

Walking with My Neighbor in Faith: Ten FABC Insights

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The 2006 Asian Mission Congress, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) 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.

[Faithful to the methodology of the Asian Mission Congress (narrative theological sharing and faith reflection), Fr. Kroeger has included in this article a story of a Bangladeshi beggar woman; however, limited by space, Tripod has to omit that story.]

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An FABC Introduction

FABC is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together 14 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 11 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, 28 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. 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.”

Missiological Foundations

Church’s commitment to missionary evangelization in Asia

The Catholic Church in Asia is committed to bringing 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,' (I Cor. 9:16) for it is 'the love of Christ which presses us' (II 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 observe 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 lead 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].

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." [Source: Paul VI, 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. 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].

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 center and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity.” [Source: BIMA I (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].

“We affirm ... that ‘the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center 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 neighbors 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].

Interfaith 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: “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]. Therefore, “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: BIMA I (Baguio): 5]. ... “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].

God’s saving design is at work in the Asian reality

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): 12].

FABC continues: “In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with the 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]. And again: “... 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]. Furthermore: “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 has 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.’” [Source: *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 the door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence.” [Source: FABC V (Bandung): 4.3].

Mission Praxis in the Asian Context

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 the spiritual treasures of their neighbors 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].

“Any dialogical enterprise requires certain basic attitudes, as exemplified in Christ: —a spirit of humility, openness, receptivity, and ... 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].

Specific attitudes toward Asia’s venerable religions

The FABC in its first plenary gathering enunciated a profound 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 honor? 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 (*Ad Gentes* 9). "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].

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].

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: FEISA I (Pattaya): 7.4.1-2]. Finally, “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].

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 (I 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].

“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].

Local Church: identity, ministries, and service

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: APMC (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: APMC (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].

Abbreviations

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	<i>Evangelii Nuntiandi</i>
FABC	Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences
FEISA	Faith Encounters in Asia
FIRA	Formation Institute for Interreligious Affairs
IMC	International Mission Congress (Manila)
RM	<i>Redemptoris Missio</i>
SFMWA	Statement on Filipino Migrant Workers in Asia

All 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.