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Editorial

Asian Christian Heritage

Christianity had its origin in Asia. During the first Millennium, Asia was the Centre of Christianity. Though Rome became the centre of Western Christianity and the See of the Papacy, all other major centres of the Church were in Asia; all the important Ecumenical Councils of the first Millennium took place in Asia; all the major doctrines were formulated in the Asian centres; most of the important theological schools were in Asia.

Asian situation, both ecclesial and socio-cultural, is so varied:

- Although Christianity is of Asian origin, it is a majority religion only in a very few Asian countries; in many Asian countries it is a minority religion, yet it plays a significant role; in some other countries it is an insignificant minority.
- In many Asian countries Christianity reached in the first centuries, but in some other Asian countries it reached only during the colonial period. Although in some countries and regions Christian mission was rather successful, in some other countries Christian mission could never claim any significant success.
- Asia is home for many Eastern Churches, which are the first indigenous Churches of those countries; however, the Latin/Roman rite reached there later. In some other countries, it is the Latin rite that became the first indigenous Church, especially during the time of the missionary expansion. Tensions between the Latin Rite and Eastern Rites continue in some of the countries.
- Asian Church is also a persecuted Church, though in many countries it enjoys freedom.
- The socio-political and economic situation in Asia is also diverse. There are a few economically developed countries, but many Asian

countries are still poor, or in the phase of development. In many countries democratically elected governments are in power, but many countries have monarchy or military rule or communist governments. Many Asian countries also are theocratic, limiting further the freedom of religion.

- Perhaps the most significant characteristic feature of Asia must be its plurality: plurality of cultures, religions, languages, races, etc. Asia is the birthplace of most of the world religions and cultures. Asia was always pluralistic, and in all probability, it will continue to be pluralistic. So, any consideration of the Asian Christian heritage has to take into account this plurality, and hence the need of dialogue.

This issue of *Asian Horizons* reflects on Asian Christian heritage. The origin and historical development of Christianity in Asia, its unique features in theology, liturgy, ecclesiastical administration, faith formation, etc. are some of the areas treated here. Besides, how this heritage continued to evolve and how the Asian Church is trying to respond to today's challenges also are explored. Evidently, the topics included in this issue are not exhaustive, but they only indicate some of the important aspects of Asian Christian legacy. Although we do not attempt a detailed analysis of the socio-cultural, economic and political life of Asia, these factors work as an important background for the reflections presented here.

Sebastian Brock argues that any discussion of Asian Christianity needs to remember the fact that Christianity is a product of Western Asia. According to him, owing to the widespread perception of the Christian tradition as having just two basic constituents — the Greek East and the Latin West — the 'Syriac Orient,' has too often been forgotten. He reminds us that it is of the greatest importance to realise that the Christian tradition is in fact tri-partite, since the Syriac Orient constitutes the only indigenous Asian Christian tradition. Brock delineates some of the distinctive features of the Syriac Orient which are of particular relevance today. Thomas Kollampampil presents the Asian Hebraic heritage of Christianity and shows how Christianity needs the resourcing from the Jewish Hebraic heritage and how the Eastern Fathers have made of this heritage. He argues that many traditions and usages of the Eastern Churches are rooted in the biblical Semitic, Judeo-Christian antecedents of Christianity and a rediscovery of those Hebraic legacies is a must for the revitalization of the Church. John Moolan deals with the theology of one of the practices of the Eastern Churches, namely, the sacraments of

initiation. According to him, up to the fourth century, the whole Christendom kept the integrity of the sacraments of initiation, namely, baptism, chrismation and eucharist. Later, the West abandoned this integrity, whereas the East continued with this practice. Referring to the works of some of the Eastern Fathers and subsequently to the text of the liturgical celebration of the sacraments of initiation in the East Syrian rite, Moolan enunciates the theology of the sacraments of initiation. This is just one example of the richness of the liturgical heritage of the Eastern Churches of Asia.

Joseph Mattam gives an overview of Catholic Christianity in India. Christianity in India has a long history from the first century, beginning with the arrival of St Thomas the Apostle. Catholic Church in India is made up of three rites, namely, the Syro Malabar, Syro Malankara and the Latin rites. Mattam presents the origin and development of these three individual Churches and the relation among them. He also summarises the main contributions of the Church in India, and outlines some of the challenges that the Church faces today. Although a minority in India, the Church has been vibrant and thus contributes to the rich Asian Christian heritage of keeping the faith living as a minority and living in a culturally and religiously pluralistic context. Anto Amarnad explores the question whether there is anything unique in the heritage of Eastern Churches with regard to their faith formation. According to him, catechesis is a school of faith, an initiation and apprenticeship in the entire Christian life. In the Eastern Churches, the liturgy is an inevitable instrument to catechize the faithful. He explains this further by the catechetical process integrated into the liturgical celebration of sacraments and by pointing out the unique features of faith formation in the Eastern Churches. Dhanyananda Oozhikattu deals with the role of the laity in the hierarchical structure and the whole functioning of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church whose ecclesial heritage is derived from the *Mar Thoma Margam*. The lay participation in the ecclesial life of the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church is unique. The lay people play a decisive role not only in the election of the Catholicos and the Metropolitans, but also in the whole administration of the Church. The article shows how this legacy of an Asian Church can be considered a model to blend the hierarchical structure and the ecclesial functions of the laity in the Universal Church.

The following three articles discuss how the Asian Church is continuing its legacy today, responding to the challenges posed by

the context. John N. Sheveland and Sathish Kumar Thiyagarajan approach the topic from the theological perspective of the FABC. Sheveland says that North Atlantic ecclesial communities can learn much from the Asian Church. According to him, through their own distinctively Asian patterns of receptivity in theological learning, FABC and Asian theologians exemplify many key tenets of Receptive Ecumenism. Thiyagarajan evaluates the fortieth year anniversary document of FABC, *FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia — A New Evangelisation*. While the document renews FABC's commitment to the triple dialogue and attempts a novel analysis of the global issues, according to Thiyagarajan, the document lacks comprehensive understanding and concrete recommendations. Shaji George Kochuthara, summarising the origin and development of Christianity in some of the Asian countries, argues that understanding the Asian Christian heritage will help the Asian Christianity to rediscover its identity and to creatively respond to its socio-cultural and religious context and challenges. He indicates some of the challenges that Asian Christianity faces in the post-colonial phase of its existence and the need of responding more creatively to the context.

Besides the above mentioned articles on the theme selected, there is one more article dealing with another pertinent theme. Delfo C. Canceran discusses the problematic relationship between religion and violence. He points out the need of making use of the potential resources of religion as a way of advancing peace.

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