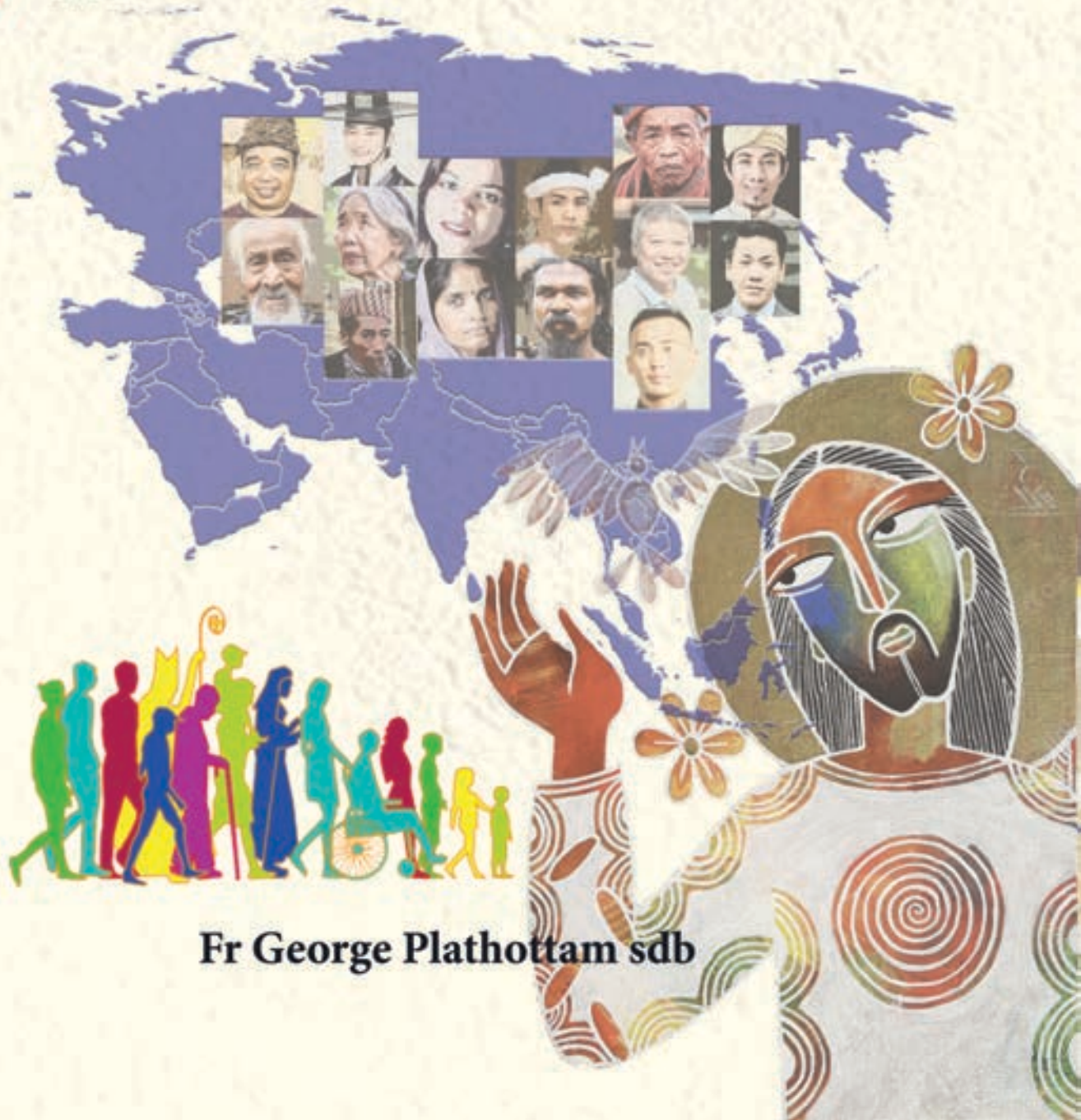




People of Asia Journeying with Jesus

Snapshots & Reflections on the Synod on Synodality



Fr George Plathottam sdb

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Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences
Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC)

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Published by
Fr George Plathottam sdb
Executive Secretary,
Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences
Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC) 2023.
Website: <http://www.fabc-osc.org>
Email: exec-sec@fabc-osc.org
secretariat@fabc-osc.org
fabcosc@gmail.com

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Cover Design: Petrus Baraik svd

Layout: Birkhang Narzary & Fr MC George sdb

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Introduction

People of Asia Journeying with Jesus tries to encapsule the story of the synodal journey of the Church in Asia which rediscovers its identity as the People of God, chosen and called together into Church by Jesus Christ. The book presents snapshots from the synodal journey from an Asian perspective through reflections expressed in prose, poetry, art, icons, images, and stories. These expressions are gleaned from the various countries and cultures of Asia.

The book is not a theological or doctrinal presentation on the Synod or on the FABC, but a tool for pastoral reflection to help meditate on the gift of God—the gift of life and faith and communion that the Church in Asia celebrates in Christ. The idea for a book like this dawned as an inspiration. If the contents of the book help to foster love for Christ, the Church, and the Synod that invites us to look more intently at our ecclesial communion and mission, our labours would not be in vain.

The snapshots are to remind the pilgrim people journeying together toward their goal so that the journey is less fatiguing and burdensome. They are meant to comfort and strengthen them on the arduous pilgrimage from the earthly life to Eternal life. It is our hope that the book serves as a pastoral instrument for the People of God and provide them deeper insights into life, and help them to be more attentive to the needs of their fellow pilgrims. May the journey with Jesus, the Good Shepherd who knows the way, lead us to the Father.

I wish to thank all those who have collaborated in the preparation of the book, especially my colleagues in the communication ministry in Asian countries. I regret to mention that not all countries responded to our invitation to contribute to this book. In spite of efforts to make up this lacunae by accessing



content from other sources to give adequate representation to all Asian countries, we cannot claim that we have succeeded. I wish each country could draw inspiration from this work to prepare a profile of the local Churches in the FABC countries incorporating the stories of the People of God.

My sincere thanks to Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, sdb, President, FABC, for the Foreword to the book. I thank Fr Petrus Baraik svd for his valuable help in assisting me to select appropriate images, and for his graphic sketches and cover design for the book. I am grateful to Fr Roy M. Thottam SJ for his reflections and artwork, Sr Vincy Joseph for contributing several of her artworks for the book. I wish to acknowledge the generous contribution of several others who have provided write ups, paintings and drawings as well as testimonies. I thank Mr Birkhang Narzary and Fr MC George sdb for the layout, Fr Joy Kachappilly for editorial assistance and Fr Anucha Chaiyadej for his assistance in overseeing the printing of the book

I wish to express my heartfelt thanks to the Catholic Bishops Conference of Korea (CBCK) for financial support towards publication of this book. Thanks also to the Chairman and member bishops of the Office of Social Communication, the staff of FABC OSC, Dr Thierry Bonaventura, Communication Manager in the General Secretariat of the Synod, and several others for their support and encouragement towards the publication of this book. I dedicate this volume to the people of Asia as we continue our journey on the Synodal path.

Fr George Plathottam sdb

Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Social Communication

Foreword



The Synod on Synodality is a moment of grace. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit for renewing the Church in our times. It is a renewed call to be witnesses and missionaries of the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world. We thank God for the leadership and vision of Pope Francis who initiated and is guiding this worldwide ecclesial movement.

We know that the Synod is not just an event but a process. We are hearing so many heartwarming stories as the Synod is unfolding at the various stages from the local ecclesial communities to the episcopal conferences, the continental stage, leading to the universal Church. The Synod offers for the whole Church an opportunity for conversion and renewal. It is an invitation to listen to the Holy Spirit, and a call to journey with Christ and put on Christ, and to be like him in our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. The fruit expected of the Synod is renewal. Renewal happens when we are open to the Holy Spirit and to Christ who assures us: “Behold, I make all things new.”

For us in Asia, the Synod offers a challenge and a renewed opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel to the millions of brothers and sisters with whom we live. It is a call to dialogue with the poor, the religions, and cultures of Asia. It is also a call to make our own distinct contribution to the universal Church on how best we can pursue the path of dialogue.



The continental document for the Synod is titled *Enlarge the Space of your tent*. We are called to make space for others. Like Christ, we are called to be more inclusive, welcoming, and caring. All of these involve a synodal conversion.

I am happy to present **Journeying with Jesus in Asia** to the Churches and all People of God in Asia and beyond as a pastoral guide for reflection. On behalf of the FABC, I express my sincere thanks and appreciation to Fr George Plathottam sdb, Executive Secretary, FABC Office of Social Communication, and Consultant to the Vatican Dicastery of Communication, for envisioning and preparing this book. I also thank all his collaborators who have contributed to the preparation of this volume as we in Asia celebrate the Synod at the continental stage.

Let us continue to listen to the Spirit speaking to the Churches in Asia. Let us pray for the millions of our brothers and sisters who live in this vast continent of Asia. Together may we be able to live in peace and fraternity, and experience the unconditional love of Christ who walks with us, and leads us as our Good Shepherd.

+ Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, SDB, DD
President, Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC)



CHAPTER 1

SYNOD ON SYNODALITY

1 Synod

‘Synod’ is an ancient and venerable word in the tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. It indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents himself as ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14:6), and to the fact that Christians, his followers, were originally called ‘followers of the Way’ (cf. Acts 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22).

2 The Common Dignity of all the Baptized

The whole People of God shares a common dignity and vocation through baptism. All of us are called in virtue of our baptism to be active participants in the life of the Church. In parishes, small Christian communities, lay movements, religious communities, and other forms of communion, women and men, young people, and the elderly, we are all invited to listen to one another in order to hear the promptings of the Holy Spirit, who comes to guide our human efforts, breathing life and vitality into the Church and leading us into deeper communion for our mission in the world. As the Church embarks on this synodal journey, we strive to ground ourselves in experiences of authentic listening and discernment on the path of becoming the Church that God calls us to be.

3 What is Synodality?

Synodality denotes the particular style that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel.

Synodality ought to be expressed in the Church's ordinary way of living and working. Synodality, in this sense, is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and bishops' assemblies, or a matter of simple internal administration within the Church; it is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.

4 Aim of the Synod

This Synod is intended as a *Synodal Process*. The aim of the synodal process is not to provide a temporary or one-time experience of synodality, but rather to provide an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern together how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church in the long-term.

A basic question prompts and guides us: how does this journeying together allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted to her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow as a synodal Church?

We recall that the purpose of the Synod is not to produce documents, but to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.



5 Three Key Themes

The three key themes that characterize the Synod on Synodality are Communion, Participation and Mission.



Communion

The communion we share finds its deepest roots in the love and unity of the Trinity. Together we are inspired by listening to the Word of God, through the living Tradition of the Church and grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share. We all have a role to play in discerning and living out God's call for his people.



Participation

Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve one another through the gifts they have each received from the Holy Spirit in baptism. In a synodal Church the whole community is called together to pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice or making pastoral decisions which correspond as closely as possible to God's will.



Mission

Our mission is to witness to the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This synodal process has a deeply missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and existential peripheries of our world.

6 The Logo of the Synod

A large, majestic tree, full of wisdom and light, reaches for the sky. A sign of deep vitality and hope which expresses the cross of Christ. It carries the Eucharist, which shines like the sun. The horizontal branches, opened like hands or wings, suggest, at the same time, the Holy Spirit.



The people of God are not static: they are on the move, in direct reference to the etymology of the word synod, which means "walking together". The people are united by the same common dynamic that this Tree of Life breathes into them, from which they begin their walk.

The 15 silhouettes sum up our entire humanity in its diversity of life situations of generations and origins. This aspect is reinforced by the multiplicity of bright colours which are themselves signs of joy. There is no hierarchy between these people who are all on the same footing: young, old, men, women, teenagers, children, lay people, religious, parents, couples, singles; the bishop and the nun are not in front of them, but among them. Quite naturally, children and then adolescents open their walk, in reference to these words of Jesus in the Gospel: "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to little children". (Mt 11:25)



7 The Adsumus Prayer

(Prayer of invocation to the Holy Spirit for an ecclesial assembly)

Adsumus Sancte Spiritus, the first word of the Latin original meaning, “We stand before You, Holy Spirit,” which has been historically used at Councils, Synods and other Church gatherings for hundreds of years, being attributed to Saint Isidore of Seville 560-636). As we are called to embrace this synodal path of Synod 2021-2024, this prayer invites the Holy Spirit to work within us so that we may be a community and a people of grace.

We stand before You, Holy Spirit,
 as we gather together in Your name.
 With You alone to guide us,
 make Yourself at home in our hearts.
 Teach us the way we must go
 and how we are to pursue it.
 We are weak and sinful.
 Do not let us promote disorder.
 Do not let ignorance lead us down the wrong path
 nor partiality influence our actions.
 Let us find in You our unity
 so that we may journey together to eternal life
 and not stray from the way of truth and what
 is right.
 All this we ask of You,
 who are at work in every place and time,
 in the communion of the Father and the Son,
 forever and ever. Amen

(The Adsumus prayer is available in several languages and formats at www.synod.va)



8 Listening

The Synod calls to listen, as the entire People of God, to what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church. We do so by listening together to the Word of God in Scripture and the living Tradition of the Church, and then by listening to one another, and especially to those at the margins, discerning the signs of the times. In



fact, the whole Synodal process aims at fostering a lived experience of discernment, participation, and co-responsibility, where a diversity of gifts is brought together for the Church’s mission in the world.

9 Fruits of the Synod

The Synod is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people’s hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission (PD, 32).

10 Call for Conversion

Pope Francis declared that “the world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission.” This call to cooperate in the mission of the Church is addressed to the entire People of God. Pope Francis made this clear when he issued a direct invitation to all the People of God to contribute to the efforts of the Church towards healing: “Every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communitarian conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does.”



CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE OF GOD JOURNEYING WITH JESUS

1 Synod: By Walking We Learn to Walk

The synodal journey is an important ecclesial movement. It is the whole Church on a journey. It is a walk undertaken by the people of God reminiscent of the Exodus- the People of God journeying towards the Promised Land.

It is by walking that we learn to walk. To begin to walk involves taking baby steps- faltering, falling down, but getting up and keep on trying until we master the art of walking. By walking and walking we gain confidence, we gain courage, we acquire the skill to walk well and to cover long distances.

We are not static beings, stones planted in a permanent place. We are people of flesh and blood. We are a pilgrim people, a people on the move. We move by walking. Walking is intrinsic to human nature. Like talking, we learn walking early in life. We move from place to place by walking. Walking was and even now for most people the primary mode of transportation- for many the only means of movement from place to place.

We walk sometimes all alone, but most of the time we walk with the others.

As in the Exodus, the Synodal journey is a walking together.

The others who walk with us are a part of us- “We are no longer aliens in a foreign land”, but children of the one God, brothers, and sisters, one in dignity and honour, one in vulnerability and sin. One in our fragility and strength.

We are one in baptism- the bond that unites us in faith. The foundational value that constitutes our identity as the Church.



We are not mere members of the Church. We are the Church, the ecclesia.
We are part of the body of Christ- Christ at the head, we forming its parts.
Christ is the vine; we are the branches. We do not exist alone.
Our vitality and strength come from him.
We are one body in Christ constituting “One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church”

2 Journeying with Christ

“Travelling always with that virtue which is a pilgrim virtue: joy”!

Pope Francis

We journey with Christ. It is in Christ that we move and live and have our being. Christ is our hope and our joy. We are planted and rooted in Christ. Being in Christ is intrinsic to our nature, our existence as Christians. Christ is at the centre of our lives. This is the identity, the mark of all the baptized.

It is our being in Christ that enables us to reach out to others- to look for other sheep the Lord has. It is not optional but a *sine qua non* condition of our being in Christ.



Our journey does not end at our own doorsteps; it takes us to our neighbours, all people of all castes, creed or character. Being rooted in Christ implies reaching out to others.

It is the mission of the Church to go out, to reach out to the peripheries, to the highways and byways. The Church is missionary; it is apostolic; both of these terms indicate ‘being sent’.



Pope Francis urges us to avoid being a 'self-referential Church'. He wishes that the Church be like 'a field hospital'. It is a Church that is ever ready to come to the aid of those who are bruised, wounded, those who need assistance.

Not only has the Church a mission, but the Church is missionary. It exists for the mission. This mission entails going out to meet others, meeting them where they are. It means taking the good news to the ends of the earth. This going out is so beautifully portrayed in three biblical texts of Isaiah 52:7, Nahum 1:15 and Romans 10:15.



How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, Your God reigns!" (Is 52:7)



Christianity is communitarian; it is not an individualistic religion. I am not an island, but a cluster. I am a petal in a flower, a branch in the vine, grain in a shaft of wheat, a grain of sand on the earth. Faith and holiness bloom in clusters. We celebrate the communion of saints.

I am part of a community, a community called into existence by God, called to receive the saving grace of God.

Christianity is not an ideology, it is a person, the person of Christ. Christ is the starting point and the end- the Alpha and the Omega.

There is no freelance, part-time Christianity, a Christianity devoid of community, the Church.

It is a myth or fallacy to believe that I can be a disciple of Christ without a community. There is no individualistic Christianity. If anyone attempts to be so, he or she is simply following an ideology. He or she cannot claim to be a disciple of Christ. We cannot be 'believers without belonging'.

Never lose the impulse of walking down the roads of the world, the awareness that walking, even going with an uncertain or halting stride is still better than standing still,



closed off in our own questions or certainties. Missionary passion, the joy of the encounter with Christ that drives you to share the beauty of the faith with others, drives away the risk of staying stuck in individualism.

-Pope Francis



3 The Exodus

Our journey in Christ takes us back to the foundational experience of Exodus. It is the story of our salvation. Exodus is both didactic and inspirational. It is a going out, a journey in search of the Promised Land. But the journey is wrought with fatigue, faint heartedness, fear, loss of faith. The Exodus journey calls for courage. It also offers promises of hope, glimpses of God's presence and providence. It is filled with hope in Yahweh who called them and nourished them with the conviction that he will lead them to the end.

*At every stage of their journey, whenever the cloud rose from the tabernacle the sons of Israel would resume their march.
If the cloud did not rise, they waited and would not march until it did.
For the cloud of the LORD rested on the tabernacle by day,
and a fire shone within the cloud by night,
for all the House of Israel to see.
And so it was for every stage of their journey. (Ex 40:36-38)*

It is a journey in which leaders like Moses instill hope and courage to people who vacillate between faith and doubt, courage and fear, trust in Yahweh and yet periodic tryst with infidelity and idolatry. Moses never tires in reminding the people of Yahweh's personal and steadfast love, his fidelity to the covenant.

The Exodus journey is a primordial symbol. It represents in the new covenant, the Church. A journey from earthly promised land to an eternal home, the end point of the journey. This is the Synodal journey, the people of God walking together, journeying to God.

4 The Emmaus Journey

In the New Testament, the Emmaus Journey represents the Church. It is a walk with Christ the risen Lord as experienced by the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

It is a walk into the night, a walk with memories of deep pain. Faint heartedness.

The two disciples were downcast, sorrow stricken... discouragement written across their faces. Not until the Risen Lord walks by their side and explains to them the scriptures. In retrospect the two recall: "Were not our hearts burring within us, as we walked with him, as he explained the scriptures to us?"

Their fear vanishes; they decide to turn back to Jerusalem- the very place of fear and danger. They can no longer wait for the dawn to take the road to Jerusalem, to tell the Apostles and Mary what happened on the road and at the breaking of the Bread.

Our journey is not far too different. We too go through moments of discouragement, pain and grief. There are times when we want to give up. When we are confused and do not know if we should go ahead or go back! When we think all is lost.

Then Christ walks into our life again. He joins the journey. He explains the scriptures, breaks the Bread. Our arid hearts begin to warm up with a new lease of life. Our fears vanish, we are restored, reconciled, filled with hope. We are ready to set out on mission.



5 Let Us Walk Together

(A song composed by the Church in Mongolia)

Plant your word in my heart
Water it with your mercy
You are our God (2)
Fill us with your love
Nurture it through steadfast faith
You are our God (2)

Chorus

*Let us listen brothers and sisters
Let us be led by the Holy Spirit
Let us glorify our God
Let us walk together towards Him*

You have gathered us together in your love
Preserve us together
You are our God (2)
We are united through our faith in you
Make us one with a firm spirit
You are our God (2) Chorus

Make us witnesses of your love
Make me a light of my homeland
You are our God (2)
Have us according to your will
Make us walk together in the divine mission
You are our God (2) Chorus

Youtube link: <https://youtu.be/wF5QM5Mwpdw>

Хамт алхацгаая

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Хамт алхацгаая" (Hamt Alkhaatgaya). The score is written in a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a common time signature (C). It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is written in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The vocal line is written in a single treble clef. The score includes measure numbers 5, 9, 13, and 17, indicating the start of new phrases or sections. The music features a mix of eighth and quarter notes, with some rests and dynamic markings.



21 후렴

25

29

33

37

2.
3.

41

45

49

53 후렴

57



6 Walk with Christ to Peace

There is the desire to walk along the path of love that Christ walked.

Let us tear down the walls that threaten peace
Walls of war, desire for power, free of diseases.
Let us walk together with our gaze on Christ
Who is in our midst as the Prince of Peace.

Paul Yong-Duk Kim



Drawing by Kim

7 Cosmic Solidarity

The eight doll-figures represent people from the margins and peripheries of the world. They embody a spiritual journey beyond their religions, status, gender, age and nationality. Together they form a global network of synodal solidarity. They nurture their true identity, embrace unity in diversity, creativity, communion, and peace



Doll painting of Françoise Bosteels

with justice. Together they 'co-arise'. They are thankful to the voices of the wind, the running waters, and the green forests. They share the same purpose and vision of wisdom giving hope to future generations. They celebrate the Divine Creator to whom they owe their existence. They are grateful to the earth from where they receive their subsistence.

Françoise Bosteels

CHURCH IN ASIA

1 FABC's Vision for a New Way of Being Church in Asia

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) grew out of the historic gathering of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 pastoral visit to Asia. The meeting 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 the Churches incarnate a decisive “turning to history” and a “turning to the Gospel” within history “for all the peoples of Asia”? How would the FABC articulate an overall vision that captures what “being Church in Asia today” truly means? This is the context for appreciating the role of the local Church in the inculturation process.

During the past five decades the FABC has aimed to strengthen the bonds of communication among Catholic communities and their bishops and to contribute to the development of a shared vision of the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia.

The FABC continues to engage in a three-fold dialogue: with Asian peoples (especially the poor) through efforts towards integral development, Asian cultures (inculturation), and Asian religions (interfaith dialogue). This vision of a “triple dialogue” has constructively guided the FABC for over the five decades.

The Asian local Churches are committed to the challenge of inculturating the Christian faith in the Asian milieu. The FABC has expressed this vision in one of its early documents: “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...”
(For All Peoples of Asia (FAPA) I, 70).



Cardinal Charles Bo inaugurating FABC 50 in Bangkok. Cardinal Oswald Gracias looks on

While affirming the importance of building and strengthening each local Church the first FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974, envisaged “a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated”

(FAPAI, 14). The Christian communities of Asia continue to search for

appropriate means to make the Church truly Catholic and truly Asian. It is imperative “to deepen the dialogue in Asia between the Gospel and culture, so that faith is inculturated and culture is evangelized”

(FAPA III, 27).

A 1991 FABC theological consultation stated: “As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering colonial image survives.... The Church is seen by some as an obstacle or threat to national integration and religious and cultural identity... The Church is perceived as foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western trained leadership and in its theology. Christian rituals often remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian.... Seminary formation often alienates the seminarian from the people. Biblical, systematic and historical theology as taught are often unpastoral and unAsian”

(FAPA II, 195-196).

Efforts to address these concerns have resulted in the emergence of indigenous theology, spirituality, religious life, creativity in liturgical celebrations. They express the commitment the Churches have made to achieve the goal of inculturation.

A dialogical approach is the only possible avenue, given the multiracial, multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural reality of Asia, the world's largest and most populated continent. Such an approach is not a mere methodology but is part of the identity of the Church as she is called to be a community of dialogue. This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church (FAPA I, 332).

Such a Church may at last become a Church *of* Asia and not simply a Church in Asia. It may then be perceived as no longer an alien presence. In this model of Church, dialogue, liberation, inculturation and proclamation are but different aspects of the one reality" (FAPA I, 333). This demands a faith-community that is in "continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures and the religions" (FAPA I, 14).

Eighty-five percent of all the world's followers of other living faiths (besides Christianity) are Asians. Christians in Asia are less than three percent of the total population. In short, except for the Philippines and East Timor, Christians are a small minority. The four largest Islamic countries are in Asia: Indonesia, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Other two major religions in Asia are Buddhism and Hinduism.

Often "Asia tends to identify nationality, religion and culture". The FABC takes a positive approach to the religions, promoting constructive collaboration, dialogue, and critical interaction. It affirms that building up a truly local Church "involves dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples." The spiritual riches and religious values by which the people of our continent have been nourished through centuries must recognize the life of the local Church to enrich it."

Asian Churches recognize the need to become truly "Asian in all things" including her ministries and ministerial structures. The FABC's pastoral-theological reflection is rooted in the emerging realities of life and recognizes 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-children, youth, workers, families, and the indigenous peoples.

Asia has much to give to authentic Christian spirituality: a richly developed prayer of the whole person in unity of body-psyche-spirit; prayer of deep interiority and immanence; traditions of asceticism and renunciation; techniques of contemplation found in the ancient eastern religions; simple prayer-forms and other popular expressions of faith and piety of those whose hearts and minds so readily turn to God in their daily lives. This is Asia's gift of prayer to the Church (FAPA I, 42). The Church is to be "a communion of communities," a "participatory Church," a "prophetic sign," a "Spirit-filled community."

For some unfamiliar with the growth of the local Churches in Asia after Vatican II, the phrase "new way of being Church" may need explanation. The phrase implies no rejection of essential dimensions of ecclesiology; it attempts to capture the aspirations of Asian Christians to live their faith in the Christian community in an "Asian way." This "new way of being Church ... is a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia.... For the spirituality of the new way of being Church is the spirituality of those who place their complete trust in the Lord." Their lives are marked by the "Gospel values that resonate deeply with the cultures of Asia."

While noting that "Asia is a cultural mosaic with rich diversity," the bishops of Asia stated their position: "We are committed to the emergence of the 'Asianness' of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an



Opening Mass of FABC 50

embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life” (FAPA III, 8).

The eight-fold movement of growth of the local Churches in Asia, particularly is indeed “Good News from Asia.” It is an inspiring story of faith and service. It is a profound witness to the action of the Spirit in Asia. It is a story of a Church renewed in its evangelizing mission. It is a narrative of God’s love becoming incarnate, a story of inculturation.

The FABC sees its growth as:

- (1) *a movement toward a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young*
- (2) *a movement toward a “truly local Church,” toward a Church “incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated”*
- (3) *a movement toward deep interiority and a praying community*
- (4) *a movement toward an authentic community of faith*
- (5) *a movement toward active integral evangelization, toward a new sense of mission*
- (6) *a movement toward empowerment of men and women*
- (7) *a movement toward the service of life in Asia*
- (8) *a movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor, and with Asian cultures (cf. FAPA III, 2-4).*



2 The Gospel-Culture Encounter

The encounter of the Gospel with the cultures of Asia is a challenge and opportunity for the Church in Asia. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) stressed as one of its major focuses of attention the triple dialogue: dialogue with cultures, religions and the poor. Asia is home to numerous cultures and cultural values. The diversity and richness of the cultures of Asia is a resource and strength. However, it is also a challenge to find ways to understand and express the Gospel in the Church's proclamation, catechesis, liturgy and way of life.

According to *Ecclesia in Asia*, culture is the vital space within which the human person comes face to face with the Gospel. Just as a culture is the result of the life and activity of a human group, so the persons belonging to that group are shaped to a large extent by the culture in



which they live. As persons and societies change, so too does the culture change with them. As a culture is transformed, so too are persons and societies transformed by it.

From this perspective, it becomes clearer why evangelization and inculturation are naturally and intimately related to each other. The Gospel and evangelization are certainly not identical with culture; they are independent of it. Yet the Kingdom of God comes to people who are profoundly rooted in a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid absorbing and integrating elements from human cultures.

Paul VI called the split between the Gospel and culture the drama of our time, with a profound impact upon both evangelization and culture. In the process of

encountering the world's different cultures, the Church not only transmits her truths and values and renews cultures from within, but she also takes from the various cultures the positive elements already found in them. This is the obligatory path for evangelizers in presenting the Christian faith and making it part of a people's cultural heritage.

Conversely, the various cultures, when renewed in the light of the Gospel, can become true expressions of the one Christian faith. Through inculturation, the Church becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission. This engagement with cultures has always been part of the Church's pilgrimage through history. But it has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign.

The 1998 Asian Synod emphasized the fact that the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of inculturation of the Christian faith in Asia. The same Holy Spirit who leads us into the whole truth makes possible a fruitful dialogue with the cultural and religious values of different peoples, among whom the Spirit is present in some measure, giving men and women with a sincere heart the strength to overcome evil and the deceit of the Evil One, and indeed offering everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God.

The Spirit's presence ensures that the dialogue unfolds in truth, honesty, humility, and respect. "In offering to others the Good News of the Redemption, the Church strives to understand their culture. She seeks to know the minds and hearts of her hearers, their values and customs, their problems and difficulties, their hopes and dreams. Once she knows and understands these various aspects of culture, then she can begin the dialogue of salvation; she can offer, respectfully but with clarity and conviction, the Good News of the Redemption to all who freely wish to listen and to respond".

Therefore, the people of Asia who, as Asians, wish to make the Christian faith their own, can rest assured that their hopes, expectations, anxieties and sufferings are not only embraced by Jesus, but become the very point at which the gift of faith and the power of the Spirit enter the innermost core of their lives.



It is the task of the pastors to guide this dialogue with discernment. Likewise, experts in sacred and secular disciplines have important roles to play in the process of inculturation. But the process must involve the entire People of God, since the life of the Church as a whole must show forth the faith which is being proclaimed and appropriated. To ensure that this is done soundly, the Synod Fathers identified for particular attention areas such as theological reflection, liturgy, the formation of priests and religious, catechesis and spirituality.

3 The Church in Asia and the Synodal Process

The Episcopal Conferences in Asia which form the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) celebrated the Synod on Synodality at various levels- parish, diocese, and episcopal conference. A similar process was followed all over the world under the guidelines and methodology proposed by the General Secretariat of the Synod in Rome.

The Asian continental assembly for the Synod on Synodality attended by bishops, priests, religious and lay leaders from episcopal conferences across Asia was held at Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Training Centre, Bangkok, Thailand, in February, 2023.

The continental assembly reflected on the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) titled *Enlarge the Space of Your Tent*. The DCS, released by the Synod Secretariat in October 2022, is based on inputs received from the episcopal conferences of the Church all over the world, and other groups such as religious congregations and Vatican Dicasteries. It is a privileged instrument for listening, dialogue and discernment. The reflections focus on the following three questions:



- Which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?
- What substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent’s perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?
- What are the priorities, recurring themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

The responses to the three questions laid out in the DCS formed the basis for preparing the continental documents which in turn would be used to prepare the working document (*Instrumentum Laboris*) for the Synodal Assembly in October 2023.

In October 2022 Pope Francis announced the extension of the Synod to 2024 in order to provide more time for extended discernment. He said there are already many first fruits from the ongoing Synod but added that more time is needed in order for them to become fully mature. He hoped this decision will “favour the comprehension of synodality as a constitutive element of the Church and help everyone to live it as a journey of brothers and sisters who bear witness to the joy of the Gospel.”

The General Secretariat of the Synod said, “This decision stems from the desire that the theme of a Synodal Church, because of its breadth and importance, might be the subject of prolonged discernment not only by the members of the



Synodal Assembly, but by the whole Church.” The extension, it said, fits in well with the ongoing synodal journey, since the Synod is “not an event but a process in which the whole People of God is called to walk together toward what the Holy Spirit helps it to discern as being the Lord’s will for his Church.” The pair of sessions in 2023 and 2024 form a “journey within the journey” with the goal of fostering a more mature reflection.



Secretary General of the Synod Cardinal Mario Grech observed that the experiences of the Synod heard or lived show a Church that is alive, in need of authenticity, healing and that yearns more and more to be a community that celebrates and proclaims the joy of the Gospel, learning to walk and discern together.

4 Centrality of Prayer

The Synod invites all peoples to pray earnestly so that the People of God are led by the Spirit. The Document for Continental Stage (DCS) begins with a prayer of thanksgiving and joy experienced by those who have set out on the Synodal journey of listening to God and to their brothers and sisters. It calls for an attitude of welcome, humility, hospitality and siblinghood.

People of Asia give great importance and value to prayer. In the religious traditions of Asia one can find many ways of addressing God. God has a thousand names in Hinduism. Prayer is enriched in different religious traditions by numerous icons and symbols, prayer flags, writings like calligraphy and inscriptions, prayer wheels, and prayer beads, flowers and incense, prayer postures, costumes, specially demarcated sacred places, and specific times of prayer. Asians also value as part of their spirituality silence, chants, music, and vocal and repetitive prayer.

The Church's worship is expressed in a variety of rich liturgical traditions. The Eucharistic liturgy, consisting of Word and Sacrament, is considered as the most sublime form of prayer and is the source and summit of all prayer. The morning (lauds) and evening (vespers) prayers of the People of God, especially of the religious communities constitute the 'official' prayers of the Church and are described as the hinges of the prayer life of the Church. The Holy Rosary is a popular form of prayer, widely used by Catholic families and individuals. Prayer forms like the 'Lectio Divina' and novenas and numerous popular devotions, also help nourish the faith of the community. The Catholic community, living in the midst of multi-religious and multi-cultural contexts, is called to find ever new ways of expressing faith in God- the Father of all peoples.

5 Enlarge the Space of Your Tent (Isaiah 54:2)

The working document for the continental stage of the Synod is titled Enlarge the space of your tent based on Isaiah 54:2. The following article by Fr George Plathottam sdb offers insight into the document)

Have you ever lived in a tent? If not, it is worth trying. Camping with friends in a tent can be a unique experience. You will remember it and cherish the experience. When those who prepared the Synod document for the continental stage chose for its title a phrase from Prophet Isaiah, *Enlarge the space of your tent (Isaiah 54:2)* my thoughts went wandering to happy memories of the days I lived in a tent. The title of the Synod document triggered in my mind fresh memories of the days when I lived under a tent, camping with scouts and scout masters.

In school I was a boy scout. When I joined the seminary, I thought I would not any more have the joy of scouting. I was mistaken. Life in the Salesian seminary and formation had many things common to scouting. Later I heard Don Bosco, the founder



of the Salesian Society, being referred to as “Scouter before Scouting began”. I was indeed happy.

As a young cleric in regency, and as a student of theology and as a priest, I was very much involved in scouting. Camping and hiking were part of my ministry. But the most memorable of the camp life was training scout masters. A training camp usually lasted two weeks, but sometimes we would have two camps back-to-back. So for the duration of a month, we would live in tents at a large wooded camp site away from the city. The trainers as well as trainees would live in tents during the whole duration of the camp.

We used to pitch a tent somewhere at the centre of the camp site. This tent would serve as the camp head office during the day and dormitory for the camp chief and other trainers at night. The trainees, who were either young religious brothers or teachers



from various schools, would have their tents pitched several feet apart from each other, but equidistance from the main area of a large open ground where we held the training sessions, games and other activities.

There would be four or six patrols as per the number of trainees and each patrol would have their own tents. The camp would start with a hands-on session on how to pitch a tent. We would demonstrate to the trainees how to do it, and how to maintain it daily throughout the period of the camp. They were also taught how to take it down, fold it and carry it and pitch it at another location.

Living in a tent is a unique experience. If you never had an experience of living in a tent, it is worth trying it sometime. Go out with friends on a hike or join a scout troop, and camp with them outdoors and try to pitch a tent and live in it. Discover the joy of a ‘tent-life experience’.

The tent is special in many ways. Unlike a regular house, it has no doors or windows, walls, or rooms or toilets. There are no beds, chairs and tables. It is an open space. In any given day, it can take in one more person. It is ever expandable. One will seldom hear words like ‘sorry, there is no room’ or ‘houseful’. Those who live in tents know they have to have some kind of affinity, affection, sense of fellowship with those who live together. They are also aware that a tent is not a permanent place. The stay is short, the facilities are a bare minimum, and the tent will be plucked up and moved as the need arises.

In the Semitic culture, people frequently moved from place to place and dwelt in tents, so it was a familiar way of life. For the Israelites who journeyed for long years in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, the tent experience was not alien. The earliest books of the Old Testament contain detailed descriptions of living in the tent. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lived mostly in tents. Moses too had his tent wherever the Israelites camped. David pitched a tent and placed the Ark of the Covenant in it.

Those who are involved in leading the Synod process chose the theme of the tent for the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) and called it “Enlarge the Space of your Tent”. They chose Isaiah 54:2 as a title for the document prepared as a fruit of the reflections gathered from the episcopal conferences of the world as well as groups such as the associations of the consecrated life, Vatican curia offices. In Isaiah’s day his listeners would easily understand the significance of the tent, and the call to expand and make space for others.

The imagery of the tent is significant for us too. The Church is like a tent which gives people shelter, which has always the possibility to enlarge, to make space for others. Those who live in tents are accommodative. They have a great sense of hospitality. There is a great deal of trust among the inhabitants of a tent. They are willing to share what they have with the sojourner. They are sensitive to the plight of the other, the one who is in need. Tent dwellers are aware of the impermanence and hardships of life, and they know the need for mutual dependence and support.



The Old Testament has many references on welcoming the foreigners, sojourners and strangers. The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. Abraham's generosity is unbounded even when he did not know the identity of his visitors. Abraham prevails on them to enjoy his hospitality. Later he learns that the Lord was the one who had come to visit him. He is blessed with a son. Abraham and Sarah knew God was faithful to his promise. Their joy knew no bounds.



In describing the incarnation of Christ, the expression 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us' is sometimes translated as 'God pitched his tent among us'. Someone coming to dwell with us in our tent is a special guest with whom we will have a special bonding. Christ did not come as a casual visitor, but an 'indweller', a fellow pilgrim, a God who comes to inhabit with us.

Paul, one of Christ's most ardent followers, was a tent maker and earned his livelihood with the trade. He surely knew what it means to pitch a tent and live in it. He preached the Gospel and proclaimed the Lord across a vast territory of the Greco-Roman world. He was enlarging the space of the tent, the Church, thorough his missionary journeys. A Church without discrimination of Jew or gentile, male or female, slave or free ones. In a world and even Church which is divided on many discriminatory elements, Paul's call to be one in Christ and shun all divisions has not lost its relevance.

How do we as a Church enlarge the space of our tent today? It means being more inclusive, welcoming, creating space for others. Avoiding 'exclusion' and neglect, eschewing discriminations based on colour, nationality or status. It means not passing by the wounded man on the highway but stopping to lift him up and

bandage his wounds, taking him to the inn and caring for him. It involves setting aside our other pre-occupations, and appointments. We do not engage in 'good neighbourliness' as a part time activity, when we are free, when we have some time to spare, when we are financially better off. It is an attitude of the heart to sense the needs of our neighbour.

Do Not Leave People Behind

A Synodal journey entails going along together, taking along everyone, and not leaving behind anyone- the weak, the feeble, the aged, the helpless, those who struggle to walk. The word 'synod' literally means walking together. It is more than doling out gifts and assistance. Like the Good Samaritan, it means getting down from one's horse, lifting the one who is wounded and fallen by the wayside, bandaging his wounds, taking him to the inn and making arrangements for him. It involves risks, it entails costs. It surely demands time and patience but above all the heart of the Good Samaritan, the heart of a loving and merciful God. The Synod is a journey. We walk along together - not ahead, not behind, but side by side. That happens when we pay attention to the three key words of the Synodal theme: *communion, participation, mission.*

Marauding armies led by ambitious conquerors in their quest for victory have often killed and disposed of wounded or feeble soldiers. People fleeing to safety during wars or natural disasters have sometimes left behind those who cannot cope with the speedy evacuation. They 'sacrifice' the weak, the feeble, the aged, the helpless, the vulnerable to secure their own safe passage. They are led by the instinct for self-preservation at the cost of the lives of others.



We in our times witness this happening in other forms of abandonment. Neglecting the old to live and die alone, people who are terminally ill or handicapped being left out or forced to choose euthanasia. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho today has so many people in need of help. In the race for life in modern times, many people seem to be out of step. They cannot cope with the speed. Society adopts the ideology of utilitarianism, and people become like a cog in a wheel, they are counted only for what they can earn or produce. They are judged by their usefulness and not their intrinsic worth as brothers and sisters, parents and elders, children of God. Pope Francis calls it the “throw away culture.” A culture against which we ought to fight.

One of the much-loved icons of charity in our times is Mother Teresa. She saw Christ in the poorest of the poor. In Christ’s cry from the Cross, “I thirst” she heard the cry of those who are dying in the streets from hunger and loneliness. She and her followers, the Missionaries of Charity, teach us how to love with the heart of Christ, how to give until it hurts. She inspires us and shows the world and all of us how to live the Gospel in our times. The scriptures continue to admonish us: “Harden not your hearts but listen to the voice of the Lord.”

ASIAN FACE OF JESUS

1 The Face of Jesus

One of the theologians have described Jesus as the human face of God. He is God in flesh, in human form so that we can have a glimpse of who God is. We can have some idea of his infinite, unfathomable love, and mercy. The Hebrew word 'hesed' expresses God's steadfast love. Jesus is God whom we can see, hear, and touch.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched— this we proclaim concerning the Word of life (1 John 1:1).

He is the one through whom God speaks to us. He is the revelation of God in flesh and blood, in time and space.

On many past occasions and in many different ways, God spoke to our fathers through the prophets. But in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe.... (Heb 1:1-2)

2 Jesus belongs to Asia

Jesus Christ belongs to all. He belongs to Asia. It is a fact that Jesus is an Asian. It might surprise some, no doubt. For too long we have been fed on a false narrative that Christianity and Christ are European, Western, foreign, a part of colonialism.



Jesus was born, lived, died and rose from the dead in the Holy Land, that small portion of Western Asia, making it a land of promise and hope for all mankind (Ecclesia in Asia, 1)

Asia is the home to ancient religious traditions and civilizations and the cradle of the world's major religions.

One can find in Asia the profound philosophies and the wisdom of the sages.

Asia is marked by diversity and convergence, especially when symbols, songs, dances and colours break into a fusion forming a harmonious song, a symphony.

Many Asians affirm Christ as their Saviour.

"We have believed and come to know that you are the Holy One of God (Jn 6:69)

During the Synod of Bishops of Asia, the Synod Fathers noted that the Church must be open to the new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia.



"Jesus Christ 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".

Jesus could be presented as the Incarnate Wisdom of God whose grace brings to fruition the "seeds" of divine Wisdom already present in the lives, religions and peoples of Asia.

In the midst of so much suffering among Asian peoples, he might best be proclaimed as the Saviour "who can provide meaning to those undergoing unexplainable pain and suffering".

They stressed many times the need to evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples. They suggested images of Jesus which would be intelligible to Asian minds and cultures and, at the same time, faithful to Sacred Scripture and Tradition. Among them were

The faith which the Church offers as a gift to her Asian sons and daughters cannot be confined within the limits of understanding and expression of any single human culture, for it transcends these limits and indeed challenges all cultures to rise to new heights of understanding and expression.

Yet at the same time the Synod Fathers were well aware of the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking. They pointed out that such an inculturation of the faith on their continent involves rediscovering the Asian countenance of Jesus and identifying ways in which the cultures of Asia can grasp the universal saving significance of the mystery of Jesus and his Church (*cf. Ecclesia in Asia*).

3 Saints, Martyrs, and Missionaries of Asia

Christian faith began in Asia from the Apostolic times. Asia has witnessed some of the earliest missionary journeys. From the time of the Apostles, Asia has been blessed with an invaluable wealth of holiness. The list of the Saints includes numerous holy men and women, exemplary witnesses of the faith, and courageous martyrs. As a result of the labours of early Christian missionaries, Churches were founded, and Christian communities flourished in different parts of Asia.

St Thomas the Apostle is believed to have preached the Gospel in Persia and India, He suffered martyrdom in Mylapore, South India. The Syro-Malabar, Syro-Malankara Catholic Churches as well as the Syrian Orthodox Church (and its daughter Churches), the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Mar Thoma Church (among others) trace their origin to St Thomas the Apostle. They are the descendants of the early Asian Christians. Persecution and social and political constraints greatly reduced the Oriental Churches of the Middle East in the



centuries since the early Middle Ages but continues to be alive and vibrant in parts of Asia.

In later centuries missionaries from Europe came to Asia, preeminent among them Francis Xavier, whose missionary work in the 16th century extended to India, Japan and other parts of Asia. Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries continued their work throughout Asia, including China, and India.

The work of the missionaries saw the growth of the Churches in Asia. With the missionaries, martyrs, and saints of the Church in Asia, we also remember today all Christians throughout Asia, particularly those who still undergo persecution. We pray for their continued witness to the living truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The following is the list of holy men and women whom the Church has proclaimed as Saints and Blessed. We have indicated the year in which they were canonized and the country or countries with which they are associated. The list is not exhaustive or complete. It may be acknowledged that there are many more holy men and women in every part of the continent, whose heroic witness to the faith has not been accurately recorded. We bow our heads before them. We seek their intercession for the Church in Asia and the whole world.



Petrus Baraik & Jaseng Marak

Saints

- Thomas, the Apostle (c.52 AD, Mylapore, India)
- Francis Xavier, Jesuit priest (1622, China, India, and Japan)
- The 26 Martyrs of Japan (1862, Japan and India)
- The 103 Korean Martyrs (1984, North Korea and South Korea)
- Lorenzo Ruiz and fifteen companions, martyrs (1987, Japan and Philippines)
- The 117 Vietnamese Martyrs (1988, Vietnam)
- John Gabriel Perboyre, priest of the Congregation of the Mission and martyr (1996, China)
- The 120 Martyr Saints of China (2000, China)
- John de Britto, Jesuit missionary priest, martyr, canonized 1947, India
- Saints Luigi Versiglia, Bishop, and Callistus Caravario, priest, Salesians and martyrs, canonized 2000, China
- Alphonsa of the Immaculate Conception, Franciscan Sister (2008, India)
- Pedro Calungsod, lay catechist (2012, Guam/Philippines)
- Kuriakose Elias Chavara, Carmelite priest (2014, India)
- Euphrasia Eluvathingal, Carmelite sister (2014, India)
- Joseph Vaz, Oratorian priest (2015, India and Sri Lanka)
- Mother Teresa, missionary of charity (2016, India)
- Mariam Theresa Chiramel, nun (2019, India)
- Mark Ji Tianxing, martyr during the Boxer Rebellion (1900, China)
- Raimundus Li Quanzhen, martyr during the Boxer Rebellion (1900, China)
- Peter Lieou, Layperson (1834, China)
- Anna Wang, martyr during the Boxer Rebellion (1900, China)
- Devasahayam Pillai, layman and martyr (India)



Blessed

- The 205 Blessed Martyrs of Japan (Japan, Korea, India)
- Denis of the Nativity (Pierre Berthelot) and Redemptus of the Cross (India, Indonesia)
- The Blessed Martyrs of Cuncolim (India)
- The Blessed Martyrs of Songkhon (Thailand and Laos)
- Gabriele Allegra, Franciscan priest (China)
- Andrew of Phú Yên, layman and martyr (Vietnam)
- John Gaspard Cratz, Emmanuel d'Abreu, Bartholomew Alvarez and Vincent da Cunha (Portuguese Empire, Vietnam)
- Thevarparampil Kunjachan, priest (India)
- Nicholas Bunkerd Kitbamrung, priest and martyr (Thailand)
- Isidore Ngei Ko Lat, layman and martyr (Myanmar)
- Mary of the Passion, Franciscan Missionary of Mary (India)
- Maria Assunta Pallotta, Franciscan missionary of Mary (China)
- Paul Yun Ji-chung and 123 companions of the Korean Martyrs (South Korea and China)
- Maurice Tornay, Augustinian priest and martyr (China)
- Mario Vergara, PIME priest and martyr (Myanmar)
- Clement Vismara, PIME priest (Myanmar)
- Diego Luis de San Vitores, Jesuit priest and martyr (Philippines, Guam)
- Eugenio Sanz-Orozco Mortera, Capuchin Priest and Martyr (Philippines)
- Iustus Takayama Ukon, Layperson (Philippines, Japan)
- Sister Rani Maria (Mariam Vattalil), Professed Religious and Martyr (India)

Akash Bashir, Pakistani Martyr

Akash Bashir is the first Pakistani whose cause of beatification and canonisation is in process. On 15 March 2015, he sacrificed himself to prevent a suicide bomber from causing a massacre in St John's Church in Youhannabad, a Christian neighbourhood in Lahore, Pakistan. Twenty-year-old Akash is a former student of Don Bosco Technical Institute in Lahore. He was serving as a security volunteer in the Church when he was killed.



This young man expressed firm faith and heroic courage in witnessing to the love of Christ and fighting violence and evil. He told the bomber before he died – “I will die but I will not let you go in.” With these words he confronted the terrorist strapped with explosives. The attacker detonated the bomb, instantly killing himself, Bashir and two others outside the Church. The Church was at that time packed with over 1,000 faithful, and Akash prevented a large-scale carnage. He sealed his witness with his young Christian blood. He fought with the power of death, hatred and violence and made light and truth triumph. He washed his white garment with the blood of the Lamb, making it resplendent (cf. Rev 7:14).

Akash Bashir is an example of holiness for every Christian. He is the voice of so many brave young people who give their lives for faith across Asia despite difficulties, poverty, religious extremism, indifference, social inequality, discrimination. The life and martyrdom of this young Pakistani makes us recognise the power of the Holy Spirit, alive, found in the least expected places – in the humble, the persecuted, the young, the little ones of God.



CHAPTER 5

ASIAN REALITIES AND CHALLENGES

Asia is beset by many problems, opportunities, and challenges. Some of these go beyond the purview of the Church. However, the Church in Asia is deeply concerned with them and consider them as priorities needing special attention in her evangelizing mission and pastoral plan. We shall examine some of the most pertinent among them.

1 Children

The situation of children in Asia varies from country to country. Within Asia, the most vulnerable region is South Asia where children suffer many adversities and hostile environment. According to UNICEF, every day, more than 30,000 children die from causes directly linked to poverty. Children are the primary victims of poverty.

As Asia's urban population is growing rapidly, many children are forced to live and grow in extreme poverty, which deprive them of basic needs such as nutrition, access to healthcare and education. They also suffer from displacement, lack of parental care, domestic violence, disability, and situations of wars and conflicts. The growing economic vulnerability will further increase the threat of child labour, child marriage



and child trafficking. An estimated 120 million children live on the streets throughout the world, of which some 30 million are in Asia.

Child protection services need to be put in place to ensure children receive essential health and social welfare services, including mental health and psychosocial support; protection and care arrangements; ensuring social protection for the most vulnerable children and households; continuing care and protection for children in institutions; and communicating with and engaging parents, caregivers and children themselves. National helplines, school counsellors and other child-friendly steps can help children in distress.

1.1 Harmful Online Activities

Given the heightened risks of online harm, technology companies and telecoms providers must do everything they can to keep children safe online. This includes providing access to cost-free child helplines, age-appropriate services, and safe e-education platforms - and using their platforms to share child online safety advice. They must also do more to detect and stop harmful activities against children online, including grooming and the creation and distribution of child sexual abuse images and videos.

Global organisations need to continue to advocate for and invest in effective child protection solutions. Policymakers, practitioners, parents, caregivers and children themselves need resources and guidance. The global community has made significant gains in protecting children from violence. Everything must be done to keep children safe now. And we must plan ahead together, to end all forms of violence, abuse and neglect of children.



1.2 Child Marriage

South Asia accounts for almost half of all child marriages that occur globally. Child marriage, defined as marriage where one or both spouses are under the age of 18, is legally prohibited under national laws as well as by international human rights treaties adopted by South Asian countries; however, the practice persists with impunity. In South Asia, 46 percent of women between ages 20-24 report being married before age of 18, this translated to 24.4 million in the region. Estimates project that 130 million more girls in South Asia will be married as children before 2030.



The prevalence of child marriage varies substantially between and within countries in South Asia. Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the region (66 percent) followed by Afghanistan (46 percent), India (46 percent) and Nepal (41 percent). These four countries are considered the region's 'hot spots' due to their high child marriage prevalence. Girls living in rural areas are hardest hit by child marriage.

Child marriage is not only a human rights violation but has numerous and serious educational, health and developmental consequences for girls. It robs them of their childhood and sentences them to a life of poverty and economic dependence, with little or no education. Child marriage negatively impacts married adolescents as they are highly vulnerable to poor maternal health outcomes, a higher risk of HIV infection and are more likely to suffer from domestic and sexual abuse.

Climate change impacts are felt unequally worldwide; children who live in geographically vulnerable areas like small island states and densely populated coastal areas, are affected disproportionately.

1.3 Conflict and Violence

Conflict and violence have great impact on the poorest communities in many Asian countries. Children and adolescents under the age of 18 are among the most severely affected in these communities. According to the United Nations, some 20 million people have been killed in over 150 armed conflicts in developing countries since the Second World War, the majority being women and children. More than half of the world's 22.4 million displaced people are children and adolescents: one in every 230 persons in the world is a child or adolescent who has been forced to flee his or her home. The impact on children may be direct and apparent, as in the case of death, wounding, family separation, or dislocation, but they are frequently far less obvious, as with economic impoverishment, hazardous labour, early marriage, or the loss of opportunities for education and health.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) provides a global charter for children's survival, protection, development and well-being. Armed conflict creates conditions which undermine children's rights. War greatly increases the threats to children.

The international community therefore has a special duty with regard to children exposed to armed conflict, civil strife and displacement. Efforts must be made to understand how children are affected by such adversities and to develop measures that mitigate the impact on children.



1.4 Pastoral Care of Children

“We must never forget, nor may we ignore, the suffering of so many children whose human dignity is violated through this exploitation.” Children are holy angles in the kingdom of God.

Manipulating children leaves massive wounds to the child, and to the Church herself, for children are the holy, the angles in the kingdom of God.

“Unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven”, said Jesus.

Reality tells us that children are violated, exploited at an early age while their minds and hearts are still innocent. At her best, the Church always tries to defend children and protect them from suffering and abuse.

Child abuse and exploitation are grave violation to the victims of human rights, an offense to children’s dignity. All those who are of good will, whether or not they profess themselves religious, cannot allow these children to be treated as objects, deceived, often sold several times, for various purposes, and in the end killed or, at any rate, ruined physically and mentally, to end up discarded and abandoned. It is a disgrace. It is not only against the moral teachings of the Church but also against the laws of any civilized nation.

2 Youth

Youth, defined by the United Nations as persons between the ages of 15 and 24, represents almost 18 percent of the current global population. The Asia-Pacific region has 750 million youth, which is 60 percent of the world's 1.2 billion youth population, making it the most youthful region. While most developed economies in the region are aging, that is not the case with the majority of developing countries. In 2020, the average age of an Indian was 29 years, compared to 37 for China and 48 for Japan. One fifth of South Asia's population is aged between 15 to 24-years-old.



Asia and the Pacific region is widely recognized as the engine of the global economy. However, 220 million young people are neither in education nor employment. The region has two-thirds of the world's poor; some 330 million people (roughly 9 percentage of the region's population) are still living on less than \$1.90 a day.

Many young people in Asia face a variety of obstacles in their access to employment, education and healthcare. Transition between education and employment is one of the main obstacles facing youth of the region. Access to adequate healthcare is also hampered by economic, social or sometimes legal barriers. Furthermore, Asian youth often remain at the margins with regard to creating development policies. Across Asia, young people show initiatives to participate in local, national and regional development as equal participants to shape their own future. However, they often remain vulnerable due to lack of requisite knowledge and skills to adapt to the changing economic and social environment.

Investing in the youth is vital for Asia and the Pacific. The region needs to ensure inclusive growth, access to good education, health services, and gender equity. But unemployed youth accounts for nearly half of the region's jobless people.



Unemployment leads to a wide range of social ills such as delinquency and substance abuse, and often feeds political unrest and violence, poor access to health services and health risks, particularly among those who are out-of-school in rural areas.

South Asia lags behind several other regions in youth with the skills they need for the 21st century. Equipping youth with skills is essential to lift them out of poverty. Failing to do so would mean loss of economic growth leading youth to despair. Young people in Asia are risking their lives to defend land, environment, and indigenous people's rights.

South Asia has entered a critical demographic time where the number of work-age adults exceeds dependents (children and the elderly). This can be a demographic bonus and opportunity for increased development. Public policies need to help increase the education, employment, health of young people and their active participation in planning for their future. Investing in young people will also secure the lives of future generations of older people.

Another critical area is improving girl's education and job prospects. Though gender gap in literacy rate is declining across South Asia, the region still has the largest gender gap with an adult male literacy rate of 79 percent, and adult female literacy rate of 62 percent. Pakistan holds the second highest gender gap in the world, almost half of the eligible grade 1-12 girls have never gone to school and only 1 in 10 girls can read (2017 Global Gender Gap Report).

South Asia is riven by conflicts; thereby engagement of youth becomes all the more important. Poor quality of education, high rates of unemployment and lack of coordination at the regional level constitute a perfect recipe for disaster.

2.1 Issues Faced by Youth in Asia

a) Gender Inequality

Gender inequalities have reduced overall but female education is affected by negative social and cultural attitudes, lack of appreciation for the value of female education, the burden of household work, and long journeys to school. Girls from poor families, rural areas, urban slums and ethnic and language minorities

are less likely to complete schooling. The imbalance can be addressed by recruitment of more female teachers and support for poor families to make schools more friendly for girl children.



Rural-urban disparities, rising socio-economic inequality and exclusion of children with disabilities, contribute to a large number of out-of-school youth. The transition between secondary and tertiary education also remains a significant challenge, closely linked to overall development levels.

b) Unemployment

There are concerns related to the staggering rates of youth unemployment. According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) South Asia has the largest youth labour force in the world with nearly 100,000 young people entering the labour market each day. Young women in South Asia are much more likely to be unemployed. Unemployment of young people in South Asia is around 20 percentage while the female labour force participation rate is a meager 23.6% as against 80 percentage for men.

Young people have borne the brunt of the global economic crisis and the subsequent sluggish recovery. Youth unemployment rates have stayed at peak levels across the world. Currently, the average rate of youth unemployment in Asia and the Pacific is estimated to be around 11 percentage, which is more than double the rate of the total working age population.

Young people are vulnerable in workplace as their jobs are characterized by insecurity, low wages, poor working conditions and lack of social protection. Today poverty is significantly higher for young workers than for their older counterparts. Long-term unemployment among youth is another challenge, with several countries in the region reporting that 30 to 75 percent of all



unemployed youth have been out of work for more than one year. Often times these youth are discouraged and stop looking for work altogether. This prolonged inactivity threatens their future prospects as well.

In search of better living conditions, many young people choose to migrate. The proportion of adolescent and youth migrants in the total international migrant population is 19 percent in Asia. In Asia, 46 percent of all migrants between 10 and 24 years of age are females. Many youth migrants, however, are undocumented and some are trafficked, including for sex work.

For young people, jobs provide a source not only of income, but also dignity and self-respect. In the absence of decent work, young people subsist in the margins of the economy and are particularly vulnerable to social exclusion, which breeds political instability.

The need for youth policies oriented toward decent employment is becoming ever more urgent, especially because the potential youth labour force in South and South-West Asia – one of the world's poorest regions – is increasing at a fast pace.

c) Health

The health of youth, particularly their sexual and reproductive health, needs to be addressed to ensure a healthy workforce. Many countries in the region do not provide comprehensive sexuality education and there are legal and social barriers to accessing youth-friendly health services.

Abuse of alcohol and drugs poses a major threat to health of the young and give rise to socio-economic problems. Alcohol and drug abuse cause stress in families and drain their resources. Some studies have shown that the women abusers in South Asian countries are on the rise.

Mental health is another concern among young people, as adolescence is the age when such problems first surface. Young people, especially young men, are at greater risk of dying of suicides and violence than people of older ages. Many countries are also seeing increase in cases of depression and eating disorders – particularly among girls. Depression is the single largest contributor to the global

burden of disease for people aged 15–19, and suicide is one of the three leading causes of mortality among people aged 15–35. Tobacco consumption, drug and alcohol use are other growing health concerns.

A persisting challenge, compromising health outcomes among youth, relates to the dire hygiene and sanitation conditions, as 58 percent of the region's population still lacks access to improved sanitation facilities.

d) Decision-making Process

A lack of structured and institutionalized opportunities continue to limit the role of youth in decision-making processes. Youth's aspirations, however, are increasingly finding space through the use of new media, access to information and networking tools. Through these tools, young people across the region have the opportunity to also become more politically active and get involved in volunteerism to promote the development of their countries and communities.

e) Church and Youth

Young people throughout Asia represent a positive and promising gift to the Catholic Church, as well as a challenge because of their expectations and the particular circumstances of their lives. Amid dehumanizing social and cultural conditions, ethnic and religious discrimination, the digital and postmodern characteristics of this era of globalization, Asian youth are crying out their existential need for life, meaning, and love.

This longing can be satisfied with the encounter with Jesus Christ, the living God, who invites them to meet him personally through the Church, so that they may discover and fulfil their true life.

How can the Church proclaim the Good News of Jesus, to young people in Asia? How can they be accompanied in their journey toward salvation in Christ? The spiritual formation of Asian Christian youth is of the utmost importance for the Church, in keeping with what Pope Francis envisaged for the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, held in 2018.



The Church in Asia must be committed to young Christians and should not be afraid to encourage them to embrace an authentic and demanding Christian life, aimed at serving God and meeting the divine human call to love and to work. The Catholic Church and religions in Asia as well as youth themselves need better understanding of the current situation and the prospects of the new generation of Asian Christians.

The Church leaders and pastors, in order to understand the so-called millennials, need to enter their world and accompany them and offer them a sense of belonging. New technologies and media, combined with the rampant



materialism of contemporary societies, are source of disorientation, loss of sense of purpose, and decline in faith among them. The Church needs to review and renew its approach to the pastoral care of youth.

Catholic schools need to become beacons of hope for today's young people, offering them vocational training which will endow them with the skills and competencies. Religious education must be geared to build the youth, giving them a sense of community, attending to their spiritual formation. Increased engagement of young Christians in the larger community and political life would enable them to build a better world.

The Church must promote a new generation of Christian leaders who would effectively represent the Christian standpoints in the public space, fighting divisive ideologies and fundamentalist forces and addressing the tensions between majority and minority groups through interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Youth can contribute to build a culture of dialogue, interfaith harmony, peace, reconciliation, and the common good by going out into the world and engaging with other communities.

Pope Francis **The restless, creative youth. I like them!**

We come from different cultures and peoples, we speak different languages, and we wear different clothes. Each of our peoples has had a different history and lived through different situations. We are different in so many ways! But none of it has stopped us from meeting one another and rejoicing to be together.

I like to speak with the youth, and I like to hear the youth. They always put me in difficulty. They tell me things that I haven't thought of, or that I've partly thought of. The restless youth, the creative youth, I like them!



3 Migration

Asia remains the continent of the world's largest migration. One in three migrants worldwide comes from the region. The number of Asian migrants has grown steadily to about 90 million.

Migration is caused by the desire for better economic opportunities, climate change, internal conflicts, and wars. The majority of Asian migrants are semi- and low-skilled workers such as maids, caregivers, and manual laborers, including those working on construction sites. Skilled Asian migrants tend to move to advanced industrial economies outside the region.

Migrants form a distinct group and exhibit enormous potential but are also exposed to a variety of problems. They are poorly paid, work in low skill jobs and in the informal sector. Their work is often difficult and sometimes dangerous. Women migrant workers are often employed as domestic workers and are exposed to risks of exploitation and abuse at the hands of their employers.



In spite of the many challenges the migrants face, they make invaluable contributions both to their countries of origin and destination. There is a huge wage disparity between domestic and overseas workers and most migrants. Given their family compulsions, most of them end up remitting the bulk of their earnings to their countries of origin and hence live on a meagre income. The money they earn is used to finance housing, education and livelihoods of their families. The countries of destination benefit too in terms of meeting skill shortages, higher productivity and returns on their investment.

Migration helps to reduce poverty, creates new connections whose benefits transcend localities and borders. As the climate changes, people face new pressures to migrate.

If all the over 62 million international migrants in the Asia-Pacific region were considered together they would make up the thirteenth largest population in the region. If the over 101 million migrants who have left their countries of origin in Asia and the Pacific were considered together, they would be the ninth largest population.

Countries of origin, such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka, have developed extensive infrastructure to protect migrants throughout the migration process — from pre-departure to return. More measures are to be adopted to ensuring their labour rights, especially those of migrant women; protecting them against human trafficking; reducing the costs of sending remittances; and ensuring that migration takes place in an orderly, safe and responsible way.

Pope Francis is a powerful voice for the rights and dignity of migrant workers. In his message for the 108 World Day of Migrants he said:

“humanity must build our future with the help of people who have left their homes in search of a better life.” He lamented ongoing tragedies of human history, which remind us how far we have yet to go along the path toward “the dwelling place of God with humanity.”

Pope Francis invited everyone to welcome their brothers and sisters from abroad as God’s plan is essentially inclusive and gives priority to those living on the existential peripheries. Among them, he said, are many migrants and refugees, displaced persons, and victims of trafficking.



3.1 Women and Migration

Asian women make up the fastest-growing category of the world's burgeoning, 35 million plus population of migrant workers. Asia is also the scene of a booming "migration industry," which operates both legally and illegally, providing contract labour to some of the world's wealthiest and most dynamic economies, often at a high human cost.

While migration provides productive labour and an economic lifeline for millions of Asian women, the dramatic plight of unprotected female migrant workers has become an increasing source of concern as evidence of abuses



mounts. An ILO report on the status of Asian migrant women concludes that efforts by sending countries to improve their working conditions are limited in their effectiveness and that more government and international efforts are necessary to guarantee the basic human rights of this vulnerable group.

"Were it not for illegal recruitment agencies, overseas employment promoters, manpower suppliers and a host of other legal and illegal subsidiaries, Asian labour migration since the mid-1970s would not have reached such a massive scale," the report notes. The ILO warns that while job-placement agencies can be useful in facilitating access to scarce overseas jobs, they can also be costly and abusive, as when agencies keep the passports of the women they place or charge exorbitant fees and provide loans to be paid from future earnings.

Millions of Asian women are working abroad either legally or illegally. The countries of origin report an aggregate outflow of 800,000 female migrant workers per year, and the number keeps increasing steadily.

The study notes that during the 1970s women accounted for only about 15 percent of the Asian migrant workforce. By the 1980s approximately 25 percent

of overseas contract workers were women, and today the flow of women migrants, both legal and illegal, often equals or outnumbers those of men.

In the Philippines, women account for about 60 percent of legal migrant workers (excluding seafarers), and this figure rises to 94 percent for those destined for Asia, excluding the Middle East. In Indonesia, documented flows show two female migrants for every male migrant. In Thailand, women account for only about 25 percent of the recorded workers leaving the country for overseas employment, but clandestine female migration is known to be significant, and the number of Thai women migrating is increasing faster than that of men. An airport survey in Sri Lanka revealed that 84 percent of migrant workers were females, of whom the vast majority, 94 percent, were domestic servants.

The main sending countries of migrant women are Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The main receiving countries are the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei are also receiving countries within Asia.

Women usually emigrate as autonomous migrants, because the receiving countries in Asia and the Middle East generally do not allow families in. The right to residence is usually linked to employment, which is subject to restrictions. For example, foreign domestic maids in a number of Asian countries are often not allowed to change jobs within two years of their employment contract. Migrant women workers are prohibited from marrying local citizens; they are not allowed to become pregnant, and some countries even subject them to pregnancy tests every six months.

Among the industries fuelling demand for Asian females one of them, "entertainment," is frequently a euphemism for prostitution. Outright prostitution is widespread, and forced prostitution, in which women are contracted to work legitimate jobs but are then forced into prostitution is a sinister but frequent practice. The report notes that domestic service and entertainment are frequently not covered by labour laws or social-security regulations in most receiving countries.



Parallel to the legitimate emigration industries are well-organised underground syndicates engaged in lucrative smuggling of immigrants. Due to the high costs and time-consuming procedures governing legal immigration, it is often the most desperate, and hence vulnerable, migrants who choose this path: women are frequent victims. The criminal nature of this activity only increases the likelihood of exploitation and further distances the migrant worker from legal recourse or official protection.

Migrant-specific ILO Convention calls upon Governments to respect the basic human rights of all migrant workers, male and female, to prevent clandestine migration for employment and stop human trafficking activities.

4 Women

The world has made substantial progress in achieving universal primary education, with girls and boys participating equally in primary education in most regions. Evidence shows that girls, once they have access to schooling, tend to do better than boys in terms of academic achievement. In tertiary education, women outnumber men, and enrolment is increasing faster for women than for men.

However, women continue to be underrepresented in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics, representing only slightly more than 35 percentage of the world's STEM graduates. Women are also a minority in scientific research and development, making up less than a third of the world's researchers.

In terms of power and decision making, women held only 28 percentage of managerial positions globally in 2019 – almost the same proportion as in 1995. And only 18 percentage of enterprises surveyed had a female Chief Executive Officer in 2020.

Among Fortune 500 corporations only 7.4 percentage or 37 Chief Executive Officers, were



women. In political life, while women's representation in parliament has more than doubled globally, it has still not crossed the barrier of 25 percentage of parliamentary seats in 2020. Women's representation among cabinet ministers remains well below parity at 22 percentage.

In the most extreme cases, violence against women is lethal: globally, an estimated 137 women are killed by their intimate partner or a family member every day. During COVID-19 lockdowns, many women and girls have been isolated in unsafe environments where they experienced intimate partner violence. Around one third of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Laws to address domestic violence are not yet universally available, with only 153 countries having such laws. UN and other international bodies have called to accelerate efforts towards the empowerment of women and girls.

5 Families

Asians in general emphasize the importance of close family relationships, helping each other and having respect for elders. However, families in Asia are undergoing rapid changes due to the influence of the west, urbanization and modernity. Asians value strong family bonds and preserve family identities. Whether families are situated in the traditional, rural environment or the modern, urban city, there is strong relationship and respect among family members.



Family relations are characterized by duty, obligation, importance of the family name, closeness and loyalty, obligation, and respect for parents, self-sacrifice for the good of the elders, and respect for status. Marriage is considered a union among families rather than individuals. Prior to marriage, the family's community standing, as well as the specific credentials of the family members, are considered.



Today, Asian families are impacted by economic changes, new political ideologies, migration and globalization. Many migrant Catholic families from Asia to various parts of the world have become evangelizers in turn. There is also a significant number of priests and nuns who have moved to other countries as missionaries, sharing Asian values. Catholic faith has contributed to reshaping the traditional family structures of many within Asian communities.

Catholic families in Asia struggle to cope with legal and moral issues when governments enact policies to legalize divorce, abortion, birth control, family planning, and same-sex marriage. Cultural and political changes affect family structures. Catholics being a minority in most Asian countries, often are not in a position to influence policy decisions. The church continues to value the importance of the family as the 'domestic Church' and emphasizes pastoral care of the families. The family is the cradle of faith formation, vocations, and living and witnessing to the faith. The theme of the family has figured significantly in the Synodal reflections at the diocesan and episcopal conference stages. The Church in Asia needs to pay greater attention to the pastoral care of Catholic families.

6 Climate Crisis

Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical letter "Laudato Si", declared climate change as a moral issue that must be addressed in order to protect the Earth and everyone on it. He called on the world's 1.2 billion Catholics as well as world leaders to join the fight against climate change.

Action on climate change is urgent if we are to lift the planet's most vulnerable population, protect development, and spur responsible growth. The Pope calls for a new vision of humanity in relation to the planet that is our home. This is a call for courage and unity, where every woman and man have opportunities and skills to contribute. Sustainability means much more than green laws and policies – it means new ways of thinking and behaving as global citizens; it means a new focus on the ocean and biodiversity.

In 2020, McKinsey and Company's Climate Risk and Response in Asia Report warned that by 2050 parts of Asia may see increasing average temperatures, lethal

heat waves, extreme precipitation events, severe hurricanes and drought. It warned of disastrous impact on Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam.

In 2019, Climate Central, a US-based climate science group, predicted that sea level rise by 2050 will hit some 300 million people globally, and 237 million of these will be in Asia, including 42 million in Bangladesh. Apart from such warnings, health experts remind that some nine million global



deaths, or about 15 percent of total deaths each year, are attributed to extensive pollution of water, air and land. Most of these deaths are in Asia, the world's most populous region.

The COVID-19 pandemic and disasters triggered by natural hazards have increased poverty in Asia. The food crisis, aggravated by the degradation of ecosystems, climate change, and food insecurity have further worsened due to Russian invasion of Ukraine which has disrupted supplies of food staples and fertilizers.

Asia and the Pacific have the highest number of people facing acute food insecurity worldwide – three times higher than before COVID-19 and due largely to fallout from the pandemic, climate-related events, and macro-economic stresses.

In 2022, food inflation spiked to an all-time high for oil, cereals, and meat prices, and the cost of sugar and dairy products. The FAO food price index, a global standard for measuring food prices, hit a record-high in March 2022, and though it has since retreated, it remains 7.9 percent above its value a year ago.

A meaningful response must recognize the triple threat facing Asia—climate change, biodiversity loss, and food insecurity. These challenges are deeply interlinked, and the current food security crisis will get even worse if we fail to address them.



Floods, droughts, disease, and other climate impacts will curtail food production. Many countries in Asia face acute food crisis and economic hardships. For instance, the recent floods in Pakistan, economic crisis in Sri Lanka, military dictatorship and internal conflict in Myanmar, recurring spread of Covid in China have worsened the crisis. Disruptions to livelihoods will drive even more food scarcity, compounded by climate-induced migration.

Nature-based solutions involve conserving natural ecosystems, community-based agroforestry, which protects biodiversity while improving crop resilience and rural livelihoods.

There is need for transformative change and innovation as well as behavioural changes in our consumption patterns. For instance, a shift to plant-based foods can lead to a significant reduction in the emissions.

Without progress on climate and biodiversity, there will be no progress on food. The scale of this triple threat demands an unprecedented level of multilateral, private, and public sector cooperation. While environmental groups clamour for governmental action to mitigate these natural and man-made disasters, the Christian community in Asia has much to do.

Since the publication of Pope Francis' encyclical Laudato Si "On the Care of our Common Home," the FABC has held seminars to "raise awareness of both the scientific and moral reasons for protecting God's Creation." Responses include many programs and campaigns which have been initiated by the local Churches, Religious Congregations and Catholic institutions across Asia.

The Asian Church leaders also promoted the establishment of "Climate Change Desks" in each episcopal conference to serve as structure for the study of the encyclical and create concrete plans of action. Religious Congregations have also adopted programmes to address the issue.

World Meteorological Organization's (WMO) State of the Climate in Asia 2020 report provides an overview of land and ocean temperatures, precipitation, glacier retreat, shrinking sea ice, rise of sea level and worsening weather. It examines socio-economic impacts in a year when the region was also struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn complicated disaster management. The report shows how every part of Asia was affected, from Himalayan peaks to low-lying coastal areas, from densely populated cities to deserts and from the Arctic to the Arabian seas.

Weather and climate hazards, especially floods, storms, and droughts, had significant impacts in many countries of the region, affecting agriculture and food security, contributing to increased displacement and vulnerability of migrants, refugees, and displaced people, worsening health risks, and exacerbating environmental issues and losses of natural ecosystems.

Sea surface temperatures and ocean warming in and around Asia are increasing more than the global average – at three times the rate in the case of the Arabian sea. High Mountain Asia is home to approximately 100,000 km of glaciers centred on the Tibetan Plateau and Himalayas. It contains the largest volume of ice outside of the polar regions and is the source of ten important Asian rivers.

Glacier retreat is accelerating, and it is projected that glacier mass will decrease by 20 percent to 40 percent by 2050, affecting the lives and livelihoods of about 750 million people in the region. Intense cyclones, monsoon rains and floods hit highly exposed and densely populated areas in South Asia and East Asia and led to the displacement of millions of people in China, Bangladesh, India, Japan, Pakistan, Nepal and Vietnam in 2020. Many weather and climate-related displacements in Asia are prolonged, with people unable to return home, integrate locally or settle elsewhere.



CHAPTER 6

THE STORY

1 The Story-telling People

The stories we tell define who we are. Stories express our deepest thoughts and emotions, provide meanings for our existence. They explore mysteries and try to provide answers to unexplained and unexplored questions concerning life. People in all nations and cultures have stories, both ancient and modern. Human history is replete with great story tellers and some of their stories live on for centuries. Many stories transcend time and territory, and become timeless and universal.

Asians love stories and we have fascinating stories that make us reflect on life here and hereafter. In this section we present some Asian stories that provide insights into life and its many mysteries. These stories in a way, reflect the reality of the local Churches, mirror biblical messages, and the themes of the Synod which explore the journey of the people of God to their final destiny.



2 The Bible, the Great Story

The Bible contains some of the greatest stories. In fact, the Bible itself is the story of God's saving action in human history. Many of these stories have been translated into the many languages of the world and have been told and retold for centuries. Some of them have also found expression in drama, songs, art, music and movies, cartoons and other graphic depictions.

We know how children and adults love the stories in the Bible, stories told by the Rabbis and Jesus himself. Jesus is a master storyteller whose stories transcend time and space. Who can ever forget the stories of the Prodigal Son, of the Good Samaritan, the man who sold everything to go after the pearl of great price, the story of the woman who lost her coin and found it, the story of the lost sheep! These stories are universal and perennial. They defy geographical or historical boundaries. Every time they are read or narrated, we get new insights. They enliven us and call us to action.

The Synod of Asia recommended that catechesis should follow "an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching".

Throughout history, people in every land, culture and religion have been fed, nourished and nurtured by stories: stories of mercy and compassion, courage and fortitude, healing and hope, faithfulness and trust, hospitality, and fellowship, suffering and wellness. We know of stories that show the danger of greed and pride, selfishness, and lack of concern for the needy.

These stories are time tested. Every time we hear or read them, we discover new insights. They urge us to be different; they make us laugh and cry, feel remorse or help us to resolve to live our lives better. We learn to have hope in the face of despair, faith in the final triumph of truth and goodness. They enable us to ponder on the perennial values of life. They caution us against reckless, godless living and call us to live for others. They remind us of the just reward God has instore for the righteous. They help us to go beyond life on earth and trust in the promises of God to give eternal life.

3 The Synod and the Story

The Church is celebrating a Synod on Synodality. The Synod is an effort to find new meanings and identity for the People of God journeying on a pilgrimage with a desire to foster communion, participation, and mission.

The whole synodal process is about a story, or stories. The Synod is the people of God on a journey, a pilgrimage. It is marked by recognition of each one's dignity



as a child of God. The journey is of pilgrims who are equal in dignity by virtue of their baptism, their discipleship in Christ. As Paul reminds us “Christ is the head and we are the members of the body (cf 1 Cor 12:27).

In literature we have stories of people on a journey, a pilgrimage: Odyssey, Canterbury Tales, Gulliver’s Travels, Pilgrim’s Progress. There are wonderful stories in every culture and religion; they form the very matrix that explore and express life for people in all places and times: Gilgamesh stories, Jataka tales, Talmud stories, Arabian tales. Stories are didactic; they teach us about creation, good and evil, God’s mercy and providence. They throw insight into wars and violence, natural forces, suffering and pain, sorrow and grief, death and life. In many ways stories give meaning to our existence. Every culture has stories that closely resemble the biblical stories and their messages.

Every community has talented story creators who can spin and weave stories. Every community also has talented story tellers who can vividly narrate them in prose and poetry, art and icons. We have tried to re-capture in a glimpse these realities that are so common to all people, particularly people of Asia.

As the people of God journey on, stories lighten the burden of their travel. It gives them the inner fire to keep going and not to give up in the face of difficulties. They offer glimmer of hope for the destination, the final end of the journey.

Finally, the story itself will no longer be needed when we reach the journey’s end, when we behold the Eternal, the Invisible, the Transcendent.

4 Asian Stories

Every country in Asia has fascinating stories that teach, impart values, and inspire faith. Many of the stories of the Asian people have rich biblical overtones and deal with creation, sacrifice, sin and salvation, providence of God. In this section we are presenting a few stories from different Asian countries and cultures that can help us reflect on the Synod.

1 Korea

The Story Bag

There once lived a very rich family which had only one child, a boy, who loved to have stories told to him. Whenever he met anyone, he would ask for a story but would never share these stories with anyone but stored them away in a small bag he carried at his belt. As days went by he heard many stories and soon the bag began to bulge and he had to pack them tight so that no story escaped. He kept the bag tied tightly at the mouth.



Petrus Baraik

He grew into a handsome young man, and a bride was chosen for him. The whole house was excited and started to prepare for the wedding. There was a faithful old servant who had been with the family ever since the boy was small. As the family was getting ready for the young master's wedding, this servant was tending a fire on the kitchen hearth. Suddenly his ears caught faint whispering sounds coming from somewhere. He realized that the voices were coming from the bag of stories which the young master had hung on the kitchen wall. The old servant listened carefully.

“Listen, everyone,” said a voice. “the boy’s wedding is to take place tomorrow. He has kept us this long stuffed in this bag, packed so closely and uncomfortably together. We have suffered for a long time. We must make him pay for this some way or another.”

“Yes,” said another voice, in agreement. “Tomorrow the young man will leave by horse to bring home his bride. I shall change into bright red berries, ripening by the roadside. There I shall wait for him. I shall be poisonous but look so beautiful that he will want to eat me. If he does, I shall kill him.”



“And, if he doesn’t die after eating the berries,” piped up a third voice, “I shall become a clear, bubbling spring by the roadside. I shall have a gourd dipper floating in me. When he sees me he will feel thirsty and will drink me. When I get inside of him, I shall make him suffer terribly.”

A fourth voice then broke in: “If you fail, then I shall become an iron skewer, heated red-hot, and I shall hide in the bag of chaff that will be placed by his horse for him to dismount on when he reaches his bride’s home. And when he steps on me, I shall burn his feet badly.” (It was a custom then to place a bag of chaff by the bridegroom’s horse so that he would not have to step directly on the ground).

Then a fifth voice whispered: “If that fails too, I shall become poisonous string-snakes, thin as threads. Then I shall hide in the bridal chamber. When the bride and the bridegroom have gone to sleep, I shall come out and bite them.”

The servant was shocked by what he heard. “This is terrible,” he told himself. “I must not let any harm come to the young master. When he leaves the house tomorrow, I must take the bridle and lead the horse myself.”

Early next morning the wedding procession was ready to set forth. The groom, dressed in his best, came out of the house, and mounted his horse. Suddenly the faithful servant came running out and grabbed the horse’s bridle. He then asked to be allowed to lead the horse.

The old master of the house said: “You have other work to do. You better stay behind.”

“But I must lead the horse today,” the servant insisted. He refused to listen to anyone and, finally, the master, surprised at the old man’s obstinacy, allowed him to lead the horse to the bride’s home.

As the procession wound along its way, the bridegroom came to an open field. He noticed bright berries which looked temptingly delicious. “Wait!” the bridegroom called out. “Stop the horse and pick me some of those berries.”

However, the servant would not stop. In fact, he purposely made the horse hurry on and said: “Oh, those berries. You can find them anywhere. Just be a little patient. I shall pick some for you later.” And he gave the horse a good crack of the whip.”

After a while, they came to a bubbling spring; its water seemed cool and tempting. “Bring me some of that water,” the bridegroom said to the servant. “I have been thirsty for some time.”

But, again, the servant prodded the horse and hurried by. “Once we get into the shade of those trees, your thirst will soon disappear,” he said, and gave the horse another crack of the whip. The bridegroom grumbled and mumbled. He was in a bad mood, but the servant took no notice. He only made the horse go faster.

Soon they reached the bride’s home. There, already gathered in the yard, was a large crowd of people. The servant led the horse into the compound and stopped it beside the waiting bag of chaff. As the bridegroom put down his foot to dismount, the servant pretended to stumble and shoved the bridegroom to keep him from stepping on the bag.

The bridegroom fell to the straw mats laid out on the ground. He blushed in shame at his clumsy fall. However, he could not scold his servant in front of all the people. So he kept silent and entered the bride’s home.

There, the wedding ceremony was held solemnly, and the newly married couple returned to the groom’s home. Soon night fell, and the bride and bridegroom retired to their room. The faithful servant armed himself with a sword and hid himself under the verandah outside the bridal chamber.

As soon as the bride and bridegroom turned out the lights and went to bed, the servant opened the door of the room and leapt inside. The newlywed couple was startled. “Who’s there?” they both shouted, jumping out of bed. “Young master,” the servant said, “I shall explain later. Right now, just hurry and get out of the way.”



The servant kicked the bedding aside and lifted the mattress. A terrible sight greeted their eyes. They saw many string-snakes coiled and writhed in a single ball. The servant slashed the snakes into pieces with the sword even as some of them opened their red mouths and darted their black forked tongues at him. The servant whirled like a madman and finally killed every one of the snakes in the room.

Then he gave a sigh of relief and began: "Young master, this is the story..." And the old servant recounted the whispers that he had heard coming from the old bag on the kitchen wall.

That is why when stories are heard they must never be stored away to become mean and spiteful but must always be shared with other people. In this way, they are passed from one person to another so that as many people as possible can enjoy them.

The Story Bag is a Korean Folktale which affirms the value of giving, love and sacrifice. The story is an invitation to us too to share the Good News and not hold it back.

2 Japan

If you Pray, you must Work too

Many years ago, there lived on the barren plain of Suruga a woodsman called Visu. He was a giant in stature and lived in a hut with his wife and children.

One day an old priest visited Visu and said: "Honorable woodsman, I am afraid you never pray."

Visu replied: "If you had a wife and a large family to keep, you would never have time to pray."

The enraged priest told the woodcutter of the horror of being reborn as a toad, or a mouse, or an insect for millions of years if he refused to pray.

Visu was shocked at these words and promised the priest that in future he would pray.

"Work and pray," said the priest as he took leave.

From then on Visu did nothing but pray. He prayed all day long and refused to do any work. His rice crops withered, and his wife and family starved. Visu's wife, now became angry, and pointing to the poor thin bodies of her children, said: "Rise, Visu, take up your axe and do something more helpful than the mere mumbling of prayers!"

Visu was so utterly amazed at what his wife had said.

"Woman," said he, "the gods come first. You are an impertinent creature to speak to me so, and I will have nothing more to do with you!"

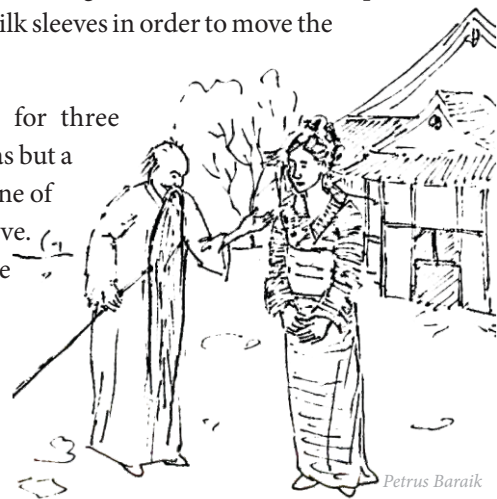
Visu took his axe and, without even saying farewell, left the hut, strode out of the wood, and climbed up Fujiyama, where a mist hid him from sight.

When Visu had seated himself upon the mountain he heard a soft rustling sound, and immediately afterward saw a fox dart into a thicket. He deemed it lucky to see a fox. Forgetting his prayers, he sprang up, and ran hither and thither in the hope of again finding this sharp-nosed little creature.

He was about to give up the chase when, coming to an open space in the woods, he saw two pretty ladies sitting down by a brook playing go. Visu was so fascinated that he could do nothing but sit down and watch them. The ladies took no notice of him, as they were absorbed in the game. Visu could not keep his eyes off these fair women. He watched their long black hair and the little quick hands that shot out from their big silk sleeves in order to move the pieces.

After he had been sitting there for three hundred years, though to him it was but a summer's afternoon, he saw that one of the players had made a false move. "Wrong, most lovely lady!" he exclaimed excitedly. In a moment these women turned into foxes and ran away.

When Visu attempted to pursue them, he found to



his horror that his limbs were stiff, his hair very long, and his beard touched the ground. He noticed that the handle of his axe, though made of the hardest wood, had crumbled into a little heap of dust.

After many painful efforts Visu was able to stand on his feet and proceed slowly toward his little home. When he reached the spot, he was surprised to see no hut. Seeing an old woman, he said: "Good lady, I am amazed to find that my little home has disappeared. I went away this afternoon, and now in the evening it has vanished!"

The woman inquired his name. When he told her that he was Visu, she exclaimed: "You must be mad! Visu lived three hundred years ago! He went away one day, and never came back."

"Three hundred years!" murmured Visu. "It cannot be possible. Where are my dear wife and children?"

"Buried!" hissed the old woman, "and if what you say is true, your children's children too. The gods have prolonged your miserable life in punishing you for having neglected your wife and children."

Tears ran down Visu's withered cheeks as he said in a husky voice: "I have lost my manhood. I have prayed when my dear ones starved and needed the labour of my once strong hands.

He remembered the words of the priest: "If you pray, work too!"

We do not know how long the poor but repentant Visu lived after he returned from his strange adventures. His white spirit is still said to haunt Fujiyama when the moon shines brightly.

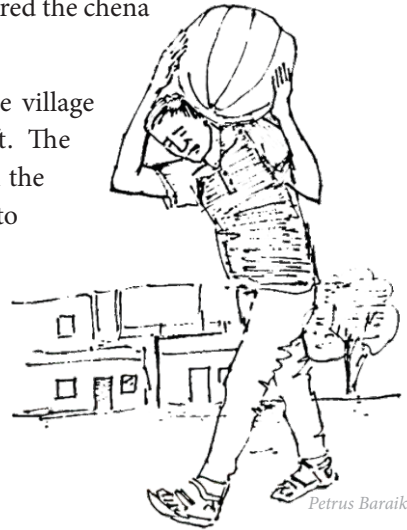
The story reflects the Christian monastic tradition of ora et labora- pray and work, rooted in the spirituality of Benedict extolling a balanced path to life and holiness.

3 Sri Lanka

Honesty

"Once there lived a farmer in a village. One day he saw a big ash pumpkin growing on his chena. Every day he came to look at the ash pumpkin which was growing bigger and bigger. "I can sell this big ash pumpkin at the village fair and get a lot of money," he thought. One night a thief entered the chena and stole the big ash pumpkin.

The farmer was very sad. He went to the village headman to complain about the theft. The headman thought of a good plan to catch the thief. He asked all the people in the village to come to one place. Then he took a bell and went round the people ringing the bell and saying to them, "There's ash on the thief's shoulder. There's ash on the thief's shoulder". When the thief heard this, he secretly looked back and wiped his shoulder. The headman saw this and cried, "That's the ash pumpkin thief. Catch him".



The village headman wanted to punish the thief. He asked the thief to go round the village with the stolen ash pumpkin on his shoulders.



4 India

People of the Seven Huts

The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya, India, has a myth that closely resembles the biblical story of creation, fall, sin and redemption. Today majority of the Khasis have embraced the Christian faith. The story is narrated by Dr Rosa Mystica Mawlong, a Khasi scholar and a Catholic.

In the beginning God created everything that exists in the universe. When the universe was young, the Earth requested God to send humans to live on it. God held the first divine council and authorized seven of the sixteen huts or clans in heaven to settle on the earth, populate and rule it. The seven huts descended to the earth through the Golden Ladder located at the Sohpetbneng hill. Humans could go up and down between heaven and earth, see and communicate with God face-to-face and with the nine huts above. Humans knew no sin, and all lived a righteous life. The seven huts or clans that came down are believed to be the first ancestors of all the clans on earth.

Evil appeared in the form of a serpent known as Thlen. He was jealous of God's creation. God organized a second council and gave the seven huts the right to earn righteousness. He then bestowed the power of speech only to mankind. Man realized the power of 'a word spoken' is 'an unbreakable covenant'.

Thlen, the serpent, tried to brainwash the entire creation with his own evil ploys. He made the Diengïei tree grow dense foliage so as to block the sun. People were enveloped in darkness. The earth could not produce crops and vegetation, and people would starve to death from lack of food. This era is known as the 'Age of Darkness'.

Man tried to cut down the tree, but at night a tiger licked all the sliced parts of the tree which



enabled it to grow back. A sparrow advised man to put sharp pickaxes on the tree, when they did so, the tiger's tongue got cut. Man realized his mistake of destroying the tree listening to a mere bird without the divine consent.

Man did manage to kill the Thlen and consumed the serpent meat. But an elderly woman left a piece of meat to share with her daughter. From that piece the Thlen revived. Henceforth, sin acquired a dwelling place in the human heart.

One day man organized a dance festival of all God's creation which unfortunately ended in tragedy. The Sun and the Moon arrived late to the dance and as they danced, some animals started mocking them saying they are siblings. The sun, who is the spotlight of the universe, was so embarrassed and fled to a cave. When evil had surpassed such limits, God broke the Golden Ladder.

So, the third divine council was held by the seven huts but was not able to come to a decision as all arguments proved to be futile. Finally, a featherless cock who was known as U Ma Lyomboit U Ma Lymbiang, came forward and expressed his readiness to bring back the sun. The cock went to the threshold of the sun with humility; he started to crow three times, the sun came back and the earth was bright once again and man rewarded the cock by giving it feathers of different birds.

When the sun returned, the face of man became radiant once again, this ushered in the 'Era of Hope'. When hope returned, man was no longer in darkness. Till today, it is the belief of the seven huts that the sole purpose of living in this world is to earn righteousness in order to carry it to the house of God at the end of the journey here on earth. They believe that this world is only a 'Guest House' and that the real life is in heaven where they will be united with God and the other nine huts.



5 Pakistan

Ominous Silence

Once upon a time a poor farmer and his wife, had finished their day's labour and eaten their frugal supper. They were sitting by the fire when a dispute arose between them as to who should shut the door, which had been blown open by a gust of wind.

"Wife, shut the door!" said the man.

"Husband, shut it yourself!" said the woman.

"I will not shut it, and you shall not shut it," said the husband; "but let the one who speaks the first word shut it."

This proposal pleased the wife. So the old couple retired to bed in silence.

In the middle of the night, they heard a noise, and, peering out, they saw that a wild dog had entered the room, and was devouring their little store of food.

Neither of them uttered a word. The dog, having sniffed at everything, and having eaten as much as he wanted, went out of the house.

The next morning the woman took some grain to the house of a neighbour to pound it into flour.

In her absence the barber entered, and said to the husband: "How is it you are sitting here all alone?"

The farmer did not utter a word. The barber then shaved his head, but still he did not speak; then he shaved off half his beard and half his moustache, but even then, the man refrained from speaking. Then the barber covered him all over with a hideous coating of lamp-black, but the farmer remained dumb.

"The man is bewitched!" cried the barber, and he hastily exited the house.

He had hardly gone when the wife returned. Seeing her



Petrus Baraik

husband in such a ghastly plight, she began to tremble, and exclaimed: “Ah! Wretch, what have you been doing?”
“You spoke the first word,” said the farmer, “so begone, woman, and shut the door.”

There is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7)

6 Thailand

Rice and Money

There was a time when all the rice disappeared. Money and Rice got into a fight with each other. The owner of the money said, “Money is more important than rice.” He kept his money with him wherever he went. When he slept, he used money as a pillow. He thought that with a lot of money he would never die of hunger.

The rice owner responded, “*Yes, rice is less important than money because when someone spills rice, it was swept away to feed dogs and chicken.*”

Hearing this, rice felt very sad, and fled. Thus, humans did not have any rice to eat. After two days, the child of the money owner began to cry because no rice was available to eat. He cried without stopping until the third day when a dog came by and slept alongside the child. Some rice had stuck on the dog’s back. The child ate the rice and stopped crying. The owner of the money saw this and thought about the importance of rice. “*If there’s no rice, people will definitely die.*” Humans and animals then started searching for rice.

Rice hid herself in a cave that no one could enter because there were magical rocks that constantly opened and closed the entrance of the cave. An ant could enter but could not come out. A spirit bird flew in and ate rice until she was full. As she was leaving



the cave, magical rocks shut the entrance and snapped the spirit bird's neck. The bird cried, "I can't leave. I will surely meet death."

Then an elderly grandmother said, "*It's not that difficult. I'll help you.*" She walked close to the entrance and lifted her sarong to the magical rocks. As the rocks watched the grandmother, they began to laugh, and the bird was set free from the cave.

The bird asked humans to promise the rice that it brought out from the cave. It had to be eaten with respect to assure that humans would have rice forever. To the present day, as rice ripens, people let birds eat the rice before harvesting because they were the ones who returned rice to human beings.

7 Cambodia

Two Women and a Baby

Once upon a time, there was a woman who bore no child but desired to have one. She wandered from place to place and, one day, she met a woman carrying a baby.

She said to the young mother, "You have a very beautiful baby. May I hold her?" The mother replied, "Of course you may," as she handed her child to the woman stranger.

The woman held, hugged, kissed, and played with the baby with joy. Then she tried to run away with the child. The mother shouted after her, "Hey! Don't take my baby away. Please give her back to me." "What? Are you crazy? This baby is mine," claimed the woman. The two disputed and went to the community court but no court in the country could come to a just decision. Thus, the case was sent to the King.

The King looked at both women and said: "You both seem to love the baby very much



and it is very hard for me to make a decision. But I have something for you to do. I will put the baby in the middle of the field and you both have to race fast to grab her. If the baby is yours, you will make all effort to get the baby first." The women agreed.

As they saw the baby being laid in the middle of the field, the two women ran as fast as they could toward the baby. In seconds, both women got to the child at the same time. One quickly grabbed her right arm and the other got her left arm. Each tried to pull the baby away from the other; however, one lady decided to let the baby go once she saw the other woman was so aggressive and harsh trying to grab the baby away from her.

After seeing the woman's behaviour, the king asked the woman who released the child, "Why did you let the baby go?" She explained, "She is my flesh, my heart and soul! I love her dearly. It hurt me deeply to see her getting torn apart by the physical struggle of the two adults."

The king knew she is the mother of the baby, and he pronounced the verdict in favour of the true mother.

8 Myanmar

The Alchemy of Earth

Once there lived a young couple. They were very happy, but soon the young man did no work as he was dreaming of turning earth to gold. "I am working as an alchemist," he told his wife. "I must have peace and quiet!"

The wife asked him to get a job, earn money to survive. She tried to make ends meet by picking fruits for the local farmer who paid her very little for her work.

"If you work, too," the wife told her husband, "We could save money and buy our own farm." But the young man shook his head. "I promise, I have almost found the secret. I just need more time."

She gave him time, but after a while, she sought her father's advice. She knew her father had also studied alchemy.



"We all have dreams," the father told her. "But I will talk to him. Tell him to come to see me tomorrow." The young man was a bit nervous to meet him but went the next morning as he respected his wife and his father-in-law.

To the young man's delight, the father-in-law was not angry. Instead, he whispered, "I, too, was an alchemist. I almost turned earth into gold. I was very close."

"You were?" the young man asked. He was surprised to know they shared a dream. "I'm on the verge of a breakthrough." He described his methods and experiments, everything that he had tried.

Now it was the old man's turn to be excited. "You are doing just what I did!" he said. "And you are close. But you have forgotten one ingredient that will change any base element to gold. By the time I made the discovery, I was too old."

But before he could finish, the young man said, "I'm young and strong. I can find this ingredient if you just tell me what it is."

"Ah," the old man sighed, "it requires a great deal of work."

"I can work," his son-in-law said. "Just tell me what to do and I shall!"

The old man smiled and said, "You need the silver powder that grows on banana leaves. But not just any silver powder. It must be the powder from plants you have grown on your own."

"That's easy," the young man said. "I can plant bananas. How much powder do we need?"

"Two pounds," the old man said.

"Are you sure you can do all this work?"

"Of course!" the young man said.

"Very well," the old man said, "let me give you the money to buy the land where you can raise your bananas. And if you promise to tell



no one, not even my daughter, I shall teach you the magic spells to say over your plants."

The father-in-law gave his son-in-law some money, and the young man bought a fertile plot of land, but it was dense with bush. For many weeks, the young man worked from dawn to dusk to clear it. For many more weeks, he tilled and sowed. When he had all his plants in the field, he whispered the magic spells over each one, and from then on, he worked all day, every day, weeding and watering and trimming.

When at last the bananas began to grow, and he had picked them and given them to his wife to sell in the market, he carefully collected the silvery powder and poured it into jars.

The banana leaves did not have much powder, and he realized he would have to harvest more plants. With the money they had saved from the sale of the bananas, he bought more land and planted more banana plants and worked still harder. He went on collecting the powder.

At long last, he had collected two pounds. Overjoyed, he hurried to tell his father-in-law, and when the old man saw the jars, he glowed with pride. "You have done fine work!" he said. "I'm proud of you."

"Now you'll teach me how to make gold?" the son-in-law asked.

"Of course," said the old man, "but I want my daughter to hear this as well. Go find her and tell her that we need her help."

The young man ran to tell his wife that he wanted to show her a surprise, and she hurried after him to her father's house.

When they were all together, her father said, "My dear, what were you doing while your husband was collecting the powder from his banana leaves?"

She smiled. "I made sure to pick every fruit and I sold them at the market. That is how we have lived all these years."

"And tell me, dear," her father said, "did you save any money?"

"Yes," she said. "My beloved husband worked so hard, we had more than enough!"

"Show me the money you have saved," her father said.

The girl walked home and soon returned with two large bags of gold.

"Let us walk outside," her father said.



There he poured the bags of gold into the dirt. He turned to his son-in-law. "You see, my son, you have turned the base elements of earth into gold."

At first, the young man was so stunned that he could not speak, but soon he understood that his father-in-law was, indeed, the wisest alchemist of all.

9 Vietnam

The Struggle of Sơn Tinh They Tinh and Nature's Fury

A popular Vietnamese legend is that of Sơn Tinh and Thủy Tinh. The Hùng King once held a contest to find a strong man worthy of his daughter's hand in marriage.

Two extraordinary figures stood out: Sơn Tinh – a mountain god with the power to move vast mountain ranges at whim, and Thủy Tinh – a water god who had complete control over the storms and the sea.

Ultimately, it was Sơn Tinh who won by a close call. But Thủy Tinh refused to accept defeat. He called upon storms and raised the sea levels to attack Sơn Tinh. In his wake, he left behind destroyed lands, crops, and houses.

To protect the people, Sơn Tinh raised mountains from the ground to block off the waves, which continued to grow as the water rose. The battle raged on for days until Thủy Tinh got tired and had to retreat. Still, he'd come back every year, only to be repelled time and again.

The story explains the fact that many parts of Vietnam suffer from annual floods and storms. It also represents the resilience of Vietnamese people in the face of natural disasters.



SENTINELS OF FAITH

We have many sentinels of faith in Asia who hold out the torch of faith and hope in the midst of darkness and gloom. They are like the “Saints next door”. Many Asian countries have witnessed fierce persecution and the ravages of war. Even today the disciples of Christ continue to suffer for their faith in many parts of the world. The Church in Asia abounds in stories of steadfast faith, courage, and witness to the gospel. In the absence of priests, sacraments and churches to worship, the flame of faith was preserved and passed on by many catechists and ordinary lay faithful. We here publish the heartwarming stories of some of the sentinels of faith. We pay homage to the many unsung heroes of faith in Asia, and trust that the Lord has counted them worthy to receive the reward promised to those who remain faithful and steadfast.



1 The Philippines A Table of Hope

The Philippine artist Joey Velasco has a captivating painting of the Last Supper called Hapag ng Pag-asa (A Table of Hope). It is Velasco’s most known work among his 30 major paintings. The 2005 painting shows Jesus dining not with his apostles but with a group of street children in a run-down place and in a poor setting. They dine not at a table but on a big delivery box used for cargo shipments. The painting was widely reproduced as postcards, calendars, and posters.



The children with Jesus are strangers to each other. One of them is holding a stolen bag. Another is eating together with a cat. A girl and a boy are sitting on an empty iron container facing Jesus. And one is eating on the ground with perhaps food scraps that he just got from the garbage.

These are Velasco's imagery of children he saw on the streets of Manila. Everyone in the painting is depiction of a real child Velasco met and helped. "The painting reveals a story of greater hunger than a plate of rice could satisfy. These children are starved of love, not merely material food," Velasco once said.

Every child in the painting has a story. Velasco wrote stories about each of them and how they inspired him in his work. One was about an 11-year-old boy named Itok who lived in a community of gangs and criminals. Politicians and rich people hired him and his friends as goons. Itok was chained up by his mother because he was involved in a gang robbery.

Another child named Emong lived near a dam to catch non-edible fish but cooked them with vinegar and soy sauce to fill their empty bellies. His family's house was built on cigarette cartons. Meanwhile, Onse was sold to a prostitute. His stepmother danced as a stripper to put food on the table. Tinay was a little five-year-old girl who nibbled her thumb and carried her old and dirty doll. She was an orphan after her drug-dependent parents left her with relatives who left her in the streets.



A Table of Hope by Joey Velasco

Velasco began his artistic career when he saw an image of the Madonna in a dream after he had undergone an operation – inspiring him to make Mary, mother of Jesus, as the subject of his first painting. He also decided to make Jesus Christ as the main subject of his works. He said Christ is the reason he lived. He portrayed the daily situation of Filipinos in his works. Aside from paintings, he also did sculptures. Having no formal art

training, Velasco, who was a former Salesian seminarian and businessman, described himself as a "heartist" and a "socio-spiritual realist".

Velasco died in 2010, at the age of 43 after a five-year bout with kidney ailments. After his death, the Joey Velasco Foundation was set up with the help of Gawad Kalinga to aid street children in select communities in Metro Manila.

2 Malaysia

Sowing Seeds, Fostering Faith

During the Japanese occupation of World War II when priests were about to be arrested Monsignor A Wachter urged my father, Julius Elias Daut, and others to 'go and spread the gospel'. At the end of the war in 1945, he took the exhortation and followed the Australian army to Labuan.

Julius Elias was born in a village called Dabak, Penampang, Sabah (then North Borneo) Malaysia in 1920. He was of Kadazan descent and belonged to a poor family of farmers. Born in a Christian family, he grew up in the midst of rampant paganism and rituals. In 1942 his marriage was blessed by Mgr Watcher. The Lord blessed them with six children.



Elias Daut

In the 1970's there were shortages of priests to serve the faithful in Sabah, as all foreign priests were either forced to leave or deported. It was a time of persecution and forced conversion to Islam. Christians, including many prominent church leaders were coerced or enticed to convert to Islam. Failing to do so they were prosecuted. Elias remained firm in his faith.

In the absence of priests Bishop Peter Chung appointed Elias, Constantine Cheah and Anthony Yen to serve as prayer leaders and care for the spiritual needs of the faithful. They led the Sunday services, distributed Holy Communion



whenever possible, visited the homebound, consoled the grieving and buried the dead. They served the mission passionately for many years, building relations and sowing the Word among the community, resulting in many conversions. In course of time many young leaders replaced them.

Elias left a priceless heritage of his blessings for the people and his own family. He was an ardent devotee of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a member of the Legion of Mary. In his final years, he devoted much of his time to promote devotion to Our Lady and the rosary. He would make rosaries and give them away. He also taught his children and in-laws to make rosaries. His children, in-laws and grandchildren followed the example of their father by continuing to serve the Lord as catechists, members of the pastoral councils, communion ministers and active members of the various catholic associations.

Elias was called to rest in the Lord on 5th August 2019, just after celebrating his 99th birthday. Like Paul, he too could say: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2Tim 4:7).

This story is contributed by George Elias, the son of Elias Daut. George 71, continues to be an active parishioner at the Blessed Sacrament Church in Labuan. He is an Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion and brings Holy Communion to the homebound, and grieving. Earlier he served in the Liturgical Committee. Presently he is an Elder of the Catholic Charismatic Covenant Community in his Parish.

3 India

Pumpkin and the Providence of God

(The story is based on a real incident at Zotoma, a village in India’s northeast Indian state of Nagaland, a region which is predominantly Christian, where the Christian faith first came about 150 years ago.)

The missionary grew restless as he paced up and down near the thatched Church at Zotoma. The creeping roses on the slopes and the greeneries lifted his spirit. But the thought of the village Church made him sad. The Church, built by the vibrant new Christian community, was blown off by the wind twice.

“How could the walls and rafters of bamboos and the roof of palm leaves withstand the might of the strong seasonal winds? How long can we go on praying and worshipping the Lord in such a place? Should we keep hoping that if we rebuilt the Church, it will not be blown off again? Would not those who still held on to the ancestral faith laugh at the Christians, and the God we worship?”

These thoughts flashed through his mind as he mused over a permanent solution. He knew the people were keen to see a better, stronger Church building. For young Christian communities in remote villages like Zotoma, a Church, however modest, is the proud symbol of their faith.



The priest was a missionary from another land and culture, and he knew he had to learn much about his people. They accepted him as their Father, as he shared the faith, ate their food, and shared in their joys and sorrows.

They esteemed him and would wait eagerly for his visit. The children would gladly sing and dance whenever the priest visited. Besides celebrating Mass and administering the sacraments, he would show them Bible movies, distribute sweets to the children, and give away medicines for the sick.

The priest decided to hold a series of meetings to plan rebuilding the Church, this time a stronger and sturdy one that would withstand the fury of nature. The community decided to pool funds and materials. Every group in the community was enthusiastic and agreed to do their best.

Some offered a few months of their salary; some families offered timber, others hours of labour. A wealthy contractor offered his truck to transport materials to the site.



Ponglang, a childless widower who took the name Noah at baptism, was delighted to know all that the community was planning. He felt sad he could not join them in any work connected with the Church construction.

But despite all efforts, the work was not taking off. On a Sunday, with a new resolve, the priest set out for Zotoma to celebrate Mass and have another meeting with his beloved community. When the community gathered for the meeting, the priest introduced the plans for constructing the new Church. The village leader stood up and reported all that have been done so far. He said it was not because of lack of funds or materials that the work did not begin. It is the absence of a person, like the priest with them. “Father, stay with us and the work will start, and it will be completed soon.” And most of the participants nodded in agreement.

As the people continued to speak and listen to various suggestions, Ponglang Noah slowly came into the meeting with his walking stick in one hand and a pumpkin in the other. As all looked at him, Ponglang, gave the pumpkin to the priest and said shyly “Father, I feel sorry I could not contribute anything for the Church building. But I managed to get this pumpkin from the backyard of my shack. Please cook it on the day you begin the work.” Accepting it gratefully and with joy, the priest said with moistened eyes, “Yes Noah, we will certainly cook and eat it.”

A man sitting in the front row, however, said, “Father, let’s do it in this way. Let’s auction the pumpkin and use the proceeds for the construction fund.” All felt that it was a better idea. People began to bid for the pumpkin one by one. The contractor outbid them all for ten thousand rupees (\$150). He then surprised everyone by giving it back for cooking. All clapped hands for Ponglang and the big contribution he had made.

Touched by the gesture of Ponglang and what was done by each one in the community, the priest announced: “I have decided to stay here with you. We shall begin the work tomorrow.”

The story is written by Fr R.R. Graviour Augustine, a missionary priest of the Diocese of Kohima, Nagaland, where the story is set. He has doctorate in Catechetics and is currently the Dean of Oriens Theological College, Shillong.

4 Malaysia

The Sea and the Beautiful Garden

Lee Eng Kiat, born in 1900, was the only child, and was brought up in a village named Mempakul, in the district of Menumbok, Sabah in East Malaysia. Young Kiat loved the sea and spent time on the wooden jetty at the beach front to watch colourful fishes in the turquoise waters. This interest one day caused him to slip and fall into the sea. As he couldn't swim and it was a high tide, he quickly sank to the seabed, kicking his way up to the surface to gasp for air before going under again.



He did this several times but soon lost consciousness. He felt transported into a tunnel where he saw a bright light shining at the end of the tunnel. He remembered walking till he reached the end and stepped into a beautifully lit garden. As he was admiring the garden, he met a man with long hair and beard, wearing white shiny robes. The man was holding a book. The man then asked Kiat, “what is your name?” and my grandfather told him his name. The man then opened his book, went through it and then closed the book and told him, “Ah, your time has not yet come, you must go back.” But Kiat was reluctant to go as he felt very peaceful and happy in that garden.

Nevertheless, the man insisted that he turn back but told him he can return to the garden again one day. And so reluctantly he turned around and the next instant, he became conscious of vomiting water while being carried upside down. It was only sometime later that he learned a fisherman had chanced upon a bobbing ponytailed hair in the water at the jetty's edge and pulled him out to safety. Thankful for being given a new lease of life, he vowed to return the kindness



shown to him in helping others to the best of his ability. He hoped that by doing so, one day he would return to that beautiful garden and meet the man in white robe again.

As years passed, Kiat landed a job with the then British government (prior to World War II) and his office was situated not far from the beach front of Mempakul. He married and had a family. He never ceased to help anyone in need, even the strangers. He urged his children and grandchildren to do the same. Relatives or strangers would often stay in his house. This went on even after the family moved to various parts of Sabah, Malaysia, and even after his retirement when he settled down in the island of Labuan.

Kiat continued to live as a pagan although a few of his daughters converted to Catholicism. It was only after the death of his wife in 1979 that he expressed the desire to become a Catholic. His daughter then connected him to the Franciscan Nuns and he was given informal catechism classes. He was baptized at the age of 81 and took the name Thomas Lucas. The Nuns and the leaders of the Church of the Blessed Sacrament, Labuan, continued to visit him and support him in prayer as his health slowly deteriorated.

As he became frail, he expressed his wish to return to that beautiful garden which he saw in his vision. On October 6, 1982 he started to slip in and out of consciousness and his son called the Nuns and they led the family to pray the rosary. As the 'Glory Be' on the fifth decade was being said, suddenly a gentle breeze swept through the room, and he calmly breathed his last. Kiat held on to the hope of returning to the beautiful garden where he saw the man in white robes.

Years passed but the legacy of his kindness and hospitality have touched the hearts of those whom he helped in his lifetime. One day his son was on board a ferry traveling back from Menumbok to Labuan and he overheard an elderly man seated on a bench onboard the ferry telling his family how beautiful the beach of Mempakul was back in the old days.

He then went on to tell how once he was caught in a severe storm while fishing with a group of friends at Mempakul. He remembered a tall slim man, in his late 30s who smoked a pipe, coming to meet them at the wooden jetty and invited them over to his house. He provided them food and insisted that they stay overnight till the storm passed. On the following morning, he provided them food for their journey. The old man wondered if the tall man was still alive.



Extended family of Thomas Lucas alias Lee Eng Kiat

At that point, Kiat's son, who was listening with wrap attention, could not help but turn around and tell him that the old man was none other than his own father. He told him that his father had passed on. The man then shook my dad's hand and with tears in his eyes said, "your father was indeed a very good man!"

Although Kiat did not know Christ at the beginning, but out of gratitude he lived his life helping others as best as he could, holding on to the hope that one day he will return to the beautiful garden and meet the man in white robes. We, his grandchildren, now realize that what he did in his lifetime was all the while a Catholic virtue called 'charity'. We continue to strive to emulate his legacy in our daily lives. We remember the words of Jesus: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me." (Mt 25: 40).

(This is a true story narrated by Irene Lee, the granddaughter of Lee Eng Kiat who took the name Thomas Lucas at baptism. Irene is a member of the Social Communication Commission of the Blessed Sacrament Parish in Labuan Island, Malaysia. We are grateful to Irene and Ruben Sario for sharing this story).



5 India

Guarding the House of God

My name is Benjamin and I hail from Nurpur, an agricultural village in Punjab, India. I am 21 years old, and work as a security guard in a bank in the big city nearby. But I don't consider this as my main job as I am thinking how I can bring more and more people to Christ.

There is a chapel in my village where a priest used to come from the city on every fourth Saturday of the month to celebrate Holy Mass. This occasion is like a festival for all of us as we are keen to receive the Holy Eucharist.

Though I am working as a security guard in a bank, I am also the guard of the house of God. My daily schedule begins by cleaning the chapel in my village. Then I attend Mass in the city parish. I also join the novena in honour of Mother Mary, and I pray that my village may have a priest who can celebrate Mass daily.

Sometime ago, God listened to our prayers when the bishop appointed a senior Brother to our village to take care of our pastoral needs such as preaching the Word of God. We were happy and overjoyed. But I was delighted when the parish priest asked me to accommodate the brother in my own house.

After a few days of the arrival of the brother, a kind of transformation began to take place, because he started to visit the families, teach catechism, gather people in the chapel for daily Rosary and evening prayers. He formed various groups for children, youth, women, elders, and make them lead prayers. He also offers counselling for students and adults.

Within a year the whole atmosphere of the village has changed. The Holy Mass which used to be held once a month is



now taking place every week, and people from nearby villages too have started to attend it. The number of the faithful started to increase day by day. Recently the bishop established a convent in our village. The presence of the Religious Sisters is another blessing of God for us.

(Benjamin Amos Michael belongs to Kaputhala, Diocese of Jalandhar, Punjab, India)

6 China

Handing over the Word of God

The painting "Copying the Bible" is in the form of traditional Chinese painting. During the pandemic, the priest in Wang Chi's diocese led the faithful to copy the Bible, while the elderly at home often took care of the children. Children were able to feel the atmosphere of faith through the elderly. Apple represents peace. Flowers represent people's desire for an early end to the epidemic. When the flowers bloom in spring, people will rekindle their hope and enthusiasm for life and faith!

Wang Chi



Copying the Bible



CHAPTER 8

CHURCH ON PILGRIMAGE

1 The Tent of Fellowship

The Church is like a tent large and spacious
Ever expandable, ever ready to welcome anyone
But more specially the poor and the needy
The wayfarer, the sojourner, those without a home.

The pilgrim who yearns to find God
Who trudges on life's wearisome road
Welcome to walk with all people of God
In a common quest to find peace and happiness.

The Church beckons each of God's children
To walk together as brothers and sisters
Under the watchful care of a loving Father
Who sends the sun and rain equally on all.

It does not matter how different we are
It does not matter how weak or weary we are
We can sense a bonding, a communion
As we are called to live in the tent of the Church.

The Church is Christ's sacrament of love
To bring healing and comfort to all his children
Strength and solace to the faint and downcast
To all those who are lonely and lost.



Acts of the Apostles tells of the unity
Of all who embraced Christ's love
"They were of one heart and mind
And shared everything in common."

And all people who saw them exclaimed:
"See how they love one another"
And resolved to join their fold to follow Christ
And day by day the Lord added to their numbers.

George Plathottam

2 The Power of Mercy

In its infancy, the Church braved fierce persecution
Yet the cruel arms of the Roman empire did not stifle it
The Church grew through the witness of the martyrs
Who shed their blood and testified to Christ's love.

The Church never flagged in showing mercy and love
And continued to reach out with solace and support
To people stricken with plagues that ravaged Rome
Zealously bringing care, healing, food and medicine

The Church set up food kitchens to feed the poor
It took to its shelter the people abandoned on the streets
It built hospitals and orphanages and homes to care
And buried the dead whose bodies lay abandoned.

The mighty Roman empire continued its tyranny
On hapless Christians who followed the Way
Of the one who died for them and shed his blood
Jesus Christ of Nazareth- their Lord and Saviour.



The empire floundered; the powers fumbled
The fortresses crumbled and the might of Rome fell
Their gods and goddesses could not withstand
The power of mercy Christ came to share with all.

George Plathottam

3 A People Called by God

The Church continues its sacramental presence
Welcoming the poor and those in dire need
Bringing them healing and solace in our day
All those who struggle, the sick and the weary.

The Church's might is proved in serving the poor
In homes of lepers, soup kitchens in the cities
Hospitals in remote towns and villages
Reaching out to those on the margins.

Men and women moved by Christ's call
Continue to serve without counting the cost
They give all they have and can until it hurts
For that is what they have been called to do.

The Church is ecclesia, the people of God.
We are a people called by God.
We are made his children through baptism
The Church is our mother and teacher- mater et magistra
The sacrament of salvation, leading us to God.

The Church is a sign and witness to Christ and his Gospel.
We are called to live it, bear witness to it with our life
Draw people to Christ- the way, the truth and the life.
The one who gives us life in all its fullness.



Let's tell the story of Jesus to Asia's millions who yearn for God
Let's call them to walk with us on the road
As we journey on together as brothers and sisters
Children of the Father who never ceases to love us.

George Plathottam

4 The Church at the Peripheries

Majority of the people in Asia live on the peripheries. They are the excluded. Very often their lives and issues are not counted in the process of development. The laws of the land are not in their favour. They are exploited and pushed aside. They are in the darkness of ignorance, injustice, caste system and poverty.

Jesus walks among the people on the peripheries. He meets them in the streets, cures them and liberates them from the darkness of their afflictions and bondages.



In the painting Jesus is healing a blind man on the street. Jesus is leaning towards him with love and compassion. The Church is the face of Christ which leans towards the afflicted, the tribals, the fisher people and the Dalits.

Roy M Thottam



5 Our Common Home without Boundaries

All created beings belong to our common home, evolved out of God's infinite love.

Our common home has no boundaries. It is our home, common to all creation. We continue to evolve, discover, explore and understand our wonderful universe, within and outside.

God entrusted us with the curiosity, intelligence, and responsibility to discover, sustain and nurture our common home with the same love with which he created us.

With greater love in our hearts, we shall experience the inclusivity of all creation.

God urges us to replace all boundaries in the universe with universal love.

The painting is in the Mandala shape, which indicates all-inclusiveness and all encompassing. The sky up and the sea beneath, the air and the earth in both sides. The birds, the butterflies, the animals, the vegetation, the fish, the sun and moon and human life are interrelated and inter-dependent. We cannot have a spirituality or Church which excludes nature and creation. Everything on earth is sacramental, originating in God and going back to God. We are on a journey towards God along with other creatures. In the background of ecological concerns of the modern times we need to strengthen a spirituality and a church that is in communion.

Roy M. Thottam



6 Saint Paul- the Apostle of All

Saint Paul- he is called the Apostle of the Strangers.
Strangers call other people from different ethnic group a stranger.
If you change your thinking and
think of anyone other than me as a stranger,
I've lived and lived on Earth,
and I thought that everyone
who will be born could be strangers.

In the center of the world,
there's a heart praying for me and other people.
I also want to bear the heavy burden that Paul
bears for Christ.

As I drew each person praying,
I saw the back of Paul the Apostle.

Yong-Duk Kim



CHAPTER 9

JESUS: GOD AMONG US

1 My Boatman, My Rock

Lord, lead your people in the journey of life-
 Arduous, tedious, exhausting, enduring
 When our eyes are drooped, and we can't see the shore
 Where the Father awaits with his arms wide open.

How beautiful on the mountain are the feet
 of those who bring tidings of you and gladness
 Soothing balm in the midst of gloom
 Comfort in pain and grief and sadness

Be the sure Rock on which I can anchor
 Against the storms that engulf my boat
 My Boatman, are you asleep even as waves rage?
 Awake and reign in the storm and calm the sea.

You ask us to gaze on your hand that holds the oars
 And not lose hope at the sight of the rising waves
 Weak faith made weaker, our confidence shaken
 You alone can heal my fears and increase my faith.

The Church is my rock too you built on Peter
 I trust the storms of our days won't prevail
 You steady Peter's hand to lead us safely
 And never cease to feed your lambs, your sheep.



George Plathottam

2 You are the Good Samaritan

Stop by me Lord when I'm knocked down
bruised and wounded and fallen by the wayside
Be my Good Samaritan on the lonely highway
Draw closer Lord and lift me up in your mercy

Truly, you are the Good Samaritan of your story
The one who comes to his neighbour in need
You are the balm of mercy that soothes and heals
The wounded and weary, the helpless and the wounded

We travel again and again on that dangerous road
That is beset with the enemy who knocks us down
Who robs us of our innocence and leaves us bruised
What mercy, you stop by each time to lift us up.

Once healed help me too to stop by my neighbour
To reach out and lift him up and nurse him
And bring him to the inn where you truly are
The Innkeeper who will nurse us back to wholeness.

May the Good Samaritans increase in our world
Where so many today cry out and call for help
May none lie wounded by the road unattended
Without a good neighbour stopping by to help.

George Plathottam



3 Like a Tree by the Waterside

Make me like a tree by the waterside
Standing tall and strong and ever verdant
With roots deep down in thy source of life
Fresh with flowers and fruits in thy garden.

The storms won't break its branches
The heat or cold won't wither it
Its lush green leaves stay open to the sun
For you hold it firm and strong and secure.

You give succor and make it grow
With the water that flows through my arid heart
Sometimes grown cold and stubborn and self-willed
With no thought for others but me alone.

Like the Rich Fool with a plentiful harvest
Who thinks in his heart there is no God
I too forget that you are the Lord of the harvest
Who gives life and growth and fruitfulness.

Help me open my arms to embrace the others
Spur in me a generous heart ready to give
To give without counting, to give till it hurts
Like you in full measure, brimming over.



George Plathottam

4 In Christ Made One

Help me embrace diversity and find harmony
And not think in binaries that divide and separate
Let me not be fixated and frozen in rigid thoughts
Of categories that divide into 'we' and the 'other'.

Diversity and difference do not diminish me
They help me understand myself and others
They mirror the uniqueness of each one
As God's children formed in varied hues.

Lead us Lord away from hate and pride
to walk humbly one step at a time
and to know we are still on course
Each moment inching closer to the end.

In you there isn't male or female
Jew or gentile, virtuous and vicious
All are your children, the Father's prized ones
Brothers and Sisters to one another.

Born in the waters that cleanse us of sin
We become the Church- the people of God
One faith, one baptism, one life in Christ
Whose mystical body we've become a part.



George Plathottam



5 Jesus of Asia

You, Christ, are an Asian, you are one among us
Born in our vast land, born of the Virgin Mary
Choosing to be human, one like us in all things
Pitching your tent in our soil, making us rich.

You know our landscape and its hues and colours
Its hills and valleys, its planes and waterways
Its myriad peoples, races and cultures
Marching on daily to our eternal destiny.

You know the air we breathe, the struggles we undergo
The longings of our people, the yearnings in our hearts
To seek you and find you, the Wisdom of the Father
The Saviour of the world who brings lasting peace.

Come Jesus, in our midst today and reveal your face
Your human countenance bruised and broken
Through the cross you gather a people shattered by sin
And save us and bring us to the Father.

George Plathottam



6 Hands

The healing hands I've seen them,
The hands that scrubbed the floor.
The hungry hands on a Winter's Day
Knocking at a door.

The trembling hands of trembling minds,
The wedded hand that baked the bread,
Smiling hands held a newborn babe,
The hands that washed the dead.

The callous hands of workers,
Cracked, broken by the years,
The hand that raised the fallen,
The hand that wiped the tear.

I've seen the hands of many,
Read the scripted palms of most,
In a queue of Sunday morning hands,
Held out for the host.

(Author Unknown)



7 Life Giving Water

A dry desert I am, and my pot is empty
I long for the life-giving stream
To quench the thirst of my soul.
Let me be filled with the living water
That will quench my soul and I'll never be thirsty.

Let my heart be soaked with the dews of Your grace
That I may sprout into new life and bear much fruit.
Pour into me Lord the eternal life-giving water
That I may become a spring of life.

It is the usual scene in villages that women wait with pots at the well to draw water. It is they who collect the living water for the family. Women carry the burden of the family. Their sacrifices are taken for granted often and their lives are under constant threats from within and from outside.

In the painting the pot is the symbol of her own soul, dry and anguished; waiting to be filled with the liberating, life-giving presence of Jesus. The spiral water is symbol of the ever-dynamic presence of God.

The fish symbolize Christ, and Jesus Himself is the well.

Roy M Thottam



8 Cosmic Dance and Fellowship

The one who made victory over the world,
Re-created the world by his divine dance.
The elements are under his command,
He is the spring of living water,
Ablaze the world with his fire of love.
He transcends the space and time,
Ever present in all times and places.
He is the table of fellowship,
Giving himself the ultimate love.
The universe is his dance,
Within His rhythm we are,
Partaking in the divine dance.



In Indian tradition the world is recreated by the divine dance. Dance is a cultural element in almost all communities, especially among the tribal and marginalized sections of the people. Dance is a way of establishing relationship as a community, with each other and with the cosmos.

In the painting the resurrected Jesus depicted as a dancer of the universe. He recreates the world through His death and resurrection. The hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus were burning within in the presence of the Risen Christ. It was an internal resurrection for them that they were totally transformed into a new hope and enthusiasm.

Two figures of the disciples are seen at the table in the picture. The left figure resembles a woman and at the right a poor man representing the marginalized. They represent the people awaiting empowerment, justice and dignity. The Church is the 'inclusive Altar' of Christ on earth which is called to continue its mission of rebuilding the world with Jesus.

Roy M Thottam



9 Thirsting for Sight

My soul falls into darkness.
 Far away from the Divine grace.
 Blinded with false-self and fear,
 Away from the garden of blessings.
 I long for in- sight.

That the eye of my heart be opened
 To the loving gaze of the Divine,
 To see God in everything,
 And everything in God.
 May I have the eyes of concern and compassion,
 To see others with enlightened vision.

Roy M Thottam



10 Peace be with You

The world is wounded by strife and wars
 Many lives are under the veil of misery
 Their hearts are crushed by brutalities.
 The world longs for peace
 And to be ruled by the king of peace.
 The weary and burdened find comfort in him.
 Let the world be healed by the song of peace
 And the broken hearts be mended by his gaze.

India is the land of Buddha and Gandhi, Great icons of peace and nonviolence. The Indian culture basically is rooted in tolerance and communal concord. It was the tradition of the land that diverse cultures and religions live in harmony. The centre figure Jesus in the painting resembles Buddha with a compassionate gaze. The afflicted people take refuge in Him. The present time is marked with divisions, and religious- communal conflicts. The Church in India is called to be the beacon of peace and harmony overcoming all divisions.



1 1 Empty Tomb, Xiangbi Mountai

*“See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.”
(Isaiah 49:16)*

A good solitude with Christ upon death,
that’s the harbour of final striving.

As with Saint Ignatius of Loyola;
as with Saint Francis Xavier, alone at last.

1689, a common year when French Jesuit
Father Tekoti raised the chapel over the old tomb.

1869, a common year, the Gothic clock tower;
then, first Catholic church in Xindi village.

What do we dream the night of our death?
At path’s end, a small gate that looks out—

open sea as horizon. How endless the dreams,
how far since Saint Paul, oh Apostle of the Indies.

Did Xavier think of that night on Holy Cross,
its bow moving closer to Shangchuan?

Perhaps a prayer walk from across port,
around astern, then back up the starboard?

His palms pressed deep into each other
—flesh against flesh.

Then lifted up, facing Christ on the Cross,
palms against sundown, auburn and aflame.

As if placed on chest—oh, Sacred Heart
—flesh against flesh,
then resurrection of body
and resting place of life everlasting.



CHAPTER 10

MARY AND THE OTHER WOMEN

The Synod of Bishops in Asia acknowledged that Asian Christians have a great love and affection, revering the Virgin Mary as their own Mother and the Mother of Christ.



Throughout Asia there are hundreds of Marian sanctuaries and shrines where not only the Catholic faithful gather, but also believers of other religions. Pope John Paul II while releasing the Apostolic Exhortation **Ecclesia in Asia** in 1999 entrusted the Church in Asia to Mary, model of all disciples and bright Star of Evangelization:

Entrustment of Asia to the Virgin Mary

By John Paul II

O Holy Mary, Daughter of the Most High God,
 Virgin Mother of the Saviour and Mother of us all,
 look tenderly upon the Church of your Son
 planted on Asian soil.
 Be her guide and model
 as she continues your Son's mission
 of love and service in Asia.
 You fully and freely accepted the Father's call
 to be the Mother of God;
 teach us to empty our hearts
 of all that is not of God, that we too may be filled
 with the Holy Spirit from on high.
 You pondered the mysteries of God's will
 in the silence of your heart;
 help us on our journey
 to discern the signs of God's powerful hand.

You went quickly to visit Elizabeth
and help in her days of waiting;
obtain for us the same spirit of zeal and service
in our evangelizing task.
You sang the praises of the Lord;
lead us in joyful proclamation of faith
in Christ our Saviour.
You had compassion on the needy
and spoke to your Son on their behalf;
teach us never to fear
to speak of the world to Jesus
and of Jesus to the world.
You stood at the foot of the Cross
as your Son breathed his last;
be with us as we seek to be one
in spirit and service with all who suffer.
You prayed with the disciples in the Upper Room;
help us to wait upon the Spirit
and to go wherever he leads us.
Protect the Church from all the powers
that threaten her.
Help her to be a true image
of the Most Holy Trinity.
Pray that through the Church's love and service
all the peoples of Asia may come
to know your Son
Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of the world,
and so taste the joy of life in all its fullness.
O Mary, Mother of the New Creation
and Mother of Asia,
pray for us, your children, now and always!



Prayer to Our Lady for China

By Pope Benedict XVI

In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed May 24, the feast of Our Lady, Help of Christians, to be a World Day of Prayer for the Church in China, which venerates the Blessed Virgin Mary under that title as the country's patroness.



*The shrine dedicated to **Our Lady of Sheshan**, honoured under the title *Mary Help of Christians*. It is the only Marian pilgrimage site in China,*

Virgin Most Holy, Mother of the Incarnate Word and our Mother, venerated in the Shrine of Sheshan under the title "Help of Christians," the entire Church in China looks to you with devout affection.

We come before you today to implore your protection.

Look upon the People of God and, with a mother's care, guide them along the paths of truth and love, so that they may always be a leaven of harmonious coexistence among all citizens.

When you obediently said "yes" in the house of Nazareth, you allowed God's eternal Son to take flesh in your virginal womb and thus to begin in history the work of our redemption.

You willingly and generously cooperated in that work, allowing the sword of pain to pierce your soul,

*until the supreme hour of the Cross, when you kept watch
on Calvary,
standing beside your Son, who died that we might live.*

*From that moment, you became, in a new way,
the Mother of all those who receive your Son Jesus in faith
and choose to follow in his footsteps by taking up his Cross.*

*Mother of hope,
in the darkness of Holy Saturday, you journeyed
with unfailing trust towards the dawn of Easter.
Grant that your children may discern at all times,
even those that are darkest, the signs of God's loving
presence.*

*Our Lady of Sheshan, sustain all those in China,
who, amid their daily trials, continue to believe, to hope, to
love.*

*May they never be afraid to speak of Jesus to the world,
and of the world to Jesus.*

*Mother of China and all Asia, pray for us, now and forever.
Amen!*



Women and the Mission of Jesus

We look at the towering figures among women- women of great fame and valour in the Scriptures -Deborah, Ruth, Anna, Susanna, Judith, Esther, Elizabeth, Mary of Nazareth, Martha and Mary, Mary of Magdala.

In the long history of the Church we have many women who are martyrs, mystics, scholars and doctors, the wise and the learned, the pious and the devote; women of outstanding charity and compassion, fearlessness, passionate for the Gospel of Jesus Christ, founders and women in leadership.

Women were among the ardent supporters of the mission of Jesus. They gave from their resources for his ministry. Women are generous, capable of sharing their wealth and resources without reserve.

They continue to support the mission of the Church- making Sunday collection in parish churches, counting out the coins and currencies at the end.

Serving the people and even tidying up the place. They do not grudge when it comes to working, rendering service.

Thousands of lay women, consecrated virgins, religious, serve the people of all categories through hospitals and care centres. Thousands of them continue to bear witness to the compassion of Christ.

They are educators who patiently impart learning through their schools, colleges and universities.

They proclaim the gospel as evangelisers, teachers of faith, offering counsel to mothers and women, families and children.

They continue to uphold the dignity of women- reaching out to those in distress, single mothers, prostitutes, women victims of trafficking and those who are convicted for crime and serving jail terms.



In the new way of being Church, the Church which is on a Synodal journey, the Lord invites us to examine the way the women's contribution can be duly acknowledged and appreciated, their voice heard; they can be trusted to share leadership, become partners in decision making processes.

The Synod which calls for communion, participation and mission cannot achieve its goals without recognizing women's dignity and worth, and being recognized as partners, collaborators, and leaders.

Women are the majority among those who are dedicated to serve through their life of consecration and vows.

Lay women outnumber in any Church during Mass, retreats and conventions, and other pastoral gatherings. But sadly, their voice is sometimes suppressed, they do not speak or are not given a voice. They remain like a silent majority.

They are to be heard, for the Spirit speaks through them. They are the beloved of God, the brides of Christ and the Church. Mothers and Sisters who lead by example.

They are integral to the synodal journey.

Their presence and witness are essential for the Church on its pilgrimage.

It is time to eschew all forms of domination, including clerical superiority, to embark on a new path where everyone is equal in dignity through the one baptism in Christ. We share the same treasures of the Word, the sacraments, and the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit.

Paul tells us there is no Jew or Gentile, male or female in Christ.

But sometimes we fail to acknowledge the fundamental equality, oneness, dignity of women and treat them as inferior.

Any such action or attitude militates against the Gospel and calls for a metanoia, conversion of heart.



Women who Ministered to Jesus

Jesus had many helpers in his public ministry:

- those who walked with him, listened to him spoke of the kingdom
- those who witnessed his miracles and saw how people crowded around him.

Among them were women who shared their resources with him

Women who loved and admired him, who saw in him the Messiah.

They shared generously the resources they had so that his work would go on.

He would be able to bring the Good News to others awaiting to hear him.

Women were among the helpers and friends of Jesus.

Women were among those who accompanied Jesus on his journeys. Luke mentions three of them by name: Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Cuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna. (Luke 8:1-3). In addition, there were many other women. They are in the line of the many other generous women of the Old Testament.

God chose women to be the first messenger to share the story of the resurrection of Christ.

But very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance... So they rushed back from the tomb to tell his eleven disciples—and everyone else—what had happened. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and several other women who told the apostles what had happened (Luke 24:1-2, 8-10).

The women who had been healed by Jesus and who now accompanied him, were those who also supported the whole group out of their own means. Luke wants us to know that these women were active contributors to the proclamation of the Gospel. Humanly speaking, this mission could not have been carried out without their support.

Lydia, in Acts 16, was the first Jewish convert to Jesus in the city. She was a wealthy dealer in textiles and supported the work of the new community. Priscilla and Aquilla helped Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well but knew only about John's baptism, to be a true disciple of Jesus. Priscilla's name appears first before that of Aquilla each time they are named in Scripture (Acts 18:24-26).

Philip the evangelist, one of the seven men who had been chosen as helpers in Jerusalem, had four unmarried daughters who proclaimed God's message (Acts 21:8-9).

When Paul wrote to the Christian community in Rome, he mentions women who held a significant place in the Church. There is Phoebe, the deacon, who very likely delivered and possibly even read the letter to the Romans.

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the Church in Cenchrea. Welcome her in the Lord as one who is worthy of honor among God's people. Help her in whatever she needs, for she has been helpful to many, and especially to me (Romans 16:1-2).

The Lord's call to proclaim the Gospel is a mission in which everyone is equally called to lead, to serve, to pray, and to carry out the works. The urgency of the mission has not diminished today. We need Spirit-filled, gifted, committed women and men to continue the work of the Apostles and ministers of the early Church.



Women have continued to share in the mission of Jesus and of the Church. They may be rich or poor, educated or not. The quality of their contribution matters.

Jesus praised the poor widow for giving trustfully, totally, generously.

Giving calls for trust, total trust in God. Those who trust know that God will provide; he will take care of tomorrow.

Women who give without counting the cost have manifested outstanding trust in God.



Meet the Women with Jesus

Jesus, lead us to the well with you to meet the woman of Samaria
To ask of her a drink of water, but more so to give her life-giving water
You are the giver of life who satiates all hunger and thirst
You are the Word that flows like water from God's throne of mercy.

May we be with you beside the woman caught in adultery
Silent victim of sin and treachery, scapegoat of a flawed system
Pushed to the periphery and condemned to be stoned
You come not to condemn or kill but give life in its fullness.

Take us Lord to Bethany, the home of Martha and Mary
Help us too to weep with you at the tomb of Lazarus, their brother
Teach us to cry in compassion and sorrow with all who grieve
And to tell them that you are the Lord of the living in whom all live.

Beckon us Lord to come to Calvary, to the foot of the cross
To be with your sorrowful mother, to behold your mortal body
To know the depth of your passion and pain of crucifixion
To be part of your mother's grief and obtain our redemption.

We wish to meet Mary of Magdala whom you chose
As an Apostle and a fearless witness of your resurrection
She continues to make haste and go forth with the Good News
That you are no longer dead but alive in our midst. Alleluia.



George Plathottam

SCRIPTURE THEMES AND REFLECTIONS

1 Prayer, Fasting, Almsgiving

We open the season of Lent with the three-fold themes of prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

These three spiritual acts are common to most religions.

They are what the Church invites the Faithful to adopt towards a metanoia, turning towards God at the beginning of Lent.

It is also a call to reach out to God and to others.

Prayer draws us closer to God, makes us realise our own limitations but opens to infinite possibilities.

Fasting makes us better both spiritually and physically. Fasting is not merely to keep our body fit, but to keep our spirit vivified. Fasting calls us to feed our body less and thereby feed our spirit.



Almsgiving enables us to be alive to the needs of others. It helps to take attention away from our ego, obsession with ourselves, pre-occupation about our material security and comfort. It is a call to look our neighbour in his or her eyes. It is a call not to pass by the man fallen by the wayside like the Levite or the Priest. But to be a Good Samaritan.

Following Christ, being a disciple is a call to move out of our own inner orbit. It is to seek God in sincerity of heart, not merely through rituals and observances Keeping rules and having knowledge. It is a movement, a journey. It is a call to draw closer to God and imbibe a heart of compassion and mercy. It is a call to recognize and accept each one as my brother and sister in Christ. If I come close to God, I can no longer be indifferent, living for myself. I will be energized, charged with a new level of power. It is like going near the fire; your face will glow; your body will be warm.

Prayer, fasting, and almsgiving are intertwined. They are not separate entities. They are pathways to come close to God and my neighbour.

*Lord, lead me to a metanoia.
Help me turn my gaze unto you.
Let me see you in the least of my brothers and sisters
and thereby behold you, the Living God.*

2 Flight of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to Egypt

Being uprooted from one's familiar home
Wandering and seeking a new place for safety, for livelihood
Joseph and Mary knew how hard it would be.
Baby Jesus, like all children, must have been oblivious of what was going on
And yet sensed on the faces of his parents something is amiss.
It is so familiar for those who migrate,
those who are forced to leave their village, town or country
for a faraway place with no friends or familiar faces to help.

Migration keeps happening all the time
They are induced by wars and violence,
natural disasters
Conflicts, poverty, and unemployment
And dreams of a better life.

Migration offers hopes of a better future- of
better jobs and living standards.
It is like trying to begin all over again.
Yet fear and hope are written in equal
measure on the faces of those who migrate
It is a leap into the unknown.

Joseph and Mary with Jesus had to flee for
fear of Herod
Who planned to take the life of their child.
God's mercy came in a dream to Joseph
And scriptures would be fulfilled: "I will
call my son out of Egypt."



3 Jesus Gifts Zacchaeus a New Lease of Life

Jesus called Zacchaeus to come down from the tree. Jesus is going to stay with him. Zacchaeus lived with a sense of rejection and probably disliked himself, his work, his physical status. He was hated for his work as a tax collector. He felt no qualms of conscience in distorting and cheating people.

Not until Christ came into his life. Jesus finds him on a sycamore tree. Jesus too would one day climb a tree to offer his life, to save all people.

He would see all the people from his cross and draw them to the Father, heal them of their wounds and sins.



Zacchaeus did not expect much, he hoped to get a glimpse. But ended up having Jesus at his home, giving him gift of salvation. Like Matthew, Peter, Paul who found Jesus, he too lost his desire for wealth or possessions.

Let us not give up hope in the hardened sinner.

Let us not discriminate people according to their appearance.

Let's not be constrained by the limitations that surround us.

Let us look within to see the infinite possibilities God sees in us.

4 Jesus is Lost; Mary and Joseph Find Him in the Temple

Thousands of children go missing every day in Asia. They are abducted, abandoned, separated from their parents, or are runaways from a home that is not safe. The trauma of a missing child with its terrifying unknowns is difficult to express. One doesn't know if the child will be found, have suffered some kind of abuse or is alive at all.

Every child deserves to be in the safety and security of a caring adult and when they are missing – no matter the circumstances – they are profoundly vulnerable.

The governments, NGOs and the Church can be involved in adopting remedial measures for the missing children through effective responses and dedicated emergency child alert system for the safe recovery of children who are in danger.

Every year, more countries commemorate International Missing Children's Day, acknowledging the need for a harmonized response to protect vulnerable children around the world.

How much it must have grieved Joseph and Mary. How deep is the pain of parents whose children have run away from home, children who are missing or lost, whose identity is not known. Many parents become anxious; their wait is sometimes endless. They drift between hope and despair.

Every father and mother of a missing child is in pain. Their hearts continue to ache; they carry within them much pain and sorrow.

Parents also grieve because they are forced to live and work far away from their children.

We remember all children who are lost or gone astray. We pray for their parents so that the anxiety and pain of Joseph and Mary comfort them.



5 Talita Kum: Little Girl, I Tell You, Arise

Girls are especially at risk of child marriage. Gender-based violence is deeply entrenched in many Asian countries. In China and India alone, an estimated two million baby girls go "missing" each year. Girl children are selectively aborted, killed as newborns, or abandoned and left to die.

Parents in several Asian countries have a strong preference for sons. A baby girl has to be paid a dowry and go to a new family when she gets married. The boy instead brings in wealth, takes care of the parents and continues the family's name and heritage.



Some religions and cultures consider men to be superior to women. Faced with the prospect of having a single child, most parents in China preferred to have a son.

Sex determination of a child prior to its birth is punishable in some Asian countries. Many families who want a son will abort a female fetus. The results of sex-selective abortion have led to skewed gender ratio with more men. In a country like India there are 49 million more men than women as of 2019. Men commit more acts of violence against women where there is gender imbalance. Women face increasing threats of rape, murder, and domestic abuse. Some women are killed for failing to produce sons, perpetuating the cycle.

The lack of enough brides for men lead to kidnapping girls in order to marry them to their sons. Brides are also imported from other Asian nations, causing much social disruption and cultural disparities.

The Catholic Church teaches that all God's children are equal, whether they are male or female. The value of a girl child or woman is not measured in relation to a man's status or dignity. Every woman and child is precious before God. A woman does not lack dignity because she is not beautiful. Everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity and love. Every girl child and woman deserves love and respect. They are our sisters, our mothers.

6 Let Little Children Come to Me

Jesus calls children to himself. He presents them as models of goodness and simplicity.

He urges us to be like children to enter the Kingdom.

Let us love the children as Jesus did. Let no child suffer due to neglect, exploitation. Let us try to wean away children from situations of abuse, distress. Let's lead them away from the street and give them a home.

Let's draw children out of violence and conflicts, drug abuse, trafficking, crime.

Neglecting the child means imperiling a nation's future and well-being.

Jesus tells us not to give scandal to the little ones. Let no adult be guilty of misleading a child into what is wrong: abusing them for gratification, using them for armed conflict and making them child soldiers, engaging them in hazardous works, using them for child prostitution, making them victims of pornography.

In Jesus' time as well as today children are socially powerless. In many Asian



countries, there is high infant mortality, especially among the poor. Many children develop life-threatening sickness caused by malnutrition and die before they become adults.

Some thought that the kingdom would be achieved by force of arms. But Jesus shocked everyone when he said that the kingdom belongs to the powerless like children. Total powerlessness can help deepen our trust in God.

Jesus Loves the Little Children

Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world.
(cf Matthew 19:14)



7 The Early Church: One in Heart and Mind

People of Asia have a strong sense of community. The Acts of the Apostles shows how the early Church formed a community. People shared everything in common. They loved one another. The life of the early Church seems too good to be true, yet that is a real testimony. Their life became a powerful witness to the majority. Day by day the Lord added to their number.

People of Asia, particularly, the indigenous communities, value such bonding, fellowship, close cultural, ethnic bonds. Their lives are marked by sharing of common land and property and resources. They grieve together, celebrate together, share much in common. The Church is already present in their midst. The witness even of small communities and individuals can make a big impact in attracting peoples and communities to Christ and the Church.



8 Jesus Cleanses the Temple

Using the motif of a folding screen painting, depicting Japanese culture, Jesus cleanses and blesses the country, expressed with his hands.

The people of Japan, predominantly Buddhists, live at the eastern edge of Asia. They join with the people of other Asian countries as brothers and sisters in asking for Jesus' blessing.

Etsuko Kitazume



9 Martha and Mary of Bethany

In the midst of a fast-changing society, Mary received God's will with all her being, listening, contemplating, and rejoicing in it.

Mary is moved by the Holy Spirit. In the joy of her heart, she proceeds to do deeds of love.

And Martha, who, mindful of the needs of others and for the sake of the love for God, uses her gifts and abilities to the fullest to serve others.

Mary's heart and Martha's thoughts are united in one with each other, giving thanks and praise to God.

Etsuko Kitazume



CHALLENGES FOR THE CHURCH IN ASIA

The 50 years of the existence of FABC, and the Synod on Synodality which is currently underway, present for the Church in Asia a number of challenges. These challenges are also opportunities to develop effective pastoral plans for the mission of the Church in this vast continent. Though neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, we shall outline here some of the important concerns and issues that have emerged from the two events that have important consequences for the Church in Asia, namely, the FABC 50, and the Synod on Synodality (2021-2024). The FABC 50 was marked by a series of studies and deliberations and culminated in a three-week general assembly in October 2022. The Synod process which began in 2021 has gone through several stages of study and reflection among the people of God in the various episcopal conferences. These two events are not closed events but grace-filled opportunities to listen to the Spirit speaking to the Church in Asia.

1 Evangelization

The Church's primary mission is to proclaim the Good News to all peoples, following Christ's command. The Church exists for evangelization and hence it is the major function around which the Church should develop other pastoral programmes. Evangelization is not limited to or exclusively tied to preaching, conversion, establishing local churches or increasing its members. The concept of evangelization has



Vinay Joseph



been presented in its broad and comprehensive perspective by Paul VI in his Encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, and by Pope John Paul II in *Remptoris Missio* and numerous other documents of the Church.

The Synod is clearly focused on the Church's mission to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. This mandate is clearly stated in the synodal themes and process and the journeying together of the People of God. The Synod reflections at various stages have acknowledged the fact that it is the Holy Spirit who is the principle agent of evangelization and mission.

2 Inter-Religious Dialogue

Asia is the cradle of the world's major religions. Religious pluralism and the minority status of the Catholic Church in Asia makes it necessary for the Church to be seriously involved in dialogue with the leaders and adherents of the big and small religious communities. Inter-religious dialogue has constituted a significant aspect of the triple-dialogue the Asian Bishops choose as its priority.



This dialogue is not a mere academic exercise among the elites, but a dialogue of life that people of different faiths live in their day-to-day existence.

The Catholic Church's understanding of inter-religious dialogue has undergone significant change

since Vatican II. It may be observed that no other continent in the world has the rich experience of living in the midst of people of so diverse religions and faith traditions. Hence, Asia has much to contribute to the universal Church in understanding religious pluralism and inter-religious dialogue and offering new pathways.

3 Culture and Language

The vast continent of Asia is known for its cultural and linguistic diversity. Asia is also diverse in traditions, religions, and customs. The role of culture for nation building and social cohesion is broadly recognized in the region, particularly in the context of increased conflicts and growing inequalities.

Even though there are great disparities in cultural policies, there are growing regional aspirations to strengthen cooperation through the initiatives of organizations, as well as through cultural diplomacy, particularly cultural routes. With the growth of economic collaboration, migration and tourism, there are growing efforts to study and understand various Asian cultures.



Culture and language constitute important dimensions of the pastoral approach of the Church in Asia. The FABC considers dialogue with cultures as one of the three-fold dialogues including dialogue with religions and with the poor as a pastoral priority. While Christianity is considered a Western religion and 'foreign' in many Asian countries, the Church in Asia has addressed the cultural question and emphasized the need for inculturation of the Gospel. Inculturation needs to find expression in the Church in its theology, liturgy and formation of pastoral personnel, costumes and dress, art and architecture. The FABC in many of its documents have emphasized the importance of culture. Since the Vatican II, the Church has become more aware of the need for inculturation as important especially as many see the Church as western and foreign and not deeply rooted in Asian soil.

The variety of languages in Asia and the lack of a link language as well as absence of translations among the major Asian language have compounded the difficulty to hold pan Asian conferences, sharing of pastoral resources and ideas. Though



FABC uses English to conduct its official communication, Church leaders in many Asian countries do not speak or understand it well. Various Church documents, including the landmark document of the Asian Synod, *Ecclesia in Asia*, have stressed the importance of culture in evangelization of Asia. The Church in Asia is rich on reflections on the theme, much need to be done if these are to be translated into practice. One can state without hesitation that the success of Christianity in Asia is closely linked to its capacity to inculturate the Gospel and take culture more seriously in its expressions.

4 Poverty and Development

Asia has the world's largest number of people living below poverty line. In several countries of Asia, millions face abject poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Poverty is further accentuated by unemployment, displacement and forced migration and natural disasters induced by climate crisis. The Church in Asia is known for its numerous charitable activities and development projects to mitigate poverty and hardship of people. The local churches have different development programmes to address the issue. Organizations like Caritas which supports projects for economic development are focused on eradication of poverty, elimination of hunger and disease. Many countries and international aid agencies of the Church are involved in supporting the efforts of the local Churches.



Persons like Mother Teresa of Kolkata and her Missionaries of Charity as well as many other religious congregations work for the uplift of the poor and improvement of their condition. FABC has from its inception adopted dialogue with the poor and integral human development as its pastoral priority. Members of the FABC need to coordinate its efforts to mobilize resources and pooling of finances to address the issue more comprehensively. It could think of a common fund to provide support in emergencies facing member countries.

5 Women

One of the critical and urgent areas which emerged from the Synodal reflections in many episcopal conferences is the need for greater recognition and appreciation of the role of women. Women constitute the majority in the Church. Yet their contribution and vocation, rooted in the common baptismal dignity, are not adequately recognized.

It has been observed that women were most committed to the synodal process as it unfolded in local Churches. There was unanimous affirmation that women love the Church deeply, though often their contributions and charism are not adequately valued. Women are often excluded from key decision-making processes. In a Church where almost all decision-makers are men, there are few spaces where women can make their voices heard.

Women, both lay and religious, want to be part of the decision-making process and pastoral action, and not to be excluded. They should not be considered as cheap labour, but must be partners and collaborators and receive a just remuneration for their ministries and services. Women also want an end to sexist language, and have a Church which is on their side. The Synod reports asked for careful discernment on a number of issues such as active role of women in the governing structures of Church bodies, women assigned to preach in parishes, female diaconate, priestly ordination for women. Women are already living synodality and are breaking new ground in solidarity. They seek collaborators and can be teachers of synodality within the wider Church processes.



6 Youth

As we have seen youth constitute a major section of the population of Asia. The Church in Asia has given much attention to youth ministry in its pastoral plan and action. Every conference in FABC has structures and pastoral plan for youth ministry. The Asian Youth Day, and participation of youth in the World Youth Day, have been occasions for young people to deepen their commitment to Christ and their fidelity to the Church and its mission. These and other encounters among fellow youth from different countries have been enriching moments for them.

The Document for the Continental Stage expressed a universal concern regarding the meagre



presence of the voice of youth in the synodal process, as well as increasingly in the life of the Church. The document emphasized the need for a “renewed focus on young people, their formation and accompaniment” as urgent need. “The Synod on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” held in 2018 raised many issues including the youth calling for a more synodal church in view of the transmission of the faith today.

The “Digital Synod” initiative is a significant attempt to listen to young people and offers new insights and opportunities for the proclamation of the Gospel. Young people are more proficient in the media of the digital age, and their insight, creativity and services can be a great asset to the Church’s mission in Asia. It is important for local churches and the FABC to reflect together with the youth themselves as to how best the Church in Asia can envisage its youth ministry in the spirit of the Synod on Synodality.

7 Human Resource

Bishops, priests, religious men and women and the vast force of lay faithful are the invaluable resource of the Church. The Synod has brought to the fore the need for greater recognition of the lay faithful, who through their baptismal dignity share in the mission of the Church. The Church in Asia needs to do more to enhance the potential of its human resource through a more systematic and planned formation in view of the synodal spirit that is key to evolve a 'new way of being Church in Asia.'

The Church in Asia is a missionary Church. It is numerically a minority in most countries. But Asia is also rich in the number of vocations to priestly and

religious life, lay missionary movements. Asia sends many missionary personnel to serve in other parts of the world. The FABC can offer a more systematic formation and coordination for pooling of human resources to enable the



local Churches within the continent to have sharing and exchange of personnel for its pastoral and evangelizing mission, and to offer personnel to work outside the continent. Such coordinated efforts will encourage many lay faithful, including youth, to commit themselves to serve their sister Churches within and outside the continent.

8 Solidarity

The Church during the time of the Apostles testified to the generous spirit of giving and spirit of solidarity through sharing of money and other material resources for the support of the mission of the Church. In



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many Asian countries the Church is poor and are dependent on the generosity of other Churches in the West and some within Asia. It is important for the FABC and the local churches in Asia together to plan a common fund to enhance and support the work of the Churches most in need in Asia. The Church needs to evolve long term and systematic plans to mobilize financial resources from the local churches, governments, aid agencies, rich individuals and concerned citizens. This can be utilized for the benefit of building a Church and human community that are in solidarity with each other.

9 Servant Church

The hallmark of the Church as a Servant Church is one of its most visible and credible signs. The services of the Church reach not only to the Christian community but to all people in society. The pastoral charity and concern expressed by Pope Francis to reach out to the poor, the migrants, the disadvantaged have profoundly impacted the Church in our times. Pope Francis' analogy of the Church to a field hospital and reaching out to those at the margins and periphery and a 'bruised Church', his call for caring for the environment and people affected by ecological crisis, poverty and deprivation, poverty and migration are reflected in the Synod as the People of God listen to the Spirit inviting everyone to live the Gospel in one's daily lives.



The Synodal journey of the Church with all peoples is a journey in humility, hospitality and service; it is rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ who said, "I have come to serve and not to be served." Service, especially to the poor, is truly the public face of the Church and the most visible mark of Christ's disciples. This

image of the Church and the Christian community is much respected and appreciated by all peoples of Asia.

10 New Way of Being Church

The expression ‘new way of being Church in Asia’ was adopted by the FABC more than three decades ago. Today the expression is being frequently used by the universal Church to indicate how can we concretely live out in our times the ‘aggiornamento’ of the Vatican II. For the Church in Asia the new way of being Church entails continuously listening to the signs of the times in its evangelizing mission. It means being a Church in dialogue with people of other faiths, and united with all disciples of Christ in an ecumenical journey.



The new way of being Church in Asia, following the synod, means paying greater attention to listening to the voice of the faithful; it means the Church that is less hierarchical, less clerical, and being more participatory; it is a Church where the talents and charisms of women and men religious, and all lay faithful are duly acknowledged and appreciated. It also demands recognizing the baptismal dignity of everyone in the Church without distinction, and everyone’s responsibility to participate in the mission of the Church.

The synod also brought to the fore the concern of those who are not listened to, who are marginalized and excluded in the Church- those who are lapsed and left the Church, the divorcees, those who have left priesthood or religious life and are excluded from the life of the Church, those segregated on account of their sexual orientations or preferences like the LGBTQ, those who suffer from mental or physical disabilities. We cannot imagine a new way of being Church at the



exclusion of these and others who feel marginalized and segregated. Disciples of Christ cannot adopt a path different from that of their Lord and Master who declared that he came to save the sinners and the lost.

Asian societies are by and large patriarchal and hierarchical. This is also somehow reflected in the Church in Asia. Hence, it is important for the local Churches in Asia as well as the FABC to recognize the need for a more decentralized form of exercising leadership, building a more participatory Church structure and a seminary formation that is more attuned to the synodal values and the Asian ethos.

11 Metanoia, Synodal Conversion

The FABC needs to revisit all its deliberations of the past plenary assemblies and study documents to explore ways to build a more participatory Church in which no one is excluded.

It may be observed that there is no conflict or contradiction between what the Church in Asia has consistently upheld and what the Synod on Synodality is calling for. However, one must admit that there are and there will be pockets of resistance to the changes. As changes do upset the status quo, change is not always welcomed and accepted by all.

The leadership must be firm and faithful to the Synod and the process being unfolded and its impact on the whole Church. The leaders must, without fear or compromise, exercise patience and persistence in evolving and implanting the changes. In the final analysis, it is to be recognized that the changes should be led not by any human agenda or programme, but by the wisdom and guidance that come from the



Holy Spirit. The Synod constantly cautions against the temptation of considering the synodal process as a democratic exercise or opinion poll rather than being a genuine listening to the Spirit, which calls for a metanoia or conversion. When proclamation of the Gospel and diakonia become the central focus of the Church, one can expect less emphasis on clerical status, hierarchical structures, and the status quo. The Church at different levels must also evolve strategies and plans for time-bound implementation of what it intends to achieve as a result of the FABC documents and the proposals that emerge from the Synod.

12 Communication and Sharing the Fruits of the Synod

Communication constitutes one of the four sectors of the Synod on Synodality. The other three sectors are Theology, Methodology and Spirituality. Some have observed that the Vatican II and subsequent documents of the Church have remained as the best kept secrets of the Church due to the failure to communicate them effectively to the people of God. If the fruits of the Synod are to be enjoyed by all concerned, it is important to take communication seriously.

In spite of the persistent emphasis of the Church's magisterium on the importance of integrating social communication in the Church's ministry, many local Churches are slow in attending to this indispensable task. The failure to heed the clarion call to take communication seriously is seen particularly in the areas of formation of personnel and overall pastoral plan. More than sixty years after Vatican II, one can observe a lack of sufficient progress in this regard.

Communication has changed and moved on since Vatican II and the new digital revolution has transformed the way the world deals with information and communication. The technological changes that we currently witness is not merely a passing phase, but a 'revolution' that calls for deeper attention and purposeful action. The Synod on



Synodality, as has been repeatedly mentioned, is not just an ecclesial event, but a process that calls for significant transformation in the way the Church is present in the world, and witnesses to the Gospel. Communication is an indispensable part of effecting this transformation. It is an essential component of the ongoing process and is like the air we breathe.

The Church in Asia has to address specific issues in the area of communication. It has to deal with the arduous challenge of ensuring that the Church's communication is not one-way and top-heavy, but participatory and interactive. It means building from the bottom, brick by brick, involving all concerned as the Synod itself is attempting to do. With the presence of numerous languages and lack of an effective link language that connects the whole of the FABC, many local Churches and the Faithful will not be able to effectively reap the fruits of the Synod and other pastoral resources. The local Churches need to address this challenge and ensure that their communication is deeply rooted in their respective cultural and linguistic soil.

The era of print and television, and the mass communication media are fast giving way to new modes of communication that is largely democratized, decentralized, and personalized. The social media platforms that are witnessing rapid growth offer new opportunities for the Church in carrying out its mission in the world. The Synod is a participatory process involving all sections of the Church and the society at large and hence, it is important to ensure that her communication is decentralized, participatory, accurate, and timely and inclusive. Those who are in leadership must engage communication media effectively if all People of God are to be renewed and enriched by this transformative experience of journeying together as the People of God in communion, participation, and mission.



Art contributors

Petrus Baraik is a Divine Word priest and artist who works in Northeast India. He is studying art, and works with the indigenous people of the region. His paintings include biblical themes, murals and depiction of tribal Christian realities.

Roy M. Thottam, an India Jesuit artist, is engaged in art and peace activities. He writes on art related topics, conducts painting exhibitions in India and abroad. He is a founding member of Company of Artists for Radiance of Peace (CARP).

Francoise Bosteels, a Belgian nun who spent 49 years in India, creates 'sacred art' with doll images which have become receptive to numerous human stories. In silence and solitude, she finds her roots where the human, the cosmic and the Divine encounter.

Wang Chi, a Teresa nun in Biancun, Zhao County diocese, Xingtai in Biancun, Hebei Province, in China, uses her art to depict the Bible in the form of traditional Chinese painting, especially to pass on the faith to children.

Vincy Joseph Kallidukkil, an Indian artist nun, uses her art to evoke feeling of serenity, strength, awareness and freedom. Using colour as language, she depicts the precious gift of life, and eternity beyond our sight.

Etsuko Kitazume born in 1944, is a Japanese artist nun belonging to the Pauline family of Pious Disciples of the Divine Master. She designs church interiors and liturgical vestments.

Jui Gracia Rozario is a Notre Dame Dei Mission (RNDM) nun from Dhaka, Bangladesh, who is a student of art and graphics.

Mary Pinky is an SMRA nun belonging to a local congregation of Dhaka Archdiocese. She is a young indigenous woman artist from Dinajpur, Bangladesh.

Tivan Mohee Hilary is a 21-year-old artist from Chottogram, Bangladesh. He is a college student, and an active member of his parish.

Paul Yong-Duk Kim is a Korean artist who works in the Department of Fine Arts, College of Culture and Arts, Kangwon National University.

Ebey Edassery is a priest of the Ernakulam-Angamaly Syro-Malabar Archdiocese. He combines priestly ministry with art, teaching and doing art.





The Synod on Synodality is a moment of grace. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit for renewing the Church in our times. It is a renewed call to be witnesses and missionaries of the Good News of Jesus Christ. For us in Asia, the Synod offers a challenge and opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel. It is a call to dialogue with the poor, the religions, and cultures of Asia.

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo SDB, DD
President, FABC

The synodal process aims to provide an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern together how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church.



Every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communitarian conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does.

-Pope Francis



Fr George Plathottam sdb is Executive Secretary, Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC) and a Consultant to the Vatican Dicastery of Communication, Rome. He holds master's degrees in journalism and mass communication, sociology and theology, and doctorate in communication. He is a member of the Salesians of Don Bosco (SDB), Province of Guwahati, India.