

An Overview of the First Asian Mission Congress

Holy Spirit Study Centre

The First Asian Mission Congress was initiated by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, sponsored by the Office of Evangelization under the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), and co-sponsored by the Bishops' Conference of Thailand. It was held on October 18-22, 2006, in Chiang Mai, Thailand, with the theme: "The Story of Jesus in Asia: A Story of Faith and Life."

Pope Benedict XVI appointed Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, Metropolitan Archbishop of Naples and former Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, as the Papal Extraordinary Envoy for this Asian Mission Congress. Cardinal Ivan Dias, the current Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, was also present at the Congress. Many Catholic leaders from the Asian region also attended the Congress to show their support.

Fr. Saturnino Dias, the overall coordinator of the Congress, emphasized that the purpose of the Congress was to help Catholics deepen their faith, realize their rights and responsibilities in missionary work, and thus increase their awareness of the need for evangelization.

The Congress was held in the Lotus Hotel, near the airport in Chiang Mei, Thailand. Over 1000 participants came from more than 30 countries in Asia. The Congress stressed that the Catholic Church had a close and inseparable relationship with the history, culture, and peoples of Asia. At the opening ceremony on October 18, Cardinal Sepe and Cardinal Dias officiated and blessed the

“Exhibition of Missions in Asian countries” prepared by the participating countries.

Bishop John Hung of the Chiayi Diocese led the Taiwan delegation, which consisted of 19 priests,



Sisters and laity coming from seven dioceses. Auxiliary Bishop John Tong of the Hong Kong Diocese led a delegation of 17 persons from Hong Kong to attend the Congress.

The aim of this Congress was not for an exchange of knowledge, but for sharing of real life experiences of faith, especially pastoral and catechetical experiences.

The First Asian Mission Congress formally began with the Eucharistic celebration on October 19, presided over by Cardinal Dias. Cardinal Sepe, the Papal Extraordinary Envoy, delivered the opening speech and declared the Congress open. Cardinal Michael Michai Kitbunchu, Archbishop of Bangkok, and Archbishop Orlando Quevedo, OMI, Secretary General of FABC, gave their welcoming speeches on behalf of the host country and the FABC respectively. Also among the congregation were government officials from Thailand and the municipality of Chiang Mai. Buddhist leaders also attended the ceremony.

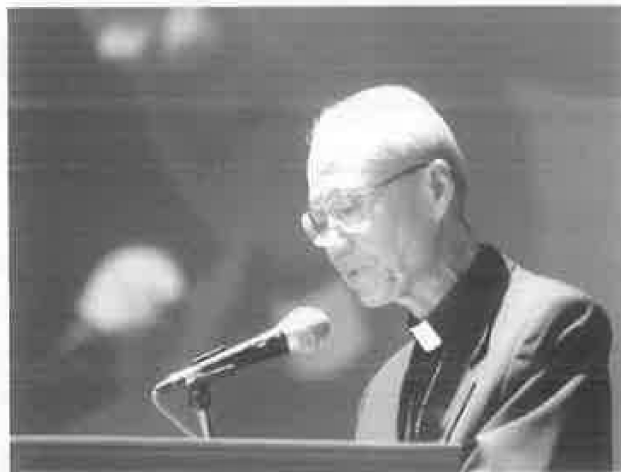
The Congress developed along the lines of “Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia.” Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle of the Diocese of Imus made the keynote speech.

Bishop Tagle said: “The Asian Mission Congress is an occasion to celebrate the calling of the Church to be missionary. It recalls with gratitude the missionary paths the Church has already taken in Asia. It rejoices at the continuing efforts at mission, with testimonies of valor, faith and love. It invites us to commit ourselves once again to the perennial bidding of Jesus Christ that we bring the Good News of the Reign of God to all the earth. It

urges us to seek new ways of understanding and doing mission, faithful to the Church's rich tradition but responsive to the realities faced by the peoples of Asia.

"It can be said that the history of the Church is the history of mission. This multi-layered and multi-colored history, dating from New Testament times, testifies to the many ways by which the Church has understood and practiced mission. We can add the fact that while the one Church is universal, it exists in local Churches that have quite unique histories and situations, and therefore quite unique experiences and notions of mission."

Bishop John Tong, Auxiliary Bishop of the Diocese of Hong Kong, was also one of the guest speakers. He gave a talk on October 19, using the seven miracles recorded in St. John's Gospel to reflect his own calling by God and the struggle of the Asian peoples in the 20th century. Bishop Tong particularly mentioned his experience of taking care of the Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s when he was a priest. Through this ministry he experienced God's presence with humankind.



The theme of October 19 was "Story of Jesus among the Peoples of Asia." The organizer used multimedia to present the spread of the Christian faith in different parts of Asia. Then two Catholics, representing two different ethnic groups, shared their faith experiences. The organizer divided all the participants into ten workshops, with each small group consisting of 12 persons. Everyone had to reflect profoundly on their personal faith history, and share with the members of their group how they had encountered Christ in their lives.

The theme of October 20 was "Story of Jesus in the Religions of Asia." On this day the Congress guided the participants

to examine the role of Jesus in the other religions. There are many different religions in Asia. Besides Christianity, there are Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Tribal/Indigenous beliefs. In many Asian countries, Catholics are only a minority, and they have to sacrifice for their faith.

The day concluded with two reflective theological syntheses by Fr. Savio Hon, SDB, and Fr. James Kroeger, MM, respectively. (Their talks are also published in this issue of *Tripod*.)

The theme of October 21 was “Story of Jesus in the Cultures of Asia,” which was a continuation of the FABC pattern of a triple dialogue with the peoples, religions, and cultures of Asia. With the use of multimedia, five sharers presented the existing conditions of different cultures in Asia. From various angles, namely, consumerism, media, new migrants, youth, and interfaith relationships, they tried to analyze the influences and challenges contemporary cultures and ideologies have on religious faith. They suggested that the Church should not neglect its work, especially among new migrants, the poor, and youth.

The fifth and last day of the Congress, October 22, was World Mission Sunday. The theme of this day was “Story of Jesus in the Life of the Church in Asia.” Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe presided at the Eucharistic celebration concluding the First Asian Mission Congress. It included ceremonies of sending on mission.

Acknowledgement

Photos on pages 6 and 7 are provided by *World Mission Magazine*.