Landas 19:2 (2005) 213-219

EVANGELIZING IN ASIA TODAY:
Youth Perspectives

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The journey of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) mirrors the journey of the disciples to Emmaus. Jesus asked them, "What are all these things you are discussing as you walk along?" Likewise, the FABC, in the honest exploration of the realities in the continent and in the spirit of oneness, is also struggling to articulate Jesus' vision—a vision for the local Churches of Asia.

The FABC documents are a rich expression of this journey indicating the Spirit at work, Pentecost in process! Yes, the FABC has provided a backdrop through which the local Churches can emerge; it gives inspiration to young Churches to grow and develop. Likewise, for those Churches that have traversed many experiences, the documents can serve as a tool to evaluate their vision and support their direction.

Yet, in its three decades of existence as a federation, has the FABC vision found a home in the local bishops' conferences? Does the process of reflection and dialogue continue in the local settings? How much of the wisdom of the FABC documents have the local Churches digested and brought down and made a reality for the people they wish to serve? If the nine FABC offices seek to promote the institution's direction and vision, how far have they gone? Does the vision remain

in writing or is it expressed in their way of ministry? How does one gauge if a specific office is productive?

This reflection revolves around the process of how these documents trickle down in actual pastoral practice. It will analyze one specific area: youth ministry in Asia within the FABC framework. How are dialogue and the use of the FABC "pastoral spiral" methodology applied in the Youth Desk as well as in local youth commissions?

Office of the Laity: Youth Desk. The FABC has always expressed its concern for the young, who comprise more than sixty percent of the continent's population. In the historic assembly of the Asian bishops in 1970, they were one in expressing that Asia is indeed a "Church of the young." They stated their wish "to be, in them and for them, a Church that they shall see as worthy of their devotion and hope" (Asian Bishops' Meeting, 23).

This preferential love for the young has been consistently manifested in subsequent assemblies and meetings of various offices. However, the need to establish a desk or an office under the FABC was recognized in World Youth Day 1991 in Czestochowa, Poland, where Asian delegates dreamed of a united Asian response, an Asian voice. This was communicated to the bishops of the FABC Office of the Laity. In 1993, in a youth consultation meeting in Bangkok, Thailand among the recommendations to the FABC was to organize a youth commission to foster collaboration and networking among youth commissions.

Thus in 1994, the Youth Desk was officially organized under the Office of the Laity, which promoted various FABC endeavors for its ministry among the young. From the first Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate on Youth in 1997, the FABC Youth Desk developed a series of meetings and gatherings directed to and giving a taste of the vision for the Church of Asia. Among these events are the following: (1) The *Asian Youth Gathering* is a Youth Festival organized within the World Youth Day; it seeks to assemble all Asian youth delegates to an afternoon of cultural and spiritual encounter; (2) The *Asian Youth Day* (AYD) is a regional assembly of young people from all FABC-

member conferences; this is a five-day gathering to promote a culture of solidarity among Asian youth and a deepened awareness of their task in Church and society; (3) The *Asian Youth Ministers' Meeting* is a second part of the AYD for national youth animators and leaders. From the thrust brought out in the AYD, the gathering seeks to enable youth animators to be more effective in ministry; collaboration is promoted.

The movement towards a truly local Church, toward a Church "incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated" (FABC I, 12) may be seen in the way by which the Youth desk has evolved through the years.

Dialogue. A key term in Asian cultures is dialogue. All seek to communicate, to understand by listening and observing, to gain wisdom by asking, and to move forward by articulating a vision as one body. Local Christian communities explore problems and possibilities together. When there is an issue to tackle, they sit together around the fire, share a meal, and decide together what is best for everyone. Though an elder is present to facilitate and to express the final decision, the elder's wisdom is a fruit of the dialogue. Such was the Emmaus event. Jesus listened and walked with them.

The Asian Youth Day (AYD) seeks to be an expression of the three-fold dialogue that the FABC promotes: the dialogue of peoples, cultures and religions. The past three assemblies (1999, 2001, 2003) have been successful in bringing together almost 1,000 Asian youth from 19-22 countries. Though half are usually local delegates, the panoramic representation from the different countries is interesting to observe. Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar despite the restrictions of their present governments, send delegates who are always a sign of hope for the whole assembly. The AYD also welcomes youth of other faiths. Countries with a large percentage of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists are asked to bring an official representative in their delegation.

Delegates are housed in foster families. Here they experience real dialogue! Families are prepared to understand the differences in culture and are given guidelines in handling their guests. Delegates are prepared

in the same way before they leave their home countries. They bring with them some images of their homes, e.g. family albums and some native tokens which they offer to their foster parents. Filipinos have shared how they had to struggle with the hot and spicy meals offered by their Indian foster homes! Koreans and Japanese understood the third world context when they were offered to take the only bed in the house while their hosts slept on the floor.

Part of the AYD event is always a full day exposure program where delegates are divided into mixed groups and sent to temples, orphanages, technical schools, slum areas, and other centers to "dialogue." Malaysian-Indian delegates traced their roots when they were exposed to local villages in India. Hong Kong delegates were ecstatic when they visited an indigenous tribe in Taiwan where they encountered rituals similar to their parents' traditions in Hong Kong.

Asia's major religions always find a special place in the AYD events. A day is offered for delegates to better understand these religions. Delegates of other faiths are asked to share their personal life stories and discussion groups are formed together with them. In the celebration of the Eucharist, you would see several youth delegates lined up for communion with their arms folded across their chests. This means they were delegates of other faiths asking for blessing! They were part of the entire process!

Developments have emerged from this experience of dialogue. Regional networking and collaboration are now taking place. Within East Asia, Chinese-speaking countries hold exchange programs; they also organize immersion experiences for their youth leaders. South Asia has formed a South Asian Youth Apostolate (SAYA), making possible joint efforts in common causes like peace and interfaith concerns. Ecumenical and interfaith dialogues are now part and parcel of youth ministry in these different countries.

Indeed, dialogue is not a forced event. It happens when the atmosphere of openness is provided. It bears fruit even when no expectations are set. More importantly, if the Spirit is alive, dialogue works!

In some Catholic universities where the majority are non-Catholics, many youth movements foster dialogue among students. Associations like the EASY Net (Ecumenical Asian Students and Youth Network) provide a venue for more open dialogue among young people, not only on issues of faith but also on other concerns that affect Asian youth. These are some indications of a great openness of the young to dialogue. Non-Catholics are typically invited into church celebrations. It is not uncommon to find a Hindu monk or a Buddhist priest participating during some special parish feasts.

It would be helpful if this FABC spirit of dialogue were fostered in all Catholic institutions, especially with non-Catholics. Are stories shared, rituals celebrated and acts of love experienced in Catholic schools, centers and hospitals? After the institution renders its service, do the people go back to their own "Jerusalem" with a renewed spirit and vision by their contact with Catholics? Better yet, do they come back and request more?

Evangelization happens when one encounters Jesus in a personal way. It is faith that comes and grows through dialogue. As Catholics who consider bearing witness to the faith a privilege and a joyful obligation, all are called to continuously dialogue at every level. The FABC Second Plenary Assembly noted: "Only if the young learn to dialogue with God in the different situations of their personal lives and to surrender themselves to Him, can they grow into fully Christian persons who strive to overcome selfish individualism and to develop toward that freedom whereby they place their lives at the service of others" (FABC II, 25).

Pastoral Spiral Methodology. The FABC, as noted by Father Kroeger in his keynote address, has developed the "pastoral spiral" approach of exposure-immersion, social analysis, contemplative reflection, and pastoral planning; it is a unique Asian methodology. This process is the framework by which Asian youth events are designed and organized. The Asian Youth Ministers' Meeting (AYMM) is a fine example where this methodology is best explored.

First, exposure-immersion, to *see* or to *dialogue* with reality, is

experienced in several steps before the meeting. National youth animators are invited for a series of preparatory meetings to reflect, plan and work out the full program of both AYD and AYMM. A questionnaire is sent to youth commissions to assess their youth ministry and present a profile in the AYMM. Third, during the AYD, national youth animators and leaders including their bishops are encouraged to participate not as facilitators but as members alongside the youth.

The AYMM then starts with a reflection on this experience in the AYD. The youth ministers are also divided by sub-regions to share national youth ministry realities. With these data, they analyze existing conditions of the youth and youth ministry. This step can be seen as the second stage of *social analysis: judge* or *discern.*

After this process, workshops are conducted simultaneously exploring issues and concerns presented in the light of the theme. In the workshops, the same pastoral spiral methodology is followed. This step can be seen as the *contemplative dimension*, a time of understanding the context in the light of faith.

Finally, pastoral planning (*acts/deeds*) by country and sub-region is done on the last day, translating the reflections of the previous steps into plans of action. Youth animators have always affirmed this FABC methodology. Many have expressed how this process has helped them in planning and organizing youth ministry programs.

Personally, I employ this methodology in my pastoral work and even in the heart of my ministry for the young. I find myself walking with them, listening to them, teaching them, the way Jesus did on the Emmaus journey. However, I am missing an essential part in the pastoral spiral. After Jesus listened and talked, he celebrated with them. Before they went back to Jerusalem, he broke bread with them.

In the FABC pastoral spiral, after the contemplative dimension, pastoral planning takes place immediately. Is there no time to celebrate realizations and reflections? How are experiences integrated so they will shape our being Church? To truly realize the FABC "new way of being Church" will demand a conscious *celebration of faith and life.* Jesus

provided the example. As in the Emmaus event, it is the moment of communion that transforms people.

Conclusion. Allow me to end on a personal note. Once I was asked why I decided to work full-time in the ministry. My answer then was, because someone ministered to me when I was young. When I was groping for meaning as a teenager, I chanced upon a youth community that enabled me to discover myself and more importantly, discover Christ in a personal way. This is why I continue to say yes to contribute in building up the Church. This is why I go on in my ministry even when struggles come along the way. I have met Jesus, the greatest gift in my life and I wish to share this gift to others.

I believe that the FABC possesses this same conviction, considering the prophetic role it has played in Asian Churches; Father Kroeger has given us a fine panorama of the FABC vision and contribution. I wish that all local Churches continue to grow in being a picture of the vision we profess. I wish for more collaboration and networking among the FABC offices. I envision sharing our gifts so that the mission of evangelization is better served and our ways in bringing Jesus to Asia become more holistic. I wish that a real dialogue in mission takes place. I dream of empowering the laity and youth, providing them the venue to dialogue with the pastors of the Church.

This is the seed by which mission can truly grow. Amidst the huge challenges of evangelization in Asia, it is such a simple step that goes a long way. I pray that more Asian Christians—especially the youth—will catch the FABC vision and live the FABC dream!