

DIALOGUE AND PROCLAMATION OF TRUTH: Reception of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* by the FABC

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationship between dialogue and proclamation of Christ in the Vatican II documents *Nostra Aetate*¹ and *Ad Gentes*² and their reception by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) – its plenary assembly, as well as the Bishops Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA) and Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) seminars under the FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. This essay argues that FABC has appropriated as well as gone beyond the teachings of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* on dialogue and proclamation. For FABC, the triple dialogue with religions, cultures, and the poor is not just a means but the mode of proclaiming Christ in Asia. Furthermore, unlike *Ad Gentes*, proclamation of Christ is not aimed at conversion to Christianity, but is, instead, understood as the promotion of God's reign. In continuity with *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*, the FABC plenary documents however do not go as far as the BIRA IV and FIRA documents where the discourse on Christianity as fulfilling all the other religions had disappeared.

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¹*Nostra Aetate* – On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, October 28, 1965 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html> (6 June 2016).

²*Ad Gentes* – On the Mission Activity of the Church, December 7, 1965 <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_eligiousvatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html> (6 June 2016).

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1. Introduction

The documents of the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* seem contradictory as the first focuses on the importance of dialogue with other religions while *Ad Gentes* stresses the need for the proclamation of Christ. This article analyzes how these documents were received by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) in a way that reconciles and goes beyond them.³ For FABC, dialogue and proclamation of Truth are not contradictory since it interprets the latter as the mission of promoting God's reign. This essay develops its argumentation by responding to the following sub-questions: 1) What is the aim of dialogue in *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*? To what extent do they cross-fertilize each other? 2) How has this been received by the FABC, as expressed in the statements of the plenary assembly and the Bishops Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA) and Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) series? 3) How does this reception by the FABC extend beyond the views of these Vatican II documents?

³The FABC is the regional conference of Asian bishops that was formed in 1970 and currently has 19 bishops conferences as members and 8 associate members. The Bishops' Institutes help the Episcopal conferences and local churches to analyze pastoral issues and identify apt pastoral responses. The Bishops Institute for Religious Affairs (BIRA) held seminars from 1979 to 1991 for bishops and other church leaders, which aimed to deepen commitment to and understanding of dialogue. The BIRA V series, in particular, included persons from other religions in a face-to-face dialogue with groups of bishops. After the BIRA series, and with the goal to bring interreligious dialogue at the grassroots level, the Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs (FIRA) held seminars from 1998-2001, focused on the formation of persons in dialogue. Both series released a statement after each gathering. See FABC Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), "A Glimpse at Dialogue in Asia," FABC paper 131, for a history and activities of the OEIA <<http://www.fabc.org/offices/oeia/history.html>> (10 March 2017).

This study contributes to the assessment of the impact –more than fifty years after – of documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* to FABC, the regional episcopal conference of Asia. It also illustrates how FABC has straddled and navigated between the Vatican teachings and the challenges of interreligious praxis in a continent where majority belong to other religions.

2. World behind the Texts

The shorter and earlier approved form of *Nostra Aetate* was initially conceived as a statement on the Catholic Church’s relation to the Jews, to be integrated as chapter four of the schema on the Decree on Ecumenism. It was deemed necessary for the Vatican Council II to express the Church’s attitude toward the Jews in the light of the Holocaust and how the Church’s anti-Judaism may have contributed to their persecution. However, in consideration of reactions from Arab governments against a special section on the Jews that might give the impression that the Council is taking side with Israel in the ongoing Middle East conflict, it was eventually expanded to include Islam and other religions and was transformed into a separate council document.⁴ The discussions led as well to the creation by Pope Paul VI of a Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions in 1964 (now known as Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) to foster the work of dialogue.⁵ *Nostra Aetate* is the first document of an ecumenical council focusing on non-Christian religions that adopts an appreciative and respectful stance even as it upholds the fulfilment of religions in Christ.⁶

⁴For the history of drafting of *Nostra Aetate*, see Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, 5 vols., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995-2006, vol. 4, 135-193, 211-226, 546-559.

⁵Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, 608-612.

⁶The First Plenary Council of India in 1950 was the first time an official Church document adopted an explicitly positive stance to the spiritual values of world religions. Thomas Emprayil, *The Emerging*

The later and much longer document *Ad Gentes* that elaborates on relations with other religions is the first ecumenical council document on the Church's mission.⁷ Among the new challenges arising from the missionary context are the decolonization process occurring in third world countries, accompanied by assertion of their own cultures and religions, resistance to foreign missionaries, increase in indigenous bishops, the need for the inculturation of the faith, and the conflict between Church and state authorities.

Like *Nostra Aetate*, *Ad Gentes* went through a turbulent process before finally being drafted and approved.⁸ A pre-council draft by the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) headed by Cardinal Gregorio Agagianian was more a synthesis of Canon Law in its relation to missions with some revisions, and not really about a theology of mission.⁹ It failed to consider the new challenges faced in the missions thus eliciting protests and heated debate. A second draft was sidelined in favour of fifteen or so propositions – the format favoured for the schemata. This set of propositions with an “old-fashioned view of the present day pagan world,” was offered but was rejected especially by bishops in the frontline of mission.¹⁰ Underlying the delay was the division among the

Theology of Religions, Vincentian Ashram, Rewa: Vincentian Publications, 1980, 14.

⁷Bishop Philip Egan, “*Ad Gentes* and the New Evangelisation,” <http://www.wonersh.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/20130904_Ad-Gentes.pdf> (6 March 2016); Stephen B. Bevans and Jeffrey Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom: Ad Gentes, Dignitatis Humanae*, New York: Paulist Press, 2009.

⁸For the drafting history of *Ad Gentes*, see Alberigo and Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, 331-345, 573-584; vol. 5, 427-451.

⁹Stephen B. Bevans, “Church Teaching on Mission: *Ad Gentes*, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Redemptoris Missio* and Dialogue and Proclamation,” <<http://www.maryknollvocations.com/mission.pdf>> (7 March 2016).

¹⁰Bishop Donal Lamont O. Carm, “*Ad Gentes*: A Missionary Bishop Remembers,” in *Vatican II Revisited by Those who Were There*, ed., Dom Alberic Stacpoole, OSB, Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston Press, 1986, 270-282.

members of the drafting committee with some desiring a more canonical approach that includes reform of the Propaganda Fide and propositions on practical matters, while others prefer a theological elaboration of the aim and nature of the missionary activity of the Church. Others also argue that a separate schema on mission may not be necessary since this theme is integrated in other Church documents.¹¹The final text that includes a theological discourse on mission as well as practical matters was eventually approved in the 4th and final session of the Second Vatican Council in 14 September 1965.¹²

3. Dialogue and Proclamation in *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*

The term dialogue¹³ occurs twice in *Nostra Aetate*. The first time dialogue was mentioned was in the context of encouraging Christians to engage in dialogue and collaboration with non-Christians. Its purpose was to enable Christians to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values among these men” (NA no. 2). The second time it was mentioned was in the context of fraternal dialogue with the Jews, which has for its aim mutual understanding and respect (NA no. 4). The need for dialogue is also implied when *Nostra Aetate* referred to the history of hostilities between Christians and Muslims and the importance of mutual understanding, “social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (NA no. 3).¹⁴

¹¹Egan, “*Ad Gentes* and the New Evangelisation.”

¹²The final draft on which the present document was based was crafted under the leadership of SVD Superior General Johannes Schütte and authored by Yves Congar, Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner, and which after some revisions, was unanimously approved in the Council's last day. Bevans, “Church Teaching on Mission.”

¹³The term 'dialogue' (in Latin text, 'colloquium') was first used in an official church document, in *Ecclesiam Suam*, 1964, by Paul VI who wrote of the need for the Church to dialogue with the world.

¹⁴See also Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* 16 that cited these two religions with which Christianity holds an affinity. Both belong to God's plan of salvation: the Jews as people of the covenant and the Muslims who believe in the Creator and have faith in Abraham. Lastly, among

Nostra Aetate affirmed that the Church “must proclaim Christ ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6),” in whom other religions find fulfilment, even though the term *fulfilment* is not used in the document itself (NA no. 2). Gavin D’Costa pointed out the silence in *Nostra Aetate* on whether non-Christian religions by themselves can be means of salvation.¹⁵ He observed though that the truth (*vera*) in other religions is referred to beginning with a small letter while the Truth (*Veritatis*) of Christ is referred to starting with a capital letter (NA no. 2).¹⁶ Furthermore, it distinguished between religions in terms of their relation to the Church from a theological, spiritual, and historical perspective.¹⁷ Only with reference to the Jews was the term *revelation* used: “The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy designed to establish the Ancient covenant” (NA, no. 4). It also mentioned “with esteem” the Muslims who revere one God and honour Abraham,

those who will be saved are those who through no fault of theirs, do not know the Gospel or Christ or the Church but they seek God and do what is good by following the dictates of their conscience, as well as, those who have no knowledge of God at all but strive to do the good. *Lumen Gentium* – Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, < www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html > (1 March 2016).

¹⁵Gavin D’ Costa, “*Nostra Aetate* – Telling God’s Story in Asia: Promises and Pitfalls,” in *Vatican II and Its Legacy*, ed. Matthijs Lamberigts and Leo Kenis: Leuven: Leuven University Press and Peeters, 2002, 331.

¹⁶“The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true [*vera*] and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth (*Veritatis*) which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself” (*Nostra Aetate* 2).

¹⁷D’ Costa, “*Nostra Aetate* – Telling God’s Story in Asia,” 331.

Jesus and Mary. On other religions, it referred to those associated with advanced cultures naming specifically Hinduism and Buddhism, and left out primal or animist religions of indigenous peoples.

It is interesting to note that while *Nostra Aetate* expressed the need for proclaiming Christ, it did not state conversion as the aim of proclamation, manifesting as it were sensitivity to what adherents of other religious would feel. Paul VI initially wanted a phrase on the conversion of the Jews but this was met by protests and angry statements from American Jewish and Protestant groups.¹⁸ Instead, in the context of condemning any form of religious persecution, it teaches that the Church should “proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God’s all-embracing love” (NA no. 4).

In *Ad Gentes*, dialogue and proclamation must be situated within the shift in its understanding of mission as one of the specialized tasks the church does, to the view of the whole church itself as missionary, participating as it were in *missio Dei* – the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit as decreed by God the Father (AG no. 2). This theology, thanks to the contribution of Yves Congar who was part of the drafting committee, implies that mission is part of the Church’s daily life and the local bishop’s responsibility.¹⁹ While the postconciliar view of mission as evangelization which encompasses all church’s activity, was not yet adopted in the document,²⁰ the foundation for a shift from a territorial concept of mission done in mission areas by Western missionaries, to a church in dialogue wherever it finds itself, has been laid down by the very nature of the church as missionary. However, there are inconsistencies in the document,

¹⁸Alberigo and Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, vol. 4, 147.

¹⁹Bevans commented that while the Decree lacks consistency on this point, this nevertheless is the logical implication ensuing from its assertion of the missionary identity of the church. Bevans, “Church Teaching on Mission.”

²⁰Edward P. Hahnenberg, *A Concise Guide to the Documents of Vatican II*, Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2007, 134-135.

which is due, according to Congar, to the differing opinions of theologians and missiologists in the drafting committee.²¹

Affirming pre-Vatican II missiology, *Ad Gentes* declared: "The proper purpose of ... missionary activity is evangelization, and the planting of the Church among those peoples and groups where it has not yet taken root" (AG no. 6). Evangelization here means to preach "the Gospel to the poor," or Jesus' message about God's Reign, and to proclaim Jesus himself. It underlined that the proclamation of truth about Christ is important for all to be saved: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, Himself a man, Jesus Christ" and, "neither is there salvation in any other." Thus in contrast to the silence of *Nostra Aetate* on this issue, *Ad Gentes* clearly professed that there is no salvation apart from Christ (AG no. 7). Conversion is the aim of proclamation, though it mentioned several caveats (AG no. 13) – that conversion is a process, that it is not forced but a free act, and that the motivations should be discerned and purified.

Reflecting though the more positive attitude toward other religions in *Nostra Aetate*, *Ad Gentes* recognized the "leading strings toward God" in other cultures, as "preparation for the Gospel" (no. 3). This "ray of Truth" (NA no. 2), according to *Ad Gentes* is reflected in individual believers (AG no. 3), rites (AG no. 9),²² endeavours (AG no. 3), and treasures (AG no. 11) of other religions. This is because the Holy Spirit has been "at work in the world before Christ was glorified" (AG no. 4) and even in the *holy men who preceded* the patriarchs, prophets, and priests, "although they did not possess his gifts to the same degree" (AG no. 5).

In its fulfilment framework (AG no. 9),²³ the purpose of dialogue is for Christians to become aware of the various

²¹Bevans, "Church Teaching on Mission."

²²"And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted, and perfected for the glory of God...." (*Ad Gentes* 9).

²³"Missionary activity is nothing else and nothing less than an epiphany, or a manifesting of God's decree, and its *fulfillment* in the world and in world history, in the course of which God, by means of

“treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth, ...furbish these treasures, set them free, and bring them under the dominion of God their Savior” (AG no. 11).²⁴ The fulfilment model had been advocated in India since the early 1900 by Pierre Johanns, SJ and the Belgian Jesuits of Calcutta and by J. M. Farquhar who in a Conference in Oxford in 1909 described it as a movement that recognizes the intrinsic value of a religion’s moral and religious insights (Hinduism, in this instance), yet proclaiming Christ as the consummation of all religions.²⁵ *Ad Gentes* grounded its fulfilment theory in a theology of the Church as sacrament (LG no. 1):²⁶

Divinely sent to the nations of the world to be unto them "a universal sacrament of salvation, the Church, ... strives ever to proclaim the Gospel to all men. The Apostles themselves, on whom the Church was founded, following in the footsteps of Christ, "preached the word of truth and begot churches." It is the duty of their successors to make this task endure so that the word of God may run and be glorified (2 Thessalonians 3:1) and the kingdom of God be proclaimed and established throughout the world (AG no. 1).

mission, manifestly works out the history of salvation” (*Ad Gentes* 9; italics mine).

²⁴See *Lumen Gentium* 16: “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.”

²⁵I. Hirudayam, “Christian Attitudes to World Religions,” Delhi Seminar, September 1973, 2, cited by Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, “Summons to Dialogue,” *FABC Papers*, no. 34, <http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_34.pdf> (7 June 2016). Among the Catholic proponents of the fulfilment theory were Cardinal Danielou who refers to non-Christian religions as “pre-Christian,” and Monsignor Guardini who speaks of Buddha as “precursor” of Christ. Other famous theologian supporters are Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Fernandes, “Summons to Dialogue,” 13.

²⁶“Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission” (LG no. 1).

Thus, the ultimate goal of proclamation and the planting of churches, according to *Ad Gentes*, is the establishment of God's reign which is what Christ himself proclaimed as the Gospel (good news), in whose footsteps we now follow. Also, in line with its shift to the understanding of mission as *missio Dei*, it is God who "opens a door of speech for proclaiming the mystery of Christ" (no. 13) and "opens the minds of non-Christians to hear the Gospel." Sensitive to this, the "how" of proclamation must proceed gradually: "[O]nly by degrees does she touch and pervade them, and thus take them up into full catholicity. The right sort of means and actions must be suited to any state or situation" (AG, no. 6). Highlighting the need for witnessing in deeds, AG no. 11 propounds another aim of dialogue which is to bring the "peace and light of the Gospel" to those in "quest of peace" especially the poor and the afflicted, and those trying to improve the living conditions of peoples (AG no. 12).

In anticipation of inculturation, which developed in the following decade, *Ad Gentes* contained remarkable passages about the need for the local people or missionaries from other places, or the whole church for that matter, to dialogue patiently in order to appreciate and profoundly adapt (AG no. 18),²⁷ the faith within the local culture.²⁸

²⁷The word inculturation first came out in John Paul II's document *Catechesi tradendae*, no. 53, in 1979. It was theologically defined in *Redemptoris Missio* no. 52 as the "intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures." Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio – On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate* <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html> (7 June 2016).

²⁸"[L]et them be joined to those peoples by esteem and love; let them acknowledge themselves to be members of the group of people among whom they live; let them share in cultural and social life by the various undertakings and enterprises of human living; let them be familiar with their national and religious traditions; let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows" (*Ad Gentes* 11).

Conscious of the dynamic character of culture,²⁹ it challenges the church to examine the significant changes, especially those brought about by developments in science and technology and to learn by *sincere and patient dialogue* what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth (AG, no. 11, Italics mine). Though not directly linking inculturation to dialogue with other religions, *Ad Gentes* pointed out how the “seed which is the word of God” found in other cultures can at the same time enrich the Christian faith (AG no. 22).

It is even implied that this cultural “adaptation” can also critique the Christian tradition (no. 22). It is encouraged to “submit to a new scrutiny the words and deeds which God has revealed, and which have been set down in Sacred Scripture and explained by the Fathers and by the magisterium.” Thus it foresaw a mutual exchange between cultures in the process of encounter, which would exclude “syncretism” and “false particularism” (AG no. 22).

With this vision, those undergoing priestly training should, in their studies in philosophy and theology, develop an appreciative awareness of their own nation’s culture and religion and their points of contact with the Christian faith. An ecumenical spirit should be fostered and they should develop skills in “fraternal dialogue with non-Christians” (AG no. 16).

4. Cross-Fertilization of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*

With unity and awareness of our commonality with other religions as its utmost concern, for *Nostra Aetate*, dialogue is primarily a way to discover, preserve, promote and proclaim the ray of truth in other cultures insofar as they reflect Christ the way, the Truth, and the life. It affirmed the need for proclaiming Christ but does not state that its aim is conversion. Instead, it

²⁹Speaking to the laity, *Ad Gentes* 21 states: “They must be acquainted with this culture [national traditions]; they must heal it and preserve it; they must develop it in accordance with modern conditions, and finally perfect it in Christ, so that the Faith of Christ and the life of the Church are no longer foreign to the society in which they live, but begin to permeate and to transform it.”

teaches that the Church should proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love.

For *Ad Gentes*, a document on mission, dialogue is more explicitly about proclaiming Christ, the Truth, as means to salvation. Whereas *Nostra Aetate* is silent on the salvific value of other religions in themselves, *Ad Gentes* declared, albeit with caveats, that there is no salvation apart from Christ. Enriched however by *Nostra Aetate's* positive stance toward other religions, it similarly holds that through dialogue, Christians can find "seeds of the Word," not only in individual believers or cultures but in religious rites, endeavours, and treasures, which will find their fulfilment in Christ. Furthermore, it alluded to the presence of the Holy Spirit among believers of other faiths, albeit, with special reference to the Jews but including the holy men that preceded the patriarchs.

Dialogue, as *Nostra Aetate* affirmed, also results to mutual understanding and respect and is thus essential in contexts of conflict among religions. *Ad Gentes* adds that fraternal dialogue brings "the peace and the light of the Gospel" to those in search of peace especially the poor, those suffering, and working to improve social conditions. Lastly, *Ad Gentes* underscored the importance of dialogue with cultures toward a more profound adaptation or incarnation of the Church in the local context.

5. World in front of the Texts: FABC Reception

Except in the Philippines and in East Timor, Christians in Asia live as a minority amidst other religions. Discerning this context, the history, and needs of the people of Asia, the 1st FABC plenary assembly in 1974, issued the document "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia." As with *Ad Gentes*, it defined evangelization as "the carrying out of the Church's duty of proclaiming by word and witness the Gospel of the Lord" (FABC I no. 25).³⁰

³⁰FABC I, "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 6 vols., vol. 1, ed. Gaudencio Rosales, D. D. and C. G. Arevalo, SJ, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, 11-26; henceforth *FAPA*

FABC I identified as integral to this task, a triple dialogue: 1) dialogue with the great religious traditions; 2) dialogue with cultures; 3) and dialogue with the poor. As the “essential mode of all evangelization” in Asia (BIRA I no. 10,³¹ dialogue is not just a means (an instrument) as in *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* but the very mode (way, attitude or stance) in evangelization; a new way of being Church (FIRA II no. 3,7, 1999).³² Just as *Ad Gentes* speaks of the whole church as missionary in its nature, the FABC professes that the whole church must be dialogical; “the acting subject of mission is the local church, incarnated and rooted firmly in the culture of its people” (FABC X, no. 5).³³

The above triple dialogue corresponds to the aims of dialogue as propounded in *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*, namely: 1) to discover the seeds of God’s Word in other religions; 2) to inculturate the faith and build a truly local church; and 3) to foster peace and integral liberation.

5.1. To Discover Seeds of God’s Word in Other Religions

In line with *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*, FABC I recognizes that the religions of the ancestors of Asians are “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” and thus worthy of reverence and honour (no. 15). But though in the FABC I statement, the focus is on dialogue with the great religions as in *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*, its recommendations expanded this to include long-standing traditions such as animism commonly found among indigenous peoples.³⁴

vol. 1). The Filipino theologian Catalino Arevalo, SJ, was the sole author of FABC I.

³¹BIRA I, 1979 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 109-112.

³²The main motivation for dialogue is the conviction that “God is One who has been in an ongoing dialogue with humanity, at all times and in all places.” FIRA IV, in *FAPA* vol, 1, no.16.

³³*For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 3, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, Quezon City: Claretians Publications, 139-145; henceforth *FAPA*, vol. 3. See also International Congress on Mission, “Outline of the Message of the Delegates,” 7 December 1979, in *FAPA* vol. 1, 141.

³⁴On the Spirit at work in primal religions, see Office of Theological Concerns of the FABC, “The Spirit at Work in Asia Today,” FABC

The FABC regards dialogue as a means to discover “seeds of the word of God” in other religions, in order to learn from these, as well as purify, heal and make them whole (FABC I, no. 27). Dialogue is a means toward mutual enrichment in the understanding and praxis toward God’s Reign.³⁵ Speaking particularly in relation to Islam, BIRA II states:

We find such values [of God’s Reign] also present in Islam. In dialogue, therefore, a Christian hopes that both he and his Muslim brother will turn anew to God’s Kingdom, their own faiths richer by mutual interchange, their mission to the world more fruitful by their shared insights and commitments (BIRA II, no. 13).³⁶

The importance of dialogue at its core stems from the FABC’s belief in the presence of the Holy Spirit in other religions.³⁷ What is implicit in *Nostra Aetate* and spoken of in *Ad Gentes* in relation to the Jews, was explicitly recognized in FABC II that “the Holy Spirit has taught “other religions “to express [their faith] in a marvellous variety of ways” (no. 35).³⁸

Among the signs of the Spirit’s presence in other religions are: “the living out of the moral code (patience, sincerity, respect, etc.), innate humaneness, the common concern to alleviate hunger and poverty, and the intense desire for world peace with justice” (BIRA IV/3, 1986). In the context of heightened fundamentalism or exclusivist attitude, a sign of the Spirit at work is if the religious traditions move toward “communion beyond their own tradition” (BIRA IV/11, no. 7).

In continuity with the Vatican documents, however, the FABC plenary assembly statements espouse the fulfilment theory,

Papers no. 81, 1997 <http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/fabc_paper_81.pdf> (8 June 2016).

³⁵ “[T]he Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church,” BIRA IV/2, 1985, in *FAPA* vol. 1, no. 1.

³⁶ BIRA II, 1986 in *FAPA* vol. 1.

³⁷ See also BIRA IV/2, 1985, no. 8.5; FIRA I, 1998, in *FAPA* vol. 3, no. 2.5. For the FABC’s theology of the Spirit, see “The Spirit at Work.”

³⁸ FABC II, “Prayer – The Life of the Church of Asia,” in *FAPA* vol. 1.

which holds that it is in Christ that the fulfilment of meaning, liberation, fraternity and peace can be found (FABC I, no. 7).

5.2. Dialogue as Necessary to Inculturate the Faith

Extending the insights of *Ad Gentes*, FABC I underscored the role of dialogue in inculturating the faith in the Asian context and thus in building a “truly local church” (no. 9, 11). Dialogue allows Asian Christian to discover their “deepest selves”³⁹ and to “find authentic ways of living and expressing” the faith. Authentic dialogue entails “re-imagining our Christian faith in the light of Asian realities in order to birth new symbols, rituals, language and expressions that are truly Asian in flavor and character” (FIRA I, 1998, no. 2.10).

Though rejecting syncretism (FABC II, no. 31), it nevertheless expresses willingness to learn with prudent discernment, from forms of contemplative prayer in other religions, which involves the union of body-psyche and spirit (FABC II, nos. 32-33) toward an enrichment of the prayer-life of the Church not only in Asia but worldwide. BIRA I speaks further on how interreligious dialogue aids inculturation. “We enter as equal partners into the dialogue in a mutuality of sharing and enrichment contributing to mutual growth ... [D]ialogue brings the partners more deeply into their own cultures and bears the characteristics of inculturation” (no. 12).⁴⁰

As with *Ad Gentes*, which employs the term “adaptation” though in a broader sense of mutual enrichment and critique between cultures, the FABC, particularly BIRA, uses the term inculturation, in a sense that is more akin to interculturality,

³⁹It seems to espouse though a homogenous and static view of culture. The 7th FABC plenary assembly statement likewise speaks of the Asian culture in the same line “We believe in ‘the 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.” FABC VII, “A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service,” in *FAPA* vol. 3, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002, 1-18, no. 9, italics mine.

⁴⁰BIRA I in *FAPA* vol. 1.

which involves mutual appreciation and critique rather than sheer translation employing a basically Roman frame.⁴¹

5.3. Dialogue to Foster Peace and Integral Liberation

In proclaiming God's Reign, the FABC elaborates on the need for dialogue in conflict situations as alluded to in *Nostra Aetate*. The rise in fundamentalism and fanaticism destroys harmonious living (FABC VI, no. 7, and FABC VII, no. 8)⁴² and threatens the vision for interreligious dialogue of the Church (FABC IX, no. 24).⁴³ Engaging in dialogue of life (no. 20) and dialogue of common action, BIRA V underlines help to dismantle the root causes of disharmony (BIRA V/2, no. 7).⁴⁴ To promote such dialogues at the local level, Basic Human Communities among peoples of various faiths with a shared concern for peace should be formed (FIRA I, no.3.4).

BIRA IV recommends that those engaged in social transformation must be conscious of the role of religions in peace building⁴⁵ and the importance of harmony among religions to attain peace. It recommends orientation and skills training in conflict resolution in the interfaith context on the level of the grassroots and basic human/Christian communities. It urges honesty in assessing to what extent Christians are responsible for the conflicts and disharmony among peoples of varied faiths (BIRA IV/7, no. 3).⁴⁶

⁴¹See Agnes M. Brazal and Emmanuel S, de Guzman, *Intercultural Church: Bridge of Solidarity in the Migration Context*, San Jose, CA: Borderless Press, 2015.

⁴²FABC VI, "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life," 1995 in *FAPA*, vol. 2, 1-12; FABC VII, "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," 2000, in *FAPA* vol. 3; see also FABC IV, "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia," 1986 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 177-198, no. 3.1.9-11.

⁴³FABC IX "Living the Eucharist in Asia," 2009, in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 5, ed. Vimal Tirimanna, CSSR, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2014.

⁴⁴BIRA V/2, 1994, in *FAPA* vol. 1.

⁴⁵*FAPA* vol. 1, 311, 307-312.

⁴⁶BIRA IV/7 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 307-312.

Influenced by liberation theology and affirming the famous slogan from the document *Justice in the World*, that "action in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel,"⁴⁷ the FABC I regards "[e]vangelization and the promotion of true human development and liberation" as components of the "integral preaching of the gospel" (no. 23). This may be viewed as in line with *Ad Gentes'* understanding of Christ's mission as being "sent to preach the Gospel to the poor" (AG no. 5). Dialogue with the poor includes working with and for them so they are enabled to analyze the cause of their poverty and change the structures, which deprive and oppress them (nos. 20-21). FABC IV emphatically states that "the call today for us Asian Christians is to become a Church deeply committed to Jesus the Liberator" (no. 4.1.3).

6. Dialogue and Proclaiming God's Reign and the Story of Jesus

While the proclamation of the gospel is held as non-negotiable by the FABC, this is understood primarily as the proclamation of God's Reign and its actualization⁴⁸ (FABC V, no. 1.7, 1990). Considering Asian Christians' daily encounter with followers of other religions as well as their minority position in society, the

⁴⁷Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 1971 <www1.villanova.edu/content/dam/villanova/mission/JusticeInTheWorld1971.pdf> (1 March 2016).

⁴⁸"Our challenge is to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood [*sic*] in these Asian realities. In short, it is to work to make the Kingdom of God a reality." FABC V, "Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium," 1990 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 273-290; see also FABC VI, "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life, 1995, no. 13 in *FAPA* vol. 2, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, 275. See also BIRA II, 1979 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 113-118, no. 11: "Her duty is always to proclaim the reign of God, to bring the proclamation of this message into every aspect of human life, and to seek the *fulfilment* of all things in Christ."

FABC lays emphasis on proclamation through deeds.⁴⁹ Holding that the “proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization” the FABC underlines that the mode in which this is done is first through the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, *a proclamation through Christlike deeds*” (FABC V, no. 4.1).⁵⁰ FABC V qualifies though that “we shall not be timid when God opens the door [AG 13] for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (FABC V, no. 4.3). Conversion is a possible fruit of the proclamation of the Gospel but not the direct aim of dialogue. As BIRA I asserts, dialogue’s “true import excludes it as a tactic in proselytism” (no. 10). BIRA III re-affirms this: “Sincere and authentic dialogue does not have for its objective the conversion of the other” (no. 4, 1982).⁵¹

Before the Synod of Bishops for Asia in 1996, concern was expressed regarding the misgivings of the Vatican on the FABC theologies as expressed in its *Lineamenta*.⁵² The Indonesian response expressed alarm over its dominant critique: “Too much emphasis on dialogue, so that proclamation is not highlighted enough.”⁵³ The Japanese also told:

Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the Truth, we must search much more deeply into how he is the Way and the Life. If we stress too much that ‘Jesus Christ is the One and Only Savior,’

⁴⁹“We must effectively translate the primacy of evangelization into deeds in a continent where two billion men and women have not yet consciously come to know Christ and his Gospel in significant ways....” (FABC III, no. 173)

⁵⁰See also FABC V, no.10.1; BIRA IV/2, no. 4.

⁵¹BIRA III, 1982 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 119-124.

⁵²A *lineamenta* is a text written as a point for discussion to prepare for a Synod of Bishops. It is meant to invite the participation of various Church groups.

⁵³The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Indonesia, “Challenges to Evangelization,” in *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, ed. Peter Phan, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002, 24.

we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions.⁵⁴

It was recommended that a small delegation be sent to Rome before the finalization of the working document to ascertain that the *Lineamenta* considers Asian realities and values from Asian perspectives.⁵⁵

The contrasting perspectives nevertheless remained reflected in the post-synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia*⁵⁶ produced by the Vatican, that bears the following notable areas of difference with the FABC assembly statements: 1) there is no recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in other religions except in the form of the thirst for living water, which only Jesus can satisfy (EA no. 18); 2) it reiterates that “[t]here can be no true evangelization without the *explicit* proclamation of Jesus as Lord” (EA, no. 19; emphasis mine); 3) it clearly distinguishes between the proclamation of Jesus Christ (EA, no. 20) and Christian life as proclamation (EA, no. 23) – an indirect critique of FABC’s accent on proclamation through Christlike deeds; and 4) inculturation is simply a prelude to proclamation of the good news of salvation (EA no. 21). Unlike in *Ad Gentes* and the FABC, the concept of inculturation in *Ecclesia in Asia*, as John Mansford Prior critiqued, is that of sheer translation, that is, integrating Asian elements within a basically Roman frame.⁵⁷

FABC VII was the plenary assembly held right after the release of *Ecclesia in Asia*. The bishops highlighted points of congruence and “filtered” areas of disagreement to suit the realities in the Asian context. For instance, instead of “new

⁵⁴The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Japan, “The Process of Preparation of the Response,” in *The Asian Synod*, ed. Phan, 30.

⁵⁵“Colloquium on Church in Asia in the 21st Century: Towards a Communion and Solidarity in the Context of Globalization,” 25-30 August 1997, no. 7.1, in *FAPA*, vol. 3, 33-46.

⁵⁶John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html> (6 March 2016).

⁵⁷John Mansford Prior, “Unfinished Encounter: A Note on the Voice and Tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*,” in *The Asian Synod*, 242, 238, 240.

evangelization," they coined the term "active integral evangelization" to signify a shift from speaking of proclamation, dialogue, inculturation, and option for the poor as distinct issues (with the stress on proclamation) to considering them as intersecting dimensions of any church activity (FABC VII, no. 5). Also, the title of the FABC VII document, following the theme of the Synod is "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," omitting the phrase "Jesus Christ the Saviour." Noting that most conversions are due to the effective witness of both clerical and lay Christians, FABC VII emphasizes that, far from being just the first mode of evangelization it is also "[t]he most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ." Expressing concern that the "exclusivist" statements of *Ecclesia in Asia* may negatively affect interreligious relations of Christians in Asia,⁵⁸ FIRA III re-asserted: "We are inclined to place less emphasis on doctrines and theologies and more emphasis on emulating Jesus as our model of dialogue, compassion and understanding" (no. 4.3).⁵⁹

In 2002, a symposium for lay people, religious, priests and bishops on "Evangelization in the Light of Ecclesia in Asia" was held. Its statement entitled "Renewed Commitment to Proclaim Jesus"⁶⁰ highlighted the importance of a "progressive proclamation" of Jesus (EA no. 2) through the use of concrete

⁵⁸The same was said of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) document *Dominus Iesus* – On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," August 6, 2000 <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html> (1 March 2016). The FABC response to *Dominus Iesus* can be found in the FABC-Office for Theological Concerns document "Doing Asian Theology in Asia Today." Edmund Chia, "FABC's Response to Dominus Iesus," *East Asian Pastoral Review* no. 3 (2001) <<http://www.eapi.org.ph/resources/eapr/east-asian-pastoral-review-2001/2001-3/fabcs-response-to-dominus-iesus/>> (8 September 2016).

⁵⁹FIRA III, 2000, in *FAPA* vol. 3.

⁶⁰"Renewed Commitment to Proclaim Jesus" in *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 4, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007, 249-258.

images and stories (EA no. 20). It emphasized that “the manner and pace of evangelization must take seriously the concrete situation and culture, receptivity and ability of people to assimilate the mystery of our faith” (no. 8) for there exists real risks in proclaiming explicitly in some places. This reinforces earlier proclamations of BIRA IV, following *Ad Gentes*, “It is the spirit who decides whether or not one must proclaim. It is the same Spirit who decides when, where and how one must proclaim as exemplified in the Acts of the Apostles. The task of the Christian engaged in dialogue is to discern the movements of the Spirit and to second his actions” (BIRA IV/7, no. 13).

It would take more than a decade for the impact of the Synod in Asia to (slightly) change the tone of an FABC plenary assembly document. In the context of increasing secularization (no. 7) and a “diminishing sense of mission” and as a result of the Synod and the document *Ecclesia in Asia*, FABC X underscores proclamation as explicitly “telling the story of Jesus as Lord and Savior” in season and out of season. It re-affirms dialogue as the mode of mission in Asia but “maintained that the proclamation of Jesus as the Lord and Savior of the world remains as the very heart of evangelization – a faith conviction that the Church in Asia firmly holds as non-negotiable.”⁶¹

7. BIRA and FIRA: Dialogue toward Mutual Fulfilment or Overstressing Continuity?

Even as the FABC plenary assembly and BIRA I-III statements affirm that conversion is not the aim of proclamation, they still adhere to the fulfilment theory of religions. The reference to the “fulfilment model,” however, noticeably disappears starting from the BIRA IV series. BIRA IV/4 cautions, “When various religious groups lay absolute claim to truth, aggressive militancy and divisive proselytism follow and, in their wake, bitter religious divisions.”⁶² BIRA IV/10, no. 9 emphasizes “[W]e need

⁶¹FABC Plenary Assembly, “FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia, 2012,” nos. 43-50 <<http://www.fabc.org/fabc%20papers/FABC%20Papers%20138%20final.pdf>> (3 March 2016).

⁶²BIRA IV/4, 1987, in *FAPA* vol. 1, 299-302, 300.

to abandon our self image as sole possessors of the Kingdom." FIRA II expresses clearly this shift in recognizing that other religions may not just possess elements that are salvific (FABC I) but can be in themselves salvific. It speaks of the presence of the divine Logos not only in Jesus Christ but also in other religions,⁶³ and asserts that "Our faith in Jesus as the Christ does not require the exclusion of savior figure of other religions [where it exists], nor does it deny the salvific value of other religions" (no. 3.4, 1999). For example, among the Mahayana Buddhists, the Avalokitesvara is a kind of personal saviour that they call on to save them from various forms of dangers.⁶⁴

FIRA II further asserts that all conversion that is based on the Gospel of Jesus is a "conversion to the Reign of God that Jesus envisioned" and that, contra *Ad Gentes*, this does not necessarily entail a conversion to Christianity (no. 3.6). Dialogue is a means toward mutual enrichment in the understanding and praxis toward God's Reign.⁶⁵ "Christians, while sharing insights from their faith, will be attentive to the insights of sisters and brothers of the religious traditions. Thus, the way is open for mutual criticism and mutual enrichment among all those who bring a religious perspective to the human quest" (BIRA IV/6).⁶⁶ Despite the desire to respect the other as other,⁶⁷ FIRA II no. 34 statement may be at risk of stressing too much the continuity between religions inasmuch as "salvation is a Christian question," which may be different from the goals of other religions.⁶⁸

⁶³FIRA II, no. 3.1, 1999 <https://www.ucanews.com/story-archive/?post_name=/1999/07/20/final-statement-of-institute-for-interreligious-affairs&post_id=1085> (7 June 2016).

⁶⁴Office for Theological Concerns of the FABC, "The Spirit at Work," 247.

⁶⁵"[T]he Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the Church," BIRA IV/2, 1985 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 241-256, no. 8.1, 1985.

⁶⁶BIRA IV/6 in *FAPA* vol. 1, 303-306, 304.

⁶⁷BIRA V/1, "Working Together for Harmony in God's World," 1992, in *FAPA* vol. 2, 143-148, 145.

⁶⁸This valid critique is informed by George Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model which is also untenable as it locks the other in its *Journal of Dharma* 42, 4 (October-December 2017)

8. Conclusion

The FABC has been profoundly influenced by the spirit, if not the letter of *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes*. *Ad Gentes'* concept of the church as missionary by nature finds expression in the FABC in its vision of a dialogical church; dialogue is primarily the way of being church in Asia. The triple dialogue with religions, cultures, and the poor, that FABC identified as integral to evangelization parallels with the aims of dialogue as elaborated in *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* – to discover the seed of God's word in other religions, to inculturate the faith, and to foster peace and integral liberation.

The FABC goes beyond *Nostra Aetate* and *Ad Gentes* in viewing this triple dialogue not as a means but as mode (attitude, way, stance) of proclaiming Christ in Asia. It also broadens the dialogue with religions to include primal or animist religions.

While likewise adopting a fulfilment model, evangelization in the FABC plenary assembly statements accentuates the proclamation of God's Reign through Christlike deeds, a regnocentric model in the multi-religious context of Asia where Christians reside as a minority, and where in some countries, explicit proclamation of Jesus is not possible. The FABC here continues *Nostra Aetate's* sensitivity to the sensibilities of people of other religions. Respectful of the movements of the Spirit, however, Christians would not be timid in presenting the story of Jesus when the opportunity arises.

The BIRA IV and V and FIRA statements, on the other hand, are much more radical in abandoning the discourse on Christianity as fulfilling the other religions. Maintaining that dialogue is about proclaiming God's Reign, they regard interreligious dialogue as a means toward “mutual enrichment,” growth or shall we say mutual fulfilment toward God's Reign. The claim of FIRA II that other religions can likewise be salvific can be validly questioned though for overstressing the

foreignness and renders other religions as untranslatable. Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2011, 195.

similarities among religions at the risk of possibly imposing Christian categories on them. Nevertheless, the Church needs to listen respectfully to the voices of those engaged in interreligious praxis on the ground and discern with them.

In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis underlined the importance of episcopal conferences like the FABC: “It is not appropriate for the Pope to replace the local episcopates in the discernment of all the problems that lie ahead in their territories,” and, “in this sense, I feel the need to proceed in a healthy ‘decentralization.’”⁶⁹ More recently, in speaking about *sensus fidei* and Church teachings, he pointed out that “even the flock has a ‘nose’ for discerning the new paths that the Lord is opening up to the church,”⁷⁰ validating as it were the significant role of people on the ground, engaged in interreligious praxis on various levels, in discerning in the light of our faith tradition how to interpret “proclamation of Truth” in relation to dialogue.

⁶⁹Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html> (7 March 2017). Though Canon Law no. 753 recognized episcopal conferences as “authentic teachers and instructors of the faith for the Christian faithful entrusted to their care” this authority was restricted by John Paul II in his apostolic letter *Apostolos Suos* no. 22 which states that their teachings constitute authentic magisterium only when this has been approved unanimously or when it received subsequent approval of the Apostolic See. *The Code of Canon Law*, London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1983; John Paul II, *Apostolos Suos*, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_jp-ii_motu-proprio_22071998_apostolos-suos.html> (7 April 2016).

⁷⁰Cindy Wooden, “Pope calls for ‘synodal’ church that listens, learns, shares mission,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 17, 2015, <<http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-calls-synodal-church-listens-learns-shares-mission>> (7 March 2017).