

A Few Ethical Contours That Emerge from the Fabc Teachings For An Asian Moral Theology

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1. A Brief History of the FABC

When the Asian bishops representing different Asian Episcopal Conferences met in Manila in 1970 (in the immediate aftermath of the Vatican-II), for the first time, they felt a unique sense of solidarity. This led them to the formation of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, popularly known as the FABC, within the next couple of years. Their enthusiasm was such that they had the very First Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Taiwan in 1974.¹ Since then, there had been eight more Plenaries, the latest one being held in August 2009 in Manila, the Philippines. According to the Statutes of the FABC, a Plenary Assembly is the "supreme body of the FABC".² Such a gathering which meets in ordinary session, every four years or so, is truly an "assembly" of the Asian Churches, attended by about 150 participants, with the bishop representatives of various member Conferences forming the bulk of

¹ For a detailed account of the origins of the FABC, see Edmund Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology," *FABC Papers* 106 (April 2003) 3-7. Also, Miguel, Marcelo Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes: The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church in the FABC Documents*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2000, 5-10.

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this number. The rest is made up of officials of various FABC Offices, theologians, resource persons, grassroots level workers in the pastoral field and other special invitees (all of whom are either appointed or recommended by the member Episcopal Conferences). At a Plenary Assembly, only the bishop-delegates have a vote. As Quatra says, the Plenaries “hold the first place” in the FABC’s hierarchy: “They mark the beat of the Federation’s journey, following a route that is not predetermined but open to seizing the opportunity of the hour, according to the signs of the times, and often in consonance with the problems of the universal Church”.³

As the name itself implies the *Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences* is primarily a network for cooperation and solidarity among the Asian bishops, especially in the pastoral field. It is a loose federation of 19 member Episcopal Conferences and 10 associate members. It has no binding juridical authority over any Church in Asia. FABC functions mainly through the nine Offices among which various pastoral aspects of the Asian Church’s mission are distributed.⁴ During its 40-year existence, through these Offices (which came into being at various stages of FABC’s evolution), the FABC has organized various Bishops’ Institutes, colloquia, seminars and other pastoral programs that have exerted an enormous influence on Church life all over Asia. A non-Asian commentator, Thomas Fox is of the opinion that the FABC plays a prophetic role in introducing “a new kind of Catholicism”, for the rest of the Church, especially to those in the West. Accordingly, FABC through its teachings enables the rest of the Church to see Catholicism from a whole new perspective, a non-Western perspective, “an Asian perspective”.⁵ It is precisely in this sense that in this paper, we intend to highlight a few peculiarly FABC/Asian moral theological contours that emerge in the FABC Plenary Assembly statements.

2. FABC Documents

FABC theology is not to be found in one given text or in a systematic series of documents. They are scattered in many of its statements.

² *Statutes of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC)*, Article 7-A.

³ Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 15.

⁴ The nine FABC Offices are: the Office for Human Development, the Office for Evangelization, the Office for Social Communications, the Office for Interreligious Dialogue and Ecumenical Affairs, the Office for Theological Concerns, the Office for Education and Faith Formation, the Office for the Laity, the Office for the Clergy and the Office for Consecrated Life.

⁵ Thomas Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002, xi.

The proceedings and statements from the FABC Plenary Assemblies and the programs and workshops of various FABC Offices are published by the FABC Central Secretariat in Hong Kong as *FABC Papers*. Moreover, the Office of Theological Concerns (known as the OTC which consists of bishop-members and theologian-members appointed by the different member Conferences of the FABC) has issued their own group reflections on various relevant theological/pastoral topics for Asia. These reflections are an effort to deepen the FABC teachings enunciated by the bishops. As Chia points out, most of the FABC documents “are a potent force for change and transformation, not only of the Church but of the Asian society as well”.⁶ For many Asians, they have become *locus theologicus* especially in the pastoral field.

An important characteristic of the emerging theology of the FABC documents is that there is no logical or classically deductive development of its thought, as in classical Western theology. The method used is basically inductive than deductive, keeping to the traditional Asian way of holistic perception of reality. As one commentator says: “To explore these *FABC Papers* is to journey with the community of Churches in Asia and to witness the diverse concerns that FABC has addressed – all under the propitious guidance of the Holy Spirit”.⁷

As already mentioned above, in this paper, we will limit ourselves to highlight and discuss only those moral contours that emerge in the Final Statements of the FABC Plenary Assemblies, the “highest authoritative” statements within the FABC corpus of documents. According to the FABC Statutes, such statements (unlike other FABC documents) are always voted upon and approved only by the bishop representatives of the diverse Asian Episcopal Conferences of the FABC, hence their status of having the “highest degree of authority”⁸ within the FABC corpus of statements. It is these Plenary Assembly documents which “provide the general orientations and foundational theological positions for later elaboration and systematization”.⁹

FABC’s theology, including moral theology, is not mere speculative theology, but down-to-earth, contextual pastoral theology.¹⁰ It is

⁶ Chia, “Thirty Years of FABC,” 16.

⁷ John H. Kroeger, “FABC Papers Comprehensive Index: Papers 1-100 (1976-2001),” *FABC Papers*, 100 (Pentecost 2001), 2.

⁸ Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 23-24.

⁹ Chia, “Thirty Years of FABC,” 38.

¹⁰ Cfr., Jonathan Yun-ka Tan, “Theologizing at the Service of Life: The Contextual Theological Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC),” *FABC Papers*, 108 (October 2003 – republished).

precisely this pastoral character that gives FABC's theology two of its principal characteristics: contextuality and relevance.¹¹ The starting point of the FABC's contextual methodology is not the universal precepts of *lex aeterna* and *lex naturalis*, or abstract metaphysical principles pertaining to God, Revelation and the Christian Gospel, or even conciliar, papal or doctrinal pronouncements, but rather the life experiences of the Asian peoples.¹² This is very much in keeping line with the traditional Asian religious belief that concepts alone are not sufficient to grasp God fully.¹³ Whereas traditional Western religious belief is deductive, emerging from abstract truths, Eastern belief is more inductive, stemming often from ancient texts or human experiences.¹⁴ The usual schema of FABC documents is to first treat the particular pastoral context from which concrete pastoral issues emanate. This is followed by a serious theological treatment of those issues, and finally, concrete pastoral recommendations are suggested.

3. A Few Ethical Contours Emerging from the FABC Documents

Due to the limited scope of this paper, we will limit ourselves to highlight and discuss very briefly only the following six areas/themes which emerge from the Plenary Assembly Statements. We believe that they may serve as crucial contours in building a truly Asian moral theology.

3.1 Harmony: An essential fundamental of Asian Ethos

Asia is the largest continent in the world and is home to almost two-thirds of humanity. "The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples who are heirs to ancient cultures, religions and traditions".¹⁵ Throughout history, Asian peoples have been known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. This is mainly because the traditional Asian holistic approach to life necessarily demands the virtue of harmony, which has been practiced

¹¹ Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 28.

¹² Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life," 6.

¹³ Of course, similar views are found also in many classical Western theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas. See for example, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.1,a.2, ad 2.

¹⁴ Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 44.

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), No: 6. In spite of its vastness and diversity, Asian theologians insist on a certain unity-in-diversity in lived Asian realities. See for example, Michael Amaladoss, "Is there an Asian Way of Doing Theology?", *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 45:1 (2008) 11-13.

in almost all the cultures of Asia.¹⁶ Accordingly, opposites can exist side by side without necessarily being in conflict with each other. Neither is there any need to eliminate them, for in fact, they do complement each other in attaining fullness or completeness: "Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength".¹⁷ The East Asian concept of *yin and yang* illustrates this point well, according to which various dimensions of reality are not contradictory but complimentary.¹⁸ Moreover, according to the South Asian *Upanishads* and also in the thought of all the great Indian thinkers, the Supreme Being himself is the coincidence of opposites.¹⁹ As the Sanskrit term *samanvaya* implies, similarities and disparities of our human living need to exist together.²⁰ FABC firmly believes that "there is an Asian approach to reality, a world-view, wherein the whole is the sum-total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other, in a word, *harmony*, a word which resonates with all Asian cultures".²¹ Thus, the Fourth Plenary Assembly could say: "Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision".²² Fox seems to have

¹⁶ What is meant here is that Asian religious cultures are primarily cultures of harmony, though there are contemporary situations of life in Asian countries that are characterized by several tragic factors of acute disharmony.

¹⁷ FABC – BIRA IV/11, No:15, as reproduced in Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (Eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences – Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 321. Henceforth, in this paper, the work of Rosales and Arevalo will be referred to as *FAPA*.

¹⁸ BIRA IV/11, No:20 as re-produced in *FAPA*, 322. See also, the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) document on "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today" as re-produced in Vimal Tirimanna (Ed.), *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil: Collection of TAC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007, 182-183.

¹⁹ K.N. Mishra, "Harmony as Samanvaya: The Conjunction of Opposites", *FABC Papers* 76 (June 1996) 21. According to Mishra, the same thought is found in *Isa* 5, *Katha* 1.2.21, *Sveta* 3.19, ... etc.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ The OTC document on "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony" as re-produced in Tirimanna, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, p.166. For further concrete descriptions of 'harmony' see BIRA IV/1, No: 13b and BIRA IV/11, No:6, as re-produced in *FAPA*, pp.249 and 319, respectively.

²² "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia", the Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Tokyo, Japan, 1986, No:3.1.10, as re-produced in *FAPA*, 181.

succinctly captured the depth of this peculiarly Asian concept of harmony when he writes, "Asians are not as quick to divide large metaphysical concepts in two as traditional Western Aristotelian thought has done for millennia. Asians prefer to unite, not divide. Good and evil are less two sides of a coin than places on a large prism... the emphasis here is on achieving wholeness, mystical unity, Oneness."²³

According to Chia, "If there is one concept or notion which undergirds all of FABC's theological thrust, then it is the notion of 'harmony'".²⁴ On FABC's reliance on the concept of harmony, Tan says:

The FABC takes very seriously the multireligious, multiethnic, multilingual and pluricultural character of the Asian milieu, as well as the proximity of non-Christians to Christians, recognizing that the task of doing theology has to take place within a wider context *in dialogue with* these non-Christian religions in a spirit of goodwill, and not merely limited to a purely confessional undertaking which is targeted exclusively towards Christians.²⁵

The Final Statement of the special Hindu-Christian encounter entitled "Working for Harmony in the Contemporary World" which was organized by the FABC's Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs held in Bangalore, India, in October 1995 had this interesting passage which echoes a common Asian belief:

It is the deep conviction of the participants that Reality is pluralistic. There is a rich pluralism in nature and human society. Cultures differ from one another and religions follow diverse paths to the experience of the Absolute. The continual search for wholeness and unity of life is a constituent feature of all religions. There is an ineffable and universal rhythm that unifies everything into an organic whole which binds together pluralistic reality. The Asian sages perceived this unifying principle of harmony as *Tao, Rta* and *Dharma*. The Asian psyche builds concepts and practices of harmony to cope with the ongoing dialectic of unity and diversity.²⁶

It is precisely within this rich but peculiarly Asian concept of harmony that the Asian bishops could dare to propose a triple-dialogue with the three main Asian realities of life as the concrete manifestation of the Church's evangelizing mission in Asia, namely, dialogues with the vibrant religious traditions, ancient cultures and teeming millions

²³ Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 41.

²⁴ Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC," 51.

²⁵ Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life," 24 (italics in the original text.).

²⁶ "Working for Harmony in the Contemporary World: A Hindu-Christian Dialogue, A Statement", *FABC Papers* 76 (June 1996) 31.

of Asian poor.²⁷ At the very base of this FABC concept of triple-dialogue is the presumption that people of other religions and cultures in Asia are not to be treated as mere “objects of Christian mission” but as co-subjects (“partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness”).²⁸ This is because the Spirit of God has been present and active in those Asian realities even before the arrival of Christianity on the ancient continent.²⁹

It should be noted that the FABC has consistently rejected the common but simplistic and rather superficial understanding of harmony as “a mere absence of strife”: “Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as ‘live and let live’. The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness”.³⁰ That is to say that the FABC teachings imply the importance not only of unity in diversity, but also the *vice versa* which is often forgotten in theological circles today, i.e., diversity in unity:

Samanvaya is the spiritual pursuit of the totality of reality in its infinite diversity and radical unity. Since the ultimate ground of being is unity-in-plurality, the divergent forms of reality are perceived in the convergent rhythm that harmonizes them. Harmony evolves by respecting the otherness of the other and by acknowledging its significance in relation to the totality. Consequently, the unique significance of every religion is gratefully and critically perceived within the context of the universal spiritual evolution of humanity.³¹

²⁷ Cfr., “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia”, the Statement of the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC Nos: 12, 19 as re-produced in *FAPA*, pp.14,15. The call for a triple-dialogue is re-emphasized in both the Fifth and Sixth FABC Plenary Assemblies. Cfr., *FABC V*, No:3.1.2 in *FAPA*, p.280; *FABC VI*, No:3 in Franz-Josef Eilers (Ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol.II, 2. For the FABC, these living realities of Asia also become “resources” of theologizing in Asia, along with the classical theological “sources”. See Tirimanna, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, 280-289.

²⁸ Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, “Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 55 (1991) 548.

²⁹ Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 32. Cfr., OTC document on “The Spirit at Work in Asia Today,” as re-produced in Tirimanna, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, 167-254. Also, see Vimal Tirimanna, “God’s Active Presence Outside the Visible Institutional Church and a Few of its Implications” in Patrick Gnanapragasam and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (Eds.), *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era – Essays in Honour of Prof. Felix Wilfred*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 356-378.

³⁰ *BIRA IV*, 11, No:15 as cited in *FAPA*, 321.

³¹ “Working for Harmony in the Contemporary World,” 33.

Harmony, thus, is the necessary fundamental ethical base in FABC teachings which ramifies into many other moral themes treated by the FABC, such as: unjust structures that create dehumanizing poverty and injustice (eg., globalization); human rights including the right to religious freedom; destabilization of Asian family values, the plight of women and children; exploitative tourism that includes sex tourism, human trafficking and prostitution; discriminations against ethnic, caste and religious minorities; migrants, refugees and indigenous peoples; violence, war and terrorism; unrestrained exploitation of natural resources, environmental pollution and ecological damage;...etc.³² According to the FABC, most of the negative moral effects of the above-mentioned issues ensue when that basic Asian sense of harmony is disrupted. Unfortunately, given the limited scope of this paper, we are unable to discuss these issues in detail, here.

3.2 Pluralism: The lived reality in Asia

An immediate logical consequence of the correct understanding of the Asian concept of harmony is a healthy sense of pluralism. The FABC does not intend to canonize any and every ideology by promoting any sort of pluralism. As the OTC in one of its documents clarifies "pluralism need not always entail a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid".³³ In the positive sense, "pluralism generally refers to a situation in which a variety of viewpoints, explanations or perspectives are offered to account for the same reality. The essential characteristic of reality which we experience as human beings is multidimensional."³⁴

Reality reveals not merely plurality but relationships, too. Things are interrelated in such an intimate way that no one thing can exist without others; for example, no religion can survive all by itself.³⁵ This is more than evident "in Asia, the birthplace of the world's great religions", where "it is in the ordinariness of daily life that the encounter of other faiths takes place".³⁶ The FABC sees the objective of inter-religious dialogue as "mutual understanding, appreciation

³² For a detailed list of themes treated by these documents, see Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life," 12-15.

³³ "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology – Doing Theology in Asia Today", *FABC Papers*, 96 (October 2000) 6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁵ Sebastian Painadath, "Coincidentia Oppositorum: A Response to Prof. K. N. Mishra's Paper on Samanvaya," *FABC Papers* 76 (June 1996) 29.

³⁶ "Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life", *Op.cit.*, No:95, p.49.

of differences, affirming and enriching the identity of the other as other, and yet growth in the similarities which we experience"³⁷. Basically, any dialogue is the harmony, the conjunction of the opposites. Dialogue is the way to reach *samanvaya*, and so, as believers of diverse religions, those who partake in dialogue are all co-pilgrims in pursuit of truth and justice, love and peace.³⁸ That is precisely why at their very first Plenary Assembly the Asian bishops opted for a dialogue with great Asian religious traditions as a priority of their ecclesial ministry when they said:

In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over the many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them?³⁹

In saying so, the FABC's main theological presumption is that the Spirit of God has been (and is) present and active even outside the Church as has been acknowledged by the universal magisterium since Vatican-II, and so, we need to take into our theological discussions what God has been up to with those religious traditions.⁴⁰ Thus, the Asian bishops perceive a perfect harmony between their Catholic faith and the revealed elements of those received Asian traditions, simply because they perceive all of them as "significant and positive elements" of the one single economy of God's plan of salvation. Tan is very forthright in emphasizing this crucial Asian point:

Specifically, the FABC views the salvation history of the Asian continent as embodied in the history, religions, cultures, challenges, aspirations and hopes of its many peoples. For the FABC, salvation history did not begin with the coming of Christianity to Asia. Rather, it recognises the Father's and Spirit's presence and saving activity in and through Asian religious traditions which preceded the coming of Christianity to Asia, and which

³⁷ Mishra, "Harmony as Samanvaya," 24.

³⁸ Painadath, "Coincidentia Oppositorum," 30.

³⁹ "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia", Nos:14-15, in *FAPA*, p.14.

⁴⁰ Cfr., Tirimanna, "God's Active Presence Outside the Visible Institutional Church and a Few of its Implications," 356-378.

also continue as an integral part of ongoing Asian religious history. Thus, the FABC rejects the presumption that Asia was a *tabula rasa* as far as salvation history was concerned, and also any attempt to relegate Asian religious traditions to the theological dustbin on account of any presumption of their inability to act as vehicles of God's self-revelation.⁴¹

Together with the universal magisterium, the FABC recognizes that "the Church has perennially held that there are universal truths, though admittedly expressed with the limitation of language and culture".⁴² Any pluralism which claims that all points of view of reality are of equal value necessarily ends up in relativism.⁴³ The Asian bishops teach that "doctrinal and moral relativism devalues"⁴⁴ universal truths. However, the bishops are convinced that the "teaching of the truth has to be done with great humility, compassion and love. This is required of a genuine caring and nurturing pastoral ministry for couples and their families".⁴⁵

3.3 The Sanctity of Human Life: Another essential fundamental of Asian Ethos

Theologizing for the FABC is rooted in the daily realities of life and is meant to serve and foster life – a life that is reflective of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.⁴⁶ Whenever the FABC talks of life, it is a reference to life in the concrete, and that's why all the official statements of the FABC begins with a situating of the issue at stake in the concrete "life context"⁴⁷ of the Asian peoples. Keeping to its true Asian vision, the FABC perceives life as an integral whole. The Sixth Plenary Assembly in Manila described vividly the FABC "vision of holistic life"⁴⁸:

At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian *reverential sense of the mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or

⁴¹ Jonathan Yun-ka Tan, "Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences," *FABC Papers* 109 (2004 – republished) 34.

⁴² "The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life," The 8th FABC Plenary Assembly Final Document, *FABC Papers* 111 (September 2004) No:87, p.46.

⁴³ "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology," 5.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ruben C. Mendoza, "Regnocentrism in the Theology of Religions in the FABC and Paul Knitter," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 19:2 (2009) 171.

⁴⁷ Cfr., "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," The Final Statement of the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, as re-produced in *FABC Papers* 74 (June 1995) No: 3, p.82.

⁴⁸ Ibid., No:10, p.85.

victory, in brokenness or wholeness. This deep interiority draws people to experience *harmony and inner peace* and infuses ethics into all of creation.⁴⁹

The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC held in Sampran, Thailand, spoke of the need “to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and value of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life”.⁵⁰ In view of this, the Assembly had this to say:

The Church has to respond to the death-dealing forces in Asia. By authentic discipleship, it has to share its vision of full life as promised by Jesus. It is a vision of life with integrity and dignity, with compassion and sensitive care of the earth; a vision of participation and mutuality, with a reverential sense of the sacred, of peace, harmony, and solidarity.⁵¹

As descendants of ancient Asian civilizations which had special ethical codes to protect human life in all its stages, almost all Asian societies hold human life in high esteem. The FABC teachings faithfully follow this age-old Asian tradition, and so, they do not get locked up within an exclusive protection of human life only at the beginning and the end of a human being.⁵² That is to say that the Asian bishops “include but also extend beyond our usual concerns about contraception, abortion, euthanasia,...etc.”.⁵³ Consequently, not only the usual traditional life issues, but also, wider life issues such as humanly-imposed hunger, infanticide, homicide, war, violence, terrorism, assassinations,...etc., are also taken up and discussed as life issues. For example, at the Sixth Plenary Assembly in Manila, the bishops explicitly “recommitted” themselves to the promotion of a holistic vision of life when they said:

We turned our attention to whatever threatens, weakens, diminishes and destroys the life of individuals, groups or peoples; whatever devalues

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service,” The Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Sampran, Thailand, January 3-12, 2000, as re-produced in *FABC Papers* 93 (January 2000) 9.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.

⁵² Of course, the Asian bishops do acknowledge with Pope John Paul II that human life is “most vulnerable” at its beginning and at its end, and that they are “the more significant moments of existence”, and so, one needs to be very attentive at these two crucial stages. Cfr., Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995) Nos:18, 44. See for example, the enumeration of various traditional Christian bio-medical issues in “The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life,” Nos:43-45, pp.23-24.

⁵³ Ibid., No:116, p.60.

human beings, conceived, born, infant, old; whatever socio-cultural, religious, political, economic, or environmental factor that threatens or destroys life in our countries. We identified some of these forces of death at work in Asia. And we concluded that as promoters of life, we could only denounce them.⁵⁴

So, together with the universal Church, the FABC re-echoes the need to respond to the prevalent 'culture of death', with 'a culture of life', but they stress on a holistic vision of "a culture of integral life".⁵⁵ In other words, they highlight the "need to understand and appreciate human life in a holistic sense":

From this holistic view, with the universal Church we condemn everything that dehumanizes, exploits and oppresses human life. Any situation, relationship, structure, situation, behaviour, or action that threatens and diminishes life is death-dealing – part of a culture of death. It is against God's will and the Reign of God. A culture of integral life on the other hand respects, nurtures, enhances, promotes and serves human life in all its dimensions, from the very finality of the procreative act and the moment of conception, through its earthly struggles to its return to God's full life at the end of time in the Reign of God. This perspective of integral life has profound implications on the meaning of "pro-life" and the extent of family ministry.⁵⁶

Thus, one needs to notice here that while the Asian bishops are very much pro-life, their concept of being pro-life is much wider (as in the gospels and the Catholic tradition) than the narrow concepts of popular, contemporary movements of pro-life (that are limited only to the two specific moments of beginning and end of human life) which are now prevalent even in many quarters of the universal Church. Thus, in their special document on Respect for Life, the OTC enumerates a few issues of a wider pro-life agenda, such as abortion, euthanasia, genocide, murders & assassinations, terrorism, suicide bombing and capital punishment.⁵⁷

The traditional Asian religious element (and the traditional Christian faith element) of life is accentuated by the FABC when it says:

⁵⁴ "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," No:7, p.83.

⁵⁵ "The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life," Nos:50, 52.

⁵⁶ Ibid., No:52, pp.28-29.

⁵⁷ OTC document on "Respect for Life in the Context of Asia," No:1.8 as reproduced in Tirimanna, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, pp.381-383. How the wanton destruction of natural resources and the disturbance of environment negatively affect human life is also highlighted in the same document. See, *ibid.*, p.381.

We Asians are searching not simply for the meaning of life but for life itself. We are striving and struggling for life because it is a task and a challenge. But life is a gift, too, a mystery, because our efforts to achieve it are far too short of the ultimate value of life. We speak of life as a *becoming* – a growing into, a journeying to life and to the source of life.⁵⁸

3.4 Family and Marriage: The Corner-Stones of Asian Societies

The two inherently connected themes of family and marriage recur in almost all the Final Statements of FABC Plenaries. Already the Fourth Plenary Assembly in Tokyo in 1986 sounded an alarm with regard to the challenges faced by the Asian families when it said:

Perhaps, the greatest challenge to the Church in Asia is that posed by the Asian family. The Asian family is the cellular receptacle of all Asia's problems, poverty, repression, exploitation and degradation, divisions and conflicts. The family is directly affected by the religious, political, economic, social and cultural problems of Asia, by the problems relating to women, health, work, business, education, etc.⁵⁹

The Sixth FABC Plenary called the Asian family "a microcosm of Asian society". They acknowledged how "it is bombarded on all sides by anti-family forces of dehumanization and disintegration, ranging from material and moral poverty to secularistic values and external pressures leading to anti-life types of bioethics and practices of abortion and contraception".⁶⁰ The Seventh FABC Final Statement expressed succinctly how the Asian bishops view the family:

Asia has a millennial tradition of great respect for the gift of the family. The family is the bearer of the heritage of humanity; and the future of humanity passes on by way of the family. It is also the cradle of faith formation, and the school for imparting Gospel values, the first arena for socialization and development of the child.⁶¹

In fact, the Eighth Plenary Assembly had as its theme "The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life". The Final Statement of that Assembly began saying, "The hope, the aspiration, the dream of the Asian family for life in fullness in the Reign of God is one that never fades. Even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable misery

⁵⁸ "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," No:9, p.85.

⁵⁹ The Final Statement of the 4th FABC Plenary Assembly, Tokyo, No:3.4.1 as cited in *FAPA*, p.184.

⁶⁰ "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," No:15.1, p.91.

⁶¹ "A Renewed Church in Asia," 10.

and poverty, Asian families live this hope not without reason with vibrant, even exuberant joy."⁶²

According to the Asian bishops, it is the Spirit of God at work in Asia who is the main cause for such vibrant joy in the Asian families.⁶³ Having noted that contemporary global developments have an impact even on the remotest rural Asian family,⁶⁴ they went on to see how Asians continue to value marriage, the basic unit of family, as "sacred", and how "despite many serious difficulties from within and without, Asian families have relatively high stability".⁶⁵ It is the Asian tradition of family values that sustains the resilience of the Asian family in the face of poverty and different death-dealing forces in today's world.⁶⁶ However, the bishops also saw dark spots with regard to contemporary family life in their Asian milieu when they said:

Still some values are ambivalent. Strong kinship and family-centeredness, for instance, has also its downside. Graft and corruption, nepotism, political and economic cronyism in Asia are often due to inordinate concern for family, to the dominant and selfish desire to serve the interests of the family, of kin and cronies – at the expense of the common good. This might even lead to strong clannishness that would divide rather than unite the whole community or society.⁶⁷

Being realistic as they were, the bishops did not fail to acknowledge (that in spite of the generally strong Asian tendency to uphold traditional family values), that today across the continent one also finds "a variety of family forms" that are different from what Asians consider "traditional" and even "ideal" family, i.e., inter-faith families, single-parent families, families with separated parents and cases of re-marriage for one or both parents, children whose parents are divorced and living with grand parents, families with un-married parents, families who enter into only a civil marriage without a Church marriage (the latter being delayed often due to lack of available funds or due to clan law or customs and traditions), and

⁶² "The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life," No:1, p.5.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., No:4, p.6.

⁶⁵ Ibid., No:6, p.7.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.7. In No:47 of the same document, a few of the traditional Asian family values are enumerated as: close kinship inclusive of extended families, love of children, respect and care for the elderly, harmony, a deep moral and religious sense, a deep respect for life and care for the life in the womb, a profound reverence for the sacred, see *ibid.* p.25.

⁶⁷ Ibid., No:7, p.8.

even families with same-sex marriages (mostly in more secularized and liberalized Asian countries). All these contemporary forms which are quite alien to traditional Asian values, “challenge our traditional understanding of the ‘Christian family’ where the sacramental marriage between man and woman is the norm as well as the beginning of family”.⁶⁸ What is novel in the FABC approach as against the official Church practice in the face of such contemporary forms of families, is that the Asian bishops instead of just condemning them as “evil” or “intrinsically evil”, are at pains to find pastoral solutions to these uncomfortable realities which have come to stay in the contemporary Asian contexts:

How to consider in the light of faith this varied situation of families, how to help married couples and families reflect on these situations in the light of their commitment to the Reign of God, how to assist families in order to be pro-active, and thus, generally how to provide pastoral guidance – these are challenges of great magnitude to every parish in Asia.⁶⁹

Another crucial reason for this uniquely benign pastoral approach of the FABC could be their consideration of family “not merely as an object to be evangelized and led to discover its identity” but “more importantly as a subject of internal mission (*missio ad intra*) within itself and external mission to others (*missio ad extra*) toward the culture of integral life in the Reign of God”.⁷⁰ Having perceived marriage and family from such a personal and pastoral view point, the bishops then (as usual in the FABC documents) go on to enumerate a long list of concrete pastoral recommendations to encounter the moral challenges connected with them.⁷¹

3.5 Inter-Faith Marriages: An unavoidable reality in Asia

All over the contemporary world, the number of inter-faith marriages⁷² is on the increase. In Asia, where some 97% are non-Catholic, the increase of such marriages is more evident now than in the past, and

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, No:10, p.9.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, No:11, p.10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, No:50 (d), p.27. Elsewhere in the same document, too, the Bishops refer to the family not merely as “object” but also as “subject” in their pastoral approaches in parishes. See *ibid.*, No:100, p.51.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Nos:116-121, pp.60-66.

⁷² What is meant by “inter-faith marriage” in these documents is exclusively what is known as a “disparity of cult” marriage, i.e., a marriage between a Catholic and a non-baptized person.

so, the Church cannot afford to ignore this reality.⁷³ The Asian bishops refer to this contemporary reality when they say: "Intercultural and inter-faith families that result from 'mixed marriages' abound. In such marriages couples might find adjustment to each other much more difficult than if they were of the same faith".⁷⁴

The Eighth Plenary Assembly of the FABC paid special attention to this phenomenon. Speaking of various ways in which Asian family life can be centres of interreligious dialogue, the bishops also noted:

But it is especially in a marriage of peoples from different religions that inter-religious dialogue is both a dialogue of word, of love and life. At the beginning of the loving encounter of man and woman of different faiths, the consideration of religious differences as well as reconciliation already begins. The dialogue of word and love proceeds through courtship and marriage, matures into a loving dialogue of life in the ordinary and daily events of married life. The values of such dialogue flows to their children. Despite religious differences, a bridge of love and reconciliation is built, a reality so significant in societies plagued by religious strife.⁷⁵

Thus, the FABC considers inter-faith marriage not only as a challenge to the faith of the Catholic spouse and the children, but also as an opportunity to build bridges, to promote interreligious harmony, and thus, be the living sign of such harmony in today's society.⁷⁶ In order to promote such goals, the bishops recommend the setting up of "holistic programs for the care of" inter-religious marriages.⁷⁷ At their request, the OTC made an in-depth study of inter-faith marriages, and produced two FABC documents on this topic.⁷⁸ Accordingly, though such marriages are "not the optimum situation", they are "a reality in a pluralistic context of Asia".⁷⁹ Both these OTC documents also provide many pastoral recommendations to be followed before, during and after such marriages.

⁷³ Some authors hold that in Southeast Asia alone, between 45% to 65% of families are inter-faith. See for example, John Prior, "The Asian Family Towards A Culture of Integral Life: A Personal Reflection on the Eighth FABC Plenary Assembly, Daejeon, South Korea", *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 42:3 (2005) 286.

⁷⁴ "The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life", No:9, p.9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, No:98, pp.50-51.

⁷⁶ Cfr., Prior, "The Asian Family Towards A Culture of Integral Life," 286-287.

⁷⁷ "The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life", No:119, p.65.

⁷⁸ Cfr., "Inter-Faith Marriages in the Pluralistic Context of Asia: Challenges, Theological Reflections and Pastoral Approaches," *FABC Papers* 118 (July 2006); Vimal Tirimanna (Ed.), "A Few Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Inter-Faith Marriages," *FABC Papers* 127 (February 2009).

⁷⁹ "Inter-Faith Marriages in the Pluralistic Context of Asia," 3.

3.6 Globalization: Imposing further structural injustice and poverty in Asia

Asia is home to the vast majority of world's poor so much so that last year the Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] estimated that a good number of the world's hungry are in Asia.⁸⁰ For the FABC, "dialogue with the poor is an integral dimension of the mission of the local churches in Asia".⁸¹ As such, the FABC sees, globalization of market economies and its ensuing structural injustice as one of the main causes that reinforces contemporary Asian poverty. About globalization which has made many nations and peoples in Asia poorer, the FABC does not mince its words:

While the process of economic globalization has brought certain positive effects, we are aware that it "has also worked to the detriment of the poor, tending to push poorer countries to the margin of economic and political relations. Many Asian nations are unable to hold their own in a global market economy" (EA 39). The phenomenon of marginalization and exclusion are its direct consequences. It has produced greater inequalities among people. It has enabled only a small portion of the population to improve their standards of living, leaving many to remain in poverty. Another consequence is excessive urbanization, causing the emergence of huge urban conglomerations and the resultant migration, crime and exploitation of the weaker sections.⁸²

The FABC bishops with their grassroots level experience of the misery of their teeming millions, opine that with globalization of market economies, values and goals such as "social justice and peace, stewardship of creation, being responsible for one another, the common good of the one human family remain illusions"⁸³:

In many instances globalization has even aggravated injustice, poverty, exploitation, oppression and the destruction of the environment in most Asian countries. The drive toward competitiveness has left hundreds of millions of Asians behind in a global economic and cultural Darwinism where the mighty prevail. Reflection on the situation in the light of faith tells us that the current path that globalization is taking is terribly wrong for the human family and that an alternative must be sought.⁸⁴

The Asian episcopate also rejects the unilateral dictates of international agents of globalization when they say: "Governments are forced to

⁸⁰ Cfr., The FAO Annual Report for 2009 as re-produced in http://www.fao.org/hunger/hunger_home/hunger_at_glance/en/ (last accessed on 1st December 2009).

⁸¹ Mendoza, "Regnocentrism in the Theology of Religions," 171.

⁸² "A Renewed Church in Asia," 6.

⁸³ "The Asian Family Toward a Culture of Integral Life", No:83.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

adopt policies and practices such as the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) dictated by the IMF, WB and the WTO. These policies are devoid of a human face and social concern. The model of economic development promoted by the transnational corporations in Asia is not acceptable.”⁸⁵

Re-echoing Pope John Paul II’s sentiments in *Ecclesia in Asia* (No:7), the Bishops gathered at Samphran in 2000 went on to point out the other serious repercussions of globalization for the Asian ethos, such as “the erosion of traditional, social, cultural and religious values that have sustained Asia”. Repeating the same concern some four years later at Daejeon, Korea, the bishops highlighted especially the danger posed by cultural globalization to marriage and family life as a consequence of such erosion of Asian traditional values.⁸⁶ As such, they conclude globalization to be “an ethical and moral issue which we, as Church, can ill afford to ignore”.⁸⁷ They also point out the need to regulate globalization by international juridical norms and universal ethical principles, as so consistently taught by Church’s social doctrine. Of the ethical principles they highlight the preservation of the integrity of creation, universal destination of created goods, human development that is integral, equitable distribution of the benefits of development, option for the poor and their participation in development.⁸⁸

At the Seventh Plenary, the bishops expressed their great hope in people’s capacity to change unjust structures (as those produced by globalization), when they said:

In the face of such a challenge, we recognize with hope “a growing awareness throughout Asia of people’s capacity to change unjust structures”, with an ever growing awareness and demand for social justice, for more political and economic participation, for equal opportunities, and the determination to safeguard human dignity and rights.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The FABC has no intention whatsoever of having its own theology that is parallel to the theology of the universal Church. Rather, the

⁸⁵ “A Renewed Church in Asia,” 7.

⁸⁶ Cfr., “Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life”, No:85-86, pp.45-46.

⁸⁷ “A Renewed Church in Asia,” 6.

⁸⁸ “Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life”, No:84, p.45.

⁸⁹ “A Renewed Church in Asia,” 8.

aim of the FABC is to construct a truly relevant Asian theology, of course, within the magisterial teachings of the universal Church. What Pope John XXIII said is very relevant here: "For the deposit and truths of faith are one thing, the manner of expressing them is quite another".⁹⁰ Pope Paul VI, too expressed similar sentiments when he wrote in 1974: "In view of the varied situations in the world, it is difficult to give one teaching to cover them all or to offer a solution which has universal value".⁹¹ It is in this sense that at their very first Plenary, the Asian bishops made their intentions clear: "Special priority must be given to Asian theological reflection. For this, living contact with the concrete realities of Asia is necessary".⁹² Moral theology cannot be an exception to this; rather, as Curran says "since moral theology deals with the systematic study of moral life and actions within the Christian community, this discipline must recognize the primary context of the Church community".⁹³ Thus, an Asian moral theology is a matter of perceiving our Catholic faith when it comes to our behaviour, through the prism of the concrete, living realities of Asia. Hence the effort in this paper to extract a few ethical contours from the lived Asian contexts (as perceived by the FABC) for an Asian moral theology.

⁹⁰ Eventually, the Second Vatican Council incorporated this teaching into her documents. See *Gaudium et Spes*, Nos: 44, 62.

⁹¹ Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) No:4.

⁹² See the "Brief Statement of the Assembly" No:23 as re-produced in *FAPA*, p.24.

⁹³ Charles Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999, 1.