

## SYNODALITY IN THE ASIAN CHURCH: FABC INSIGHTS FOR A SYNODAL CHURCH

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### Abstract

This Paper argues that some of the constituent elements of the synodal way have been already present for generations in the Asian Socio-Cultural-Religious ethos. It then highlights how from the earliest times, synodality was a common element in Asian (especially Oriental) Christian Churches. At the end, the Paper highlights some salient insights for synodality in the FABC, by first pointing out how a synodal *modus operandi et vivendi* permeates the FABC Structures and Being, and then, by extracting some synodal elements found in the vast corpus of FABC teachings. It is written from an exclusively Asian perspective.

**Keywords:** Asian Church; Dialogue; FABC; Harmony; Lay Participation; Listening; Synodality; Walking Together

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## Introduction

In this paper, our main aim is to highlight the fact that neither the Synods nor the synodal way of ecclesial life is alien to the Churches in Asia or to the universal Church. We will do this from an exclusively Asian perspective. First, we will highlight some constituent elements of synodality that have been present in Asian socio-cultural-religious ethos for generations, and then, briefly refer to the ancient synods and synodal ways of life in the early Church communities in Asia; we will draw attention to such practices which are present even now in quite a number of oriental Christian Churches in Asia. This will be followed by the extraction of some insights for a synodal Church from the life and the teachings of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC).

## Constituent Elements of Synodality in Asian Realities

In Euro-American theologies, logic functions in and through the principle of non-contradiction—two contrary affirmations cannot be true simultaneously. It has to be either one or the other. Many Western theological dichotomies (such as nature-super nature; body-soul; matter-spirit; human-divine; secular-holy; world-church, etc.) have their roots in this strictly rational “either or” approach.<sup>1</sup> Asians, however, do not make such hair-splitting distinctions; for them, the entire reality has to be grasped holistically, in its totality. Thus, instead of making rational distinctions and separating phenomena of reality accordingly, they prefer to be inclusive. They prefer to see nature and super nature together, body and soul together, matter and spirit together, human and divine together, secular and holy together, world and church together, etc. That is, they prefer an inclusive “and” approach to an exclusive “either or” approach.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Asians by nature cherish a day-to-day logic of inclusion than exclusion, and consequently, adopt a wholistic approach to reality. A necessary corollary of this is the peculiarly Asian sense of harmony that has enabled generations of Asian to co-exist—rather to live—within their multi-cultural and multi-religious societies of Asia.

Thus, after having listened to the Asian voices, especially to the Asian bishops at the Synod for Asia held in Rome in 1998, Pope John

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Michael Amaladoss, “Is there an Asian Way of Doing Theology?” *East Asian Pastoral Review* 45, 1 (2008): 10–27, at 21–22.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Michael Amaladoss, “Is there an Asian Way of Doing Theology?” 21–22. See also Vimal Tirimanna, “Asian Theology” in Lewis Ayres and Medi Ann Volpe, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 877–889, at 882.

Paul II in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA) could state:

Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence. Without denying the existence of bitter tensions and violent conflicts, it can still be said that Asia has often demonstrated a remarkable capacity for accommodation and a natural openness to the mutual enrichment of peoples in the midst of a plurality of religions and cultures (EA 6).

But it is the last para of n. 6 in EA which is really useful for our purposes here:

All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul, and it is the core around which a growing sense of “being Asian” is built. This “being Asian” is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian soul.

This precisely is a core value of the current synodal process. It does not aim to destroy contrary opinions nor plurality, but it aims to reach consensus in seeing the inherent values even in opposing views that humanly speaking could create tensions.<sup>3</sup>

In the same EA, the Pope goes on to mention some Asian family values, among which is harmony (EA 46).<sup>4</sup> He further acknowledges that “the family occupies a very important place in Asian cultures” (EA 46). He also mentions that the Asians in particular “hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity” (EA 6). The same point is repeated by the FABC in many of her statements. For example, the Final Statement of the FABC Plenary Assembly in 2009 said: “One of the strong characteristic features of Asian cultures is belonging and loyalty to one’s family, clan, community and ethnic group.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, it is this strong Asian value of family that has laid the foundation for the typically Asian communal sense within their particular socio-cultural contexts. To begin with, the

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality (Vatican City: Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, 2021), Nos: 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4; *For a Synodal Church: Working Document for the Continental Stage* (Vatican City: Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, 2022), Nos: 71, 85. Henceforth, this latter document will be referred to as DCS.

<sup>4</sup>Elsewhere in the same EA, he mentions harmony as one of the Asian values of which Asians are proud (EA 6).

<sup>5</sup>Vimal Tirimanna, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 2007 to 2012*, Vol. 5 (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014), 13. Henceforth, this work will be referred to as FAPA-V.

traditional Asian concept of family was not limited exclusively to the nuclear family, but also to the joint-family, and at times, even to an entire village. For example, the ancient Indian concept of ‘panchayat’ portrayed the collectiveness or the sense of solidarity of all inhabitants of a given geographical area: “The institution of Panchayat represented not only the collective will, but also the collective wisdom of the entire rural community.”<sup>6</sup> In the neighbouring Sri Lanka, especially among the Sinhalese of yesteryears (where the nuclear family has been the norm for centuries, instead of joint-family), “the life that counts most is the life of family, neighborhood and kin groups within the village.”<sup>7</sup> It is in this sense that one has to comprehend the popular Asian view that when two persons marry it is not only a union of those two, but also of their respective families/communities: “In Asian situation, marriage is not merely a matter of two individuals, a man and a woman, or only interpersonal, but also of two families, two clans in rural areas, two communities, perhaps two villages in certain situations.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, certain fundamental elements of synodality are clearly seen in Asian ethos from ancient times, such as a communal/familial sense of the Asian peoples.

### **Synodality in the Asian Churches**

In her recorded ecclesial history, too, the Christian communities in the Asian continent are no strangers to synods or to the synodal way of living (ecclesial existence). To begin with, the first few synods of the Early Church (that were so important in establishing and stabilizing some of the fundamental elements of the Creed) were held in what was then known as “Asia Minor” (Anatolia in present day “Turkey”) in the western-most part of the Asian continent. The better-known among them such as Nicea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople, etc. were all held in western Asia.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, historical records confirm the vital

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<sup>6</sup>Cf., <https://rajpanchayat.rajasthan.gov.in/en-us/aboutus/history.aspx> (accessed on 24<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2022).

<sup>7</sup>Bryce Ryan et. al., *Sinhalese Village* (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1958), p. 145. In this well-researched work, the first Professor of Sociology at the University of Ceylon (from 1948 to 1952), Bryce Ryan shows how family, the kin and the village in general, formed one wholistic unit of solidarity and community living.

<sup>8</sup>Vimal Tirimanna, ed., “A Few Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Inter-Faith Marriages,” *FABC Papers* No:127, February 2009, 1-85, at 52.

<sup>9</sup>Although in contemporary popular Catholic parlance, these celebrated assemblies are known as ‘Councils’, “In the Catholic Church the distinction between the use of the words “council” and “synod” is a recent one.” See International Theological

importance of what was known as “the Synod of Isaac” in Persia in 410 AD which some historians hold as “the beginning of a long process of gradual separation” of Christianity in the East from the West.<sup>10</sup> The renowned Church historian, Norman Tanner describes the synodal character of the early councils of the first millennium as follows:

The holy fathers who have gathered at intervals in the four holy councils [i.e., Nicaea I, Constantinople I, Ephesus and Chalcedon], have followed the examples of antiquity. They dealt with heresies and current problems by debate in common, since it was established as certain that when the disputed question is set out by each side in communal discussions, the light of truth drives out the shadows of lying.<sup>11</sup>

As is commonly held by the historians, the culture of synods that was so active in Christian ethos of both the East and West, gradually took a back seat in the Western or Latin Church with the dawning of the Second Millennium. As Thonippara correctly points out, “synodal and conciliar activities in the Church were very common in the first nine centuries.”<sup>12</sup> He goes on to state:

The synodal character which was spontaneously exercised through the frequent synods and councils was very much in the functioning of the Church of the first Millennium, which had been lost or ignored during the second Millennium. One of the greatest achievements of ecclesiological vision of the Second Vatican Council is the re-assertion of the collegial or synodal or participatory character of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

The International Theological Commission (ITC) puts it succinctly when it says:

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Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), No: 4, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html) (last accessed on 7th Sept. 2022). Henceforth, this document will be referred to as ITC (2018).

<sup>10</sup>See for example, Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. I (Beginnings to 1500), Second Revised and Corrected Edition (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1998), 155. For a detailed account of this important Eastern Synod, see Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, 151–157. He also gives substantial historical accounts of a few other important Eastern Synods (less known to the Western readers today, but crucially important for the Eastern Christian traditions) such as the Synod of Yaballaha in 420 AD, the Synod of Dadyesu in 424 AD, Synod of Acacius in 486 AD, etc. See Moffett, 157–161, 161–163 and 197–199, respectively.

<sup>11</sup>Norman Tanner SJ, ed., *Decrees of Ecumenical Councils*, Vol. I (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 108.

<sup>12</sup>Francis Thonippara, CMI, “Jerusalem Council: A Paradigm for a Synodal Church,” *Asian Horizons* 14, 1 (March 2020): 29–44, at 30.

<sup>13</sup>Thonippara, “Jerusalem Council,” 31.

Since the beginning of the Second Millennium, synodal procedure gradually took on different forms in the East and in the West, particularly after the breakdown of communion between the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome (11th century) and when ecclesiastical territories belonging to the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem came under the political control of Islam.<sup>14</sup>

However, as the same ITC continues to state: “In the Eastern Churches, synodal procedure continued to follow the tradition of the Fathers, particularly on the level of patriarchal and metropolitan Synods, but there were also special Synods, in which Patriarchs and Metropolitans took part.”<sup>15</sup> Much before Pope Francis launched the current unprecedented ecclesial process to recover the ancient synodal way of life in the Church, Tanner, among others, underlined the value of the same synodal character when he lamented the loss or the disappearance of the various regional councils that played a leading role in the ecclesial life of the first millennium when he wrote:

“This demise of regional councils, and the culture of dialogue they embodied, had been one of the greatest blows in the history of the Church, a principal reason why the Church has found it so difficult to remain up-to-date.”<sup>16</sup>

In its own evaluation, the ITC also expresses more or less the same sentiments when it says:

In the Catholic Church, the Gregorian reform and the struggle for the *libertas Ecclesiae* contributed to the affirmation of the Pope’s authority as primate. On the one hand, this freed Bishops from subordination to the Emperor but, on the other hand, if not properly understood, it ran the risk of weakening the identity of local Churches.<sup>17</sup>

However, as already mentioned above, Oriental Churches of diverse ancient Christian traditions (with their roots going back to the earliest Christian communities) spread in various parts of the Asian continent—such as those of the Maronite, Chaldean, Coptic, Syrian, Armenian, the St Thomas Christians in India—which have been consistently and uninterruptedly using synodal ways of ecclesial living are still vibrant with life though at present confined to

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<sup>14</sup>ITC (2018), No: 31.

<sup>15</sup>ITC (2018), No: 31. For a succinct history of the gradual disappearance of the synodal way of life in the Western/Latin Church, see also Ugo Sartorio, *Sinodalità: Verso un nuovo stile di Chiesa* (Milano: Ancora Editrice, 2021), 52–59.

<sup>16</sup>Tanner, *Decrees of Ecumenical Councils*, 15.

<sup>17</sup>ITC (2018), No: 32.

comparatively small minority Christian communities. For example, for the St Thomas Christians in India, “the synodal or participative nature of the universal Church had a varied expression in the daily church administration.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the two most numerous Churches of St Thomas Christians that are in full communion with Rome – the Syro-Malabar and the Syro-Malankara Churches – have synodal ways of ecclesial existence even today. As a matter of fact, in these two Churches, the Episcopal Synods are “ecclesiologically the highest representative” bodies.<sup>19</sup> As the Indian Church historian Thonippara points out, with their elevation to Major Archepiscopal Church status, in 1993 and 2005 respectively, both these “*sui iuris* Churches have lot of administrative freedom. In the election of the Major Archbishop, in the election of the bishops and in liturgical matters the Synod enjoys reasonable freedom of the early church.”<sup>20</sup> In this way, they seem to have in their ecclesial existence the very ecclesiology proposed by Vatican II in spite of some minor limitations here and there. Thus, with regard to the participation and communion – as proposed both by Vatican II and Pope Francis – these Churches have the traditionally in-built ecclesial structures that promote the involvement of all the baptized in the ecclesial affairs. Commenting on the revival of the traditional Syro-Malabar ecclesial concepts such as “Palliyogam,” “Desiyayogam” and “Mahayogam” in the Syro-Malabar Church, Thonippara says: “The fruits of the renewal promised by the Second Vatican Council in promoting ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality, and synodal functioning have been to a great extent achieved by the Syro-Malabar Church.”<sup>21</sup> According to him: “*Palliyogam* and *pratinidhiyogam* have great powers, especially in the temporal administration.”<sup>22</sup> In n. 77 of the Continental Stage Document of the current synodal process, we read a quotation sent in by the Syro-Malabar Church in response to the questionnaire that was circulated at the early stages of the current synodal process:

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<sup>18</sup>Francis Thonippara, “Synodal Church from a Historical Perspective,” *Jeevadhara* XVVII, 280 (July 2017): 25–40, at 38.

<sup>19</sup>Thonippara, “Synodal Church from a Historical Perspective,” 39.

<sup>20</sup>Thonippara, “Synodal Church from a Historical Perspective,” 39.

<sup>21</sup>Francis Thonippara, “Synodality among the Christians of St. Thomas Tradition and the Challenges” in Anthony Lawrence, Stany C. Fernandes and Simon Pinto, ed., *Church in India on the Synodal Path National Conference 21–23 March 2022* (Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2023), 236–249, at 242.

<sup>22</sup>Thonippara, “Synodality among the Christians of St. Thomas Tradition and the Challenges,” 242.

The ancient synodal structures and ecclesial processes existing in the Syro-Malabar Church (Prathinidhiyogam, Palliyogam and Desayogam) express the synodal nature of the Church at the local, regional and universal levels, and are useful for forming us to synodality. They are at the service of the parishes and communities, which discover collaborative exercise of the pastoral ministries to move forward by listening to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, there are some new initiatives and attempts which try to empower the synodal structures of the Church (Syro-Malabar Catholic Church).

The Syro-Malankara Church, too, has a three-tier synodal functioning.<sup>23</sup> No wonder then that Pope Francis could teach that the Latin/Roman Church can learn from these ancient oriental Christian traditions about their synodal experience through receptive Ecumenism:

If we really believe in the abundantly free working of the Holy Spirit, we can learn so much from one another! It is not just about being better informed about others, but rather about reaping what the Spirit has sown in them, which is also meant to be a gift for us. To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality. Through an exchange of gifts, the Spirit can lead us ever more fully into truth and goodness.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, it should be obvious that the synodal way of life proposed by Pope Francis in accordance with the ecclesiology of Vatican II (especially in LG) is neither an ecclesial novelty nor a personal pet idea of his. Rather, it has been a constitutive element of the Christian tradition (especially in Christian communities of ancient origins) from the earliest times. As such, in addition to re-activating the conciliar ecclesiology, the current synodal process is also a return to the ecclesiological spirit of the early Christian churches (a *resourcement*).<sup>25</sup> According to the present writer, it is nothing but providential that the Oriental Churches (especially in Asia) amidst many challenges (both from within and without) in history had painstakingly preserved the

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<sup>23</sup>Thonippara, "Synodality among the Christians of St. Thomas Tradition and the Challenges," 242.

<sup>24</sup>Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), N. 246.

<sup>25</sup>The term 'resourcement' is used here to indicate "a return to the original sources/heritage." For a fine description of this term, see John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, (Cambridge [Massachusetts]: Harvard University Press, 2008), 40-43, 300-302.



synodal way of existence and decision-making and decision-taking as part of their inherited ecclesial patrimony.<sup>26</sup>

In that sense, one can see the sagacity of Pope Francis when he teaches that the Church and synodality are synonymous, re-echoing the sentiments of St John Chrysostom's celebrated statement that the term Church in its essence connotes "walking together."<sup>27</sup> As scholars point out, in the first millennium synods and synodal ways of living were constituent elements of most of the Christian churches though in the second millennium a sort of a hierarchical centralization came into being and gradually held sway in most of ecclesial life even unto our day. Accordingly, in the latter period, the clergy and laity were compartmentalized into two strictly separated classes within the Church (especially in the western Latin Church) wherein the former came to be considered superior to the latter in a pyramidally arranged hierarchical model. Although Vatican II sought earnestly to overthrow this pyramidal model, during the past six decades or so, it is precisely this model that has continued to dominate all ecclesial life. Now the present Pope is making a valiant effort amidst fierce challenges—mainly from within the Church—to resuscitate the spirit of Vatican II ecclesiology.

### Insights for Synodality from the FABC

Although synods have existed among some Asian Christian communities from earliest times, the concept of 'synodality' is of recent coinage. The main defining characteristics of synodality (as is used currently), in its essence, are based on the ecclesiology of Vatican II, especially on the concept of the Church as the People of God. As the ITC document said, "although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging."<sup>28</sup> Luciani defines synodality as follows:

We can define synodality even more precisely as an *ecclesial way of proceeding*, meaning that it is a *constituent*, processual reality rather than

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. Vimal Tirimanna, "Past Divisions and Present Ecumenical Dialogues: Are these Elements of God's Providential Plan?" in William T. Cavanaugh, ed., *Gathered in My Name: Ecumenism in the World Church*, Studies in World Catholicism, Vol. 9 (Eugene (Oregon): Cascade Books, 2020), 197–211.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Discourse of Pope Francis on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, AAS 107 (2015): 1142. See also International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2018), No: 3, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html) (last accessed on 7th Sept. 2022).

<sup>28</sup>ITC (2018), No: 6.

simply a particular practice of a functional and organizational nature. Synodality involves the constant review of *life styles* (spirit) and *discernment practices* (method) at all *levels and structures of government*. It is the application of the classical medieval principle according to which *what affects everyone must be discussed and approved by everyone* (*quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari et approbari debet*).<sup>29</sup>

If synodality basically means a ‘walking together,’ then, the whole of humanity walk together in one pilgrim journey, and in the Asian context, not just the believers, but also those who do not belong to the community of believers.<sup>30</sup> From an exclusively Asian perspective, it is a pilgrimage of ‘all the peoples of Asia.’<sup>31</sup> In fact, true to their daily lived experiences in Asia, from its very inception, the FABC had been striving to walk together with all the peoples of good will in Asia belonging to various cultures, religions, etc., not forgetting the teeming millions of the Asian poor, as is so evident in her insistence on the triple dialogue as the peculiar Asian way of evangelizing.

As is well-known, the FABC was formed as a consequence of the sense of episcopal solidarity experienced by the Asian bishops at the Vatican II.<sup>32</sup> One of the main original aims of the FABC was to put into practice what the Council taught, especially its fundamental ecclesiology.<sup>33</sup> No wonder then, that the conciliar ecclesiology which was mainly centred on the concept of the Church as the People of God had a tremendous influence on the FABC from the very beginning both in its way of being and in its teachings. In what follows, we will try to briefly highlight a few salient points wherein one notices some of the basic constituent elements of the concept of synodality in their seed form (insights), both in FABC’s way of functioning and in its teachings.

<sup>29</sup>Rafael Lucianai, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 27. The Italics are in the original text.

<sup>30</sup>The opening line of *Lumen Gentium* (LG) 9 says: “At all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him (cf. Acts 10:35).” See also LG 16.

<sup>31</sup>Interestingly, the series of the collections of FABC’s teaching documents have been entitled “For All the Peoples of Asia” which implies “all the people of good will.”

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Vimal Tirimanna, “A Brief History of the FABC,” *FABC Papers*, No: 139 (Dec. 2013), 1–64.

<sup>33</sup>The very first theological task undertaken by the newly formed Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC was the study of what it means to be a local Church. Cf. “Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context,” nn. 13–14, in Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil: Collection of TAC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]* (Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007), 22.

## **Insights from the FABC Structure and the Way of Being**

Ever since its inception in early 1970's, the FABC has followed a somewhat synodal way of life, at least in the early decades of her history. This was most evident at the periodically held early FABC Plenary Assemblies which in addition to the Asian bishops also had an almost equal number of lay persons representing various ecclesial groups as observers. They were indeed Assemblies of the representatives of the whole People of God.<sup>34</sup> The various FABC Offices, too, consist of bishops, priests, religious and active lay persons as their members, thus signifying a sense of the whole People of God involved in the mission of the local Churches.

The same ecclesial sense was also evident in what was known as "Bishops' Live-in" experiences in which the Asian bishops were given opportunities to immerse themselves in the lives of the Asian peoples of diverse religions and cultures in the grassroots levels of their lived realities. The rich experiences harvested through the FABC's live-in opportunities are highlighted by the Asian bishops regularly.<sup>35</sup>

Also, in the ground-breaking resolution of the Asian bishops at their Bandung Plenary Assembly in 1990 to adopt "a new way of being the Church in Asia" that led to the emergence of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (ASiPA) or the evangelization through basic ecclesial Christian and human communities, one notices not only a pilgrimage walked together by all the peoples of Asia, but also an effort to integrate all rungs of Asian Christians into the Asian ecclesial life. It also was an effort to make the participation of all peoples of good will in ecclesial life at the grassroots levels of the Church.

## **Insights from the FABC Teachings**

Some of the fundamental elements of the current synodal process initiated by Pope Francis were already present in the FABC teachings often quite explicitly, and at times, at least in their rudimentary (seed) form. We will highlight some such insights in FABC teachings under the following headings:<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>The FABC Plenary Assembly in Daejong, Korea in 2004 was the last to have had this sort of configuration representing proportionately all the segments of the People of God.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. For a fine summary of such live-in experiences and their effects, see FAPA-V, 121-126.

<sup>36</sup>What we will be highlighting are just a tiny selected portion from the vast corpus of FABC teachings since 1970's.

### ***Walking Together***

The Preparatory Document (PD) for the current synodal process as well as the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS), right from their very opening words till the end of their respective contents speak of synodality as a journey. In fact, the PD's first Chapter is entitled: "The Call to Journey Together."

The FABC consistently speaks of life as a journey or a pilgrimage. For example, the Message of the ninth Plenary Assembly of Asian bishops in Manila said: "We are pilgrims on earth, walking in the light and shadows, journeying with anxieties and uncertainties, pains and sufferings, oftentimes, imposed upon us."<sup>37</sup> And in their Final Statement at the same Assembly, they said: "The Church journeys with the peoples of Asia as they search for true life."<sup>38</sup>

Walking together with others has been a common theme for the FABC ever since its inception in 1970's. Being tiny minorities amidst the vast ocean of diverse religions and cultures, the Christian communities in Asia have always sought to live and walk together this journey of life here on earth:

We believe that everyone in Asia is a partner and co-pilgrim in the journey to God's Reign, that the fields of mission are grounds of the mysterious presence and action of God's Spirit. In the vast mission in Asia the silent but eloquent witness of an authentic Christian life requires a humble presence, a mode of dialogical living that includes a prayerful and "contemplative" way of life.<sup>39</sup>

### ***A New Way of Being the Church***

In his inaugural address at the opening of the Synodal process in October 2021, Pope Francis himself quoted Yves Congar: "Father Congar, of blessed memory, once said: 'There is no need to create *another Church*, but to create a *different Church*' (*True and False Reform in the Church*). That is the challenge."<sup>40</sup> Thus, synodality basically amounts to no radical change as such, but to "a new way of being the Church." It basically amounts to returning to the ecclesiology taught by Vatican II, in its very existence—it is the genesis of a new culture of being Church:

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<sup>37</sup>FAPA-V, 7.

<sup>38</sup>FAPA-V, 11.

<sup>39</sup>FAPA- V, 45.

<sup>40</sup> Cf., Pope Francis' inaugural address at the October 2021 Synod, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/document\\_s/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/october/document_s/20211009-apertura-camminosinodale.html) (last accessed on 5th Dec. 2022).

Synodality is much more than the classical institutional forms – such as councils, synods, or conferences – through which it has traditionally been practiced. Neither is synodality a new ecclesial model. Rather, it is what makes a new model possible by setting in motion a process of constant ecclesio-genesis that generates an ecclesial way of proceeding.<sup>41</sup>

The FABC had been talking of “a new way of being the Church” for decades, beginning with the Bandung Plenary Assembly in 1990’s.

### *“Enlarging the Tent”*

Right now, as we are moving towards the Continental Stage of the current synodal process, the overall trend running through the contents of the DCS which in essence is exactly what its title says: “Enlarge the Space of your Tent.” Expressing faithfully what the People of God had communicated in their responses to the synodal questionnaire, this title implies that no one should be excluded in the synodal journey: “Enlarging the tent requires welcoming others into it, making room for their diversity” (DCS 28). Then, in No: 31 of DCS we read: “The vision of a Church capable of radical inclusion, shared belonging, and deep hospitality according to the teachings of Jesus is at the heart of the synodal process.”

This has been a perennial theme of the FABC, too. For example, in 2012, the FABC clearly stated: “We must rediscover servant leadership which does not exclude anyone.”<sup>42</sup> With regard to the indispensable need for building up mutual confidence and inter-dependency among all such good-willed peoples in Asia, especially in facing the menace of various fundamentalist trends in Asia, the FABC in 2011 stated:

...we endeavour to understand other cultures, other perspectives and other peoples of Asia” by being “‘bridge-builders’ who despite all difficulties, clashes and confrontations, have shared a worldview, ethical values and attitudes. Shifting from religious isolation we engage in inter-religious collaboration for the sake of humanity and the world.”<sup>43</sup>

The Statement went on to say: “Thus, we are ready to cross religious and cultural boundaries in order to counter fundamentalism and join hands with all of good will in prayer and in work for social justice, communal peace, the empowerment of the poor and the marginalized and nurturing of creation.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*, 27.

<sup>42</sup>FAPA-V, 250.

<sup>43</sup>FAPA-V, 235.

<sup>44</sup>FAPA-V, 235.

Such walking together with those who are diverse from us becomes all the more relevant, when one takes seriously what Pope John Paul II taught some three decades ago:

The Spirit manifests himself in a special way in the Church and in her members. Nevertheless, his presence and activity are universal, limited neither by space nor time. The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the “seeds of the Word,” to be found in human initiatives-including religious ones-and in mankind's efforts to attain truth, goodness and God himself.<sup>45</sup>

An awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit even outside the Church boundaries has been a recurring theme in the FABC teachings all along: “We discern the Holy Spirit’s lively presence in the religious, social, cultural, political and economic movements that safeguard the rights of the poor, children, women, migrants, laborers and the integrity of creation”.<sup>46</sup>

As such, the need to open doors to all people of good will:

We therefore see the need for Christians to join hands with the civil society actors in Postmodern Asian society of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Based on what draws us together rather than what separates us, we as Church must open our doors even more to peoples of all cultures and religions, engaging more with civil society, selectively and through a process of discernment.<sup>47</sup>

### *Living in Harmony*

Enlarging the tent does not mean that we endorse whatever attitudes and worldviews of those who enter into our Tent. Neither is it a question of clashing with or fighting against those who are different from us in life and in their visions of life. It is rather the attitude of living together with diversity: “This is the authentic pillar of a synodal Church and the theological foundation of a unity which is capable of resisting the push towards homogenisation” (DCS 9).<sup>48</sup>

For Asians to live in harmony is not a theoretical matter, but rather something that they live out in their day-to-day living within their own multi-cultural, multi-religious Asian realities. Accordingly, opposites can exist side by side without necessarily clashing with each other. Neither is there any need to eliminate them, for in fact, they do complement each other in attaining fullness or completeness.<sup>49</sup> As the FABC itself holds:

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<sup>45</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), No: 28.

<sup>46</sup>FAPA-V, 11.

<sup>47</sup>FAPA-V, 201.

<sup>48</sup>See also DCS 71 and 85; *Vademecum*, Nos: 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4

<sup>49</sup>For a detailed study of the peculiarly Asian concept of harmony see the OTC study entitled “Asian Christian Perspectives of Harmony” as re-produced in Tirimanna, *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil*, 111-166; see also Gaudencio A. Rosales and C.V.

“Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be celebrated and promoted, since it represents richness and strength.”<sup>50</sup> No wonder then that one of the most peculiar characteristics of the theology propounded by the FABC is its concept of harmony. According to BIRA IV/11:

Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as ‘live and let live’. The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness.<sup>51</sup>

The statement went on to state:

One of the serious obstacles to harmony is the attitude of exclusivity, not willing to open oneself and see the beauty and truth in the other. At the root of this attitude is the failure to view the complementarity which exists between peoples, cultures, faiths, ideologies, world-visions, etc. For the promotion of harmony, it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. This is something very characteristic of Asian traditions which consider the various dimensions of reality not as contradictory, but as complimentary (*yingyang*).<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the above-mentioned East Asian concept of *ying and yang*, the FABC also comments on the popular South Asian concept of *samanvaya* when it says:

*Samanvaya* is the spiritual pursuit of the totality of reality in its infinite diversity and radical unity. Since the ultimate ground of being is unity-in-plurality, the diverse forms of reality are perceived in the convergent rhythm that harmonizes them. Harmony evolves by respecting the otherness of the other and by acknowledging its significance in relation to the totality.<sup>53</sup>

### ***Lay Participation***

As we saw earlier in this paper, one of the defining characteristics of the synodal way of life is the participation of all believers, especially of the laity. In launching the process of synodality, one of the main intentions of Pope Francis also is to enhance the participation of all the baptized – especially of the laity – in ecclesial matters.

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Arevalo, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences 1970-1991* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 155–160. Henceforth, this latter work will be referred to as FAPA-I.

<sup>50</sup>FABC – BIRA IV/II, No: 15 as FABC – BIRA IV/II, No. 15 as reproduced in FAPA-I, 321.

<sup>51</sup>FAPA-I, 321.

<sup>52</sup>FAPA-I, 322.

<sup>53</sup>FAPA-I, 157.

At the Plenary Assembly to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the FABC, the Asian bishops spoke about the empowerment of the laity: "The seminal ideas of Vatican II on communion, co-responsibility, and participation have been brought down in Asia to the level of Basic Christian Communities, ecclesial movements, and other decision making, and in action for social transformation."<sup>54</sup>

The Asian bishops' priority to build up participatory Church is expressed in the following words: "The focus of Asian bishops has been on the nurturing of a "new way of being church," namely the building up of a participatory and prophetic communion of communities in dialogue with Asia's cultures and religions ever close to the poor."<sup>55</sup>

The fact that there is a separate Office of the FABC dedicated for the Laity also is evidence to the FABC's interest in promoting lay participation in ecclesial affairs. This Office is also responsible for promoting the participation of both women and youth in Church affairs. In fact, within this Office, there are separate desks dedicated for these particular groups.

### *Listening*

Creating an ecclesial culture of listening is also a main aim of the current process of synodality. In No: 15 of the PD we read:

The meaning of the journey to which we are called is above all that of discovering the face and form of a synodal Church, in which "everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the 'Spirit of Truth' (Jn 14:17), in order to know what He 'says to the Churches' (Rev 2:7).

One of the recurring FABC insights has been the need "to be a listening church to a symphony of voices" in Asia.<sup>56</sup> The need for cultivating "a servant leadership, which pay greater attention to the voice of the laity" is also found in the FABC teachings.<sup>57</sup>

The importance of listening to others, especially to their stories is mentioned by the bishops who gathered at the Plenary Assembly in Manila: "The faith that comes from listening involves the human stories and words through which God speaks."<sup>58</sup> They also lamented about deafness of those who ought to hear: "One of the alarming situations in

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<sup>54</sup>FAPA-V, 65-66. In a footnote, the Statement says: "The Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate (BILA), first organized by the FABC Office of the Laity in 1984, has been significant in promoting lay empowerment."

<sup>55</sup>FAPA-V, 196.

<sup>56</sup>FAPA-V, 196.

<sup>57</sup>FAPA-V, 197.

<sup>58</sup>FAPA-V, 20.



Asia is the systematic silencing of people's voices coupled with a deliberate self-imposed deafness on the part of those who should hear."<sup>59</sup>

### **Dialogue**

The DCS No: 22 says: "A synodal process is incomplete without meeting brothers and sisters from other confessions" while the PD says that the perspective of 'journeying together' is "broader, and embraces all humankind whose 'joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties' we share" (PD No: 15). The latter also holds that one of the perspectives in which to understand 'journeying together' is to consider "how the people of God journeys together with the entire human family" in and through "relations, dialogue, and possible common initiatives with believers of other religions, with people who are distant from the faith..." PD No: 29).

Right from its inception, the FABC has been promoting dialogue as the mode of evangelizing in Asia, especially with the three main living realities of Asia – religions, cultures and the poor.<sup>60</sup> This characteristic Asian triple dialogue has been repeated almost at every Plenary Assembly of the FABC. For example, in 2009, the Asian bishops reaffirmed this commitment to the triple-dialogue when they said:

We reaffirm the enduring validity of the initial insight of FABC in 1974 that our mode of evangelizing is by way of dialogue, particularly the triple dialogue with the peoples of Asia especially with the poor, with the rich and ancient cultures of Asian peoples, and with their many religious and philosophical traditions.<sup>61</sup>

The FABC also teaches: "Asia needs a dialogical approach to ethics in such a way that it becomes accessible to all human beings irrespective of their religious or ideological differences."<sup>62</sup>

### **Conclusion**

From what we have been saying very briefly above, the synodal way of life is not alien to Asian ethos. In fact, most of the fundamental core elements of synodality are already present in Asian socio-cultural realities themselves which the FABC teachings have tapped as their main contextual sources. Moreover, the ancient Christian traditions that have been extant in the Oriental Churches in Asia do vibrate still with such core elements of synodality.

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<sup>59</sup>FAPA-V, 22.

<sup>60</sup>Cf., FAPA-V, 51-52, 54,

<sup>61</sup>FAPA-V, 77.

<sup>62</sup>FAPA-V, 201.