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CHALLENGES TO EVANGELIZATION IN ASIA

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This short presentation is a response to a keynote paper given during the annual meeting of the Philippine Association of Catholic Missiologists (PACM). A response may be an answer or a reply. I prefer to understand it here as a reaction to a stimulus. The PACM conference is so rich that it stimulates not only one but many responses. The presenter, Father Kroeger, is known among bishops in Asia as the chonicler of the teachings of FABC; he has written so well about its doctrinal ministry.

The Bishops in Asia (FABC) are very aware of the challenges to evangelization in Asia. In particular, I will comment on two challenges to evangelization and also on the meaning of being a Catholic population in Asia. I will present: **(I)** Challenge of the Past and the Varied Religious Traditions; **(II)** Challenge of Modernization; and, **(III)** Challenge of Being a Majority in Asia.

I. Challenge of the Past

Father Kroeger mentioned the dialogue with Asia's religious traditions, underlining very correctly the positive attitudes of FABC towards these religions. Nevertheless, one should also mention that

this is a daunting task. For the story of Asia and the Church's role in its societies places special demands on both narrator and listeners. It forces Christians to enter into cultural and conceptual frames of reference that could be radically different from our own.

Take, for example, the existence in Asia of religious and philosophical traditions differing from those of the West. The Western mind tries to comprehend reality through the optics of Plato and Aristotle, of Augustine and Aquinas down to Newton, Kant and Darwin. On the other hand, millions in Asia draw inspiration for their philosophy from the ancient text of the *Bhagavad-Gita* where the great warrior, Arjuna, discusses a vision of righteous living with his charioteer, Krishna.

In Asia's largest archipelago, millions of Indonesians lead an intensive devotional life based on the Qur'an. While sociologists link the Protestant ethic to the successful capitalist societies in the West, it is the Confucian Way that provides the foundation for the disciplined habits of the spirit among Asia's newly industrialized countries. Another great tradition, Buddhism, spread from India and now flourishes in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar as well as in Tibet and China.

These are religions that have come, in the view of the historian Arnold Tonybee, the chrysalises of new civilizations (cf. *A Study of History*, 380). Their holy books have inspired the conduct of millions in Asia. Their teachings have counseled young and old to be compassionate and unselfish. Housewives and businessmen from Bangkok to Tokyo and beyond have found peace of mind in following their prescriptions. Their myths become the substance of song and poems while their rituals give meaning to the mysteries of birth, suffering and death.

Father Kroeger said that "no Asian Church is so small or poor that it does not have something to give...." Then, the necessary questions come: What has the Church to offer the believers of these religions many times older than Christianity? What is meant by the Christian presence in countries whose values have been defined and nourished for centuries by other religions?

II. Challenge of Modernization

There is a second observation taken from mission history, which can be shared, since it could help explain the challenges facing the FABC. It is a statement Francis Hsu, the first Chinese Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, made in 1968. Bishop Hsu, a Shanghai man of letters, an Oxford graduate and a convert from Protestantism remarked that before the Church could plan its works in Asia, it must first draw lessons from the missionary experience in pre-1949 China. His conclusions brought out these points: "The Church that has received from its divine founder the mandate to teach all nations was mute when my country, having broken with its past, looked beyond its horizons for light and guidance. I was born the year after the May Movement. May 4, 1919 marks the Student Demonstration in Beijing outside the Tianamen Square when students showed their anger at the Chinese statement at Versailles who signed away China's rights at the World War I Peace Conference. From this event the Students' Movement began which Mao Zedong later capitalized on. It was thus the beginning of the Chinese People's struggle for autonomy from Western influence" [cf. Harrison E. Salisbury, *The New Emperors*, 55, 439, 463]. The author notes the Emperor's Palace is the place of authority and the symbol of power where all the great events in Chinese history occur. The recent student demonstrations a few years ago take on an added significance in the light of the May 4, 1919 Movement, when anti-Confucian iconoclasts finally won the day and projected science and democracy as the almighty gods.

Less than thirty years later, communism had conquered the country. In between there was a long, tormented period of disenchantment with Western civilization followed by cynicism, war-weariness, decadence and moral collapse. The spiritual vacuum that appeared in the wake of the dissipation of Confucian influence became wider and deeper until communism filled it by default. The Church was a helpless spectator. This does not mean that the missionaries were not aware of the danger or did not preach the Gospel with zeal. No, it means that faced with a desire for change and a new order of things, the Church failed to make its message intelligible and obviously relevant. The traditional

way of preaching, even if it had been extended and enlarged a thousand times, would have remained ineffective. Given to pagan Chinese as it had been by Christ to the Jews, the Sermon on the Mount must have sounded like romantic escapism. "Is that all you have to offer us"? incredulous Chinese intellectuals asked the sons of Matteo Ricci. China was going through a phase of soul-searching agony and the Church in China could offer no help [cf. Michel Masson, *Chinese Culture and Christianity: Assessing the Agenda*, 7].

This reflection is given in full because of its wider relevance for missionary work not only to China but also to all Asia. Like pre-1949 China, many Asians experience a spiritual vacuum in the wake of the dissipation of traditional values. A period of disenchantment with the dehumanizing consequences of Western civilization is emerging. Asians are looking beyond the horizon offered by modernity for an alternative vision of good life.

This is then the dual predicament faced by the Church in Asia: how to proclaim the Gospel to a vast multitude whose hunger for transcendence finds fulfillment in the bosom of ancestral religions and yet whose entry into the modern economic system is dictated by secularism where God becomes "an unnecessary hypothesis." Consider the reply of the mathematician Laplace to Napoleon's comment that on reading his treatise he had found no reference to the work of God; Laplace replied: "Sir, I have no need of that hypothesis."

This clash of two divergent outlooks, one stemming from the religious sphere and the other from secularism, tends to create a form of cognitive and psychological dissonance in contemporary men and women trying to integrate them. This leads to the question on whether the ancestral religions with their problems of rigidity and entropy, can still command unquestioned obedience from their adherents now exposed to scientific explanations of religious phenomena.

Will the Church remain, as Bishop Hsu said, a silent spectator to this search for a meaningful paradigm of life? Or would she have learned profitably from the past?

It is encouraging to know that our Bishops in Asia know that this

is truly the challenge the Church faces today in Asia. The Holy Father, in fact, calls this period for the Church as the "spiritual crossroad" of the great continent of Asia. [cf. *L'Osservatore Romano* (January 25, 1995), 5]. In the real sense, this is the challenge to you and to me, to all.

III. Challenge of Being a Majority in Asia

Why is this challenge so daunting? I repeat here an observation of Kroeger in another paper "Filipino Fiesta of Faith." Asian mission statistics show that there are 3.5 billion people in Asia today. Of this only 2.9% are Catholics and this despite the very long history of missions to this continent, thousands of martyrs, even more men and women religious and lay evangelizers. The 2.9% of Catholics in Asia is equivalent to about 110,234,000. This means almost 63% of Catholics in Asia are from the Philippines! It means many things, but obviously this is a faith challenge to the Church, particularly to all of us Catholics in the Philippines!