

**ASIAN
HORIZONS**

Vol. 8, No. 3, September 2014

Pages: 527-538

SHARING THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL IN ASIA THROUGH DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, has to be preached. Pope Francis adds that this must be done with a joyous heart. He further invites Catholics to do so by finding new paths in order to better fulfil the evangelizing mission of the Church. This is exactly what the Church in Asia has been doing since the Second Vatican Council. Employing the critical Asian principle to discern an appropriate methodology for doing theology in Asia, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) opted for what has come to be known as the Triple Dialogue. Christianity's dialogue with other religions is a central feature of this method. At the most recent FABC Plenary Assembly the bishops reflected on the advances made in the last forty years, as well as the challenges which lie ahead for the Church in Asia.

This article takes as starting point the first Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis which was proclaimed on 24 November 2013. As is customary of Vatican documents, the title of the exhortation is actually the first words of the document in its original Latin, i.e., *Evangelii Gaudium* (The joy of the gospel).¹ Pope Francis begins with these words:

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¹Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html#III.%E2%80%82The_new_evangelization_for_the_transmission_of_the_faith

The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come (§ 1).

Evangelii Gaudium in Asia

As far as the Catholic Church in Asia is concerned the new paths for the Church's journey in the years to come will have to take seriously Christianity's engagement and relationship with the many religions in Asia. Not only because Christians number no more than three or four percent of the total population of Asia, but more so because it will be the Asian Church, if anyone at all, who will lead the way towards a more positive appreciation of religious pluralism which is a reality within the contemporary post-modern world in the global realm. How the various religions engage with and encounter one another will to a great extent determine the future of not only religions in general but of the human community as well. It is, as it were, the Holy Spirit specially ordaining the Asian Church to show the way and map out new paths for what it really means to be living in harmony with the other great wisdom and religious traditions of humankind.

If the universal Church, in discussing the *New Evangelization*,² is exploring how Roman Catholics must be united as "part of a determined effort to give new fervour to the faith and to the testimony of Christians and their communities" (§ 9), Asian Catholics will have to do so in the context of the overall religious life in Asia. If Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today (Heb 13:8), this reflection is especially important in Asia where the majority of the population go on with life, independent of Christ. While the universal Church may be more concerned with why Jesus Christ has not made a more significant impact in the life of the people in general, we in Asia should perhaps be asking how our message of Christ and the Christian religion can be more appropriately presented and appreciated in the context of the religiously plural Asian world. Instead of asking why persons of other religions are not embracing Christ and the Church, we might have to begin first by asking what

²Synod of Bishops, XIII Ordinary General Assembly, The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, *Instrumentum Laboris*, Vatican City, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20120619_instrumentum-xiii_en.html

Christianity needs to do in order to be more relevant to the local cultures and accepted by the peoples of Asia. Even if straightforward answers are not forthcoming, it is important that the correct questions continue to be asked.

On her part, the Church will have to be more dependent upon divine guidance and be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who blows where it wills (Jn 3:8), even in and through the other religions of the world. Dialogue will probably be the means where some of these questions will be answered. This will be in keeping with a thrust as presented by the document on the *New Evangelization*: "The question is not simply devising something new or undertaking unprecedented initiatives in spreading the Gospel, but living the faith in the spirit of it being a divine proclamation" (§ 9).

German theologian Georg Evers puts it rather bluntly: in light of the "new questions and problems posed by the phenomenon of religious pluralism," it is ridiculous that we "turn to the stock of old answers and traditional theological method and declare that the new answers are lacking and not compatible with the Catholic faith." What is needed, instead, is that "the Asian Churches and theologians [ought to be] called to be the pioneers to do the original theological work from their particular experiences, in order to help the wider theological community to find new orientation and agreement."³

Uniqueness of the Asian Church

As early as the 1970s Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe was already insisting that "contextualizing theology takes the concrete local context seriously... Authentic theological reflection can only take place as the *theologia in loco*, discerning the contextuality within the concrete context."⁴ Thus, it is appropriate that we begin the present reflection by identifying features which make up the contextual realities of the Church in Asia. In comparison with Western Christianity one can point to certain specifics which, when pulled together, can be regarded as unique to or characteristic of Asian Christianity. Protestant theologians within the association of Asian theological schools refer to this as the "critical Asian principle," a

³Georg Evers, "Recognise the Creativity of the Local Churches," *Jeevadhara* 31/183 (May 2001) 189, 192, in 187–192.

⁴Shoki Coe, "Contextualizing Theology," in *Mission Trends No. 3, Third World Theologies*, ed. Gerard H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, New York: Paulist Press, 1976, 19–24, at 22.

principle which has served “as a frame of reference” for doing theology.⁵ The following three features best capture them.

The first is the fact that except for the Syriac or St Thomas Christians of the Malabar Coast in India and some younger churches, such as the Church in Mongolia and the newer Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, most of the other churches across Asia were established under the auspices of European colonialism. They are therefore linked to colonial expansionism and Western domination. Sri Lanka theologian Aloysius Pieris calls this the “unholy alliance of the missionary, the military and the merchant.”⁶ Secondly, except for the Philippines, East Timor, and to a certain extent South Korea, all the other churches are also small in numbers in proportion to their nation’s population. World Council of Churches’ theologian Deenabandhu Manchata has this to add: “Most of these are also composed of socially and economically disempowered sections, with very little or no public space at all, as fragmented minority communities often in hostile contexts.”⁷ Thirdly, and following from the first two features above, there is a heightened consciousness amongst scholars today that Asian Christianity is situated within a rich and plural context of the many poor, the many cultures, and the many religions of the Asian continent. Pieris points out that “the common denominator linking Asia with the rest of the Third World is its overwhelming poverty. The specific character defining Asia within the other poor countries is its multifaceted religiousness.”⁸

These three features, which constitute the critical Asian principle, have served as hermeneutical lens with which Asian theologians do theology. They have also guided the reflections of the church’s pastoral magisterium in Asia, especially with respect to the theology advanced by the Roman magisterium. The pastoral magisterium in Asia can be discerned through the directives advanced by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC).

⁵Emerito P. Nacpil, “The Critical Asian Principle,” in *What Asian Christians are Thinking: A Theological Source Book*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood, Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1976, 3–6, at 5.

⁶Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, Quezon City: Claretians, 1988, 50.

⁷Deenabandhu Manchata, “Interrogating Asian Ecclesiologies for Purposeful Theological Engagement for Asian Ecumenism,” in *Asian Handbook for Theological Education and Ecumenism*, ed. Hope Antone et al., Oxford: Regnum, 2013, 175–185, at 175.

⁸Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, 69.

From Vatican II to FABC

As the universal Church celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the Church in Asia also commemorates the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the FABC. Since its juridical founding in 1972 and its first plenary assembly in 1974 the FABC has had nine other assemblies, the latest held in December 2012 in Xuan Loc, located in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. This was the tenth plenary assembly and will henceforth be referred to as FABC X.

The institution of the FABC can actually be traced back to the Second Vatican Council. It was during this period, while in Rome, that many Asian bishops were meeting one another for the very first time and developed friendships which they then continued to nurture upon their return to Asia. They began to talk informally about the need for a structure which would enable them to have more interactions amongst bishops across Asia.

The papal visit of Paul VI to Asia in November 1970 provided the occasion for the bishops of Asia to come together in Manila, the Philippines. It brought together 180 bishops for what has come to be known as the Asian Bishops' Meeting. During the gathering the notion of a Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was officially conceived and conceptualized.⁹ In his message to the bishops at FABC X, Cardinal Rosales of the Philippines recounted that after the papal visit, "a select group of leading Asian Church men met at the Jesuit Francis Xavier Provincial House in Manila, with the Jesuit Provincial, then Father Horacio de la Costa, assisting them." He named them as Cardinals Valerian Gracias of Bombay, Stephen Kim of Seoul, Justin Darmojuwono of Semarang, Bishops Stanislaus Lokuang of Taipeh, Francis Hsu of Hong Kong and Mariano Gaviola of the Philippines and suggested that they were simply "[t]aking off from Vatican II's *Christus Dominus* on the need of regional conferences" (p. 1).¹⁰

In an official *Message to Catholics in Asia* at the end of FABC X, the bishops remarked that "[t]o this day the key ideas of the Council — the people of God, the Kingdom of God, integral evangelization,

⁹C.G. Arévalo, "...The Time of the Heirs," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, Documents from 1970 to 1991, vol. 1, ed. Gaudencio Rosales & C. G. Arévalo, Quezon City: Claretian, 1997, xviii. [Hereafter cited as *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1].

¹⁰Gaudencio B. Cardinal Rosales, *Message of the Extraordinary Delegate to FABC 10th Plenary Assembly* (Xuan Loc, Vietnam, 10 December 2012), accessed at http://www.fabc.org/index_10th_plenary.html.

communion, co-responsibility, collegiality, participation, dialogue, liturgical renewal, engagement with the modern world — continue to serve as guiding principles for the renewal of the Church in Asia” (p. 2).¹¹ It is in this spirit of the Second Vatican Council that the FABC has been renewing and rejuvenating the Church in Asia throughout the last forty years.

FABC’s Spirit of Dialogue

The spirit of Vatican II was brought to heightened consciousness at FABC’s first plenary assembly which took place in Taipei in April 1974. Cardinal Rosales sums it up this way: “It was in that Conference where Asia’s bishops, reflecting on the situation, history and needs of the Asian people decidedly assigned to themselves the challenges of Evangelization among the people: the Triple Dialogue” (p. 2). Speaking of evangelization as the Triple Dialogue was something unique to the Asian bishops, especially in light of the 1974 Synod on Evangelization which was convoked by Pope Paul VI six months after FABC I. In fact, the theme of the FABC assembly in Taipei was “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia.”

The Triple Dialogue also takes its lead from Paul VI’s encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*,¹² which not only employed the term dialogue for the first time in Church documents, but also proclaimed that “[t]he Church must enter into dialogue with the world in which it lives” (§65). This dialogical attitude has shaped FABC thinking since. In the FABC X *Message* the bishops continued to advance the doctrine of dialogue by asserting that it must be regarded as the “mode of life and mission” for the Church in Asia. Referring to the *New Evangelization*, they declared that it “calls for a spirit of dialogue that animates daily living and opts for a unifying, rather than adversarial, relationship.” They then characterized dialogue as the “hallmark of all forms of ministry and service in Asia.” Dialogue is described as “humble sensitivity to the hidden presence of God in the struggles of the poor, in the riches of people’s cultures, in the varieties of religious traditions, and in the depths of every human heart” (p. 3).

¹¹Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia: *Message of X FABC Plenary Assembly* (Xuan Loc, Vietnam, 16 December 2012), accessed at http://www.fabc.org/index_10th_plenary.html.

¹²Encyclical letter of his Holiness Pope Paul VI: “On the Ways in which the Church must Carry out its Mission in the Contemporary World” (Vatican City, 6 August 1964).

This is another way of expressing the Triple Dialogue as (i) with the poor, (ii) with the cultures, and (iii) with the religions of Asia, a cliché which has infiltrated FABC thought for the last 40 years. The *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 10th FABC Assembly further describes this Triple Dialogue as the three ministries of (i) integral liberation and option for the poor, (ii) inculturation, and (iii) inter-religious dialogue respectively.¹³ The first draws on the teachings of Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*,¹⁴ which begins with these thoughts: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ" (§1). The second began developing in the universal Church only in the decades following Vatican II and is best captured by Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, especially where it states that "[a]s she carries out missionary activity among the nations, the Church encounters different cultures and becomes involved in the process of inculturation" (§52). The third is inspired by Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* where it refreshingly and boldly states that,

[t]he Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (§2).

FABC's Pastoral Methodology

It has to be pointed out that this spirit, mode and indeed, life of dialogue, is arrived at not by merely reflecting on Scripture and Tradition but through a deeper discernment process or what has come to be known as the Pastoral Cycle/Spiral. This is essentially FABC's methodology for pastoral discernment. FABC X's *Instrumentum Laboris* describes this as beginning "with immersion-exposure in the life situation of a group of people," which then proceeds "to situation analysis and reflection in faith on the situation," which then results "in pastoral decisions and planning to implement the decisions" and ends "with implementation" (§11). The bishops' *Message* at the end of the Assembly confirms this: "Guided

¹³*Instrumentum Laboris of FABC X Plenary Assembly*, Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (10 December 2012), accessed at <http://cbcvietnam.org/Church-Documents/instrumentum-laboris-of-fabc-x-plenary-assembly.html>.

¹⁴All the documents of the Second Vatican Council can be found in Walter Abbott, ed., *The Documents of Vatican II*, Piscataway: New Century, 1966).

by the Spirit we read the signs of the times, the social mega-trends in Asia and our own ecclesial realities, and analyzed the unfolding challenges and opportunities so that we might respond to them from the depths of our faith" (p. 2).

Reflecting on the mega-trends shaping Asia today, the bishops gathered at Xuan Loc carefully acknowledged in the *Instrumentum Laboris* that there are positive as well as negative elements "that will shape the evangelizing mission of the Church in Asia" (§15). Responding to these contemporary pastoral challenges they confirmed "the enduring validity of the initial insight of FABC in 1974 of evangelizing by way of the Triple Dialogue" (§48). Through the FABC X *Message* they announced that "[t]he same Spirit who animated Vatican II now summons us to become renewed evangelizers for a New Evangelization" and went on to declare the "need to live a spirituality of New Evangelization" (p. 2). This seems like a logical flow from the dialogue "in the depths of every human heart" which the bishops had added to the Triple Dialogue in their final *Message* (p. 3). In other words the *New Evangelization* entails both the external ministerial dialogue — with the poor, the religions, and the cultures of Asia — as well as an internal spiritual dialogue — as manifested through what the FABC X *Message* describes as "a deep, personal, and transforming encounter with the living person of Jesus Christ" (p. 2). This is what reading the signs of the times tell us, is the challenge of the *New Evangelization* and the call to dialogue is the result of the discernment process.

This preferred method of FABC actually takes its cue from *Gaudium et Spes* which advocates that "the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel" (§4). It has led the bishops over the years to take seriously "Asian realities as resources" and has fostered "a method of 'liberative integration, interrelatedness and wholeness' and 'emphasizes symbolic approaches and expressions, and is marked by a preference for those in the periphery and *outside the Gate*'" (FABC X, *Instrumentum Laboris*, §11).

Contextualizing the Local Church

The locus of these theological reflections is, since Vatican II, what has come to be known as the local Church. The FABC X *Instrumentum Laboris* confirms this by stating that "[t]hey (the bishops) affirmed that the acting subject of mission is the local church, incarnated and rooted firmly in the culture of its people, taking up their strength as

well as their weaknesses in the light of the healing and redeeming grace of Christ" (§5). Positing that the local Church is the acting subject of mission follows from a shift of responsibility back to the local peoples.

This is the Asian bishops' active response to the many years which the Church in Asia has been modelled after and dependent upon the European missions so much so that the Asian Church continues to be viewed as a colonial Church and Christianity even as a foreign religion. Acknowledging the significant role of the local Church also acknowledges the significance of local and contextual models of theologies. Doing so would be in obedience to the teachings of Vatican II's *Ad Gentes* which is emphatic that it is "necessary that in each major socio-cultural area, such theological speculation should be encouraged" (§22). The directive is augmented by another Vatican II's document, *Lumen Gentium*, which asserts that the "Church of Christ is truly present in all legitimate local congregations of the faithful which, united with their pastors, are themselves called churches in the New Testament" (§26).

That is why the bishops of FABC X in the *Instrumentum Laboris* insists that "[o]ur overarching pastoral priority remains that of building the Local Church as the subject of evangelization" (§48). They have been making this same assertion since FABC I when they had asserted that "[t]he primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church" (§9).¹⁵ In fact, practically every single FABC Assembly since then has reiterated the importance of the building up of the local Church. This is what the contextualization process entails and it remains the primary task and agenda of the Church in Asia.

The Triple Dialogue emphasizes not so much the fruits as on the actual process of dialogue. Dialogue is an active word, a verb which necessitates some sort of action. It is in the "do-ing" of dialogue that makes for its uniqueness. These dialogue activities are not confined to those within, but extend beyond institutional boundaries, including those of other religious traditions. Mission and evangelization are therefore not so much tasks to be fulfilled, but ways of being and relating across church and religious lines. Expressed another way, it is not so much the content as it is the praxis or method which the evangelizing mission of the Church is focused upon. The praxis of dialogue is central to FABC's theology of the Triple Dialogue.

¹⁵For All the Peoples of Asia, vol. 1, 14.

This in some way correlates with the emphasis coming out from Rome especially in the ministry of ecumenism. Inspired by Pope John Paul II's ecumenical document *Ut Unum Sint*, long-time president of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, introduced and promoted the method of Receptive Ecumenism.¹⁶ Acknowledging that the ecumenical efforts of the past decades have more or less reached an impasse in what has been called an "ecumenical winter," Kasper's proposal is that we continue to be committed to the conversations. What is different, however, is that instead of focusing on the gifts each church brings to the table we now turn our attention to what each church can learn from the other. For the Roman Catholic Church this is called "Catholic Learning." The church becomes not so much an *ecclesia docens* (a teaching church) but an *ecclesia discens* (a learning church).

The Triple Dialogue

This is what the Triple Dialogue emphasizes. It is not merely a method for doing theology but also a way for being church in Asia.¹⁷ In other words, Christians — all of them — need to be engaged in the dialogue with the poor, the religions, and the cultures of Asia. What this means is best explained by an image Stanley Samartha — the Indian theologian who served as the first director of the World Council of Church's sub-unit for Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies — employed in describing the postcolonial church. Samartha refers to the image of the bullock-cart to describe what a contextualized and dialogical church entails.¹⁸ For the bullock-cart to move forward it has to be grounded and in contact with Asian soil and interacting with all the ground realities.

Thus, the Triple Dialogue entails the church being in touch with the poor, the religions, and the cultures of Asia. The church is in touch, not so much as preacher or teacher but as pilgrim and servant. She must be, as Pope Francis advises, a church with "the smell of the sheep," walks with the people, learning with them, and engaging with all to promote harmonious living especially amongst

¹⁶"The Call to Ecumenical Learning: Durham 2006 and onwards," *The Society for Ecumenical Studies*, accessed January 18, 2014, <http://sfes.faiithweb.com/0711receptive.html>.

¹⁷Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, "Toward an Asian Theology of Dialogue," in *Edward Schillebeeckx & Interreligious Dialogue: Perspectives from Asian Theology*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012, 127–50, at 133.

¹⁸Stanley Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991, 116.

communities of different religions. That is the task and method of the *New Evangelization*, especially in Asia. It calls on Christians to be in constant engagement and dialogue with the realities surrounding their own contexts. In today's world where the many poor, the many religions, and the many cultures are not merely confined to Asia but very much present in the rest of the world as well, the vision of the Triple Dialogue rightly applies to the entire Christian communion, including those of the West or the so-called "Christian" continents.

If Christians embrace the vision of the Triple Dialogue as the methodology for the *New Evangelization* then they will not only be working alongside one another for the sake of God's Kingdom but will be doing so together and with the poor and their neighbours of other faiths as well. Evangelization would then be transcending the boundaries of church and Christianity. Even as this might seem like an *ad extra* vision and involvement, to be sure, it will certainly help facilitate the unity of the church. Denominational and doctrinal differences would be rendered unimportant when Christians of different churches can witness together to the name of Jesus and especially in the name of God.

It is from the perspective of the Triple Dialogue that the theme of 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, which is the prayer "God of life, lead us to justice and peace," will become meaningful, not only for the Christian community but for all peoples of good will as well. When Christians are able to bring to reality God's abundant life and a world of justice and peace, then the prayer of Jesus "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21) will apply as much to the Christian community as to the world's human community.

Vision versus Reception

One might wonder why it is necessary for FABC to be making the same assertion of the Triple Dialogue for the past forty years. Would it not be sufficient to say it once and go on with its implementation? The truth of the matter is that what we have discussed above is the vision of the bishops for what the Church in Asia should be. Unfortunately, the vision has not been made a reality within parts of the Asian Church. In fact, the *Instrumentum Laboris* of FABC X conspicuously confesses the shortcomings of the Churches in Asia:

Yet while thanking the Lord for countless blessings, we are sadly aware that our decisions and actions do not always match our words and intentions. Renewal of values and mind-sets, of agents of evangelization

and of church structures towards a new way of being Church has not been steady and consistent. The FABC vision and its key ideas, its programs and projects have not yet impacted grassroots to the extent that we had desired. We have a long way to go towards the vision of a new way of being Church. For this we humbly say to the Lord, *mea culpa, mea maxima culpa* (§15).

On the other hand the above *mea culpa* might not necessarily be endorsed by all the bishops in Asia. Just as there is debate over the hermeneutic of continuity as opposed to the hermeneutic of discontinuity with regard to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, a similar debate can also be found within Asia with regard to FABC's vision and directives. While some tend to see the FABC as advancing a set of teachings which seem like a rupture from the classical and traditional teachings of the Church, others might view it as faithfully in continuity with the colonial approaches. These differences in interpretation and approaches remain resulting in the reception of FABC teachings to be ambiguous at best.

But, just as we rejoice over the 16 documents of the Second Vatican Council and the spirit of renewal which it inspired, we must also rejoice that the Asian Church has a vision and blueprint for its own renewal. If the reality on the ground does not seem consistent with this vision it is partly because authentically fulfilling the dictates of the new way of being Church in Asia can be a true challenge. A truly contextualized, inculturated and incarnated local Church which opts for the Triple Dialogue necessarily means that the Church has to live in full Christian discipleship, perhaps to the point of experiencing the baptism on the cross. Not only does this look unappealing it can be rather threatening as well. That is why the *Message* of the bishops at the end of the 10th FABC Plenary Assembly in Xuan Loc was: "We are not to fear. We have the Lord's assurance, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid' (*Matthew 14: 27*)" (p. 4).