

## Asia's Missionary Local Churches: FABC Perspectives and Insights

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**Abstract:** The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has been the most influential body in the Asian Church since the Second Vatican Council. Its beginnings emerge from the 1970 meeting of 180 Asian bishops with Pope Paul VI in Manila. For the past fifty years, the FABC has promoted a vision of evangelization which incorporates a "triple dialogue" with Asia's peoples, especially the poor, Asian cultures, and Asian religions. Through the FABC a true "community of Asian churches" has grown and flourished, nourished by the transforming action of the Holy Spirit. FABC has been described as fostering an "Asian Pentecost"; FABC can validly be seen as "Asia's continuing Vatican II".

Central to the theological-missiological vision of the FABC is its theology of "local church". The first FABC Plenary Assembly (1974) described the local church as "a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated..., a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people." Another document insightfully identified the local church as the "acting subject of mission".

This article presents the highlights of the FABC's transforming vision of the local church, its role in theology and pastoral life, in dialogue and evangelization, in spirituality and social justice, in shaping a truly inculturated faith community. As you read, your faith will deepen; your love of the Church will grow; you will appreciate the "pathways of the Spirit" in the Asian context!

[摘要] 自梵蒂岡第二屆大公會議以來，亞洲主教團協會（FABC）一直是亞洲教會中最具影響力的機構。它的起源始於1970年，教宗保祿六世在馬尼拉與180位亞洲主教的會面。在過去五十年，FABC倡導了一種傳福音的願景，當中包括與亞洲人民，特別是窮人、亞洲文化和亞洲宗教的「三重對話」。通過FABC，在聖神轉化行動的滋養下，一個真正的「亞洲教會共同體」得以發展和興盛。FABC被描述為培育了「亞洲的五旬節」；FABC堪稱為「延續梵二精神的亞洲版」。

FABC的神學和傳教學的願景核心是其「地方教會」神學。第一屆FABC全體會議（1974）將地方教會描述為「臨在於人民中的教會，本土化和與本地文化結合的教會…，與活傳統、文化和宗教進行持續、謙虛和友愛對話的教會——即是與人們的所有生活現實對話的教會。」另一份文件有洞見地將地方教會等同為「傳教的行動主體」。

FABC曾多次論及地方教會的特點，本文介紹了相關願景的發展，包括它在神學和牧民生活、對話和傳福音、靈性和社會正義等方面的角色，以及在塑造真正本地化信仰團體的作用。當您閱讀時，您的信仰將會加深，您對教會的愛將會增長；您會欣賞聖神在亞洲教會的足跡！

The Catholic Church has joyfully celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council (1965-2015). In addition, the year 2015 marked five decades since the issuance of the Council's missionary decree *Ad Gentes* (December 7, 1965), the fortieth anniversary of Pope Paul VI's inspirational apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (December 8, 1975), as well as twenty-fifth anniversary of John Paul II's mission encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990). In addition, Pope Francis gifted the Church in 2013 with his missionary exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In this broad context, the local churches in Asia continue to explore their understanding and commitment to the Church's mission of evangelization. The Christian communities of this vast continent seek to listen to "what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). They seek to follow Jesus, the first evangelizer and missionary of the Father, who took flesh as an Asian; the Savior of the world was born in Asia. With renewed zeal and vigor, Asia's local churches accept their missionary vocation; with John Paul II they hope and pray that "in the third Christian Millennium *a great harvest of faith* will be reaped in this vast and vital [Asian] continent" (*Ecclesia in Asia* 1).

This presentation explores the vision and some significant contributions of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) for understanding an "Asian" theology

of local church and the concomitant renewal of dedication to missionary evangelization. Following a brief introduction of the FABC, this essay highlights areas where the Asian bishops have contributed to enabling the churches of Asia to accomplish their mission. Particular attention will be focused on the FABC insights into the “theology of local church.” Related topics would be: (a) the FABC “pastoral spiral” methodology; (b) the FABC approach of dialogue; (c) the positive view of religions promoted in Asia; and (d) a contemporary description of the motives for Mission; these four topics are related to a comprehensive theology of local church (though they are not fully presented in this paper). Finally, this overview of the FABC contributions to the theology of local church and mission enables one to validly assert that the FABC is truly “Asia’s continuing Vatican II.”

## **Introducing the FABC**

The Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) has been the most influential body in the Asian Church since the Vatican Council. FABC’s roots are found in the 1970 meeting of 180 Asian bishops with Pope Paul VI in Manila; the FABC documents, now spanning five decades, are an essential source and wellspring for comprehending the dynamic development of mission, theology, dialogue, ecclesiology, and evangelization in Asia’s local churches. A Spirit-inspired instrument, the FABC has fostered the genuine local reception of the teachings of the Council, enabling them to be concretized for all the peoples of Asia.

The FABC is a continent-wide episcopal structure that brings together fourteen 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 eleven 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, twenty-eight countries are represented in the FABC.

The FABC has a modest central structure; in addition, there are nine FABC offices, which carry out many concrete projects and initiatives. These offices, located in various Asian nations, are focused on evangelization, social communications, laity and family, human development, education and faith formation, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Each of these nine offices sponsors a wide variety of activities promoting the growth of the Asian local churches. The offices of human development, evangelization, interreligious dialogue, and theological concerns have been particularly productive.

The supreme body of the FABC is the Plenary Assembly. Official delegates from member conferences and the FABC offices attend; there are many invited consultant participants. It is noteworthy that the “non-bishops” in

attendance have often reached nearly fifty percent of the total participants. Eleven plenary assemblies, usually held every four years, have been convened, extending from 1974 to 2016. They have been held in: **I.** Taipei, Taiwan: 1974; **II.** Calcutta, India: 1978; **III.** Bangkok, Thailand: 1982; **IV.** Tokyo, Japan: 1986; **V.** Bandung, Indonesia: 1990; **VI.** Manila, Philippines: 1995; **VII.** Samphran, Thailand: 2000; **VIII.** Daejeon, Korea: 2004; **IX.** Manila, Philippines: 2009; **X.** Xuan Loc and Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: 2012; and, **XI.** Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2016. FABC **XII** was scheduled for 2020, the fiftieth anniversary of the “founding” of FABC during Pope Paul VI’s 1970 Asian pilgrimage; unfortunately, the planned assembly had to be postponed due to the global pandemic.

The FABC has promoted 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. The initial impetus for the FABC theological orientation was provided by the first plenary assembly in 1974; it asserted that 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 nearly five decades. Through the FABC, an ecclesiology and missiology of the Asian local churches has been shaped.

It remains true that, independent of size, each local church is called to mission in the power of the Spirit. No

Asian Church is so small or poor that it does not have something to give; likewise, no Asian Church is so large and powerful that it does not have something to receive. A “new way of being Church” uniquely adapted to the Asian context and challenges has emerged. Indeed, the FABC has fostered an “Asian Pentecost”!

### **Exploring the Theology of Local Church and Mission**

Explore any major document that has emerged from the extensive reflection of the FABC and you will probably find several creative insights on the local Church in the Asian context. Historically, as noted earlier, it was the 1970 Asian pastoral visit of Pope Paul VI with the Asian bishops that gave the impetus for the local Churches to begin formulating a vision of Church and mission adequate to the “new world being born” in Asia in the post-colonial period. They asked themselves: How would local faith-communities respond to the grace that was the Second Vatican Council? How would the churches incarnate a decisive “turning to history” and a “turning to the Gospel” within history “for all the peoples of Asia”? Consistent, prolonged, pastoral and theological reflection on the Church and her mission of evangelization has enabled the FABC to articulate an overall vision that captures what “being Church in Asia today” truly means. The insights have grown out of a belief that the Spirit was speaking to the churches.

FABC pastoral-theological reflection is decidedly inductive—emerging from life’s concrete realities.

Therefore, an ecclesiology with local church as its focal point most adequately captures the hopes and aspirations of local peoples. As the community of Jesus' disciples in Asia, the Church consistently links her identity with Asia's peoples and their life situations. She seeks to be — in fact, not only in theory — the “Church of the poor” and the “Church of the young.” She shares the vicissitudes of the “Church of silence” in several parts of Asia. Her pastoral priorities concern the displaced (refugees and migrants), women and the girl-child, youth, families, the poor, the followers of Asia's great religious traditions.

She actively fosters increasing communion among Asia's local churches in unity with the See of Peter, which lovingly presides over the universal Church; she promotes authentic catholicity. She firmly believes, following Vatican II, that the Church is the *corpus ecclesiarum* (*Lumen Gentium* 23), the one united body of the various local churches.

The theological thematic of *local church* provides an appropriate, integrating center for the life of Asia's faith-communities. This fact helps explain why internationally some of the very best theological reflection on local church has emerged in Asia and through the FABC. It is imperative to tell the story of the local churches in Asian and FABC theological reflection—with all its depth, richness, and inspiration. Methodologically, this presentation of FABC material on the local church is unfolded chronologically;



the format lends itself to greater clarity. In addition, the author consciously quotes the FABC materials directly and extensively; this approach avoids diluting the freshness, creativity, and insightfulness of the original documents. Finally, references to all FABC documents will be simply given by referring to the plenary assembly, along with the specific paragraph numbers (e.g. FABC I, 9-12); this method assures an accurate citation, independent of the various formats or languages of publication of the FABC documents.

### **Building up of a Truly Local Church: A Task of Evangelization**

**FABC I.** The First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974 focused on the theme: “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia” (it was also a preparation for the Synod on Evangelization to be held in Rome later that same year). The Asian Churches through their bishops defined the central and most urgent mission duty incumbent upon them: “The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church. For the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time” (FABC I, 9-10).

“It is not a community in isolation from other communities of the Church one and catholic. Rather it seeks communion with all of them. With them it professes the one faith, shares the one Spirit and the one sacramental life. In a special way it rejoices in its communion and filial oneness

with the See of Peter, which presides over the universal Church in love” (FABC I, 11). Note how this statement integrates the local Churches with the universal Church!

FABC I continues: “The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions — in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God’s Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery” (FABC I, 12).

## **Discovering the Identity of Asian Churches**

### **Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church.**

Three years later in 1977, during the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (ACMC) held in Hong Kong, the theme of local church received another impetus: “... 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 not only for the ministries the Asian Churches will have to perform but also for all aspects of their life. We should beware of seeing our future mission in categories that belong to the past, when the West shaped the Churches' history. *If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future*" (ACMC, 14) [the italicized emphasis has been added by this author].

"Each local Church is determined by her human context and lives in a dialectical relationship with the human society into which she is inserted as the Gospel leaven.... Each local Church, in order to be viable, needs to become fully responsible and must have the legitimate autonomy which her natural and harmonious growth demands" (ACMC, 25).

"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" (ACMC, 26).

"Since Christ's mission is universal, all local Churches are called to live in communion with each other. This bond of unity, visibly expressed in the college of bishops presided over by the Bishop of Rome, implies that the search of each Church for ministries adapted to her needs is subject to verification and testing by the other Churches. In this bond of union lies the guarantee of the true apostolicity

and catholicity of each local Church” (ACMC, 27). Again, one marvels at the balanced integration local and universal Church!

**FABC II.** The Second FABC Plenary Assembly in 1978 was organized around the theme: “Prayer—The Life of the Church of Asia.” The Bishops-delegate noted that an important motive for their assembly was “to deepen our knowledge of our local churches” (FABC II, 1), and they addressed “the tasks which the carrying-out of the mission of the Church in Asia demands: commitment to the upbuilding of Asian communities in the life of the Gospel, to inculturation of Christian faith and life, to the endeavor for total human development and authentic liberation of peoples in justice and love, to interreligious dialogue and to renewed missionary formation” (FABC II, 3).

## **Being Responsible for Mission: The Work of the Local Church**

**International Mission Congress.** The successful International (though predominantly Asian) Mission Congress (IMC) held in 1979 in Manila once again strongly affirmed the centrality of the local Church for a “new age of mission” in Asia.

The final IMC document noted: “What is the newness of this ‘new age of mission’? First, the realization in practice that ‘mission’ is no longer, and can no longer be, a one-way movement from the ‘older churches’ to the ‘younger

churches,' from the churches of the old Christendom to the churches in the colonial lands. 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*. Hence we are moving beyond both the vocabulary and the idea of 'sending churches' and 'receiving churches,' for as living communities of the one Church of Jesus Christ, every local church must be a sending church, and every local church (because it is not on earth ever a total realization of the Church) must also be a receiving church. Every local church is responsible for its mission, and co-responsible for the mission of all its sister-churches. Every local church, according to its possibilities, must share whatever its gifts are, for the needs of other churches, for mission throughout [hu]mankind, for the life of the world" (IMC, 14).

"Once again, what is the newness of this 'new age of mission'? We believe that the Spirit of the Lord calls each people and each culture to its own fresh and creative response to the Gospel. 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 nor destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled (as the Second Vatican Council teaches) in the life of the Spirit" (IMC, 15).

Two workshop papers (V and VII) of the Manila Mission Congress spoke eloquently of the local Church. The participants of Workshop VII noted: “We recognize that the local church is the center and source of evangelization” (1). “Just as it is the responsibility of the Christian to work for the growth and development of the local church, in the same way he must become aware of his responsibility toward churches in other parts of the world” (9). This means: “Each local church is co-responsible with its sister churches everywhere, Rome being the foundation and center, for the building up of the kingdom of God throughout the world” (9).

The same document of Workshop VII affirms that “Missionaries from sister churches are not only living signs of the universality of the Church and the existence of co-responsibility, but because of their different cultural and Christian background, they enrich and fruitfully challenge the local church. The local church should welcome, accept and help integrate them into its life” (10).

### **Fostering Genuine Participation and Co-responsibility**

**FABC III.** The Third FABC Plenary Assembly in 1982 chose “The Church — A Community of Faith in Asia” as its central theme. Again, one finds enlightening words on the local Church. The final FABC III statement noted: “We have seen ... how the local church must be a community of graced communion rooted in the life of the Trinity, a community of prayer and contemplation, and of sacramental

celebration and life centered around the Eucharist. It must be defined by its life of faithful discipleship in the Gospel, patterned on the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, 'a community for others.' We have realized that genuine participation and co-responsibility must be essential elements of its existence, and theological reflection and discernment integral components of its life. It is a community which strives to remain in unfeigned unity with its pastors, within the bonds of local and universal communion in the one Church" (FABC III, 15).

**Theses on the Local Church.** The centrality of the local Church in the theological-missiological thought in the Asian area is highlighted by the FABC commitment to study the question in depth. The FABC has promoted indigenous Asian theological reflection since its early years; the formal establishment of the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC came in the 1980s. A five-year period of extensive study and consultation culminated in a comprehensive document entitled "Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context" (TLC). This is one of the longest documents ever produced by the TAC (well over 50 closely printed pages); it was released in January 1991. In the opinion of this author, worldwide it is probably the best and most comprehensive document to date on *local Church*.

The FABC-TAC document on the local Church contains several sections. After a lengthy contextualized introduction and clarification of terms, the fifteen theses are presented in two thematic sections: "Biblical Foundations"

(Theses 1-4) and “The Birth, Life and Mission of the Local Church” (Theses 5-15). Next, a concluding section follows; finally, a wide variety of practical “Pastoral Corollaries and Recommendations” are presented. Some salient quotes serve to capture the spirit of this insightful piece of Asian theological reflection on the local Church.

“Already, as we have noted, the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC spoke of building up of the local Church as the present focus of the Church’s mission in Asia. That discernment remains valid today [1991].... More and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church” (TLC: C, 3-4).

“We see the emergence of the world of the Third Millennium already upon us.... Whether the Gospel shall be present in this new age with its unpredictable turnings and its manifold diversity will depend greatly on whether local Churches fulfill their vocation in the historic moment which is now upon them. We grasp something of the significance of local Church and inculturation in this context; those who cannot understand this fail to resonate with the signs of our time, and the heartbeat of our peoples” (TLC: C, 5).

“We must surely be grateful that we experience today the ‘rush of the Spirit’ in our Churches. For it is a privileged moment for local theological reflection and discernment, for the gathering and spending of energies, for the upbuilding of authentic local Churches in our part of the world....We can



only pray that we may listen and be obedient to the Spirit, that we may be guided by his creative power and be filled by the commitment and courage which are his gifts” (TLC: C, 6-7).

### **Appreciating the Contribution of the Laity**

**FABC IV.** The Fourth FABC Plenary Assembly in 1986 focused on the theme: “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia.” Set in the context of “the task of the Church in the world of Asia” (FABC IV, 2.2), the assembly focused heavily on various concrete areas where the laity makes its contribution to serving the local Church and the peoples of Asia.

An impressive panorama of the various involvements of the laity was explored: politics, youth, women, family, education, mass media, work, business, health services, community, liberation, lay apostolates, clergy-laity relationships, formation, spirituality, and kingdom theology. Treatment of each of these specific topics is beyond the scope of this presentation; one need only assert that clearly the theology of local Church underpins these many areas of engagement.

### **Viewing the Local Church as the Acting Subject of Mission**

**FABC V.** Most major documents of the FABC refer explicitly to the role of the local Church in mission and evangelization. The Fifth Plenary FABC Assembly in 1990,

with the theme “Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium,” added new clarity and focus by asserting that it is the local Church which is “the acting subject of mission.”

“The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local church* living and acting in communion with the universal Church. It is the local churches and communities which can discern and work out (in dialogue with each other and with other persons of goodwill) the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God’s Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local churches” (FABC V, 3.3.1).

“This local church, which is the acting subject of mission, is the people of God in a given milieu, the whole Christian community—laity, Religious and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic Ecclesial Community and other groups. Their time has come for Asia” (FABC V, 3.3.2). Indeed, it is important to highlight the repeated emphasis on the local Church as the “acting subject of mission”!

**FABC VI.** The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly in 1995 in conjunction with the visit of Pope John Paul II for the World Youth Day summarized key themes of the 25-year history of FABC. The final statement entitled “Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life” noted that: “The overall thrust of activities in recent years has been

to motivate the Churches of Asia towards ‘a new way of being Church,’ a Church that is committed to becoming ‘a community of communities’ and a credible sign of salvation and liberation” (FABC VI, 3). “It is the Spirit of Jesus that creates the [Church as a] disciple-community” (FABC VI, 14).

Many are the challenges of being an authentic local Church in Asia. Asian Catholics admit: “We may hesitate because we are a minority group. Indeed we are a little flock in Asia. But it is from this position of weakness that God’s gift of divine life in Jesus Crucified, the power and wisdom of God, is most significant” (FABC VI, 14.3). Most local Churches in Asia continually discover and live their identities as minorities within their national societies.

## **Becoming a Communion of Communities**

**Asian Synod Echoes FABC Themes.** A short excursus provides interesting insights into key FABC themes about local Church that resounded in the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops (“Asian Synod”) held in Rome from April 19-May 14, 1998. As Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan of Korea greeted the Holy Father and the Synod participants in his opening address on April 20, he described the realities of Asia which “is made up not of various nations but, one may say, many worlds.”

Kim noted the endeavors and accomplishments of the FABC “for the past 27 years”; in building up a truly local Church in Asia “continual and quite serious efforts have been

made to listen to, learn from, and reflect and act upon today's lived Asian realities in faith and prayer. And, we have felt called to an ever renewed self-understanding of the Church and her mission, not so much from abstract thought, but in the face of given pastoral situations and their exigencies" (*L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), OR-EE: April 29, 1998: 5).

Bishop Josef Suwatan, MSC, of Indonesia asserted that the "peoples of Asia need the witness of 'being Church'." He pointed out how "the Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC in 1990 in Bandung speaks about 'a new way of being Church' in Asia, as a 'communion of communities'." He reiterated: "Note well, it speaks about 'being' Church!" (OR-EE: April 29, 1998: 15). Again, Archbishop Petrus Turang of Indonesia echoed the same theme and focused on the growth of the local Churches: "The Churches of Asia need to take advantage of the vision of a new way of being Church" (OR-EE: May 20, 1998: 8). This new approach will also achieve, according to Bishop John Cummins, "the desired communion among local Churches"; this means accepting "the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences as a vehicle to do this" (OR-EE: May 20, 1998: 13).

The missionary dimension of the local Churches of Asia emerged strongly in the Synod. Father Edward Malone, FABC Assistant Secretary General, emphasized several crucial points: "Asian Christians and local Churches have a deep sense of gratitude for the gift of faith.... With the

renewal of ecclesiology a wide variety of mission initiatives must necessarily emerge from within each local Church....” Concretely, specific actions must help promote “the emergence of missionary local Churches”; thus, “pastoral care is not to derail the local Church mission effort” and “the actual foundation of Asian-born missionary societies is to be fostered in each local Church” (OR-EE: May 13, 1998: 14).

Several Synod interventions focused on the challenges of this FABC-inspired “new way of being Church.” Bishop Pakiam of Malaysia captured the essence of this commitment to “be witnesses of the Gospel as a community of the local Church in a multiracial, multicultural, multilinguistic country”; note that this description reflects the reality of most Asian countries. Bishop Pakiam recommended following FABC directions so that local Churches become “a communion of communities, a participatory Church, a dialoguing and prophetic Church” (OR-EE: June 17, 1998: 8).

In the final session of the Synod on May 13, Cardinal Darmaatmadja of Indonesia again referred to the task of “being Church in Asia.” For him all local Churches must struggle to be “a Church with an Asian ‘face’ [and an] Asian appearance”; they must avoid appearing “foreign to Asia’s traditions and cultures” (OR-EE: June 17, 1998: 10-11). In a word, they must emerge as truly *local Churches*!

## Fostering the Ecclesiology of Communion

**FABC Themes in *Ecclesia in Asia*.** The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* promulgated by Pope John Paul II in New Delhi, India on November 6, 1999 echoed the ecclesiology of the Asian Synod Fathers of the FABC region. Although the document develops the “ecclesiology of communion” extensively, significant insights on the local Churches of Asia are found within the papal exhortation.

*Ecclesia in Asia* notes that “the Synod Fathers were well aware of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking” (20). It is necessary that “each local Church should become what the Synod Fathers called a ‘participatory Church,’ a Church, that is, in which all live their proper vocation and perform their proper role” (25). The pope’s exhortation praises the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences by name, because it has “helped to foster union among the local Churches” and has “provided venues for cooperation in resolving pastoral problems” (26).

In *Ecclesia in Asia* Pope John Paul II identifies important responsibilities of the local Churches in Asia: “where possible the local Churches in Asia should promote human rights activities on behalf of women” (34); “local Churches, for their part, need to foster awareness of the ideal of the religious and consecrated life, and promote such vocations” (44); mission is the task of each local Church, and the Pope recommends “the establishment within each

local Church of Asia, where such do not exist, of missionary societies of apostolic life, characterized by their special commitment to the mission *ad gentes, ad exteros* and *ad vitam*" (44).

John Paul II continues: "the local Churches in Asia, in communion with the Successor of Peter, need to foster greater communion of mind and heart through close cooperation among themselves" (24); while unity in the Church is essential, it also respects "the legitimate diversity of the local Churches and the variety of cultures and peoples with which they are in contact" (25).

## **Renewing the Call to the Mission of Love and Service**

**FABC VII.** The Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly, the first major Church gathering of the Jubilee Year 2000, was held from January 3-12, 2000. The assembly of 193 participants (cardinals, bishops, clergy, religious, and laity) explored the theme: "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service." Once again, the integrating theology of local Church came to the fore in the final statement.

The participants asserted: "from the depths of Asia's hopes and anxieties, we hear the call of the Spirit to the local churches in Asia. It is a call to renewal, to a renewed mission of love and service. It is a call to the local churches to be faithful to Asian cultural, spiritual and social values and thus to be truly inculturated local churches" (FABC VII: Introduction).

The assembly reflected: “The thirty-year history of the FABC has been a concerted series of movements toward a renewed Church.” Of the eight movements noted, one pivotal initiative has been the “movement toward a ‘truly local Church,’ toward a Church ‘incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated’.” The assembly statement boldly affirmed: “This is the vision of a renewed Church that the FABC has developed over the past thirty years. It is still valid today” (FABC VII: I-A).

**FABC VIII.** For the first time in its history, the FABC held its plenary assembly in Korea. The theme of the 2004 gathering was: “The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life.” The assembled bishops expressed their hope that the assembly would provide a “deeper reflection on the Asian family in view of relevant and effective pastoral care” (FABC VIII: 5).

Relating the family to the Church, the bishops asserted: “The family is the basic cell of society and the fundamental ecclesial community, the Church that is the home. In Asia today there is a growing realization that the family has to be the focus of integral evangelization and the essential building block of the BEC/BHC [Basic Ecclesial Community / Basic Human Community] and *even of the local Church as a whole* [emphasis supplied]. In other words, the Church begins in the home” (FABC VIII: 46).

Later, in the same final document of the plenary assembly, it is noted: “May it not even be said that the focal



point of evangelization should be the family as object and subject, to which all parish pastoral programs are geared? The BEC would then be a community of families, and the parish truly a community of communities.... It is in these communities, at the level of the family, where the ‘globalization of charity and solidarity’ begins” (FABC VIII: 100).

### **Living the Eucharist in Daily Life**

**FABC IX.** “Living the Eucharist in Asia” was the central theme of the Ninth FABC Plenary Assembly held in Manila, Philippines in 2009 (originally scheduled for Bangalore, India). The assembly sought to integrate the insights of two recent international synods on the Eucharist (2005) and on the Word of God (2008), examining the synodal reflections in reference to the challenges of “a new way of being Church” in the Asian context. The discussions had a decidedly “pastoral” focus; the emphasis centered, not on the “believing” dimension (doctrinal faith) or the “celebrating” aspects (liturgical practice) of the Eucharist, but on the “living” ramifications (concrete praxis) of Eucharist within the realities of daily life in Asia.

As the Eighth FABC Plenary Assembly focused primarily on the family, this gathering took the Eucharist as its central focus. Thus, in both cases little is specifically said about the “local” Church. Yet, in this assembly one finds inspiring references to the missionary identity of the “entire” Church. “Every Eucharistic celebration renews the Church in its missionary calling. By its very nature as the bearer of

the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Church is missionary. Only by being true to its mission can it remain true to its identity” (FABC IX: E-4). “In Asia, the missionary witness of the Church is a way of living the Eucharist.... The dynamism of the Eucharist becomes the rhythm of life of the followers of Christ. The Eucharist forms the Church. The Eucharist is the life of the Church” (FABC IX: F).

### **Promoting the FABC Process of Dialogue among Local Churches**

**FABC X.** Gathering for the first time in its history in Vietnam in 2012, the FABC took up the theme: “FABC at Forty Years — Responding to the Challenges of Asia: New Evangelization.” The gathering noted how the previous nine plenary assemblies had “provided the principal themes of renewal for the local Churches in Asia” and that they “affirmed that the acting subject of mission is *the local church*, incarnated and rooted firmly in the culture of its people, taking up their strengths as well as their weaknesses in the light of the healing and redeeming grace of Christ” (FABC X: 5).

The assembled bishops asserted that “the Church has to be a humble servant. She is *a community-in-mission, a disciple-community* in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus who came to serve and not to be served. Christian discipleship in Asia, the Asian Bishops affirm, has to be *a service to life*” (FABC X: 7). “We thank the Lord for a challenging *vision of Church in Asia*. This vision of Church has been the over-

all objective of the pastoral reflection, discernment, prayer, and pastoral action of the FABC through the years” (FABC X: 11). “The FABC process has been truly a dialogue among local churches.... The communion of local churches is marvelously enriched.... The Lord has, indeed, blessed FABC through and in each of its members for the mission of evangelization that he has entrusted to the Church in Asia” (FABC X: 15). Undoubtedly, the FABC vision of a “new way of being Church” has taken flesh in Asia over the past four decades (1972-2012)!

### **Building Family-centered Local Churches**

**FABC XI.** The Asian local Churches gathered for the eleventh FABC plenary assembly in Colombo, Sri Lanka from November 28 to December 4, 2016. The chosen theme was: “The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy.” One entire section (21) of the final statement was dedicated to “A Family of Faith, Domestic Church of the Poor,” followed by another section (22) entitled “The Family — ‘Missionary Disciple’.”

FABC XI asserted that Pope Francis’ vision of the Church as “missionary disciple” is “dramatic and vivid,” also noting: “If the whole Church, so also the domestic church, the family. The Catholic family is by identity a ‘missionary disciple.’ Mission is the birthright of the Catholic family” (22). “If we believe that the Family is the Focal Point of Evangelization, it is recommended that the pastoral programs of the local church be oriented to the development of God-

fearing families, steeped in the values of the Gospel and of the Kingdom so necessary for society” (45). “May Jesus, Mary, and Joseph be the companions of the Catholic Family in Asia to become in word and in deed a domestic church of the poor on a mission of mercy” (60). Truly, a marvelous vision of family-centered local Churches throughout all of Asia!

### **Concluding Reflection**

This presentation has highlighted some significant Asian developments in the theology of local Church and mission since the Second Vatican Council; it has attempted to describe the “Good News from Asia” about engaged missionary local Churches. In summary fashion, we can briefly recall some of those pivotal phrases emerging from the fifty-year FABC experience. “The primary focus of our task of evangelization ... is the building up of a truly local church” (FABC I, 9). “For the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time” (FABC I, 10). “If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future” (ACMC, 14).

The FABC plenary assemblies always seek “to deepen our knowledge of our local Churches” (FABC II, 1). “Every local church is responsible for its mission, and co-responsible for the mission of all its sister-churches” (IMC, 14). “More and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church” (TLC:C, 3). “The renewal of our sense of

mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local church*” (FABC V, 3.3.1). The local Church “has to be a humble servant. She is a *community-in-mission, a disciple-community*” (FABC X, 7).

Undoubtedly, the experience of the pilgrim local Churches in Asia since Vatican II has been an exciting and inspiring faith-journey. It has been an experience in *ecclesiogenesis*, the birthing and development of local Churches. It has verified the ancient adage that the Church is always *in via*, on the road, in process — as she awaits her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The road has not been a well-trodden path; Asian Churches are making their pilgrim way in the very process of walking it — under the guidance of the befriending Spirit. Asian Christians rejoice in their “new way of being Church” (FABC VI, 3). The dream of vibrant local Churches within an authentic catholicity continues to grow and take on flesh. Christians frequently meditate on the wondrous mystery that, in the power of the Spirit, the Church is for believers *donum Dei atque officium nostri*, at one and the same time, both God’s gift and our task! Asia’s local Churches have assiduously tried to follow the Gospel injunction: “What you have received as a gift, give as a gift” (Mt 10:8).

## Abbreviations

- ACMC - Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church  
(Hong Kong: 1977)
- FABC - Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences
- FABC I - First FABC Plenary Assembly (Taiwan: 1974)
- FABC II - Second FABC Plenary Assembly (India: 1978)
- FABC III - Third FABC Plenary Assembly (Thailand: 1982)
- FABC IV - Fourth FABC Plenary Assembly (Japan: 1986)
- FABC V - Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly (Indonesia: 1990)
- FABC VI - Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly (Philippines: 1995)
- FABC VII - Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly (Thailand: 2000)
- FABC VIII - Eighth FABC Plenary Assembly (Korea: 2004)
- FABC IX - Ninth FABC Plenary Assembly (Philippines: 2009)
- FABC X - Tenth FABC Plenary Assembly (Vietnam: 2012)
- FABC XI - Eleventh FABC Plenary Assembly (Sri Lanka: 2016)
- IMC - International Mission Congress (Philippines: 1979)
- OR-EE - *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Edition)
- TAC - Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC
- TLC - *Theses on the Local Church* (FABC)

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