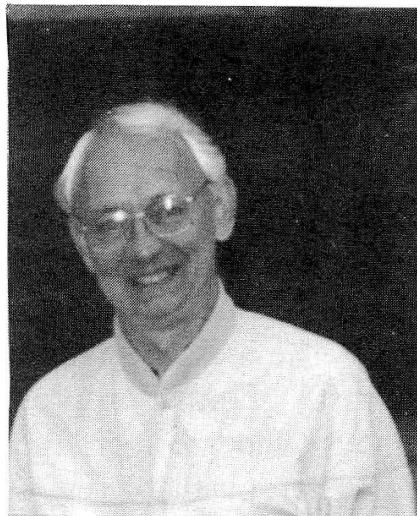


The Message from the Synod of Asian Bishops

by Peter Barry, M.M.

I had occasion recently to read the Message from the Synod of Asian Bishops which took place in Rome from April 19 to May 14. The synod was attended by more than 250 prelates from over 30 countries. What struck me about the Message was the spirit of evangelization which permeates it.



The document begins and ends with the Eucharistic Sacrifice to invoke the presence of Jesus, and of His Spirit, on the churches of Asia in all their pastoral and missionary endeavors. The synod Fathers acknowledged that Jesus Christ is the source of their strength and life. The theme running through the Message are Jesus' words (referred to three times in the text): "I have come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10)

Early on the Message expresses the Synod Fathers' gratitude to the missionaries, past and present, who brought and are bringing the faith to Asia. Funding agencies are also thanked for their generous assistance to the churches of Asia. At the same time, respect is expressed for the spiritual values contained in the other great religions of Asia, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam, and in the beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples.

The daily reading of the Word of God at Mass made the synod Fathers realize that they themselves need to be evangelized while they are striving to evangelize others. The presence of observers from other Christian Churches made them painfully aware of the divisions in Christianity, the Message says, and rekindled in them a longing for unity.

But it is in Section Five (out of the eight-sectioned Message), entitled *The Mission of the Church*, which contains the heart of the Message. This section recalls the model of the early Church, in which the Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers.” It points out that the Word of God in the Bible occupies the central place in the life of Asian Christians, and that it should nourish them spiritually.

The Synod Fathers expressed the belief that the presentation of Jesus as the personification of God’s love and forgiveness has great relevance for Asia. The liturgy also has a key role to play, because it is in the liturgy that believers can get in contact with God, who has taken the initiative to meet them. The synod Fathers are happy to note that practically everywhere in Asia the liturgy is celebrated in the language of the local people.

The message calls for “a deep missionary spirituality, rooted in Christ.” Formation programs are called for “to train priests and religious who are men and women of God devoted to prayer and living deep spiritual lives.” The document goes on to say: “Christians in Asia need to have zealous pastors and spiritual guides, and not efficient administrators.”

The Synod highlighted the need for inculturation and for inter-religious dialogue. In fact the need for a triple dialogue is posited: a dialogue with the cultures of Asia, with the religions of Asia and with the peoples of Asia. A periodic evaluation of church-run educational institutions is called for, especially regarding their content and methodology, their benefit to the recipients, the values inculcated and their impact on society.

Plans for the pastoral use of the communications media are called for. Concern is expressed for the degradation of the environment in Asian countries. The role of the laity in the mission of the church was emphasized. And support for the family (“the most endangered institution in Asia,” according to the Message), under attack by materialism and greed, was urged. Women’s consciousness of their dignity and equality with men must be respected, the document states, and youth must be formed to face the challenges of an ever-changing society. The hearts of the young people of Asia should be filled with hope to enable them to become evangelizers.

At the end of Section Five, which concerns the mission of the church, the Message urges that attention be given to migrant workers and to refugees in Asian countries.

The whole document ends with a resounding message of hope. The reasons for such hope are Jesus own words: “Take heart, it is I; have no fear” (Mt. 14:27), and “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). Appropriately, the words of Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (#80) directed towards the evangelizers themselves, are quoted. May the evangelizer, Pope Paul said, be filled with “an interior enthusiasm that nobody and nothing can quench”....so that the world of our time “may be enabled to receive the Good News, not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervor.”

Here one is reminded of the advice St. Augustine gave to the deacon Deogratias from Carthage who was experiencing difficulties teaching the doctrine to adult converts: “Remember that we are listened to with much greater satisfaction when we ourselves are enjoying our work; for what we say is affected by the very joy of which we ourselves are aware, and it proceeds from us with greater ease and more acceptance....The important thing is that everyone should enjoy catechizing; for the better we succeed in this the more attractive we shall be.” (*On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 4,5)

The document issuing from the Synod Fathers, then, is not simply a factual statement of the concerns addressed by them, but a warm, upbeat, hopeful, evangelical communication to all missionaries. It is rightfully called a *Message*. May all workers in the Lord’s Asian vineyard read it, and, as I did, be inspired by it!