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**PILGRIM COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES:
AN ASIAN MODEL OF THE CHURCH**

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The word “church” conveys many different meanings to different people. When Catholics hear the word, they generally think of the hierarchy, the Pope and Roman curia. For many Protestants, “church” means the local community, their congregation. For the followers of other religions, it means a building, an institution. The meaning, belongingness and commitment depend on the image or model the word brings to their mind. The changes of time and context call for new models to explain the mystery of the Church. The Second Vatican Council and the pluralistic context of Asia demand a new model of the Church to convey what it is meant for in Asia. In this article, I propose a model of the Church as *Pilgrim Community of Disciples* for the pluralistic context of Asia. Pilgrim conveys the eschatological and dynamic nature of the Church, the community points to its historical rootedness in Jesus of Nazareth and the complementary role of institution and charism and disciples suggests the openness needed to learn from co-pilgrims on the way to the fullness of the Kingdom.

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The Necessity of Models

The Church, co-instituted by Christ and the Holy Spirit, is dialectically a gift and a task. As a gift, the Church is divine, *ecclesia de Trinitate*; as a task, the Church is human, *ecclesia ex hominibus*.¹ The task depends on how one understands the gift. If the gift is understood as static and explained as Christ founded a Church as a hierarchically structured society provided with all the means needed for its mission to communicate salvation,² then the task is primarily to preserve the gift intact. In his opening address at the Second Vatican Council, Pope John XXIII reminded the Council Fathers that “our duty is not just to guard this treasure, as though it were some museum-piece and we the curators, but earnestly and fearlessly to dedicate ourselves to the work that needs to be done in this modern age of ours...”³ If the gift is understood as a mystery, then the task is to build up the Church in co-operation with the Spirit. Model is required only if we understand the Church as mystery. St Paul explains the Church as a mystery related to the absolute oneness of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:4-6; 1Cor 8:6; 12:6ff.). Vatican II adopted the title of the first chapter of *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* (LG): “The Mystery of the Church.” In his opening address at the second session of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI declared, “The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and ever greater explorations.”⁴ The mystery of the Church cannot be fully comprehended or defined by finite human beings but only be described with a plurality of complementary theological analogies, images, or models.

A model in ecclesiology is a perception and expression of the mystery of the Church from a particular angle. In the words of Avery Dulles, “When an image is employed reflectively and critically to deepen one’s theoretical understanding of a reality it becomes what is today called a ‘model.’”⁵ The mystery of the Church is always greater and

¹Joseph A. Komonchak, “Towards a Theology of the Local Church,” *FABC Papers* 42 (1986) 9.

²Yves Congar, *The Word and the Spirit*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1986, 48.

³Pope John XXIII, “The Council – At the Threshold of a New Era: Address of Pope John XXIII at the Opening of the Council,” *The Pope Speaks* 8, 3 (1963) 212.

⁴Quoted in *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed., Hans Küng, Yves Congar, and D. O’Hanlon, Glen Rock, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1964, 26.

⁵Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 2nd ed., Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988, 23.

richer than any one model can capture. There is, therefore, no single model that is ever exhaustive, or exists in a pure state. Nor can any model be interpreted in so exclusive a manner as to negate the teachings of other approved models. Models provide a knowledge that is always partial and inadequate but never false. The mystery of the Church can best be comprehended by the simultaneous espousal of different models.

The Bible uses as much as ninety-six images.⁶ Dulles provides a comprehensive view of ecclesiology by using six models of the Church: institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, servant and community of disciples. Each of these discloses a distinct way of understanding the mystery of the Church. The Church as an institution emphasizes the Church's external and often hierarchical aspects. The Church as mystical communion focuses on the Church's reality as a community mystically united to Christ and to one another. The sacramental model points to the Church's nature as visible sign and instrument of divine and human unity. The herald and servant models highlight on the Church's task of proclamation and commitment to personal and social transformation, respectively. Community of Disciples model harmonizes the differences of these five models. Jerome P. Theisen has presented nine models of the Church: the Church and Christ, Church as Sacrament, the People of God, the Human Church, the Community, the Church and the Spirit, the Existential Church, the Church as Prophet, and the Church and Eschatology.⁷ Brothers Gehard and Norbert Lohfink propose the Church as "Contrast Society."⁸ Liberation theologians have developed the model of the Church as Basic Ecclesial Communities.

No one model makes other models dispensable. The models emerge as a response to the signs of the times in a changing world. Moreover, the mystery of the Church is perceived and described by living subjects who are rooted in their own particular culture and history. Hence, new circumstances and new understanding of the culture and the world give rise to new models. None of the above-mentioned models addresses adequately the religiously pluralistic context of

⁶Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 19.

⁷P. Jerome Theisen, *The Ultimate Church and the Promise of Salvation*, Collegeville, Minnesota: St. John's University Press, 1976, 122-51.

⁸John Fuellenbach, *Church: Community for the Kingdom*, Manila: Logos Publications, 2000, 202.

Asia. Pluralism existed in Asia from the very beginning. But today there is an acute awareness and a different perception of religious pluralism and its significance for salvation. The rise of fundamentalism and the increasing politicization of religions have contributed to this awareness. This new perception of religious pluralism calls for a new model of the Church in Asia as well as in the pluralistic world to illuminate the mystery of the Church. The model of the Church as Pilgrim Community of Disciples reveals the mystery of the Church in the pluralistic world.

The Nature of the Pilgrim Community of Disciples

Church as Pilgrim

Before Vatican II, the Church was defined as hierarchical and juridical. According to Yves Congar the whole treatise on ecclesiology was more like a "hierarchology."⁹ The reason for this understanding is *Christomonism*¹⁰ – a focus on Christ to the exclusion of the Spirit. The new self-understanding of the Church found expression especially in the Second Vatican Council's *Dogmatic Constitution of the Church* (LG) and the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (GS). These documents brought a shift from the rather static and institutional model of the Church to a more dynamic model of the Church as a pilgrim people *en route* towards the fullness of Kingdom. This model sought to give the Church a new relevance, a new vitality and a new sense of mission.

The Church receives the pilgrim character because it originates from the Trinity. The Blessed Trinity is the source and model of ecclesial society. Life originating from the Father is first communicated within the Godhead, thereby constituting a divine society - the Holy Trinity.¹¹ This Trinitarian life is, then, extended to a multitude of creatures by the "missions" of the Son and the Holy Spirit in order that they might share the life and participate in the purposes of God. The Church is thus the fruit of a two-fold "divine mission" of the Word and the Spirit, both in its life and in its origin. Jesus becomes

⁹Yves Congar, "The Historical Development of Authority in the Church," in *Problems of Authority*, ed., John M. Todd, London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1962, 144.

¹⁰Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols., New York: Crossroad, 1983, vol. 1: *The Holy Spirit in the 'Economy': Revelation and Experience of the Spirit*, 1:157.

¹¹Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, London: Centenary Press, 1939, 48.

the Way (Jn 14:6) of the pilgrim Church. To journey with Christ is to transcend our own fears and insecurities and risk the journey into the unfamiliar and unknown. The Holy Spirit is the guide to take such risks and journey into the unknown.

The Trinitarian foundation gives the Church dynamism and movement. Jürgen Moltmann portrays the Trinitarian structure in the following sequence: in the sending, surrender and resurrection of Christ, the sequence is: Father-Spirit-Son; in the lordship of Christ and the sending of the Spirit, the sequence is: Father-Son-Spirit; and finally in the eschatological consummation and glorification, the sequence is: Spirit-Son-Father.¹² Hence, the Holy Spirit, the eschatological gift, is the one who guides the pilgrim Church to *eschaton*. The Greek fathers emphasize that it is the Spirit who is “the sanctification, fulfilment, completion and goal of all reality.”¹³ The Spirit is always ahead of us and draws us on towards the eschatological inheritance of the kingdom of God.

In the New Testament, only the letter to the Hebrews construes the believing community as on a pilgrimage.¹⁴ However, the elements of the pilgrim motif can be found in each book of the non-Pauline writings. In the letter to the Hebrews, there is no one specific term which directly bears the idea of pilgrimage but it contains considerable data (people of God, pilgrimage, the house of God, the future city, the heavenly Jerusalem) that support at least the idea of movement and expectation. We can find four essential elements which comprise the pilgrim idea: (1) a separation from home; (2) journey towards a definite goal; (3) hardships along the way; and (4) promised blessings at the destination.¹⁵ These elements explain much of what the letter to the Hebrews articulates about God’s people and their relationships within the community of faith and with society.

The pilgrims live on society’s fringes, “on the margins of the social order in order to gain God’s approval through their faith” (Heb 11:37-39). In the letter to the Hebrews, the pilgrim community is called to

¹²Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981, 94.

¹³Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, New York: Crossroad, 1984, 224.

¹⁴Robert W. Wall, “New Testament *Koinonia*,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed., David Noel Freedman, New York: Doubleday, 1992, 1: 1108.

¹⁵William G. Johnsson, “The Pilgrimage Motif in the Book of Hebrews,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97/2 (1978) 240-41.

separate itself from its rival religious community, with its traditional observance.¹⁶ For, it is understood as a cultic community¹⁷ which is on a journey to a definite goal. In the letter of James, the separation is understood as standing "on the side of the poor rather than on the side of the influential (Jam 2:1-13)."¹⁸ In either case this radical action produces not comfort but anxiety and hardship. But the destination of the pilgrimage mitigates the sufferings and difficulties of separation. In the letter to the Hebrews, that destination is God's City, the heavenly Jerusalem where the blessings of salvation are found (chapters 11-12). The endurance to the end depends upon the pilgrim's ability to focus on the goal and to continue the pilgrimage, difficulties notwithstanding.

Christ is interpreted in the letter to the Hebrews as the one who redeems his pilgrim community by becoming a pilgrim himself and sharing the pilgrim's situations of insecurity, temptation, suffering and death. In his ministry, Jesus turned deliberately to the outcasts in society touching lepers and having table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (Mk 3:1-6; 10:13-16). These were "not casual gestures on the part of Jesus but elements of a deliberate strategy."¹⁹ The action of Jesus' cleansing of the temple of Jerusalem was not disrespect for the temple or for God's presence in the temple. Rather, "it was a matter of how and where that presence was to be encountered."²⁰ Jesus finds God's presence in table-fellowship with tax-collectors and sinners. Therefore, Jesus' pilgrimage is primarily towards the people rather than to the Jerusalem temple. According to the letter to the Hebrews, we are all "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Heb 11:13). Pilgrims, by definition, are 'outsiders.' They come as strangers to be with other strangers, each journeying for their own reason. What they have in common is the end of the journey and the journey itself. Thus the pilgrim Church is called to be on the society's

¹⁶Wall, "New Testament," 1108.

¹⁷Christians are cultic community because Hebrews sees Christians as "sanctified," "perfected," "purified" (Heb 3:1; 13:24; 2:11; 9:13; 10:10, 14, 29) and therefore, they have access to God. Johnsson, "Pilgrimage Motif," 249.

¹⁸Wall, "New Testament," 1108.

¹⁹George Soares-Prabhu, "Jesus and the Poor," in *Poverty in India: Challenges and Responses*, ed. J. Murickan, Bangalore: Xavier Board, 1988, 266.

²⁰Sean Freyne, "Jesus the Pilgrim," in *Pilgrimage*, ed., Virgil Elizondo and Sean Freyne, Concilium 1996/4, London: SCM Press, 1996, 28.

fringes, on the side of the poor and in fellowship with co-pilgrims of all other religions along the way.

Pope John Paul II uses the image of pilgrimage on several occasions. He says, "We are all pilgrims on the path of seeking to do God's will in everything. Let good will and peace govern our relations! Let us be always willing to speak to each other and listen to each other."²¹ The Pilgrim Church is thus not static but "a community in pilgrimage journeying with peoples of other faiths towards the Kingdom that is to come."²²

The Church as Community

The Church as *community* originates from the earthly Jesus, the Word incarnate. A number of Catholic theologians hold the view that the Church is a post-Easter reality brought about through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost but having its foundation in the earthly Jesus who lived and acted by the power of the Spirit.²³ Therefore, the Church has two dimensions: institution and charism. Institution refers to the Word, the sacraments, and the ministry which come from Jesus of Nazareth and is essential in the Church in order to represent Christ to every succeeding generation and to every place. The Church is built up not only through the institution but also through the charisms of the Spirit given to its members. The Church enjoys the fullness of the Spirit's gifts by welcoming and integrating the contributions brought from all members. Vatican II emphasizes the charisms of the Spirit "as dynamic principles given to all believers for the building up of the Church and the carrying out of the Church's mission."²⁴

The institution and charism are two inseparable poles of the Church. The overemphasis on either will result in a purely hierarchical or a purely personalistic ecclesiology. Therefore, they can neither be

²¹John Paul II, Gambia, February 23, 1992; quoted in Sebastian Painadath, "Dominus Jesus Rewritten," *Jeevadhara* 31 (2001) 247.

²²Bishops Institute for Religious Affairs IV/4, 2, in Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 1:300, henceforth cited as *FAPA*, 1.

²³This position is held by Karl Rahner, A. Vögtle, O. Semmelroth, Joseph Ratzinger, and Richard McBrien. Fuellenbach, *Church*, 44-45, 47.

²⁴Congar, *Word and the Spirit*, 80; referring to *Lumen Gentium* 12, 2; *Ad Gentes* 23, 1, 28.

opposed nor absorbed but are to be considered as complementary. The overemphasis of the institution at the expense of the charism has led people to look for free and spontaneous groups that govern themselves. There is today an undeniable thirst and hunger for prayer and contemplation. Being in Rishikesh, the heart of Hindu spirituality, for the last six years, I am convinced that in spite of an apparent appetite for worldly things in life like money, power, pleasures, comforts, the present generation has not lost a thirst for something deeper in life and higher in destiny. An increasing number of Christians from Europe give up formal religious practices and come to India, especially to Rishikesh to learn yoga and meditation. They are not against religion but only manifesting that the core concern of religion must be spirituality that leads to deeper experience of God rather than rituals and laws. The search for deeper experience has led some members of the Catholic Church to Pentecostalism, others to find alternative paths in Eastern movements such as ISKON, Zen meditation and even the monastic lifestyle of Tibetan monks. It is a sign and a challenge for the Church to breathe with its both lungs, institution and charism. The dialectical tension between institution and charism "is too divine for us to be able to break it without betraying some aspect of it."²⁵

In the Pilgrim Community of Disciples, the Spirit should have primacy. The institutional elements are God's gifts to the community but the Spirit given at Pentecost is Gift par excellence. Since God's communication of himself reaches its completion in the Holy Spirit, he is the eschatological gift who completes the works of God. The institutional elements are operative and effective in time and space only by the power of the Spirit.²⁶ The indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the distribution of its gifts to all the members through the sacrament of baptism constitute a fundamental equality with functional differences among the disciples in the community. The ordained ministers have a unique role in the Church as mediators of God's grace but they exercise their ministry in communion with all the baptized. In the pilgrim Church, ministers should become charismatic persons like the gurus of Indian tradition or the masters of Chinese tradition rather than efficient administrators. In Asian

²⁵Congar, *I Believe*, 1:68.

²⁶Davis Varayilan, *Spirit and the Pilgrim Church: A Study of Yves Congar and the FABC Documents*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 35-37, 197-99.

countries, especially in India, "authority is something that emerges from below and is discovered due to one's spiritual energy to contribute to the new pilgrimage of man towards his ultimate goal. Hence, one who has 'authority' is the God-experienced man who leads others to such an experience and not one who is appointed from above. This is best embodied in the guru who is the opposite of a bureaucratic administrator."²⁷

Church as a Community of Disciples

The Church is a community of disciples. The most common designation for the followers of Jesus in the Gospel is "disciples". The title "disciple" refers to the personal dimension of being the followers of someone. Christians are called to follow Christ which implies both sharing in Jesus' life and mission. To be a disciple means to be a learner, to be on the way towards discipleship. Therefore, a disciple must be always open to learn from the master. According to St. Augustine the Holy Spirit is the "inner master"²⁸ of the disciples (1 Jn 2:27) on the pilgrim way. Jesus has given the Spirit to the Church "as an exegete or a living and sovereign master."²⁹ This Spirit (*Paraclete*) not only teaches the disciples and reminds them of everything that Jesus has said (Jn 14:26) but also communicate to them what is to come (Jn 16:13). A disciple, therefore, has to follow the movements of the Spirit wherever it is present and active. "It is in following the Spirit that we become the true disciples of Jesus Christ."³⁰ The FABC documents acknowledge that "the great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures."³¹ This Spirit is "the same Spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church."³² Therefore, the disciples are called to learn from them what the Spirit has taught them and enter into dialogue with them.

²⁷D.S. Amalorpavadass, "The Church As a Community of Faith in the Asian Context," *FABC Papers* 30 (1982) 18.

²⁸Cited in Congar, *Word and the Spirit*, 22.

²⁹Congar, *I Believe*, 2:43.

³⁰FABC Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," in Franz-Josef Eliers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002, *FAPA*, 3:320.

³¹BIRA IV/7, 12, *FAPA*, 1:310.

³²BIRA IV/3, 6, *FAPA*, 1:259.

In the community of disciples in Asia, there is a need to distinguish various classes of disciples such as: Peter as prototype of the apostle-disciple, Mary as prototype of the believer-disciple and Mahatma Gandhi as the prototype of follower-disciple. There are many followers of Jesus in Asia who do not want to break their relationship and belongingness to their own communities and their own cultural and religious traditions by accepting baptism.

Task of the Pilgrim Community of Disciples

The task of the pilgrim community of disciples is to make the Church one, catholic, apostolic and holy in the context of Asia. The Church is viewed as a living organism that grows and moves constantly towards its fullness. In this pilgrimage, the attributes of the Church are the creedal signs of the Kingdom in the world. The Church participates in them as the first fruits but full participation takes place only at the end. Therefore, these attributes obligate the Church to be ever more fully one, catholic, apostolic, and holy as it moves towards the *eschaton*. Their significance within the Church and their relationships to realities outside the Church are treated as unity through participation, catholicity through inculturation, apostolicity through mission and holiness through bearing witness.

Unity through Participation

The unity is a mysterious reality that comes from God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who makes the Church one. The Spirit is the transcendent principle of unity or communion in the Church. At Pentecost, the one Spirit was given to the community and individual persons not as individuals but as persons in communion with one another.³³ Thus, the unity in the Church is brought about through participation of all the members and of the local Churches in the Church Universal. Since the same Spirit who has been given to the Church at Pentecost is active amongst the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today the unity has to be viewed from the perspective of the Kingdom of God.

The unity is brought about through *participation of all the members* in the life and mission of the Church because the members are not objects but free and responsible subjects who are the source of personal initiatives in word and action. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit

³³Varayilan, *Spirit*, 53.

dwells in the faithful (1Cor 3:16) and distributes charisms not collectively to a mass of people but always to individual persons under the form of a specific charism (Rom 12:3, 6). Therefore, each person is absolutely irreplaceable and indispensable in the Church. The Spirit gives a specific charism to a person not for his/her own spiritual enrichment but for the service of the advancement of the entire Church (1Cor 12:7). The charisms are the very principle of the Church's organization.³⁴ Hence, the local Church is built up and receives the fullness of the Spirit through the participation of all the members by the sharing of their charisms. The Church is not just a fellowship of persons. The unity that is peculiar to the Church is brought about through the Word of God, sacraments and ministry.

The unity in the Church also means the *participation of a local Church* in the local Churches of other places in the universal church. Congar affirms, "The church possesses the fullness of the Spirit's gifts insofar as it is the community of all churches. And these churches, which are all 'catholic', are not alone but exist in the community of the whole."³⁵ All local churches share the same identity in Christ and the common Spirit. This bond of unity is expressed in the college of bishops presided over by the Bishop of Rome. The unity means also the sharing of one's gifts as well as sharing in the sufferings of others. Moltmann states, "A community which does not see the suffering and testimony of other communities as its own suffering and its own testimony is dividing the one Christ who suffers and acts in all places and at all times."³⁶ It is this unity and communion that is the strength of the Asian Church which is a minority and often persecuted.

Unity means the *participation of the Church* in the realization of the Kingdom of God. The Spirit of God has filled the world (Wis 1:7) and is at work even beyond the visible frontiers of the Church. God's Spirit is at work in religious traditions, moving their followers to an authentic communion within and beyond their own traditions. The FABC documents state that "the religions of Asia have a crucial role to play in God's great enterprise to bring peace, communion and a more human way of life to all peoples in Asia, indeed to the whole

³⁴Yves Congar, "Renewed Actuality of the Holy Spirit," *Lumen Vitae* 28 (1973) 18.

³⁵Yves Congar, "The Search for Unity: 1927-1977," *Theology Digest* 27 (1979) 253.

³⁶Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 1977) 343.

human family.”³⁷ This understanding motivates the Asian bishops to join hands with the followers of other religions and form a pilgrim human community by sharing the gifts of the Spirit through dialogue. The Sixth Plenary Assembly of FABC emphasizes, “We build bridges of solidarity and reconciliation with peoples of other faiths and will join hands with everyone in Asia in forming a true community of creation.”³⁸

Catholicity through Inculturation

The catholicity of the Pilgrim Community of Disciples ultimately derives not from the community itself but from the Trinitarian communion that reaches the humankind through the incarnate Word and the Spirit. The catholicity of the Church is “the catholicity of Jesus Christ” (Eph 4:10,13; 1:23) but the Holy Spirit is the principle of catholicity because it is the Spirit who makes the plenitude of the Christ event, given once and for all time, present in the world and in history.³⁹ “All truth, no matter where it comes from, is from the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰

For a long time, catholicity was understood as the geographical extension of the Church throughout the world without recognizing the “other” as different and diverse. Today we need to emphasize the qualitative dimension of catholicity where the unique contributions of diverse persons and cultures have a place in the ecclesial body. This is necessitated by the emphasis given by Vatican II on the charisms of the Spirit given for the building up of the Church and the local church which carries within itself the grace of catholicity and unity. The Church comes to a fuller understanding of her catholicity by living and growing organically through the assimilation of all the marvelous wealth and variety of human values. For this purpose, the Church has to go beyond the Christian sphere and recognize the signs of the times, attentive to the presence of the Spirit, receptive to the new and take up all human values into the unity of the Body of Christ and become the Church of the peoples in a new way.

To realize the catholicity of the Church there is an urgent need for localization and concretization of the Church in the socio-cultural and

³⁷BIRA IV/12, 7, FAPA, 1:326.

³⁸FABC VI, 14.2, FAPA, 2:8.

³⁹Varayilan, *Spirit*, 64.

⁴⁰Maxim used by the Ambrosiaster; quoted in Congar, *I Believe*, 2:219.

religious traditions of the peoples of Asia through a deep and mutually enriching encounter with the Gospel, which is inculturation. It is the effort of the community to bring the Gospel teaching to its culture and respond to the Spirit present in the reality of that culture. The Church that was implanted *in Asia* becomes the Church *of* the peoples of Asia when it pulsates with an Asian way of holistic thinking, harmonious living, contemplative way of praying, and communicating by bearing witness to its lived experience.⁴¹ In a holistic way of thinking which is based on the *yin-yang* symbolism of “both/and,” the differences are seen not as opposition but as creative complementarities of opposites. Thus human beings, society and the whole universe are seen as interconnected, interrelated and interdependent. This vision of unity helped the Asian Church to develop a universal vision of salvation history and situate the Church and the other religions within the Kingdom of God.

The Asian way of contemplative prayer, which awakens a deeper awareness of God and the whole self in recollection, silence, and prayer, provide the Church with an “inner authority” to play a greater role in interreligious dialogue, in human development, and in responding to the deep thirst and hunger of the peoples of Asia to experience the Divine.⁴² The Christian Ashrams in India and other forms of contemplative life are the signs of the Church’s becoming a new way.

The Asian way of thinking and praying leads to a harmonious way of living. Since realities are perceived, expressed, and lived differently, pluralism and diversity are inevitable and these are seen in Asia not as a problem but as richness and strength. To assimilate the richness of the Asian culture of harmony the Church advocates dialogue as the distinct mode of relating with other religions and cultures. A dialoguing Church is never centered on itself but seeks “to be truly catholic in its concerns, in its appreciation of the gifts of others, and in its readiness to work with others for a world at once more human and more divine.”⁴³

In the Asian culture of holistic thinking and harmonious way of living “there is an intimate correspondence between the exterior and

⁴¹Varayilan, *Spirit*, 152-59.

⁴²ICM/CPW VI, 1, *FAPA*, 1:152.

⁴³BIRA VI/12, 49, *FAPA*, 1:333.

the inner world; one reflects the other."⁴⁴ Therefore, to communicate the Gospel message in a credible and effective way Christians are called to show the marks of God-realized persons and bear witness to their lived spiritual experience rather than to proclaim through words. In the religiously pluralistic context of Asia, what counts inestimably more is *not the large numbers* of crowded Churches and numerous institutions but the *quality* of one's witness as servant and disciple of Jesus.

Apostolicity through Mission

Apostolicity is a matter of "preserving the messianic and eschatological way of living in community that was received from the Lord until he comes again."⁴⁵ It is not simply the commemoration of what has already happened for salvation but a dynamic affirmation of the ongoing presence and power of God to make those realities present until the end of the Age. And the task of the Church is to ensure that there is a continuity and a substantial identity between the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. The apostles in co-operation with the Spirit carry out this task. Aloysius Pieris suggests that it is on the basis of this twofold sending of the Spirit and the Apostles that the Christians could and should call themselves "apostolic churches."⁴⁶ The Spirit accompanies the apostles in everything that they do and the apostles make every decision in communion with the Holy Spirit, so much so that the Synod of Jerusalem used the formula: "It has seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us" (Acts 15:28).

The Holy Spirit keeps the Church apostolic by making it a missionary Church. The Church exists not for itself but to evangelize (EN 14). God constituted a people (the Church) who know and confess him and who form the "first fruits," or "a leaven in the world" or a "contrast society." The Church is the visible sign and sacrament of Jesus Christ and is endowed with special gifts and charisms, therefore, she is called to be a transparent sign and an effective instrument by revealing, expressing, proclaiming, and promoting the Kingdom. To promote this Kingdom in the Asian context of positive

⁴⁴BIRA IV/11, 17, *FAPA*, 1:321.

⁴⁵Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 3 vols., New York: Crossroad, 1983, vol. 2: *He is Lord and Giver of Life*, 2:39.

⁴⁶Aloysius Pieris, "I Believe in the Holy Spirit: Ecumenism in the Churches and the Unfinished Agenda of the Holy Spirit," *EAPR* 42 (2005) 97.

religious-cultural riches and negative socio-economic poverty, the Asian Church has to become the Church of the people, a Church that recognizes, appreciates, and incorporates the richness of the people and is involved itself actively in the transformation of society, especially the poor.

The missionary Church must, therefore, become, first of all, a dialoguing Church. The mission of promoting the Kingdom of God finds concrete expression in dialogue with the co-pilgrims. Dialogue is an integral dimension of the Church's mission and an essential mode of evangelization. This does not, however, denigrate the importance of proclamation. Proclamation is the affirmation of and witness to God's action in the Church, while dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's continuing activity through the Spirit outside the Church.⁴⁷ Secondly, the missionary Church in Asia must become the Church of the poor. The distinguishing mark of the poor of Asia is their deep religiosity. In the Asian continent "culture, religion, and society are interdependent, interacting and mutually transforming."⁴⁸ Therefore, to be the Church of the poor of Asia means to be inter-religious. The poor become the meeting point for all religions to collaborate in their pilgrimage towards the fullness of the Kingdom because the mystery of God's preferential presence and activity is revealed in them and they are immensely rich with the values of the Kingdom.

To be a Church of the poor, the Spirit calls the Church to journey with the Asian peoples "as servants of the Lord and of humanity" by following Jesus' way of self-emptying and self-giving. A servant Church is a suffering Church. It suffers for two reasons: firstly, the suffering of the poor becomes the suffering of the Church and secondly, the mission of the Church with the poor definitely involves the resistance, opposition, and intimidation which Christ and the apostles encountered in their mission. The Christians who are a tiny minority in Asia frequently encounter threat, terrorizing and persecution in carrying out the mission of Christ. These persecutions and sufferings are signs of apostolicity. The growth of the early Church was determined not only by the Easter appearances of the

⁴⁷FABC Theological Advisory Commission, "Thesis on Interreligious Dialogue," 6.5 *FABC Papers* 48, 16.

⁴⁸BISA VII, 6, *FAPA*, 1:230.

risen Christ but also by the suffering and sacrifice of the disciples.⁴⁹ Hence, the Asian Church manifests its apostolicity by being a dialoguing Church and a Church of the poor and bearing its consequences.

Holiness of the Church through Bearing Witness

The holiness of the Church does not stem from its members but is received as a gift from God in and through Christ and in and through the Spirit. Paul says, "You were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor 6:11; Rom 15:16; Heb 2:11). The Church is sanctified in Christ but by the Holy Spirit. Congar explains the holiness of the Church by distinguishing the *ecclesia congregans*, (gathering Church) and the *ecclesia congregata* (the assembled Church). Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit co-instituted the gathering Church (apostolic functions with its magisterial and sacramental functions) and therefore, it enjoys a perpetual and objective holiness which has as its goal the subjective holiness of the assembled Church.⁵⁰ The Church does not cease producing saints who change the lives of others by radiating their holiness in the world. Hence, the Church is holy not only because of its objective holiness but because it is composed of saints and of people who strive to be holy.

The Church is divine and human, holy and sinful at the same time. The Church will be perfectly holy only at the end. Hence, the Church must unceasingly purify itself and follow the path of penance and renewal (LG 8) as the "holy Church of sinners." This path of renewal and conversion is a "pass over" with Christ to the poor, to Asian cultures and to other religions.⁵¹ The Church bears witness to its holiness by acknowledging its weakness with humility and publicly admitting its sinfulness and asking pardon from the victims. In recent decades the Church has made an effort to confess its sins publicly. In 1975, during a Eucharistic celebration, Pope Paul VI fell on his knees before the Metropolitan Meliton, the envoy of the Patriarch of Constantinople, and kissed his feet as a sign of reconciliation with the Greek Orthodox Church which was separated in 1054.⁵² At the end of the second Millennium Pope John Paul II made a public admission of

⁴⁹Moltmann, *Church in the Power*, 361.

⁵⁰Congar, *I Believe*, 2:54.

⁵¹FABC, "Conclusion of Theological Consultation," 16, *FAPA*, 1:338.

⁵²Pieris "I Believe in the Holy Spirit," 102-3.

guilt in a spirit of repentance and witnessed to the Church's holiness. Moltmann cites a similar gesture made by the Protestant Churches in Germany and Japan after the Second World War, and by the Churches in the colonial countries for slavery and racialism.⁵³ All these actions are to be viewed as superb witness to the Church's holiness.

The Asian Church bears further witness to its holiness by recognizing the movements of the Spirit outside the Church and translating into deeds what the Spirit bids the Church to accomplish. The church is sanctified wherever it participates in the lowliness, helplessness, poverty and suffering of Christ and its holiness is manifested through the sign of poverty.⁵⁴ Saying "yes" to all the manifestations of holiness outside the Church with a visibly repentant humility is at once "our poverty and our sanctity."⁵⁵ As the sanctified, the Church sanctifies the world as it moves on in pilgrimage.

Conclusion

The model of the Church as Pilgrim Community of Disciples is very relevant and significant in the religiously pluralistic society of Asia. The perception of Church as the Pilgrim on the "Way" is understandable and appropriate in the Asian pluralistic context because in Asia the religions are known as the "Ways" to the Ultimate. Pilgrim Community of Disciples journeys with the followers of other religions as fellow pilgrims on the way towards the Ultimate. This pilgrim character brings unity and harmony through dialogue and co-operation in the social causes.

The concept of pilgrimage resonates well with the Asian religious and cultural psyche. Indians are more pilgrims than tourists. There are no tourist seasons, only pilgrimage seasons in India. Pilgrimage has played a key role in spreading Hindu Dharma. For example, Adi Shankaracharya (8th c), the great Hindu reformer and thinker, founded four pilgrimage centres at the four corners of India and encouraged people to go on pilgrimages to those places to propagate Hinduism which was almost wiped out by Buddhism. This pilgrimage methodology succeeded in almost eliminating Buddhism from the face of India. Pilgrims are well respected and served by

⁵³Moltmann, *Church in the Power*, 354-55.

⁵⁴Moltmann, *Church in the Power*, 355; see also 355-57.

⁵⁵Pieris, "I Believe in the Holy Spirit," 102.

everyone in the society. In this context of pilgrim consciousness, presenting the Church as Pilgrim Community of Disciples is very relevant, appropriate and effective for evangelization in Asia.

In the context of mass movements and migration, this model of the Church becomes relevant. *Ecclesia in Asia* observes that migration is “a major social phenomenon, exposing millions of people to situations which are difficult economically, culturally and morally” (EA 7). The perception of the Church as Pilgrim Community of Disciples can help the Christians who migrate to feel as members of one community wherever they go by actively involving themselves in the life of the Church. It can also help the pastors to give them good pastoral care by accepting and listening to them and responding to their issues and problems. The youth constitutes the majority of Asia’s population. They are the source of energy and vitality in society as well as in the Church but they are also the most vulnerable and victimized group in the present swiftly changing world. This model of the Church encourages the youth to use their charism and take initiative to become agents of evangelization.

This model of the Church suggests that the essential nature of the Church is found only by going outside and living as mere “strangers and exiles here on earth.” It highlights the inclusive, dynamic and eschatological nature of the Church. The characteristics of this model are openness to dialogue with the co-pilgrims on the way rather than to confrontation; finding avenues for joint witness rather than glorifying in one’s own accomplishments; participation and exchange rather than domination; flexible community-oriented structures; openness to correction and the insights of others; involved in the grime and sweat of history; first-hand experience of earth and sky, people and culture, slums and market places; practicing hospitality and accepting it from others; experiencing the risk and uncertainty of an obscure future; and obedience to the promptings and urgings of the Spirit. Every pilgrim on the way is a potential companion, a possible resource, even a possible threat. Hence, there is a need to engage in dialogue with others. This model is capable of addressing the problems of pluralism within and outside the Church, of creating communion and respecting differences, and of challenging and giving hope to the present generation.