

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2019
Pages: 125-130

Editorial

The Theologian in the Local Church

One of the unique contributions of Vatican II is the theology of the local Church. Whereas in the pre-Vatican II period the emphasis was on the universal Church, its unity and uniformity and the Papacy, in Vatican II there is a shift of emphasis to the local Churches with their diversity and legitimate autonomy. The local Church is the concrete manifestation of the universal Church. The local Church is fully the Church, not just an administrative unit of the universal Church. However, Vatican II documents did not give a precise definition of the local Church. 'Local Church' could mean a Basic Christian Community, a Eucharistic assembly, a parish, a diocese, an individual *sui iuris* Church, a regional Church, a national Church, etc.

This was continued in the post-conciliar documents and various documents from Bishops' conferences. For example, Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* says:

Nevertheless this universal Church is in practice incarnate in the individual Churches made up of such or such an actual part of mankind, speaking such and such a language, heirs of a cultural patrimony, of a vision of the world, of an historical past, of a particular human substratum. Receptivity to the wealth of the individual Church corresponds to a special sensitivity of modern man. Let us be very careful not to conceive of the universal Church as the sum, or, if one can say so, the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different individual Churches. In the mind of the Lord the Church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world.¹

It is interesting to note how this theology is reaffirmed by Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, which underscores that though unity of teaching and practice is necessary, it

¹Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 62.

does not exclude variety of interpretations: “Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For ‘cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle... needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied.’”² In fact, the Pope is referring to the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 44), and various other post-Conciliar documents, including his own Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (nos. 69, 117). Similarly, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences has given great attention to the theology of the local Church. For example, FABC Papers, especially no. 60 is an excellent example for the theology of the local Church.³ “A local Church emerges from the encounter between a people and the Gospel.”⁴ It is the “historical actualization of the mystery of God in Christ.”⁵

It is important that the ecclesial identity, concrete human experience in the context, unique social, cultural contexts and resources and traditions are not lost in a universal concept of theology, but that they receive significant place and role in the theology, contributing to the development of theology.⁶ This calls for a new understanding of the Church, and a re-discovery of the incarnational theology in the Local Church, the vocation of the theologian in such a new understanding and re-discovery. The theologian committed to theologize in the local Church need to dialogue with the indigenous religious traditions, philosophies, etc. Moreover, in this process, a special attention is to be paid to the ‘voice of the marginalized’ and the ‘cry of the poor.’⁷ Local Church and theology are not threats to the ‘universal,’ but they are complementary. Through dialogue both enrich each other and develop.

This also means that the theologian takes the local culture seriously, as a mode and place of God’s revelation. This does not mean accepting everything in the culture as it is. There should be a

²Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 3.

³FABC 60 - *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context* (1991), FABC Papers, No. 60, 1990, http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_60.pdf

⁴FABC 60 - *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context*, 5.

⁵FABC 60 - *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context*, 12.

⁶Cfr. Antonio Autiero and Laurenti Magesa, “Introduction,” in *The Catholic Ethicist in the Local Church*, ed. Antonio Autiero and Laurenti Magesa, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2018, 1.

⁷Kuncheria Pathil and Dominic Veliath, *An Introduction to Theology*, Bangalore: Theological Publication in India, 2013, 79-81.

process of sifting to discern – but without being judgmental – what can be accepted and what can be helpful in the incarnational process of the faith in the given context. Thus, inculturation and indigenization are significant functions of the theologian.

Regarding inculturation and indigenization also the Second Vatican Council's contribution is invaluable. Particularly to be noted is the teaching on culture in *Gaudium et Spes*.⁸ GS clearly says that the Church "is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life..." and hence "enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves" (GS, 58). Taking cue from such positive view of culture and inculturation in the Council documents, and in post-Conciliar documents, Asian Churches have contributed a lot in the dialogue with Asian cultures. For example, *Ecclesia in Asia* underscores how inculturation and evangelization are interrelated, and it invites theologians to develop an inculturated theology.⁹

June 2019 issue of *Asian Horizons* on "The Theologian in the Local Church" discusses the theology of the local Church, the ecclesial vocation of the theologian and concrete ways that theology has been developing in the local Church. Some of the possible tensions and conflicts in the development of local theologies vis-à-vis the traditional approach to theology also are considered.

Simeiqi He points out that drawing from its rich spiritual and cultural treasures, the Chinese Catholic Church is called to articulate its own distinctive theological voice, so as to further its mission in China and contribute to the universal Church. This article proposes a triple-engagement in doing Chinese Catholic theology and identifies its two unique Chinese characteristics. Simeiqi He argues that Chinese Catholic theology ought to be done by considering the sacramentality of the history of Chinese Catholicism, everyday encounters of faith and transformation of life through inculturation, and the lived experience of Chinese Catholics as three valid grounds for theological reflection, and with sustained attention to the contextual reality of China and the ways in which Chinese Catholic identity is expressed in the Chinese language and popular pieties. She affirms that "Chinese Catholic theology will become a unique gift to the universal Church only when it claims its Chinese characteristic and takes seriously this aspect of God's revelation present in the life of the Chinese Catholic Church." At the same time, the author points

⁸Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 53-62.

⁹John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 21.

out that doing Chinese Catholic theology is a challenging task that requires the collaborative creativity of Chinese Catholic theologians in dialogue with the universal Church.

Naiju Jose Kalambukattu presents contours of new paradigms of a tribal Church in Bastar, an exclusive tribal region in the state of Chhattisgarh in India. According to him, the tribal Church in Bastar with incarnational approach must be a 'Church from Below,' which is sensitive to and fully immersed in the tribal context and breaks down the barriers of any kind in building up the Kingdom of God. Since the gospel by its very nature is intended for all peoples, ages, land and context, it is not bound exclusively to any particular culture; it enters into dialogue with and pervades all cultures. Hence, the gospel must be adapted to different cultural contexts and the message of the gospel, which is a message of love and freedom, especially to the captives, the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized, must be articulated in the cultural categories of the people, argues Kalambukattu. He emphasises that a genuine encounter with the living Christ and his gospel with the culture of the people leads to the realization of the Church or ecclesiogenesis, a process in a new context. It is necessary to take into consideration the existing socio-cultural and religious milieu and have a genuine love and respect for all peoples, cultures and religions. This also includes what theologian can learn from the tribal people, and how tribal life, value perspectives and faith experience can be utilized for theologizing. At the same time, the theologian may need to challenge some of their perspectives and practices as well, if needed. Thus, the role of the theologian is engaging a mutually enriching dialogue.

Francis Appiah-Kubi and Gregory Aabaa deal with African indigenous resources for developing an eco-cultic spirituality. They argue that African traditional worldview provides strong religious basis for eco-cultic spirituality and thus contributes to the catholic eco-theology. For this, they describe various indigenous resources used to preserve balance and harmony in nature through the articulation of their cosmology, a land ethic, the cultic practices of totemism, taboo system and the keeping of sacred groves or sacred forests. Based on this, they argue that the project of a global catholic ecological spirituality should be able to arrive at a new understanding of the indigenous eco-cultic practices of Africans through reinterpreting and re-theologising the motives for these practices. Thus, Appiah-Kubi and Aabaa successfully show how theologians should make use of local resources to develop

indigenous theology that would in turn contribute to the development of universal theology.

Anto Amarnad discusses an evolving theology of evangelization and catechesis for the Indian context. According to him, India, which is a mosaic of diverse cultures, religions, castes, and classes with unimaginable pluralism and diversity at all levels, needs a true inculturated knowledge of faith, method of proclamation, liturgical life, moral formation, community life and transmission of the mission of the Gospel of Jesus. Referring to six paradigms of mission presented by David J. Bosch, Amarnad analyses how they are relevant for mission and catechesis in India. He emphasises the role of the local Church in evangelization, which aims at a communion in Christ in which the Church and people of different faiths share their experience of the ultimate values. This is also a process of learning from the wisdom and spiritual experiences of indigenous people.

Local Church means also the particular Church or *sui iuris* Church. Developing local theology also implies developing a theology of the *sui iuris* Church, utilizing the resources of its tradition and responding to the demands of the present context. The Catholic Church is a communion of Churches consisting of the Latin Church and the Eastern Churches. John Moolan analyses the theology of the restored adult initiation of the Syro-Malabar Church, one of the Eastern rites of India. The Catholic Church has maintained the unity of the sacraments of initiation, but in the past some of the Churches in the Catholic communion had discontinued it in practice. The Syro-Malabar Church continued to use it as the St Thomas apostolic tradition until the liturgical Latinization process of the Diamper Synod (1599). The restoration took place in 2005 with the new text for the administration of sacraments, which includes also the adult initiation. By analysing the theology of this restored rite, John Moolan points out how it can contribute to the strengthening of local theology.

Africa, a continent with varied religious background, is currently facing persistent religious violence, often between Islam and Christianity. These religious conflicts perpetuated for political, economic, social and psychological needs of some people have turned the African Continent into a conflict zone. Inaku K. Egere discusses how the theologian can combine communication and theology to manage violence in Sub-Saharan African context. Unfortunately, media with their reportage have often contributed to heightening religious tension and violence in the African continent. Egere argues that communicating theology from the point of view of peace amidst

religious violence can be an antidote to violence. He opines that sharing of common beliefs of Islam and Christianity by theologians via posters, billboards, newspapers, tracks, pamphlets, radio, TV, Internet (social media), etc. will promote interreligious harmony and peaceful coexistence of both religions.

Jojo Parecattil undertakes a comparative study of the relation between the '*Śruti* (revelation) and *Smṛti*' (tradition) literature of Hinduism and the Catholic position that Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God. In Hinduism, there is no duality between *Śruti* and *Smṛti* scriptures, instead a harmony between them is maintained. Hinduism always maintains a healthy relationship between revelation and tradition or beliefs and practices. They are complementary to each other and hence, proper attention is given to both. Parecattil explains that we can find some striking similarities between the scripture and tradition of Catholic Church with *Śruti* and *Smṛti* texts of Hinduism. Both accept the importance of tradition in scripture. He shows that this similar position of the Catholic Church and the Hindu scriptures gives ample opportunity for Bible scholars and theologians of the Local Church for dialoguing with the Indian tradition for enriching and developing its own Scriptural Doctrines. Parecattil emphasises that it is through its positive and creative encounter with other cultures that Church could also remain a meaningful presence in the world.

In developing its theology and organising its life, the local Church has to take into consideration the law of the land, besides the ecclesiastical law. Albertina Almeida discusses how this is applicable to the Indian Church, especially in the case of sexual abuse by clerics. She argues that there is a specific tripartite framework for dealing with sexual harassment of women by clerics, under a polycentric governance comprising of The Holy See, the Indian Catholic Church, and the Indian/State Government. Based on this, she makes it clear that the CBCI Guidelines on dealing with Sexual Harassment at the Workplace, the *Motu Proprio Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, as well as the Indian law are a measure of Christian theological praxis in India bearing witness in a patriarchal society ridden with various axis of discrimination. In particular, she emphasises that feminist Christian theology has the potential to birth a praxis that can hold a liberating potential for women to experience sexual harassment-free lives.

Shaji George Kochuthara

Editor-in-Chief