

A New Way of Being Church in Today's World? Insights from the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

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Chapter One of the *Lineamenta* on the "New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" calls for a re-evaluation of the Church-World relationship and invites us, among other things, to search for "new ways of being Church." How would a new way of being Church in multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual, and multireligious Australia look like? Rather than turn to Europe for past precedents, and because the contemporary Australian society has more in common with Asia than Europe, let us look to Asia and examine the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)¹ for fresh ideas.² The FABC has articulated a "new way of being church" in Asia³ that is (i) rooted in the immense diversity and plurality of Asia, (ii) undergirded by a commitment and service to life, and (iii) oriented towards a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions, and the poor as "active integral evangelization."

First, the FABC seeks to work within the diverse and pluralistic Asian world. While others may consider the diversity and plurality of postmodern Europe and North America as challenges that the Church has to confront and overcome, the FABC perceives pluralism as an innate and unique aspect of the Asian socio-religious landscape⁴ and has sought to discover how the Asian Church could be at home within such pluralism.⁵ For the FABC, pluralism is a source of richness and strength that enables different communities to live and work together beyond mere toleration.⁶

Second, the FABC's vision of a "new way of being church" is undergirded by a commitment and service to life that sees God's Spirit as active in the diverse and pluralistic Asian milieu.⁷ FABC VI uses the imagery of Jesus' foot-washing to root its call for commitment and service to life: "We join Jesus in serving life by washing the feet of our neighbours."⁸ FABC VII further develops this commitment and service to life in Asia when it calls for the Church 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."⁹ In turn, this entails a deep immersion and experiential participation in the lives of these peoples, not as outsiders who visit and leave, but as insiders who are bound in solidarity with them.¹⁰

Third, the new way of being Church in Asia entails a dialogue with the threefold reality of Asian religions, cultures and poverty.¹¹ For the FABC, dialogue is "an integral part of evangelisation,"¹² "intrinsic to the very life of the Church,"¹³ an "essential mode of all evangelisation,"¹⁴ and "a true expression of the Church's evangelising action."¹⁵ More particularly, "dialogue is ecclesial: it is the very being and life of the Church as mission."¹⁶ While FABC V affirms that "the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the centre and primary element of evangelization,"¹⁷ nonetheless, it explains that this proclamation is realised through "dialogue and deeds,"¹⁸ and specifically in its threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor.¹⁹ FABC VII reasserted its preference

for the “witness of life”²⁰ as the Asian way of proclaiming the Christian Gospel in Asia and coined the term “active integral evangelisation”²¹ to integrate commitment and service to life, life witness, and threefold dialogue.²²

In conclusion, the FABC realises that the Church would never dominate Asia in the manner Christendom dominated medieval Europe, and for the Church's survival it has to become truly rooted in the Asian milieu. Hence, the FABC has chosen to “immerse” the Asian Church in the diverse and pluralistic Asian milieu, sharing life in solidarity with the Asian peoples. The FABC recognises that diversity and pluralism lie at the heart of what it means to be Asian. As Asia is “marked by diversity and torn by conflicts,” therefore “the Church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony.”²³ Moreover, the Church “must live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress,” because “the human person created in Christ, redeemed by Christ and united by Christ to himself is the way for the Church, the Church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity.”²⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ The FABC is a transnational body comprising fifteen Asian Catholic Bishops' Conferences as full members, viz., Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as ten associate members, viz., Hong Kong, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and East Timor. The FABC convenes in Plenary Assembly, the highest body, with the participation of all presidents and delegates of member conferences once in every four years. To-date nine plenary assemblies have been held: FABC I: Evangelization in Modern Day Asia (Taipei, Taiwan, 1974), FABC II: Prayer – the Life of the Church in Asia (Calcutta, India, 1978), FABC III: The Church – A Community of Faith in Asia (Bangkok, Thailand, 1982), FABC IV: The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia (Tokyo, Japan, 1986), FABC V: Journeying Together Toward The Third Millennium (Bandung, Indonesia, 1990), FABC VI: Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life (Manila, Philippines, 1995), FABC VII: A Renewed Church in Asia on a Mission of Love and Service (Sampran, Thailand, 2000), FABC VIII: The Asian Family Towards a Culture of Integral Life (Daejeon, South Korea, 2004), and FABC IX: Living the Eucharist in Asia (Manila, 2009). The foundation for the FABC was laid at an historic meeting of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops in Manila during the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Philippines in November 1970. From its inception, the FABC has sought to make a significant contribution to the development and growth of the spiritual and theological life of the Asian local churches through its Plenary Assemblies, as well as congresses, consultations, colloquia, conferences, and symposia that are organized by its various offices. For an excellent overview of the FABC, its history and theological perspectives, see Edmund Chia, *Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology*, FABC Papers No. 106 (Hong Kong: FABC, 2003). For a more popular presentation of the FABC's early beginnings and significant accomplishments, see Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

² All of the important documents of the FABC have been collected and published in a convenient four-volume collection: *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales & C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. I*); *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. II*); *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 3: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997-2001*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 2002, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. III*); and *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 4: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2002-2006*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 2007, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. IV*). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the FABC are taken from this four-volume collection.

³ This forms the core thesis of Thomas Fox's thought-provoking book, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002). See also Peter C. Phan, "Christian Mission in Asia: A New Way of Being Church," in Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003) 13-31; Felix Wilfred, et al., "Document: What the Spirit Says to the Churches. A Vademecum on the Pastoral and Theological Orientations of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)," *Vidyajyoti* 62 (1998) 124-133; Jacob Kavunkal, "Local Church in the FABC Statements," *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997) 260-271; L. Stanislaus, "The Responses of the Church to Human Development: An Overview from FABC Documents," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 31 (1994) 95-118; Petrus Maria Handoko, *Lay Ministries in the Mission and Ministry of the Church in Asia: A Critical Study of the FABC 1970-1991* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1993); Jacques Dupuis, "FABC Focus on the Church's Evangelising Mission in Asia Today," *Vidyajyoti* 56 (1992) 449-468; FABC Theological Advisory Commission, *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context*, FABC Papers No. 60 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1991); and Felix Wilfred, "Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC: An Interpretation of its Theological Orientation," *Vidyajyoti* 54 (1990) 583-592.

⁴ As the final statement of the FABC's BISA II puts it:

"[P]luralism is a necessity once we work through the mediation of secular analysis and worldviews. This pluralism should not be a threat to our Christian unity, but on the contrary, a positive and creative sign that our unity is deeper than whatever the concrete technical analysis or viewpoints might show: a genuine value that emphasizes unity in diversity" (*BISA II*, art. 10, in *FAPA Vol. I*. 204).

⁵ The following statement from the FABC Theological Advisory Commission's *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue: An Essay in Pastoral Theological Reflection*, FABC Papers No. 48 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1987) summarizes the situation succinctly:

In the course of the last two thousand years the Church has encountered and dialogued with various peoples, cultures and religions, with varying levels of success. Today, however, especially in Asia, in the context of the Great Religions, which are in a process of revival and renewal, the Church is aware of a markedly different situation. We do not ask any longer about the relationship of the Church to other cultures and religions. We are rather searching for the place and role of the Church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 0.8).

See also the extended discussion in Lorenzo Fernando, "CBCI and FABC on Religious Pluralism," *Vidyajyoti* 64 (2000) 864-869.

⁶ BIRA IV/11 explains the importance of accepting diversity and plurality as follows:

peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as "life and let live". *The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness* (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 15, emphasis added, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 321).

At the same time, the FABC is unequivocal in its rejection of all forms of religious exclusivism and triumphalism, stating: "When various religious groups lay absolute claim to truth, aggressive militancy and divisive proselytism follow and, in their wake, bitter religious divisions" (*BIRA IV/4*, art. 4, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 300). In response to critics of religious pluralism who often raise the spectre of unbridled relativism or subjectivism, the FABC Office of Theological Concerns explains in a recent document entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today* that, among other things, recognition of the pluralism *per se* does not necessarily lead to an acceptance of subjectivism or relativism:

Pluralism need not always entail a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid. However, it is also true that the dawn of pluralistic, democratic, modern societies has paved the way to excessive individualism and subjectivism, and a consequent relativising of all reality. Thus, today there are persons and groups who hold all reality to be relative. For such persons or groups, pluralism means relativism, in the sense that they claim all points of view are equally valid. *Such philosophical or theological positions are to be rejected; and, in fact, all the major Asian religions condemn such relativising of reality, especially the relativising of basic human values.* However, just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to

perceive pluralism as relativism, or just because they tend to relativise all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism (*FAPA Vol. III*, 334).

⁷ As the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly explains:

Ours is a vision of *holistic life*... We envision a life *with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy. It is a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for the earth... At the heart of our vision of life is the *Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness (*FABC VI*, art. 10, *emphasis in the original text*, in *FAPA Vol. II*, 5).

For an in-depth discussion of this point, see FABC Office of Theological Concerns, *The Spirit and Work in Asia Today*, FABC Papers No. 71 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1998).

⁸ *FABC VI*, art. 14.3, in *FAPA Vol. II*, 9. More specifically, the Sixth Plenary Assembly unpacks its vision of commitment and service to life as follows:

Our solidarity requires a *resolve to work with our Asian sisters and brothers in liberating our societies from whatever oppresses and degrades human life and creation, most especially from sin*. We offer the radical freedom of life in Christ. ... Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life in the way of Jesus' solidarity with humanity. With out Asian sisters and brothers, we will strive to foster communion among Asian peoples who are threatened by glaring economic, social and political imbalances. With them we will explore ways of utilizing the gifts of our diverse religions, cultures and languages to achieve a richer and deeper Asian unity. We build bridges of solidarity and reconciliation with peoples of other faiths and will join hands with everyone in Asia in forming a true community of creation (*FABC VI*, art. 14.2, *emphasis added*, in *FAPA Vol. II*, 8).

⁹ *FAPA Vol. III*, 8. The Final Statement of FABC VII unpacks this as follows:

We are also convinced that only by the "inner authority" of authentic lives founded on a deep spirituality will we become credible instruments of transformation. ... 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 (*FAPA Vol. III*, 8-9).

In making this statement, it cites with approval, art. 6 of *Ecclesia in Asia*:

[We believe in] 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 (*ibid.*).

¹⁰ As the First FABC Plenary Assembly puts it, this "dialogue of life ... demands working, not for them merely (in a paternalistic sense), but *with* them, to learn from them (for we have much to learn from them!) their real needs and aspirations" (*FABC I*, art 20, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 15).

¹¹ "[A] church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions - in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. - Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God's Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery (*FABC I*, art. 12)." *FAPA Vol. I*, 14.

¹² *BIMA II*, art. 14, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 100.

¹³ *BIRA I*, art. 9, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 111.

¹⁴ *Message of the 1979 International Congress on Mission*, art. 19, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 131.

¹⁵ *BIMA II*, art. 14, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 101.

¹⁶ *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 3.3.

¹⁷ See the *Statement of the FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelisation*, Suwon, South Korea, August 24-31, 1988. The relevant paragraphs state: "While we are aware and sensitive of the fact that evangelisation is a complex reality and has many essential aspects, ... we affirm that there can never be true evangelisation without the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (*BIMA IV*, art. 5, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 292). "The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and the primary element of evangelisation without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity. In the same way, evangelisation will gather together the believing community, the Church, through faith and baptism" (*BIMA IV*, art. 6, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 292)

¹⁸ In unequivocal terms, FABC V states: "[T]he proclamation of Jesus 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 Christlike 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." *FABC V*, art 4.1, *italics in the original*, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 281-282.

¹⁹ As FABC V puts it emphatically:

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. *Mission will mean a dialogue with Asian's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions* (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.2, *emphasis added*, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 280).

²⁰ According to FABC VII:

The most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*. The embodiment of our faith in sharing and compassion (sacrament) supports the credibility of our obedience to the Word (proclamation). This witnessing has to become the way of the Gospel for persons, institutions and the whole Church community. *Asian people will recognize the Gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God* (*FABC VII*, *emphasis added*, in *FAPA Vol. III*, 12-13).

²¹ *FAPA Vol. III*, 3.

²² FABC VII explains the rationale of "active integral evangelization" as follows:

For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelisation, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. *These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act "integrally."* *As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters, and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do* (*FABC VII*, *emphasis added*, in *FAPA Vol. III*, 8).

²³ *FABC V*, art. 4.2, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 282.

²⁴ *FABC V*, art. 6.2, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 283.