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ECCLESIA IN ASIA: CHALLENGES FOR ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

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ECCLESIA IN ASIA: CHALLENGES FOR ASIAN CHRISTIANITY

With the official promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* by Pope John Paul II in New Delhi, India on November 6, 1999, the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, henceforth the Asian Synod for short, which had met in Rome from April 19 to May 14, 1998, in a certain sense came to an end.¹ Proclaimed as “a moment of special grace” (*EA*, 3), the synod had drawn, both during its preparatory stage and in its aftermaths, both favorable and unfavorable comments, especially with regard to its *lineamenta* and its *modus operandi*.² Similarly, the immediate reception of the Exhortation has been, as to be expected, mixed: it was received in some quarters with unfeigned enthusiasm; in others, with muted applause; still in others, with unalloyed disappointment.³

¹ For an English translation of *Ecclesia in Asia*, see *Origins* 29, 23 (November 18, 1999): 358-384. The document will be cited as *EA*, followed by the numbers of its paragraphs.

² It is well known that criticisms of the *lineamenta* were sharp, some of which came from episcopal conferences, in particular the Japanese bishops. For other evaluations, see, for instance, Chrys McVey, “The Asian Synod: What Is at Stake,” *East Asian Pastoral Review (EAPR)* 35,1 (1998): 143-146; Michael Amaladoss, “Expectations from the Synod for Asia,” *Vidyajyoti: Journal of Theology Reflection (VJTR)* 62 (1998): 144-151; G. Gisbert-Sauch, “The *Lineamenta* for the Asian Synod: Presentation and Comment,” *VJTR* 61 (1997): 8-17; Paul Puthanangady, “*Lineamenta* for the Asian Synod,” *Jeevadhara* XXVII, 160 (1997): 231-248; Kuncheria Pathil, “*Lineamenta* for the Asian Synod: Some Observations and Comments,” *Jeevadhara* XXVII, 160 (1997): 249-259; J. Constantine Manalel, “The Jesus Movement and the Asian Renaissance: Some Random Reflections for the Asian Synod,” *Jeevadhara* XXVII (1997): 133-153; Francisco Claver, “Personal Thoughts on the Asian Synod,” *EAPR* 35, 2 (1998): 241-248; S. Arokiasamy, “Synod for Asia: An Ecclesial Event of Communion and Shared Witness of Faith,” *VJTR* 62, 9 (1998): 666-675; Gali Bali, “Asian Synod and Concerns of the Local Church,” *Jeevadhara* 27 (1998): 297-330; John Mansford Prior, “A Tale of Two Synods: Observations on the Special Assembly for Asia,” *VJTR* 62 (1998): 654-665; and Luis Antonio Tagle, “The Synod for Asia as Event,” *EAPR* 35, 3 & 4 (1998): 366-378.

³ See, for instance, James H. Kroeger, “Asian Synod – Asian Pentecost. Introducing *Ecclesia in Asia*,” *SEDOS* 32, 1 (2000): 8-11.

The Asian Synod in Context

As is often the case, how one reacts to the Bishops' Synods and the ensuing Apostolic Exhortations largely depends on the expectations one entertains of them. As is well known, the International Bishops' Synod was established by Pope Paul VI in September 1965, shortly before the close of the Second Vatican Council, as an instrument of episcopal collegiality. The synod, which the pope reserves the right to convoke, intends to foster a close collaboration between the bishops and the pope. It is, however, advisory and not deliberative. Since its foundation there have been eleven international synods (both ordinary and extraordinary)⁴ and eight national or regional synods, including the five continental synods called by John Paul II's *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* to celebrate the new millennium.

Unfortunately, as Michael Fahey, S.J., a highly respected American ecclesiologist, has put it tersely, "despite high hopes for their success, results of synods have been negligible. Each new synod attracts less and less attention; the structure of their sessions has become unwieldy, they have become rituals with little practical impact on the life of the Church. In the last 30 years the institution has not been notable as a wellspring of new ideas or strategies."⁵ Furthermore, since the Apostolic Exhortations that follow these continental synods (so far three have been issued) are not the work of the synodal participants themselves (though they are supposed to incorporate the synods' "propositions") but are composed by the pope with the assistance of a post-synodal committee, they are often suspected of having filtered the results of the synods to an officially acceptable level. Moreover, being usually quite lengthy and turgid in style, they have aroused little interest, even among the clergy and theologians; and, of course, it is totally unrealistic to expect that they will be read by the laity, at least in their entirety.

⁴ Complete documentation of these eleven general synods has been published by Civiltà Cattolica, Rome, under the supervision of Giovanni Caprile.

⁵ Michael Fahey, "The Synod of America: Reflections of a Nonparticipant," *Theological Studies* 59 (1998): 489.

These remarks are not intended to cast a cynical eye on the Asian Synod and *Ecclesia in Asia*. On the contrary, they serve as a warning that unless concrete steps are taken to put the synod's 59 "propositions," which have been more or less incorporated into *Ecclesia in Asia*, into practice at the level of the local churches, the Asian synod will not be unlike one of the many firework displays celebrating the coming of the third millennium, spectacular festivals of sounds and colors but in the end, nothing more than blurred memories of the New Year's Eve extravaganzas. What steps can and should be taken by the Asian Churches to prevent their synod from joining the rank of its predecessors, illustrious indeed, but reduced to being a convenient quarry for doctoral dissertations, bereft of real and lasting influence on the life of the Churches of Asia?⁶

In the following pages, what is being offered is neither an evaluation of the Asian Synod nor a commentary of *Ecclesia in Asia*. Rather, as an expatriate Vietnamese who has for a quarter of a century been engaged in the study and teaching of theology in the United States of America, and whose academic interest has focused on Christianity of Asia,⁷ I will advance, very selectively, some reflections and proposals as to how certain teachings of the Asian Synod, as embodied in *Ecclesia in Asia*, can be implemented in Asia.⁸

⁶ Not that careful studies of these continental synods are of no value; on the contrary, there is a great need of objective and detailed assessments of the Apostolic Exhortations that resulted from these synods, especially by comparing them with their preceding *instrumentum laboris* and the "propositions" made by the synodal participants. There are indeed already some helpful studies of these synods. For the African Synod (1994), see *The African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, comp. and ed. Africa Faith & Justice Network under Maura Browne (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996); for the Synod of America (1997), see, besides the essay by Michael Fahey cited above, Paul D. Minnihan, "Encountering the American Synod," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 597-624. Peter C. Phan is preparing a volume on the Asian Synod to be published by Orbis Books in 2001, tentatively titled *The Asian Synod*. Hopefully, there will be similar studies for the Synod of Oceania (1998) and the Synod of Europe (1999).

⁷ For a brief explanation of the perspective from which I formulate these reflections, see Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999), 113-133.

⁸ As is well known, the Asian Synod comprises the episcopal conferences of all the churches

The Church not *in* but *of* Asia: The Asianness of Christianity

By any standard *Ecclesia in Asia* is John Paul II's typical theological product, with its rather forbidding length, its frequent insistence on complete orthodoxy, its abundant citation of the pope's own writings, and its emotional peroration with a prayer to Mary. Besides an introduction and a conclusion, the Exhortation is composed of seven parts dealing with the following themes: the Asian context, Jesus as Savior, the Holy Spirit as Lord and Giver of life, proclamation of Jesus in Asia (with a focus on inculturation), communion and dialogue for mission (with a focus on ecumenical and interreligious dialogue), the service of human promotion, and Christians as witnesses to the Gospel.

For an Asian reader, the inevitable question arises: Has the Exhortation said anything new and important for the Churches of Asia that either had not been said before by these Churches themselves or could not have been said except thanks to the work of the synod itself? To both parts of the question the answer is frankly no. Except the first section on the Asian context, most of the Exhortation could have been written prior to and apart from the synod, and what the Exhortation says on the other six themes has already been said, powerfully and in great detail, by the various documents of the FABC.⁹

This does not mean however that the synod and the Exhortation have not rendered a valuable service. After listing the 15 points of agreement out of the 59 propositions the synod

located in Asia, including East Asia (represented by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences), Western Asia or Middle East (represented by the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East), and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan). In this essay I limit my reflections to the Churches that are members of the FABC.

⁹ Sadly, of the Exhortation's 240 notes, none refers to the documents of the FABC (except John Paul II's addresses to the FABC). Is this omission intentional? Are not the teachings of the FABC authentic magisterium? There are two references to the work of the FABC (together with the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East) for ecclesial communion and collaboration but not to their *teachings* (nos. 3 and 26).

submitted, Luis Tagle acknowledges that there is nothing new in them in comparison with the teachings of the FABC, but he correctly insists that there was something genuinely new in the fact that these issues and concerns have been voiced in a synodal forum and recognized by the Church of Rome, and through it, have been brought to the consciousness of the universal church.¹⁰ What was new is not what the Asian bishops said but *that* they said it and *how* they said it at the synod. What they said had been said, at length and with power and depth, for almost 30 years, ever since the founding of the FABC in 1972, in its numerous plenary assemblies and in the documents of its several institutes.¹¹ But at the synod, they said it again, *to the whole Church*, and with surprising *boldness* and refreshing *candor*, with what the New Testament calls *parrhesia*.

The synod was the first official recognition that the Churches of Asia have come of age, or as a synodal participant put it, that they are not branch offices of the Roman Curia. To the universal Church the Asian bishops proclaimed, humbly but forcefully, that the Churches of Asia not only learn from but also have something to teach the Church of Rome as well as the Church universal, precisely from their experiences as Churches not simply *in* but *of* Asia. The fact that the Exhortation has incorporated several elements of the Asian Synod and made them part of the papal magisterium is an eloquent witness to the value of the experiences and wisdom of the Asian Churches.

What is new, in a word, is the public recognition of the necessity and validity of the *Asianness* of the Churches of Asia. Of course, Asianness is a notoriously slippery concept, and the *Lineamenta* and the Exhortation attempt to circumscribe it by listing several cultural and religious values that purportedly constitute the “Asian soul” or “being Asian”: “love of silence

¹⁰ See Luis Antonio Tagle, “The Synod for Asia as Event,” 370-371.

¹¹ For a collection of these statements, see *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991*, ed. Gaudencio Rosales and C. G. Arévalo (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and *For All Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications, 1997). They will be cited as *For All Peoples*, vol. 1 and 2 respectively.

and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical inquiry ..., respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety toward parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community” (EA, 6). The Exhortation also attends to the economic, social, and political contexts in which Christianity exists in Asia (EA, 7-8). Unfortunately, when it speaks of the fact that “despite her centuries-long presence and her many apostolic endeavors, the church in many places was still considered as foreign to Asia and indeed was often associated in people’s minds with the colonial powers” (EA, 9), it uses the past tense and fails to recognize that the foreignness of Christianity in Asia and the perception of its association with colonialism are *present* realities, and this not simply “in many places” but in *all* parts of Asia.

If the Asian Synod is to have a lasting transformative effect on the Churches of Asia, so that they may become truly *of* Asia and their association with colonialism may be removed, the most important thing, in my judgment, is that Asian Catholics take their Asianness seriously as the context of their being Christian. In practice, this means that the first and last concern for the leaders of the Asian Churches must be not how a particular policy is conformable with canonical requirements and directives coming from Rome or elsewhere but rather how it will respond to the challenges of the Asian social, political, economic and religious contexts and whether and how it will effectively help Christians live their faith in fidelity to the Gospel and the living Christian tradition, here and now, in Asia. Determining this Asianness and making it the perspective through which the Christian faith is consistently expressed and lived should be the top priority for Asian Christianity in the post-synodal era.¹²

Those of us who live close to the ecclesiastical centers of the churches of the so-called Third World sometimes experience the sad irony of these churches trying to be “more Roman than Rome.” Perhaps such a phenomenon is understandable when these churches lack the

¹² This determination of the Asian context has become the first step in the theological method adopted by the FABC.

necessary resources to be on their own, especially in countries with governments hostile to Christianity, and are still as it were in their minority. Now that the Asian churches have come of age, however, they should be able to move to the stage of self-government, self-support, self-propagation, and self-theologizing. As the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church already put it in 1977: "... The basic fact is that today in our Asian context we are in the process of re-discovering that the individual Christian can best survive, grow and develop as a Christian person in the midst of a self-nourishing, self-governing, self-ministering and self-propagating Christian community."¹³

To assume responsibilities in these areas, while remaining in full communion with the Church universal, demands courage, imagination, creativity, collaboration at all levels of the Church life, and above all trust in the Holy Spirit, and is much more challenging (and uncomfortable) than simply "applying" existing Church laws and traditions to the different situations of Asia. But it is only in this way that the Churches *in* Asia become truly *of* Asia. As Christian Churches, they must of course proclaim and live the Christian faith, the same *faith* handed down the ages, but not in the theological categories and with the church structures imported from without. Rather they should do so in the modalities conceived and born from within the Asian contexts. These Asian categories and structures need not of course be totally different from those of the Churches elsewhere; however, whether they are identical with or different from these cannot and should not be determined beforehand and a priori but must be shaped by real experimentations in the concrete situations of each Asian country. The Churches of Asia must claim and exercise the God-given right, based on the mystery of divine incarnation (and not a concession granted by a some higher ecclesiastical authority), to find out and determine for themselves how best to proclaim and live the Christian faith in Asia. Such a task is a matter of life and death for the Church, since if the Church in Asia is not Asian, it is no Church at all.

¹³ *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 77.

This task of becoming *Asian Churches* is all the more urgent in light of the astounding acceptance by *Ecclesia in Asia* of a point made by the Asian Synod that “Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia. It is paradoxical that most Asians tend to regard Jesus – born on Asian soil – as a Western rather than an Asian figure” (EA, 20). While ways must be found, as the Exhortation urges Asian theologians to do,¹⁴ “to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking” (EA 20)¹⁵, the most effective way to present Jesus as an Asian figure is to make the Churches authentically Asian.

A New Way of Being Church

Another way of making the point I have argued for so far is to say that for the Asian Synod to have a lasting impact, the Asian Churches must, with courage and creativity, find new ways of being Church, and hence construct an alternative ecclesiology. This is a theme repeatedly emphasized by the FABC, especially in its third and fifth plenary assemblies in Bangkok, 1982 and Bandung, Indonesia, 1990 respectively. This ecclesiology, in a sort of Copernican revolution, de-centers the Church in the sense that it makes the center of the Christian life not the Church but the reign of God. Christians must be not ecclesiocentric but regnocentric. Their mission is not to expand the Church and its structures (*plantatio ecclesiae*) in

¹⁴ The Exhortation lists a series of images of Jesus that may be understandable to Asians: the teacher of wisdom, the healer, the liberator, the spiritual guide, the enlightened one, the compassionate friend of the poor, the good Samaritan, the good Shepherd, the obedient one (EA, 20). For a discussion of Asian Christologies, see *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993); Peter C. Phan, “Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 399-430; Peter C. Phan, “The Christ of Asia: An Essay on Jesus as the Eldest Son and Ancestor,” *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996): 25-55; Michel Fédou, *Regards asiatiques sur le Christ* (Paris: Desclée, 1998); and Jacques Dupuis, “Jesus with an Asian Face,” *SEDOS* 31, 8/9 (1999): 211-216.

¹⁵ It is difficult to see how to reconcile this text with another text of the Exhortation, which quotes Paul John Paul II’s encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, 72, insisting on the necessity appropriating and sharing the linguistic, philosophical and cultural categories used by ecumenical councils “in the encounter with the various cultures” (EA, 20). Are these categories (not doctrines) essential parts of divine revelation and how are they to be made into Asian “cultural patterns and ways of thinking”? For an evaluation of *Fides et Ratio*, see Peter C. Phan, “*Fides et Ratio* and Asian Philosophies: Sharing the Banquet of Truth,” *Science et Esprit* 51 (1999): 333-349.

order to enlarge the sphere of influence for the Church but to be a transparent sign and effective instrument of the saving presence of the reign of God, the reign of justice, peace, and love, of which the Church is a seed. As the Exhortation puts it well: “Empowered by the Spirit to accomplish Christ’s salvation on earth, the church is the seed of the kingdom of God, and she looks eagerly for its final coming. Her identity and mission are inseparable from the kingdom of God The Spirit reminds the church that she is not an end unto herself: In all that she is and all that she does, she exists to serve Christ and the salvation of the world” (EA, 17).¹⁶ The new way of being Church in Asia and the ecclesiology undergirding it are characterized by the following features.¹⁷

1. First, the church, both at the local and universal levels, is seen primarily as “a *communion of communities*, where laity, Religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers”¹⁸ At the heart of the mystery of the Church is the bond of communion

¹⁶ For a theology of the reign of God for Asia, see Peter C. Phan, “Kingdom of God: A Theological Symbol for Asians?” *Gregorianum* 79/2 (1998): 295-322.

¹⁷ In elaborating this ecclesiology I make use of some of the FABC’s statements, but the reflections on their consequences for the Church life in Asia are mine and should not be attributed to the FABC.

¹⁸ *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 287. The Exhortation unduly narrows this vision of the Church as a communion of churches by saying that in the view of the synod fathers, it applies primarily to the diocese: “The synod fathers chose to describe the diocese as a communion of communities gathered around the shepherd, where clergy, consecrated persons and the laity are engaged in a ‘dialogue of life and heart’ sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit” (EA, 25). In fact, the FABC’s vision applies to the Church both at the local and universal levels: “It [the Church] is a community not closed in on itself and its particular concerns, but *linked* with many bonds to *other communities of faith* (concretely, the parishes and dioceses around them) and to the one and universal communion, *catholica unitas*, of the holy Church of the Lord”(For All Peoples, vol. 1, 56). In other words, not only the diocese but also the Church universal are a communion of communities. The universal Church is not a church above the other dioceses and of which the local churches are constitutive “parts” with the pope as its universal bishop. Rather, it is a communion in faith, hope and love of all the local churches (among which there is the Church of Rome of which the pope is the bishop), a communion in which the pope functions as the instrument of unity in collegiality and corresponsibility with other bishops. Furthermore, EA emphasizes the gathering of the local church around the bishop, making him the center of unity, whereas the FABC emphasizes the basic equality of all the members of the local church (“as brothers and sisters”).

uniting God with humanity and humans with one another, of which the Eucharist is the sign and instrument par excellence.¹⁹

Moreover, in this ecclesiology there is an explicit and effective recognition of the fundamental equality among all the members of the local church as disciples of Jesus and among all the local churches in so far as they are communities of Jesus' disciples and whose communion constitutes the universal Church. The communion (*koinonia*) which constitutes the Church, both at the local and universal levels, and from which flows the fundamental equality of all Christians, is rooted at its deepest level in the life of the Trinity in whom there is a perfect communion of equals.²⁰ Unless this fundamental equality of all Christians is acknowledged and put into practice through concrete policies and actions, the Church will not become a communion of communities in Asia. Living out this fundamental equality is particularly difficult in Asia, not only because the insistence on the hierarchical structure of the Church tends to obscure and minimize it but also because it goes against the class consciousness of many Asian societies.

Furthermore, this vision of Church as communion of communities and its corollary of fundamental equality are the sine qua non condition for the fulfillment of the Church's mission. Without being a communion, the Church cannot fulfill its mission, since the Church is, as intimated above, nothing more than the bond of communion between God and humanity and among humans themselves. As the Exhortation puts it tersely, "communion and mission go hand in hand" (EA, 24).

2. This pastoral "discipleship of equals" leads to the second characteristic of the new way of being Church in Asia, that is, the participatory and collaborative nature of all the ministries in

¹⁹ For an extended discussion of communion ecclesiology, see J.-M. R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, trans. R. C. De Peaux (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

²⁰ For a theology of the Trinity as a communion and *perichoresis* of persons, see Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986).

the Church : “It is a *participatory* Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful – lay, Religious, and cleric alike – are recognized and activated, so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized.”²¹ This participatory nature of the Church must be lived out not only in the local church but also among all the local churches, including the Church of Rome, of course, with due recognition of the papal primacy. In this context it is encouraging to read in the Exhortation the following affirmation: “It is in fact within the perspective of ecclesial communion that the universal authority of the successor of Peter shines forth more clearly, not primarily as juridical power over the local churches, but above all as a pastoral primacy at the service of the unity of faith and life of the whole people of God” (EA, 25). A “pastoral primacy” must do everything possible to foster co-responsibility and participation of all the local churches in the triple ministry of teaching, sanctification, and service in the Church and must be held accountable to this task so that these words do not remain at the level of pious rhetoric but are productive of concrete structures and actions.

If the Asian Synod proved that the Asian Churches do have something vital to teach the Church of Rome and the Church universal, then the “magisterium” in the Church can no longer be conceived as a one-way street from Rome to the other local churches. Instead, there must be *mutual* learning and teaching, *mutual* encouragement and correction between the Church of Rome and the other churches, indeed among all the local churches. Only in this way can correction be made of the widespread perception, especially in countries with the so-called national or patriotic churches, that the Christian Church in Asia is a foreign (indeed,

²¹ *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 287. See also *ibid.*, 56: “It [the Church] is a community of authentic *participation and co-responsibility*, where genuine sharing of gifts and responsibilities obtains, where the talents and charisms of each one are accepted and exercised in diverse ministries, and where all are schooled to the attitudes and practices of mutual listening and dialogue, common discernment of the Spirit, common witness and collaborative action.” The Exhortation also recognizes this participatory character of the Church but emphasizes the fact that each person must live his or her “proper vocation” and perform his or her “proper role” (EA, 25). There is here a concern to maintain a clear distinction of roles in ministry, whereas the FABC is concerned that all people with their varied gifts have the opportunity to participate in the ministry of the Church.

international) organization, comparable to a multinational corporation, that must take orders from a foreign power.

In this context it may be useful to point out that a certain language to describe the relationship between the local bishop and the Bishop of Rome, traditional though it is in some ecclesiastical circles, should be avoided to obviate misunderstanding. I refer to words such as “loyalty” and “obedience” to characterize the attitude of bishops to the pope which, to Asian ears, inevitably suggest oaths of submission of vassals to their lords in a feudal system. Besides the fact that in the Church “loyalty” is owed to no one but Christ and that the bishop is not beholden to the pope for his episcopal office nor is he the pope’s vicar, it is theologically much more appropriate to describe and live the relationship between the local church and the pope in terms of collegiality and solidarity. Only in this way can the Church’s teaching office and the pope’s ministry of promoting unity be effectively exercised, learning from the varied and rich experiences of being Church from all corners of the globe and welcoming respectful but frank warning and correction when errors of intellectual narrowness, moral arrogance, and spiritual blindness have been committed.

3. The third characteristic of a new way of being Church in Asia is the *dialogical* spirit: “Built in the hearts of people, it is a Church that faithfully and lovingly witnesses to the Risen Lord and reaches out to people of other faiths and persuasions in a dialogue of life towards the integral liberation of all.”²² Ever since its first plenary assembly in Taipei, Taiwan, 1974, the FABC has repeatedly insisted that the primary task of the Asian Churches is the proclamation of the Gospel. But it has also maintained no less frequently that the way to fulfill this task in Asia is by way of dialogue, indeed a triple dialogue, with Asian cultures, Asian religions, and the Asians themselves, especially the poor.²³ The Exhortation reiterates the necessity of this triple dialogue.

²² *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 287-288.

²³ For the intrinsic connection between the proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue in its triple form, see *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 13-16.

In the dialogue with the Asian cultures (inculturation), the Exhortation highlights the areas of theology, liturgy, and the Bible (EA, 22). In the dialogue with other religious traditions, the document emphasizes ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. It quotes approvingly the proposition 41 of the synod: “Interreligious relations are best developed in a context of openness to other believers, a willingness to listen and the desire to respect and understand others in their differences. For all this, love of others is indispensable. This should result in collaboration, harmony and mutual enrichment” (EA, 31). In the dialogue with the poor, the Exhortation affirms the necessity of the preferential love of the poor (in particular, the migrants, indigenous and tribal people, women and children), defense of human life, health care, education, peacemaking, cancellation of foreign debts, and protection of the environment (EA, 32-41). There is no doubt that if the Christian Church is to become truly *of Asia*, Asian Christians must be engaged, relentlessly and wholeheartedly, in this triple “dialogue of life and heart” and in this way fulfill their inalienable right and duty of proclaiming Jesus to their fellow Asians.²⁴

In this context of the proclamation of the Gospel and the triple dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, it may be appropriate to raise the vexed issue of how to proclaim Christ as the Savior and as the only Savior in Asia. The Exhortation affirms that “there can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord” (EA, 19) and that this proclamation “is prompted not by sectarian impulse nor the spirit of proselytism nor any sense of superiority” but “in obedience to Christ’s command” (EA, 20). Therefore, the proclamation must be done with a twofold respect: “respect for man (sic) in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life and respect for the action of the Spirit in man” (EA, 20).

As to how to proclaim that Jesus is the *only* Savior, the document frankly recognizes that this proclamation is “fraught with philosophical, cultural and theological difficulties, especially in light of the beliefs of Asia’s great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and

²⁴ For a discussion of mission in the form of this triple dialogue, see Peter C. Phan, “Christian Mission in Contemporary Theology,” *Indian Theological Studies* XXXI, 4 (1994): 297-347.

specific world views” (EA, 20). This difficulty is compounded by the fact that, as has been mentioned above, Christ is perceived as foreign to Asia, as a Western rather than an Asian figure. Here the Exhortation deserves praise for recommending (1) a *gradual* pedagogy in the proclamation that Christ is the only Savior,²⁵ (2) the use of narratives to complement ontological categories in this proclamation,²⁶ and (3) the legitimate variety of approaches to the proclamation of Jesus.²⁷

This is not the place to enter the theological debate regarding exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism,²⁸ but in my judgment, the issue of Jesus as the only Savior, interesting though it may be in *theology*, is a red herring in preaching and catechesis. The reason is that the immediate goal of the proclamation of the Gospel is to enable a person to accept Jesus as his or her “personal Savior,” to use a favorite phrase of Pentecostal Christians, and not as the “only Savior.” It is this personal and total commitment of the catechumen to Jesus that is being

²⁵ EA, 20: “The presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Savior needs to follow a pedagogy that will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery.”

²⁶ EA, 20: “In general, narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story as the Gospels do. The ontological notions involved, which must always be presupposed and expressed in presenting Jesus, can be complemented by more relational, historical and even cosmic perspectives.” The question can be raised as to how “the ontological notions” can be “expressed in presenting Jesus” when Jesus is presented to billions of Asians whose world is as removed from the Hellenistic philosophical categories in which classical Christology is couched as heaven from earth. Furthermore, why should the ontological notions be those of Greek metaphysics and not those of Asian philosophies?

²⁷ While accepting pluralism in Christology, EA insists that “in all evangelizing work, however, it is the complete truth of Jesus Christ that must be proclaimed. Emphasizing certain aspects of the inexhaustible mystery of Jesus is both legitimate and necessary in gradually introducing Christ to a person, but this cannot be allowed to compromise the integrity of the faith” (EA, 23). The vexing question is of course how this “complete truth of Jesus Christ” is to be presented to Asians.

²⁸ For a magisterial study of religious pluralism and the role of Christ, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997). See also *Christianity and the Wider Ecumenism*, ed. Peter C. Phan (New York: Paragon House, 1990).

promoted, and not the rejection of *possible* ways in which God can reach *other* people, a possibility that can no longer be denied after Vatican II . The vital question before all else is not whether and how *other* people can be saved but how *I* can fully enter a personal relationship with God. Once a person has found that Jesus is the way for him or her to reach God, then out of this personal experience he or she can bear witness to this fact to others. The strength and fervor of this witness are born not out of the theological conviction that Jesus is the *only* Savior but out of the deep experience that he is the *personal* Savior for me. Were I asked in my preaching questions about other religions and savior figures, I will have to recognize, joyfully and gratefully, their various good elements and the saving presence of God's Spirit in them, but I will testify to Jesus as *my* way to God and invite others to try out this way for themselves. If they accept Jesus as their personal way to God, then I will have shown that Jesus is the universal and only Savior, that is, Savior for me as well as for others.²⁹

4. The fourth and last feature of the new way of being Church in Asia is *prophecy*: The Church is "a leaven of transformation in this world and serves as a *prophetic sign* daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come."³⁰ As far as Asia is concerned, in being "a leaven of transformation in this world," Christianity must give up its ambition, so enthusiastically endorsed in many missionary quarters at the beginning of the twentieth century, to convert the majority of Asians to Christ.³¹ The report of the demise of Asian religions was premature and vastly exaggerated. In Asia, where Christians still form but a

²⁹ For a discussion of the uniqueness and universality of Jesus, see Peter C. Phan, "The Claim of Uniqueness and Universality in Interreligious Dialogue," *Indian Theological Studies* XXXI, 1 (1994): 44-66.

³⁰ *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 288.

³¹ Recall the optimism of the World Mission Conference at Edinburgh in 1910, as expressed by its leader, John R. Mott, and the motto of the Student Volunteer Fellowship: "The evangelization of the world in our own generation." For considerations of the factors making such a goal no longer possible, see Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task: A Theology of Christian Mission* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 16-30.

minuscule part of the population after four hundred years of mission, and where non-Christian religions have recently staged a vigorous revival, the prospect of a massive conversion of Asians to the Christian faith is utterly unlikely. Christians in Asia must come to terms with the fact that they are destined to remain for the foreseeable future a “small remnant” who must journey with adherents of other religions toward the eschatological kingdom of God.

The objective of the Church’s mission of “making disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) in Asia cannot therefore be adding as many members to the Church as possible, even though baptism “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19) remains the desirable outcome of the Church’s mission. Rather, the primary task of the Church is to become a credible “prophetic sign” of the coming reign of God. This new focus of the Church’s mission must be the light guiding the ordering of its priorities and the choice of its policies which must not aim at serving the internal interests of the Church but the proclamation of the Gospel through the triple dialogue mentioned above.

One helpful way to describe this mission of the Church is, as Thomas Thangaraj has proposed, to see it as part and fulfillment of the mission of humanity itself which is composed of three basic tasks: responsibility, solidarity, and mutuality. By responsibility Thangaraj means that humans are beings that go forth from themselves and come back to themselves in their reflexive consciousness, interpret themselves, and with a sense of accountability take responsibility for themselves and their actions. This task they must perform in solidarity with one another and mutuality for one another.³² What the Christian mission adds to the mission of humanity from its faith perspective is to inform these three tasks with a new modality: *crucified* responsibility, *liberative* solidarity, and *eschatological* mutuality.³³

As a consequence of this view of mission, the Churches of Asia must form not only Basic

³² See Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task*, 49-58. For Thangaraj, the *missio humanitatis* is “an act of taking responsibility, in the mode of solidarity, shot through with a spirit of mutuality” (58).

³³ See Thomas Thangaraj, *The Common Task*, 64-76.

Christian Communities, which the Exhortation highly recommends,³⁴ but also Basic Human Communities. Given the urgent need of Asian Christians to collaborate with their fellow Asians in the task of human promotion, the second kind of community is no less necessary than the first for the Church to become a credible prophetic sign of the reign of God.³⁵ This kind of community broadens the concerns of Christians beyond the narrow walls of their Churches and puts them in constant dialogue of life and heart with followers of other religions and even non-believers.

“If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future”³⁶

These prophetic words of the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church held in Hong Kong on March 5, 1977 were true then and will be even truer during the post-synodal era. Since then, the FABC has been trying to develop a pastoral approach designed to implement this Asian way of being Church called “Asian Integral Pastoral Approach towards a New Way of Being Church in Asia (ASIPA).”³⁷ The goal is to develop “genuine Christian communities in Asia – Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others.”³⁸

The significance of the Asian Synod and *Ecclesia in Asia* lies, I have argued, not so much

³⁴ *EA* accepts the synod fathers’ emphasis on “the value of basic ecclesial communities as an effective way of promoting communion and participation in parishes and dioceses and as a genuine force for evangelization ... a solid starting point for building a new society, the expression of a civilization of love” (*EA*, 25).

³⁵ On Basic Human Communities, see Aloysius Pieris, *Fire & Water: Basic Issues in Asian Buddhism and Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 161: “What happens in the BHCs is a veritable *symbiosis* of religions. Each religion, challenged by the other religion’s unique approach to the liberationist aspiration of the poor ... discovers and renames itself in its specificity in response to the other approaches.”

³⁶ *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 70.

³⁷ See *For All Peoples*, vol. 2, 107-111 and 137-139.

³⁸ *For All Peoples*, vol. 1, 70.

in what they say as in the recognition that the Churches of Asia have come of age and must continue to pursue the task of becoming *Asian*, relentlessly, courageously, creatively. Only in this way can the Christian Church fulfill its missionary vocation which is the task of the entire Church.³⁹ It is only by living out a new way of being Church that Asian Christians will make true what the Exhortation states as a fact: “Contemplating Jesus in his human nature, the peoples of Asia find their deepest questions answered, their hopes fulfilled, their dignity uplifted and their despair conquered” (EC, 14).

³⁹ It is interesting to note that in describing the missionary task of the Church, *EA* begins with the pastors – bishops and priests – then proceeds with religious and the laity, in the descending order of importance, whereas the *FABC* has consistently focused on the primary role of the laity, especially women. Clearly, this variance is not merely rhetorical but indicates an important difference in ecclesiology.