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# A church in the service of the reign of God

## Prophetic dimensions of an Asian ecclesiology

by Peter C. Phan

Recent reports of clerical pedophilia in Europe, a decade after those in the United States, once again exposed the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, this time even Pope Benedict XIV himself, to the glare of the media limelight. Church leaders who had covered up these sexual crimes were urged to resign, and a few mitred heads have rolled. No doubt the bishops who sheltered the pedophile priests by shuffling them to different pastoral assignments or paying hush money must be held accountable for their failures of pastoral oversight and possibly criminal acts, not only to their Roman superiors – some of whom were allegedly not free from blame – but also to their local churches and societies.

In response to costly lawsuits and under heavy public pressure, the Vatican subsequently introduced norms and policies to protect children from clerical sexual predators and to prevent future cover-ups of sexual crimes. Whether these canonical measures are adequate or too little and too late, the clerical sex abuse, in addition to the enormous damage it has brought to the credibility of church authorities, has had at least two deleterious effects on church life and theology. First, the focus on the hierarchy and the subsequent call for administrative transparency and church reforms (including the abolition of mandatory clerical celibacy), albeit necessary, has tended to identify the church with its hierarchy and of blurring the nature of the church as the People of God. As is well known, the rediscovery of the church as a community of fundamentally equal members – the People of God – is one of the greatest achievements of the Second Vatican Council. With the authority to regulate matters regarding clerical sex abuse being reserved exclusively to the hierarchy, together with the repeated attempts by the Roman Curia in the post-Vatican II era to bring about the »reform of the reforms« – an euphemism for a restorationist agenda – this ecclesiological insight runs the risk of being erased and its practical implications neutralized.

Secondly, the current fixation in the church on sex (not only pedophilia but also homosexuality and woman ordination) has diverted its collective attention and energy from other pressing issues such as economic justice, peace, the integrity of creation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue. In addition, clerical pedophilia has cost the church huge sums of money, reportedly amounting to several billions of dollars in the United States alone. Of

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1 The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) was founded in 1970, on the occasion of Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila, Philippines. Its statutes, approved by the Holy See *ad experimentum* in 1972, were amended several times and were also approved again each time by the Holy See. For the documents of the FABC and its various institutes, see

Gaudencio ROSALES/C. G. ARÉVALO (Ed.), *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1970 to 1991*, vol. 1, New York/Quezon City 1992; Franz-Josef EILERS (Ed.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1992 to 1996*, vol. 2, Quezon City, 1997; IDEM (Ed.), *For All The Peoples*

*of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 1997 to 2002*, vol. 3, Quezon City 2002; and IDEM (Ed.), *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Documents from 2002-2006*, vol. 4, Quezon City 2007.



course, the victims of the sex abuse must be justly compensated. Nevertheless, the enormous financial resources that have been spent to settle lawsuits against clerical pedophilia could have been used for the other causes mentioned above that lie close to the mission of the church.

The theme of this essay is not clerical sexual abuse. Rather, in celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the TAC/OTC of the FABC, it raises the question of whether the teaching of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences and Asian theologians on the mission of the church, and within this context, the church's prophetic function, can help obviate the above-mentioned twin dangers, posed by the scandal of clerical pedophilia, of reducing the church to the hierarchy and neglecting certain key dimensions of Christian mission. More specifically, it examines whether the Asian Catholic theology of the church as a *prophetic* community can serve as a timely corrective to the kind of ecclesiology underlying the way some bishops in the West have handled clerical pedophilia, whose concerns lie more in protecting the institutional interests of the church, such as its reputation and finances, than in defending the victims of clerical sexual abuse and hence in serving the reign of God.

Ironically, Google ›Asian ecclesiology‹ and you will not find so many hits as when you type in, let's say, ›papacy‹ or ›episcopacy.‹ Indeed, were one to survey the rather extensive official documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and the writings of Asian theologians, one would be struck by the dearth of explicit treatments of what is commonly referred to as ecclesiology or the theology of the church.<sup>1</sup> If anything, there is a conscious shying away from »churchy« themes such as papal primacy and infallibility, apostolic succession, magisterium, episcopal power, the hierarchical structure, canon law, the Roman Curia, and the like. Not that these realities are of no importance for the Asian churches. Of course, they are, but they do not occupy the central position on the theological radar of the Asian churches, as they do in Western theological circles. Rather, instead of developing an ecclesiocentric or church-centered ecclesiology, Asian bishops and theologians have fostered what may be called a regnocentric or kingdom-of-God-centered way of being church. Their main concern is not so much to elaborate a theoretical ecclesiology as to implement ways of being church appropriate to the socio-political, cultural, and religious contexts of Asia. Their ecclesiology, when it comes to be formulated, is born out of an attempt to practice an authentic way of being church.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to infer from this paucity of references to ecclesiastical matters that the church is not a major concern for Asian Christians. On the contrary, a »new way of being church,« to use a popular slogan among Asian theologians, arguably lies at the heart of the pastoral ministry of the Asian churches. To explain this new way of being church the essay begins with a presentation of the main elements of Asian ecclesiology. In the second part attention will be given to the way Asian ecclesiology understands the prophetic function of the church's mission. The essay concludes by noting how this ecclesiology can help Christianity shape the future of both the worldwide church and Asia itself as the continent assumes an increasingly significant role in the global village.

## 1 Elements of an Asian Ecclesiology

Asia is characterized by mind-boggling diversities – geographic, linguistic, ethnic, economic, political, cultural, and religious – and it is within this pluralistic context that the Asian theology of the church should be broached. One of the bitter ironies of Asian Christianity is that though born in (Southwest) Asia, it returned to its birthplace as a foreign religion, and worse, as the religion of its colonizers, and is still being widely regarded as such by many Asians. But such



perception of Christianity as a Western religion imported to Asia by Portuguese and Spanish colonialists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and later by other Western imperialist powers such as Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and lastly the United States, belies the ancient roots of Asian Christianity. The conventional image of Christianity is that of a Western religion, that is, one that, though born in Palestine, soon moved westward, with Rome as its final destination, and from Rome as its epicenter, sent missionaries worldwide. This inaccurate picture ignores the fact that in the first four centuries of Christianity's existence, the most successful fields of mission were not Europe but Asia and Africa, with Syria as the center of gravity.<sup>2</sup>

Given its ancient history and its vast territory, Asian Christianity is also characterized by extreme multiplicity and diversity, with at times mutually conflictive ecclesial histories, canonical structures, denominational affiliations, liturgical traditions, and theological orientations. Consequently, it is impossible to formulate a common theology of the church that might be called an Asian ecclesiology. In what follows I will only attempt to outline some key elements of a vision of church among Asian church leaders and theologians. Such ecclesiology, as will be made clear, is geared not so much toward developing an idiosyncratic understanding of the institutional elements of the church as toward facilitating a new way of being a Christian *in* and *of* Asia.

## 2 A Regnocentric Church

I have alluded above to one of the curious features in Asian magisterial documents and theological writings on the church, namely, the conspicuous absence of »churchy« issues. This lack of interest in the institutional aspects of the church is not the result of ignorance nor is it dictated by merely pragmatic considerations. Rather it is derived, I submit, from what might be called »ecclesiological kenosis,« a moving away from the church *ad intra* to the church *ad extra*, from self-preservation and self-expansion to mission and service to the world. This shift is predicated upon the theological conviction that at the heart of the Christian faith and practice there lie not the church and all its institutional and juridical elements but the reign of the Triune God. It is only by bearing witness to and serving the reign of God among all Asian peoples, and not by increasing its membership and expanding socio-political influence, that the church will truly become Asian. To be church truly, the Asian church, paradoxically, must »empty« itself and cease to exist for its own sake, in the service of a higher reality, namely, the kingdom of God. What the church is, is determined by what it must do; its essence is defined by its function. Ecclesiology, in the Asian perspective, must be essentially pastoral theology. It should not given pride of place in theological discourse; it must not occupy a high position in »the hierarchy of truths,« to use an expression of Vatican II.

Recent Asian theology has vigorously urged this »ecclesiological kenosis.« In his book, *Pentecost in Asia*, Thomas C. Fox has described well the evolution of the Asian Catholic Churches from their church-centered way of being church to a regnocentric or kingdom-

2 For a comprehensive history of Asian Christianity, see Samuel Hugh MOFFETT, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1998 and *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume II: 1500-1900, Maryknoll, N.Y. 2005.

See also Scott W. SUNQUIST, (Ed.), *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, Grand Rapids, Michigan 2001.

3 Thomas FOX, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 2002.

4 *Ecclesia in Asia (EA)*, no. 17. For the English text of EA, see Peter C. PHAN (Ed.), *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 2002, 286-340.

5 *Lumen Gentium*, no. 5.



centered ecclesiology. This conversion took place over three decades, from the foundation of the FABC in 1970 to the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Asia (the »Asian Synod«) which met in Rome from April 19 through May 14, 1998.<sup>3</sup>

In this kingdom-centered ecclesiology no longer is the church considered the pinnacle or the center of the Christian life. Rather it is moved from the center to the periphery, from the top to the bottom. Like the sun around which the earth and the other planets move, the reign of God is the center around which everything in the church revolves and to which everything is subordinated. In the place of the church the reign of God is now installed as the ultimate goal of all the activities within and without the church. Now both what the church is and what it does, are defined by the reign of God and not the other way round. The only reason for the church to exist is to serve the reign of God, that is, to help bring about what has been commonly referred to as the »kingdom values.« It is these values that the church must promote and not its self-aggrandizement or reputation or institutional survival. Every law and policy of the church must pass the litmus test of whether they promote the reign of God.

The point of regnocentric ecclesiology is not to devalue the role of the church but to determine its nature and purpose correctly. Needless to say, there is an intrinsic connection between the reign of God and the church, as is well expressed by Pope John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* promulgated after the Asian Synod: »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 which Jesus announced and inaugurated in all that he said and did, above all in his death and resurrection. 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.«<sup>4</sup>

There is therefore no intrinsic incompatibility between serving the kingdom of God and expanding church membership and influence – often euphemistically referred to as »church growth« in missiological literature. Indeed, the two activities of Christian mission must go hand in hand. The issue is rather one of theoretical and practical priority. That is, when push comes to shove, what is to be favored, the reign of God or the church? When, for instance, the choice is between standing in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, and as a consequence, forfeiting the church's privileges and favors among the powerful and the wealthy, what option must the church make? Or, in the case of clerical pedophilia, who is to be protected, the abused children or the clerical predators and the »good name« of the church/clergy?

The same problem can be framed in terms of the relationship between the reign of God and the church. Clearly, the church is not identical with the kingdom of God, nor is the kingdom of God confined to the church. The church is only, as Vatican II puts it, »the seed and the beginning of that kingdom.«<sup>5</sup> Its constitution is defined by the kingdom of God, which acts as its goal and future, and not the other way round. The church is not an end unto itself; its *raison d'être* is to serve the kingdom of God. It is a community of persons existing not for themselves but for a transcendent purpose; it is, to put it bluntly, a means to an end.

When this relationship is reversed, with the church turned into the goal of one's ministry, or when mission is made to serve the church, the possibility of moral corruption, especially by means of power, is enormous. Worse, one is tempted to protect one's personal advantages and interests under the pretext of defending the church! Asian theologians are particularly sensitive to this temptation, given past connections between Catholic missions and colonialism in their countries.



### 3 Church as Missionary: Liberation, Inculturation, and Interfaith Dialogue

A regnocentric church is by nature a missionary church, committed to promoting the »kingdom values« preached by Jesus. But what are these? Or, more concisely, what does the kingdom of God stand for? Despite Jesus' frequent use of the symbol of the reign of God, he did not give it a clear definition. What is meant by the reign of God and the values that it proclaims are implicit in Jesus' parables, miracles, and above all in his ministry, death and resurrection. After all, the kingdom of God has come in and with Jesus who himself is the *auto-basileia tou theou*. In a nutshell, the reign of God is nothing less than God's saving presence in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, a presence that brings about gratuitous forgiveness and reconciliation and restores universal justice and peace between God and humanity, among humans themselves, and between humanity and the cosmos.

In Asia's economic, cultural, and religious contexts, the Asian bishops and theologians propose that the church's mission of realizing the kingdom values take the form of a triple dialogue. The reason for this dialogical modality is the presence in Asia of the many religions and cultures. Living in such cultural and religious milieus, Christians, who are but a tiny minority, must enter into dialogue with other believers, in an attitude of respect and friendship, sometimes for physical survival. But, more than pragmatic considerations, there is the theological doctrine today, at least in the Roman Catholic Church, that, as John Paul II says, »the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions. Indeed, the Spirit is at the origin of the noble ideals and undertakings which benefit humanity on its journey through history.«<sup>6</sup>

Given this religious pluralism, it is only natural that dialogue is the preferred mode of proclamation. As Michael Amaladoss puts it: »As soon as one no longer sees the relationship of Christianity to other religions as presence/absence or superior/inferior or full/partial, dialogue becomes the context in which proclamation has to take place. For even when proclaiming the Good News with assurance, one should do it with great respect for the freedom of God who is acting, the freedom of the other who is responding and the Church's own limitations as a witness. It is quite proper then that the Asian Bishops characterized evangelization itself as a dialogue with various Asian realities – cultures, religions and the poor.«<sup>7</sup>

It is important to note also that dialogue as a mode of being church in Asia does not refer primarily to the intellectual exchange among experts of various religions, as is often done in the West. Rather, it involves a fourfold presence: »a. The *dialogue of life*, where

6 JOHN PAUL II., *Redemptoris Missio* [RM], no. 28. For the English translation of RM, see William BURROWS (Ed.), *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1993, 3-55.

7 Michael AMALADOSS, *Making All Things New. Dialogue, Pluralism, and Evangelization in Asia*, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1990, 59.

8 THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE/THE CONGREGATION FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 42 (19 May, 1991). See also *For All Peoples* (1997) (see note 1), 21-26.

9 See EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples of Asia* (1992) (see note 1), 14-16; 22-23; 34-35; 107; 135; 141-43; 281-82; 307-12; 328-34; 344; *For All Peoples of Asia* (1997) (see note 1), 196-203.

10 As Archbishop Oscar V. Cruz, Secretary General of the FABC, said at the Seventh Plenary Assembly: »The triple dialogue with the poor, with cultures, and with peoples of other religions, envisioned by FABC as a mode of evangelization, viz., human liberation, inculturation, interreligious dialogue.« See *A Renewed Church in Asia. Pastoral Directions for a New Decade* (FABC Papers 95), Hong Kong 2000, 17.

11 For reflections on the connection between evangelization and liberation according to the FABC, see Peter C. PHAN, *Human Development and Evangelization: The First to the Sixth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, in: *Studia Missionalia* 47 (1998) 205-227.

12 *A Renewed Church in Asia* (see note 10), 8.

13 *A Renewed Church in Asia* (see note 10), 3-4. The document is available from FABC, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong. E-mail: hkdvac@hk.super.net. For the Final Statement of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly, see *For All Peoples* (2002) (see note 1), 1-16.



people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations. b. The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people. c. The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and to appreciate each other's spiritual values. d. The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance, with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of areas in which dialogue must be carried out, the FABC suggests three: dialogue with the Asian people, especially the poor; with their cultures; and with their religions.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the three essential tasks of the Asian churches are liberation, inculturation, and interreligious dialogue.<sup>10</sup> It is vital to note that for the FABC these are not three distinct and separate activities of the church; rather they are three intertwined dimensions of the church's one mission of evangelization.<sup>11</sup> As the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly puts it concisely: »These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act integrally.« As we face the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4 The Eightfold Movement of the Asian Churches

This necessity to be local churches living in communion with each other was reiterated by the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly (Samphran, Thailand, January 3-12, 2000). Coming right after the Asian Synod and the promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* and celebrating the Great Jubilee, with the general theme of »A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service,« this assembly is of particular significance because it highlights the kind of ecclesiology operative in the Asian churches. Taking a retrospective glance at over a quarter of a century of its life and activities, the FABC summarizes its »Asian vision of a renewed Church« as composed of eight movements constituting a sort of Asian ecclesiology:

- 1 A movement towards a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young.
- 2 A movement toward a »truly local Church,« toward a Church »incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated.«
- 3 A movement toward deep interiority.
- 4 A movement toward an authentic community of faith.
- 5 A movement toward active integral evangelization.
- 6 A movement toward empowerment of men and women.
- 7 A movement toward active involvement in generating and serving life.
- 8 A movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor and with the cultures, a Church »in dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples.«<sup>13</sup>

This eightfold movement describes in a nutshell the new way of being church in Asia. Essentially, it aims at transforming the churches *in* Asia into the churches *of* Asia. Inculturation, understood in its widest sense, is the way to achieve this goal of becoming local churches. This need for inculturation in the church's mission of »love and service,« according to the FABC's Seventh Plenary Assembly, has grown even more insistent in light



of the challenges facing Christianity in Asia in the next millennium, such as the increasing marginalization and exclusion of many people by globalization, widespread fundamentalism, dictatorship and corruption in government, ecological destruction, and growing militarization. The FABC sees these challenges affecting special groups of people in a particular way, namely, youth, women, the family, indigenous people, and sea-based and land-based migrants and refugees.<sup>14</sup> To meet these challenges fully, the FABC believes that it is urgent to promote the »Asianness« of the church which it sees as »a special gift the world is waiting for«: »This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life.«<sup>15</sup>

In sum, this Asian way of being church places the highest priority on communion and collegiality at all the levels of church life and activities. At the vertical level, communion is realized with the trinitarian God whose *perichoresis* the church is commissioned to reflect in history. On the horizontal level, communion is achieved with other local churches, and within each local church, communion is realized through collegiality, by which all members, especially lay women and men, are truly and effectively empowered to use of their gifts to make the church an authentically local church.

## 5 The Prophetic Role of the Church

To be a kingdom-centered church, that is, an efficacious sign of the reign of God anywhere, the church must also be a truly local church built on communion and equality everywhere. And to achieve this goal, the church, according to the FABC, must be characterized by the following features, among which prophecy obtains a preeminent place.

### 5.1 The Prophetic Role of the Asian Churches

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«<sup>16</sup> At the heart of the mystery of the church is the bond of communion uniting God with humanity and humans with one another, of which the Eucharist is the sign and instrument par excellence.<sup>17</sup>

2 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

14 See *ibid.*, 6-12.

15 *Ibid.*, 265.

16 EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 287. The FABC applies this vision of church as »communion of communities« 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 [see note 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 co-responsibility with other bishops.

17 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, Minnesota 1992.

18 For a theology of the Trinity as a communion and *perichoresis* of persons, see Leonardo BOFF, *Trinity and Society*, trans. Paul BURNS, Maryknoll, N.Y. 1986.



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.<sup>18</sup> This fundamental equality among all Christians, which is affirmed by Vatican II,<sup>19</sup> annuls neither the existence of the hierarchy in the church nor the papal primacy. Rather it indicates the modality in which papal primacy and hierarchical authority should be exercised in the church, that is, in collegiality, co-responsibility and accountability to all the members of the church. Unless this fundamental equality of all Christians with its implications for church governance is acknowledged and put into practice through concrete policies and actions, the church will not become a communion of communities.

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 indicated above, nothing but the bond of communion between God and humanity and among humans themselves. As *Ecclesia in Asia* puts it tersely, »communion and mission go hand in hand.«<sup>20</sup>

3 This pastoral »discipleship of equals« leads to the third characteristic of the new way of being church in Asia, that is, the participatory and collaborative nature of all the ministries in 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.«<sup>21</sup> 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 *Ecclesia in Asia* 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.«<sup>22</sup> 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.

4 The fourth characteristic of the 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.«<sup>23</sup> 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, as pointed out above, is by way of dialogue, indeed a triple dialogue, with Asian cultures, Asian religions, and the Asians themselves, especially the poor.<sup>24</sup>

19 See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 32: »All the faithful enjoy a true equality with regard to the dignity and the activity which they share in the building up of the body of Christ.«

20 EA, no. 24.

21 EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 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.

22 EA, no. 25.

23 EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 287-288.

24 For the intrinsic connection between the proclamation of the Gospel and dialogue in its triple form, see EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 13-16.



5 The fifth 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.«<sup>25</sup> As far as Asia is concerned, in being »a leaven of transformation in this world,« the church must now understand its mission of »making disciples of all nations« not in terms of converting as many Asians as possible to the church (which is a very unlikely possibility) and in the process increasing its influence as a social institution (*plantatio ecclesiae*). Rather, being a »small remnant« and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future, Christians must journey with the followers of other Asian religions and together with them – not instead of, or worse, against them – work for the coming of the kingdom of God.

## 5.2 The Central Role of the Laity in Asian Christianity

Given the geographical vastness of Asia and its huge population, and given the small number of Asian Christians, it is clearly impossible for Christianity to fulfill its mission were it to rely primarily on its clergy and religious. Indeed, in many Asian countries, most if not all non-sacramental functions, especially evangelization and social services, are carried out by the laity. This is particularly true among Pentecostal and Charismatic churches, which do not require ordination for leadership and emphasize the duty of each and every member to spread the faith. Indeed, it is the work of the laity that accounts for the tremendous growth of these churches, especially in communist countries, which tend to control the activities of the clergy and ignore the lay people.

In the Roman Catholic Church, however, the role of the laity, in spite of Vatican II's reform, has been very restricted. The FABC is well aware of the extremely limited role to which the laity have been consigned both in the life of the church and in their specific ministry to the world. It has been advocating, repeatedly and vigorously, for a greater involvement of the laity, especially women, in the church and in the world corresponding to their baptismal vocation. Among its seven offices, the FABC has one dedicated to the laity, and of its seven general assemblies so far, two, the third and especially the fourth, focused on the laity, though of course discussions of and statements on the laity are also found in the other general assemblies.<sup>26</sup>

At the third general assembly (1982) the FABC lamented the overemphasis on the church as institution and the eclipse of the laity within it: »The structures of our ecclesial organization (sometimes so large, amorphous and impersonal) often image-forth ›institution‹ in its less attractive aspects, and not ›community‹; church groups not infrequently remain individualist in ethos and practice. Sometimes organs of lay participation and co-responsibility have not been established, or are left inactive and impeded, existing only in name. Often enough the gifts and charisms of the laity – both women and men – are not duly recognized, welcomed or activated in significant functions and tasks of ministry and apostolate.«<sup>27</sup>

25 EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 288.

26 For the final statement of the third general assembly, see EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 53–61 and for that of the fourth, see *ibid.*, 178–98.

27 EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 57.

28 *Ibid.*, 193. Emphasis added.

29 *Ibid.*, 195. Emphasis added. Space does not allow a longer presentation of the FABC's teaching on the laity. For a fuller picture, see especially of the work of its Institute for Lay Apostolate (*For All Peoples* [1992], 235–246) and its Office of Laity (*For All Peoples* [1997], 75–139 and *For All Peoples* [2002] [see note 1], 65–116).

30 *EA*, no. 45.



Four years later, in 1986, at its fourth general assembly, the FABC turned its full attention to »the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world of Asia.« It examined the role of the laity with regard to the plight of Asian women, the family, education, mass media and work, business, and health care. Among the many recommendations the FABC made, two stand out with regard to the theme of this essay. First, it stressed »renewal of structures: communion, collegiality, co-responsibility«: »The renewal of inner ecclesial structures does not consist only in strengthening and multiplying the existing parochial and diocesan organization, nor in creating new ones. It consists in creating the right atmosphere of *communion, collegiality and co-responsibility for an active and fuller lay initiation, participation and action.*«<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, with regard to the clergy-laity relationship, the FABC insisted that »there is no one-sided renewal of clergy or laity. In a Church of communion we, clergy as well as laity, are mutually related and mutually conditioned. We feel the need for a basic change of heart. In a Church which is a communion that tries to liberate others from oppression and discrimination, *collegiality and co-responsibility are urgent* [...]. In this respect, the clergy leadership has a duty to make the initial moves to foster lay involvement and to recognize the emerging leadership of the laity.«<sup>29</sup> By linking the task of developing collegiality with and co-responsibility to the laity with that of liberation from oppression and discrimination, the FABC implicitly emphasized the need for the liberation of the laity both within and without the church.

It is only in a church that is truly participatory, »in which no one feels excluded,«<sup>30</sup> and in which everyone is co-responsible and accountable to everyone else, and whose sole *raison d'être* is to serve the kingdom of God, that any structural reform will lead to a greater transparency in church governance. In this task of church reform the experiences and teachings of the churches of Asia can lend their humble yet clear and firm voice, fully aware of their deficiencies, just as they too must learn from the experiences and teachings, and at times, the failures of the other churches.

## 6 Asian Christianity within the World Church and within Asia

A theological critic, especially one trained in Western ecclesiology, might object that the various elements I have expounded above as essential parts of an Asian ecclesiology, important as they are, have not dealt with many other aspects that must be considered fundamental to a theology of the church such as apostolic succession, hierarchical structure, the Petrine office, collegiality, the magisterium, ecumenicity, and so on.

Such criticism is well taken were a comprehensive ecclesiology to be developed. However, as pointed out above, the Asian bishops and theologians are not interested in elaborating a comprehensive dogmatic ecclesiology as such. While not denying the institutional aspects of the church, they are primarily concerned with the mission of the church and its pastoral ministry. Their overriding question is: How to make the church into a living reality not only *in* but also *of* Asia? In other words, the task they set for themselves is forming a Christianity with an Asian face.

Recent demographical studies have noted that the future of Christianity seems to lie not in the West but rather in the non-Western parts of the globe. There has been a massive shift of the Christian population from the north (Europe and North America) to the south (Africa, Asia, and Latin America), a fact long known among missiologists and recently brought to the attention of the larger public by Philip Jenkins in his *The Next Christendom: The Coming*



of *Global Christianity*.<sup>31</sup> It is projected that by 2025 there would be 2.6 billion Christians, of whom 633 million would live in Africa, 640 million in Latin America, and 460 million in Asia, whereas there would be only 555 million in Europe. In other words, by then half of the Christians on the planet would be found in Africa and Latin America. Furthermore, it is projected that by 2050, only about one-fifth of the world's 3 billion Christians would be non-Hispanic Whites.

From the geopolitical and economic perspectives, Asian countries such as China, India, Japan, and Korea (especially South Korea but also North Korea, for military reasons) will likely play a significant role on the global stage in the twenty-first century. The challenge for Asian Christianity at this juncture is how to help Asia achieve a beneficial impact on the world scene. It does not seem that the solution lies in converting individual Asians. Asian Christians still form but a tiny minority of the population, and even though the number of Pentecostals and Charismatics has been growing rapidly in recent decades, a drastic increase in the Christian population in Asia is highly unlikely. In fact, Asian churches, at least the mainline ones, do not seem to be overly concerned about augmenting their membership or even saving souls, as if Asian non-Christians were »pagans« destined to eternal damnation unless they convert to Christianity. Rather, they see as the primary task the evangelization of the Asian cultures and societies by imbuing them with the kingdom values.

This task cannot however be accomplished unless Christianity acquires an Asian face. This is of course a tall order, and the various steps the Asian bishops and theologians have suggested, i. e., focusing on the reign of God, evangelizing through dialogue, developing a church as communion of communities, and enabling the laity, no doubt will contribute greatly to shaping an authentically Asian face to Christianity.

Of these steps, I suggest the triple dialogue as an especially appropriate means for contemporary Asian Christianity. Dialogue with the Asian poor, through liberation and integral development, is rendered more necessary and urgent than ever by globalization, which arguably is taking place more extensively in Asia than in any other continent. This economic process, while it has raised the standard of living in general, is creating a growing gap between the rich and the poor and between the wealthy and the impoverished countries. Unless the Asian churches stand in effective solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, who constitute the great majority of the Asian population, their preaching of the Good News is not credible. Similarly, dialogue with adherents of other religions, in particular Hinduism and Islam, is urgently called for to achieve peace and reconciliation, especially in India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines where religiously-inspired conflicts threaten to erupt. Finally, dialogue with cultures remains a permanent challenge since Christianity is still burdened by its linkage with Western colonialism and imperialism. This is true in particular in the case of Roman Catholicism since it is viewed not only as a foreign religion but also as part of a State (the Vatican), with all its diplomatic apparatus and political power.

In this »dialogical ecclesiology,« church issues such as communion and papal primacy, which have been a bone of contention in Western ecclesiologies, will, I submit, be approached rather differently. Communion will be seen in a context wider than that of Eucharistic and intra-church unity. It will be enriched by the Asian concept of yin-yang

<sup>31</sup> Philip JENKINS, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford 2002.

<sup>32</sup> EILERS (Ed.), *For All Peoples* (1992) (see note 1), 70.



harmony, which admits conflict and diversity as a vital and necessary component of unity. Furthermore, in a harmony (rather than communion) ecclesiology, church unity is directed *outward*, in the sense both of mission (which is relatively absent in current communion ecclesiology) and of collaboration with other religions (mission as dialogue). Similarly, papal primacy will be seen not so much as the pope's juridical power over his fellow bishops but as a reciprocal relationship of collegiality among them.

There is no doubt that for Christianity to acquire an Asian face is an arduous and lengthy process. But the stakes are high. A statement of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences put it starkly 30 years ago: »The decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia – Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experiences to others [...]. If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future.«<sup>32</sup>

### **Zusammenfassung**

Die Kirche steht im Dienste am Reich Gottes – Mission und Dienst an der Welt sind darum unabdingbare Momente für eine asiatisch inspirierte Ekklesiologie. Die Kirche ist in dieser Perspektive immer wieder gefordert, es abzulegen, um ihrer selbst willen existieren zu wollen. Sie ist ein Mittel zum Zweck auf das Reich Gottes hin. In Asien, als Ursprungskontinent des Christentums, stellt sich in diesem Kontext zudem die dringende Frage nach der Formung und Gestaltung einer Kirche mit asiatischem Angesicht.

### **Abstract**

The church serves the kingdom of God – mission and service to the world are therefore indispensable moments for an Asiatically inspired ecclesiology. In this perspective the church is constantly being called upon to set aside the wish to exist for its own sake. It is a means to an end, to the kingdom of God. Furthermore, in this context the urgent question arises in Asia, as Christianity's continent of origin, about the formation and organization of a church with an Asian face.

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