

Asian mission for the next millennium?

Chances and challenges

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HAD PAUL AND BARNABAS TRAVELLED into the Asian continent, Christianity and Christian churches in all probability would have taken a different shape. Their relationship to the Roman or European churches would have developed differently. But that was not to be so in God's plan for the Asian continent. Though the Spirit of God was already at work in Asia among God's people in their religions and cultures, it was left to the Counter-Reformation churches of Europe to undertake the mission of Christ further into Asia. Except for the churches of St Thomas Christians in India, the first phase of the evangelization of Asia started only in the sixteenth century. Though the churches have now grown to a certain maturity, they still carry some 'birthmarks and burdens' of history. For our study of their future mission it is useful to take note of these birthmarks and burdens of history still affecting the churches.

Birthmarks of the churches in Asia

The European missionaries who planted the churches in Asia were sons and daughters of the Church of the time. The pioneer missionaries, who mostly accompanied colonial powers for the conquest of new lands for their kings in Portugal or Spain, went with an almost similar aim of conquering souls for Christ and his Vicar in Rome. They planted and built churches according to their understanding and experiences at home, and loyal to instructions from their superiors in Rome. Not only the architecture of the churches but also the style of Christian life, traditions and customs were all imported from Europe.

Missionary activity in Asia was not in the first place the sowing of the seeds of the gospel but more a teaching of the tridentine catechism and the prayers for the liturgy. What gave the people the hope of salvation was not so much belief in Jesus Christ and his Word, but becoming members of a Church that claimed that salvation is possible only within it. The dominant note of the preaching done in the ver-

nacular through *indigenous* lay catechists and other lay helpers was that only the Church, as the unique bark or saving boat of salvation, could save people from ruin and damnation, especially that caused by the satanic forces operative in the false religions of Asia. It was based on a theology of mission which set the Church against the other religions.

Despite these efforts, today Christianity enjoys only a minority status among the religions. After nearly four hundred years of missionary activity, the Catholic population, including the Philippines, is only 2.27 per cent of the Asian population, and excluding the Philippines only 1.47 per cent of the Asian population. The exceptional situation of the Philippines, with its 84 per cent Catholic population, not only boosts the overall Asian Catholic percentage but also often blurs the challenging realities of Asia. With the growth of other churches and sects in the Philippines, as well as the prohibitive policies and laws introduced in many Asian countries against conversion to Christianity, the minority character of the Asian churches is bound to stay. But how far is the minority character a handicap for its true mission?

This minority character is often made an excuse for a lack of prophetic courage and action vis à vis the sinful and unjust measures of the majority religions and cultures. But to be a minority is characteristic of the prophets and their eloquent stance for truth and justice. It is often forgotten that the Church is prophesied to be a 'small flock'¹ and a '*Lumen gentium*'² and still be faithful to its mission for truth, justice and peace. Hence Asian churches will do well not to be disheartened by 'a minority position in a massive continent' but to appreciate and discover the strategy and mission present in their minority situation.³

Financial dependence and paternal supervision

The Church in Asia has considerable influence through its institutions. With finances flowing freely from their mother churches, the missionaries built up not only churches, presbyteries and convents but also schools, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged etc. More and more personnel from Europe and Asia were educated and trained for specialized services in these institutions. The unmarried status of the religious and priests enabled them to give dedicated service that captivated the minds and hearts of the people of other faiths. Many conversions were effected by the evangelical witness of priests and religious.

All the same, these services evoked a great deal of suspicion. Since it was believed that outside the Church there was no salvation, zealous

missionaries sacrificed everything to convert peoples from their 'pagan' religions and cultures and bring them into the fold of the churches. In most cases it was a direct invitation to conversion, baptism and membership in the churches while offering pre-evangelization or pro-evangelization services as attractive incentives. Although missionary convictions such as 'no salvation outside the Church' justified their efforts, still the methods used came under suspicion and resentment. Nevertheless it can be said that the churches are appreciated and respected for their services to the poor and the oppressed.

Although new missionaries for Asia are neither available in Europe nor welcome in Asia, the much-needed finances for initiating new activities and for building and maintenance of institutions continue to flow from the western churches. Without this financial assistance, many of the institutional buildings like bishops' houses, seminaries, catechetical centres, schools and convents and the education of priests and religious in Europe are not possible. Much of this assistance is facilitated and channelled through Rome. As a result the Asian churches have not only to be loyal and faithful to the authorities in Rome, but are also dependent on them for their survival as an institutional church.

Numerically their presence in this massive continent of peoples is far below the global average of 18 per cent. But their influence in the Asian countries is visibly over-proportional. Today if the churches command any importance and respect among the peoples, religions and cultures of Asia it is not because of any power or the superiority of what they preach, not because of the massive institutions they have and the influence they wield on the world scene, but because of the witness and service rendered by many churches and their charismatic leaders.⁴

Vatican II as the 'The First Council of Jerusalem' for Asia

For the world Church the Second Vatican Council was the end of the Counter-Reformation period and the beginning of a new era. For the churches in Asia it meant even more than that. It was a radical transition from an old vision of itself, as well as of the Asian realities the Church is called to serve. This transition can be compared to the breakthrough made in the First Council of Jerusalem with regard to its transition from a Judaic church to a gentile church. Karl Rahner compared the opening created by Vatican II to be a truly world Church to that of the First Council of Jerusalem, and referred to it as the fundamental interpretation of the Council.⁵ And this is more true in the Asian situation than anywhere else in the world.

In its preparatory stage, and to a great extent in the sessions, the Council was dominated by European churches. Most of the Asian participants were either European missionaries or young Asian bishops.⁶ Problems and difficulties of the churches in Asia did not figure in the Latin *schemas* already prepared in Rome and circulated before the sessions. Topics such as non-Christian religions and cultures arose only later during the course of the Council, originally as responses to European concerns.⁷ But called to participate in a decision-making world-event such as this Council, the Asian bishops all felt exhilarated about their belonging to a world Church. Though they rejoiced over this global identity they were not yet clear about their identity and mission in their home country.

There was the happy coincidence of parallel developments in the political and the religious worlds of Asia. The euphoria of socio-political changes around them, combined with the opening and encouragement given by the Second Vatican Council, urged the churches, too, to seek their own new identity in the changing conditions, as well as to discover their new mission to Asian realities.

The post-conciliar Spirit, euphoria and mission

The personal experience and the outcome of the Council in the form of its sixteen documents gave the bishops of Asia a new spirit and courage to go beyond the initial euphoria and explore new paths. This outbreak of freshness, enthusiasm and commitment was helped largely by the sharp increase in the number of indigenous priests, religious and bishops⁸ during the fifties and sixties.

In the first two decades after the Council, when the documents of the Council were scrupulously translated and interpreted in the various national contexts through study and seminars, the spirit of change was increasingly visible. There were efforts made in studying, planning and making the churches really present *in* their world of religio-cultural and socio-political realities. Besides the already existing institutions for education and charitable works for which the churches were mostly known in Asia, new centres of theological and pastoral animation arose in the field of Bible study, liturgy, spirituality, catechesis etc.; new centres for ecumenism and dialogue with other religions as well as centres for the promotion of socio-political and cultural activities sprang up both at diocesan and national levels.

After centuries of a rigid and ghetto Christianity, the opening of the doors and windows of the Church naturally was felt in some quarters as

a whirlwind of the Spirit liberalizing some traditional structures and questioning some age-old practices of religious obedience and clerical celibacy. But unlike in the West, fewer priests and religious in Asia abandoned their ministry⁹ during this whirlwind experience.

The best of the gifts the Council Fathers brought with them appeared to be the use of the vernacular in the liturgy. Though the churches ran well-known educational and charitable institutions, it was liturgy in their churches that stood out as the distinguishing mark of Catholicism. Hence hearing the Word of God and singing praises in their mother tongue, composing hymns and introducing new gestures were all a great achievement. A good part of the resources by way of personnel and funds were devoted to translating, composing and rendering of liturgical music into the vernacular.

Seminaries and centres for pastoral and liturgical renewal ventured with enthusiasm to incorporate religio-cultural elements of the land and people into the Catholic liturgy. The pastoral concern of the magisterium for the initiatives of the young churches allowed only a limited time of three years for guided experiments in approved institutions like seminaries and liturgical centres. But this tended in practice to be a period of toleration rather than an encouragement to venture out with the Spirit to express their creative ideas and feelings in liturgy. Concern for preserving the Roman liturgy from syncretism, and fears of making it unclean by the rituals of pagan religions and cultures, hardened the Roman attitude towards the liturgical renewal undertaken by many of the local churches of Asia. What was initiated with much euphoria and enthusiasm soon came to a grinding halt. At present the liturgy of the Catholic churches in Asia has largely a translated, but not sufficiently inculcated, form.

Liturgy in the vernacular was clearly a small step forward in giving an Asian face to the churches hitherto seen as European churches. Even without having a true Asian identity, the churches began to see that their new mission went far beyond this initial euphoria with the liturgy. In the world-view promoted by the Second Vatican Council and in keeping with the new self-understanding of the Church as the light of the nations, the old concept of missionary activity naturally had to undergo a radical change. To this end the Council defined the whole Church to be missionary and not just the churches of the mission territories.¹⁰ Second, this activity was defined as salvific service to the whole world. These changes had deeper consequences for the younger churches of Asia because they were to become new missionaries of the light to the whole of Asian reality. The concept of mission widened

from a narrow-minded conquest-activity into a deeper and broader involvement for salvation of the whole world.

Missionary activity no longer meant a proclamation or teaching of a catechism for the conquest of souls. Thus new missionary activity, though ecclesiastically organized in some way, is not so much church-centred as gospel-centred. It is a proclamation and an invitation to live the gospel as a community becoming church.¹¹ Through the new missionary activities conversion can take place, and churches can grow, but the main focus of evangelization is neither conversion nor planting of churches, but enabling an encounter of the people of Asia with the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this respect the new missionaries are not those who go out with their 'knowledge' of the gospel, with their skills and blueprints for preaching, teaching and building the Church, but courageous prophetic missionaries of the good news of Jesus Christ. They venture into the unknown, urged by the Lord's command, and with faith that Jesus accompanies them. They go where the Spirit prompts and guides them to go. They carry not the mere light of their learning, nor the tactics of a Bible-promoter, but the light and love of Christ's message as well as his humble lifestyle to meet persons of other faiths. They join seekers of other faiths in their journey, seeking answers to the problems and challenges of modern humanity.

Proclamation and through the three dialogues

The Asian bishops slowly converged towards an understanding of mission by way of three dialogues – namely, with religions (inter-religious dialogue), with culture (inculturation) and with the poor (socio-political and economic involvement).

The *dialogue with the religions* is fraught with questions and difficulties. To what extent is inter-religious dialogue compatible with proclamation? Is proclamation weakened or replaced by dialogue? To what extent is dialogue proclamatory? The consensus seems to grow that the old direct proclamation aimed at bringing about conversion from other religions is no longer compatible with inter-religious dialogue. Besides, conversion to Christianity has become more and more provocative and offensive to other religions and vehemently opposed by them.

Besides the encouragement given by Vatican II to improve relations with the non-Christian religions, to recognize all that is true and holy in them and to forge ahead in dialogue and collaboration with them,¹² the multi-religious situation of Asia demands dialogue as indispensable for

the future of the Asian churches.¹³ Asians feel that the churches can do all these within the universal salvific plan of God the Father revealed through his Son Jesus Christ and realized by the universal presence and action of the Spirit. Hence, notwithstanding some accusations and suspicions about the Christians having found a new way to effect conversions through friendly and subtle conversations, the churches have opened themselves up for better relations through inter-religious dialogue and inter-religious collaboration.

Dialogue understood and undertaken as communication and sharing of divine life, as journeying together in a common search of the work of the Spirit, removes prejudices and helps mutual understanding and enrichment. Involving both individuals and communities, dialogue proceeds from exterior aspects of living and working to more interior aspects of spiritual life.¹⁴ In this sense inter-religious dialogue is not against the proclamatory mission of the Church. In fact dialogue and proclamation are integral but dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church's mission of new evangelization.

With the concept of *inculturation* the Council clearly gave a courageous vision and mission to the young churches of Asia to engage in 'a wonderful exchange' with the peoples, their religions and cultures. In order to achieve this goal it also encouraged the undertaking of theological investigations in each socio-cultural region, including even a fresh scrutiny of the deeds and words of the Scriptures as unfolded by the teaching authority of the Church.¹⁵

With the usual euphoria of returning to their 'own native context and richness', the Asian churches undertook efforts at divesting the churches of their colonial or western garb and trying to don an indigenous one, at least in some areas of ecclesial and ecclesiastical life. With the European missionaries winding up their pioneer efforts and handing over the responsibilities increasingly to indigenous clergy and their bishops, this phase was easy, well taken up by the people and financially supported by the West.¹⁶

The call to inculturation was greeted with enthusiasm and hope but soon slowed down to cautious adaptation and accommodation.¹⁷ As time went on it became clear to the Asian churches that the inculturation they were allowed by way of certain accommodation or adaptation was not sufficient to realize the true vision of the Council as based on the incarnation. The question is often raised whether inculturation is only tolerated by the magisterium as a *necessary corrective of appearances and attitudes* left by the first evangelization, or is promoted as a genuine encounter between the gospel and cultures.

However, Asian theologians continue to interpret the 'wonderful exchange' between gospel and culture, modelled according to Vatican II on the incarnation, as not only the enriching of the gospel and the Christian faith through the culture but also the enriching of culture through the values of the gospel. Only through a continuous process of inculturation will the local churches of Asia realize their true identity as the Church of Asia.¹⁸

With the process of inculturation is also bound up the effort of the Asian churches seeking their true identity in Asia. Asian Christians had a Christian identity that was often suspected of diminishing their national identity. Hence Asians have the need to harmonize two identities into a single one to live and act as Asian Christians. While Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians or Shintoists find themselves in their 'natural habitat' for their religious practices, it is the Christians in Asia who are called to demonstrate their patriotism and national allegiance. This suspicion over their true loyalty to the nation and a consequent minority complex urge them to go further in their reforms than mere adaptation limited to liturgical decorations and some 'de-westernization'. They want to follow the prompting of the Spirit as discerned by their Asian leaders for a genuine encounter with the cultures of the land. If culture is the God-given natural cradle of their birth and Christian faith too is a gift of God, why should we hinder the encounter urged by the Spirit?

The long road for Christians in Asia to become Asian Christians and live as Asian churches and concurrently to evangelize Asia depends greatly on the co-operation extended to the Spirit at work in Asia. Some leaders responsible for the institutional Church may frown on inculturation as fraught with syncretism and as a threat to the institution. But have the churches a future mission in Asia without listening to the Spirit active in Asia? Without genuine encounter with the cultures? Without finding their identity in Asia?

Along with the resurgence of post-colonial nationalism and development of new nations in Asia there has been a growing awareness of *socio-political and economic problems* in Asia.¹⁹ The problems and their tragic consequences naturally pose challenges to the churches for immediate relief as well as for long-term remedies or solutions. They call the churches and their organizations to be genuine and compassionate helpers. The humanitarian response of the churches which were financially supported by the churches of the West was gratefully recognized by the non-Christian governments and the people, and has won acclamation and even privileges for the churches. But this eccle-

sial response of helping 'to bury the dead, heal the wounded and console the victims' amounts to treating only the symptom and not offering the remedy or solution of the problems. Arguably such an approach is nothing more than that of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the International Red Cross (ICRC) or *Médecine sans Frontières* (MSF).

With the encouragement given by the Second Vatican Council to the churches to be *in* the world and *for* the world, to function in the heart of secularity through the witness and services of adult laity, the churches are called to play a role far beyond those humanitarian services. They are not only to participate in the joys and sorrows of the world, not only to be in solidarity and in service to the needy but also to become *courageous witnesses to truth, advocates of the poor, defenders of justice* and so on. In spite of (or because of) their minority status in the country, they are increasingly required to be the leaven for change and to be the light to dispel the darkness of sin such as corruption, injustice, oppression. Their leaders are called to be the voice of the voiceless and advocates of the oppressed.

Hence Asians tend to understand their proclamation of Jesus Christ and his good news of salvation in terms of enabling an encounter of the salt and light of Christ with the Asian realities in the form of various dialogues – with culture, with religions, with the poor and suffering. But mission in Asia through this type of salt-light-proclamation, and not by direct proclamation, has evoked dissatisfaction in Rome and continues to arouse suspicions about the missionary seriousness of the Asian churches. The centre complains that direct proclamation is neglected, if not given up, in favour of inter-religious dialogue. Hence the dispute between the leaders of the Asian churches and the Roman authorities will in the future be more and more about Asia's mission to proclaim Jesus Christ and the good news of salvation, and the compatibility of this mission with the mission to sincere dialogue.²⁰

Nevertheless, many challenging questions await an answer. Will the churches and their leaders pay the price for their prophetic stance? Will they give up their safety and security to go with the poor and stand up for them? Will they become living martyrs for the truth they are called to witness? The martyrs of the early churches were tested for their faith and that martyrdom became the seed of the later churches. The Asian martyrdom guaranteeing a future for the Asian churches will be one of witness to truth, justice and human dignity in the context of socio-political and economic upheavals.²¹

Structures and reflections of hope for the new millennium

The post-conciliar decades also saw the functioning of new initiatives leading to growing consensus in pastoral and theological reflections. These will continue to serve the Asian churches in their challenging and complex mission into the new millennium.

The formation of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) officially in 1971, and consequently their various institutes and offices²² for various apostolates, introduced new structures for Asian renewal and commitment. The efforts of diocesan and national commissions with regard to social, missionary, religious and lay efforts were animated and co-ordinated through these FABC structures. More initiatives, reflections and study-exchanges were done on a regional or national basis, so building up regional consensus to make demands from the centre. Hence the themes of the synods were also studied before and after the event through these structures and a minimum of consensus arrived at before participation in the events. All these activities, at different levels of the churches, were eloquent signs of the movements of the Spirit in Asia, and the cumulative effect of these was a gradual growth in awareness of Asian realities as well as in self-confidence and self-identity.²³

Rethinking western aid and patterns of formation

Most of the western aid presently given to churches in Asia is for pioneer missionary activity and for building and maintaining institutions for pastoral training. The former is now limited by the secular and anti-conversion feelings growing among the non-Christians of Asia, and continuing support of the latter is becoming increasingly difficult for Asian economies. Hence many church leaders are convinced that the institutions they build and maintain with foreign aid are not only too expensive but they are also foreign to the people of the land. Further, this dependence has facilitated the strict surveillance and control over these churches by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. As a result, freedom and space for new initiatives demanded by the Asian context are narrowed down.

In the light of these considerations, the aid flowing into Asia from the western churches needs rethinking so that its future use is to support an appropriate model of church for Asia. The churches in Asia should not be considered by western donors as branches of a western institution functioning in Asia, but as brothers and sisters who are poor and need to be helped to grow to maturity and independence.²⁴

In keeping with the spirit of the churches transplanted from Europe, a scholastic philosophy and theology – in the form of Latin textbooks written by professors of the Roman universities – were taught to most of the Asian clergy. The strong Counter-Reformation approach given in these books²⁵ kept the Asian students under Roman control! Consequently, by the time of the Council, academic dissatisfaction, as well as feelings of pastoral irrelevance, were growing among the indigenous bishops and leaders of the churches.

The Council awakened interest and gave hope of a better future, not only for the people as a whole, but also to those leaders suffocating in tightly controlled institutions and wanting to breathe more of the Spirit present and active in Asia. With the Council documents as the ‘new scriptures’, courageous men and women of the Spirit walked out of traditional structures, organized seminars and reflections, founded centres for regular action and reflection, and formulated the prompting of the Spirit as they experienced it in relation to various issues of the Church. Bishops, who were taught by the Council not to curtail the Spirit, had a hard time in discerning the Spirit and controlling spirit-filled persons! But such were the beginnings of biblical, liturgical, ecumenical, dialogue and socio-political centres as well as ashrams, study-circles, research institutes and so on in Asia. Though these efforts may suffer temporary setbacks due to scrutiny in Rome and financial pressures, if they are truly of the Spirit working in Asia, who can curtail them?

Asians taking to the new ways of the Spirit

Asians do have a right and a duty to question and challenge the validity, relevance and suitability of a theology formulated in Europe and imposed on Asia as the one and only theology. And what is coming out from Asia in humble forms, without the tussles of a scholastic theology, may be the beginnings of Asian theologies. It does not mean that they emanate from an evil spirit from the East contrary to the good one from the West. They need not evoke alarm signals at the centre nor be silenced for the sake of uniformity and centrality. What is needed is a sincere dialogue in a spirit of openness with the new thinking prompted by the Spirit in Asia. Condemnations and excommunications from the centre without the least dialogue cause unnecessary pain.²⁶ New missions vis à vis new realities evoke new reflections. As long as they are done in faith and with the guidance of the Spirit, they have a value of their own, call them what you will.

What has emerged on the Asian scene is the sincere enthusiastic effort in theological reflection starting from contextual realities and using Asian resources in preference to western resources. The praxis-oriented search is to find Asian vision, understanding, formulation, motivation and spirituality for further practice of faith in the Asian context. Guardians and architects of western theology should not be over-critical and cynical but welcoming to most of these efforts as corrective, complementary and creating the impulse for further search.²⁷

Pastoral reflections arising from a growing concern for Asian challenges and issues and from a praxis of faith in these Asian contexts have engaged both individuals and groups in more theological reflection and formulation. They take up issues vitally related to Christian life in Asia.²⁸ A deductive approach of reasoning downward from enunciated principles or teaching of the Church to arrive at liturgical, moral and pastoral conclusions is given up in preference for an inductive approach of moving from a faith-oriented praxis to a praxis-based reflection and formulation. Contrary to propping up reflections on enunciated principles or statements with scriptural quotations, Asians prefer to identify the challenging realities around them and then bring relevant scriptural reflections to bear on them. By further enriching that biblical reflection on the issue in the light of other revelations and manifestations of God, Asians are trying to reap the harvest of God's revelation in its fullness for that particular issue or challenge. Thus theological reflection by Asians takes a serious look at the revelations of the Spirit in the 'non-Christian resources' too.

A courageous faith to walk over the rough waters of Asia

The churches in Asia are moving into the new millennium, not with any confrontational or conquest mentality to win over converts and save only those baptized from the millions of followers of other faiths. They believe in the universal salvific will and plan of God as well as in the unique mission of Christ in Asia. The lessons of the first phase of evangelization, as learnt and reflected in Vatican II, have opened to them a new vision and understanding of Asian realities, given them new directions and priorities and taught them new ways of spreading the light of Jesus Christ into the multi-religious and poverty-stricken continent of Asia. With the help of the Spirit active in Asia, they are discovering their own identity as Asian churches among other religions, and are taking responsibility for identifying the chances and challenges

of Asia and being a new evangelizing presence in Asia. Their presence can be evangelizing only to the extent that the light of Christ is carried deep into the world of religions, cultures and poverty of Asia.

Though the Lord of Asia beckons and the Spirit in Asia urges the churches to move on, some questions continue to lurk in the minds of leaders and hinder them from responding to the call. May the Lord who calls, and the Spirit which urges on, grant to the Asian churches a courageous faith to walk over the rough waters of Asia.

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NOTES

1 The biblical image of the Church as the '*pusillus grex*' ('little flock'), salt of the earth, leaven in the dough, is often forgotten.

2 This biblical title – *lumen gentium* – speaks volumes for the new self-understanding of the Church in the modern world. Light understood as a centrifugal radiation of waves of energy helps us to understand the enlightening mission of the Church in a world of many darknesses.

3 The situation of churches in lands where they are a majority is not very encouraging when it comes to evangelization and prophetic mission in their context.

4 Mother Theresa of Calcutta won more accolades for the Indian Church than most of its church leaders.

5 Karl Rahner, 'Towards a fundamental interpretation of Vatican II' in *Theological Studies* (1979), pp 716ff.

6 The number of indigenous bishops from the mission lands increased rapidly during and after the Council. Unlike the time of Paul's missions, indigenous clergy were not considered up to the required standards to become bishops, even after centuries of Christianity in mission territories.

7 For example, inspired by Cardinal Augustino Bea and other German bishops, the Council attempted to rectify and renew relations between the Church and the Jews. But the Council Fathers went on to discuss the relation of the Church with other religions too. This gave birth to the document *Nostra aetatae* (NA) on the relation of the Church not only to the Jews but also to believers of other non-Christian religions.

8 Many missionary bishops of European origin felt the need to hand over the leadership to indigenous bishops for better implementation of the Council documents. On the other hand, with the growth of seminaries and secular clergy more indigenous bishops were appointed.

9 This may be due to two reasons: the fact that the new ways opened by the Second Vatican Council for the churches in Asia were more attractive and promising than the questions about celibacy and obedience; and the values of obedience and celibacy are already well-recognized values in Asian religions and cultures.

10 In this respect the older churches of Europe, which were supporting missionary activities in other parts of the world, were called to their mission in their context of atheism, secularism and other forms of socio-economic evils.

11 Just as the love of neighbour cannot be divorced from the love of God, community living of the gospel cannot be divorced from the following of Christ. Following of Christ implies community living and becoming church.

12 *NA*, nos 1–2.

13 The urgency of inter-religious dialogue prompted the Theological Advisory Committee of the FABC to study this theme as their first task in 1987.

14 Theses 1–5 of the TAC-FABC *Theses on interreligious dialogue in Being Church in Asia* vol 1.

15 *Ad gentes divinitus (AGD)*, no 22: ‘Thus in imitation of the plan of the Incarnation, the young churches rooted in Christ and built on the foundation of the apostles take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance (cf Ps 2:8). From the customs and traditions of their peoples, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these churches borrow all those things . . . If this goal is to be achieved, theological investigations must necessarily be stirred up in each major socio-cultural area . . . a fresh scrutiny will be brought to bear on the deeds and words which God has made known . . . and which have been unfolded by the teaching authority of the Church.’

16 Financial assistance was given by the older churches for the formation of the indigenous clergy and religious, for building suitable institutions and their further maintenance. But this had the long-term effect of the West controlling and steering a formation that was in many ways contrary to inculturation.

17 *AGD*, no 22: ‘Thanks to such a procedure, every appearance of syncretism and of false particularism can be excluded . . . and the churches be taken into Catholic unity . . . without prejudice to the primacy of Peter’s See.’

18 Theses 5, 6, 10 of the TAC-FABC *Theses on the local Church in Being Church in Asia* vol 1 (Claretian Publication, 1994).

19 Asia consists of three regions – Far Eastern (Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong), Eastern (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam etc.) and South-East (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka). Socio-political and economic situations vary greatly from massive poverty in Bangladesh, India and the Philippines to economic prosperity in Japan, Korea and Singapore.

20 Three important Roman documents treat this post-conciliar problem. After the 1974 Synod on Evangelization, Pope Paul VI gave the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* which has gained wide acceptance as the Magna Carta of evangelization in the modern world. With growing concern about the lack of interest in direct proclamation, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples urged Pope John Paul II to write the encyclical letter *Redemptoris homini (RH)* to warn about the christological errors involved in dialogue and insist more on direct proclamation. Coinciding with *RH* the Secretariat for Inter-religious Dialogue brought out its Statement on Dialogue and Proclamation, clarifying a certain type of dialogue that is not incompatible with proclamation. But all these have not solved the problem of the new missionary activity.

21 In his Declaration of the Jubilee Year 2000 Pope John Paul II states, ‘Our present century has had as consequence of National Socialism (Hitler’s), Communism and racial conflicts many martyrs . . . the churches all over the world will be anchored to the witness of martyrs’ (*Incarnationis mysterium*, 13).

22 BISA = Bishops’ Institute for Social Apostolate; similarly, BIMA = for Missionary Apostolate; BILA = for Lay Apostolate; OEIRA = Office for Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Affairs, etc.

23 But the procedure of selecting bishops who will show more obedience to the directives of Rome than to the cries of the people hinders the growth to this self-identity. Immaturity is still seen in some bishops who expect further directives about their particularities to be given by Rome and who spurn the urging of the Spirit in Asia.

24 Fr P. Divarkar SJ: ‘What is clear from history is that as long as the present Catholic Church, with its intricate structure and centralised control, claims Asia as an occupied territory, the

Saviour's mission will not progress on the very continent where Jesus was born and died "that they may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10)' (at the Synod for Asia in Rome).

25 Many of the professors in the Asian seminaries were trained in European seminaries or universities. Even now the Asian seminaries affiliated to Roman universities and financially supported by Rome are expected to follow strict guidelines in the teaching of theology and philosophy.

26 The recent excommunication of Fr Tissa Balasuriya OMI of Sri Lanka without sufficient dialogue with the local hierarchy, within the Oblate Congregation and with the Roman Office, caused much pain and protest among theologians not only in Asia but also worldwide. The belated dialogue facilitated by his religious congregation to rehabilitate him in the Church could have spared all this distress, had it taken place earlier.

27 Missiology, earlier understood as the learning of missionary methods and praxis, was taught as a marginal subject outside of dogmatic theology. But the new questions for dogmatic theology arise truly out of the missionary dialogues taking place mostly outside Europe.

28 During the first ten years of their existence, the Theological Advisory Committee of the FABC did not pick up dogmatic issues to split hairs with western theologians. They have reflected on the following: inter-religious dialogue, local churches and inculturation, Church and politics in Asia, towards a theology of harmony in Asia, the Spirit at work in Asia today. Nor did the Asian bishops at the Synod for Asia give in to attempts by the centre to be drawn into dogmatic debates about older questions. Instead they underlined dialogue, inculturation and poverty as their own challenges and priorities for mission.