

# Mission in Asia Today - Relations with Other Religions Existing in Asia

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Archbishop Gracias, [absossie@sancharnet.in](mailto:absossie@sancharnet.in) and [ahpossie@rediffmail.com](mailto:ahpossie@rediffmail.com) , presented this address to the Urbanian University in Rome to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Ad gentes*, the Vatican II decree on the missionary activity of the Church. He was Archbishop of Agra and President of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India. Today he has been transferred to the See of Bombay. In the address he analyzes the Asian situation and presents the mission under the four aspects of Presence, Animation of the temporal order, Dialogue with other religions at various levels and Proclamation of the person and work of Jesus Christ. He shows how under different circumstances different aspects are emphasized, but all are needed for a complete mission. This leads him to outline the attitudes that must animate the missionaries today, whether they are lay or religious, ordained or non ordained.

The title of this article is suggestive, for Mission in Asia cannot today be considered apart from a relationship with other religions. The two concepts go together. We are in a unique epoch in history. If we lead lives of faith, the Spirit speaks to us through the signs of the times. The strengths and opportunities of a given time and place are an invitation from God to conduct mission in a particular manner. No reflection on mission would be complete or even adequate without taking into account the context in which mission has to be carried out.

## **A. The Asian situation**

Asia is a vast mosaic comprising over forty countries where two thirds of the world's population live. Two countries alone, China and India, together make up half of the world's population. Many would say that it is impossible to characterize the Asian situation in general. In fact great disparities are present. On one side there would be a vast population which is a-religious, if one takes into account, for example, the situation of people officially under Communis regimes. On the other hand there is deep religiosity in a vast number of people. There are vast areas of peace and co-existence; but in some parts the bitterest of conflicts are being fought for decades. Some parts of Asia are the most developed and very affluent; in other parts the people are among the most deprived in the world.

Nevertheless there are some general characteristics of Asia that we could identify if we were to study Asia closely.

1. Asia has a plurality of *cultures*. If culture is described as the complex of factors that create a mindset, there is no area in the world that is devoid of culture. Culture is a social heritage, a distinctive way of life of a group of people. In a sociological sense, culture refers to the historic totality of the way of feeling, the system of thinking, the pattern of behaviour, social relationships and other capabilities and habits which characterize a group's adjustment to environment over a period of time. What makes Asia special are two factors about its culture. First, the multiplicity of cultures existing in the same country. One would be amazed for example, if one moved from South India to North India that the language, the modes of dress, the food habits, the mentality and even ethnic origin are totally different. Secondly, these cultures are highly developed cultures. Some of the most ancient civilizations in the world have their roots in Asia.

2. Asia is a land of a great plurality of *religions*. Many of the world's major religions were born in Asia: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Sikhism and Jainism. Because of the universal dimensions of Jesus, we often forget that Jesus himself was born in Asia. Besides there are any number of tribal religions in Asia. What stands out here is not only that there is a big number of religions, but also the fact that they have survived for hundreds and thousands of years.

3. Asia is a land where much poverty can be found. There are economic giants, it is true, but there are also some of the countries with the lowest per capita income in the world. The same would be true within a country itself. To give an example of India: in big cities like Mumbai and Delhi, some of the world's richest families live side by side with slums where people lack adequate food, clothing or shelter. While many urban areas show signs of progress and great hope, many rural areas remain deprived of the benefits of progress and sink into ever deeper poverty.

4. Against this backdrop one can also notice a growing *political maturity* in Asia. Colonization has practically disappeared. Even though there exist different forms of Government, the sovereignty of the people is being recognized more and more. People dissatisfied with their rulers are able to change Governments peacefully - though besides the Communist countries, there still remain pockets where oppressive or semi-oppressive Government rule.

5. Asian countries are no longer insular. *Globalization* has had its

inevitable impact on Asia. Development in the field of communication coupled with globalization has resulted in the media flooding Asian homes and offices with consequent influences on the value systems of our people. Barriers that governments attempted to put up have gradually been crumbling and it is inevitable that this will happen all over.

A resultant factor is also becoming more visible, *the secularization of society*. The media is largely responsible for this and family life is affected and a materialistic mentality is infecting particularly urban Asia.

## **B. Theology of Mission**

What is mission against this backdrop? The explicit mandate given by Jesus to preach the Gospel makes the missionary nature of the Church clear. The Church cannot but be missionary if she is to be true to herself (*Ad gentes*, 1-2). When we think of mission, we think immediately of the indefatigable missionaries who came to Asia from Europe and America and travelled first on foot or horseback, then on push cycles and motorcycles, to preach the Gospel. They combined their preaching mission with educational initiatives and health care, while others got into the socio-economic field, generally with aid and sometimes animation.

Celebrating the fortieth anniversary of *Ad gentes* it is appropriate that we go back to this basic document of Vatican II to get the principles of mission. *Ad gentes*, taken together with *Nostra aetate*, distinguished four types of evangelizing activity:

a. *Evangelization by Presence*: Often this is the first type of the *plantatio Ecclesiae*. I think of the Lord's hidden life, which was also redemptive, as evangelization by Presence. The incarnation transformed the world into a true temple of God by the Word's very presence. Naturally our presence must have authentic witness value. One is reminded of the words of Francis of Assisi "Preach always; if necessary use words."<sup>1</sup>

b. *Animating the temporal world*: Evangelization is making the reign of God present. It means liberating all in creation that is distorted from the effects of sin: taking away ignorance, injustice, exploitation, untruth, disunity, and planting in their place the human values as found in the Gospel.<sup>2</sup> This is evangelization in a very real sense because by it the Gospel permeates the temporal sphere. Other citizens recognize the worth of these values and take on themselves to make them present in their areas.

<sup>1</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 5-6; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21 <sup>2</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 12; *Redemptoris Missio*, 58-59

c. *Ad gentes* and, in a more detailed way, *Nostra aetate*, recognizing the pluri-religious situation of our times mention *Dialogue* as integral to mission. This has been further developed in subsequent documents from the Magisterium, especially by Pope John Paul II who not only spoke often about it, but by his historic 1986 Assisi meeting, raised dialogue among religious leaders to a new level. After Vatican II there has been a general awakening of interest in this field. Many studies have been made on this topic.<sup>3</sup>

d. Finally the fourth aspect of mission spoken of by *Ad gentes* is *Proclamation*. We proclaim not only by making Gospel values present in the temporal sphere, but by explicitly mentioning the name of Jesus and his message to make him known and loved by peoples.<sup>4</sup> For those whom the grace of God touches and who are open to receiving him, this may result in baptism. But faith and baptism are a gift of God and do not come from human planning and strategy.

### C. Mission in Asia

What does this mean for our mission in Asia today? How do these principles of mission apply to our Asian situation? Our evangelization efforts, while being deeply Christian, must also be truly Asian. I would like to take up Presence, Animating the temporal world, Dialogue and Proclamation separately and see what they require from us in the Asian background. These are not four stages in our work; they are simultaneous forms to carry on the mission according to the context of the living situation.

1. *Presence*: We said that the Asian situation is characterized by debilitating poverty, developed cultures and ancient religions, as also its openness to progress. These factors would need a specific response from us in our evangelizing presence. To have a Christian presence in a situation of poverty, we must be poor like Christ was poor. Big institutions that jarringly stand out in the midst of a village situation of extreme poverty could be a counter-witness. A simple life style in the manner of food, dress, housing and means of transportation can have authentic witness value.<sup>5</sup>

In the past the presence of a missionary often connoted political,

<sup>3</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 2; *Redemptoris Missio*, 55; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 31

<sup>4</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 13; *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22; *Redemptoris Missio*, 44; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 10

<sup>5</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 13

cultural or social superiority. This is not respectful of a developed culture. A true evangelizing presence must give an opportunity to the Gospel to be inculturated: to evangelize the local culture and to make the Gospel itself find expression in the local cultures. Starting from *Ad gentes* and *Evangelii nuntiandi*, and then *Redemptoris missio* and *Ecclesia in Asia*, the stress has been on inculturation, which theologically flows from the Incarnation of the Lord. However more strenuous efforts accompanied by deep theological research in this field are called for.<sup>6</sup>

Dialogue accompanies presence. We could hardly have an evangelizing presence without engaging in dialogue.<sup>7</sup> Mission in Asia is dialogue. Our presence is not meant to insulate us but to facilitate an osmosis between different religions. Our interaction begins with the simple followers of other beliefs, and continues with leaders of the religious groups and then with the spiritual Gurus. Dialogue is so important a factor of our mission in Asia that it needs more extensive treatment.

2. *Ad gentes* spoke of *Animating of the temporal sphere* with Gospel values, which are genuine human values. From early times, the Church was involved in this apostolate.<sup>8</sup> The Church sees education, health care and socio-economic work as part of her mission. Our schools are meant to plant Kingdom values in the lives and hearts of the students in our institutions. When these students become leaders in society, these values could gradually permeate and transform society. All socio-economic projects and health care are meant to liberate people from the shackles of moral, physical or social bondage: the effect of sin in the world. The Asian situation is characterized in many spots by the darkness of poverty. Animation of the temporal sphere is precisely meant to combat this situation head-on. It is only when forces of selfishness, egoism, corruption and injustice take priority over authentic values that people do not make progress, are unable to resurrect themselves from the oppressive situations in which they are, so that the bonds of structural sin that hold them back cannot be broken.

This animation of the temporal sphere should be carried on with great sensitivity to the local cultures. Christ did not come to destroy culture, but to purify it and enrich it.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes even the needy reject

<sup>6</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 22; *Redemptoris Missio*, 52

<sup>7</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 55; *Ecclesia in Asia*, 31

<sup>8</sup> *Deus Caritas est*, 22-25

<sup>9</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20

socio-economic projects because we have not consciously realized this.

Networking with other religious groups for this can result in a more effective animation of the temporal sphere. The "rays of truth" in other religions that Vatican II speaks of show themselves in an ardent desire that all people of good will have to better the lives of the marginalized. Working together with those of other beliefs is an effective means of proclaiming the Gospel, both for the beneficiaries and for those who interact with us for this purpose.

3. *Dialogue with other religions:* In Mt 9:38, Jesus does not condemn the other merely "because he was not following us." Pope Paul VI said that "Dialogue is a new way of being Church today." We have to develop a spirit of dialogue with religions, cultures and with the poor. We begin this dialogue conscious of the presence of the Spirit of God in all human beings, their cultures and religions.<sup>10</sup> In the Asian context, with its great pluri-religious situation it is evident that there can be no mission without inter-religious dialogue. The Church has barely 2.6% of the Asian population. Only East Timor and the Philippines have a majority Catholic population. Without these two countries the Catholic population comes down to less than 2%. When one realizes that two-thirds of the world's population lives in Asia, it strikes one how much the Gospel has still to be preached.

For those who are authentically living the Gospel, every dialogue becomes proclamation because every contact with the other is a witness, animating the temporal sphere with Gospel values or even proclaiming the name of Jesus our Master.

### *Types of Dialogue*

Immersed as we are in a predominantly multi-religious milieu, the *Dialogue of Life* is the first form of dialogue. When we harmoniously live together, we accept each other, learn from each other and appreciate each other. Common celebrations of religious functions are a good means of dialogue of life." However, there can be no real dialogue of life without inculturation, an immersion in our milieu. Inculturation thus becomes a missiological imperative. In the past some efforts suffered a set back because we mistakenly began inculturation with the liturgy, instead of with life itself.

<sup>10</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 28

<sup>1</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 31

The next form is *Dialogue of Action*. This is a particularly potential area for taking up socio-economic issues: tackling together community problems, like the lack of basic facilities, fighting for human rights, opposition to unjust Government policies, promoting the education of the illiterate, combating corruption, can become areas of intense Dialogue of Action. Papal pronouncements have often said that these socio-economic works are not in the periphery of the Church's mission, but at the heart of it. Pope Benedict XVI has beautifully described this in Part II of his Encyclical *Deus caritas est*.

Third is the *Dialogue of Spiritual Experience*. Each one's experience of God can help open the other to a spiritual experience. This is a much deeper level of dialogue and needs both authentic understanding of one's own religion and a deep living of it. Many centres of spiritual exchange have been set up to promote dialogue with Asian faith traditions: in Japan the Zen Meditation centres and in India the ashrams where priests and religious have attempted to live an eremitical life in the style of the Hindu gurus. This Ashram movement embodies the perennial quest for spiritual freedom and the quest for the Absolute.

Finally there is the *Dialogue of Theological Exchange*. Here points on doctrine are taken up. Reflection on the meaning of good and evil; the purpose of life; the idea of reward and punishment, the understanding of life after death. These are just some of the points that may come up for discussion at this level.<sup>12</sup> The list is endless. But the end result is always a deeper appreciation of the beliefs of the other and a greater harmony in the community. Christians must understand themselves as pilgrims with believers of other religions in pursuit of the mystery of the Divine. This is a whole new area that has vast scope.

4. *Proclamation*: The mission requires us to listen to the other and to share our faith with them. Evangelization is never complete without proclamation of the name of Jesus. Our dialogue would not be authentic if the name of Jesus is kept hidden as a strategy. Genuine dialogue, once it has generated mutual openness and trust, has to result in proclaiming what we truly and fully believe: that Jesus Christ is the fullness of revelation, that the Father has sent His Son into the world to redeem it and that the Spirit continues to be operative in the Church and in the world.

<sup>12</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 1-2 *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*,

Specially in Asia proclamation of the Gospel pre-supposes an atmosphere of dialogue. Christ has to be understood, lived and expressed in the local language (EA 20). The miracle of tongues at Pentecost signifies that our proclamation must be inculturated, so that the miracle be repeated in our times (EA 22).

Unfortunately the adherents of some religions have seen the proclamation of the Gospel as a threat to them. Fundamentalist groups have therefore sought to stop the preaching and even the socio-economic activities by Christian missionaries. Influenced by these powerful groups some Governments have imposed restrictions on the activities of our clergy and religious, e.g., restricting the numbers of priests and nuns, controlling their activity and accessibility to funds, enacting anti-conversion legislation, etc. This however has not in any way, dampened the fervour of missionaries ready to preach the Gospel and to live and die for it. The last decade has produced many martyrs for the faith in Asia,<sup>13</sup> but the blood of martyrs continues to be the seed of Christianity even today, as it was from the very beginnings of the Church.

Where there are tribal religions - and there are many in several parts of Asia - the situation is different. Many of these natural religions seem a preparation for the Gospel. They take almost naturally to the message of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of their own religion. He is the "unknown God" whom they worship (St Paul), and there is no feeling of threat for them. This explains the large number of tribals who have become Christians in several parts of Asia.

#### **D. The Challenges Ahead**

Mission in Asia today presents us with several challenges for the future. Asian theologians have been continuously grappling with the challenge of how to proclaim Jesus in a situation that is overwhelmingly non-Christian, that has ancient well-developed cultures and that have ancient religions that people have followed for centuries and found solace in. Not having encountered Jesus or having encountered only an incomplete or distorted image of our Saviour, non-Christians are unable to appreciate the true richness of the Gospel and the values that Jesus gave us by his word and work and by his life and death. To many such people, an assertive approach would seem threatening and would result in immediate rejection.

<sup>13</sup>*Ecclesia in Asia*, 10

While dialogue is accepted by all as a vital component of mission, initiatives for dialogue have often been hampered because of a lack of clarity about the principles of dialogue: an insufficient theological motivation, too few significant facts, lack of guidelines, and a scarcity of competent and trained personnel. True dialogue, while keeping us consistent with and faithful to our own religious traditions, must make us open to the other.

Dialogue has sometimes caused difficulties for people working in the field. If one can be saved by other religions, why preach the Gospel, why baptize? Our efforts at dialogue should in no way hamper our proclamation. The two go hand in hand in all genuine dialogue. If mission is not to falter and if genuine dialogue is to be promoted, the principles should be clear. Lack of clarity will result in lack of motivation.

Religious priests, sisters and brothers are a vast and powerful army of labourers in the vineyard. Institutions are run by them as disciples of Jesus, in imitation of him and in response to his call. A theological understanding of the evangelical value of our educational institutions, health care services and socio-economic projects is necessary for all to experience an enkindled and renewed missionary zeal.<sup>14</sup>

A significant feature of evangelization today is the inspiration many lay faithful feel to go out and spread the Gospel.<sup>15</sup> As individuals or as groups and communities, with a life-long commitment or for a period of some years, they go out, under the guidance and direction of the local bishop, to spread the Gospel. This is a new gift of the Spirit for our times which we are invited to recognize, encourage and nurture.

Globalization is spoken of as one of the features of modern times. It must be seen as an opportunity rather than as a threat. With the world becoming smaller and the media bringing messages instantaneously to all parts of this global village, the Good News of Jesus Christ can be made more accessible to all men and women.<sup>16</sup> The current process of globalization creates a new context for religious communities as it facilitates the extension of their presence and activities.

This then is our challenge for the future: To understand fully the soul of Asia; to accept wholeheartedly the call to mission and to learn how to bring effectively to the people of Asia the life, passion, death and

<sup>14</sup> *Deus Caritas est*, 25

<sup>15</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 45; *Redemptoris Missio*, 71

<sup>16</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 48; *Redemptoris Missio*, 37

resurrection of Jesus Christ and its fruits for the world.<sup>17</sup>

*Ad gentes* was a landmark in the missionary life of the Church. Successive Popes, Paul VI, John Paul II and now Benedict XVI, have spoken of the pressing need to bring Jesus to all people. Every priest, religious and lay faithful by virtue of baptism is called to be a missionary: a carrier of the Good News to all peoples.

### Conclusion

May I conclude with a few remarks on the calling of the bearers of the Good News in Asia today.

1. The first prerequisite for all mission work is faith in the Lord. There can be no authentic witness, no genuine dialogue and, no effective proclamation without a deep faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup> The mission is not for those with a weak faith. If uncertain in faith, the message will only confuse. The deep faith-consciousness that inspired missionaries to give up land and home and come to preach the Gospel continues to inspire those who even today are active in the spread of the Gospel. Only strengthened and emboldened by this deep faith will the mission be courageously carried on.

2. The second pre-requisite is a deep love for the people. The first task missionaries undertake is to learn the language of the people so that they can communicate. But more than the language of words, it is the language of the heart that communicates effectively and deeply. This is especially so in Asia: if there is no genuine love for the people in their culture, their religious beliefs and even in their poverty, the messenger will not be accepted, the message given will not be received. The world is in urgent need of men and women, clerics and lay faithful, who are witnesses of a lived faith, a firm hope and an ardent love. It has need of prophets and poets of the God who is present in the midst of the lights and shadows of history, who wants life and a happy future for all and whose love makes no distinction of race, colour of the skin and religion.

3. Where there is a deep faith in the Lord and a genuine love for the people, it will result in an openness of Spirit: an appropriate response to the call of the times. This would mean an openness to the teachings of the magisterium - with the developments in theology and ecclesiology. It would also mean openness to modern communication media: print and electronic - which God has made available to us. Our age of

<sup>17</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 21

<sup>18</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 23

professionalism requires of the missionary an openness to use the advances of theological and scientific progress for work in mission.

4. And finally, combining as it were all the above, a committed discipleship of the Lord is essential.<sup>19</sup> Only a true disciple of Jesus can have the dedication that looks not to the self, but to the other. The Asian soul is more sensitive to the messenger than the message. The example of dedicated and selfless service always continues to inspire and attract. *Redemptoris missio* said that a missionary is a contemplative in action. It follows that a deep experience of God in prayer and contemplation is necessary if a lasting impact on the people is to result. *Ecclesia in Asia* states that the chief ingredients of Asian religiosity are renunciation, detachment, humility, simplicity and silence. To this, one may add certain religious and cultural values in which the people of Asia take pride: harmony, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, thirst for philosophic enquiry and a highly developed sense of community.<sup>20</sup> In fact this is the core of what it is to be truly Asian.

The Asian soul is a searching soul: searching for truth, searching for the Absolute, searching for the Transcendent. Spiritual realities matter more than material ones. Prayer, contemplation and the values of the Spirit attract. Pope John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Asia* prayed that the third millennium would see a harvest of souls in Asia. This hope of our much loved and remembered Pontiff can only become a reality if we become deeply conscious of the reality of Asia, are delicately sensitive to its different aspects and accordingly carefully adapt our approach to mission. If Mother Teresa was able to make such a deep impact, it was because she communed with the soul of Asia, its diverse cultures, its many religions and its situation of poverty and so was able to whisper the name of Jesus to the soul of Asia.

May Mary, the most true disciple of Jesus, who opened her heart to all in need and continues to do so, who lived in unshakable faith in God, guide and inspire all our missionaries in Asia to bring Jesus to the Asian continent as she brought Jesus to the world.

<sup>19</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 90  
<sup>20</sup> *Ecclesia in Asia*, 6