' of consultants. This 'think tank' of experts should include also heads of diocesan institutions and religious congregations of men and women and especially lay people who will explore the possibilities for integrating ICTs in ministry.
 - They will develop a comprehensive short-term and long-term plan, along with ICT awareness programs at all levels. Such a step should help to prepare our people, especially children and youth, in the use of New Media and the choices available to them.
 - They will work out an inventory of resources – human, material and financial – for the adaptation of ICTs wherever possible and evaluate its usefulness periodically.
2. There should be a *gradual and phased exposure* to the modern means of communication.
 - We should encourage the inclusion of courses on e-communication and e-reachout programs in the formation of young people, especially seminarians and religious, and all those involved in a special way in Church administration and ministry.
 - We should further explore and develop the possibilities of ICTs for Evangelization and Re-Evangelization – e-vangelism (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* 37c).
 - A similar approach should be taken for our educational institutions and the ongoing formation of Church personnel.
3. The possibilities for diocesan and other Church-related websites, blogs and other ICT means should be explored and used. This must secure especially a *regular* update.
4. The possibilities of *digital Church databases* should be used to save on administration, paper and other expenses and to make data like birth and marriage certificates etc. more easily retrievable and available. This will benefit the Church in terms of staff, time and costs in due course.
5. We should be concerned and willing to help bridge the *Digital Divide* which still hampers ICT developments in many parts of Asia while some countries are in the forefront of ICT progress. Churches from both ends should join in mutual support and this trend must be encouraged even within dioceses.
6. We should be aware of the *moral implications* of Cyberspace in our Asian situation. ICTs should help towards human wellbeing, to the Common good and support the right to information, privacy, etc (cf. *Ethics in Internet* 2002).
7. We should promote any ways and means to preserve our *cultural identities* but at the same time also integrate them into the new communication situation.
8. Church personnel, especially laypeople, should be encouraged to take up *specialized training* in ICTs for the good of the Church and her members.
9. The psychological and spiritual implications of ICTs on the development of *young people* ('born with the mouse'!) should be our special concern.
10. The potentials of ICTs for Interreligious Dialogue and mutual understanding (Justice and Peace) should be fully explored and applied to our ministries.
11. The documents of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (*Ethics in Internet; Church and Internet* 2002) and Pope John Paul II's Message for World Communication Day 2002 (*Internet: A Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*) should be an integral part of our planning and considerations.

The final statement and recommendations of our earlier BISCOM II (1999) should be considered part of this statement.