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THE CALL TO NEW EVANGELIZATION

The Church in Asia in the Next 50 Years*

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May I begin with a geographical context. The "Asia" that I shall discuss does not include the Middle East Countries. Rather, I refer to the "Asia" of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). This Asia consists of the countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgystan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan); the countries of South Asia (Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka); East Asia (the countries of Mongolia, South Korea, Japan, the territories of Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan); and the countries of Southeast Asia (Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, Timor-Leste and Indonesia).

The FABC territory covers a large swath of the Asian continent and consists of 18 Bishops' Conferences as members and 8 Associate Members (those without a Bishops' Conference such as Turkmenistan, Macau, Hong Kong, and Taiwan). All in all, FABC covers 28 Asian countries and territories.

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Therefore, when I speak of the Church in Asia, it is the Church that is constituted by the bishops' and episcopal conferences of the FABC. "Church" as used in this presentation refers only to bishops and not to the entire People of God.

I shall attempt to answer the following questions:

- How does the Church in Asia understand "evangelization" and "new evangelization?"
- How does the Church in Asia want to evangelize?
- What will the Church in Asia do to evangelize in the next fifty years?

It is best to let the Asian bishops themselves address the questions on the basis of the statements, messages, and documents issued by their plenary meetings.[1]

A. Evangelization in Asia

Evangelii Nuntiandi speaks of evangelization in different ways. In a broad way, to evangelize is "to bring the Good News into all areas of humanity, and through its impact, to transform that humanity from within, making it new."[2] More specifically, evangelization is "the clear and unambiguous proclamation of the Lord Jesus."[3]

1. Dialogue and Proclamation

On the other hand, the significant document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), jointly produced by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious

[1]These plenary documents are found in the five-volume work, *For all the Peoples of Asia*. Also very useful for our purposes would be *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, ed. Vimal Tirimanna (Claretian Publications, 2007).

[2]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), 18.

[3]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 22.

Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, has an alternative description of evangelization. The document states that "the single but complex and articulated reality" of the *evangelizing mission* of the Church consists of the following "principal elements: presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life; prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and finally, proclamation and catechesis."[4] Thus, in this sense, dialogue and proclamation are both different and distinct components of the evangelizing mission of the Church.

Dialogue and Proclamation acknowledges that dialogue at the purely human level means "reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communion" as well as "an attitude of respect and friendship" ("spirit of dialogue").[5] This spirit of dialogue should permeate all the evangelizing activities of the Church. However, *Dialogue and Proclamation* chooses to treat specifically of interreligious dialogue and its relationship to explicit proclamation. When official Church documents speak of dialogue, it is usually about interreligious dialogue, a concept the documents consider as separate and distinct from proclamation.

It is the sense of explicit proclamation that *Evangelii Nuntiandi* speaks of when it declares that "there is no true evangelization if the name, teaching, life, promises, kingdom and mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed."[6]

2. Proclamation in Asia—the Asian Face of Jesus

The proclamation of Jesus has never been a problem in Asia. But for the Church in Asia, proclamation and dialogue are not two

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[4]Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Dialogue and Proclamation* (1991), 2, citing *The Attitude of the Church toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission* (Secretariat for Non-Christians, 1984), no. 13.

[5]*Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 29.

[6]Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 22.

separate and juxtaposed realities. Proclamation and all other paths of evangelization are in the mode of dialogue.

The final statement of the FABC International Theological Symposium[7] described the Asian idea of proclamation:

> If Jesus were to ask us today in Asia, "Who do you say that I am?" we would boldly confess as did the early Church "You are the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (cf. Col. 1:15). You are the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord! "You are the Word in the beginning, you are with God, you are God" (cf. Jn. 1:1). Ours is the faith of the Apostles in the Risen Christ.
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> Yet as we reflect on the harsh underside of suffering Asia, the image of Jesus that captures our imagination is his human portrait in the Scriptures. Born of woman (Gal. 4:4), he is the God who pitches his tent among us (Jn. 1:14). He empties himself to be in solidarity with the little ones, those treated as non-persons—the poor and deprived, the outcast and marginalized, the oppressed and downtrodden, the sick, those who do not count, children and women. He strikes at the natural upward mobility of humankind and goes down to the downtrodden, walks among them, lives with them, takes up their burdens, calls them his friends (Lk. 4:18; 15:2). This predilection for the poor we now call his preferential option.
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> This is how we see Jesus with an Asian face …. This human face of Jesus, born of woman, God-made-poor, God-with-us, our Peace, teacher and prophet, healer, a person of harmony, suffering servant-leader, liberator, lifegiver, is one that powerfully resonates with Asia's situation of servitude, with Asia's struggle towards jusice and harmony—with our struggle for life.

Such a declaration seems to be in tension with the idea of explicit proclamation of Jesus, the unique Savior of the world, without which there is no true evangelization.

Some Asian theologians are seen to put aside the uniqueness and finality of Jesus as God and Savior in interreligious dialogue. But undoubtedly FABC official documents do not do so.

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[7]Pattaya, Thailand: 1994.

I recall here the famous adversarial positions taken by a non-Asian keynote speaker and a Filipino theologian at the opening session of the 1990 Bandung FABC Plenary Assembly. The former attacked Asian theological development that puts aside the uniqueness and finality of Jesus the Lord and Savior and thus diminishing the need for mission. The Filipino theologian put aside his prepared paper and directly rebutted the attack as an unjustified overgeneralization.

3. Telling the Story of Jesus

At the 1998 Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia, Pope John Paul II listened intently to the way Asian bishops spoke about evangelization and proclamation. And in his post-synodal exhortation a year later (1999), Pope John Paul II "canonized" the way the Church in Asia proclaims the Lord Jesus.

He first reminded the Church in Asia: "There can be no true proclamation without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord."[8]

But, taking the language and spirit of Asian bishops, in the light of the cultures of religions of Asia, he explained what he meant by proclamation: "In fact the proclamation of Jesus can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do."[9]

Asian bishops at the Assembly had suggested images of Jesus that are intelligible to Asian cultural patterns and are "faithful to Sacred Scriptures and Tradition."

> Among them were "Jesus Christ as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One" …. In the midst of so much suffering among Asian peoples, he might best be proclaimed as the Savior "who can provide meaning to those undergoing unexplainable pain and suffering."[10]

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[8]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), 19.

[9]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 20.

[10]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 20.

Thus did the Magisterium finally resolve the tension between explicit proclamation of Jesus, the unique Lord and Savior, and the Asian way of "proclamation by telling the story of Jesus" as in the Gospels.

In the 2006 Asian Mission Congress in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the Church in Asia picked up the Asia-inspired insight of Pope John Paul II. The Congress developed the theme "Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life."

In a remarkable way, the basic text provides both a preview and a synthesis of the Mission Congress. It speaks of the Asian context of religious and cultural pluralism in the journey of faith. It speaks of an Emmaus experience in that journey as it narrates the story of Jesus in the early Church, and the story of Jesus in Asia as Jesus reveals his Asian face. And finally, it concludes with the story of Jesus in the lives of individuals as in the lives of Asian holy men and women of past and recent history.

The message of the Mission Congress speaks of the inspiration and strength of faith that more than one thousand participants derived from listening to the personal stories of Jesus in the lives of the elderly, families, youth, children and women, of Christians in BECs, migrants, and poor people—stories of "faith, heroism, service, prayer, dialogue and proclamation."[11]

As they listened to stories of transformed life, they remembered what the Apostle John had written: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon, and touched with our hands" is none other than "the Word of Life" (1 Jn. 1:1). From this encounter with Jesus comes mission: "Go home to your own people and tell them what the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (Mk. 5:19), the scriptural passage adopted by the Mission Congress.

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[11]*Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia*, Asian Mission Congress (Chiang Mai, Thailand: October 19, 2006), http://www.eapi.org.ph/resources/eapr/east-asian-pastoral-review-2007/volume-44-2007-number-3/telling-the-story-of-jesus-in-asia (accessed February 5, 2016).

B. The Mode of Evangelization in Asia—Dialogue

As has been noted, the term dialogue is usually understood as interreligious dialogue as distinguished from proclamation. This is not so in the understanding of the Church in Asia. Its understanding of dialogue comes from Vatican II as it opened the the doors of the Church to dialogue with the world, with its joys and sorrows. This is echoed by Pope Francis in his use of dialogue with society and the state, with science and reason, with cultures, and with the poor.

Dialogue is the human encounter between individuals, between human groups, communities and societies, ethnic groups and races, cultures and creeds, and institutions. It is finally the encounter of the human and the divine.

1. The Triple Dialogue of the Church in Asia—Dialogue with All the Life Realities of a People

In telling the story of Jesus, the Church has to reach out in dialogue with the cultures of Asia, with its religions, and with its peoples, especially the poor.

In dialogic encounter, a dynamic reciprocal action takes place, guided by the Spirit of Jesus. There is mutual enrichment between faith and culture, between the Gospel and different religious and philosophical traditions, between the Gospel of the Kingdom and the poor. It is the mysteries of Incarnation and Redemption taking place. And in the process, the Church becomes truly Asian while never ceasing to be universal.

2. Dialogue with Cultures—Inculturation, Indigenization

That magnificent section on the local Church in the Final Statement of the First FABC Plenary Assembly[12] sums up the idea of dialogue with cultures in near-lyrical language:

[12]Taiwan: 1974.

> The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. … Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God's Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery.[13]

3. Dialogue with Asia's Religious Traditions

Going beyond dialogue with cultures (indigenization), the Final Statement further develops the dialogue with all the life realities of the people. It involves "a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples."[14] It "means dialogue with the poor."[15]

Asia is the cradle of the great ancient religions of the world, including Christianity. Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Islam, as well as the great philosophical tradition of Buddhism were born in Asia. We have to recognize the riches of these ancient traditions. They were the wellsprings of ancient civilizations. From them, countless generations of people drew, and continue to draw, authentic religious experiences. The Spirit of God hovers over them and so we can discern "seeds of the Word" in them[16] as well as the presence of a "ray of that truth which enlightens all."[17] In mutual enlightenment, dialogue with

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[13]Final Statement of the First FABC Plenary Assembly, no. 12 (Taipei, 1974).

[14]"Inter-Religious Dialogue," Final Statement of the First FABC Plenary Assembly, no. 14.

[15]"Human Development and Liberation," Final Statement of the First FABC Plenary Assembly, no. 19.

[16]On the Mission Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes* (1965), 11.

[17]Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* (1965), 2, cited in *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 16.

them enables us to understand our own spiritual riches more clearly and with respect and humility offer these riches to them.

The observation of the great Jewish philosopher of dialogue, Martin Buber, is apropos to an understanding of the FABC idea of dialogue. He speaks of dialogic relationships in terms of values, of recognition of human dignity, respect and understanding, of trust and love. He says: "When two people relate to each other *authentically and humanly*, God is the electricity that surges between them."[18] "Dialogic is not to be identified with love. But love without dialogue, without real outgoing to the other, reaching to the other, the love remaining with itself—this is called Lucifer."[19]

Reaching out to the other, love going out of itself, the power of the Spirit surging between interactive relationships—this is a way to understand FABC interreligious dialogue.

4. Dialogue with the Poor of Asia

Already in 1970, Pope Paul VI reminded the Asian bishops gathered in Manila of the immense missionary possibilities of Asia as the continent of the poor. Together with the rich variety of cultures and ancient religions, poverty is the third characteristic of the Asian continent that the Asian bishops discerned at the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974 as they faced the challenge of evangelization.

To dialogue with the life realities of Asian peoples is also to dialogue with them in their poverty. It involves active solidarity with them and empowering them in their struggle for a better life. It requires eyes and hearts that see and understand reality from their optic. It requires of the Church a commitment to social justice and "active participation in the transformation" of the Asian world. It requires finally of the Church to become a Church of the poor.

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[18]Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner, 1970), 23.

[19]Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor-Smith (London & New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 21.

Inculturation, interreligious dialogue, dialogue with the poor—the Asian triple dialogue—are tasks for the local Church to be truly rooted in Asian soil. They are tasks by which Jesus is proclaimed, his story told, and faith in him evoked.

Thus did the Asian bishops in 1974 draw up a vision of the Church that would be the guiding light for local Churches and episcopal conferences—the Church in Asia as a Church of dialogue and a Church of the poor.

Pope John Paul II's magisterial teaching recognized this characteristic, stating "the importance of dialogue as a *characteristic mode of the Church's life in Asia*."[20]

And so is dialogue the Church's mode of evangelization. Consequently, telling the story of Jesus in dialogic mode should be gradual and progressive, employing a pedagogy that is evocative,[21] not proselytizing but respectful and humble, guided certainly by the Spirit of God, while patiently waiting for God's grace for the final fruition of the Jesus story. Or, as Pope John Paul II says, until in God's own time "the final appropriation of the mystery" of Jesus is realized.[22]

C. New Evangelization in Asia

The way Asian bishops understand "new evangelization" has always been the call to the dialogic mode of evangelization for a "new way of being Church." It was a call heard from the beginning of the FABC up to the present, old but ever new.

The 2012 FABC Assembly in Vietnam dealt specifically with the New Evangelization. It had this to say:

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[20]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 3. Italics in original.

[21]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 20.

[22]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 20.

> In most of Asia, as in Mongolia where Catholic presence is only 20 years old, the paramount need is for "first proclamation" …. We do recall that from its very beginning the FABC has been promoting a new evangelization by its vision of a Church in Asia becoming a "*new way of being Church*."[23]

The Vietnam Assembly discerned the pastoral situation forty years after the statutory inauguration of FABC in 1972 and confronted new pastoral challenges including climate change and post-modern secularism. Building on the dialogic mode of evangelization of a new way of being Church, the Assembly declared:

> A New Evangelization is imperative …, "new in its ardor, methods and expression" …. The New Evangelization has to take in the whole of creation …. The New Evangelization has to insist on the religious and moral character of God's Creation where God dwells in many and various ways.[24]

1. Contemplative Dimension and the Principle of Communion

Since 1974, the Church in Asia has been insisting on the necessity of two faith realities in telling the story of Jesus:

- the spiritual and contemplative dimension, and
- the principle of communion.

Thus, the second and third assemblies were devoted to the themes of prayer—the life of the Church and the Church as a community of faith in Asia. A spirituality of communion has been a continuing work in process.[25]

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[23]Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly (Vietnam: 2012), no. 53.

[24]Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly, no. 53.

[25]See esp., e.g., Part II of the 1982 Samphran Plenary Assembly; Workshop VI of the 1979 Manila International Mission Congress; "Communion with Jesus and Communion of Liberation, Lay Spirituality" in the 1986 Tokyo Assembly; "Spirituality for Our Times" in the 1990 Bandung Assembly;

2. Megatrends in Asia—Challenges to New Evangelization

Surveying the signs of the times, the 2012 Vietnam Plenary Assembly discerned new pastoral challenges which would preoccupy the episcopal conferences and local Churches in years to come. In brief, the Assembly discerned the following megatrends in Asia, some of which have been the concerns of the Church in Asia for two decades:

- economic *globalization*;
- an emerging *global secular and materialist culture*;
- growing *Asian poverty* abetted by social injustice;
- the plight of *Asian migrants and refugees*;
- the integral development of marginalized *indigenous peoples*;
- *population control*;
- *religious freedom* besieged by extreme and violent religious radicalism;
- *life threatened* by national security ideology, ethnic conflicts, and arms buildup;
- the immense but ambiguous potential of *social communications*;
- ecological concerns of *global warming and climate change*;
- inadequate integral *faith-formation of the laity*;
- the discriminatory, abused, and exploited *situation of women*;
- inadequate social and ecclesial response given to the concerns of *Asian youth*;
- the continuous growth of *pentecostalism*; and
- nourishing the springtime of *Asian vocations* to the priestly and religious life.

Parenthetically, that list of megatrends was drawn up four years ago in Vietnam. But the first draft of a working paper for this year's FABC plenary assembly in Sri Lanka is suggesting a shorter list of the more urgent megatrends for the New Evangelization.

"Family Spirituality of Communion" in the 2006 Daejeon General Assembly; and "The Eucharist as Communion with Jesus" in the 2009 Manila Assembly, esp. sections A, D, and E.

Unless the world's social, economic, and political order is radically transformed, the New Evangelization in Asia will be addressing these megatrends over the next fifty years.

3. A Vision of the Church as Acting Subject of the New Evangelization

Despite variations in pastoral priorities and praxis in FABC regions and local Churches, ever constant is the continuing effort of the Church in Asia to realize its vision of being a Church of dialogue and a Church of the poor. Such vision indicates both the mode and the acting subject of the New Evangelization, i.e., by mode of dialogue, by a new way of being Church.

Most recently, in the 2012 Vietnam Plenary Assembly, the Asian bishops rearticulated and expanded the 1974 vision of Church.

> We envision a Church that is:
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> - *truly Asian, in triple dialogue* with the religions, cultures, and peoples of Asia, especially the poor [interreligious dialogue, inculturation, and integral liberation];
> - *a humble servant of the peoples of Asia*, accompanying them to the Kingdom of God;
> - *a credible herald of the Gospel, a disciple community sent on mission of integral evangelization* to tell the story of Jesus to Asians in season and out of season;
> - *bearing in herself the Asian face of Jesus*, the God who became man, compassionate, loving, forgiving, self-sacrificing, a teacher, servant, healer, prophet, life-giver, ennobler of the poor;
> - *a communion of communities, reflecting the Trinitarian communion*;
> - *a participatory Church* of renewed servant-leaders, of prophetic Religious and empowered laity;
> - *a Church of the Poor*, where the sick and the needy are at home;
> - *a Church of the Youth* where they find solidarity in their struggle for authentic life; and
> - *a Church in solidarity with the whole of creation* [a new component of the vision of Church].

Conclusion: Spirituality of New Evangelizers

The Vietnam Assembly also briefly synthesized what the Church in Asia means by the spirituality of communion.[26]

What may be more relevant for us at this time is the Final Message of the Assembly, "Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia." The bishops came up with the term "spirituality of New Evangelization," stating that the "*spirituality of communion is in truth the spirituality of the New Evangelization.*"[27]

That spirituality for our times requires of the renewed evangelizer the following dimensions:

- a deep *personal and transforming encounter with Jesus Christ*;
- *a passion for mission*, lighted with the fire of God's love, in order to share one's faith in Christ;
- *focus on the Kingdom of God* which is never to be separated from the person of Jesus and is oriented towards the integral transformation of the Asian world;
- *commitment to communion*, realizing that "communion is both the source and fruit of mission";[28]
- *dialogue, a mode of life and mission*, characterized by *humble sensitivity to the hidden presence of God* in the struggles of the poor, in the riches of people's cultures, in the varieties of religious traditions, and in the depths of every human heart;
- *humble presence*, a "mode of dialogical living" that is aware of the "mysterious presence and action of the Holy Spirit" among the peoples and cultures of Asia;[29]

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[26]Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly, no. 55.

[27]Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly, "Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia," Final Message (Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam: Dec. 16, 2012), 4.

[28]John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* 24, citing *Christi fideles laici* (On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World), 32.

[29]Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly, "Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia," no. 6.

- being a *prophetic evangelizer* who will denounce the contradictions in the Asian world and in so doing tell the story of Jesus who himself as a child was prophesied as a "sign of contradiction";
- *in discipleship of Jesus, solidarity with and compassion for victims* who are the victims of globalization, natural and man-made disasters, injustice and violence, oppression and marginalization;
- *care for the integrity of creation, a responsible stewardship of God's gift* for the sake of intergenerational justice confronted by the crisis of global warming and climate change;
- *boldness of faith and martyrdom* inspired by the cloud of many holy witnesses and martyrs who by their lives and their deaths told the story of Jesus throughout Asia.

A final word on the call to new evangelization will have to come from paraphrasing Pope John Paul II and I would address it to everyone of us here:

> The silent witness of a faithful Christian life in Asia is most eloquent in credibly telling the story of Jesus, unique Lord and Savior.

Thank you very much.