# FABC @ 50:
## Renewing the Clergy of Asia

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In 2011, I was invited to be part of a panel discussion at a seminar for bishops of Asia held in Thailand. I was asked to share my experience of shepherding the priests of my diocese to the participant-bishops of that gathering. Little did I know that I was being eyed to be a bishop-member of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences - Office of Clergy (FABC-OC). At that time, I was the Chairman of the Episcopal Commission on Seminaries of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and was already involved in organizing the renewal programs for seminary formators of diocesan seminaries in the Philippines. With some persuasion from Orlando Cardinal Quevedo, Archbishop-Emeritus of Cotabato, who was then the Secretary-General of the FABC, I accepted the invitation and the appointment to become a member of the FABC-OC. From then on, my journey of being part of renewing the clergy of Asia unfolded until I became its Chairman in 2016. I chaired the office for two consecutive terms as allowed by the FABC statutes but was extended for another year until the end of 2022 due to the postponement of the FABC 50 General Conference that will take place on October 12-30, 2022.

### A Brief History and the Nature of the FABC-OC[1]

Attuned to the clarion call of the Second Vatican Council for an *aggiornamento* which means keeping the Church

1 The contents of this section were summarized from a file dated 27 June 2007 turned over by Fr. Lawrence Pinto, MSIJ the first Executive Secretary (2004-2012) of the FABC-OC.

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up-to-date, the FABC was established in 1970. In line with this call, and with the desire to be *ecclesia semper reformanda*, that is, "the church must always be reformed", particularly for the bishops and priests of Asia, St. John Paul II asserted: "To serve the Church as Christ intends, Bishops and priests need a solid and continuing formation, which should provide opportunities for human, spiritual, and pastoral renewal, as well as courses on theology, spirituality and the human sciences."[2] This paved the way for organizing the FABC-OC.

The FABC-OC was created in June 2004 and began to function actively after the 8th Plenary Assembly of the FABC held in Seoul, South Korea in August 2004. Its main objective is to help bishops, priest-formators, and other clergy to deal with contemporary issues affecting their life and ministry through seminars, consultations, and conferences. The first chairman of the office was the late Most Rev. Peter Fernando, D.D., the Archbishop-Emeritus of the Archdiocese of Madurai, India. The second chairman became Most Rev. Vianney Fernando, D.D., Bishop-Emeritus of the Diocese of Kandy, Sri Lanka. I have been the current Chairman of the office since January 2016 and will end my term by December 2022. The incoming Chairman by January 1, 2023 will be Most Rev. Udumala Bala, D.D., Bishop of Warangal, India.

> Through the years, since its establishment, the FABC-OC was able to craft its vision and mission statements to define where it wants to go and what it wants to achieve to be a vessel of renewal for the clergy of Asia. Its vision statement is as follows:
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> The FABC-OC will ardently strive to offer its facilitative efforts 1) to help priests to progressively know, love,

2 St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia,* 6 November 1999. Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html (accessed 11 July 2022), no. 43.

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> and live the priesthood of Jesus Christ in the contexts of their own particular culture or nation of Asia; 2) to assist the national commissions of clergy (of a particular national bishops' conference) as well as the diocesan bishops in enriching, empowering and deepening the communion between bishops and priests, between priests themselves and priests and the faithful; 3) to help priests to deepen their priestly commitment as diocesan priests. It will also make efforts to provide assistance to formators in the area of formation of seminarians (organizing seminars for formators), especially to ensure the formation of seminarians in the human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral facets of their training for the priesthood, and also plan for on-going formation of priests.
>
> From this vision statement flows the following mission statement:
>
> This mission statement refers to the execution of the Vision of the Office of Clergy. Having become aware of the present world scenario of human life, including priestly life, which is progressively impacted by the negative effects of fundamentalism, media, cultural confusion, and hedonism, this office intends to protect the lives of priests in Asia. Priests today need sources of empowerment to withstand the ill effects of the present fast-changing world to live a healthy priestly life in order to dedicate themselves to the mission of the Lord.

The above vision and mission statements have given a direction for the FABC-OC to provide episcopal conferences with programs and activities to deepen the spirituality and commitment of bishops, seminary formators, and many diocesan priests in their ministry and life so as to respond to the "new way" of being Church in Asia.

## Seminars Organized in Retrospect[3]

Since its inception in 2004, the FABC-OC has been able to organize formation seminars and consultations for the clergy of Asia. Some consecrated persons and lay people also attended particular seminars and networked with some FABC Offices. The following is a rundown of the themes, objectives, dates, venues, and attendance of the seminars organized in the past years.

**1. Theme: Human Formation of Priests**

**Objectives:**

a) to help clarify the identity of the priest;

b) to enhance the ministry and life of priests;

c) to help priests meet the challenges encountered in present-day Asia in keeping with the dignity and demands of the priesthood.

Dates: May 14-19, 2006

Venue: The Salesian Retreat House, Hua Hin, Thailand

Attendance: 74 Participants—4 Bishops, 66 Priests, 2 Sisters, and 2 Lay Volunteers

**2. Theme: Caring for Priests, Especially Those with Difficulties**

**Objectives:**

a) to help Bishops to reflect on the identity and vision of the priesthood in the Asian context;

b) to help them identify obstacles that priests face in their life and ministry;

c) to help them further to care for priests in their difficulties with regard to their relationships with their

3 The contents of this section were summarized from a file dated 28 August 2019 files turned over by Fr. Philip Lazatin, SDB the second Executive Secretary (2013-2021) of the FABC-OC.

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own self, with the faithful and other people, with their bishops, and with God Himself.

Dates: August 27-31, 2007

Venue: Redemptorist Retreat House, Pattaya, Thailand

Attendance: 90 Participants—1 Cardinal, 84 Archbishops and Bishops, 4 Priests, and 1 Lay Person

**3. Theme: Asian Vocations Symposium – "Asian Vocations Today" (in partnership with the FABC - Office of Consecrated Life)**

**Objectives:**

a) to be more aware of the situation of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life in Asia and explore future perspectives;

b) to understand motivations for priestly and religious vocations in the Asian context in the light of freedom, radicality, and sacrifice;

c) to rediscover the family as a seedbed of vocations;

d) to reflect on the need for a holistic and integrated formation of priests and religious.

Dates: October 22-27, 2007

Venue: Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Center Samphran, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 150 Participants—Bishops, Clergy, Religious, and Laity from sixteen countries

**4. Theme: The Catholic Priesthood – A Challenge of the Modern World**

**Objectives:**

a) to help bishops to reflect on the identity and vision of the priest in the Asian context;

b) to help bishops to identify obstacles that priests face in their life and ministry;

c) to help bishops to care for priests in their difficulties concerning their relationships with the faithful, other people, bishops and priests, and God himself.

Dates: May 17-22, 2008

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 83 participants—5 Archbishops and Bishops, and 78 Priests from 10 countries

**5. Theme: Caring for Priests: A Need of the Hour**

**Objectives: Please refer to the objectives in no. 4.**

Dates: September 8-14, 2008

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 90 Priests, Archbishops, and Bishops from 10 countries

**6. Theme: Paradigm Shift in the Mission and Ministry of the Priest in Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to help priests face the challenges of the ever-changing society of the modern world;

b) to search for relevant spiritual formation for priests of Asia;

c) to strengthen the spiritual life of priests.

Dates: May 10-15, 2010

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 90 participants—6 Archbishops and Bishops from 10 countries

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**7. Theme: Spiritual Formation of Priests**

**Objectives:**

a) to help priests face the challenges of the ever-changing society of the modern world;

b) to search for relevant spiritual formation for priests of Asia;

c) to strengthen the spiritual life of priests.

Dates: November 14-19, 2010

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 79 Participants—76 Priests, and 3 Bishops from 9 countries

**8. Theme: Bishop as Father, Brother, and Friend of Priests**

**Objectives:**

a) to discuss and reflect deeply on the ministry and mission of the bishop as the shepherd of his flock, with the collaboration of priests;

b) to enhance his awareness of his sanctity in order to be an example to his priests and the faithful of his diocese;

c) to help reflect deeply on his significant role as the father, brother, and friend of his priests and as a servant-leader in Christ.

Dates: May 16-21, 2011

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 45 Archbishops and Bishops from 8 countries

**9. Theme: The Impact of Pedophilia Crisis on the Church in Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to make bishops and formators aware of the gravity of pedophilia on the Church in Asia;

b) to explore the possibilities of remedial measures for pedophilia-affected persons and organize programs to train skilled personnel to handle possible pedophilia-crisis in the future;

c) to prepare guidelines for church leaders, formators, and those in charge of children's organizations for the protection of children in particular.

Dates: November 14-19, 2011

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 65 participants—1 Cardinal, 9 Archbishops and Bishops, 54 Seminary Formators, and 2 Lay persons from 7 countries

**10. Theme: Contemporary Challenges in Living Priestly Celibacy in the Context of the Present-Day Crisis in the Church in Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to help bishops, formators, and priests to reflect on how postmodern culture and moral relativism in the modern world affect priestly celibacy;

b) to help bishops and formators to become more deeply aware of their responsibility to ensure that seminarians are guided and directed to grow psychosexually during their formation towards a healthy future for a celibate priesthood;

c) to help priests meet the challenges of the present world in keeping with priestly celibacy and to maintain the dignity of the priesthood.

Dates: May 14-19, 2012

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 91 Participants—1 Cardinal, 7 Archbishops and Bishops, and 83 Priests-Formators from 7 countries

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**11. Theme: Formation of Positive, Integral, Effective and Humanly Well-Developed Priests for the Continent of Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to identify the positive aspects of human formation in seminaries;

b) to equip formators to help seminarians become humanly integrated persons;

c) to assure the Church in Asia of well-motivated, emotionally mature, humanly, and spiritually well-developed priests with a strong sense of commitment to the Church and her mission.

Dates: May 6-11, 2013

Venue: Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand

Attendance: 91 Participants—11 Archbishops and Bishops, and 80 Seminary Formators from 10 countries

**12. Theme: Proclaiming the Joy of the Gospel as Renewed Evangelizers in Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to understand what 'new evangelization' means in an Asian context;

b) to equip bishops and priests involved in priestly formation with insights and guidelines regarding the relevance, perspectives, and challenges of the 'new evangelization';

c) to identify, explore, and understand the pastoral challenges of 'new evangelization' in shepherding parish communities in Asia;

d) to face the challenges faced by priests in shepherding and proclaiming the gospel in new media.

Dates: November 10-15, 2014

Venue: Redemptorists Center in Pattaya, Thailand

Attendance: 103 Participants—2 Cardinals, 19 Archbishops and Bishops, 72 Priests, 2 Deacons, and 7 Lay persons from 11 countries

**13. Theme: Shepherding Families in Asia: Contemporary Challenges and Responses (in partnership with the FABC-Office of Laity and Family)**

**Objectives:**

a) to understand current challenges from specifically Asian perspectives on marriage and family life that are contrary to genuine Christian teaching;

b) to empower bishops and priests with insights, means, and guidelines in strengthening and safeguarding the sanctity of marriage and family life;

c) to motivate the participants to identify, explore, and devise pastoral plans to promote and strengthen good Christian families after the example of the Holy Family in Nazareth, sustained by the Trinitarian relationships.

Dates: May 16 – 20, 2016

Venue: The Salesian Retreat House, Hua Hin, Thailand

Attendance: 99 Participants—14 Archbishops and Bishops, 24 Priests, 2 Religious nuns, and 59 Lay Leaders from 14 countries

**14. Theme: Seminar-Workshop on The Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults: The Accountability of Bishops in Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to brief the bishops of Asia on the current global situation of clergy sexual abuse of minors and how it is handled by the Church;

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b) to highlight the significant canonical procedures on matters of sexual abuse of minors, especially on the accountability of bishops;

c) to draw out from the participant-bishops significant questions about handling sexual abuse cases;

d) to respond to these questions not only through the eyes of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) but also through the sharing of cases from the participant bishops;

e) to assist episcopal conferences of Asia (for those who have none) to map out their own protocol/procedures aligned with the CDF guidelines.

Dates: May 15 – 19, 2017

Venue: The Salesian Retreat House, Hua Hin, Thailand

Attendance: 62 Participants—mostly Bishops and a few priest delegates from 11 countries

**15. Theme: Consultation of Selected Participants Involved in Assisting Priests in Difficulty in Asia**

**Objectives:**

a) to let professionals share their own experiences in caring for priests in distress;

b) to share the best practices that they follow at the center where they work;

c) to propose the kind of action needed in dealing with priests having special difficulties based on their experiences;

d) to come up with proposals that are to be presented to the Central Committee of the FABC.

Dates: July 23-25, 2018

Venue: Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Center, Sampran, Thailand.

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Attendance: 12 Participants—2 Bishops, 9 Priests, and 1 Lay (from the Pontifical Office of the Protection of Minors)

**16. Theme: Pastoral Perspectives on Accompaniment of Families in the Light of *Amoris Laetitia* (in partnership with the FABC-Office of Laity and Family)**

**Objectives:**

a) to deepen our insights and understanding of the previous seminar (May 2016) "Shepherding Families in Asia: Contemporary challenges and responses for Bishops, Priests, and Lay Leaders," with minds enlightened by the XI FABC Plenary Assembly deliberations and FABC study sessions;

b) to reflect on the fruits gained in the light of *Amoris Laetitia;*

c) to learn some pastoral skills in accompanying families.

Dates: November 19-23, 2018

Venue: Redemptorist Center Pattaya, Thailand

Attendance: 63 Participants—1 Cardinal, 4 Bishops, 20 Priests, and 37 Lay Leaders from 10 countries

**17. Theme: Awakening Climate Change Concerns in Seminaries (in partnership with the FABC-Office of Human Development)**

**Objectives:**

a) to equip bishops and priests involved in priestly formation with insights and guidelines regarding the situation, history, relevance, perspectives, and challenges of climate change;

b) to identify, explore, and understand the pastoral challenges of climate change in shepherding parish communities in Asia guided by *Laudato Si;*

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c) to help them share best practices and devise means of inculcating conviction and responsibility for the care of Mother Earth among future pastors;

d) to face the challenges faced by bishops and formators in accompanying young candidates in the process of becoming good shepherds and stewards of creation.

Dates: November 18-22, 2019

Venue: Salesian Center of Spirituality, Hua Hin, Thailand (Live Streamed via Facebook with the participation of thousands of netizens)

Attendance: 40 Participants: 6 Bishops, 26 Priests, 1 Religious lay Brother, and 7 Lay Persons from 10 countries

These seminars organized in the past years concretely reveal how the FABC-OC has been true to its mission to renew and empower clergy in the Asian context to deal with the contemporary challenges in their priestly life and ministry.

From these seminars, five FABC Papers were produced, namely: 1) Caring for Priests, Especially for Those with Difficulties (no. 122, 2007); 2) Asian Vocations Symposium: "Asian Vocations Today" (no. 123, 2007); 3) The Contemporary Challenges in Living Priestly Celibacy in the Context of the Present Day Crisis in the Church in Asia (no. 137, 2012); 4) Shepherding Families in Asia: Contemporary Challenges and Responses for Bishops, Priests, and Lay Leaders (no. 157, 2016); 5) Awakening Climate Change Concerns in Seminaries: For Bishops and Seminary Formators of Priests in Asia (no. 162, 2018).[4]

4 The FABC Papers has been a project of the FABC to disseminate the fruits of symposia, seminars, plenary assemblies, and even speeches of the past popes who have visited Asia. The series of papers have been circulated in print over the past years and have been helpful for students of theology in their research and dissertation writing. They can also be downloaded in the FABC website. Cf. FABC Papers, FABC Archive, http://www.fabc.org/ offices/csec/ocsec_fabc_papers.html (accessed 11 July 2022).

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Oswald Cardinal Gracias, Archbishop of Bombay, India and first and former President of the FABC,[5] once quipped that the most attended seminars organized by the FABC are those conducted by the FABC-OC. This indicates the desire of many bishops and priests to be updated about the current trends and topics that affect their ministry in the Asian context.

## Prospects Beyond 50

Looking forward to the next fifty years and beyond, what can we expect from the FABC-OC?

If not for the pandemic, a seminar would have been held in partnership with the FABC Office of Laity and Family with the theme: "Contemporary Pastoral Approaches in the Accompaniment of Asian Youth in the Light of Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Christus Vivit*: For Bishops, Priests, Formators, and Lay Leaders". The objectives of this seminar were already outlined as follows: a) to understand the current situation and challenges in youth ministry from specifically an Asian perspective in the light of *Christus Vivit*, b) to empower bishops and priests with insights, means, and guidelines in accompanying and empowering youth to be proactive apostles, c) to help participants identify, explore, and devise pastoral plans to promote and strengthen youth ministry in families, parishes, giving special attention to social media as the youths' new playground. This future seminar on youth ministry would attract bishops and priests as they stir and animate youth people who serve in their parishes and dioceses.

5 Before 2013, the main person heading the FABC was called a Secretary General. However, during the 2012 Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly held in Vietnam, further amendments of the FABC Statutes were approved by the Holy See. One of them is to call the head of the FABC a President.

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Currently, a partnership between the FABC and the Catholic Safeguarding Institute, Inc. (CSI) is being forged through the FABC-OC. In a virtual meeting initiated by the FABC-OC with the CSI held on 4 June 2022, Dr. Gabriel Dy-Liacco, President of CSI and also a member of the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, shared the following:

> The Catholic Safeguarding Institute (CSI) partners with stakeholders in the safeguarding mission of the Church. The aim of such partnerships is to implement the safeguarding mission of the Church, which Pope Francis has identified as "the protection of minors and vulnerable persons, which is an integral part of the Gospel message that the Church and all its members are called to proclaim throughout the world". These partnerships include collaboration in any of the following four mission tasks: safeguarding formation, development of a safe environment system, theological and pastoral reflection, research, and consultation, and are formalized through Memoranda of Agreement.[6]

Given the serious mandate of Pope Francis to counter abuses of clergy against minors and vulnerable persons, the partnership will ensure basic and advanced education for clergy on this aspect. The FABC-OC can tap the CSI to offer week-long formation modules like the Basic Orientation Seminar of Safeguarding Minors and Vulnerable Persons for bishops and priests of Asia.[7]

Moreover, customized seminars on specific points in the New Book VI of the Code of Canon Law instituted in January 2021 can also be organized to inform and update the clergy of Asia. The New Book VI introduced new criminal offenses

6 Pope Francis, Apostolic letter issued *motu proprio* on the protection of minors and vulnerable persons, 19 March 2019.

7 For more information on CSI, cf. https://www.catholicsafeguarding.net

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and has better defined other offenses already provided for by the Code, punishing them with different penalties. Among others, new offenses and penalties have been introduced in the area of financial and economic matters for clerics. The New Book VI also included crimes and penalties reserved to the CDF like child abuse, not only by clerics but also non-clerical religious and by lay people who occupy certain roles in the Church, as well as any such behavior with adults but committed with violence or abuse of authority.[8]

Finally, as we approach the Continental Phase of the Synod on Synodality initiated by Pope Francis that will take place from September 2022 to March 2023, we are just excited to find out the results of the listening process from the National Consultations done in the episcopal conferences of Asia. One can just foresee burning issues like priestly lifestyle, effectiveness, relevance, social communications, and the like that have to be dealt with in the ministry of bishops and priests in their service to the peripheries.

The FABC 50 General Conference that will gather around 150 bishops all over Asia will reflect on new pathways that the Church in this continent needs to consider as urgent in order to respond to "the signs of the times" beyond two decades of the new millennium. Fifteen emerging realities have been identified for pastoral reflection and action, namely: global pandemic, globalization, climate emergency, digitalization, urbanization, migrants and refugees, the transformation of cultures, youth, gender issues, family values, indigenous peoples, human dignity, and a transforming church. Given these realities, strikingly, one of the prospects for consideration

8 Holy See, *New Book VI of the Code of Canon Law,* 1 June 2021, Holy See Press Office, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/ pubblico/2021/06/01/210601b.html (accessed 13 July 2022).

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is for the FABC to offer Asian bishops and episcopal conferences more platforms for the formation of bishops themselves to be "Apostles of Listening" in their respective ecclesiastical territories as they journey with the people they shepherd in the spirit of synodality.[9]

9 Cf. FABC Papers, *FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document,* 29 November 2020, FABC Archive, http://www.fabc.org/offices/csec/ocsec_fabc_papers.html (accessed 13 July 2022).

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