

ASIAN

HORIZONS

Vol. 5, No. 4, December 2011

Pages: 778-795

**NEWNESS AND BOLDNESS OF APPROACHES
FOR EFFECTIVE
EVANGELISATION AND MISSIOLOGY**

“For the kingdom of God consists not in spoken words but in power” (1 Cor 4:20-21)

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Introduction

The call for new and bold approaches to evangelization and missiology has been a perennial challenge and concern of the Asian bishops and theologians, more so for the local Churches inserted in the web of everyday relationship amongst the marginalized and believers of the different cultures and religions. Whatever the new approaches, the Church must be manifesting the sacred power of God’s Spirit in the perennial mission of proclaiming the sustainability of life with dignity and justice in the human and earth communities that is free from corrupt and violent practices because all beings, all lives and all persons are created sacred in the sight of God.

1. A Way Forward Bold and New

This call becomes all the more urgent after the meeting of the appointed advisors of the Secretariat for Ecumenism and Interreligious Relationship who met at the Jesuit curia of the Society of Jesus in Rome, from September 6-8, 2010. The shared insights of the secretariat is that “theologically we need to explore new approaches to evangelization and missiology, taking account of

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Vatican II perspectives as well as our recent experiences and relationships with those of other faiths.”¹ In addition, this call urges that the new approaches draw their inspiration from the kind of spirituality that focuses more on relationship rather than doctrines, relationships with others across religious frontiers that “must be personally embodied, since personal witness is a prerequisite for our credibility.”²

Pope Benedict XVI has added his papal perspective to the call for effective proclamation of the Word. In his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* published on Thursday November 11, 2010, the pope highlights the need to strengthen the missionary mindedness within the Church. The Pope writes:

The Church must go out to meet each person in the strength of the Spirit and continue her prophetic defense of people’s right and freedom to the word of God while constantly seeking out the most effective ways of proclaiming that word, even at the risk of persecution. The Church feels duty-bound to proclaim to every man and woman the word that saves.³

What then are the new approaches to evangelization and missiology that needs to be articulated? What constitute the newness and boldness in these approaches? How do the newness and boldness in approaches articulate with effective proclamation of the word in today’s context, given the rapid changes, not just in Asia, but in the Arab and global world?

I believe “crossing over” is still one of the most challenging ways forward in terms of evangelization in Asia. It calls for a “crossing over” of the Church’s own confines to encounter the cultural and religious other across the frontiers in order to experience the omnipresence of God. Second, evangelization calls for “crossing over” of the cultural frontiers in order to discover and experience the God who is present and active in the life-worlds and customs of the peoples of other cultures. Third, evangelization calls for “crossing over” of the many diverse and different religious frontiers, motivated by the Church’s teachings and discovers and recognizes that God’s omnipresence precedes the Church. Fourth, evangelization involves initiating and nurturing personal and communal relationship that respect the “otherness of the other” because Jesus the “Relational

¹See the *Report of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Relationships*, dated October 4, 2010. Henceforth cited as *Report*.

²*Report*.

³The post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation is available [on-line]; <http://www.zenit.org/article-30942?l=english>

Other" is already present in the midst of the believers of other faiths. Fifth, evangelization calls for unleashing the sacred power latent in the religiosity of the marginalized and to awaken them to their liberative role in the new order of God's reign. Last of all, in a world desecrated by global capitalism, evangelization calls for the promotion of sacred sustainability for the survival of humankind and our planetary home earth.

2. Crossing Over: Doing Mission in Humility and Authority

The call to "cross over" was alluded to in the report of the above-mentioned secretariat which states that "less attention today seems to be given to relationships with others across religious frontiers, even as such relationships are more urgently needed in a time of identity politics and fundamentalisms."⁴ To this must be added the need of fostering of cross-ethnic-religious relationships based on the emergence of anti-government mass protest movements based on people-power politics across the globe, as adequately demonstrated by the outbreak of unrest and uprising in the Arab and global world.

The "crossing over" of the different frontiers takes on a particular meaning ascribed by Pope Benedict when he explained the need "to reach the geographical and spiritual places where others do not reach and find it difficult to reach."⁵ This "crossing over" is guided by two Ignatian theological principles: (a) that "God's action is antecedent to ours"⁶ and (b) that "all women and men are our concern for *dialogue* and for *proclamation* because our mission is that of the Church: to *discover* Jesus Christ where we have not noticed him before and to reveal him where he has not been seen before. In other words, *we look to "find God in all things."*⁷ The "pull-factor" of this approach to evangelization draws its inspiration from the Ignatian spirituality which alerts us to the God whose omnipresence is the sacred liberative power at work in the diverse cultures, histories, societies and relationships outside the confines of the Church. This experience

⁴The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation.

⁵See the allocution of Pope Benedict XIV to the Jesuits on Feb 21, 2008.

⁶This theological principle is enunciated in the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, in Decree 4, entitled *Mission & Culture* and in no. 17 it states clearly that "The ministry of dialogue is conducted with a sense that God's action is antecedent to ours."

⁷This second theological principle is enunciated in the 35th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, in Decree 2, entitled *A Fire That Enkindles Other Fires*, no. 23. Also see *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10-12; *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, no. 41-42; *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 11-12.

of the omnipresent God is integral to the experience of the God of Jesus Christ within the Church.

2.1. *Beyond the Church's own confines.* In the Asian context of multi-religiosities, the call to "cross over" the different frontiers requires the ecclesial forerunners of the local Churches to recognize that God's Spirit beckons the Church to go beyond its own ecclesial confines.⁸ The willingness to respond to this call is an act of humility by which the Church acknowledges, recognizes and respects the wealth of cultural and religious wisdom in the diverse traditions of the ancient civilizations of Asia. This act of humility, exemplified by Jesus in stooping down to receive the baptism from John the Baptist (Mark 1:9-13) is an imperative pathway for the Church to walk down and savour the wealth of Asian diverse religiosities and wisdom traditions.

In Pieris' opinion, the Asian Church needs to heed the "prophetic imperative to immerse oneself in the baptismal waters of Asian religions that predates Christianity."⁹ Only in this act of humility is the Church an authoritative voice to be heard by believers and an authentic and credible sign of salvation in Asia.

The local Church *in Asia* needs yet to be "initiated" into the pre-Christian traditions under the tutelage of our ancient gurus, or it will continue to be an ecclesiastical complex full of "power" but lacking in "authority." It is only in the Jordan of Asian religiousness that it will be acknowledged as a voice worth of being heard by all "*Hear ye him*".

The mission crisis is solved only when the Church is baptized in the twofold liberative tradition of monks and peasants of Asia. Like its master, let it sit at the feet of Asian gurus not as an *ecclesia docens* (a teaching Church) but as an *ecclesia discens* (a learning Church), lost among the 'religious poor' of Asia, among the *anawim* who go to their gurus in search of the kingdom of holiness, justice, and peace. Unless the institutional Church takes the plunge itself, it can hardly hope to be for Asians a readable word of revelation or a credible sign of salvation.¹⁰

⁸By ecclesial forerunners, I refer to baptized, ordained and consecrated leaders like chairpersons of parish pastoral councils, bishops and priests, religious superiors, formators who participate in programs organized by BISA (Bishop Institute for Social Action), FEISA (Faith Encounters in Social Action), FIRA (Formation Institute for Inter-Religious Affairs). These forerunners form the ecclesial communities in the local churches.

⁹Joseph Mg Swee-Chun, "Aloysius Pieris' Two-Edged Liberative Theology of Enreligionization," STL Thesis, 2004:136.

¹⁰Joseph Mg Swee-Chun, "Aloysius Pieris' ...

With this recurrent “baptismal immersion,” the Church will be progressively purged of its perennial sin of theological arrogance rooted in an unacceptable ethno-ecclesiocentricity that has decimated and still denigrates in many parts of Asia the rich cultural resources and religious wisdom of the multiple ancient traditions. Immersed and purified, the “born-again” Church of Asia will not only be enriched and Asian-inculturated, but prepared to be mission-driven by the power of God’s Spirit already active in Asia. Then the enlightened Asian gurus and awakened believers will be disposed and prepared to elevate the Church to a position worthy of teaching, and its message spoken in the tone of the Asian Jesus, be received with reverential gratitude and its revelation, deemed profoundly salvific and be converted to partner the Church in the Kingdom-project of greater justice and peace for all peoples.

2.2. “*Discipling*” in relationship *under the Asian Gurus*. To be a Church of Asia (rather than a foreign Church implanted in the Asian soil) in solidarity with the believers and the marginalized of Asia calls for a period of “come and stay” when “*learning through storytelling and by doing*” actually takes place “sitting at the feet of the Asian guru,” in an Ashram or a rural school of “*dsiscipling*.”¹¹ It is a “*discipling*” into a way of seeing with new eyes so that we see as the gurus see and value with the heart what the gurus value. This way of seeing and valuing is best described as imbibing what I call *an Asian sense of religious realism*. Unless the mind and hearts of the Church takes on this Asian sense of religious realism, the Church of Asia will not be fully evangelized by the Asian gurus and the believing marginalized. With this paradigm shift of learning, the Church’s proclamation will be more readily acknowledged and received by gurus and believers of Asia as the priceless rather than useless gems.

The pedagogy of the Asian school of “*discipling*” is relational. This pedagogy calls for building a trusting relationship to the extent that the esoteric religious knowledge is entrusted in confidence to the disciples. This relational communication is never totally textual but oftentimes oral and more importantly experiential in which the praxis of “*learning by doing*” takes precedence. The gurus gradually introduced the disciples to the ancient wisdom and the sacred power of the unseen world of the spirits. The experience of the sacred power

¹¹For more details, see Jojo M. Fung, “A Theological Reflection On ‘The Baptism Into The Deep’ and Its Missiological Implications for The Asian Catholic Church,” *Mission Studies* 20 (2005) 227-247 and *Garing The Legend: A Decorated Hero A Renowned Shaman*, Sabah Museum, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah: Percetakan Kolombong Ria, 2006.

occurs during rituals of healing, deliverance of persons from evil spells, and appeasing the spirits to restore harmony where there is communal rupture or disharmony between the different worlds. Much emphasis is given to storytelling, punctuated by occasional silence (between the guru and disciple), the performance of household chores, punctuated by periodic celebration of communal festive activities and ritual celebrations.

As the affective bond deepens, there is a growing mutuality that is characterized by a greater openness and freedom of heart to enter into the "sanctuary" of the guru's life. It takes time and patience in this process of "*discipling*" and entails living for a long period of time with the guru, fully engaged in the everyday life and struggle of the village. There in the guru's sanctuary, the disciples gain further familiarity with the religiosity of the gurus and greater identification with the aspirations and struggle of the believing communities.

Only through this prolonged process of "*discipling*," the Church's role of awakening the power from within becomes a manifestation of the power of a God of liberation. This is the liberative power that sets the Church of Asia free from the unfounded suspicion and animosity of the wisdom and power of the local cultural and religious traditions. At the same time, a liberated Church more readily disposes itself towards the liberative struggle of the believing communities from all forms of marginalization that deprived them of equal access, sustainable livelihood and dignity. The involvement of the Church is itself a powerful proclamation of the God of justice and equal access for all, the God to be experienced in silence and solitude of human hearts and in the sacredness of nature and God's creation.

3. Relationship of Reverential Beholding of the Other

The crossing over that calls for "baptismal immersion" in the stream of Asian cultures and religiosities makes possible a disposition that fosters a symmetrical relationship that accepts the cultural and religious other as sacred. Persons are made in God's image (Gen. 1:26) and they are sacred, for the omnipresent God is indwelling in all persons. As persons created sacred, believers are to be regarded as co-pilgrims in the sojourn towards the ultimate destiny of life.

In contrast with the unequal violent relationship fostered by nation-states and the religious hierarchies, a symmetrical relationship better disposes the Church to nurture a *reverential beholding* of the religious other in her/his Otherness. This reverential beholding is best understood as the freedom of the heart to be awe-inspired by the religious Other. It is a manner of beholding that disposes the Church

to learn to respect and accept the totality of the Other, including the otherness of the religio-cultural practices and beliefs.

This reverential beholding enjoins the Church to be at home with the differences “if we are to recognize our religious neighbours as our Other instead of merely a paler version of ourselves.”¹² The Church has the onus “to learn how to recognize and honour these differences and respond to their theological significance of religious differences.”¹³

Let me illustrate this point. During the time of my “*baptismal initiation*,” I witnessed Garing, my shaman-guru “calling forth” the spirits and they come to him and converse with him, although I could not hear or see them. I witnessed on another occasion a conversation in full view of some of the villagers. In sharing with me his own experience of being initiated into shamanhood, Garing mentioned how he was whisked off to a cave, welcomed with great hospitality by the family of spirits and apprenticed as a shaman. After the “*baptism*,” I have come to recognize what is radically unfamiliar and different in the beliefs and practices of Garing and yet learn to respect him as the Other. Respecting Garing as the religious other calls me to “let go” instead of wanting to “dominate” and “domesticate” his experiences. In this way, I learn to empty myself of the desire to “hollow out” the differences in his beliefs and practices.

In addition, citing the experience in Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Fredericks unequivocally cautions:

What is “true and good” in Buddhism (to cite *Nostra Aetate*) is what Christians already know, from their own faith, to be true and good. The fulfilment theology of religions is necessary for the Church, but also a strategy of control which succeeds in keeping the Otherness of Buddhism at bay. Buddhism’s Otherness, is, without a doubt, a danger to establish formulations of faith – but it also comes to us bearing a gift: the potential to transform faith. The fulfilment theology of religions, to the extent that it shelters faith from the Otherness of *Dharma*, also succeeds in keeping the Christians from appreciating the Buddhist Other as a neighbour.¹⁴

The ecclesial forerunners of the Church of Asia, after the “*baptismal*” experience, will have to allow for a dialogic space in which differences are gifts of a gratuitous Creator-God. In this way, the

¹²James Fredericks, “Solidarity with the Religious Other: A Reflection on Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” *NewTheology Review*, 22, 2 (May 2009) 5-14.

¹³James Fredericks, “Solidarity with the Religious Other.”

¹⁴James Fredericks, “Solidarity with the Religious Other, 9.”

forerunners build up a sense of true solidarity with the religious Other of the Asian poor. A dialogic relationship blossoms into a true solidarity that “creates a space in which difference can be recognized and even honoured.”¹⁵ In the words of Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus annus*, in no. 22, true solidarity “creates a space for difference, pluralism, lack of consensus, and even opposition.”¹⁶ In the space of true solidarity, God continues to reveal to us a soteriology that is truly liberative for the indigenous poor of Asia.

The reverential beholding of the otherness of the Other opens the ecclesial forerunners to behold and experience the Otherness of the God whose salvific presence cannot be monopolized by any faith. In Jesus, God in God’s otherness chose to become the God-Incarnate-in-the-world. By virtue of the incarnation, Jesus becomes God’s “Salvific Other” in Judaism and more specifically in Christianity. While incarnated, God remains in God’s Otherness, unbounded by any religion, so that God’s omnipresence in the diverse cultures, histories, societies and religions is considered a presence that is antecedent to the Church. Present as Spirit, the otherness of God and Jesus both can be experienced in spirit.

This experience that comes from reverential beholding hopefully opens many ecclesial leaders to gradually behold God as the God who is above all, over all, through all and all in all, that is, in all the other cultural and religious traditions of the believers of Asia.

4. Crossing Over: Experience of God’s Liberative Presence

In its evangelizing mission, the ecclesial communities of forerunners have to be audacious to cross over those violence-afflicted boundaries where God manifests God’s transformational power in their midst. Asia abounds in these grassroots experiences of “crossing over” such boundaries.

In the height of the ethnic conflict involving political and ecclesial complexities and strifes in Sri Lanka, Aloysius Pieris, a renowned Asian theologian, shared how the Mission Animation Team (MAT) visited Jaffna in March 1984, five months after the Black July. The overwhelming hospitality transformed Bishop Diogupullai who just seven years earlier rejected any theological discourse on liberation. Indeed, Jaffna changed the team members and all of them returned

¹⁵James Fredericks, “Solidarity with the Religious Other, 13.

¹⁶This papal document is available [on-line] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html

different people. The transformation was so profound that Pieris reiterated, “nothing like *crossing over to the victim’s side*, as the good Samaritan did in contrast with the Religious and the Priests!”¹⁷ The emotionally charged sharing only convinced these ecclesial forerunners that God’s Spirit is at work “across and beyond” the ethnic divide, in the war-torn societies and violence-stricken bodies of the (mis)perceived “enemies” of the ruling government.¹⁸

5. Crossing Over: Beholding God’s Salvific Presence

If “crossing over” an ethnic divide has such profound transformational impact on the participants, what more the “crossing over” of the religious frontiers when ecclesial forerunners participate in the rites of other faiths? If we do participate, on what grounds do we justify our participation?

The legitimate grounds for participation are found in the teachings of the curial, Episcopal conference of Asia, and a few of the papal documents on dialogue with the other faiths. Suffice to state from the onset that the Vatican II documents provides us the openness and encouragement with the arguments that the other faiths contain elements of “grace, truth, goodness and holiness” (*Nostra aetate*, no. 2; *Optatam totius*, no. 16; *Ad gentes*, no. 9; *Lumen Gentium*, no. 17), “not only in the hearts of peoples but also in the rites and customs of peoples, although all must be “healed, elevated, and completed”(cf. *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22).

Reflecting on the multi-religiosities of Asia in the light of the teachings of Vatican II, the Asian Bishops recognize the other faiths as salvific channels by which God saves the other believers, for “the mystery of salvation reaches out to them, *in a way known to God*, through the invisible action of the Spirit of Christ.”¹⁹ This postulation has its basis in the Asian Bishops’ conviction of the “profound spiritual and ethical meaning and values” found in the other faiths. This conviction occasioned the Asian bishops to declare these faiths as “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design

¹⁷This is an extract from Aloysius Pieris’ article which was emailed to the author in 2010, entitled “A supplement to Fr Emmanuel Fernando’s Paper: The Church in Sri Lanka during the Last Decade” (2000-2009) [i.e. in the First Decade of the 21st Century], 8.

¹⁸For more information, see Joseph Ng Swee-Chun, “Aloysius Pieris’ Two-Edged Liberative Theology of Enreligionization,” STL Thesis, 2004:136.

¹⁹The Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 29, in Burrows, ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, 93-118.

of salvation."²⁰ The curial document, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, in no. 29, premised salvation of other believers upon the "sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions and by following the dictates of their conscience. "Only then they respond positively to God's invitation and receive salvation in Jesus Christ, even while they do not recognize or acknowledge him as their Saviour."²¹

Since these faiths are salvific channels, the 1991 papal encyclical, *Redemptoris missio*, in no. 29 affirms that "the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only the individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions." In no. 28, the papal document attributes God's spirit to be "at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history" and points out that the "marvellous foresight directs the course of the ages and renews the face of the earth." The same document hastens to add that God's Spirit in the risen Christ "is now at work in human hearts through the strength of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end."²² As a result of this original inspiration, the document concludes that "every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart."²³

If God's presence and God's Spirit is active and operative in the other faiths, including in their rites and custom, with visible influence not just at the level of individuals but at the levels of their cultures and religions, then "crossing over" the religious boundaries with the specific intention of participating in their rituals also enables the ecclesial forerunners to gain a heightened "awareness of God's presence and action outside its boundaries" and deepen the Church's "openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believers."²⁴ The profound transformational experience will open more members of the local Churches to God's Spirit who will also transform the Church in terms of its ecclesial members, the Christian cultures and religions.

²⁰First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC) held in Taipei, 1974.

²¹See *Dialogue and Proclamation*, no. 29.

²²John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, no. 28, [on-line]; available on http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html

²³John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, no. 29.

²⁴See the FABC's paper, "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue," art. 6.5.

Ultimately, where God is encountered with a genuine heart characterized by an authentic desire for God, there too God's Spirit will be experienced in the inspired communal prayers of the other faiths and bring about the *metanoia* in the attitudes, behaviour and relationship of Church participants. An ecclesial community truly transformed is a microcosmic local Church converted to accept God's antecedent omnipresence in the other faiths. When God becomes the common inspiration of all faiths, God's Spirit makes it possible for humankind to aspire to the attainment of a life that is more just and humane and to direct the whole earth to a more sustainable life where there is greater dignity for all things, all persons and all beings.²⁵

Narrating a "crossing over" experience of religious frontier is in order at this juncture. A group of 20 university students and graduates participated on January 7, 2011 in the Hindu rite called *poojas* (the weekly Friday worship) after the guided tour of the glass palace.²⁶ The tour and worship was led by Guru Bhaggawan Sittar, an unassuming primary school teacher who was inspired by the Sun-god to construct the first-ever Hindu glass temple in the world which is known as the Arulmigu Rajakaliamman temple. Although many of us did not understand the worship conducted in Tamil, many of us sensed the inspiration behind the communal chants led by Guru B. Sittar.

Many of us were touched by the sincere reverence of the Hindu devotees at the time of the blessings. In his homily, Guru B. Sittar demonstrated an unprecedented openness with his teachings on the person of Jesus Christ. During the worship, there is a sense of the scent of sacredness, exuding from the believers' hearts, ascending on high, riding on the waves of smoke from the burnt incense, a sight reminiscent of the thick clouds (1 Kg. 8:10-13) in the temple that signified Yahweh's sacred presence. Before such omnipresent God, one can only bow down and bend low and admit that every authentic prayer is inspired by God's Spirit and the inherent goodness, holiness

²⁵ This is a paraphrase of *Redemptoris missio*, no. 28 that reminds the church of Asia that God's Spirit in the risen Christ "is now at work in human hearts through the strength of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end."²⁵ As a result of this original inspiration, the document concludes that "every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart."

²⁶This Hindu Temple is located in the heart of the Johore Bharu City, in the southern most state of Peninsular Malaysia, known as Johore.

and truthfulness in the other faiths is unmistakably sustained by God's sacred presence.

6. Crossing Over: Awakening of the Poor

An ecclesial community of forerunners that is evangelized by the gurus and converted by the Omnipresent God is beckoned by God's Spirit to cross over to the world of the marginalized. This crossing over enables such an ecclesial community to experience the sacred power of God aglow in the hearth of the multi-religiosities of the excluded teeming masses of Asia. Once the glow is ignited by the religious fire of the awakened poor, the multi-religiosities at the margin unleash a sacred power that implodes the liberative potential of the marginalized. Thus awakened, the poor take up the liberative role of negotiating for a more sustainable livelihood with the powers that be. Mindful of this role, Pieris argues that awakening is the truth about evangelization in Asia.

This is the truth about evangelization that the local Church in Asia finds hardest to accept. To awaken the consciousness of the poor to their unique liberative role in the totally new order God is about to usher in – this is how I have already defined evangelization – is the inalienable task of the poor already awakened. Jesus was the first evangelizer – poor but fully conscious of his part in the war against mammon with all its principalities and powers.

An illustration will substantiate this awakening. In 1985, the Karens of the Maelid and neighbouring villages had to recourse to their power inherent in their religiosity due to the imminent destruction of their watershed occasioned by the mining industry. Negotiation has failed and they resorted to sacred power in their indigenous religiosity. They invoked the Absolute Being through a ritual. The rituals enabled the people to gain access to *Ta Thi Ta Tau* (Absolute Being) and made the power "beyond" immanent. Even though the negotiation with the mining company had reached a stalemate, the rituals gave the Karen of the 10 villagers an experience of a "power within," derived from the power beyond to negotiate the contestations and conflicts they encountered. In 1987, the extractive industry ceased its operation due to heavy losses, ranging from some workers becoming sick, others killed in a landslide and the unexplainable disappearance of the minerals. The villagers attributed the disappearance of the minerals to the power of the Absolute Being.²⁷

²⁷For more information on Asian Liberation theology, see Aloysius Pieris, especially the section "The Way Toward Ecclesiological Revolution: The double

Amongst the Lahu Nyi hilltribe of Northern Chiangmai is a ritual in which they have a performative utterance known as “*Kusha-yalo-wei*” which denotes that “God has come down.” This describes the descent of the power from on high amongst a violated people who invokes on the Creator or God.²⁸ It is through such belief and ritual-invocation that the indigenous villagers gained access to the “power beyond” so that God’s power descends on the community and becomes the liberating power of the community. This power descends on the people, empowers them in their struggle, so that a “power beyond” becomes a “power within” that translates into a “power over” the mining company and the villagers prevented the destruction of their watershed area, a forestland which is so vital for a more sustainable livelihood in the rural villages.

The experience of the Karen and the Lahu Nyi reminds us of how the federated tribes of Israel called upon the power of their tribal deity, Yahweh whose sacred power descended upon them and manifested the power of Yahweh through the liberative leadership of Moses. The “power beyond” became the sacred “power within” for the liberative struggle of Israelites for freedom from oppression.

7. Crossing Over: Promoting Sacred Sustainability

Given the present ecological crisis and the unprecedented climate change reported in the media, it is important for the ecclesial communities of forerunners to “cross over” to the indigenous homeland and learn from the renowned shamans that the indwelling spirits of nature and culture have made all things, all spaces and all persons sacred. Having learnt and imbibed this religious sense of sacredness, the shamans enjoins the ecclesial community of forerunners to inculcate a sense of the sacred of the *cosmos* and the *anthropos* by communicating and educating the believers in Asia that the sacred power of the Creative *ruah* is at work through all shamanic spirits indwelling in creation. By its creative power, the indwelling *Ruah* suffuses all of God’s creation with divine grandeur and glorious splendor, rendering all things, all beings and all spaces in God’s creation sacred. This ecclesial community has the task of persuading the many believers that science, technology and global capitalism have failed to deliver. With this failure, life is unsustainable for the

Baptism in Asian Religion and Poverty” in his article “Asia’s Non-Semetic Religions and the Mission of the Local Churches,” in *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1992, 45-50.

²⁸Based on a conversation in a Lahu Village situated an hour from Chaingmai City, on September 15, 2010 with Fr. Niphot Thievihan, the director of the Research and Training Religio-Cultural Community Centre, Chiangmai, Thailand.

human and earth communities. Only when all things, persons and spaces are respected as sacred is life sustainable for all of God's creation. The ecclesial communities of forerunners needs to uphold and promote this foundational sense of the ontological sacredness of everything and everyone in creation in its evangelizing mission in order to ensure the sustainability of life in a world where persons are no longer desecrated and the earth plundered as exploitable resources. This ontological sacredness that sustains life in the *cosmos* and *anthropos* is best captured in the term sacred sustainability.

The promotion of sacred sustainability paves the way for the ecclesial communities of forerunners to network with people of the different faiths and cultures, and collaborate with religious leaders and wisdom-figures, including the indigenous shamans of integrity. In this way, the believers gain access to the sacred power beyond through the *pooja*, the Creative *ruah* through the communal liturgy and the sacred power of the spirits through shamanic rites. The "power beyond" descends and becomes the "power within" which the ritual invocations subsequently transform into "power with and for" the liberative struggle of the marginalized communities and the earth for greater sustainable livelihood. The power that implodes during the times of negotiation and resistance against the hegemonic power of global capitalism becomes the "power over" that comes from the concerted celebration of the rites. These ritual celebrations manifest a sacred power that suffused creation and thus re-sacralizes all desecrated spaces and persons in ways known to God.

Along with the inculcation of the sacredness of all things, beings and spaces is the call of the Church to incessantly denounce the godless desecration of all resources by the death-dealing forces of global capitalism that sacrifice the global underclass and the earth on the altar of lust and greed enshrined in the hearts of the wicked. The idolatrous addiction to the idols of profit, prestige and pleasure has numbed the wicked to the cries of the marginalized for God's saving justice and human dignity. At the same time, in the unmasking of the idolatrous hearts, it is the Church's mission to invoke God's power to free their hearts and open them to behold a sense of the sacred "within" and "beyond" so that they are transformed by the sacred power of God. Only with an enlightened realization and a transformative felt-experience of the sacred can the liberated hearts receive the free offer of grace that wins them over as ardent advocates of sacred sustainability that ensure the future of the *cosmos* and *anthropos*.

8. Mission as Prophetic Defence

Once an ecclesial community of forerunners has been evangelized by the gurus and the awakened poor of Asia, the Church will be accorded the dignity of an *ecclesia docens* (teaching Church). Then the Church's prophetic defence of the right and freedom of all peoples of the many cultures and religions to the Word of God that reveals the true nature of humankind in relation to God will be well received and heard.

Given the offensiveness of unethical manner of proselytization²⁹ in Asia and its adverse reaction by the religious leaders of the other faiths, this evangelizing mission of the Church of Asia is thus more nuanced and contextualized in Asia. The question is: how does the Church of Asia "continue her prophetic defence of right and freedom of peoples to the word of God since it is duty-bound to proclaim the word that saves? "Indeed seeking out the most" effective ways of proclaiming that word, even at the risk of persecution, is the way forward.

The Asian bishops articulated the theological framework with valuable insights befitting this reflection on mission of the Asian Church as prophetic defence of everyone's right to the saving word.

First, it is pertinent to recognize that the Spirit of God and of Christ is active outside the Church. Changing religious allegiance, baptism and membership in the Church is not the only way by which God saves since the free offer of God's salvific grace remains mysterious and unfathomable to the Church.

It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person. God's grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. God's ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of divine grace (Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs/BIRA II, art.12).

²⁹Of considerable interest to the Church of Asia is the global meeting held in Bangkok on March 11, 2011. This meeting is a collaborative effort of the Vatican-based Pontifical Council for IRD (PCID) and the WCC Offices - the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Evangelical Alliances (WEA), WCC-Geneva IRD Cooperation programme wherein ethical proselytization was discussed while spelling out the sublime goal of "the promotion of mutual respect and understanding among members of the different religions so that they may live and work together for the common good." For more detail, see *The Herald*, February 13, 2011.

The 1987 FABC Theological Advisory Committee's paper entitled *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* offers further insights. In Thesis 2 this document has described the rationale for the Church's mission of proclamation and dialogue as inseparable.

While *proclamation* is the expression of its awareness of being in mission, *dialogue* is the expression of its awareness of God's presence and action outside its boundaries...Proclamation is the affirmation of its awareness to God's action in oneself. Dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believers. It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of one without the other." Dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believers. It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of one without the other" (art. 6.5).

The same thesis urged the need for the openness to accept the other religions as Gods' salvific ways for believers of other faiths. The fruits of the Spirit are obviously identifiable in the believer of other faiths.

Its experience of the other religions has led the Church in Asia to this positive appreciation of their role in the divine economy of salvation ... based on the fruits of the Spirit perceived in the lives of the other religions' believers: a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for self-renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender of the self to God, and an attachment to the transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself, though human weakness and sin are not absent.³⁰

The Asian Church is convinced that God's salvific will for humanity is one for all peoples and the role of the Church is to discern and urges all believers to bring about the fullness of God's kingdom when God is over all, through all and all in all.

This positive appreciation is further rooted in the conviction of faith that God's plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples; it is the kingdom of God through which God seeks to reconcile all things in Godself in Jesus Christ. The Church is a sacrament of this mystery - a symbolic realization that is on mission towards its fulfilment (LG 1:5; cf. BIRA IV/2). It is an integral part of this mission to discern the action of God in peoples in order to lead them to fulfilment. Dialogue is the only way in which this can be done, respectful both of God's presence and action and of the freedom

³⁰See J. Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred, ed., *Being Church in Asia*, Manila: Claretian Publications, 1994, 13.

of conscience of the believers of other religions (cf. LG 10-12; *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 41-42; *Redemptoris hominis*, 11-12).³¹

Within this theological understanding, the word of God revealed in Jesus is about the salvific message that humankind can only be saved by following the dictates of their conscience and sincere practice of

a sense of the sacred, a commitment to the pursuit of fullness, a thirst for self-realization, a taste for prayer and commitment, a desire for self-renunciation, a struggle for justice, an urge to basic human goodness, an involvement in service, a total surrender of the self to God, and an attachment to the transcendent in their symbols, rituals and life itself.³²

The word of God reminds believers that the noble aims of the different religions are only achievable in the strength of God's Spirit, not by sheer human efforts alone. Christ is an exemplar par excellence of one who does God's will and attained God's noble dreams for humankind and God's creation through the power of God.

In today's context, the word of God revealed in Jesus is about the salvific message that humankind can only be saved when all become fully human and like Christ (hence in the words of FABC V, art. 4.1, "Christlike, live like him ... and do his deeds by the power of his grace"). We become Christlike when we walk the way of Christ in doing God's will for the sacred sustainability of the earth and human communities; we become Christlike when we embrace and embody Christ's truth - with God and God's omnipresence in all hearts, all spaces, and all beings, life on earth becomes sacred and sustainable. Finally, Christlike enjoins us to lead lives of fullness and wholeness in union with God, together with all of God's peoples, bio species and creation. In Jesus, humankind is saved when everyone realizes what it means to have God with us and within us. In this way, as humans "im-planeted" in creation, humankind attains the full flourishing of being the daughters and sons of God, together with believers of all faiths, in the sacred power of God's omnipresent Spirit.

This does not preclude that the attainment of full flourishing in the local ecclesial communities is made possible through baptism and incorporation into the Body of Christ. It is Christ who made it possible for such fullness of life or total flourishing because the Church proclaims that Jesus is not only the salvific message but the one who saves through the message. Yet it must be maintained in Asia, that outside the bounds of the Church, the same attainment is

³¹J. Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred, ed., *Being Church in Asia*.

³²J. Gnanapiragasam and Felix Wilfred, ed., *Being Church in Asia*.

accomplished by God's unfathomable Spirit whose power pulsates in the hearts of all believers, sustaining all their *Christlike* practices so that the end-realization of sacred sustainability is when God finally reconciles all persons, all spaces and all beings in God, in ways unknown to humankind and the Church, but only known to God alone.

Conclusion

With the rapid changes in our times, it is timely to envision new and bold approaches that make the Church's evangelizing mission more effective. In the multi-religiosities of Asia, the Church has to earn its place as *ecclesia docens* (a teaching Church) by first being *ecclesia discens* (a learning Church), subjected to a trying apprenticeship in which the *ecclesia discerns* becomes "*discipled*" by the Asian gurus and the awakened poor. Once evangelized, the Church of Asia becomes a readable word of revelation and a credible sign of salvation because it manifests the Reign of God. This manifestation is not so much in words as in the power and authority of its saving guru Jesus who once lived and taught in Asia. As a teaching Church, its members are so "overpowered by God's Spirit" as to be enabled to behold the religious Other of Asia with great reverence and respect the otherness of the Other in their dignity as persons inviolable and beliefs as tenets incongruent because of the observable differences.

Such reverential beholding enables the Church to behold, discover and announce God's omnipresence already active across the ethnic and religious frontiers. The omnipresent God becomes the foundational grace that makes possible the co-pilgrimage on earth as believers of the different faiths. This grace makes possible the concerted partnership that collaborates with God in the gradual and ultimate transformation of humankind in the likeness of God and the earth in the creative largesse of heart of God. Above all, God's omnipresence that pulsates through the entire creation has rendered all spaces, persons and being sacred. This inviolable sacredness at the deepest depth of all cultures and nature is what renders sustainability of life possible for the earth and human communities. The promotion of sacred sustainability is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church. Finally, what makes the Church effective in its prophetic defence of humankind's right to the saving word is to announce that humankind is saved when all live and act like Christ who has shown humankind the way, the truth and the life when the earth and human communities attain total sacred sustainability when God becomes the God in all, over all and all in all.