The FABC Vision of Dialogue as an Appropriate Approach for the Catholic Church in Vietnam in its Mission of Evangelization Today

Hoan Chinh Tran, SJ

Contextual Background

Asia is the world's largest and most populated continent. It includes one-third of the land area of the whole world (17,124,000 square miles) and is home to almost 60% of humanity.[1] It is known for its diversity, contrasts, and contradiction, with rapid economic growth and social change, overwhelming poverty, and cultural and religious pluralism (cf. *FABC Papers* # 81, 31-43). In addition, natural calamities such as earthquakes, floods, typhoons, and diseases are causing significant damage to households, the economy, and the ecosystem. Young people are forced to migrate to cities or abroad in search of better jobs, thus, becoming possible victims of injustice or contributors to the erosion of Asian family values.

Asia is also home to the most influential world religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.[2] In this continent, only 4.5% of the total population are Christians, with the Catholic population a minority at 3% (cf. *FABC Papers* # 131, 1-2). In that context, the people of God in Asia are invited to be missionaries through creative, innovative, dialogical, and

1 James H. Kroeger, "Walking the Path of Dialogue in Asia: Insights from the FABC," *Studia Missionalia* 58 (2009): 45.

2 Kroeger, "Walking the Path of Dialogue," 45-47.

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inculturated approaches to the Gospel.[3] This also extends to dialogue with ancient cultures, religions, and philosophical traditions.

After the fall of the Republic of Vietnam in 1975, the country was reunified under a Communist rule. Vietnam facilitated the so-called "socialist-oriented market economy" wherein agricultural collectives, private businesses, and foreign investments were discouraged. Paradoxically, Vietnam has become a capitalist economy behind a Communist façade. Despite these, crucial changes in the political system, like the advancement of religious policies have taken place. However, wounds and divisions still linger as the historic and devastating conflict that left more than three million Vietnamese dead on both sides.

The relationship between Catholics and communists has had a conflictual and complicated history. In the past, Ho Chi Minh perceived the Vietnamese Catholic Church as a threat to national security to the point that he publicly expressed his desire to abolish it completely.[4] Yet, the Catholic-communist relationship has gradually improved since 1980. The Vietnamese communist government continues to discuss with the Vatican for the normalization of diplomatic relations. Meanwhile, a few are aware of the evangelization efforts in Vietnam.[5] While most Vietnamese Catholics have access to religious services, a number would avoid dialogue with the communists and followers of other faiths. Thus, being Church is practiced only at home and in places of worship only.

3 Ibid., 47.

4 Peter C. Phan, "Christianity in Vietnam Today (1975-2013): Contemporary Challenges and Opportunities," International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church, 14:1 (2014): 8-9.

5 UCANews.com Reporter, "Evangelization Efforts Proving Ineffective in Vietnam," *UCANews,* March 9, 2017, https://international.la-croix.com/news/evangelization-efforts-proving-ineffective-in-vietnam/4816 (accessed February 21, 2020).

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Conflict Between Vietnamese Catholics and Communists

Vietnam was under French rule for nearly eighty years (1858-1945). Since then, Catholics have become active in various nationalist movements. A wave of anti-French sentiment led to a political agenda of establishing an independent national church. According to Charles Keith, Ho Chi Minh's independent movement (Viet Minh) showed no anti-Catholicism sentiment, but it sharply criticized foreign missionaries and Western influence.[6] Therefore, when the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi was established on September 2, 1945, the Catholics supported the Viet Minh and its new government. On November 4, 1945, the Vietnamese bishops implored spiritual and international support from Pius XII and the peoples of goodwill, respectively.[7] Ho Chi Minh named a few patriotic Catholic activists and well-educated intellectuals to serve in his government. He even invited Le Huu Tu, the new bishop of Phat Diem, to serve as a supreme counselor.

However, in the mindset of the Viet Minh's leaders, Catholicism was still a foreign religion, or a camouflage for external aggression. They viewed "Catholic opposition as a result not of religion in and of itself but of the highly organized, hierarchical structure of the Church, which … allowed European religious and their acolytes to undermine a national government."[8] Opposing religion was not their intent, but they aimed to remove every foreign influence as much as possible.[9]

6 Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: A Church from Empire to Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 219.

7 Keith, *Catholic Vietnam,* 216.

8 Ibid., 230-231.

9 Chu, Lan T, "Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* 3, no. 1 (2008), 157.

On the contrary, Church officials were more concerned about the consequences of the Viet Minh ideology and its promise to uphold the freedom of religion and establish a national Church.

Ho Chi Minh wanted to establish a state-managed or patriotic Catholic Church in Vietnam. Peter Phan wrote that Ho Chi Minh's primary goal "was to destroy the Vietnamese Catholic Church, which he perceived as a threat to national liberation."[10] In China, the victory of Mao Zedong's communists led to the persecution of the Chinese Catholic Church. The Vietnamese bishops feared that their national government would follow in the same footsteps. Moreover, anti-communism at the Vatican became extremely powerful and particularly affected Vietnamese Catholics.[11]

During the First Indochina War, the Vatican began to support the suppression of Communism in China and Vietnam. On November 10, 1951, the bishops of Indochina issued a pastoral letter and warned that "Communism was inimical to the Catholic faith … [and] it was impossible to be both a Catholic and a communist and that any Catholic joining the Communist Party would be excommunicated."[12] From a formerly patriotic stance, Vietnamese Catholics openly cooperated with the French troops to fight against

10 Phan, "Christianity in Vietnam," 6.

11 Keith, *Catholic Vietnam,* 231.

12 Phi Van Nguyen, "A Secular State for a Religious Nation: The Republic of Vietnam and Religious Nationalism, 1946-1963," *The Journal of Asian Studies,* Volume 77, Issue 3 (2018), https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-asian-studies/article/secular-state-for-a-religious-nation-the-republic-of-vietnam-and-religious-nationalism-19461963/6686A381A12183648E76430BC 646BC85/core-reader (accessed June 18, 2020).

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the Viet Minh.[13] This led to the estranged relations between Vietnamese Catholics and the Viet Minh nationalists in 1951. Until the end of the decade, all foreign missionaries, including Apostolic delegate John Dooley were forced to leave North Vietnam. Seminaries were forced to close. Any contact between the Northern Catholic Church and the outside world, including the Vatican, was not allowed.[14]

Article 14 (d) of the 1954 Geneva accords provided free movement for those who wished to move north-south or south-north for three hundred days. As a result, more than 810,000 people took the opportunity to move from the North to the non-communist zone south of the seventeenth parallel.[15] Over 75 % of the refugees were Catholics.[16] With North Vietnam in its control, the Communist Party adopted an anti-religious attitude. According to Peter Phan, the government's strategy "to destroy the Vietnamese Catholic Church was threefold: eliminating its leadership, demolishing its structures, and impeding its activities."[17] In 1955, Ho Chi Minh convened Vietnamese Catholic representatives in Hanoi and established the so-called "The Liaison Committee of Catholics for Patriotism and Peace" to control the Church

13 Nguyen Quang Hung. "The Relationship Between Vietnamese Communists and Christians During the Vietnam War." *S-Space of Seoul National University,* http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/42712/3/The%20Relationship%20Between%20Vietnamese%20Communists%20and%20Christians%20During%20the%20Vietnam%20War.pdf (accessed on June 10, 2020), 7.

14 Ibid., 16.

15 Robert F. Randle, *Geneva 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 462–467.

16 Peter Hansen, "Bac Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959," *University of Chicago Press,* http://online.ucpress.edu/jvs/article-pdf/4/3/173/185667/vs_2009_4_3_173.pdf, 179.

17 Phan, "Christianity in Vietnam," 6.

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and rally Catholics behind governmental policies and projects.[18]

The desire for an independent Church hierarchy was officially achieved on November 24, 1960 when Pope John XIII issued his apostolic constitution *Venerabilium Nostrorum*. However, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has not only lost its influence in society but has also been struggling to re-imagine its identity from the 1960s up to the present. Indeed, due to communist propaganda, Catholicism has been unfairly accused as a "foreign" religion in the country.[19]

In 1960, Vietnamese bishops released a pastoral letter that strongly condemned the communist ideology. They strongly emphasized the impossibility of peaceful coexistence, "as if there could be coexistence between good and evil, honest people and criminals, God and Satan."[20] Consequently, they warned of ex-communication to those who would join or support the Communist Party.

The Vietnamese Church started to show her reconciliatory stance and readiness to collaborate in the1980s. However, the Communist government retained its repressive measures. A case in point is the government's confiscation of properties and the arrest of Jesuit Father Superior Nguyen Cong Doan. To demolish the organizational structures of the Church, the Communist Party established the Committee for the Unification of Patriotic Catholics in 1983. It was motivated to nullify the authority of the Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy by erecting a national patriotic Church with no ties to the Holy See and the universal Church. In 1984, Archbishop Nguyen Kim Dien was barred from pastoral works and put under

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 139.

20 Lan Chu, "Catholicism vs. Communism, Continued: The Catholic Church in Vietnam," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies,* 3, no. 1 (2008): 5

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house arrest until his death in 1988.[21] From 1987 to 1988, tensions between the Church and the government increased, especially when the Vatican canonized 117 martyrs on June 19, 1988. The communist government asserted that martyrs had not been killed for their faith but for their collaboration with the French colonizers.[22]

Theology of Dialogue

Dialogue has been defined, understood, and perceived in various ways. It has often been understood narrowly as bilateral and multilateral conversations between parties concerning dividing issues, conflicting interests, and varying claims. It is also "understood as shared communication for mutual understanding, to address divisions or conflicts, or to nurture solidarity for peace and justice or mutual empowerment."[23] According to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, dialogue means "reciprocal communication, leading to a common goal or, at a deeper level, to interpersonal communication."[24] To offer some useful definitions of dialogue and explore and deepen their meaning, this section

21 Tran Thi Lien, "The Challenge for Peacewithin South Vietnam's Catholic Community: A History of Peace Activism," *Peace and Change,* September 23, 2013, https://online library.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/pech.12040, 466-467.

22 J.B. An Dang, "Jubilee of Vietnamese Martyrs Begins", *Asia News,* June 20, 2018, http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Jubilee-of-Vietnamese-martyrs-begins-44223.html (accessed June 20, 2020).

23 World Council of Churches, "Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations with People of Other Religions," January 1, 2004, https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation/interreligious-trust-and-respect/ecumenical-considerations-for-dialogue-and-relations-with-people-of-other-religions/ (accessed July 14, 2020), n. 18-19.

24 Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID), "Dialogue and Proclamation: Reflection and Orientations on Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ," Vatican Archive, May 19, 1991, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/ rc_pc_interelg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html (accessed July 16, 2020), no. 9.

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looks at the biblical and theological foundations for dialogue through perspectives of the universal Church, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), and the Vietnamese Catholic Church.

Universal Church Perspectives

Five documents of Vatican II (*Nostra Aetate, Lumen Gentium, Ad Gentes, Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dignitatis Humanae*) contain important elements, theological reflections, and orientations for understanding the Church's role vis-à-vis the world and other religions. According to James Kroeger, some general themes reflect the spirit of openness and common ground for dialogue:

> The need to recognize within religions 'elements of truth and grace' (AG 9), 'treasures which the bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth' (AG 11), 'a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men' (NA 2); recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit (GS 11; AG 4); the presence of treasures of the ascetical and contemplative life (AG 15, 18) and the presence of 'Seeds of the Word' (LG 17; AG 11).[25]

First, *Nostra Aetate*, or the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions states that it is necessary to "lay the foundation for dialogue, for a new system of communication between people of different faiths."[26] The Council has openly acknowledged the presence of positive values in the religious life of individual believers and the traditions from which they belong.[27] *Nostra Aetate* also speaks of "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all" (NA 2).

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25 James Kroeger, *Becoming Local Church* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 2003), 91.

26 Miikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (London: Brill Academic Publisher, 1992), 85.

27 PCID, *Dialogue and Proclamation,* no. 17.

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Other Vatican II documents attempt to redefine the missionary means of the Church.[28] *Gaudium et Spes*, or the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, reaffirms that Jesus Christ, through the mystery of his incarnation, death, and resurrection, is at work in each human person in the hopes of bringing about interior renewal:

> This holds true not for Christians only but also for all persons of goodwill in whose hearts grace is active invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal mystery (GS 22).

Gaudium et Spes speaks of universal dialogue, which is not merely about issues and projects but about entering into a deeper level of conversation and encounter (cf. GS 23). Dialogue is proof of the Church's solidarity, respect, and love for the entire human family (cf. GS 3), and is to be promoted at the international and national levels in a sincere, prudent, and neutral manner (cf. GS 21, 85). Catholics are invited to initiate and be enthusiastic in entering into dialogue with all peoples of good will (cf. GS 88, cf. AA 14). The dignity of the human person, the human community, and the meaning of human activity lay the foundations for the Church's dialogue with the modern world (GS 40).

In the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity or *Ad Gentes*, this idea of "a ray of truth" is also presented and expressed as the presence of "the seeds of the Word" (AG 11) in which God has sown his elements of goodness, truth, and grace. This recognition by the teaching authority opened the Church's doors to dialogue and collaboration with ecumenical and interfaith counterparts (NA 2; cf. GS 92-93): "Let

28 Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine,* 86.

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Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral good found among non-Christians, as well as their social and cultural values" (NA 2). To make dialogue possible, *Christus Dominus,* or the decree on bishops, places in the very nature of the Church the integral elements of clarity, humility, courtesy, prudence, and truth (cf. CD 13).

Pope Paul VI's *Ecclesiam Suam* was received warmly in Asia. It speaks of a dialogue that is rooted in divine communication. There are four levels to reflect this divine communication imagery: (1) within the Catholic Church itself, (2) with other Christians, (3) with people of other living faiths, and (4) with the world and all its peoples.[29] Furthermore, the pope affirmed the competence of the Church to engage in these matters, "The Church has something to say; the Church has a message to deliver; the Church has a communication to offer" (ES 65). And this quest for dialogue extends to questions that concern the full meaning of human life.

FABC Perspectives

Asia is home to almost 60% of the world's total population. Catholics are a minority at 3%. The minority situation indicates that "being a missionary Church in Asia" demands creative, innovative, dialogical, and inculturated approaches to the Gospel.[30] Therefore, *Ecclesiam Suam* has not only been received but developed to appropriate to the Asian context.

Right from the very beginning, the spirit of openness and dialogue was emphasized during the first meeting of bishops in 1970: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia,

29 James Kroeger, "Exploring Diverse Pathways in Dialogue," *The Missions Newsletter,* Volume 58 (2020): 5.

30 Kroeger, "Walking the Path of Dialogue," 47.

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that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development."[31] Hence, dialogue is at the forefront of FABC's missionary orientation. This internal activity opposes the popular belief that dialogue is an external methodology and an adaptation. FABC confirmed in its First Plenary Assembly that dialogue is "a new way of being Church" (FAPA I, 332).

The FABC wanted to pursue a programmatic evangelization by building genuine local Churches. It resulted in a "triple dialogue" that has guided Asia's missionary orientation ever since (*FABC Papers* # 130, 5). In 1978, dialogue became a prominent theme of the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate.[32] Dialogue has been described as "a witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives, in their particular cultural context, their own religious traditions, their socio-economic conditions."[33]

Almost simplistically, dialogue may be interpreted using the diagram below:[34]

Local Church (subject)	<<<	**DIALOGUE** (approach)	>>>	**Asia's Peoples, focus on Poor** **Asia's Cultures** **Asia's Religions**

James Kroeger interprets this dialogical approach within a two-fold process of dynamic interaction:

31 "Asian Bishops' Meeting: Message and Resolutions of the Asian Bishops Meeting," November 29, 1970, Manila, Philippines, n. 12 in *FAPA I*, 3-10.

32 "BIMA I: Letter of the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate," 27 July 1978, Baguio City, Philippines, *FAPA I*, 93-96.

33 "BIMA I: Letter of the First Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate," n. 5.

34 Kroeger, "The Faith-Culture Dialogue," 82-83.

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> There is always mutual reinforcement; this means that while the Church influences the people, their cultures, and religions, the Church herself is concomitantly being shaped and molded. In a word, the dynamic of inculturation is always at work. This operative paradigm of holistic evangelization [the "triple dialogue" approach] is the interpretive key to understanding and appreciating the inculturation process in Asia today. This is how the Church "lives and breathes" in Asia. Here one finds the Holy Spirit at work. This is an authentic reception and continuation of the Second Vatican Council in Asia.[35]

Similarly, in 1987, the FABC produced the *"Theses on Interreligious Dialogue"* wherein dialogue works for integral human life, peace (cf. FABC Papers # 48, 1), and self-actualization (FABC Papers # 48, 7). Towards this achievement, individuals and communities must be willing to let go of prejudices to enter into mutual understanding[36]

Perspectives of the Vietnamese Church

After their historic gathering on May 1, 1980, the Vietnamese bishops proposed dialogue, collaboration, and understanding as a response to the impetus of the Vatican II Council:

> In the plan of redemption for mankind, God took the covenant to gather together a lineage to be his own People. And through this People's history, he has revealed himself and his intention of redemption to the entire mankind. But these People are just an image and preparation for the new People of God, which is brought together by the new covenant that Jesus Christ

35 Ibid., 83.

36 James Kroeger, "An 'Asian' Dialogue Decalogue: Principles of Interreligious Dialogue from Asia's Bishops," *Loyola School of Theology,* https://www.lst.edu/community/article-archives/353-an-qasianq-dialogue-decalogue-j-kroeger-mm/ (accessed July 21, 2020).

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> establishes in His holy blood. This new covenant People is the Church of Christ, bringing together all people from every corner and country on earth over time and national boundaries (PL 6).[37]

Moreover, by placing the human person at the center of its contextual theology, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has explicated the Church's relationship with society based on three fundamental realities of human existence: human activity, community, and the centrality of the human person.[38] This person-centered pastoral development is essential to the Vietnamese Church's dialogical engagement with society. By getting involved in peoples' concrete, existential, and historical circumstances, the Vietnamese Church chooses a new direction for its evangelizing mission. The letter calls all Vietnamese Catholics to go forward with and serve the Vietnamese people by contributing effectively to the country's development:

> As the Church in the heart of Vietnam nation, we are determined to stick to the destiny of our homeland, following the national tradition and integrating it in the current life of our country. The Council teaches that "the Church goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does." (GS 40). So we have to go forward together with our people, share the common life with our nation because this homeland is the place where we are called to live as God's children ; this country is the womb carrying us in the process of implementing the vocation as children of God; this nation is the community that God gives us to serve as citizens and members of God's People (PL 9).

37 The 1980 Pastoral Letter shall be hereafter cited as PL in the in-text citations.

38 P. Hai, "The Contextual Theology of the Vietnamese Episcopal Conference in the 1980 Pastoral Letter," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 48, no. 4 (2011): 334; cf. CBCV, 1980 Pastoral Letter, n. 7; GS 40.

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In addition, the bishops also called for the expression of the faith within one's tradition and culture. Faithful to the wisdom of *Lumen Gentium,* the bishops acknowledged their beauty and goodness but urged the Catholics to have a firm grasp of the object of faith (cf. PL 11).

Meanwhile, the history between the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the Communist government clamors for the latter as the fourth priority in the dialogical approach. Towards this, the Catholics were called not to "look the past with the negative complex and judgment" (PL 14) but to look for common ground to help Vietnam toward prosperity, freedom, and happiness (cf. PL 10). Along these lines, the Vietnamese bishops also vowed to respect the autonomy of the State during the 2010 Congress:

> When engaging herself in building the society of this world, the Church "never wants to take the place of the government, but only hopes that through dialogue and mutual respect and collaboration, the Church can participate in the life of the country, in order to serve everybody." That is also a proof of the true beauty of the Gospel, using the expression of Pope Benedict XVI, in his exhortation to all of us, priests, religious and faithful: "By the life founded on charity, honesty, respect for the common good, you should prove that good Catholics are also good citizens."[39]

What the Vietnamese Church Can Learn from the FABC

The Vietnamese Catholic Church may learn from the FABC through an urgent imperative and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

Firstly, in Vietnam, only 7% of the total population are Catholics. The Vietnamese Catholic Church should turn

39 CBCV, *The Message of the 2010 Congress,* n.4.

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to dialogue as an urgent imperative "due to the perceived 'foreignness' of the Church" (*FABC Papers* # 130, 7). "Foreignness" is described as follows:

As a social institution, the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins…. The Church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and religious and cultural identity…. The Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western trained leadership and in its theology (FAPA II, 195-196).

Secondly, dialogue becomes possible if openness is present. This openness is related to recognizing the movements of God's grace, affirming the presence of the seeds of the Word in faith traditions and peoples of goodwill. What dialogue demands, in turn, is a spirit of humility. Openness, receptivity, love, and seeing the face of God in them would help the Vietnamese Catholic Church accept the new way of being Church. The Church is not exclusive, but that which "has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life" (FAPA III, 8).

Thirdly, John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* emphasizes that "the Holy Spirit is the main agent who makes possible a fruitful dialogue with the cultural and religious values of different people." This is because "the Spirit's presence ensures that the dialogue unfolds in truth, honesty, humanity and respect" (EA 21). On a related note, Vietnamese Catholics must let the Spirit direct them to work for unity and, hopefully, toward national reconciliation.

Dialogue as an Appropriate Approach in Our Evangelizing Mission

Threefold Dialogue Plus One

The triple dialogue is considered the Asian way of evangelization because "no evangelization will be lasting and fruitful if it does not travel the path of this threefold dialogue."[40] This triple dialogue is a model for the missionary activity of the local Churches in Asia, including the local Church in Vietnam.

Dialogue with all People, Especially the Poor

Asia may be rich and diverse in cultures and traditions, but many of its countries still belong in the third world. In Vietnam, the Indochina wars severed society on economic, social, and moral levels. Towards this, the Church in Vietnam is prompted to reaffirm her missionary commitment to become a "Church of the Poor." She must be involved in different pastoral and social activities to eliminate injustice within society:

> The preferential option for the poor, which the Asian context demands from all local Churches, is in deep harmony with the nature of the Church herself as the sacrament of Jesus Christ, who for us became poor and made himself a servant (*FABC Papers* # 92: 30).

For dialogue to be authentic, it requires a humble and loving exchange:

> … the Church truly renewed in and through groups and communities of Christians, especially those formed with and among the poor, truly committed to conversion and commitment to the Gospel, truly given

40 James Kroeger, *Living Mission: Challenges in Evangelization Today* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1994), 67-68.

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> to the service and the true liberation in full evangelical sense (given in EN) of the poor and the powerless among our peoples, truly dedicated to a presence, witness and self-giving which proclaims in life the Gospel amid the world.[41]

To work for liberation means empowering the poor towards independence. This necessitates awakening their consciousness to unjust structures and helping them realize their God-given dignity and right to self-determination. This resonates well in the Vietnamese bishops' 2011 Pastoral Letter:

> Evangelization also incites the faithful to serve humans more generously, particularly the poor and the abandoned. Dialogue with the poor helps the Church learn the way of looking at Christ, who realizes in the poor the need to be loved and respected rather than mere material things. At the same time, this dialogue also helps the Church discover the new forms of poverty, and be more sensitive to the changes in society so that she may respond appropriately under the prompting of the Holy Spirit…. Christian communities should find a way to love and serve them concretely, accompany them in the trials and difficulties of life, help them realize the joy of faith by being united with the Crucified, and completing what is lacking in Christ's affliction for the sake of His body, the Church.

Hence, the Catholic Church in Vietnam chooses the option for the poor as one of her most fundamental ways to embody the Gospel and witness it as a sign of hope in situations of injustice, hopelessness, and despair.

41 John Paul II, *Address of His Holiness John Paul II to the Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate,* Vatican Archive, January 28, 1979, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1979/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19790128_messi-co-puebla-episc-latam.html (accessed September 5, 2020).

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Interreligious Dialogue

The role and significance of interreligious dialogue in the evangelizing mission of the Vietnamese Church are not yet fully recognized. To be authentically rooted in the Asian soil marked by a wonderful yet complex diversity in religious traditions, Vietnamese Catholics must dialogue with believers of other religions, such as Buddhism (and Caodaism and Hoa Hao), Confucianism, and Taoism. The FABC recommends:

> Religious leaders, social activists, artists, and scholars, as well as communicators from different religions of Asia, must engage in inclusive and sustained dialogues leading toward deeper interreligious understanding. Elaborating the richness of religious experience and underlining common-ness rather than differences will contribute to more profound and more sincere dialogues (FAPA IV, 236).

In interreligious dialogue, both sides need to overcome past prejudices and misunderstandings to learn from the heritage and wisdom of each other's religions and cultures. Christians are invited to keep "an openness of faith to God's universality of grace" (*FABC Papers 90 #*, 11-12). It requires the openness of the heart and mind so that mutual acceptance and respect may ensue. Hence, the Vietnamese Catholic Church must take the initiative to readjust and harvest the fruits of this interreligious dialogue. Interreligious dialogues are not about exchanges of doctrines but everyday living: "dialogue must take place in daily life by communicating, doing business, trading, and sharing with each other. Religions must be the foundation for people to come close to one another."[42]

Dialogue with Culture

The *Quoc Ngu*, or Vietnam's national writing system, has helped foreign missionaries and local Catholics integrate

42 CBCV, *2001 Pastoral Letter,* no. 13.

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Catholic values into national traditions, cultures, and society via dictionaries, literature, poems, dramas, songs, plays, and daily customs.[43] Peter Phan writes,

> From its very beginning, the Christian mission has always sought to incarnate the Good News in the cultures of the peoples it evangelized. It did this not only by translating its sacred text into their languages but also adapting its message to their culture.[44]

However, Vietnamese Catholics were considered traitors to their cultures and tradition due to the conflict between the Catholic faith and ancestral worship. Therefore, to make the Gospel more rooted effectively in Vietnamese culture and tradition, the Vietnamese bishops stressed the importance of inculturation:

> In light of the Mystery of the Incarnation, the Church realizes that inculturation and respect for the indigenous character are intrinsic requirements of our Christian faith. Upon receiving the Gospel, a local Church takes the responsibility of integrating the Gospel values into the culture of her own nation. This process does not eradicate but purifies and enriches the features of our national culture by virtue of the Gospel values, particularly the value of the love "to the end" and "love of enemies."

To achieve a true and dynamic inculturation, Christians must participate and immerse in the dialogue of life (cf. *FABC Papers* # 90:10). Although inculturation is still a big challenge for the local Church in Vietnam, she has made many attempts to integrate the Gospel values into the culture of her own nation through chanting, meditation, Marian devotions,

43 UCANews Reporter, "Church Praised for Role in Romanization of Vietnamese Script," *Union of Catholic Asian News,* October 30, 2019, https://www.ucanews.com/news/church-praised-for-role-in-romanization-of-vietnamese-script/86428# (accessed September 5, 2020).

44 Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 25.

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processions, oriental-style Church buildings, ancestral altars, burning incense, death anniversaries, marriage rites, and funeral rites. From the FABC perspective, "dialogue with cultures or inculturation takes place when the local Church lives its faith and the Gospel in terms of the cultures of its peoples, the Church being enriched internally by these cultures and in turn transforming them from within" (FAPA I, 266).

Dialogue with the Communist Government

The Vietnamese Catholic Church sees dialogue with the Communist government as imperative to national reconciliation. In their 1980 Pastoral Letter, the Vietnamese bishops directed the Catholics to remove their anti-communist stance and adopt openness, solidarity, and aspiration for social integration instead. In this way, Catholics should be able to contribute to faithfully building a just society. The same pastoral letter makes mention of the Catholic Church's involvement in numerous social, educational, and charitable works. Even Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI mentioned holistic liberation as imperative to the attainment of justice and peace:

> … the Church invites all her members to be loyally committed to building a just, supportive and fair society. Her intention is certainly not to replace government leaders; she wishes only to be able to play a just role in the nation's life, at the service of the whole people, in a spirit of dialogue and respectful collaboration…. By a life founded on charity, honesty, and respect for the common good, you should prove that good Catholics are also good citizens. [45]

45 Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam on Their *Ad Limina* Visit," Vatican Archive, June 27, 2009, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/june/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090627_ad-limina-viet-nam.html (accessed March 13, 2021).

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On the international level, after long and patient discussions, the Vatican has achieved significant steps toward establishing diplomatic relations with Vietnam. The Catholic Church and the communist regime can coexist with opposing worldviews and ideologies. The Holy See has had a non-resident pontifical representative to Vietnam since 1975. Since 2007, top leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Government have been going on several trips to the Vatican to enhance mutual understanding. Up to now, both sides have continued to keep in contact.

The road toward full religious freedom and noninterference in the Church's internal affairs remains a long and arduous task. Although the Church and the State are different, both share a common aspiration for liberation, harmony, and building a just society. The Vietnamese Catholics continue to live up to their vocation as good Catholics and citizens that contribute to integral human development. Thus, they will opt to be on the side of dialogue in their evangelizing mission, even if it means engaging with the Communist government almost repetitively.

Conclusion

This paper presented the FABC' s vision of dialogue by exploring its theology and its application to the unique situation of Vietnam. Its triple dialogue scheme appeared to be received well in the Asian context. However, in Vietnam's context, much work has to be done toward achieving religious freedom and integral human development. Furthermore, the author adds "dialogue with the government" as a potential addition so that the long and deep-seated struggle between the Vietnamese Catholic Church and the Communist government would hopefully come to an end.