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SOME SALIENT CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE FABC TO THE ASIAN CHURCHES DURING THE PAST 40 YEARS

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Introduction

As the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) chalks up the 40th year of its fruitful existence this year (2012), perhaps it is opportune to take stock of its service to the Asian Churches. With this in mind, in this article, I intend to reflect briefly on the unique service rendered by the FABC to the Asian Churches¹ by highlighting a few salient characteristics of the FABC's contribution to them, under the following sub-headings.

1. Injecting 'Asianness' into the Churches in Asia

Although there is historical evidence to demonstrate the existence of Christianity in Asia much before the advent of the European

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¹In this essay, the term "Asian Churches" covers only the Episcopal Conferences that are members of the FABC, that is, countries in South Asia, South-East Asia and East Asia. The reader needs to note that a vast area of Asia (and the Churches therein) such as China and those countries in the Middle-East are, hence, excluded.

colonizers on the continent,² the roots of most of the Asian Churches in their present form do not go beyond the Colonial period of the 15th-16th centuries. Most of the Asian countries received the message of the gospel through the European missionaries who were often hand in glove with the European colonizers. Consequently, almost till the late 1960's many Asian Churches were mere replicas of the European Churches to which their respective missionaries belonged.³ One of the lasting negative effects of this is that many Asian Churches were looked down by the rest of Asia as 'foreign' or 'alien' to Asian ethos.⁴ That is why the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC could say: "From the Asian perspective, mission history from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century presents Christianity as intruding on Asian harmony or as the "period of Christianity conquering all the other religions and cultures for Christ."⁵

This more than apparent 'alienness' (and the perceived anti-Asianness) of Asian Christianity may also be construed as one of the main reasons for the vast majority of Asian peoples not to be convinced by the message preached by the Churches in Asia though the founder of Christianity himself was born in Asia.⁶ Although Asia boasts for nearly two thirds of world population, the Asian followers of Christ today are still an almost negligible tiny island in the vast ocean

²Cfr., Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500*, Vol.I, New York (Maryknoll): Orbis Books, 1998. Besides, some of the ancient Asian Churches, such as the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches in India, claim their roots to Apostolic times. See also, Felix Machado, "The Development of Theology from Vatican II to Our Days: A South Asian Perspective," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 8 (August 1999) 559.

³While acknowledging the many good and lasting works the European missionaries did in founding most of the Asian Churches, that too, amidst very trying conditions, we also need to mention that there were some negative effects of their missionary efforts which of course were performed in good faith. Moreover, though most of the Asian hierarchies were already predominantly native by the time the FABC was formed, the basic Church life was still non-Asian.

⁴Pope John Paul II himself acknowledges this fact. See *Ecclesia in Asia* (1999), No. 9. (Hereafter, this document will be referred to, simply as EA). This suspicion of being 'alien' is cast mostly upon the Churches of the Roman Catholic communion because of its centralization in and dependence on Rome.

⁵Office of Theological Concerns, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," No. 1.5.1, as re-produced in Vimal Tirimanna, ed., *Sprouts of Theology from the Asian Soil: Collection of TAC and OTC Documents [1987-2007]*, Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2007, 118. Hereafter, this work will be referred to, simply as *Sprouts*.

⁶Unfortunately, Christianity which was born in Asia, returned to Asia with the European Colonizers, in Western garments that were alien to the Asians.

of the adherents of other great Asian religions, and this in spite of nearly five centuries of zealous missionary efforts to evangelize Asia.

These facts of appearing 'alien' and being a minority have been a thorn in the flesh for generations of Asian Christians, and even a sort of a 'complex' for some Church personnel all along. That is why the Asian Christians, especially the Catholics, welcomed with immense joy the teachings of the Second Vatican Council which encouraged inculturation in all spheres of Church life. Taking its main inspiration from the Council, the FABC from the time of its inauguration has endeavoured to foster inculturation in order to make Asian Churches truly rooted in the Asian soil, and thus, be genuinely Asian Churches. The Asian bishops gathered at the Special Synod for Asia in Rome in 1998 affirmed again and again (in their 191 interventions on the floor and in the small group discussions) that it is imperative that the Church in Asia be truly Asian; otherwise it will have no future, they insisted.⁷ Their interventions were re-echoes of FABC-inspired sentiments, and they were expressed succinctly in Proposition no: 3 of the Synod which said: "the Churches must be immersed in the diverse contrasting and even conflicting realities of Asia. Only such immersion will help the Church define her mission to the people of Asia in an intelligible and acceptable manner."⁸

Moreover, the FABC has consistently taught that the "little flock" of Christ in Asia has a crucial role to play just as the tiny nation of Israel in the Old Testament days did in being God's chosen people. The 4th Plenary Assembly of the FABC, for example, pointed out that the main mission of Asian Christians is to bear witness to the gospel and kingdom values. It further said:

Our minority status should not deter us from patiently working out in collaboration with Christians of other Churches and peoples of other religions and persuasions the steps needed to liberate our people from the bondage of sin and its societal manifestations, and to inscribe the values of the Kingdom in Asian society. For the Lord assures us:

⁷Peter C.Phan, "Reception of Vatican II in Asia: Historical and Theological Analysis," *Gregorianum* 83, 2 (2002) 284.

⁸As cited in Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 12 (December 1999) 889. This growing sense of "being Asian," according to Pope John Paul II "is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony." Cfr., EA, No. 6.

“Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased the Father to give you the Kingdom” (Lk 12:32).⁹

Later, at their 7th Plenary Assembly, the Asian bishops said:

We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life. We are also convinced that only by the “inner authority” of authentic lives founded on a deep spirituality we will become credible instruments of transformation. This is important, because our contacts with those of other religious traditions have to be at the level of depth, rather than just the level of ideas or action. We are aware that this Asianness, founded on solid values, is a special gift the world is awaiting. For the whole world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life. In this task, together with all Asians, the Church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole Church in Asia.¹⁰

Thus, the FABC has taken the apparent “inferiority complex” as a vibrating challenge to be immersed in Asian realities, and has changed the perceived “minority complex” into a spiritual strength, in their efforts to be truly Asian. In what follows too, the reader can easily notice the other FABC efforts to achieve the same goal.

2. Harmonious Living with Other Asian Realities

If, as pointed out above, the FABC was instrumental in enabling the Asian Churches to wean themselves out of their “complexes”, it also played a similar role in paving the way for the same Churches to get rid of an equally disastrous “superiority complex”, too. A vast majority of Asian Catholics, following the teachings of their zealous missionary pioneers were taught to look down upon anything and everything that was not within the institutional Roman Catholic Church, as something negative. According to this exclusively pro-European/pro-Roman institutional Church vision, only the Roman

⁹The Final Statement of the 5th Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 4.6, as re-produced in Gaudencio Rosales and C.G.Arevalo (Eds.), *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992, 282. Hereafter, all citations from this main source of FABC documents will be referred to, simply as *FAPA – I*.

¹⁰The Introduction to Part III of the Final Statement of the Seventh Plenary Assembly in Sampran (2000), as cited in Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, Vol. 3, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002, 8-9.

Catholic Church possessed the truth, and consequently, all others, including other great religions, philosophies, cultures, civilizations,... etc. of Asia, were in error.¹¹ Since the same ecclesiastical vision held that error has no rights, all those Asian realities were looked down upon not only as erroneous, but at times, even as the work of the devil which needed to be exorcised! In short, Asian Catholics were conditioned to be in an unrealistic 'superiority complex' that cut them off from their very Asian roots. Not seldom did such a vision provoke them to be in unnecessary polemics with their non-Christian Asian brothers and sisters with whom they had been living in harmony for centuries before the arrival of the Christian missionaries.

However, as Pope John Paul II himself wrote: "The most striking feature of the continent is the variety of its peoples who are heirs to ancient cultures, religions and traditions."¹² Throughout history, Asian peoples have been known for their spirit of religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence, and this is considered as a unique characteristic of Asia. This is mainly because the traditional Asian holistic approach to life necessarily demands the virtue of harmony, which has been practiced in almost all the cultures of Asia.¹³ Accordingly, opposites can exist side by side in daily life without necessarily being in conflict with each other. Neither is there any need to eliminate them, for in fact, they do complement each other in attaining fullness or completeness: "Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength."¹⁴ The East Asian concept of *yin and yang* illustrates this point well, according to which various dimensions of reality are not contradictory but complementary.¹⁵ Moreover, according to the South Asian *Upanishads* and also in the

¹¹So much so, that till the Second Vatican Council, the Church literally taught: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("Outside the Church, there is no salvation").

¹²EA, No. 6. In spite of its vastness and diversity, Asian theologians insist on a certain unity-in-diversity in lived Asian realities. See for example, Michael Amaladoss, "Is there an Asian Way of Doing Theology?," *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 45, 1 (2008) 11-13.

¹³What is meant here is that Asian religious cultures are primarily cultures of harmony, though there are contemporary situations of life in Asian countries that are characterized by several tragic factors of acute disharmony.

¹⁴FABC – BIRA IV/11, No. 15, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 321.

¹⁵BIRA IV/11, No. 20 as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 322. See also, the Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) document on "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today" as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 182-183.

thought of all the great Indian thinkers, the Supreme Being himself is the coincidence of opposites.¹⁶ As the Sanskrit term *samanvaya* implies, similarities and disparities of our human living need to exist together.¹⁷ A non-Asian commentator seems to have succinctly captured the depth of this peculiarly Asian concept of harmony when he writes:

Asians are not as quick to divide large metaphysical concepts in two as traditional Western Aristotelian thought has done for millennia. Asians prefer to unite, not divide. Good and evil are less two sides of a coin than places on a large prism... the emphasis here is on achieving wholeness, mystical unity, Oneness.¹⁸

Rooting herself in this deep Asian ethos, the FABC firmly believes that "there is an Asian approach to reality, a world-view, wherein the whole is the sum-total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other, in a word, *harmony*, a word which resonates with all Asian cultures."¹⁹ Thus, at its Bandung Plenary, the FABC could say:

Mission in Asia will also seek through *dialogue* to serve the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures and socio-political structures. In an Asia marked by diversity and torn by conflicts, the Church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony.²⁰

Thus, the Fifth Plenary Assembly could say: "Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision."²¹ Thanks to the FABC's inspiring vision of Asian realities, today, they are no longer seen as negative realities to be

¹⁶K.N. Mishra, "Harmony as Samanvaya: The Conjunction of Opposites," *FABC Papers*, 76 (June 1996) 21. According to Mishra, the same thought is found in Isa 5, Katha 1.2.21, sveta 3.19,... etc. See also Machado, "The Development of Theology from Vatican II to Our Days," 568.

¹⁷Mishra, "Harmony as Samanvaya...", 568.

¹⁸Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 2002, 41.

¹⁹The OTC document on "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony" as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 166. For further concrete descriptions of 'harmony' see *BIRA IV/1*, No. 13b and *BIRA IV/11*, No. 6, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 249 and 319, respectively.

²⁰The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 4.2, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 282.

²¹The Final Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Tokyo, Japan, 1986, No. 3.1.10, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 181.

combated, but they are taken as spheres in and through which God has been active from ancient days, so much so, they now serve not only as Church's partners of dialogue but also as "resources" of emerging Asian theology:²² "The Holy Spirit is at work both in the Church and beyond its visible boundaries, since the Spirit acts in freedom and his action cannot be reduced to persons, traditions, institutions or problems of relationship."²³

Consequently, today, the vast majority of Asian bishops have extricated their Churches to a great extent from the earlier unrealistic triumphalistic vision and have inserted themselves in harmony with their teeming millions of Asian brothers and sisters.²⁴

3. Highlighting two Specific Asian Ways of Evangelizing

True to the prevalent spiritualities and theologies in which they were formed, one of the zealous preoccupations of missionary pioneers in Asia was to convert the whole of Asia to Christianity. Even at the turn of this millennium, there were a few Asian ecclesiastics themselves who (reminiscing their missionary pioneers) were still talking of converting the whole of Asia to Christianity so that they could present it as a gift to Jesus on his 2000th birthday! While insisting on the non-negotiable imperative of the Christian mission to proclaim Jesus Christ to Asia, the FABC has been much more contextually realistic in achieving this goal in and through a two-fold pastoral means: "Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia."²⁵

²²Cfr., S. Arokiasamy, "Doing Theology with Asian Resources in the Context of FABC," in Vimal Tirimanna, *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2011, 1-20. Hereafter, this work will be referred to, simply as *Reaping*.

²³BIRA IV/1, 1984, No. 10, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 249. The reader needs to note that this is also a conviction of Pope John Paul II, repeated in many of his writings using the well-known Johannine verse "The Spirit moves where he wills" (3:8), Cfr., *Dominus et Vivificantem* (1986), No. 53; *Redemptoris Missio* (1991) No.28.

²⁴This is precisely what Pope John Paul II spoke in EA, No. 6 when he spoke of "the innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul; and it is the core around which a growing sense of being Asian is built. This 'being Asian' is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own Tradition and to the Asian Soul."

²⁵Final Statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly in Bandung (1990) of the FABC, No. 4.1, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 282.

3.1. Triple Dialogue

It is precisely within the rich but peculiarly Asian concept of harmony that the Asian bishops at their very first meeting could dare to propose a triple-dialogue with the three main Asian realities of life as the concrete manifestation of the Church's evangelizing mission in Asia, namely, dialogues with the vibrant religious traditions (*inter-religious dialogue*), ancient cultures (*inculturation*) and teeming millions of Asian poor (*option for the poor*).²⁶ At the very base of this FABC concept of triple-dialogue is the presumption that people of other religions and cultures in Asia are not to be treated as mere "objects of Christian mission" but as co-subjects ("partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness").²⁷ This is because the Spirit of God has been present and active in those Asian realities even before the arrival of Christianity on the ancient continent.²⁸ The Asian bishops believe that the Asian Christians are "fellow-pilgrims on the way" with the believers of other religious traditions.²⁹ Moreover, in their insistence on a dialogue with the poor, one needs to notice the firm Asian Episcopal conviction of the real presence of Christ in and through the Asian poor. According to the Asian bishops, Christ is not only to be proclaimed in dialogue with these living realities, but he is also to be recognized in and through them, as a concrete means of evangelizing in Asia. For this very reason, the FABC through her Office of Human Development (OHD) has organized for Asian bishops, priests, religious and laity, down through the past 40 years, many immersion experiences in various contexts of the teeming millions of Asian poor.

²⁶Cfr., The Statement and Recommendations of the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC, No. 12, 19 as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 14, 15. The call for a triple-dialogue is explicitly re-emphasized in both the Fifth and Sixth FABC Plenary Assemblies. Cfr., *FABC V*, No.3.1.2 in *FAPA-I*, 280; *FABC VI*, No. 3 in Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 2, 2. Hereafter this latter source will be referred to, simply as *FAPA-II*. For the FABC, these living realities of Asia also become "resources" of theologizing in Asia, along with the classical theological "sources". See *Sprouts*, 280-289.

²⁷Archbishop Angelo Fernandes, "Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 55 (1991) 548.

²⁸Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 32. Cfr., OTC document on "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 167-254. Also, see Vimal Tirimanna, "God's Active Presence Outside the Visible Institutional Church and a Few of Its Implications," in Patrick Gnanapragasam and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, ed., *Negotiating Borders: Theological Explorations in the Global Era – Essays in Honour of Prof. Felix Wilfred*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2008, 356-378.

²⁹See for example, *BIRA IV/6*, No. 6, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 304.

3.2. Witnessing through Deeds

St. Francis of Assisi is reported to have told his disciples: "Go and preach the gospel, use words only if necessary!" The same seems to be the conviction of the Asian bishops when they say:

Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode. We affirm, together with others, that "the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization" (Statement of the FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization, Suwon, South Korea, August 24-31, 1988). But the proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through Christ-like deeds. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds – this is the first call to the Churches in Asia.³⁰

As Cardinal Tagle points out, in Asia, emptying oneself as Christ emptied Himself (Phil 2:5-8), is the best form of not only being missionary but also being in solidarity with the teeming millions of Asian poor:

The kenosis of Christ means first and foremost emptying oneself of prerogatives. Although it is a minority in Asia, the Church still has so much of which to divest itself in terms of privileges and wealth, whether real or claimed. As Christ emptied himself taking the form of a humble hidden human existence, the Church in Asia must learn to choose it because it is the way of the Spirit-filled Jesus. It just cannot wait for circumstances and place to dictate it. It is edifying to see discipleship lived in the humblest of ways among the poor of Asia. When priests and religious are content to have as little food as the nearest neighbours even when they could use their influence to collect more, dialogue in self-emptying happens. When lay people renounce lucrative jobs to serve and live with the neglected poor, dialogue in self-emptying happens. When the leaders of the Church declare that the poor are the centre of gravity of the Church's life and live by it, dialogue of self-emptying happens. The nobility of self-emptying love simply radiates through these heroic Christians of Asia.³¹

³⁰The Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 4.1, as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 281-282.

³¹Antonio Luis Tagle, "The Mission of the Church in Asia: Living the Incarnation in Poverty and Plurality" in *Reaping*, 128-129. See also Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation*, New York (Maryknoll): Orbis Books, 1988, 35-50.

Nothing can be truer than this with regard to evangelization in Asia. Pope John Paul II himself had already echoed this point when he wrote:

People in Asia need to see the clergy not just as charity workers and institutional administrators but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit (cf. Rom 8:5). The reverence which Asian peoples have for those in authority needs to be matched by a clear moral uprightness on the part of those with ministerial responsibilities in the Church. By their life of prayer, zealous service and exemplary conduct, the clergy witness powerfully to the Gospel in the communities in which they shepherd in the name of Christ.³²

4. Experiencing a Sense of Episcopal Solidarity

In the immediate aftermath of the Vatican – II, when the Asian bishops first met in Manila in 1970, for the first time, they felt a unique sense of solidarity that led to the formation of the FABC within just a couple of years. Their enthusiasm was such that they had the very first Plenary Assembly of the FABC within the next two years in Taiwan in 1974. Having thus come together, they “were emboldened by one another, becoming collectively stronger than **any** one imagined alone.”³³ Fox describes the Asian Episcopal situation as follows:

To a greater or lesser degree, each of the bishops who came for the first FABC plenary, sometimes called FABC I, brought with him a complex bundle of historical, cultural, and social factors that had shaped his local church differently from others. Until Manila and Taiwan, each Asian bishop had lived in isolation, carrying these prejudices, vulnerabilities, and fears, cut off from others who might somehow understand. Yet each had been empowered by a faith that offered hope and a belief that they would prevail. For the first time, Manila and Taiwan were breaking down that sense of isolation. While individual circumstances might vary, each Asian bishop was finding others sharing the same feelings, the same insecurities, the same hopes and aspirations.³⁴

This sense of Asian Episcopal solidarity continues to be shared by the Asian bishops even today through the FABC network. Thanks to the FABC, many Asian bishops surely have come to know personally

³²EA, 43. What is said here explicitly on clergy is valid for all the baptized, too, with regard to witnessing.

³³Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 21.

³⁴Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 31.

many of their counter-parts in Asia whom they would have never known otherwise. Through this Asian Episcopal network they have had the opportunity to share and evaluate among themselves their own diocesan pastoral programmes. During my 15 years of close involvement with the FABC, I have personally seen how this sense of solidarity, brotherhood and friendship among our Asian bishops have in turn inspired individual Asian bishops in their pastoral policies and also their activities in their respective dioceses and Episcopal conferences. In short, today, there is a unique sense of solidarity among many Asian bishops, which amounts to a genuine communion of Asian episcopate in concrete terms. Quatra sums up this unique FABC contribution as follows:

It had offered many occasions and stimuli to overcome the not infrequent minority complex that characterized them. It had gradually been forging a broader community of vision, discernment and action. It had stimulated and given directives for a contextual pastoral policy and a missionary activity in solidarity. It had guided the Churches to an active and creative involvement in the history of Asian peoples, and it had helped them to grow as *local* Churches, as *Asian* Churches, and as *universal* Church.³⁵

Moreover, FABC also has enabled many Asian bishops to speak in one voice of how they perceive new Evangelization in their own Asian continent. Some authors cite the example of how they courageously voiced their faith convictions springing from their very lived contexts, at the Synod for Asia in Rome in 1998 in spite of repeated, alleged "Vatican curial efforts to distract them from such convictions."³⁶

5. Realizing that the Kingdom is wider than the Institutional Church

In the pre-Vatican-II era, it was very common to identify the institutional Church with the Kingdom preached by Jesus, as we read in many of the Church's prayers, popular devotions, sermons,... etc. of this period. In many of the Asian Churches, too, the same mentality was prevalent. However, FABC teachings, following the lead given by Vatican-II, kept on insisting that the Kingdom preached

³⁵Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 19.

³⁶See for example, Edmund Chia, "The 'Absence of Jesus' in the VIIIth FABC Plenary Assembly," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 63, 12 (December 1999) 892-899.

by Jesus is a much wider reality than the visible, institutional Church.³⁷ The Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC, for example, wrote:

The focus of the Church's mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and building up the Church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom is therefore wider than the Church. The Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, visibilizing it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it.³⁸

Pope John Paul-II himself says:

Empowered by the Spirit to accomplish Christ's salvation on earth, the Church is the seed of the Kingdom of God and she looks eagerly for its final coming. Her identity and mission are inseparable from the Kingdom of God which Jesus announced and inaugurated in all that he said and did, above all in his death and resurrection. The Spirit reminds the Church that she is not an end unto herself: in all that she is and all that she does, she exists to serve Christ and the salvation of the world.³⁹

Peter Phan elaborates this point in the Asian context when he says:

... instead of developing an "ecclesiocentric" or church-centered ecclesiology, Asian bishops and theologians have fostered what may be called a regnocentric or kingdom-centered way of being church. Their main concern is not so much to elaborate a theoretical ecclesiology as to implement ways of being church appropriate to the socio-political, cultural, and religious contexts of Asia. Their ecclesiology, when it comes to be formulated, is born out of an attempt to practice an authentic way of being church.⁴⁰

Phan goes on to say that such an ecclesiology is "a moving away from the church *ad intra* to the church *ad extra*, from self-preservation and self-expansion to mission and service to the world." He concludes that ecclesiology, in the Asian perspective, must be essentially pastoral theology.⁴¹

The Christian tradition has customarily given a leading role to the Church's hierarchy without negating the crucial role of the laity.

³⁷Cfr., Michael Amaladoss, "The FABC's Theology of Religions," in *Reaping*, 59.

³⁸The Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC, "Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection," No. 6.3, as re-produced in *Sprouts*, 13. See also Amaladoss, 59-61.

³⁹EA, No. 17.

⁴⁰Peter Phan, "A Prophetic Church in The Service of The Reign of God: Dimensions of An Asian Ecclesiology" in *Reaping*, 193.

⁴¹Peter Phan, "A Prophetic Church in The Service of The Reign of God, 195.

However, with the ever-increasing centralization of Church leadership in the recent centuries, today, in many circles, the Church has come to be identified almost exclusively with the hierarchy. The FABC has tried its best to be faithful to the pre-dominant Vatican-II vision of the Church as the entire People of God:

The lay apostolate of our Churches still remains basically parish-oriented, inward-looking and priest-directed. The need of our Asian context and the thrust of Vatican II to make the apostolate world-oriented or Kingdom-oriented must be increasingly emphasized. The apostolate must involve more lay initiatives and the power of decision-making; and it must respond to the real needs of the people. The ordained leadership need not fear or be over-concerned about juridical problems in starting newer forms of lay apostolate or ministries relating to the contextual realities of their Churches. Instead, they should encourage and promote more vigorous, world-oriented forms, initiated and directed by the laity themselves. Such initiatives will help the laity to mature, and consequently make the whole Church more effective and relevant in its mission to Asia.⁴²

Consequently, FABC has consistently insisted on the particular but crucially important role the laity ought to play in Asian Christianity, often taking into account the peculiar examples of Japan and Korea where evangelization was originally carried out not by missionary priests and religious, but by the laity, under very trying circumstances.⁴³ The Fifth Plenary Assembly said:

The renewal of Asian society which the Lord bids us to accomplish in dialogue and collaboration with peoples of other religious traditions and persons of goodwill requires the effort of the whole Church. While bishops and priests should be active in the Christian formation of lay people (Pope John Paul II, Message to FABC V, Bandung), the lay faithful should take upon themselves as their specific responsibility the renewal of Asian society according to the values of the Gospel. They are the primary evangelizers of culture and of cultures, and of the whole fabric of life in society. Hence, there must not be in Catholics what Vatican II has described as a "pernicious opposition between professional and social activity on one hand and

⁴²The Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Tokyo (1986), No. 4.6.2, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 193-194.

⁴³In this regard, it is also worth mentioning here that even in Sri Lanka, during the Dutch persecution of the Catholics in the 17th-18th centuries, it was the Goan-born Oratorian priest, Blessed Joseph Vaz who along with a well-organized lay-network ("Muhuppu-Annavi") that re-kindled and kept alive the flame of faith in the island.

religious life on the other" (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 43).⁴⁴

The Bandung Plenary in 1990 was a turning point in FABC's ecclesiology geared towards pastoral action exercised by the whole People of God, that is, the hierarchy, religious and lay people. Having enumerated the contextual challenges the Asian Christians were facing, the Final Statement of this Asian Episcopal gathering stated in no uncertain terms the need to be a "new way of being and becoming Church in Asia"⁴⁵ in order to respond to those challenges effectively. First of all, the Statement reaffirmed that the acting subject of mission is the local Church living and acting in communion with the universal Church.⁴⁶ Then, it stated:

It is the local Churches and communities which can discern and work out (in dialogue with each other and with other persons of goodwill) the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God's Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches.⁴⁷

At the presentation of Pope John Paul II's post-Synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia* in New Delhi in 1999, one of the Presidents of the Synod, Cardinal Darmaatmadja of Indonesia had this to say in his memorable response:

What must become the new aspect regarding "our new way of being Church in Asia" is, first, that we continue our search for a fuller way for the Church to be rooted in Asia and grow more in Asian appearance. It means: we are searching for ways to make the particular Churches, fully and deeply present in the one Church of Christ shepherded by the Pope as the unifying factor in our one faith in Jesus Christ, but at the same time deeper and deeper rooted in our cultures and in our deepest inner aspirations as peoples of Asia. In saying this, what we have chiefly in mind is the opinion that within the Churches of Asia itself there is also the need for differences among them.⁴⁸

⁴⁴The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 5.1, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 282-283.

⁴⁵The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 1.6, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 275.

⁴⁶The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 3.3.1, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 281.

⁴⁷The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Bandung (1990), No. 3.3.2, as reproduced in *FAPA-I*, 281.

⁴⁸Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," 888.

The Cardinal also said: "The new way of being Church in Asia, therefore, is expected to become in a concrete way a Church 'with' and 'for' the people in order to achieve their integral human development, culminating in the fullness of life given by Our Lord Jesus Christ."⁴⁹

The Asian bishops often repeat their conviction that the Asian Churches are called to be communities of dialogue with the living Asian realities: "This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church."⁵⁰ The Plenary that followed five years later in Manila, said: "The overall thrust of activities in recent years has been to motivate the Churches of Asia towards 'a new way of being Church,' a Church that is committed to becoming 'a community of communities' and a credible sign of salvation and liberation."⁵¹

Thus, in this peculiarly FABC concept of "new way of being and becoming the Church in Asia" one needs to notice the FABC's concern to empower all the baptized, especially the laity as evangelizers in their pilgrimage of life with other peoples in Asia. This, in fact, is an anti-dote to the earlier prevalent exclusively institutional, hierarchical concept of the Church.

6. Putting Theology into Contextual Pastoral Practice

FABC theology is not to be found in one given text nor is it developed in a systematic series of documents. The FABC teachings are scattered in many of its statements.⁵² The specific themes chosen for the FABC Plenary Assemblies, are a clear reflection of the mainly pastoral nature of the FABC's service to the Asian Churches.⁵³ As Chia points out, most of the FABC documents "are a potent force for change and transformation, not only of the Church but of the Asian society as well."⁵⁴ For many Asians, they have become not only the *locus theologicus* but also first-hand guides especially in the pastoral field.

⁴⁹Cardinal Julius Darmaatwadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia," 890.

⁵⁰BIRA IV/12, 1991, No. 48, as re-produced in FAPA-I, 332.

⁵¹The Sixth Plenary Assembly of the FABC, Manila (1995), No. 3, as re-produced in FAPA-II, 3.

⁵²The proceedings and statements from the FABC Plenary Assemblies and the programs and workshops of various FABC Offices are published by the FABC Central Secretariat in Hong Kong as *FABC Papers*.

⁵³Cfr., FAPA-I, FAPA-II, FAPA-III, and Franz-Josef Eilers, *For All the Peoples of Asia*, Vol. 4, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2007.

⁵⁴Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC," 16.

Moreover, the Office of Theological Concerns (known as the OTC which consists of bishop-members and theologian-members appointed by the different member Episcopal Conferences of the FABC) has issued their own group reflections on various relevant theological/pastoral topics for Asia.⁵⁵ These are efforts to contextualise theology in and through the lived Asian realities. This is precisely what the Asian bishops intended at their very first Plenary: "Special priority must be given to Asian theological reflection. For this, living contact with the concrete realities of Asia is necessary."⁵⁶

The predominantly pastoral methodology used in the FABC documents is also a unique characteristic to be noted. The documents normally begin with the lived pastoral reality, and then, using theology, magisterial teachings, Asian resources⁵⁷ and human sciences, an effort is made to discern in Christian faith the pastoral challenges which those realities pose to the Asian Churches. Finally, pastoral recommendations are enumerated based on scripture, tradition and the magisterial teachings. In other words, the pastoral challenges spring forth from the pastoral contexts and they lead back to the pastoral context in the form of pastoral recommendations. Hence, it is a sort of a 'spiral', a pastoral spiral, to be precise.

In the last analysis then, FABC's theology is not mere speculative theology, but down-to-earth, contextual pastoral theology.⁵⁸ It is precisely this pastoral character that gives it two of its principal characteristics: contextuality and relevance.⁵⁹ The starting point of the FABC's contextual methodology is not the universal precepts of *lex aeterna* and *lex naturalis*, or abstract metaphysical principles pertaining exclusively to God, Revelation and the Christian Gospel, or even conciliar, papal or doctrinal pronouncements, but rather the life experiences of the Asian peoples.⁶⁰ This is very much in keeping

⁵⁵Cfr., *Sprouts*. The latest OTC document which was published after the publication of this collection of documents, is entitled "Being Human in the Changing Contexts of Asia Today," Cfr., *FABC Papers*, 133 (2011).

⁵⁶See "Briefer Statement of the Assembly" No. 23 as re-produced in *FAPA-I*, 24.

⁵⁷Cfr., Soosai Arokiasamy, "Doing Theology with Asian Resources in the Context of FABC" in *Reaping*, 1-20.

⁵⁸Cfr., Jonathan Yun-ka Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life: The Contextual Theological Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)," *FABC Papers*, 108 (October 2003 – republished).

⁵⁹Quatra, *At the Side of the Multitudes*, 28.

⁶⁰Tan, "Theologizing at the Service of Life," 6.

line with the traditional Asian religious belief that concepts alone are not sufficient to grasp God fully.⁶¹ Whereas traditional Western religious belief is deductive, emerging from abstract truths, Eastern belief is more inductive, stemming often from ancient texts or human experiences.⁶² As one commentator says: "To explore these *FABC Papers* is to journey with the community of Churches in Asia and to witness the diverse concerns that FABC has addressed – all under the propitious guidance of the Holy Spirit."⁶³ FABC, in short, has paved the way to have Catholic theology and living with an Asian face in the local Churches.⁶⁴

The *lineamenta* or the working paper⁶⁵ for the forthcoming 10th Plenary Assembly of the FABC which is to be held in December this 40th anniversary year (2012), has as its theme "FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges in Asia." This theme is a case in point that illustrates the overwhelming pastoral nature and pastoral concerns of the FABC. Moreover, the working paper's main divisions substantiate this point: *Part one* is dedicated to remember with gratitude the numerous blessings of God showered on the Asian Churches through the FABC, and to give thanks for them. *Part two* makes an effort to discern the contemporary pastoral situation, and *the third Part* is a reflection in faith of these pastoral challenges, and *the fourth Part* provides pastoral responses to the contemporary Asian contexts.

Conclusion

As we have seen above, the FABC has been the centre around which the Asian Episcopate rallied round in the immediate aftermath of the Vatican II, and it was the same FABC which served (and continues to serve) as the living link between the conciliar teachings and the lived realities of Asia. That is to say, it has been the link between the universal Church and the local Asian realities. The unique

⁶¹Of course, similar views are found also in many classical Western theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas. See for example, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q.1,a.2, ad 2.

⁶²Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, 44.

⁶³John H. Kroeger, "FABC Papers Comprehensive Index: Papers 1-100 (1976-2001)," *FABC Papers*, 100 (Pentecost 2001) 2.

⁶⁴Cfr., S. Arokiasamny, "Synod For Asia: An Ecclesial Event of Communion and Shared Witness of Faith," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 62, 9 (September 1998) 670-673.

⁶⁵This Working Paper is in the process of being drafted at the time of writing this essay.

contribution of the FABC is that it was a serious, sincere and successful effort to realise some of the major teachings of the Vatican II in and through the Asian/local idiom, as taught by Pope Paul VI,⁶⁶ but always being in communion with the universal magisterial teachings. This is not easy, but the FABC has successfully managed to keep a very healthy balance in this regard. FABC teachings also can be called “Asian perspectives” of the universal Catholic faith.⁶⁷ They have enabled Churches *in* Asia also to be Churches *of* Asia.⁶⁸

It is no exaggeration to say that without the FABC, the Asian Churches would have been poorer, and it would have been hard to imagine the ‘progress’ they would have made in the years following the Council. On the one hand, the FABC has been ‘innovative’ in the sense that it enabled the Asian Churches to be what they are today in contrast to what they were in the pre-Vatican II era. On the other hand, there is nothing so drastically ‘innovative’ in the FABC in the sense that what it has done is simply to facilitate the Asian Churches to come closer to the dreams of the universal Church in the form of the Vatican II. The FABC, after all, is called by some authors “a continuation of Vatican II in Asia.”⁶⁹ Georg Evers opines that the FABC is “the most important fruit of Vatican II for the Churches in Asia.”⁷⁰ Peter Phan is of the opinion that the responses of the Asian Churches to the challenges of Vatican II “could not have been successfully carried out without the guidance and encouragement of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences whose establishment is certainly a landmark in the history of Christianity in Asia.”⁷¹

This year is also the 50th year of the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council. There have been many positive outcomes of the Council which are acknowledged not only by the Church membership, but also by the wider world outside the institutional Church. At the same time, there had also been a lot of question marks and doubts with regard to the interpretation and implementation of

⁶⁶Cfr., Pope Paul VI, *Octagesima Adveniens* (1971), No. 4.

⁶⁷Fox, *Pentecost in Asia*, xi.

⁶⁸Arokiasamy, “Synod For Asia,” 673.

⁶⁹See, for example, the end of the Introduction in James H. Kroeger, *Theology from the Heart of Asia: FABC Doctoral Dissertations – I* (1985-1998), Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2008.

⁷⁰Cfr., Georg Evers, “Challenges to the Churches in Asia Today,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 43, 2 (2006).

⁷¹Phan, “Reception of Vatican II in Asia: Historical and Theological Analysis,” 281.

what was so overwhelmingly approved at that ecumenical Council by the Church's hierarchy, that is, the 2,500 Bishops from all over the world. Anyone who probes meticulously into the documents of the FABC, and follows carefully the many pastoral activities performed by its nine Offices, will surely perceive a sincere and serious Asian ecclesial effort to make the Council teachings a reality. At a time when even some ecclesiastics try to read into the Vatican II teachings their own narrow interpretations which are acutely at variance with the way the very Fathers of the Council themselves interpreted them (in putting them into practice in their very dioceses) in the years immediately after the Council, the Asian Episcopate in and through the FABC, has a uniquely prophetic role to play in the coming years. May the FABC continue its prophetic, witnessing pastoral role not only on paper but also in the vast pastoral fields of Asia!