

Call to be the one Church. An Asian Catholic Perspective

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1. Rediscovering the Asian roots of Christianity

Being not more than 3% of the population of Asia, where nearly two thirds of the people of the world live, Christians are a “small flock” (*Lk* 12:32), immersed in the diverse, contrasting and even conflicting realities of Asia. Yet, far from considering themselves to be a closed and timid minority, they are alive in the faith and growing steadily, especially during the last decades, not just in number, but what is more important, in their own self-awareness as disciples of Jesus in their Asian cultural identity.

Asia is the cradle of the world's major religions and this includes Christianity. It was the continent where Christ chose to be born, live, die and rise. The entire Biblical drama (except for some of Paul's travels) was enacted on Asian soil. Already in the early centuries Christianity reached the two great nations of Asia: India probably during the first and China by the sixth or seventh.

The Good News of Christ from the East penetrated ever more deeply into the cultural structure of the West, and from there, it spread further to America and Africa. In Asia itself, however, the same journey still remains slow and difficult. The majority of Asian countries came into contact with Christianity only in the second half of the second millennium. By then, however, the Christian faith did not come with the freshness and openness of the origins, it was laden with doctrine and the life experience of the West, with established institutional structure, and unfortunately, with the ambiguous support of colonial forces and with signs of division.

It is therefore a sad irony, that Christianity, though born in Asia, is still today regarded in most Asian countries, as a “foreign import”, and that Christian churches are still looked upon as “bonsai-churches”, trees transplanted from abroad and still growing in borrowed pots. Conscious of the burden and the resource of the past, the Church in Asia now tries to look back on her history not with resentment or polemic, but with thankfulness and a healthy critical spirit to decipher God's plan of salvation realised in human events. Efforts are being made to “rediscover the Asian face of Jesus”, to promote contextual Asian theologies, to search for “Asian ways of being Church”.

Three events within the Catholic Church have marked the rhythm of the movement toward a new way of understanding and being truly Asian Christian communities.

- The Second Vatican Council has been characterized as the most significant event of the century, and not only within the Catholic Church. Even if Asian bishops and theologians were playing only a minor role in it, the impact of the Council on the Asian Churches is clearly discernable, especially in the field of inculturation and dialogue.
- The next important event for the Catholic Churches in Asia was the foundation of the *Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (FABC) in 1970. In the course of its now almost 40 years of operation, the FABC has developed into an extremely valuable and important instrument for all its member churches in Asia. It unites the Churches, creating bonds of mutual knowledge and understanding, friendship and solidarity. Due to the various activities under

the auspices of the FABC the Asian Catholic Churches were enabled to develop common guidelines for theological orientation, pastoral work, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue.

- The Asian bishop have used the occasion of the “Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops” held in Rome 1998, to express their problems and hope, their gratitude to God their need for conversion, and their theological ideas and pastoral conceptions. It is the first time that the Church in Asia has discussed its own mode of being on such a large scale. Before the pope and the Roman curia, humbly but forcefully, the Asian bishops have affirmed that the churches of Asia not only have received much, but also have something to offer to the universal Church.

2. Commitment of the Asian Catholic Church to Christian Unity

Church division, which was the heritage of historical circumstances in the West and was imported into Asia, is perceived as a painful reality. Of all religions Christianity appears to be the most divided. Because of the confusing multiplicity of churches and ecclesial bodies, and because of the frequent mutual suspicion that have characterized relations among the different groups, the unity to which all Christians should bear witness, is not visible to people. An extreme example: in China Protestants and Catholics are considered to be members of two distinct religions. Precisely in Asia, where Christians are a tiny minority, the division among them is seen as a scandal, “a counter-witness to Jesus Christ by many in Asia who are searching for harmony and unity through their own religions and culture”¹. Therefore Christian churches in Asia are especially impelled to work for unity and communion.

It must be said that in the Catholic Churches of Asia in general, the primary emphasis has been given to inter-religious dialogue, considered to be more urgent and more important than ecumenical dialogue. Happily, Catholics have come gradually to realize that both dialogues are indispensable for the life of the Church, for ultimately, effective dialogue with other religions presupposes that Christians can have one and the same language, “speaking the truth in love” (*Eph* 4:15), that they appreciate one another and have taken up the journey towards full unity together. Indeed, the necessity for inter-religious dialogue makes ecumenical dialogue even more urgent. Pope Benedict XVI has issued an unmistakable call to the church when he affirms convincingly: “Ecumenism is not an option, but a sacred duty”², a call he proclaimed at the beginning of his pontificate and reiterated several times.

A sign of growth in ecumenism in Asia can be seen in the ever active participation of the Catholic Church in ecumenical associations. In 1994 the CCA (*Christian Conference of Asia*) and the FABC founded the *Asian Movement for Christian Unity* (AMCU). To date, the movement has had four meetings: the first (Hong Kong, 1995) with the theme “Theology of Ecumenism”; the second (Bali, 1998) focused on “Ecumenical Formation as Churches of Asia towards the next Millennium”; the third (Chiang Mai, 2001) “Giving Shape to a New Ecumenical vision of Asia” and the fourth (Kuala Lumpur, 2007), “Our Common Witness in Contemporary Asia”³. The two bodies engaged themselves in joint projects such as the *Congress of Asian Theologians* (CATS)⁴ and the *Asia Conference of Theological Students* (ACTS). The activities carry out by the CCA-FABC jointly

¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, 1999, n.30

² Pronounced on 23 November 2007, available at : <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=10884>

³ At the fourth Meeting participated also the Evangelical Fellowship of Asia (EFA).

⁴ Six Congresses have been held so far: 1. Suwon, Korea, 1997: *Asian Theology in a Changing Asia: Asian Theological Agenda Towards the 21st Century*; 2. Bangalore, India, 1999: *Celebrating Life Together*; 3. Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 2001: *Visioning New Life Together among Asian Religions*; 4. Chiang Mai, Thailand, 2003: *Building Communities of Peace: Asian Theologians in Search of New Pedagogies of Encounter*; 5. Hong Kong, 2006: *Sharing Hope in a New World*; 6. Iloilo City, Philippines, 2009: *Doing Mission from the Underside: A Challenge to the Understanding of Mission since 1910*.

have brought Asian Christians closer. Their coming together, thinking, discussing, sharing, praying and working together fraternally and on an equal footing, encourages the endeavour of promoting unity on a grassroots level and continues to inspire the greater Asian ecumenical scene.

3. Asian realities as resources for theology and ground for ecumenism

Despite the complexity and diversity of the Asian context, there are some common features that mark the whole continent, some challenges that all Christian churches have to face in their life and mission, some contextual realities that can become resources for theology. By interacting with these realities in the spirit of Christ, Christians of different traditions can come closer to one another and can strengthen together their identity of Asian Christians.

a) Multi-religious context

Living in a multi-religious context Christianity has tried to emphasize what distinguishes Christians from the rest of the people. Perhaps it is now the time to get back to the central Gospel of universal love. Christians have to learn to forge new relationship with their neighbors, and let the universal message of love flow freely in the bloodstream of the society. Asian Christian Churches need to work together to develop a language of relationship and of encounter. Their identity-consciousness is not a matter of seclusion from others, but an awareness of being bound intimately with the people around them. There are surprising ways in which the person of Jesus and the message of the Gospel draw the hearts and minds of the people.

b) Inculturation

The engagement with culture is a constant commitment of the Church through history and everywhere, but it has a special urgency in Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign. Asian Christians had a Christian identity that was often suspected as being diminishing, if not disloyal, to their national identity. Hence, Asians have the need to harmonize two identities into a single identity to live and act as Asian Christians, while Hindus, Buddhists, Confucians or Shintoists find themselves in their 'natural habitat' for their religious practices.

Asia has also been blessed by God with ancient traditions, profound philosophies, rich civilizations and insightful wisdom. Inculturation is a continuous process of keeping alive the interaction between the Gospel and these rich cultures, so that the Good News of Jesus can touch profoundly minds and hearts, be integrated with life and flow into spirituality and options for action.

The Church in Asia, under the guidance of the Spirit, should never cease to learn the art of proposing and offering, being inviting and fascinating, involving with gentleness and respect, with deep understanding and in the spirit of dialogue. This is a process that involves all Christians, and it is a field of fruitful collaboration and constructive ecumenism among the Churches.

c) Witness of life and spirituality

All Asian philosophical traditions give particular importance to experience or an immediate relationship with the reality. Asians esteem holy men and women who are deep in their spiritual perception. The Gurus in Hinduism and Buddhism, the sages in Chinese culture, the spiritual leaders in the Islamic tradition in Indonesia, the rabbis in Israel, attract their followers by their life before inspiring them with their wisdom. Actually, this is what happened with Jesus and his disciples. Thus witness of life plays a leading role in the communication of faith⁵.

Together with holiness of life, Asia values contemplation, spirituality and prayer. Regretfully in

⁵ *Ecclesia in Asia*, n.23.

Asia Christianity is known in general more for its magnificent organizational structures and efficiency, for its works of charity, for its splendid Churches, for its European style of religious practices, and less for its spirituality. Asia's thirst for the divine challenges Christianity to give more evident witness of a praying Church, a Church in continue pilgrimage towards the fullness of life, a Church lead by the Holy Spirit and therefore enabled to lead people in the search of God.

Even in the context of ecumenism, holiness of life and spirituality play an important role. In fact, "Spiritual Ecumenism" occurs frequently in recent documents⁶. It is described by *Unitatis Redintegratio* as "the soul of ecumenism" (n.8).

d) Ethical and human promotion

Asia is marked today by swift and far-reaching transformation, a continent undergoing profound social change, along with globalization and the break-up of traditional societies. Whereas for millennia people have looked up to religion for practical guidance in life, we note today that traditional ethical role of religion is gradually being taken over by new social movement – movements for human rights, for sustainable environment, emancipation of women, and so on. Christians have to take active part in the newly developing moral universe. As pilgrim of the same journey, Christians can share with others the light of Christ that illumine the moral choices to be made in different spheres of human life. In the service of the human family, they are united with all people of good will, striving to build with them a civilization of love, founded upon the universal values of peace, justice, solidarity and freedom, as it is in God's plan. When this plan is not respected, and human dignity is violated, which is occurring in many parts of Asia, Christians are called to be the counter-cultural embodiment of hope and love. And they have to be so as a united body of Christ.

e) Poverty and injustice

Despite being a continent of plentiful resources and great civilizations, and despite the phenomenal economic growth of many countries in recent years, Asia is still a continent of the poor. More than half the population suffers poverty, exploitation and the consequences of war. This situation shapes the Asian Church on different levels, that of self-awareness, theological reflection, pastoral ministry and also ecumenical endeavor. The Bishops at the Asian Synod affirm: "In seeking to promote human dignity, the Church shows a preferential love of the poor and the voiceless, because the Lord has identified himself with them in a special way"⁷. The Church in Asia strives to make the love of God felt by the poor and commits herself to the eradication of all forms of oppression. Furthermore, the Bishops called on Asian Catholics to adopt a lifestyle of simplicity in solidarity with the poor and as imitation of Jesus, so that the Church herself may become a Church of the poor and for the poor.

Urged by the same love of God Christians of different traditions are working with increasing frequency together to meet the needs and the sufferings of the poor. Before the world, united action on the part of Christians is the most visible and credible witness to the truth they profess together: God is love.

f) Women

⁶ Cf W. KASPER, *A Handbook of Spiritual Ecumenism*, New City Press 2007. The Handbook provides insightful perspectives for implementing spiritual ecumenism and concrete courses of action to be taken in the pursuit of unity. It is grounded in the documents that have shaped the Catholic Church's engagement in seeking Christian unity, those of the Second Vatican Council, as well as others such as the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

⁷ With the very eloquent symbol of "a fire that can only be lit by something that is itself on fire", the Bishops at the Asian Synod pointed out the need for holy men and women, "who are themselves on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known more widely, love more deeply and followed more closely". See *Ecclesia in Asia*, n.34.

“Within Christianity, more than in any other religion, and since its very beginning, women have had a special dignity...; it is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potential has yet been made clear”⁸. Pope Paul VI said this more than 30 years ago. In these years much has been achieved in recognizing the dignity and vocation of women, but there are still places in Asia where women are discriminated against or undervalued. Christians must work together to bring about a change of mentality and attitude.

At the same time there is a growing appreciation of the contribution of women to the Church and to all humanity. With their typical “feminine genius” women offer a new perspective of reading the Bible, they find out effective ways to incarnate the Gospel message in daily life, they will also discover interesting ways of promoting Christian Unity if they are given enough space and trust.

4. Reflections on Ecclesiology

Ecclesiology is always the central issue of ecumenical dialogue and now the focus of our Assembly. Studying the Faith and Order document *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity has concisely expressed the Catholic ecclesiological view¹⁰ and indirectly answered some of the questions formulated in the 2006 Porto Alegre text on ecclesiology *Called to be the One Church*. I would just like to highlight two points which are ecumenically relevant and to which Asian Catholics are particularly sensitive.

a) Ecclesiology of Communion

In recent years the theme of communion (*koinonía/communio*) has become central to the ecclesiology of many Christian churches. The Orthodox and Anglicans have traditionally made much of this category. The Lutherans tend to speak of themselves less frequently as a confession and increasingly as a communion. The idea of the Church as communion has been underscored in various ecumenical dialogues, some of which are still in progress¹¹. From the Catholic perspective Pope John Paul II declared that the concept of communion lies “at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding”¹². The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued in 1992 a *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some Aspects of the Church understood as Communion*, in which is stated that the concept of communion (*koinonía*), prominent in the texts of the Second Vatican Council, “is very suitable for expressing the core of the mystery of the Church, and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology”.

In the teaching of the Catholic Church the concept of communion is not an univocal one. As a principle of love, it refers primarily to the interior relatedness of men and women to the triune God. But it also points to the relationships among the faithful themselves among the pastors, and among particular churches in the larger communion of the universal Church. Ecclesial

⁸ Speech of Paul VI To the participants in the National Congress of the Italian Women Centre (CIF) (December 6, 1976), quoted by John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter “Mulieris Dignitatem”*, 1988, n.1.

⁹ *Mulieris Dignitatem*, n. 31.

¹⁰ See *A Catholic contribution Toward Revising “The Nature and Mission of the Church*

¹¹ The Canberra Assembly of the World Council of churches (1991) issued an important statement: *The Church as Koinonia: Gift and Calling*. The fifth world Conference on Faith and Order, held at Santiago de Compostela in 1993, composed a message *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia*. In the recent ecclesiological studies published by Faith and Order: *The Nature and Purpose of the Church* (1998) and *The Nature and Mission of the Church. A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement* (2005) the notion of *koinonia* has been decisively opted as a fitting way of describing both the nature of the Church and the goal of ecumenical movement towards full visible unity.

¹² JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the Bishops of the United States of America*, Sept. 16, 1987; cf further the statement made in his apostolic exhortation on the laity: “The reality of the Church as communion is, then, the integrating aspect, indeed the central content of the ‘mystery’, or rather, the divine plan for the salvation of humanity” (*Christifideles laici*, 19).

communion, into which each individual is introduced by faith and by Baptism, has its centre in the Holy Eucharist, through which the Church can truly be the body of Christ. Thus the common visible sharing in the goods of salvation (*communion of holy things*), is the source and expression of the invisible communion among the sharers (*communion of saints*).

It must be said that the category of *koinonia/communio* alone does not suffice as the basis of an adequate ecclesiology, but it is well founded in Scripture and Tradition, open and all embracing. It has many attractive features, especially to the Asian mentality.

b) Kingdom-centered ecclesiology

There is an enormous shift in the Catholic Church's approach to mission after the Vatican Council. The traditional mission approach viewed Asia and the Asian people primarily as potential converts to the Church. Missionaries came to Asia to save souls. In this process, they would build up churches and communities which were usually replicas of what they had left behind in their native land. "Implanting the church" was a missionary priority. Today, missionaries are less "church-centered". This is motivated by the theological conviction that at the heart of the Christian faith and practice there lies not the Church and all her institutional elements, but rather in the reign of the Triune God. The work of the missionaries does not aim at the building up of the Church, but the Kingdom Jesus came to announce. In this kingdom-centered ecclesiology both what the church is and what it does, are defined by the reign of God, which acts as her ultimate goal. The reason for existence of Church is to serve the reign of God, that is, to help bring about what have been commonly referred to as the "kingdom values" preached by Jesus: love, gratuitous forgiveness and reconciliation, justice and peace between God and humanity, among humans themselves, and between humanity and the cosmos. The Church is only, as Vatican II puts it, a "sign and instrument" of the "Kingdom of Christ now present in mystery"¹³, "the seed and the beginning of that Kingdom"¹⁴. Thus, the eschatological dimension and the aspect of the Church as sacrament, as well as the attitude of *kenosis* are highlighted. The church lives in the service of a higher reality.

A kingdom-centered Church is by nature a missionary church. It is not inward-looking or self-absorbed, but open to the world, and above all, open to the God's life-giving Spirit working in a surprising way in and beyond Christian communities. Pope John Paul II states: "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"¹⁵.

We are convinced that the same Holy Spirit, "who fills and unites the whole Church"¹⁶ is present now in our *Faith and Order* Plenary Commission meeting, calling us to be the one Church. We believe that, notwithstanding our differences, we can find a measure of communion in our common confession of faith in Christ and in our common mission of revealing the presence of the kingdom of God in the world. In dialogue we can gain a deeper sense of lived communion, enabling us to renew our churches from the gospel, and to stand together in opposition to the dechristianizing and dehumanizing forces in contemporary society. On the way to unity, we can enjoy a communion of joint testimony, moral solidarity, prayer, spiritual relatedness, collaboration in the service of love. The Holy Spirit can use this transconfessional communion, limited and fragile though it be, as an instrument for achieving humanly unforeseeable advances.

¹³ *Lumen Gentium*, n.1.

¹⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, n.5.

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, n.28.

¹⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS, *De Veritate*, q. 29,a.4c. quoted by Vatican II, Decree *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n.2.