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**AN ASIAN ECCLESIOLOGY GUIDED BY
THE SPIRIT OF VATICAN II
Vision of the Asian Church Based on FABC
Documents**

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Introduction

The Vatican has renewed and strengthened the universal Church. During the Council there was a Copernican revolution in her understanding of other world religions and other churches in the world. The council opened the eyes of the global Church to understand and identify herself with the poor, the suffering and the people of working classes. She proclaimed her faith conviction that in serving the poor and marginalized she can serve her Master and Lord Jesus Christ more authentically.

The Asian bishops have rediscovered and redefined the identity and mission of the Church, in the “complex human reality of our peoples”¹ in Asia. How do they understand the Church in the Asian

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¹Gaudencio B. Rosales, and C.G. Arevalo, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, ed., Quezon

context? Is it the same Church founded by Jesus Christ?² Does their understanding of the Church correspond to the renewed vision of the Church, especially after Vatican II, “the People of God and the Sacrament of salvation”?³ What plans have they to present her as the visible sign and instrument of communion between God and the peoples⁴ who follow different faiths, are rooted in different cultures and are economically poor and socio-politically oppressed? What does it mean for them to bring the Good News of Jesus to the peoples of Asia? As “the Good News of Jesus Christ constitutes her deepest identity” (A., 98), how can she manifest it through the various activities of her mission to transform the existing situation of injustice, corruption and pain? (A., 33).

To answer these questions the bishops, the theologians and the Christians in Asia need a guiding light, which is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the way to inculturation, dialogue and liberation. In him they find the identity and mission of the Church. Jesus himself was born and brought up in Jewish culture (A., 72) but realised by word and deed God’s universal plan. In following him, the Church learns to incarnate, to proclaim the reign of God, to bring the Good News “into every aspect of human life, and seek the fulfilment of all things in Christ” (A., 115). She follows ‘the life of Jesus’ “through personal witness, life style, concern for others, ...” (A., 138) and dies in her service of liberation, to save the millions of Asians: “This is the mystery of the ‘local Church’, in Asia this is the mystery of the Asian churches” (A., 72).

The awareness that Jesus is an *Asian* has an impact on the Church. It inspires the Asian Christians to celebrate their life in which they remember Jesus who was consistent with his word and witness (A., 8-

City: Claretion Publication, 1992, 97. The FABC documents from 1970 to 1991 have been published in this book. *Please Note:* Henceforth all the footnote references taken from the above book will have the name of Arevalo who is one of the editors of the FABC documents, with the page and paragraph numbers as they are given in the documents. And there are also other references and ideas taken from the same book and presented in the main text as: (A., p).

²*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 3: “The council brings to mankind light kindled from the gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder.”

³*Lumen Gentium*, No. 9.

⁴*Lumen Gentium*, No. 1.

13; 145-46). Transformation will take place, when Asian Christians and situations allow Jesus Christ to take hold of them and to determine all their lives, "attitudes and values, choices and words, concerns, hopes and loves" (A., 153). It enables the bishops to realise their vision of creating an Asian Church with new structures⁵ and to rediscover her identity and mission. This is how we understand that Ecclesiology has its roots in the life and message of Jesus Christ.⁶ It is Jesus Christ who inspires, influences, guides, regulates, moves and even controls the mission of the Church and gives meaning to Church's very identity and existence. Thus in the following of Jesus Christ, her Master, Lord and God, the Asian Church is a servant, reconciling, prophetic, courageous, acculturating, dialoguing, praying and liberating Church.

1. Church as Servant

To follow Jesus who emptied himself⁷ the Church serves humankind, particularly the poor who need her service. The Church has a universal mission to serve humanity and she concretises it in her mission of service to the poor: "The Christian communities are called upon to make Christ's love real to those in the country who are victims of discrimination and injustice in whatever form.⁸" The victims in Asia are the poor, oppressed, outcasts, Tribals, women, unorganised labouring class and all who are marginalized socially and economically.⁹ The mission of the Church is justified to the extent that she lives as a servant of the poor to empower them.

⁵Arevalo, 73, No. 28. The unique mission (inculturation, dialogue and liberation) of the Church in Asia needs "new structures ordained to meeting (its) own situation in Asia today in all its newness."

⁶"Becoming the Church of Poor: with Industrial Workers," *FABC Papers*, LII, August 28 - September 5, 1987 (1989) 47: "The Church is built on Christ. Ecclesiology is built on Christology." Felipe Gomez, "Christology and Pastoral practice 'from below'" *East Asian Pastoral Review*, XIX (1982/1) 4: "Ecclesiology is built on Christology. Vatican II had good insights about the Church; but it did not explicitate the figure of Jesus which would flesh them out. Post-conciliar theology, therefore, had to concentrate on Christology where the centre belongs."

⁷*Ad Gentes*, No. 3.

⁸Jerry Rosario, *Slums are Human*, Bangalore: Ashirvad, 1985, 15.

⁹Rudolf C. Heredia, et al, *The Formation Review Commission: The Interim Report*, Sivakasi: Pioneer Press (P) Ltd., 1991, 3.

The Church proclaims Jesus who came to serve and wants to follow him in her total service to others.¹⁰ She serves the poor who long for life and wait for liberation. "When the poor are at the centre of the Church, they give direction and meaning to everything that legitimately and necessarily constitute the concrete Church."¹¹ In the light of this the Church has to evaluate her existing structures according to the spirit of Christ¹² to find her real and true identity in the service of the poor.

The bishops desire to fulfil their ministry of leadership as pastors of Asian people in the Spirit of servanthood taught by Jesus "who lived in our midst 'as one who serves' and who came 'to give life for the redemption of all'" (A., 5). It is the felt need of the bishops that the Church in Asia, in her work of liberation and salvation, "conform to the model of humble service set by the Master" (A., 72). The event of 'washing of the disciples' feet (Jn 13: 1-10) is the perfect example to remember. Jesus is their teacher and Lord (Jn 13: 14) and yet he serves as a servant. He shows them the meaning of real leadership and how it can be actualised in service to one another. He sets an example to his disciples and instructs them that they follow him closely by rendering loving service: "For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." He makes it clear to them that it is a blessing (Jn 13:17) to have this knowledge that 'a leader is a servant' and to live it by service to one's neighbour.

Our acceptance and proclamation of God as our Father has its direct consequence on our lives.¹³ It makes us realise that we are all children

¹⁰Arevalo, 340, No. 23. A servant Church is one that is a "servant of God, servant of Christ, servant of his plan of salvation; servant also of the Asian peoples, of their deep hopes, longings and aspirations; servant of the followers of others religions, of all women and men, simply and totally for others."

¹¹Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor*, Great Britain: Richard Clay, The Chaucer Press Ltd., 1985, 94.

¹²Amalorpavadass, *Gospel and Culture, FABC Papers, XV, (1979) 51*: "Christ's mission is to be no more understood in terms of imperialist conquest, geographical expansion, territorial limits, numerical additions, but by an all-round, ever-ready presence in the socio-cultural milieu through the spirit of Christ which is one of humble and loving service, losing one's false identity in order to find a new identity which will be genuinely Christian."

¹³Jacob Kavunkal, *The 'Abba Experience' of Jesus: The Model and Motive for Mission Today, FABC Papers, XLIII, (1986) 13*: "It goes without saying, that the acceptance of God as the loving Father of all implies the acceptance of equality and fraternity."

of the one and same Father and hence our life in this world has to be lived on the basis of mutual love and service and not domination and oppression.

2. Church in Reconciliation

If reconciliation is an invitation from God through Christ, it is this Christ who reconciles us to God. This Fatherhood of God implies one family-hood of humankind, sons and daughters of one family. This means that reconciliation is a process in which we die to caste, race, class and cultural, religious and even national divisions and hatred; and rise anew to humanness, unity, love and life.

The Church has a role of reconciliation in an Asia which is divided by oppressive caste¹⁴ and class structures. These make it difficult for her to serve the poor as it demands the transformation of oppressive structures. Any effort made to transform these structures brings many conflicts among different groups with vested interests. In situations of unavoidable conflicts, she has to play a role of reconciliation without compromising with injustice and unjust structures.

There has been a change in the Church's self understanding especially in the past one hundred years or so. In 1885, Leo XIII, in his encyclical *Immortale Die* points out that the Church on earth is a superpower and no power on earth, including any civil power, can be superior and no power can control her.¹⁵ In contrast to this, we read in Vatican II that the Church advances through trials and tribulations¹⁶ in the world, until she reaches her goal, which is God himself, the eternal light of salvation. The latter attitude and image about herself, filled with simplicity and humility, help her to be open

¹⁴In a country like India, a person is treated well or ill according to his caste. Caste plays a vital role in determining one's own social status and hence it is a socio-cultural-power.

¹⁵Juan Luis Segundo, *The Community Called Church*, New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1973, 92.

¹⁶*Lumen Gentium*, No. 9: "Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God's grace promised to her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from perfect fidelity, but remain a bride worthy of her Lord; that moved by the Holy Spirit she may never cease to renew herself, until through the cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting."

and reconciled to the other cultures and religions. This radical change of attitude is because of many reasons, particularly a) the historical hegemony of Christianity has disappeared, b) pluralistic socio-cultural trends have emerged and above all c) the efforts of Vatican II to move towards the original charism, away from its institutional nostalgia.¹⁷

Before preaching the Good News of reconciliation to the world, the churches themselves have to become reconciled with one another. Any reform has to begin first with oneself. In this respect, what has been reflected in the documents of Vatican II has not only to be recognised but also to be actualised in real life and in the practice of the Church. Vatican II, "by its surprising refusal to identify the Church of Christ exclusively with Roman Catholicism, has opened up new avenues of thought."¹⁸ Although the Church of Christ truly and fully, with all her sanctifying grace and truth, subsists¹⁹ in Roman Catholic and Apostolic Communion, "many elements of sanctification and truth can be found outside her visible structure."²⁰ This progressive thinking and attitude of the Church expressed here, as well as in no. 3 of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, reveal the Church's acceptance of other churches and ecclesial communities outside the jurisdiction of the Roman Catholic Church. This attitude now provides a strong basis for reconciliation, understanding and co-operation among the churches.²¹ Every time they celebrate the Eucharist, they have to not only pray for the unity of all the churches but also plan and work together to make this dream a reality. The transformation of this world through their service of preaching the Good News and doing good has to begin first in and among themselves and in their structures.²²

¹⁷Segundo, 93.

¹⁸Avery Dulles, *The Dimensions of the Church*, New York: Newman Press, 1967, 10.

¹⁹*Lumen Gentium*, No. 8. The word 'subsist' is used here to explain that the Church "subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him."

²⁰*Lumen Gentium*, No. 8.

²¹Lothar Lies, "Einige Bemerkungen zur Enzyklika 'Ut unum sint,'" *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, 120 (1. 1998) 14. In his interpretation of the above encyclical, Lies points out that in the present situation of division among the churches, the point that we have to emphasise more is that the Roman Catholic Church is also open to the 'Truth' outside of her.

²²Donal Flanagan, *The Meaning of the Church*, Noas: Leinster Leader Ltd., 1966, 72-3. Flanagan points out that any "reform within the Church depends on whether it

The Church, as the follower of Jesus Christ, has to practise reconciliation not only among Christians but also in the unique plurireligious context of Asia.²³ As an ambassador for Christ (2 Cor 5: 20), the Asian church moves out with the mission of dialogue and service to the brothers and sisters of other faiths, so that the Word and the Spirit of reconciliation may also “be shared in fidelity and joyfulness with our brothers and sisters in the other human communities which surround it” (A., 56).

The diversity of beliefs with their different cultural expressions bound to bring up misunderstandings, conflicts, hatred and division among the peoples of Asia. Being aware of this, the Church has a responsibility of promoting peace, harmony and reconciliation among the children of Asia.²⁴ The same is the wish and vision of the bishops who say that “the Church must in a special way be a sacrament - a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (A., 282). Meeting together for prayer and dialogue, making effort to work together for the common cause of Asian liberation can be ways of promoting peace, unity and reconciliation. This is the longing of the bishops who “... pray for reconciliation and unity among our divided peoples” (A., 294).

3. Prophetic Church

In Asia where the voiceless suffer injustice, the Church has no option except to be a prophetic voice to defend them.²⁵ She follows her master and Lord Jesus Christ who was a prophet²⁶ both in word and

finds its way into the local community of diocese and parish.”

²³Kavunkal, *The Abba Experience of Jesus: The Model and Motive for Mission Today*, 14: “The basic comprehensive goal of mission is to promote and serve the unification and healing of a divided, wounded humanity... The solidarity to which this unification leads may look different in each place: it may be a solidarity against oppression and domination in Latin America; in Africa it may be a fraternity within and across autonomous cultures; in Asia it may be predominantly a solidarity amidst the diversity of religions.”

²⁴Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994, 288: “What concerns Jesus and what should concern the Christian community is the task and mission of making God’s forgiveness real in the world in which we live.”

²⁵Amalorpavadass, *The Church as a Community of Faith in the Asian Context*, 27. The churches in Asia “have to stand up for the poor for whose liberation the *Jagat Guru* (the guru of the whole world) spent his life.”

²⁶Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops’*

action: Jesus in his encounter with the Pharisees, reveals his prophetic conviction that each law should serve the interests of the poor, make them free, equip them with power, and not enslave them (Mk 2:23-28).

In the face of injustice suffered by the poor, the bishops "resolve also to have the courage to speak out for the rights of the disadvantaged and powerless, against all forms of injustice no matter from what source such abuse may come; we will not tie our hands by compromising entanglements with the rich and the powerful in our respective countries" (A., 5-6). They encourage every Church to raise her prophetic voice openly denouncing and protesting against all oppression, injustices, exploitation and inequalities. This is their way of living the values of the Reign of God and bearing witness to Jesus the Saviour and the great Liberator (A., 283-84). A few churches or Christians will not be able to change the huge, powerful, oppressive structures and bring liberation to the poor. We need a liberative force to change them. That force cannot be anything but the grace²⁷ of the Trinitarian God that is operative in the 'Gospel People'- the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed (Lk 4:18-19). This is an incarnational ideology. God himself dwells among them and, in and through their struggle and suffering, manifests God's self and God's plan of liberation.²⁸

The Church in Asia experiences religious discrimination "under totalitarian regimes of every kind" (A., 132) and she lives in an atmosphere of forced silence. In some countries where the majority belong to a particular religion, she is forbidden to proclaim the Good News and to practise her faith. In countries like India although she is allowed to practise her faith, the government does not provide her economic help and other benefits. It is human right of the every individual to embrace and practise religion freely. Denial of this fundamental human right from a government amounts to religious

Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996, II, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, 9: "Just as Jesus worked as a prophet of new life and died to usher it in, so we in Asia today must prophesy on behalf of the God of life. Refusal to prophesy and speak against the forces of death is to fail in serving life!"

²⁷Vernard Eller, *Christian Anarchy. Jesus' Primacy over the Powers*, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987, 249: "Apart from grace, justice and freedom are impossible goals."

²⁸Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1985, 18.

discrimination. The Church fights against them. Being discriminated against, she hopes only in the promise of the Lord who said: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for such men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:11).

The Church suffers on account of her prophetic voice. The bishops see in her sufferings a witness to Christ and a proclamation of the Gospel. This is why the bishops repeatedly affirm their "solidarity with the silent and suffering churches of Asia ..." (A., 294). In their involvement with the people, they share the mystery of the Cross (A., 19) for their liberation. In some countries the bishops say that the Christians are "relatively isolated, or in some cases persecuted and reduced to suffering and silence" (A., 59). In their suffering, the bishops acknowledge the working of the Spirit in "sustaining them in their admirable fidelity and perseverance, planting in their lives and hardship future harvest for the Kingdom of the Father, and fruitfulness for the future of the Church as sacrament of the oneness of all mankind" (A., 59).

4. A Courageous Church

The example of Jesus who spoke the truth courageously before religious and political leaders (Jn 18:19-21; 37), gives her strength to be courageous in defending the poor who, for no fault of their own, have been dehumanised for centuries. Like Jesus she has to raise her voice against the unjust structures and be ready to have a share in the Paschal Mystery of Christ with a hope of sharing in his resurrection.

The Church in Asia has her own fears and anxieties. This is because there are hostile powers who work with determination to wipe out religions. There are authoritarian and dictatorial regimes that prohibit the mission of the churches and drastically curtail religious freedom (A., 70). In the midst of threats and persecution, she moves forward with unshakeable hope (A., 282) and courage which are rooted in the promise and assurance of Jesus: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Lk 12:32).

In spite of many problems, the bishops do not lose hope in the guidance and direction of the Spirit (A., 131). For it is He who ultimately transforms and liberates. Today the churches "have an opportunity they never had for the last 1600 years" (A., 71) to

dialogue with other religions. They understand positively²⁹ that it is “the great call of the Lord” (A., 71) to begin their dialogue with other religions and “start collecting again the ‘seminal reasons’ (*logoi spermatikoi*) in modern man’s old and new religions and integrate them into a new synthesis of the Gospel as it is experienced by today’s man” (A., 71).

The churches come to know and learn from each other in their different programmes, projects, progress and failures. They attempt to help each other, to participate in common projects and to share both material and personnel resources. In mutual encounter and help they become increasingly aware that they are “truly sister-churches in the one family of communities of the Gospel which is the Church of Jesus Christ” (A., 54).

All works of proclaiming the Good News, education and media³⁰ are directed with “the topmost priority” (A., 163) for “total liberation of the socially and economically oppressed” (A., 163) and to have “a more human, just world of economic order” (A., 218). All Christians are invited to evangelise themselves and the peoples to renew the Asian society according to the values of the Reign of God and be a “leaven for the transformation of Asian society” (A., 283). The ultimate transformation is possible only through the help of “the creative Spirit, a Spirit sometimes disturbing but ever surprising, challenging and hope-giving” (A., 283).

5. Church in Inculturation

“It is not the Gospel as such that meets culture as such”³¹ but people meeting people. The people who have accepted the person and message of Christ want to proclaim it to their people and in their

²⁹Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 252, No. 3: “We see the Church of Asia as *small stocks* living in the midst of vast numbers of peoples who have different beliefs and persuasions, in which we find the values of the Kingdom - deep religiosity, prayer and contemplation - which are the sources of our own enrichment.”

³⁰Gustavo Gutierrez, *The Power of the Poor in History*, 187, No. 3.6.6. While speaking on the theme ‘The Laity and Mass Media’, the bishops say that “the People of God must reach out to millions struggling for social transformation, a struggle that requires an interfaith collaboration.”

³¹Parmananda R. Divarkar, “Reflections on the Problem of Inculturation” *FABC Papers*, VII (1978) 1.

cultural context.³² To realise this more meaningfully Christians follow Jesus' Way of inculturation. Accepting what was good in his culture, Jesus did not hesitate to criticise and purify that part of the culture that needed transformation.³³

The bishops acknowledge their "hesitations and mistakes in the past" (A., 6) and failures to inculturate the life and message of Christ. But being inspired by the Fathers of the Church who were inculturated in Graeco-Roman traditions, the bishops and the theologians suggest that the Church inculturates in all the rich Asian traditions and values which is one of the ways to present Jesus and his good-news in the "social and cultural idioms" (A., 339). It is "through their culture people assimilate the gospel, and through their culture they express it."³⁴

The bishops say that on the one hand we need to appreciate all that is good and life-promoting in cultures and, on the other hand, be critical of those value systems which perpetuate violence, injustice, hatred and disunity (A., 313-14). The bishops are aware of how the Gospel values inculturate in any culture. The Gospel appreciates what is human and grace-filled and purifies what is inhuman and sinful in cultures. In this every culture has to undergo the suffering and death of the Paschal Mystery in order to rise again: "The gospel dies, as Jesus did, in the historical-cultural body it has in order to rise in the cultural bodiliness of the new context. That new situation too enters into a paschal style of life. It keeps dying not to authentic cultural creations but to what is incompatible with the human which the gospel illumines."³⁵

Inculturation is a process in which all human reality of the people in Asia "is assumed into the life of the Body of Christ, so that all of it may be purified and healed, perfected and fulfilled" (A., 16).

³²Hardawiryana, *Building the Church of Christ in a Pluricultural Situation*, 17: "Inculturation is ... a dialogue between groups of people. We are dealing with people of flesh and blood, in their real life-situations; cultural, religious, social, economic, political."

³³Lothar Lies, *Europa Und Die Kirchen Säkulare Katholizität - Plausibilität neuer Kirchlichkeit*, Wien-München: Kulturverlag, 1995, 54. Lies, in his discussion on the pluricultural context of Europe, insists that a culture is really a culture only when it serves and promotes the dignity of man.

³⁴Francis Clark, "Inculturation: Introduction and History," *Teaching all Nations*, XV (No. 4, 1978) 212.

³⁵Samuel Rayan, "Inculturation and the local Church" *Focus*, VI (No. 4, 1986) 245.

Inculturation encounters the entire meaning system of a given community, therefore "the sensibility of the community should influence all decisions."³⁶ Where the community is not human, it is challenged, healed and perfected in its encounter with the values of the Gospel. This is an endless process for a community that is open and searches for meaningful ways "to express its faith and its love in renewed ways."³⁷ Inculturation means to have "a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples and to help Asians remain truly Asian ..." (A., 6). The mystery of salvation revealed in Jesus³⁸ is the foundation for the churches and they have to realise inculturation, "according to the model of the mystery of Trinitarian life, where Father and Son have everything in common because they exist in mutual giving and receiving, and live in the perfection of sharing which is the Spirit."³⁹

6. Church in Dialogue

In Asia, dialogue is "witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives, in their particular cultural context, their own religious traditions, and their socio-economic conditions" (A., 94). This witnessing to Christ is made possible through different dialogues like, "dialogue of life, dialogue of deeds, dialogue of experts, and dialogue in the sharing of the experiences of faith" (A., 253).

Although the openness of the Church to other religions can be found in the early history of the Church, even in the time of Justin Martyr, somehow in the course of history she lost her original vision and the sense of dialogue with other religions. Instead of dialogue, she decided to dominate and rule, and even went as far as destroying other religions. This unfortunate attitude to other religions is similar to that of the western colonial powers.

³⁶Thomas Menampampil, "The Challenge of Cultures," *Omnis Terra*, 259 (June 1995) 291.

³⁷Thomas Menampampil, "The Challenge of Cultures," 295.

³⁸Arevalo, 343, No. 35: "The mystery of the incarnation and the paschal mystery are at once the foundation and the model for the deep insertion of local churches in the surrounding cultures, in all aspects of their life, celebration, witness and mission."

³⁹Robert H. Hardawiryana, "Building the Church of Christ in a Pluricultural Situation" *FABC Papers*, XLI (1985) 3.

Liberated from the wrong notion of other religions, the Church today officially declares to the whole world that the other religions are worthy enterprise and that she has to enter into dialogue with them. This change of attitude in her thinking is due to the inspiration and guidance of the Spirit of Christ (A., 258). This is a *Copernican Revolution* after Vatican II in the attitude and approach of the Church to other religions.⁴⁰ This changed attitude⁴¹ enables the bishops to seek together with the brothers and sisters of other religions, that fullness of Christ which is God's plan for the whole of creation.

The bishops say that dialogue with the great, living religious traditions of Asia "should be the ideal form of evangelisation ..." (A., 94). They draw inspiration from Vatican Council II. Interreligious dialogue is a mandate given by the universal Church to all her sons and daughters.⁴² The Church in Asia receives it with immense joy and happiness as she finds herself in the midst of many religions and cultures. In their faith experience, the bishops themselves are convinced that it is God who "encourages us to enter into dialogue with the peoples of other religions in Asia" (A., 292). Dialogue is the way through which God calls the Church to bear witness to Christ in a plurireligious world.

Yet another need for interreligious dialogue is that the Church acknowledges and proclaims that all human beings are related to Christ.⁴³ This is a very basic and fundamental tenet of her faith. This understanding makes the bishops say: "All mankind is rooted in the Christ event; this anthropology is operative even in those who do not know Christ. Our main point of contact is the search for a new humanity and a new human family" (A., 232).

The fundamental principle and motivating factor for dialogue is God himself. It was He who began His dialogue with the world through different prophets (Rom 1:2) and finally through His Son who was

⁴⁰*Nostra Aetate*, No. 2. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions."

⁴¹Michael Amaladoss, "Interreligious Dialogue: A View from Asia" *Landas*, VIII, (July 1994) 209: "John Paul II, in his symbolic gesture at Assisi in 1986, acknowledged the legitimacy of other religions. He also frequently calls for the collaboration of all believers and of all people of good will for the promotion and defence of common human and religious values."

⁴²*Nostra Aetate*, No. 2.

⁴³*Ad Gentes*, No. 7.

called "the Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32) and "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 1:4). The purpose of His dialogue is to reveal His love so that the world may live (1 Jn 4:9).

The bishops find the commandment of love given by Jesus himself as another motivating factor and basis for dialogue.⁴⁴ Love breeds love. In dialogue with the brothers and sisters of other faiths, the Christians have a chance to express their love and concern for them through their sharing of "the Good News of God's Kingdom in Jesus Christ" (A., 291), which in turn enables them to love Christians. In an atmosphere of peace, harmony and love, becoming aware of how God is working through his Spirit in the whole of creation, Christians, together with their brothers and sisters of other faiths, discover the redeeming, transforming and loving presence of God. This is the foundation of the integral development and liberation of all Asian people.

Yet another motivating factor for the bishops is to understand the plan of God in the economy of salvation in allowing the other religions to exist side by side. Inspired and encouraged by Vatican II, the Church in Asia has become increasingly conscious of "the positive role of other religions in God's plan of salvation" (A., 119). This is the background against which they say that "the presence of Jesus Christ and his Spirit in the world" (A., 101) are not only within the Church but also "beyond the boundaries of the Church community and that our non-Christian brethren in ways unknown to us also relate to the mystery of the Church" (A., 101). The bishops also "exhort the Catholics in Asia to let their lives be guided by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council" (A., 116).

7. Church in Prayer

People in Asia have a profound religious sense which the bishops call "the resources of the spirit" (A., 5). The bishops see that there is a new awakening among the Christians and particularly the youth in favour of prayer and contemplation. This need felt for prayer, a

⁴⁴*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 23: "... Love therefore is the fulfilment of the law (Rom 13:9-10; cf. 1 Jn 4:20). To men growing daily more dependent on one another, and to a world becoming more unified every day, this truth proves to be of paramount importance."

readiness to share and reflect on the Word of God, and meaningfully and increasingly participate in the Eucharistic celebration are all certainly a "sign of the presence and action of the Spirit" (A., 59). With the guidance of the same Spirit and with their prayer and committed involvement, Christians can bring about a transformation of society. Because it is the same Spirit of the Lord who was upon Jesus announcing the Good News to the poor (Lk 4:18), who dwells also among the Christians and moves them to identify themselves with the poor in their simplicity and poverty. The Church understands that this is the way the Spirit moves her to follow the simple and poor Christ in Asia (A., 129).

Prayer is seen as a fruitful activity very directly and closely linked with liberative and concrete action programmes for development, involving a process that brings "conversion in men's hearts and the renewal of societal structures" (A., 33). It is prayer that motivates and orients one's life to the cause of liberation of Asian people. For it is in prayer that the Christians come to a deeper understanding of the poverty and oppression and the same prayer binds them to "solidarity with the poor and the powerless, the marginalized and oppressed in our societies" (A., 336). In prayer Christians understand that injustice and oppression are the results of selfishness and sinfulness in human heart. In prayer accompanied by regular discernment, they can plan "*effective actions* that would help dismantle structures of sin oppressive of our peoples" (A., 282).

The whole project of liberation is seen by the bishops as the project of God himself, as he himself makes such liberation possible in the Asian history, "through the Faith, Hope and love which are divine gifts mediated to us through prayer" (A., 33).

In their exposure-immersion program, in their involvement with the poor and in their struggle, "the bishops attempted to discover a liberative spirituality for social action among the poor and by the poor" (A., 230). In general when we think of Christian spirituality, we think of the spirituality of monks, religious men and women and priests. The bishops, in their involvement with the ordinary and poor people, discover a deeper spirituality which incorporates in its dynamic way and functions both "the incarnational spirituality of a salvific involvement in the world, as well as a paschal spirituality of dying and rising to new life" (A., 240). Discovering such a spirituality of the poor the bishops not only want to remodel and reshape the

spirituality of the Church today but also recommend that the incarnational and paschal spirituality of the poor should be the spirituality of all in order that we are 'active for the Reign' of God in Asia (A., 240).

8. Church of the Poor

The Church in Asia is poor. In her encounter with other religions she understands that the majority of their children are also poor. With poverty, the poor have to suffer from different kinds of oppression which keep them in an inhuman condition. Being conscious of her poverty and minority status, she tries to collaborate with men and women of good will in order to break every kind of oppression that dehumanises the poor and raise them to that dignity which is the dignity of the children of God.

The bishops feel that "the Church should also be the voice of those without a voice: the poor and the weak, the marginalized and the victims of injustice, wherever they may be" (A., 205) and she has to commit herself for the "total development of people."⁴⁵ The bishops see in every man and woman the image of God and say that it is "God's gift and making" (A., 6). But the image of God is disfigured and destroyed by injustice and oppressive structures (A., 6-7) and to eradicate these and renew and restore the image of God is "a task and duty laid on all of us by God" (A., 6). The bishops proclaim that the preferential option for the poor should be "the real pattern of our daily praxis" (A., 60).

In this regard the bishops say that among the many Christians in Asia there is an increasing desire to observe poverty for a deeper solidarity with the poor who are oppressed and made powerless, as the way of following Jesus. Today there is an "increased commitment to tasks of human development and struggles for justice and human rights" (A., 59). There is a growing awareness and willingness among the Christians in Asia "to eradicate the causes of de-humanisation" (A., 330). They are also convinced now more than ever that "only by co-operating with sisters and brothers of other faiths" (A., 330) can such a task be realised.

⁴⁵Arevalo, 6. No. 21; 244, No. 11: "Our work with and for the poor must concretely reduce the poverty of the people and make their lives truly human."

A preferential option does not mean to have “just a concern for the poor” (A., 94) or to have sympathy for the poor. It demands, following the example of God himself, to be incarnated in the poverty and struggle of the poor. The bishops are convinced that the Church in Asia is “not only the Church for the poor but of the poor” (A., 100). Hence: “A preferential option in favour of the poor is called for, to which we believe the Lord is calling our churches.” (A., 100). This preferential option “consists in a certain identification with the poor in life style, and solidarity with the poor in their struggle for justice and a more human existence.”⁴⁶ The option for the poor has its consequence in the churches' understanding of her vision and mission. It has brought about a different understanding of conversion. It demands a reformulation of the catechism and a recreation of the existing formation programmes, including those for priests and bishops.

9. Conclusion: A Vision for the Future

The Asian theologians who came to reflect on the activities of FABC commented that the Church in Asia somehow reflects the colonial Church that came to Asia during the sixteenth century with commercial traders and western political powers. This “transplanted (Church) from the ‘old world’ to ‘new lands’” (A., 339), is in contrast to the primitive Church which was inspired by the Holy Spirit, suffered and died like Jesus in her encounter with every new culture and people and rose again as the Church of Christ, “making a living option for the poor, aligning themselves with the lower classes and the marginalized” (A., 339).

The bishops are aware of this criticism. But they are optimistic of their future mission in Asia, because God through His Spirit⁴⁷ and His grace⁴⁸ guides the Church in her weaknesses and difficulties. He enables her to feel sorry and ask pardon for her failures and sins in the past and courageously walk in her pilgrimage to the Reign of God. With this trust in their hearts, during the Asian Colloquium on

⁴⁶Arevalo, 225, No. 8; 284, No.6.4. In her compassion the Church in Asia has to serve “each human being - but especially the poor, deprived and oppressed - the very person of Christ who has united himself to every human being though he/she may be unaware of it.”

⁴⁷*Lumen Gentium*, No. 4.

⁴⁸*Lumen Gentium*, No. 39.

Ministries in the Church, the bishops took stock of things and projected a vision for the future of Asia. This vision consists of two parts. A vision for the whole of the Asian world and a vision for the Asian churches. The bishops say that, on the one hand, it remains for them a great challenge to build the Church of Christ in this part of our world⁴⁹ with its unique characters, needs and problems and, on the other hand, they want this universal mission of liberation and salvation to remain always in union with the universal Church, and express its loyalty to the Pope.⁵⁰

In the First Plenary Assembly itself the main focus of the bishops was “the building up of a truly local Church” (A., 14). It meant to “make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples” (A., 14), so that all the peoples of Asia may know ‘God’s design’ for this world and respond positively to the grace of God and the voice of His Spirit, and make the design of God ‘reach its fulfilment’.⁵¹ Hence the Church has to “dialogue with the great religious traditions of the people” (A., 14), and dialogue with the poor (A., 15) and cultures of Asia. At this historical juncture, her mission is filled with the pastoral implications of inculturation, dialogue and liberation. She looks at Jesus, her spouse, for inspiration and guidance⁵² so that “the Kingdom of Christ now present in mystery, grows visibly in the world through the power of God.”⁵³

9.1. Christ calls the Church of Asia

We understand from the FABC documents that the majority of Christians, although a minority (only 3%), are poor. The Church is not only a Church of the poor but she also has to be for and with the

⁴⁹Arevalo, 281, No. 3.3.1: “In fact it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local churches.”

⁵⁰Arevalo, 3, No. 3. The Pope, say the bishops in Asia, “as Peter in the midst of his brothers in the apostolate ...”. Arevalo, 7, No. 28; 281, No. 3.3.1. In their desire to build a new Asia they are always united with the Pope, the touchstone of their unity and love.

⁵¹*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 2.

⁵²*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 10. The Church “holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point, and the goal of all human history. ... Hence in the light of Christ, the image of the unseen God, ... (she hopes to find) the solution to the outstanding problems of our time.”

⁵³*Lumen Gentium*, No. 3.

poor. This character of her being and becoming poor, which is both a call and challenge of Jesus, fixes her other characters and her very life in Asia. She can be the Church of Christ in Asia only to the extent that she is with the poor of Asia, "sharing their life and their aspirations, knowing their despair and their hope, walking with them in their search for authentic humanity in Christ Jesus" (A., 144). Hence the bishops say that "it is from the material deprivation of our poor people, as well as from their tremendous human potential, and from their aspirations for a more fully human and brotherly world, that Christ is calling the churches of Asia" (A., 169).

The poor belong to different religions and ideologies and the Church is aware that she has to dialogue with them in order to understand them well and redeem them.⁵⁴ In her dialogue with the Asian poor, she understands how she is alienated from the peoples' cultures and how the cultures she encounters are alienated from Jesus and his Good News. She observes that her redeeming mission has to begin at the very oppressed level of life in which the people live. The mission demands a "commitment to the up building of Asian communities in the life of the Gospel, to inculturation of Christian faith and life, to the endeavour for total human development and authentic liberation of peoples in justice and love, to interreligious dialogue and to renewed missionary formation" (A., 29-30). Her mission of liberation and salvation has to go through the process of dialogue and inculturation simultaneously in order that her mission be made relevant, meaningful and fruitful in a multicultural, plurireligious and poverty-stricken Asia, until "the end of time she will achieve her glorious fulfilment."⁵⁵

9.2. To Be and to Become Asian Churches

Now the time has come for the churches in Asia to discover themselves as Asian churches (A., 281). The Asian identity demands from the churches that they are "Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others" (A., 281). The churches will have their future only through the self discovery of themselves as the churches of Asia.

⁵⁴Arevalo, 250. No. 3: "We see, therefore, the Church as weakly emerging from self-centeredness towards a maturity that urges her to reach out to all brothers and sisters of other Christian churches, religions and peoples of good will in service and in love."

⁵⁵*Lumen Gentium*, No. 1.

In the process of becoming the Asian churches, they have challenges and needs. The bishops indicate three priorities. 1) Evangelisation, 2) Serving the Reign of God in the Asia of tomorrow and 3) The social question, namely that the poor in Asia suffer injustice and oppression and eagerly wait for liberation. Although they seem to be three in number, they all aim at only one goal - the Reign of God. Hence: "All we have to do is to start doing what Jesus did: 'to preach the Good News' - not only by words but by deeds, and to do this with all the demands of the Gospel on Asia" (A., 71). To preach the Good News in the Asian context, the churches have to be attuned to the Spirit of the Lord in order to "discover the path the Lord of History wants His Church in Asia to tread" (A., 71).

The bishops commit themselves "to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit" (A., 209) and create "a new society of justice and peace" (A., 209). This task needs a certain way of planning and doing things as revealed in the liberating plan of God in the prophets and in his Son Jesus. The Way, for the bishops and the Christians, is Jesus the Christ and the Liberator "who has a special love for the poor and wishes to be identified and served in the naked, hungry, thirsty, and imprisoned" (A., 208). In the Spirit of Christ, all the Christians in Asia have to dialogue with all the brothers and sisters of other faiths in "an effective way to work for the Reign which Christ (himself) proclaimed" (A., 259; 275).

As they journey together toward the third Christian millennium, the bishops reflect on a new way of being the churches of Christ in Asia. They say that the churches will have to be a *communion of communities*. The various Basic Christian communities like neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities, 'covenant' communities and others have to come together to pray, share the word of Jesus, and bear witness to him by living his words in their daily lives. With these basic communities, the churches will have to be *participatory* churches: "The Church then is a communion in the Spirit, a community of sharing and fellowship, of witness and service" (A., 72). The Spirit of the living God showers his gift on all the members of the churches. They, in turn, share their talents and gifts not only among themselves but also with the brothers and sisters of other faiths to realise the mission of Jesus.

The churches have to evaluate their existence in terms of the mission that flows into different activities through which they bear witness to

Jesus their Founder. Their participation in the Paschal Mystery demands that they “‘pass over’ with Christ to the poor, to Asian cultures and to other religions” (A., 338). This ‘pass over’ is not without risks, uncertainties and sufferings:

The Asian churches have to overcome their fear of the unknown, and must have the courage to leave the one sheep in the fold to seek out the ninety-nine outside. And so we dream of a Church without conditions or calculations, a Church at the service of the followers of other faith traditions, a reconciling Church at the service of human communities in conflict, an open Church at the service of the poor. This service entails risk, this risk of losing our life in order to find it (Mk 8:35). Have we the courage to ask the Lord that we might follow him until the end? (A., 347).

9.3. A Radical Model of Local churches

To empower the poor and the oppressed in Asia we need a radical model of local churches. We propose the following radical model of a local Church or local churches.

It is a two-tier system of local churches. The ‘two-tier’ means two levels of formation, involvement, organisation and actualisation of the common goal of liberation and salvation. One is the centripetal and the other centrifugal. The two-tier system can structurally function as described below. The centripetal involvement is in the midst of the poor and oppressed to build the local Christian community - a community of love, sharing and brotherhood. The foundation of the community is Jesus Christ who is the *Way* to the Father, the author of liberation and salvation and source of unity. Following this Jesus, their master and the Eucharistic Lord, Christians of different local churches, give up their lives generously for others, especially for the poor and oppressed.

The centrifugal involvement is in the midst of the poor and oppressed, living outside the local churches. Jesus, who was being filled with the power the Spirit (Lk 4:18), “always moved about at the grass-roots level ... and began his liberation by giving value to their persons.”⁵⁶ The local churches in Asia, being the followers of Jesus, have also to live and concentrate more at the grass-roots levels in

⁵⁶Severino Croatto, *Exodus – A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, New York: Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1981, 51.

order to raise the poor and the oppressed from their low image and brokenness through conscientisation, so that they may begin to “rise from the obscurity of their ‘being less’, to their ‘being more’, of their being the ‘New Person.’”⁵⁷ Thus the centrifugal involvement will ultimately lead the local churches to participate fully in the people’s struggle for justice and collaborate with all people’s movements like agricultural labourers, Tribals, Fisher-folk, the outcastes and oppressed, so that the poor and oppressed will be able to decide everything for themselves and have respect, dignity and life, which is the plan of God for His children in Asia. Basic communities models, which the bishops themselves very much recommend (A., 30-31), are good examples for centrifugal involvement, as they move out to sisters and brothers of other faiths in dialogue with the common goal of liberation and salvation.

The churches in Asia, always open to God and His Spirit, have to work together and move forward both *centripetally* and *centrifugally*, so that the poor are ultimately liberated by the power of God. It is in and through their liberation and salvation that all men and women will become the children of the Father in obedience, and worship Him in Spirit and Truth (Jn 4:23), and “the human race as well as the entire world ... will be perfectly re-established in Christ ...”⁵⁸

⁵⁷Severino Croatto, *Exodus – A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, 51.

⁵⁸*Lumen Gentium*, No. 48.