

The Story of Jesus in the Religions of Asia

Asian Mission Congress Reflections

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My presentation will focus on five questions. The attempt to answer these questions is based on the recent teaching of the Church.

1. What is the Story of Jesus?

A good story draws our attention, provokes interior feelings, inspires the minds, and challenges us to a new vision of life.



The Story of Jesus is the greatest story ever told¹. Even

¹ The four Gospels are excellent versions of the Story of Jesus. The truth they bear is remarkably summarized in GS 22. The whole thrust is on the fact that humankind's solidarity with Adam is superseded irreversibly by solidarity with Christ. Hence, no one is left untouched by the mystery of the Incarnate Word: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.

He who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15; cf. 2 Cor 4:4) is himself the perfect man. To the sons of Adam he restores the divine likeness which had been disfigured from the first sin onward. Since human nature as he assumed it was not annulled, it has been raised up to a divine

today, 2000 years since his death, the force of His words and deeds on earth continues to inspire the world. The Story bounces back to the start when there was no time but only the divine love overflowing from the Triune God. The divine love is so interwoven with human life that the creation becomes an on-going entrance of God into the world which finds its climax in the Incarnation of the Word. Such a great event has turned everything upside down that even original sin provides an opportunity for the Church to chant the "felix culpa."

The Story does not end with the Ascension of Our Lord. It

dignity in our respect, too. For by his incarnation the Son of God has united himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin (cf. Heb 4:15).

As an innocent lamb he merited for us life by the free shedding of his own blood. In him God reconciled us (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19; Col 1:20-22) to himself and among ourselves; from bondage to the devil and sin he delivered us, so that each one of us can say with the Apostle: The Son of God "loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20). By suffering for us he not only provided us with an example for our imitation (cf. 1 Pt 2:21; Mt 16:24; Lk 14:27), but he also blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning.

The Christian man, conformed to the likeness of that Son who is the firstborn of many brothers (cf. Rm 8:29; Col 3:10-14), receives "the first-fruits of the Spirit" (Rm 8:23) by which he becomes capable of discharging the new law of love (cf. Rm 8:1-11). Through this Spirit, who is "the pledge of our inheritance" (Eph 1:14), the whole man is renewed from within, even to the achievement of "the redemption of the body" (Rm 8:23): "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then he who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also bring to life your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who dwells in you" (Rm 8:11; cf. 2 Cor 4:14). Pressing upon the Christian to be sure, are the need and the duty to battle against evil through manifold tribulations and even to suffer death. But, linked with the paschal mystery and patterned on the dying Christ, he will hasten forward to resurrection in the strength which comes from hope (cf. Phil 3:19; Rm 8:17)."

becomes a life-giving memory with which the Holy Spirit keeps renewing humankind. The Story, first recounted by the apostles then written in the form of the Gospels, is to be perpetuated in the proclamation of the Church so that faith in God may be enlivened, hope for salvation aroused, and love for others enkindled. **It is the Story that touches the stories of all human individuals**, whether implicitly or explicitly. It is only in the Second Coming of the Lord that the recapitulation of all in Christ will become manifest. He is “the way, the truth and the life.” (Jn. 14:6)²

² The story contains various dimensions:

The Trinitarian dimension of the Story

The Father created the world (*creatio prima*) by speaking the Word. The Word spoken became the foundation and purpose of every creature. “In him were created all things ... and all things were created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16). God has made the Story of Jesus happen and it always has something to do with the unity of the three Persons in creation, redemption, and renewal of humanity.

The Christological dimension of the Story

The story re-told by the Church is her faith in Jesus. He being the Son of God become man was like us in all aspects except sin. He preached the Kingdom of God and performed great wonders. For us and for our salvation, he was crucified and was raised from the dead. In such a way, in Christ alone dwells the fullness of God in bodily form (cf. Col 1:29), establishing him as the unique and absolute saving Word of God. His words and actions not only reveal the Holy Trinity, but also fully reveal the depths of what it means to be human. “In Jesus we marvel at the inexhaustible capacity of the human heart to love God and man, even when this entails great suffering” (EA 13). The Mission of Jesus not only restored communion between God and humanity, but also established a new communion between human beings alienated from one another because of sin.

The pneumatological dimension of the Story

The Holy Spirit as the mutual love of the Father and the Son has always been at work ever since the creation. There is nothing created that is not filled with the ceaseless exchange of love that marks the innermost life of the Trinity, “the Spirit of the Lord has filled the world” (Wis 1:7). The presence of the Spirit in creation generates love and harmony in the world. The love of God still abides in spite of sin and disorder, and is an

2. Why does the story of the elephant weaken the Story of Jesus?

The re-telling of the story of Jesus is not without challenges, especially in a world where **relativism becomes almost the driving force of cultures.**

In one Buddhist parable, a king in Benares, for his own entertainment, summoned some men of his kingdom who were born blind, and directed each of them to touch an elephant. The king proposed a prize for the one who could best describe the elephant. The elephant was huge and no one could embrace the whole, but each one could only touch a part. Some touched the elephant's head, some its ear, some its trunk, some its hindquarters, and others the hair at the tip of its tail. Finally, the king asked the blind men what the elephant was like, and they each answered according to the part he had felt. They answered: "It is like a pillar," "It is like a wall," "a broom," and so forth. The blind men began to quarrel to the extent of striking one another with their fists, which delighted the king. The story is so famous that it has become a Chinese proverb meaning that human "blindness" should not pretend having complete knowledge. **Only the enlightened can sense the whole.**

I am not saying that God is an elephant, but they both have something in common. They both are huge and tangible, so huge that it is beyond human reach, and so tangible that everyone can get in touch with it. The parable, however, is often used as a sort of

absolutely vital part of the mystery of Jesus and of the salvation which He bears. Created in the image of God, human beings become the dwelling place of the Spirit.

The ecclesial and liturgical dimension of the Story

The core of the liturgical celebration of the Church cannot be separated from the Story of Jesus. It is a commemoration of the Story through the proclamation of the Word, and at the same time a re-actualization of the same Story under the veil of the signs and prayers. With the hymns and chants the assembly also turns the Story into a Blessing, which enables their active participation in the Divine life, though still in the eschatological tension between "already" and "not yet".

justification of relativism. It teaches **human inability to know the whole.** Each one can know only a part. Thus, what a human being knows is doomed to be a version of truth but no version can claim fullness.

In a continent like Asia which is “a cradle of the world’s major religions” (EA 6), each offering “an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence” (NA 1), **why should the Story of Jesus be an absolute claim that Jesus Christ is the only One Savior for all?** Why can we not make all religions equal? This is the crux of the problem.³

Relativism is the theory which holds that all religions are equal; this remains the largest problem for those who wish to claim the permanent truth of the Catholic faith.⁴ It is a common opinion

³ The Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (DI) intends to tackle this thorny problem and sets forth the doctrine of the Catholic faith. It is centered on three affirmations, namely, the fullness and definitiveness of the revelation of Jesus (DI 5-8), the unity of the salvific economy of the Incarnate Word and of the Holy Spirit (DI 9-12); the uniqueness and the universality of the salvific mystery of Jesus Christ (DI 13-16). These affirmations have always been part of the Church’s constant missionary proclamation. See also Angelo Amato, *L’assolutezza salvifica del Cristianesimo: prospettive sistematiche*, in *Seminarium* 33(1998), *Tavola Rotonda “Dominus Iesus”*, in *Camilianum* 1(2001) 165-184, *Unicidad y universalidad salvifica de Jesu Cristo y de la iglesia*, in *Toletana* 4(2001) 9-30.

⁴ DI shows a great concern that the Church’s missionary proclamation might be endangered by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure*. For this reason DI, right from the outset re-affirms the following positions:

- the definite character of the revelation of Jesus Christ,
- the personal unity between the Eternal Word and Jesus of Nazareth, the unity of the economy of the Incarnate Word and the Holy Spirit,
- the unicity of universality of the mystery of Jesus Christ, the universal salvific mediation of the Church,
- the inseparability of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of Christ, and the Church, and the subsistence of the one Church of Christ in the Catholic Church.

that **whoever is not a relativist is intolerant**. Often we are faced with a dilemma regarding presenting doctrine and making dialogue: on the one hand, to claim the truth of the Catholic faith is often taken as intolerance for other religions or world views, while on the other, the denial of absolute truth overturns the permanence of Christian doctrine. In other words, the issue for many is one of freedom, and relativism provides a sense of being liberated from the justification to claim absolute truth.

Indeed, the teaching of the Church in *Redemptoris Missio*, *Dominus Iesus*, *Fides et Ratio* and *Ecclesia in Asia* provides the grounds for rebutting this dilemma. The main position will be to

The roots of the errors are found in certain presuppositions of both a philosophical and theological nature, which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth. Some of these can be mentioned:

- the conviction of the elusiveness and inexpressibility of divine truth, even by Christian revelation;
- relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others;
- the radical opposition posited between the logical mentality of the West and the symbolic mentality of the East;
- the subjectivism which, by regarding reason as the only source of knowledge, becomes incapable of raising its “gaze to the heights, not daring to rise to the truth of being”;
- the difficulty in understanding and accepting the presence of definitive and eschatological events in history;
- the metaphysical emptying of the historical incarnation of the Eternal Logos, reduced to a mere appearing of God in history;
- the eclecticism of those who, in theological research, uncritically absorb ideas from a variety of philosophical and theological contexts without regard for consistency, systematic connection or compatibility with Christian truth;
- finally, the tendency to read and to interpret Sacred Scripture outside the Tradition and Magisterium of the Church.
- See also Savio Hon Tai-fai, *Christological Affirmations of “Dominus Iesus” and Interreligious Dialogue. Dialogue with Confucian Classics from a Christian Perspective*, in *Path* 1(2002) 315-342.

affirm both the absolute truth of the Catholic claims by giving their justification, and the right of every human being to practice religious freedom.

In short, the story of the elephant would have lost its strength, if inside the story there had not been some who could see. Those who could see the “whole” will understand why the blind can only affirm a “part”. In an analogical way, the Church will understand why other spiritual traditions do not see the “whole” and can only affirm some “part” of it. This is how the Church understands herself. “How presumptuous!” one may argue, “Can the Church not be blinded by her own pride?” The answer is no, as far as the salvific truth is concerned. It is because the eyes of the Church have been opened by Christ the Savior of the World. The Church is not presumptuous, because the same Christ will also open the eyes of the rest of humanity. Far from being presumptuous, the Church needs to be humble to serve humanity by recounting the Story of Jesus and by presenting Jesus as the “eye-opener” to the truth. The Church is convinced that deep down in the human heart there is the desire and the possibility to receive “eye-opening” grace from the Savior of the World.

3. How does the Story of Jesus touch you and me?

It all starts with our hearts to which God speaks out of love. What God speaks of is the Story of Jesus, because in Jesus God wants us to be free and loved. He who defines his conduct by a set of rules determined by “religion” imprisons his songbird in a cage. The best song comes not through bars and wires, but from utmost freedom and love. He who listens to the Story attentively finds the way to love and worship God in Spirit and Truth. For in worship one cannot but fly higher and higher. The Story reveals the power between the darkness of the Cross and the light of the Resurrection. Thence one encounters God as the Lord rich in mercy and compassion. One finds not a mere solution to the riddles of life but the God-given wisdom and strength to embrace them.

It is God who chooses concrete ways to let the Story be heard without depriving the hearers of their freedom of choice. Indeed, God will give abundant grace to sustain the truth-seeking hearers in their search and choice for Him. Thus, anyone who is touched by the Story of Jesus and starts taking it seriously in faith-hope-love is always moved by the grace of God. However, **the way God chooses to approach us is not unrelated to human nature⁵ and to destiny that He has pre-designed.**

Human nature is so fashioned that **God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth**—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves. (cf. FR 1)

Human destiny is to **share the Divine life** that Christ has gained for us (2 Pt 1:4). “Christ the Redeemer fully reveals man to himself. The person who wishes to understand himself thoroughly must draw near to Christ. The Redemption that took place through the cross has definitively restored to man his dignity and given back meaning to his life in the world.” (RM 2)

In *Fides et Ratio*, Pope John Paul II has **two concerns**. **First**, such a desire is often neglected to the extent that the **force of so-called right reason has been weakening**. **Second**, such negligence gives rise to **theories that feed relativism** to the extent that the fundamental truths of the Catholic faith risk being distorted and denied. (cf. FR 4-5)

As a long standing practice, the Church endeavors to sustain **the doctrine of right reason**, especially that of conscience which “is the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. **There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths**. In a wonderful manner, conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor (cf. Mt 22:37-40; Gal 5:14). In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of men in the search

⁵ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 8 ad 2: “cum enim gratia non tollat naturam sed perficiat.”

for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals from social relationships.” (GS 16, the bold type is mine) To be able to listen to one’s own conscience is already a grace from God.⁶

There are **three levels of truth**. One is proper to daily life and is discovered by the **natural sciences**. The second is proper to **philosophy** and is attained by speculative reason. The third is concerned with **the ultimate truth** that the Church claims to have received through **faith from the revelation of Jesus Christ**, namely, the Story of Jesus. Thus, there are **two orders of knowledge**, one deriving from reason and the other from faith. (cf. FR 30)

The two orders are not identical or mutually exclusive but **have a profound and indissoluble unity**, as taught in the Patristic and Medieval periods: “*Credo ut intellegam, intellego ut credam*” (I believe so that I may understand; I understand so that I may believe). Both faith and reason are from God, and thus should go together in harmony and not be in contraposition. “Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfillment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason.” (FR 43)

If reason is to be true to itself, it must realize that human knowing is an on-going journey. Such a path is not for the proud who think that everything is the fruit of personal conquest. It is grounded in the fear and reverence of God, whose transcendent sovereignty and provident love reason must recognize in nature and history (cf. FR 17). **To consolidate the trustworthiness of reason is to make it open to faith**. The one who seeks the truth by reason is also the one who lives by faith, especially faith in the persons one trusts and loves. The knowledge acquired through belief often involves interpersonal relationships.

⁶ “Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.” (LG 16)

The Story of Jesus is the truth the Church believes and tries to convey through an interpersonal relationship in love and freedom. This truth is not opposed to the truths which science and philosophy perceive. On the contrary, the two orders of knowledge lead to truth in all its fullness. **The unity of truth is a fundamental premise of human reasoning.** (cf. FR 34)

The Church defends rigorously human reason and freedom from the contamination of relativism because **the way God chooses to tell the Story of Jesus is intrinsically related to human nature as such.** Human beings are created in the image of God, characterized by reason and freedom. Their yearning for truth makes them true hearers of the Story of Jesus.⁷ Faith in Him is not to abolish reason's autonomy nor to reduce its scope for action, but to enlighten and enlarge the human capacity for God. (cf. FR 16)

Thus, the Mystery, like "the elephant", is still "huge and big", but the Story of Jesus is likened to the "eye-opener", all-important for anyone who is serious in the search for the ultimate truth and who wants to be enlightened by its incomparable greatness.

4. Can there be Ways of Salvation by bypassing the Story of Jesus?

If the question is to ask whether there is any way of Salvation other than Christ, then the answer is simply "**none other than Christ**". If the question is to ask about the salvation of those who, through no fault of their own, have never heard the Story of

⁷ The desire or thirst in the heart is often stressed in *Ecclesia in Asia*. "The heart of the Church in Asia will be restless until the whole of Asia finds its rest in the peace of Christ, the Risen Lord." (EA 10) "The Church is convinced that deep within the people, cultures and religions of Asia there is a thirst for 'living water' (cf. Jn 4:10-15)." (EA 18) "The people of Asia need Jesus Christ and his Gospel. Asia is thirsting for the living water that Jesus alone can give. The disciples of Christ in Asia must therefore be unstinting in their efforts to fulfill the mission they have received from the Lord, who has promised to be with them to the end of the age." (EA 50)

Jesus, then the answer remains the same but needs to be nuanced in the sense **that their salvation is related in a mysterious way to Christ and to the Church.**

From the Scriptures and Tradition, we are certain that **salvation is offered to all as gift.** This gift cannot be limited to those who have heard the Story of Jesus and believe explicitly in Christ by entering the Church. Salvation must be made concretely available to all. We have not been given the possibility to discern the mystery of how God works in people's minds and hearts, in order to assess the power of Christ's grace. However, we have been given the certainty that He has the mission to take possession of all humans, in life and in death, that "the Father gives Him," and which He claims not to "lose" (cf. Jn 6:39-40).⁸

"Many people do not have the opportunity to come to know or accept the Gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people, salvation in Christ is accessible **by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church,** but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. **This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of His Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation.**" (RM 10, the bold type is mine)⁹

⁸ Cf. Francesco Gioia (ed.), *Interreligious Dialogue. The Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963-2005)* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media 2006) pp. 582-585, nn. 831*-832*, where is reported the speech of John Paul II to the faithful in the General Audience, Rome, May 31, 1995.

⁹ And in ways known to Himself, God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel to the faith necessary for salvation (cf. AG 7). "The Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal

In this way, the famous statement of St. Cyprian, “**No salvation outside the Church,**” still has its relevance but in a positive sense.¹⁰

The axiom mainly points to **the necessity of the Church and Baptism.** “[Christ] Himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it.” (CCC 847; cf. LG 14)

However, for those who have not received the Gospel, salvation is accessible in a mysterious way, in as much as saving grace is granted to them by virtue of Christ’s redeeming sacrifice, without external membership in the Church, but nonetheless always in relation to her (cf. above RM 10). In order to take effect, saving grace requires acceptance, cooperation, a yes to the divine gift. This acceptance is, at least implicitly, oriented to Christ. However, Christ is the Head of the Church (Mystical Body). Anyone who is oriented to Christ is also oriented to the Church. It can be said that *sine Ecclesia nulla salus*, namely, no Church no salvation. Anyone who receives saving grace from Christ will also be made mysteriously related to His Mystical Body through the Holy Spirit. It is a mysterious relationship: mysterious for those who receive the grace, because they do not know the Church and

mystery.” (GC 22). Certainly the condition “through no fault of their own” cannot be verified by human evaluation, and must be left to the divine judgment by “ways known only to God.”

¹⁰ The statement “*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*” was made by St. Cyprian (*Epist.*, 73, 21; PL 1123AB). It belongs to the Christian tradition and was included in the Fourth Lateran Council, in the Bull *Unam Sanctam* of Boniface VIII, and in the Council of Florence (DS 802; DS 1351). See also LG 8 and 14.

sometimes even outwardly reject her. It is also mysterious in itself, because it is linked to the saving mystery of grace, which includes an essential reference to the Church founded by the Savior. Salvation already begins during earthly life, which grace when accepted and responded to makes fruitful in the Gospel sense for earth and for heaven.¹¹

Such a claim does not justify the relativistic position of those who hold that a way of salvation can be found in other religions, even independently of faith in Christ the Redeemer. The affirmation of Christ's uniqueness derives from the New Testament. God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. (cf. 1 Tm 2:3-6; Mk 10:45). There is no salvation in anyone else (cf. Acts 4:12).

5. How should the Story of Jesus be related to other religions?

From its origin, the Church has encountered on many levels the question of the **plurality of religions**.¹² She recognizes that other religions can exercise a **positive influence**¹³ on the destiny of

¹¹ Cf. Francesco Gioia, *op. cit.* pp. 584-585, n. 832*.

¹² Asia contains two-thirds of humanity, with very ancient religious traditions, profound philosophies, rich civilizations and insightful wisdom. Asia is also the cradle of the world's major religions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It is the birthplace of many other spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism. (...) The Church has the deepest respect for these traditions and seeks to engage in sincere dialogue with their followers. The religious values they teach await their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. (Cf. EA 6)

¹³ Expressions like “answers to those unsolved riddles of the human condition” (NA 1), “a ray of that Truth which enlightens all” (NA2), “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (NA2), “seeds of the Word” (AG11), “Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the

their sincere followers. **The Story of Jesus is related to other religions because of the fundamental solidarity¹⁴ and universal unity between Jesus Christ and every human being.¹⁵**

Gospel.” (LG 16) “whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples” (LG 17), “But whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God” (AG 9), “Although participated forms of [Christ’s] mediation of different kinds and degrees are not excluded” (RM 5), reveal clear affirmations of the spiritual values in other religions.

“The people of Asia take pride in their religious and cultural values, such as love of silence and contemplation, simplicity, harmony, detachment, non-violence, the spirit of hard work, discipline, frugal living, the thirst for learning and philosophical enquiry. They hold dear the values of respect for life, compassion for all beings, closeness to nature, filial piety towards parents, elders and ancestors, and a highly developed sense of community. In particular, they hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity. Asian peoples are known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence.” (EA 6)

¹⁴ Cf. GS 22: “For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.”

¹⁵ Pope John Paul’s speech to the Roman Curia (December 22, 1986) on the prayer for peace in Assisi, on October 27, 1986 provides stimulus for reflection. He underlined the radical unity of the human race. Such unity is based on the common origin and destiny of the human race in creation, on the mystery of the universal redemption in Christ, on the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person. The role of the Church is an effective sign of this unity. The Pope brought out forcibly the significance of interreligious dialogue, while at the same time reaffirming the Church’s duty to announce Jesus Christ the Lord. Cf. Francesco Gioia, *op. cit.* p.398, nn. 562-573.

“The universal unity based on the event of creation and redemption cannot fail to leave a trace in the lived reality of people, even when they belong to different religions. For this reason, the Council invited the Church to **discover and respect the seeds of the Word present in such religions** (cf. AG 11), and affirmed that all those who have not yet received the Gospel are ‘oriented’ toward the supreme unity of the People of God.”¹⁶

The Church proclaims Christ because in Him there is the fullness of truth, even if the core of this truth remains transcendent and inexhaustible. Besides, **those who do not know Christ**, even through no fault of their own, **may be in a state of darkness and spiritual hunger**, often with negative repercussions on the cultural and moral levels. **The Church’s missionary work can provide them with the resources for the full development of Christ’s saving grace**, by offering full and conscious adherence to the message of faith and active participation in Church life through the sacraments.¹⁷

In its attempt at expressing the “transcendent and inexhaustible”, the Church is not supposed to canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others, but should remain open to “**the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia**” (EA 20, the bold type is mine). In fact, “the Synod Fathers stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way **that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples**, and they suggested images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to the Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Among them were Jesus Christ as the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One.” (EA 20,

¹⁶ Cf. Francesco Gioia, *op. cit.* p. 402, n. 568.

¹⁷ Cf. Francesco Gioia, *op. cit.* p. 585, n. 832*.

the bold type is mine)

Precisely here lies the importance of the Church's indispensable role, for the Church "is not an end unto herself, but rather is fervently concerned to be completely of Christ, in Christ, and for Christ, as well as completely of men, among men, and for men" (RM 19; Pope Paul VI's address at Vatican II). The Church does not exist for herself, nor does she work for herself, but is at the service of a humanity called to be the children of God in Christ. **The Church exercises an implicit mediation also with regard to those who do not know the Gospel.**¹⁸

The missionary effort of the Church has also to make explicit her mediating function. Proclaiming Christ is the priority of the Church (as affirmed by RM and EA).¹⁹ The re-telling of the Story of Jesus should go on. In so doing, the Church should not ignore certain religious and cultural sensibilities. Whatever good or truth the Holy Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures and religions is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel (cf. LG 16). **As the Story of Jesus told in the fourth Gospel presents Him as the "logos" with a certain Hellenistic flavor, so the same Story can be re-told to present Jesus, for example, as a Holy Sage with a certain Confucian sensibility.**²⁰

¹⁸ Cf. Francesco Gioia, *op. cit.* p. 584, n. 832*.

¹⁹ Cf. Jacob Kavunkal, Errol D'Lima, Mathew Jayanth (ed.), *Church in the service of Asia's Peoples* (Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Pune 2003). A conference was held by the Pontical Athenaeum Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth Pune from November 15-19, 2001 in commemoration of the Platinum Jubilee of the same institute. Around 40 theologians from different Asian countries came together to reflect on the document. I was invited to take part. Later a book about it was published.

See also Savio Hon Tai-fai, *Proclaiming Christ in Multiple Contexts: Some Methodological Considerations in Theology with reference to Ecclesia in Asia*, in *Path 4* (2005) 203-232.

²⁰ Cf. Savio Hon Tai-fai, *A Confucian Reading of the Life of Jesus from a Christian Perspective*, 88-100, in Vimal Tiramanna (ed.), *Asian Faces of*

A Confucian presentation of the Story of Jesus from a Christian perspective is both legitimate and relevant.²¹ Theology seen in this way must be made relevant to the people and enter into a dialogue with their culture. The achievements of the New Confucianism²² raise more hope for a genuine dialogue between Confucianism and Christianity. It is good to defend the originality of Confucianism on the one hand, and not to let it remain closed in its distinctiveness to the extent of opposing Christianity on the other. **In re-telling the Story of Jesus with a certain cultural sensibility, one should insist upon the openness of cultures to the universality of the truth which the Story bears and let the same Story break through all the cultural barriers which seek to contain it.**

Christ (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation 2005). The book gathers the articles from the Colloquium organized by the Office of Theological Concerns under FABC from May 11-15, 2004, in Sampran, Thailand.

²¹ For some interesting attempts, see 房志榮等著, 《21世紀基督新畫像》 (Mark Fang et al, *The new images of Christ in the 21st century*, Taipei 2002) 台北光啓 2002, 209-224. Jonathan Tan Yun-Ka, *Jesus, The Crucified and Risen Sage: Towards a Confucian Christology*, in Vimal Tiramanna (ed.), *op. cit.* pp. 49-87.

²² Cf. Umberto Bresciani, *Reinventing Confucianism. The New Confucian Movement* (Taipei: Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies 2001) pp. 468-475, the achievements are:

- to elucidate the nature of Confucianism with historical studies;
- to compare Confucianism with Western philosophies;
- to reconstruct Confucian thought more in terms of philosophy accessible to Westerners;
- to retrieve the traditional ways of discovery of the moral and spiritual self (mind-heart);
- to widen the scope of epistemology;
- to elucidate the relation between moral concern and ontology; and
- to put more in focus the Religious dimension of Confucianism.

A kind of Conclusion

The Story of Jesus has its own originality and power and is of crucial importance in the mission of the proclaiming Church. Today there are relativistic theories that tend to weaken its force. The Church, on the one hand, defends right reason so as to preserve the strength of the hearers and, on the other, safeguards the “mysterious” relationship between Christ-Church and every human person, especially those who do not know Christ. In this way, it is both relevant and urgent for the Church to keep the Story of Jesus alive in a context of so many religious traditions without losing sight of their cultural sensibilities.

It is not easy to offer a simple answer or a password to the mystery that all could cheer about and try to remember on the way home. In this sense, perhaps the Confucian sagehood (聖 *sheng*) has a lot of relevance. It is on the path of moral self-cultivation that one strives to be perceptive to the “mysterious” transcendence coming from above and manifesting itself from within. Confucius also said, “I do not complain against Heaven. I do not blame men. I study things on the low level, but my understanding penetrates the higher level. It is Heaven that knows me.” (*Analects* 14, 37) 「不怨天，不尤人，下學而上達：知我者，其天乎！」(《論語》，憲問第十四)