

TEN THEOLOGICAL TRENDS FOR MISSION IN ASIA: FIFTY YEARS AFTER VATICAN II

Cardinal Orlando B. Quevedo, OMI

ABSTRACT

Recently the East Asian Pastoral Institute was privileged to listen to Cardinal Orlando Quevedo speak about the future of mission in Asia. The documentation for this significant presentation was in the form of an outline with specific key points receiving emphasis. Clearly, the Cardinal was speaking from his many years of experience with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). An editor, conversant with the FABC, has refashioned the basic insights into a narrative presentation, always seeking to remain faithful to the key insights of Cardinal Quevedo. To better appreciate the ten pivotal points highlighted by the Cardinal, the editor first presents an overview of Asian realities and some background on the FABC.

Asia and the FABC

Asia, the world's largest and most populated continent, constitutes one third of the land area of the whole world (17,124,000 square miles) and is home to approximately 60% of humanity (4.5 billion people in Asia). It is a continent of the young (about 40% are below 15 years of age); there are more than 30 megacities in Asia with populations ranging from 5 to 20 million. The nine most populous nations (in descending order) are: China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Vietnam, Philippines, and Thailand. The population of both China and India exceeds one billion each. With this massive bulk goes a wide variety of diversity and contrasts – physical, ethnic, social, economic, cultural, political, and religious.

Asia is a continent rich in non-Christian cultures. It is the homeland of many eminent world religions, e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, etc. Eighty-five percent of all the world's non-Christians are in Asia. Apart from the major religious traditions, there are more than 150 million indigenous Asian people, divided into more than 2,000 specific ethnic groups. Indeed, the human mind struggles to grasp all this overwhelming data.

Hinduism, born about 5,000 years ago, has about 900 million followers, most of them in India and neighboring countries. Buddhism is a religion and philosophy developed from Hinduism by Siddhartha Gautama, (the “Enlightened One”); it has 375 million followers, mostly in Asia. Islam, established by the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century, is a monotheistic religion; it incorporates elements of Judaic and Christian belief. Islam numbers over 1.1 billion followers in Asia alone. The four largest Islamic nations in the world, each with over 100 million Muslims, are found in Asia: Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Other significant religious and philosophical-ethical systems in Asia are Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, as well as many indigenous, traditional belief systems.

There are two predominantly Christian countries in Asia: East Timor and the Philippines. The Catholics of Asia are around 130 million. Significantly, well over 50% of Asian Catholics are found in one country alone – the Philippines; thus, Catholics in most Asian nations are a small – even tiny – minority (frequently less than 1%).

Catholic Church in Asia

Catholics worldwide constitute 17.2% of all people; all Christians are 33.1% of humanity. Catholics in Asia represent only 2.9% of all Asians. The Church in Asia continues to grow slowly; it is known publicly for its commitment to education, health care, and social services. Some few, representative Asian countries and the *percentage of the Catholic population* are the following: **Bangladesh** (0.27%); **Burma/Myanmar** (1.3%); **China** (0.5%); **East Timor** (89%); **Hong Kong** (4.7%); **India** (1.72%); **Indonesia** (2.58%); **Japan** (0.36%); **Korea-South** (6.7%); **Pakistan** (0.6%); **Philippines** (81%); **Singapore** (6.5%); **Thailand** (0.4%); **Vietnam** (6.1%).

These few secular and religious statistics already indicate that “being a missionary Church in Asia” demands creative, innovative, *dialogical*, and *inculturated* approaches to Gospel proclamation. Local Churches must consider diverse cultural, religious, political, social and economic realities as they envision a pastoral program of integral and dialogical evangelization. The task before the Churches is great; they must respond with enthusiasm and insight!

An Asian Church Perspective

The Church in Asia, like anywhere in the world, necessarily seeks to accomplish her mission within definite contexts. A pivotal dimension of the Asian Church is the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC); it is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together bishops from 28 Asian countries; it grew out of the historic gathering in Manila of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 Asian visit.

FABC has a modest central structure; there are also nine FABC offices, which carry out many concrete initiatives and projects. These offices, scattered among various Asian nations, are focused on evangelization, social communication, laity and family, human development, education and faith formation, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Through their diverse activities such as seminars and publications, each of these offices promotes the growth of the Asian local Churches.

Succinctly, one may validly assert that 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 four decades. One can validly assert that the FABC is truly “Asia’s Continuing Vatican II.” This presentation now turns to ten pivotal theological trends for mission in the Asian context, as elaborated by Cardinal Quevedo.

1. Mission as Dialogue. Since the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC in 1974, the Church in Asia has viewed her mission of evangelization to be accomplished by way of dialogue. This is true, because Asia is the cradle of many ancient religious traditions; it is also a continent of ancient civilizations and cultures. In addition, it is a fact that many Asians find themselves mired in poverty. These realities form the *context* in which the Church is to “tell the story of Jesus” through dialogue, word, and life-witness.

2. Christocentrism and Regnocentrism as Mission Approaches. Some theological documents from outside Asia have spoken negatively about the approach to evangelization taken by the Asian Churches. These critiques claim that Jesus is not proclaimed as the unique Savior and that Christians “bracket out” Jesus as they approach other religions, only focusing on a common journey to God’s Kingdom. Asian bishops and theologians strongly reject this “non-Asian” critique. Asians see no dichotomy between Christocentrism and Regnocentrism, between Christ and God’s Kingdom; they assert that Jesus personifies the Kingdom and to proclaim the Kingdom is to also proclaim Jesus.

3. The Asian Face of Jesus. Evangelization in Asia begins with a valid “Christology from below,” presenting the face of Jesus with emphasis on his humanity; this is the same emphasis found in the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS). The Asian Churches focus their attention on several qualities of Jesus: ► he is truly a human *par excellence*; ► he is born of poor Asian parents on Asian soil; ► he taught people to be religious persons by word and example; ► he grew in wisdom and knowledge; ► he “worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind, acted by human choice, and loved with a human heart” (GS 22); ► he was an itinerant preacher and proclaimer of God’s Kingdom; ► the poor followed him with great expectations; ► he was a healer and teacher; ► he was crucified on false charges.

The Asian Churches assert that Jesus’ transcendence is clearly shown in his immanence, his humanity; his compassionate love reflects the love of his Father.

Thus, in their approach to evangelization, Asians continue to tell and retell the story of the Asian Jesus and his Kingdom message. This is a pedagogy that is evocative; it gradually unfolds the truth of the mystery of Jesus, until in God's own *kairos* there is full acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior of all. In a word, this is a valid Asian approach to Jesus and the Church's evangelizing mission.

4. Pneumatology: God's Spirit in Asia. The Word of God has existed from all time; the Spirit of God has always hovered over the world, over Asia. The Spirit is mysteriously responsible for the salvific "rays of truth and life" in Asian religions (cf. *Nostra Aetate* 3), as well as for the enduring values found in Asian civilizations and cultures. The Spirit has been preparing Asia for the Gospel of Christ, thus, enabling us to proclaim Jesus and God's reign today by means of dialogue. The Spirit is the Spirit of Truth who respects humble dialogue; he is the "principle agent of evangelization" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 75). He prepares people for the Gospel of Jesus, continuing to work to renew Asian peoples in ways that go beyond our understanding. Thus, our task is to acknowledge this faith reality and to collaborate with God's Spirit in the mission of evangelization.

5. The Kingdom of God in Asia. God's Kingdom continually irrupts in time and space, manifesting the presence of a reigning God; this manifestation of divine grace unfolds in the temporal world, within communities and within us as individuals. It is validly described as "God-in-Christ reigning within." The Preface for the Feast of Christ the King describes it as "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace." Since the Kingdom is both a reality of grace and a goal to be achieved, we constantly pray: "May your Kingdom come!"

Our vision of the Reign of God impels us to engage in social transformation, seeking to renew our Asian world with authentic justice, love, and peace. In this context, one notes that the "reigning of God" is, in fact, an essential belief of major religions; thus "salvation in the Kingdom" is a clear point of convergence among faith traditions. All of Asian humanity is on a common journey; the task of the Church is to be an active companion and humble servant of all Asians in this common pilgrimage.

6. Asian Ecclesiology: A New Way of Being Church. In its First Plenary Assembly in 1974, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) laid down the fundamental dimensions of a theological-pastoral vision of the Church in Asia and its mission of evangelization. Several pivotal phrases from the final document of FABC I deserve being quoted verbatim: ► "To preach the Gospel in

Asia today we must make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our people. The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church” (9); ► “The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, loving and humble 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” (12).

Cardinal Quevedo continues quoting FABC I: ► “In Asia especially this involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples.... 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” (13, 17); ► “A local church in dialogue with its people, in so many countries in Asia, means dialogue with the poor. For most of Asia is made up of multitudes of the poor ... deprived of access to material goods and resources ... because they live under repression” (19); ► “Engaged in tasks of justice in accordance with the spirit and the demands of the Gospel, we will realize that the search for holiness and the search for justice, evangelization and the promotion of true human development and liberation, are not only not opposed, but make up today the integral preaching of the Gospel, especially in Asia” (23). Undoubtedly, it is through these three tasks that evangelization is to be carried out in Asia (cf. 25–28).

Several imperatives of evangelization can be noted: ► Prayer and contemplation, as well as the ability to discern (31); (see also Pope Paul VI’s Message to the Asian Bishops, where he speaks of the resources of prayer and about the Asian religious spirit); ► Renewal of missionary formation (32); ► Construction of a genuinely Asian theological reflection (33); ► Use of media of social communication for evangelization (34). These dimensions of the FABC vision of Church are the fundamentals of “new way of being Church” in Asia. Concretely, this vision can be actualized in the Basic Ecclesial Communities, since they are small participatory communities of the poor, centered on Word and Eucharist, focused on *orthopraxis*, with a vibrant sense of mission so as to become active agents of social transformation.

7. Method of Pastoral-Theological Discernment. The FABC has provided an approach which recognizes the importance of *context* in evangelization; it is termed the Pastoral Cycle or Pastoral Spiral. It includes: ►

exposure-immersion, ► social and cultural analysis, ► faith-reflection, ► pastoral decisions, ► pastoral planning, ► action, and ► evaluation. Actually, it is an elaboration of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn's "See-Judge-Act" approach. Attention to *context* assures the rootedness of discernment in concrete realities, the relevance of faith reflection not separated from context, and the importance of decisions that effectively address the situation. In a word, this is theologizing from below, not theological deduction from general principles.

8. The Triple Dialogue: An Asian Way of Evangelizing. In *Ecclesia in Asia* it is noted that dialogue is characteristic of Asian life and that evangelization in Asia calls for dialogue. This means a "triple dialogue" with Asia's cultures (Inculturation), with Asia's religions (Interreligious Dialogue), and with Asia's peoples, especially the poor (Development and Liberation).

Inculturation - Interculturation. Since Asia is a continent of ancient civilizations and cultures, to proclaim Christ in such a context requires engaging the cultures of Asia in a dialogue. Indeed, for the faith of the Church to become truly Asian, it has to be inculturated; the culture of the Gospel interacts with the many cultures of Asia. The Church's faith is to be immersed within the cultures of Asia through a symbiotic and living give-and-take process. Thus, the faith is enriched organically by the positive values of Asian cultures; it also purifies other Asian values to become Gospel and Kingdom values.

Interreligious / Interfaith Dialogue. The Asian context reflects a pluralism of religious and philosophical traditions that have formed the Asian religious spirit. Thus, various levels and forms of respectful and humble interreligious dialogue emerge: ► dialogue of life; ► dialogue of religious experience; ► dialogue of theological exchange, and ► dialogue of action.

Dialogue with the Poor and Option for the Poor. The Asian context reveals vast multitudes of the impoverished, the marginalized and the excluded. This reality demands the Church's dialogue with the poor; it includes telling the story of Jesus who is liberator and healer. Jesus called the poor blessed rather than the rich in a startling reversal of human dignity. He lived among them, walked with them, called them his friends; he proclaimed the Gospel of integral liberation to them and told them of salvation in God's Kingdom. The Cross reveals Jesus' total identification with the poor; it is a symbol of his utter poverty and vulnerability as well as the power and the wisdom of God. To make an option for the poor, to love the poor, is an expression of Christian radical love. It asserts that to love Jesus is to love the poor. It sees the face of Christ in the many faces of the poor.

9. Empowerment. The empowerment of the poor is a process of activating the charisms already given by the Holy Spirit; the poor have the power to evangelize. I assert this fact from my pastoral experiences in the dioceses of Kidapawan, Nueva Segovia, and Cotabato. They have evangelized me; I have learned much from them; I have witnessed: ► their total trust in the Lord; ► their deep understanding of Divine Providence and of God's *kairos*; ► their patient endurance of suffering and deprivation; ► their simplicity and humility; ► their joy in the midst of poverty; and, ► their generosity in helping one another. Their simple life of deep faith is a divine ray showing forth God's *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

One sees other areas of empowerment in the major pastoral priorities identified by the FABC: women, youth, children, overseas workers, immigrants, and indigenous peoples. This empowerment reflects key dialogical attitudes of care and active compassion, of defense and support, and of solidarity and empowerment. It extends to the empowerment of the laity in Asia through participation at various levels of decision-making as well as partnership and collaboration among laity, religious, and clergy in the mission of the Church. In the basic ecclesial communities, lay leaders take charge of their respective communities; ministries for the laity abound; and, members are imbued with a sense of mission. Finally, one notes the latest development: concern for the integrity of creation and intergenerational justice. Here one can refer to the seminal work of the FABC Office of Theological Concerns on Responsible Stewardship of God's Creation and link it with Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*.

10. Family as Focal Point of Evangelization. The family has been theme of two FABC Plenary Assemblies: "The Asian Family towards a Culture of Integral Life" (Daejeon, South Korea, 2004) and "The Catholic Family in Asia: Domestic Church of the Poor on a Mission of Mercy" (Colombo, Sri Lanka, 2016). From these assemblies two significant *desiderata* emerge: (1) Family Ministry goes beyond only Pro-Life Concerns to cover Ministries to Families in Difficult Situations (e.g. broken families, families of migrant workers, families in conflict situations, and dislocated families); and (2) Family as the Focal Point of Evangelization (explicitly mentioned by the 2004 and 2016 plenary assemblies).

Other pivotal "family themes" are: ► family as the smallest cell of society and of the local Church; ► family as the primary object as well as the subject of evangelization; and ► the evangelized family as an effective and credible evangelizer.

Conclusion

Additional theological trends in the Asian Church in the past 50 years center on: ► an effort to construct an Asian theology; ► the pastoral concern over economic and cultural globalization; and ► the formidable challenge to construct a full-blown Asian theology of mission.

References. One notes two important sources for documentation of the FABC and its many initiatives: (1) Six volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia* have been published (Claretian Publications, 1992–2017); and, (2) *FABC Papers* (1976 to present) are available worldwide on the website of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). Always remember to consult Papers #100, #125, and #150 to avail of the comprehensive indexes.

Postscript. This text was originally written in pointers and delivered as keynote speech by Cardinal Quevedo on the occasion of *APMS* launch at the Loyola School of Theology on September 6, 2019. Father James Kroeger, MM, has helped *APMS* with his professional knowledge and skill to edit the text. He also presents a rather lengthy background (nearly two pages) on Asia and on the FABC in this text.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CARDINAL ORLANDO B. QUEVEDO, was ordained in Washington, DC, as a priest of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, with degrees in Religious Education and Theology. He was a missionary in Cotabato and Jolo. In 1973, he was selected as one of the Ten Outstanding Young Men of the Philippines. In 1980, Pope John Paul II appointed him as bishop of Kidapawan. In Rome in 1994, he was elected with the highest vote by the synod fathers as member of the Ordinary Council of the Synod Secretariat. He is a former president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines and former secretary general of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. He is now the Archbishop Emeritus of Cotabato. His interests are on church renewal, basic ecclesial communities, and the issues of justice and peace.