

A -Walking With My Neighbour in Faith

Ten FABC Insights

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The 2006 Asian Mission Congress, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences through its Office of Evangelization and hosted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand is an important milestone in the journey of the local Churches in Asia in the Vatican II era. To gather over 1,000 Catholics from all parts of Asia and beyond is a momentous undertaking. Done for the purpose of renewing Asia's Christian communities in their mission of evangelization, this congress can validly be compared to an ongoing "Asian Pentecost."

This presentation is a theological-missiological-pastoral reflection on the religions of Asia and the Church's interaction with these venerable faiths. It unfolds in two major stages. After a brief introduction to the FABC,¹ the missiological foundations of the Church's approaches and attitudes to other religions are presented. Drawing upon the insightful literature of the thirty-five year FABC experience, five missiological foundations are identified; they are basic to a constructive encounter of the Church with the followers of Asia's religions. This is followed by a second major section that speaks of mission praxis in the Asian context. Emerging from the rich reflection anchored in the pastoral practice of the

¹Abbreviations used in this article: **ACMC** = Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church; **AMSAL** = Asian-born Missionary Societies of Apostolic Life; **BILA** = Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate; **BIMA** = Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate; **BIRA** = Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs; **CTC** = Conclusions of Theological Consultation (Hua Hin - 1994); **EN** *Evangelii Nuntiandi*; **FABC** = Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences; **FEISA** = Faith Encounters in Asia; **FIRA** = Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs; **IMC** = International Mission Congress (Manila); **RM** = *Redemptoris Missio*; **SFMWA** = Statement on Filipino Migrant Workers in Asia. For these abbreviations used in the text refer to FABC documents found in the three volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia*, produced by Claretian Publications in Manila.

local Churches of Asia, five operative guidelines are presented; they can facilitate the practical dimensions of genuine interfaith dialogue. Finally, faithful to the methodology of the Asian Mission Congress (narrative theological sharing and faith reflection), a story of a Bangladeshi beggar woman will be included.

A. An FABC Introduction

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together fourteen bishops' conferences from the following countries as full members: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. FABC has eleven associate members drawn from the ecclesiastical jurisdictions of East Timor, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Thus, in total, twenty-eight countries are represented in the FABC, which grew out of the historic gathering of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 Asian visit.

Aside from a modest central structure, there are nine FABC offices, which carry out many concrete initiatives and projects. The offices, purposely scattered among various Asian nations, are focused on evangelization, social communication, laity, human development, education and student chaplaincy, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Each of these offices sponsors a wide variety of activities that promote the growth of the Asian local Churches.

The supreme body of the FABC is the Plenary Assembly, which convenes every four years. The themes, places, and dates of the eight plenary assemblies have included the following: "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia" (Taipei, Taiwan: 1974); "Prayer - the Life of the Church in Asia" (Calcutta, India: 1978); "The Church - Community of Faith in Asia" (Bangkok, Thailand: 1982); "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia" (Tokyo, Japan: 1986); "Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium" (Bandung, Indonesia: 1990); "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life" (Manila, Philippines: 1995); "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service" (Samphran, Thailand: 2000); and, "The Asian Family toward a Culture of Life" (Daejeon, Korea: 2004). These and other materials are available in the three (soon to be four) volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia* (Manila: Claretian Publications). The *FABC Papers* are available

on the UCANews website with its *FABC Papers* link; see number 100 for a comprehensive index.

The FABC has been the most influential body in the Asian Church since the Second Vatican Council. It has strengthened the bonds of communication among the bishops in the region and has contributed to the development of a shared vision about the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia (copious FABC quotes in this presentation will reveal the depths of this FABC vision). For the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity it must continually engage in a three-fold dialogue with the peoples (especially the poor), the cultures, and the religions of Asia. This programmatic vision has guided the FABC for over three decades and it formed the basic structure of the 2006 Asian Mission Congress. One can validly assert that the FABC is truly "Asia's Continuing Vatican II."

B. Missiological Foundations

1. The Church's Commitment to Missionary Evangelization in Asia

The Catholic Church in Asia is committed to bring the Good News to Asian peoples. However, local Christians are not always committed to this mission; this is precisely one reason for the efforts made to sponsor this continental mission congress. The FABC documents assert that

... the preaching of Jesus Christ and His Gospel to our peoples in Asia becomes a task which today assumes an urgency, a necessity and magnitude unmatched in the history of our Faith in this part of the world. It is because of this that we can repeat the Apostle's word, and repeat it joyfully, "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16), for it is "the love of Christ which presses us" (2 Cor 5:14) to share with , 'our peoples what is most precious in our hearts and in our lives, Jesus Christ and his Gospel, the unsurpassable riches of Christ (cf. Eph 3:8). [Source: FABC I (Taipei) 8]

Asian Christians believe that

... it is as *servants of the Lord* and of *humanity* that we Christians share the same journey with all the Asian peoples. The Church was not sent to be served but to serve* - to serve the Asian peoples in their quest for God and for a better human life; to serve Asia under the leading of the Spirit of Christ and in the manner of Christ himself who did not come to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for all (Mk 10:45) - and to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family As servant of Yahweh and of humanity, the Church will seek above all faithfulness to God and to the Asian peoples, and will also invite to full participation in the Christian

community those who are led to it by the Spirit of God. [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 6:3]

The Church in Asia admits its limitations;

How insufficient for the most part has been our missionary consciousness and responsibility. We have so frequently forgotten that the summons and challenge to make known the person and message of Jesus Christ to those who do not know him is a mandate addressed to even the youngest Christian community. [Source: FABC III (Bangkok) 9:9] Unfortunately for many Catholics, faith is only something to be received and celebrated. They do not feel it is something to be shared. The missionary nature of the gift of faith must be inculcated in all Christians. [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 3.2.3]

2. The FABC's Vision of Integral Evangelization

This task of evangelization is holistic and comprehensive in its scope; Pope Paul VI noted: "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new" (EN 18). FABC describes missionary evangelization:

Mission, being a continuation in the Spirit of the mission of Christ, involves a being with people, as was Jesus: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 3.1.2] Evangelization is the carrying out of the Church's duty of proclaiming by word and witness the Gospel of the Lord. [Source: FABC I (Taipei) 25]

The content of evangelization is noted:

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions (FABC I). [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 3.1.2] Local Churches, servant and inculturated, are the subject of the evangelizing mission.... The principal elements [are] as follows: (1) simple presence and living witness; (2) concrete commitment to the service of humankind; ... (3) liturgical life... prayer and contemplation; (4) dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions; ... (5) proclamation and catechesis.... The totality of Christian mission embraces all these elements. [Source: CTC (Hua Hin, 1991) 36]

Integral Evangelization requires that we become witnesses in our lives to the values and norms of the Gospel based on our baptismal consecration. [Source: SFMWA (Hong Kong) 28]

The FABC has also spoken about the motivation for missionary evangelization:

Renewal of a sense of mission will also require a renewal of our motivations for mission. There has been perceived in some way a weakening of these motivations so necessary to persevere in this demanding task. Why indeed, should we evangelize?... (a) We evangelize, first of all, from a deep sense of *gratitude to God*.... (b) But, mission is also a *mandate*.... (c) We evangelize also because we *believe* in the Lord Jesus.... (d) We evangelize also because we have been *incorporated by baptism into the Church*, which is missionary by its very nature.... (e) And finally, we evangelize because the Gospel is *leaven* for liberation and for the transformation of society: [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 3.2]

3. Announcing the Person and Promises of Christ

The Churches of Asia see a clear Christological component to evangelization. They assert:

While we are aware and sensitive to the fact that evangelization is a complex reality and has many essential aspects - such a witnessing to the Gospel, working for the values of the Kingdom, struggling along with those who strive for justice and peace, dialogue, sharing, inculturation, mutual enrichment with other Christians and the followers of all religions- we affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity. [Source: BIMAI (Suwon) 5-6]

It is true that in many places Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words. But he can, and should be, proclaimed through other ways, namely: through the witness of the life of the Christian community and family, and their striving to know and live more fully the faith they profess; through their desire to live in peace and harmony with those who do not share our faith.... Our proclamation of Jesus must also be urgently directed towards the workers, the poor and needy, and the oppressed.... [Source: BIMA III (Changhua) 10-11]

FABC continues:

... challenged by the stark reality of millions on our continent who have not yet been evangelized, we welcome ... this opportunity to face with a sense of urgency the task of making Christ known, loved and followed by the vast multitude of our brothers and sisters. [Source: BIMA I (Baguio): 2] More than two billions of Asians have perhaps never encountered the Person of Jesus in a knowing and conscious way; more than two billions of Asians have never really heard his message. While this fact fills us with sorrow, it also spurs us on to longing and hope,

because we know he will accompany the ways of all those whose footsteps are lovely because they bring the good news of his mercy and love. [Source: BIMA III (Changhua) 4]

We affirm ... that 'the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization. ... But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom Of God, *a proclamation through Christ-like deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds - this is the first call to the Churches in Asia. [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 4.1] The local Churches of Asia will proclaim Jesus Christ to their fellow humans in a dialogical manner. [Source: CTC (Hua Hin) 51]

4. Inter faith Dialogue as a Key Dimension of Mission

Asia's bishops have a deep appreciation of the role of dialogue in the evangelization process. They hold that

Interreligious dialogue is another integral part of evangelization which in the situation of our churches needs to become a primary concern. We live in the midst of millions of people belonging to the great religious traditions.... In this context we believe that interreligious dialogue is a true expression of the Church's evangelizing action in which the mystery of Jesus Christ is operative, calling us all to conversion.... We would wish to see interreligious dialogue become a reality at the grassroots level of our Church, through greater openness and reaching out of all their members towards their brothers and sisters of other religious traditions. [Source: BIMA II (Trivandrum) 14]

The Church, the sacrament of God's message in the world, continues Christ's work of dialogue.... The Church is particularly concerned with man's religious experience, the motivating and leavening agent in his culture. This means that the Church must constantly be involved in dialogue with men of other religions (cf. *Nostra Aetate* 2). The Christian finds himself continually evangelizing and being evangelized by his partners in dialogue (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 13)." [Source: BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur): 11] "It suffices for the present to indicate here the continued building up of the local church as the focus of the task of evangelization today, with dialogue as its essential mode, ... through interreligious dialogue undertaken in all seriousness. [Source: IMC (Manila): 19]

Indeed, since the Church in Asia is a "small flock," the FABC insightfully asserts:

Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia: it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode: [dialogue]. [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 4.1]. From our experience of dialogue emerged the conviction that *dialogue was the key we sought*- not dialogue in the superficial sense in which it is often understood, but as a witnessing to Christ in word and deed, by reaching out to people in the concrete reality of their daily lives.... [Source: BIMAI (Baguio) 5] In the context of dialogue we tried to penetrate the meaning of the uniqueness of Christ-in our own inner experience, in our contact with others; ... we realized that there is still much to be discovered, and much that is already discovered but not sufficiently integrated in our lives and in our missionary effort.... We feel that the Christian experience in contact with the age-old religious experience of Asia has much to contribute to the growth and the transformation in outlook and appearance of the Universal Church. [Source: BIMA I (Baguio) 12]

FABC adds an important point of clarification:

Dialogue does not call for giving up one's commitment, bracketing it or entering into easy compromise. On the contrary, for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith. [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay) 10]

5. God's Saving Design is at Work in the Asian Reality

The FABC documents are premised on a broad vision of God's loving plan of salvation; thus,

Christians believe that God's saving will is at work, in many different ways, in all religions. It has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 22; *Lumen Gentium* 16), that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church (cf. *Redemptor Hominis* 6). God's saving grace is not limited to members of the Church, but is offered to every person.... His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace. [Source: BIRA II (Kuala Lumpur) 12J]

God, the Father of all, has called all men to share in his life and love through his son Jesus Christ. The risen Christ and his Spirit are active in the world making this love a present and growing reality, making all things new. This same love urges us on to dialogue with people of odier religions, because we have, especially since the Second Vatican Council, an increasing awareness of the positive role of other religions in God's plan of salvation. [Source: BIRA III (Madras) 2]

FABC continues:

In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with die great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive

elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. [Source: FABC I (Taipei) 14] ... a clearer perception of the Church's mission in the context of the Asian reality helps us discover even deeper motivations. Members of other religious traditions already in some way share with us in the mystery of salvation. [Source: CTC (Hua Hin) 50]

We are glad that Vatican II affirmed the presence of salvific values in other religions. We are grateful for the timely insights.... The Gospel fulfills all hopes, a Gospel which Asia and the whole world direly need. [Source: BIMA I (Suwon): 7]

On this theme Pope John Paul II had written: "The Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals, but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.... The Church's relationship with other religions is dictated by a twofold respect: Respect for man in his quest for answers to the deepest questions of his life, and respect for the action of the Spirit in man." (*Redemptoris Missio*: 28-29). Within the awareness of the Holy Spirit's action and their commitment to dialogue, Asia's bishops boldly state: "We shall not be timid when God opens die door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence." [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 4.3]

C. Mission Praxis in the Asian Context

1. Basic Attitudes Essential to Dialogue Practice

The commitment of Asia's bishops to interfaith dialogue is clear and consistent; the FABC enunciates foundational attitudes essential to this dialogue.

In Asia, the emphasis in interreligious dialogue falls not so much on academic or theological discussions, as on the sharing of life at all levels. Christians carry out the mission entrusted to them by Jesus Christ when they participate fully in the social and cultural life of the societies in which they live, enriching others by the values they have learned from the Gospel, and finding themselves enriched by ihe spiritual treasures of their neighbours of other faiths. Thus, the 'dialogue of life' is central to Christian life in Asia.... Christians in Asia are called to live their faith deeply, in openness and respect for the religious commitment of others. [Source: FIRA IV (Pattaya) 4]

Dialogue demands transformed attitudes:

To be able to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue, we need to deepen bur self-knowledge and coritinueously discover our personal identity.... Wis need to be continually healed of negativities like suspicion and fear....; in order to go deeper into ourselves in this inward journey to the God

of the Ongoing Dialogue, we need to integrate Asian forms of prayer.... We acknowledge here the tremendous opportunities we have of learning from the other religious traditions of Asia, especially from the mystical traditions. [*Source*: FIRA I (Ipoh) 3.2-3.3]

Any dialogical enterprise requires certain basic attitudes, as exemplified in Christ: - a spirit of humility, openness, receptivity ... for what God wishes to tell us through them [Asia's religions]; - a witnessing to the saving grace of Christ, not so much by the proclaimed word but through love in the Christian community, so that its universal validity is seen and felt as such; - a placing of priority on fellowship..., so that we are led spontaneously and naturally to deeper religious dialogue. [*Source*: BIRA I (Bangkok) 18]

FABC promotes a balanced appreciation of dialogue:

... for a deeper and fruitful dialogue, it is even necessary that each partner be firmly committed to his or her faith.... While firmly adhering to our commitment to Christ, it is indispensable for dialogue that we enter into the religious universe of our dialogue partner and see his or her sincere and unflinching faith-commitment. More than that, we should appreciate the commitment of the other.... That is why listening attentively with our heart to the personal commitment of faith and witness of the other partner can, not only facilitate dialogue, but also enrich us and make us grow in our faith, and help us to reinterpret it. [*Source*: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay) 10-11]

Dialogue is a crucial challenge to the Churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the kingdom. This challenge is fraught with risks.... However, with the confidence that the Spirit is with us and helps us in our weakness (Rom 8:26), we commit ourselves to this task of dialogue.... [*Source*: BIRA III (Madras) Conclusion]

2. Specific Attitudes toward Asia's Venerable Religions

The FABC in its first plenary gathering enunciated a profound -even poetic appraisal of Asia's religions:

In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations. [*Source*: FABC I (Taipei) 14] How then can we not give them reverence and honour? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them? [*Source*: FABC I (Taipei) 15]

Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God (*AdGentes* 9). This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples' deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons. [Source: FABC I (Taipei) 16] Finally, this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God's Word. [Source: FABC I (Taipei) 17]

Asia's bishops continue:

On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son; the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and in the fellowship of the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation - a salvation which assumes and gives meaning to human freedom, earthly realities, and the course of this world's history. [Source: FABC I (Taipei) 18]

3. Necessity of a "Spirituality of Dialogue"

Over three decades FABC has asserted that spirituality is linked to authentic dialogue:

In Asia, home to great religions, where individuals and entire peoples are thirsting for the divine, the Church is called to be a praying Church, deeply spiritual, even as she engages in immediate human and social concerns. All Christians need a true missionary spirituality of prayer and contemplation. [Source: FABC VII (Samphan) C-2].

At the center of this new way of being Church [in Asia] is the action of the Spirit of Jesus, guiding and directing individual believers as well as the whole community to live a life that is Spirit-filled - that is, to live an authentic spirituality. It is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia. [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 9:1]

To risk being wounded in the act of loving, to seek to understand in a climate of misunderstanding - these are no light burdens to bear. Dialogue demands a deep spirituality which enables man, as did Jesus Christ, to hang on to his faith in God's love, even when everything seems to fall apart. Dialogue, finally, demands a total Christ-like self-emptying so that, led by the Spirit, we may be more effective instruments in building up God's Kingdom. [Source: BIRA IV/7 (Tagaytay) 16]

In Asia, the dialogue of prayer and spirituality is highly valued. Prayer

together, in ways congruent with the faith of those who take part, is an occasion for Christians and followers of other faiths to appreciate better the spiritual riches which each group possesses, as well as to grow in respect for one another as fellow pilgrims on the path through life. Human solidarity is deepened when people approach the divine as one human family. [Source: FIRA IV (Pattaya) 8]

The Asian bishops have a "friend of dialogue" in the person of John Paul II (see *Redemptoris Missio* 55-57); elsewhere in the same document the Pope wrote: "The interreligious meeting held in Assisi was meant to confirm my conviction that 'every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human heart'" (RM 29).

Asia's bishops face the challenge of dialogue with realism:

Interreligious dialogue is never easy, it calls for its own spirituality. It is our resolve, therefore, to live and witness to this spirituality of dialogue.... [Source: FIRA I (Ipoh) 4.2]. ... credible evangelization demands from us Christians in Asia a life of authentic contemplation and genuine compassion.... Only an ego-emptying, and consequently powerless, Christian community has the credibility to proclaim the folly of the message of the cross. Such a process of evangelization fosters a culture of dialogue in Asia. [Source: FEISAI (Pattaya) 7.4.1 -2] The call of the laity to holiness and consequently, to the apostolate of the Church..., is a demand of their Christian identity in virtue of the Christian's full incorporation into Christ and in the Holy Eucharist. [Source: BILA III (Singapore) 6]

4. Dialogue Serves a New Humanity and the Kingdom

FABC asserts that dialogue is always oriented outward in service of people and God's kingdom.

Dialogue is a crucial challenge to the churches in Asia in their growing commitment to the building of the kingdom. This challenge is fraught with risks arising out of confusing socio-political tensions, besides other causes. However, with the confidence that the Spirit is with us and helps us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26), we commit ourselves to this task of dialogue in order to unite the whole universe in Christ so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). [Source: BIRA III (Madras) Conclusion]

We build the Church in order to build the Kingdom in our Asian societies and cultures.... Our mission therefore must be a dialogue with those of other religious ways that will require us both to proclaim and be proclaimed to, to speak and to listen, to teach and to learn. Through such a dialogical mission, God's Reign will grow in Asia and the Church will become more truly an Asian Church, inculturated in Asian realities. [Source: FIRA II (Pattaya) 3.5]

The Kingdom of God is therefore universally present and at **work**. Wherever men and women open themselves to the transcendent divine mystery which impinges upon them and go out of themselves in love and service to fellow humans, there the reign of God is at work.... This goes to show that the Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the Church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is the fundamental 'mystery of unity' which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart. [Source: CTC (Hua Hin) 29-30]

With clear resolve, Asia's bishops state:

Therefore, we commit ourselves: ...To take every opportunity to make Jesus Christ and his message known in a way that is acceptable to Asians, presenting him to them with an 'Asian face,' using Asian cultural concepts, terms and symbols.... To present the Gospel message as humble servants of the Kingdom of God, always sensitive to the religious and cultural traditions of the people where the Spirit leads us to make Jesus known. [Source: AMSAL I (Tagaytay) 2]

This common spiritual pilgrimage demands that we take inspiration from the praxis of Jesus, especially his table fellowship with publicans and sinners, wherein we discover the primal form of the Church of Christ. Before Christianity got established as a structured religion, it was a spiritual movement: Jesus' journey with the poor towards the Kingdom of God. In close dialogue with the poor and the religious cultures of Asia, the Church would be able to rediscover its pristine dynamism which demands a radical emptying (*kenosis*) in its thought patterns, ritual forms and community structures. This age of journeying with sisters and brothers of Asian religions is a privileged moment (*kairos*) for the Church to return to its original call. [Source: FEISA I (Pattaya) 7.5.1]

5. Local Church: Identity, Ministries and Service

To promote and concretize this dialogical vision, the FABC links its implementation with Asia's local churches and their ministries.

Each local church is determined by her human context and lives in a dialectical relationship with the human society into which she is inserted as the Gospel leaven. Since each local church should embody into the context the task entrusted to her by the servant Lord, she has to discover time and again what ministries and what ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfill her mission to offer to a human society the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ.... [Source: APMC (Hong Kong) 25]

The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local church* living and acting in communion with the universal Church. It is the local churches and communities which can

discern and work out ... the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God's Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local churches. [Source: FABC V (Bandung) 3.3.1]

The FABC forcefully asserts:

Asian churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls on the part of the churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage. [Source: ACOM (Hong Kong) 26]

Now - as Vatican II already affirmed with all clarity and force - every local church *is* and cannot be but missionary. Every local church is 'sent' by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding milieu, and to bear it also into all the world. For every local church this is a *primary task*.... Every local church is responsible for its mission.... [Source: IMC (Manila) 14]

With great conviction, Asia's bishops state:

... 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-experience to others. The consequences will be tremendous ... [in] all aspects of their life.... If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future. [Source: ACOM (Hong Kong) 14]

Each local church has its own vocation in the one history of salvation, in the one Church of Christ. In each local church each people's history, each people's culture, meanings and values, each people's traditions are taken up, not diminished or destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled ... in the life of the Spirit. [Source: IMC (Manila) 15].

D. A Bangladeshi Beggar Woman

In the light of the foregoing presentation of the FABC's profound understanding of the Church's mission of fostering relationships and dialogue with Asia's religions, I conclude with an integrating quote and the narration of a true experience. Pope John Paul II, speaking in Manila during his 1981 Philippine visit, asserted that the goal of interfaith dialogue should be altruistic (not focused only on personal enrichment). He stated: "Christians will, moreover, join hands with all men and women of good will [and] work together in order to bring about a more just and peaceful

society in which the poor will be the first to be served." Yes, the Asian way of mission is dialogical service of the needy; this approach can clearly reveal the face of Jesus in Asia today. This was poignantly brought home to me in a transforming experience that I consider a gift of the Lord to me.

During the Lenten season some few years ago, while I was a visiting professor in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I had a "graced moment," a "defining experience" in my missionary awareness and perspective. It has remained seared in my consciousness and has forced me to ask many foundational questions about faith, mission and my own commitment. It involves a Bangladeshi beggar woman.

I saw her on the road, in front of the large walled compound of a wealthy family dwelling. I could not clearly see her face, as she was several hundred feet ahead of me. Her tattered clothes covered a malnourished body; she was alone, although other beggars were walking ahead of her on the road. I was proceeding along the same path, leisurely taking a late afternoon walk.

Suddenly a luxury car approached with its horn blowing. The driver probably wanted the beggars to disperse and also wanted the gate of the compound opened by the servants. The woman appeared startled as the car turned sharply in front of her and the gate swung open. Within seconds two large dogs emerged from the compound and jumped at the woman, knocking her to the ground. She screamed and cried both from fear and the pain caused by the dogs nipping at her. I stood frozen, horrified at the sight.

A well-dressed madam promptly emerged from the chauffeur-driven car. She ordered the driver to bring the car into the compound; the dogs were called to return inside; the servants were commanded to close and lock the gate. And, the beggar woman? She was left alone on the ground - outside the gate. I stood helpless, gazing at this appalling scene.

Only the other frightened beggars came to the aid of the woman. Only they showed mercy and compassion. I stood at a distance and wept at this scene of crucifixion. I admitted to being a guilty bystander. My fears and inadequacies left me paralyzed. I had not one *taka* coin in my pocket to give; I could not offer one word of consolation in the Bengali language which I did not speak; I did not approach the woman for fear of misinterpretation that a foreign man would touch a Bengali woman in public in this strictly Islamic culture. I simply wept in solidarity. I wept long and hard. And, in succeeding years, I have frequently returned to

that scene and prayed to God: "Do not let me forget that experience. Allow it to shape my life and mission vision. Permit it to remain a 'defining moment' in understanding my mission vocation."

My Christian faith provides me with a vision to interpret this experience. I believe in a God who is radically compassionate to everyone - Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian. Thus, relying on God's grace, I look forward to meeting once again that Muslim Bangladeshi beggar-woman - she who so deeply shared in the paschal mystery - in the resurrected life with Christ the Lord in heaven. I am confident she will be there!

What the Church can Learn from Dialogue with Asian Religions

- From Muslims the Church can learn about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- From Hindus the Church can learn about meditation and contemplation.
- From Buddhists the Church can learn about detachment from material goods and respect for life.
- From Confucianism the Church can learn about filial piety and respect for elders.
- From Taoism the Church can learn about simplicity and humility.
- From animists the Church can learn about reverence and respect for nature and gratitude for harvests.
- The Church can learn from the rich symbolism and rites existing in their diversity of worship.
- The Church can, like the Asian religions, learn to be more open, receptive, sensitive, tolerant, and forgiving in the midst of a plurality of religions.

Source: James KROEGER, *The Future of the Asian Churches*, p. 14.

B - Document 1

Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia

The Message of the First Asian Mission Congress

Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18-22, 2006

Jesus lives! Christ is Risen! Our Saviour is with us; his life is our life. These affirmations capture our sentiments as the participants of the 2006 Asian Mission Congress. Gathered in Thailand, October 18-22, 2006, we express the same joyful faith as Christ's first disciples, who proclaimed: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18); "It is the Lord" (Jn 21:7); "It is true: the Lord has risen" (Lk 24:34); "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). The first disciples rejoiced: their friend, their teacher, their prophet, their compassionate healer, their beloved was miraculously - mysteriously - alive. Fear and disappointment, trauma and devastation became faith and rejoicing. Who could have expected? Who would have dreamed?

Jesus comes personally to his followers. He calls them by name: Mary of Magdala, Thomas, Peter, James, John. They recognize him. He speaks words of peace and reconciliation. The disbelieving disciples are transformed. Yet, Jesus, the Crucified-Risen One, expands the dimensions of their faith. He challenges them further. He sends them on mission: "Go forth to every part of the world, and proclaim the Good News to the whole of creation" (Mk 16:15); "Go forth and make all nations my disciples" (Mt 28:19); "You are witnesses to all this" (Lk 24:48); "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21). And so the disciples set out to tell the Jesus story. They go to places, near and far: James to Jerusalem, Peter and Paul to Rome, Thomas to India. Indeed, to encounter the Risen Lord is to be sent on mission.

In God's gracious providence, over 1,000 of us contemporary disciples of Jesus assembled for the first-ever Asian Mission Congress. A spacious, sprawling hotel in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, became the New Upper Room. We gathered to share our experience, to tell our stories, to meet other disciples from across the vast Asian continent, from Lebanon to Japan, from Kazakhstan and Mongolia to Indonesia. We heard inspiring stories, too numerous to count, stories of life, faith, heroism, service, prayer, dialogue, and proclamation. *An* infectious mood of joy pervaded us. No one doubted the active presence of the befriending Spirit of God. Together we celebrated our faith and our life as disciples of Jesus through sharing, listening, praying, celebrating the Eucharist. The multiplicity of cultures and languages added light and color to the celebration of our one common faith.

This pastoral-catechetical congress explored a unique methodology of evangelizing: story-telling or faith-sharing. We listened to narratives about the elderly, families, youth, children and women, BECs. We heard perspectives from Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Tribals. Contemporary contexts were highlighted: Consumerism, Media, Migrants, and Interfaith Dialogue. How significant these are to the mission of evangelization in the present context of ethnic conflicts and religious tensions!

The Story of Jesus was the unique thread, weaving all these life experiences into one grand narrative. All the colours, peoples, languages, cultures, values, religions, and arts of Asia's peoples formed one grand tapestry. Lord, how marvelous are your ways! How deep your designs!

The world is full of stories. Human life is unimaginable without stories. Stories tell us who we are and they link us with other peoples, all across Asia and even throughout the world. Through them we explore life's deeper dimensions, including the mystery of our own being. Stories impact our life and our faith. They transform perspectives and values. They form community. Stories contain a hidden dynamism and transforming power, incalculably so when they emerge from experience. They are remembered much longer than lessons learned in school or books that are read.

Jesus was known as a story-teller. As a *rabbi*, a teacher, his favorite method of instruction was telling parables, insightful vignettes that revealed the depths of God's Reign. Who does not know the parable of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son? Jesus' parables challenge us with new possibilities in our relations with God and all our brothers and sisters. Many might think of Jesus, who was born in Asia, as merely akin to the great Asian wisdom teachers, such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Gandhi. But more marvelously, we Christians believe that Jesus is the God who became Man, sent by the Father. He is God's love story in the flesh - God's Incarnate Story.

The Asian Mission Congress sought to enliven many of the challenges found in Pope John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA): "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" (EA 20f)- Pope John Paul II recommends following "an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching" (EA 20g).

The local Churches in Asia can be faithful to Christ's mission mandate by telling and retelling the Jesus story both in words and effective deeds of service. Repeatedly, the Church communicates its faith that originates in its experience of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, the Great Storyteller, guides the Church in all situations to tell, especially through the witness of a transformed life: "What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands"; it is none other than "the Word of Life" (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). Mission means keeping the story of Jesus alive, forming community, showing compassion, befriending the "other," carrying the Cross, witnessing to the living person of Jesus.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus observed: "Did we not feel our hearts on fire as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us (Lk 24:32)?" For us, the way to Chiang Mai has become our Emmaus road. At the Mission Congress we shared our experiences of faith. Stories from Bangladesh and Hong Kong, from Thailand and China, from Japan and Nepal - from all across the Asian continent - set our hearts on fire. Echoes of *Ecclesia in Asia* resounded loudly: "A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire" (EA 23b). The Church in Asia is to be "a community aflame with missionary zeal

to make Jesus known, loved and followed" (EA 19a). Jesus casts fire on the earth and prays that it be ablaze (cf. Lk 12:49). "The Church in Asia shares his zeal that this fire be re-kindled now" (EA 18c). We know that our 2006 Mission Congress, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and its Office of Evangelization, thanks to the Holy Spirit, was able to set many hearts ablaze.

The Asian Mission Congress, particularly the exchange of our faith-stories, has provided new perspectives for our task of dialoguing with the peoples (especially the poor), the religions, and the cultures of Asia (cf. FABC V: 3.1.2). The stories of Asia's poor today (beggars, people living with AIDS, migrants, the outcasts) must be read within Jesus' story and his Paschal Mystery. Asia's many venerable religions may be seen within God's universal design of salvation - that all would be saved (1 Tim 2:4). The riches of Asian cultures can be a most suitable vehicle for communicating the Jesus story. This task has "a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia" (EA 21b). The insightful "triple dialogue" promoted by the FABC for over three decades can be accomplished in "new and surprising ways" (EA 20f) -one of which is in the exchange of gifts through the sharing of our life's story.

At this First Asian Mission Congress we rediscovered the "joy of evangelization." Pope Paul VI's words ring true; effective mission is to be done "with ever increasing love, zeal and joy" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, EN 1). Jesus' disciples must "proclaim with joy the Good News which one has come to know through the Lord's mercy" (EN 80).

We, the Congress participants, commit ourselves to carry home to our own communities new insights into the story of Jesus, particularly its Asian dimensions. We seek to be on fire, ready to bring home vivid and inspiring stories, which could light the flame of mission in young hearts. We wish to follow Jesus' words to the possessed person (the scriptural passage we adopted at the Congress): "Go home to your own people and tell them what the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (Mk 5:19).

We seek to approach evangelization in an Asian way, an evocative way through stories, parables and symbols, a method so characteristic of Asian pedagogy, as Pope John Paul II has so perceptively noted. It is, therefore, a way of sharing our faith with others, an authentic path of dialogue. Still we, who believe in this distinctive approach to evangelization, will also "not be timid when God opens the door for us to proclaim explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence" (FABC V: 4.3).

On this World Mission Sunday we thank the Lord of the harvest for the countless missionaries who have come to serve in Asia through the centuries. We prayerfully commend to the Lord's love and protection the thousands from Asia who now serve in various parts of the globe.

We beseech Mary, our Mother and the Star of Evangelization, to intercede for us that our hearts may remain on fire with love of Jesus her Son, whose story we shall tell and retell through words, deeds and the witness of our lives.

C - Document 2

Mission Orientations and Priorities

First Asian Mission Congress

Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18-22, 2006

Moved by the experience of the First Asian Mission Congress, we the participants have identified the following important areas of concern which we consider as priorities for our missionary task in Asia, and we commit ourselves to implement them:

The Story of Jesus in Our Life

We will make the story of Jesus come alive through our personal encounter with the Risen Lord through:

- a deeper study and living of the Word of God in such a way that the power of Jesus' story transforms our life
- cultivating a habit of recognizing the story of Jesus in one's own personal life, in all our experiences, particularly, in our struggles and pains, joys and sorrows
- making the celebrations of the community especially the Eucharist as powerful moments of encounter in which the story of Jesus comes alive through the symbols used in the liturgy (the breaking of the Bread, etc.)
- fostering the attitudes and values of humility and openness before the mystery of God at work in the peoples of Asia especially in those who suffer, such as the poor, the marginalized, migrant workers, the sick, women and children *
- promoting the participation of the laity especially the youth who are the future of the Church in Asia
- proclaiming Jesus especially through witness as the distinguishing mark of our missionary identity
- living and promoting a spirituality of the dialogue of life with the peoples of Asia
- learning to recognize the presence of the story of Jesus in the stories of trauma, exclusion, sufferings and poverty as well as in their other varied experiences of life
- learning the art of eagerly awaiting the opportune moment to share Jesus' story as God's gift for the fullness of life

The Story of Jesus in Peoples of Other Faiths

We will:

- recognize our ignorance and prejudice (individual and collective) by taking concrete steps to acquaint ourselves with other religious traditions

- develop in our educational and formation institutes, especially in our seminaries, such positive attitudes of understanding and respect towards other religions
- form families to grow in openness and a humble attitude to the mystery of God at work in other religions
- make similar efforts to remove misunderstanding and prejudice from the people of other faiths in regard to the Christian faith and practices
- offer more effective pastoral care for those in mixed marriages and other interreligious situations

The Story of Jesus in the Cultures of Asia

We will:

- integrate positive cultural values of Asia as mentioned in *Ecclesia in Asia* into our Christian living - at personal and collective levels - all the more so when such values are being eroded by consumerism, materialism and other forces with the support of the media and the market
- promote a culture of service, compassion, disciplined life, meditation, silence, simplicity, reconciliation and harmony
- take concrete steps to integrate local festivals and cultural forms of expression such as dance and music, art and architecture
- introduce with proper catechesis inculturation at all levels of our life so that we can effectively present the Asian face of Jesus to our sisters and brothers in Asia

Follow-up

We appeal to each Episcopal Conference to organize national/regional Mission Congresses in such way as to effectively promote a renewed sense of mission of TELLING THE STORY OF JESUS in an Asian way to the peoples of Asia. We hope that the above measure, among others, will revitalize our missionary dynamism with a sense of urgency and with a spirit of enthusiasm and joy.

For He is indeed Risen and Alive in Asia!

D - Asian Mission Congress Reflections

An Asian Tapestry - Created by the Spirit

James H. KROEGER, M.M.

Tapestries are a specialized form of art. Using subtle colours and richly textured fibers, the artist weaves an inspiring piece, capturing people in their uniqueness, geometric designs in their intricacies, animals in their diversity, and nature in all its beauty. The vision and skill of the artist serve to create a moving work of art, often a masterpiece.

Peoples and cultures across the centuries have used and perfected this form of hand-woven fabric. Through the skill and artistry of the weaver, great beauty and refinement can be achieved. Viewing a tapestry means appreciating the wonderful intricacies displayed and the artist's attention to detail. Tapestries can evoke deep reflection and insight into the beauty of life.

The First Asian Mission Congress, held in Thailand in October 2006, noted in its final message: "All the colours, peoples, languages, cultures, values, religions, and arts of Asia's peoples formed one great tapestry." The story of Jesus became the unique Congress thread that wove all these dimensions and experiences of life into one multifaceted design. With hindsight, one can partially capture the beauty of this Mission Congress by examining some of the diverse threads that were woven together into a great tapestry, into "God's Asian Tapestry."

Congress Vision

The Mission Congress was not envisioned as a symposium or seminar; rather, the gathering in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, was to be "a celebration of faith and life." The first stated Congress goal was "to share the joy and enthusiasm of our faith in Jesus Christ" and to "celebrate our faith in Asian language, song, story, art, music, symbol, and architecture." Next, this approach sought to move from a celebratory phase into concrete "Asian ways of mission through witness in the midst of life realities." It also moves to a deepened awareness about "the renewed understanding of mission *ad gentes* during and since the Second Vatican Council" and to "priorities for a renewed mission animation."

Here one hears echoes of Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* where he focuses on "encouraging our brethren in their mission as evangelizers"

so that they may accomplish their task "with ever increasing love, zeal and joy" (EN 1). In the Asian context where the Church is a small minority, truly a "little flock" (less than 3% of the vast multitudes of Asia), mutual encouragement is constantly needed and **appreciated**. **Thanks** to the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, the Congress delegates experienced renewed joy in being truly Catholic and truly Asian; they departed for their home churches with renewed enthusiasm. Many hearts were set ablaze in that New Upper Room (the Congress Hall of the Lotus Hotel in Chiang Mai). A renewed "joy of evangelizing" permeated the more than 1,000 participants!

An Asian Approach

The Mission Congress tapestry was to be woven through a carefully chosen methodology: "story-telling in faith" or "narrative missiology." One can appreciate this approach by recalling the basic elements of a story. In brief, stories tell us who we are; they link us together and deepen our identity, revealing many aspects of the mystery of our being. Stories are windows through which we view the world; they possess tremendous power to influence faith and life. They probe the heart, illuminating our relationships with God and others.

The key-note congress address by "master-weaver" Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle identified eight dimensions of story-telling that help the Church understand her evangelizing mission in Asia: (1) Good stories emerge from experience; the Church tells the Jesus-story from its experience of Jesus; (2) Stories reveal personal identity and the formative influence of people and events: the Jesus-story manifests the identity of the Church among the peoples (especially the poor), religions, and cultures of Asia; (3) Stories are dynamic and transformative: the Church keeps the memory of Jesus dynamically alive; (4) Stories help interpret spiritual, doctrinal and ethical symbols, and the Jesus-story provides meaning to the Church's symbols of faith.

Tagle continued weaving his artistic design by showing: (5) Stories create community: the story of Jesus generates the Church; (6) When received, stories transform the listener; the Church must listen to Jesus' story and be renewed by it; (7) Just as stories can be narrated in a variety of ways, the Church can tell the Jesus-story with a multiplicity of approaches; finally, (8) Stories of individuals and whole peoples can be suppressed: the Church must give voice to society's victims and their suppressed stories. Tagle succeeded in winning people's hearts and minds, convincing them that story-telling is a very valid insight into evangelization in Asia today.

Experiencing "Asian-ness"

For all the participants, the Mission Congress was a rich experience of the great diversity of Asia and her 3.6 billion people. In the congress itself over forty countries were represented in the more than 1,000 participants. Asians came from remote places such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, from Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma) and China, from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Cambodia. They brought with them their stories, cultures, experiences and, above all, their faith and love of Jesus and his Church. One heard numerous languages being spoken - as diverse as those heard on the first Pentecost. People eagerly shared their persons and experiences - in hotel corridors and dining rooms, in the 100+ small discussion groups, in their mission expositions, in their national dress, songs and dances during the final banquet and grand socialization. The "people tapestry" at the Congress was overwhelming and marvellous.

This first Asian Mission Congress was the largest event ever sponsored by the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences). Delegates to the FABC plenary assemblies held every four years - there have been eight to date - usually number around 300 persons at the most. To have participated in this congress meant a total immersion in "Asian-ness." And, for the majority of delegates, it was a new, enriching encounter that they had never experienced before. People, God's People, coming from every race, family, and nation in Asia - all assembled, hearing about "the marvels of God." Everyone was amazed and astonished; "they asked one another what it all meant" (cf. Acts 2:11-12).

FABC's Triple Dialogue

Since its first plenary assembly in Taipei in 1974 which focused on *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, the FABC has developed an "Asian Paradigm" for missionary evangelization. The paradigm focuses on the building up of truly inculturated local Churches. The operative approach is the distinctive mode of dialogue. The "dialogue partners" of the local Church are Asia's peoples (especially the poor), Asia's cultures and religions. This "Asian Way" of being Church, commonly termed the "triple dialogue," shaped the thematic structure of the entire Congress.

Brief opening ceremonies were held on the evening of October 18. The first full day (October 19) was devoted to the story of Jesus in the Peoples of Asia. The "faith sharers" or "story-tellers" focused on the elderly and the family, two key segments of Asia's population. Delegates met for the first time in their workshops and reflected on their personal faith story, responding to the question: "How have I encountered Christ in my life?"

Continuing the work of the Congress, the second full day (October 20) focused on the role of Jesus in the Religions of Asia. An interesting panel presentation addressed four of the living faiths in Asia: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Tribals/Indigenous. Workshops responded to the question: "What do I appreciate in the followers of other religions in my country?"

The morning of the next day (October 21) centred on the Cultures of Asia; participants heard "faith sharings" on consumerism, media, migrants, youth, and interfaith relationships. Afternoon workshops reflected on this question: "What practices or traditions in my culture best express the Gospel of Jesus?"

The final day of the Congress was World Mission Sunday (October 22). The final "faith sharer" focused on the Thai Tribals and their journey in faith. A Congress synthesis was presented; the Congress message and mission orientations were read publicly (see VJTR Jan. 2007). The final highpoint was the World Mission Sunday 2006 Eucharistic Celebration, presided by Crescenzo Cardinal Sepe, the Special Envoy of the Holy Father.

Five days, October 18-22, 2006, days filled with stories of faith, enriched by intercultural sharing, deepened by theological reflection, celebrating faith and life! These days added new meaning to the FABC and its mission in Asia. Terming the FABC as "Asia's Continuing Vatican II" is no misnomer! Pentecost continues to unfold in Asia!

Reflection, Faith, and Prayer

The tapestry of the Asian Mission Congress would be incomplete if one failed to mention the role of theological-missiological reflection that was integrally interwoven into the fabric. Each day time was allotted for a formal reflection on the Church's understanding of her evangelizing mission in Asia. Fathers Julian Saldanha, SJ, Proper Grech, OSA, Savio Hon Tai Fai, SDB, James Kroeger, MM, and John Prior, SVD were invited to enhance and deepen the faith sharers' story-telling and the feedback from the discussion groups. Once again, this missiological reflection followed the FABC's "triple-dialogue" pattern.

The full title or theme of this First Asian Mission Congress was: "The Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life." Faith was clearly evident - in many and diverse ways. Participants seemed to be brimming with joyful faith and enthusiasm from their arrival until their departure; their spontaneous faith perdured through a very full and exhausting congress schedule. Indigenous saints and blessed - especially

the martyrs - continue to be vibrant faith influences on Asia's Catholics. A clear expression of gratitude was heard for the self-sacrificing missionaries who laboured to bring the Christian faith to Asia. A marvellous musical drama with over 400 student performers portrayed how the faith arrived and took root in Thailand. Personal journeys of faith were spontaneously shared in the small discussion groups.

Prayer in many forms seemed to be like a golden thread integrating the five-day assembly. Solemn daily celebrations of the Eucharist were presided by five cardinals (Crescenzo Sepe, Papal Envoy; Ivan Dias, CEP Prefect; Michael Michai Kitbunchu, Bangkok; Ricardo Vidal, Cebu* Telesphore Placidus Toppo, Ranchi). Creative morning prayers, based on the themes of light, colour, and water, invited participants to focus on God's presence in the Congress.

There was perpetual Eucharistic adoration in a special chapel. National groups sang their indigenous songs for communion-time meditation. There was the recitation of the mission rosary and a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament on the Friday evening of the Congress; confessions were available during morning prayer and the holy hour. A large "Jesus-Asia" mission cross was given to each country delegation during the closing Eucharist; each delegate received a smaller necklace version of the mission cross. All received a special papal blessing during the Mass on **World Mission Sunday**. In a word, prayer was woven well into the design of the Congress.

An Asian Tapestry

As a specialized art form, tapestry is unique. Woven from various threads - silk, wool, and cotton, bright and dark - a tapestry reveals the artist's imagination and design. Each tapestry narrates a story, it captures life, it invites reflection.

At the Asian Mission Congress, the Holy Spirit wove a unique tapestry of the Story of Jesus in Asia. How beautiful it was to witness the master-weaver at work! Even the less than perfect threads helped shape the final design.

Mission belongs to God, it is his project, his work, his masterpiece. Only God's weaving is important. His thoughts, his ways, his artistry shape the final tapestry - a masterpiece not made by human hands (cf. Heb9:11)!

