

INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY, FOCUSED ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ASIA: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

■ MINA RAMIREZ

Introduction

The greatest gift of the Catholic Church to the world is its pronouncements on the dignity of the human person, endowed with mind and freewill to be responsible stewards of the whole creation. On the basis of this truth of Faith, the Church through her social encyclicals and other Church documents has provided the peoples of the world with the guiding moral and social framework by which we could bring about a social order of justice and peace.

Considered an expert in humanities, the Church delivers her message which, according to Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin, D.D., is “globally embracing” and is bounded by “two complementary polarities which inspire all Judeo-Christian social reflection. Right from the first pages of the Bible, in the creation narratives of Genesis, we find these two polarities: the particular and the global. God, manifesting his love, looked on each single element of his creation as being good. God created the human person – male and female – in His own image and likeness. Each human person has, therefore, a unique individual worth and dignity and is endowed with inherent rights, relationships which he established among all the elements of creation. Humankind is not just a group of isolated individuals, but also a family. The human family is the custodian and the steward of the God-given harmony and equity of relations within creation, the goods of which are destined to be at the service of humankind”.¹

The social question triggered by the new mode of production in the industrializing era (18th century) in Europe coupled by the impassioned colonization of tribes and nations in the world has wittingly or unwittingly resulted in the violation of respect for the dignity of the human person and

¹ “The Social Dimension of Globalization and Christian Social Teachings”, by Bishop Diarmuid Martin, D.D., former Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. He delivered the Francis Senden Memorial Lecture to a Philippine Audience from different sectoral groups in October 1999. The lecture was published in *Occasional Monograph* no. 10 of the Asian Social Institute (ASI) in 2000.

integrity of creation. This condition has produced the multifaceted divides in society – a challenge for an enlightened minority whose efforts represent humanity’s struggle to re-create a just peace.

The dignity of the human person, from which we derive the human rights with their corresponding duties and responsibilities is expounded in the first part of *Pacem in Terris* (PT, 1963),² a summary of the Christian Social Doctrine of the Church since Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and according to changing social contexts had its unique elaboration and development in the encyclicals of succeeding Popes – Paul VI,³ John Paul II, the latest being our present Pope Benedict XVI’s *Caritas in Veritate* (CV, 2009). The march towards a humanizing and civilizing social order continues in a globalizing world. These social doctrines have had their impact in the world-at-large through social legislation particularly in Western Europe and North America. In the struggle of South and Central America to resolve the social question as a result of the desire to “develop” following the model of Western countries, the people have nevertheless been made conscious that authentic development is people-centred. Development of nations should be free from impositions but be promoted by mutual exchanges on the basis of partnerships among equals in a common quest for the greater good of all.

² Part One of PT deals with the ff. rights: the right to life and a worthy standard of living, rights pertaining to moral and cultural values, the right to worship God according to one’s conscience, the right to choose freely one’s state of life, economic rights (which includes the right to work, to a working wage capable of giving the family a decent standard of living, right of meeting and association), the right to emigrate and immigrate, the right to take part in public affairs and contribute one’s part to the common good of the citizens. It also deals with corresponding duties: the duty to preserve life, of living life becomingly, of seeking the truth; the duty to contribute generously to the establishment of a civic order where all citizens and social entities collaborate together for people’s well-being, the duty to act freely and responsibly; social life (and thus political society) should be established in Truth, Justice, Charity and Freedom, spiritual values which when practiced leads “to a better knowledge of God, who is both personal and transcendent, and thus they make the ties that bind them to God the solid foundations and supreme criteria of their lives both of that life which they live interiorly in the depths of their own souls and of that in which they are united to other men in society” (PT, printed by Daughters of St. Paul, pp. 5-13).

³ Pope Paul VI’s encyclical referred to here is *Populorum Progressio* (1967), which Pope Benedict XVI considers as ‘the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age, shedding light upon humanity’s journey toward unity’ (CV, no. 8). Other Church Documents written by Pope Paul VI on Integral Human Development and Integral Evangelization are the following: *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Humanae Vitae* (1968) and *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) [CV, no. 15].

Liberation Theology⁴ emerged from the people's struggle particularly in Latin America to free themselves from poverty and oppression of dominating powers both locally and internationally. Guided by people's reflection on Gospel values, Christian leaders have renewed Faith life. An ongoing process was a search for a way of life rooted in the person's relationship with our Triune God in and through Jesus Christ. Fruits of this view of the world in relation to God have been: the Basic Christian Communities (BCC)⁵ as a way of being Church, and the liberating kind of education espoused by social thinkers, such as Paulo Friere (1926–1997)⁶ with his cele-

⁴ Cf. Dennis Caroll, *What is Liberation Theology?* The Mercier Press, Ltd. (no year). According to Dennis Caroll, "the theology of liberation frequently represents the themes of the great Church Fathers on faith, salvation, justice, charity and so on. Nor do the theologians of liberation question the model of theology as rational knowledge underpinned by critical philosophical analysis. However they vigorously reject abstract philosophizing as normal theological procedure. Instead they carefully attend to the human sciences – history, sociology and psychology as aids to doing theology. ... The theology of liberation forsakes the discourse of the curiae, of the chancellors and of most universities. Nor does it address the 'modern man' of Europe and North America. Rather its interlocutor, its partner in dialogue, is a non-person. The marginalized woman or man consigned to the 'underside of history'. These are the silent ones of history. In the Latin American perspective, the silent ones are the Indians, the blacks, the mestizos, the dwellers of shantytowns, the landless peasants, the day laborers. Whereas the concern of conservative classical theology of liberation is the search for meaning discovered in freedom, the overarching concern of the theology of liberation is the cry of the poor. The cry is for participation in fashioning the new person, free from dependence, free to build the kingdom of justice, love and peace glimpsed in the 're-appropriation of the Bible'. In the face of this cry, the only relevant theological question is how to tell the non-person ... that God is love and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters" (pp. 26–27).

⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez as cited in Dennis Caroll's book, *What is Liberation Theology?* says that "the experience of many base level Christian communities is making us realize that they are the active agents of evangelization of a whole people in the very midst of the struggle for liberation". Sergio Torees adds that the BCCs are "not a church parallel to the institutional church, but rather one that responds to the most basic Christian demands" ... "these communities DO the theology of liberation. So, too, those bishops, priests, and religious who, without being professional theologian, make their own, the life, the interests and the aspirations of the poor" (p. 14).

⁶ cf. Moacir Gadotti. Translated by John Milton. *A Land of Contrasts and a Pedagogy of Contradictions*. State University of New York Press, Albany. 1994¹. Paulo Friere, a Brazilian educator, recognized worldwide ... (who) "has provided the conditions for countless individuals regardless of race, gender, caste and class to break free from the historically contingent and entrenched vocabularies to face up to their fallibility and strength as agents of possibility ... continues (through his writings and educational advocacies) to identify and challenge not only those pedagogical mechanisms central to the phenom-

brated publication of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and *Deschooling Society* by Ivan Illich (1926–2002)⁷ recognized worldwide as a social critique of the dominant educational system operative in widening the gap between the rich and the poor. That this critique has resulted in debates about the true nature of education for lessening gaps has been a healthy sign. For my part, I still believe that it is the Churches and the Universities, Schools and Colleges which could be the catalysts of justice, peace and integrity of creation by being the social facilitators of conversion (*metanoia*, a theological concept), social transformation (institutional positive change, a sociological concept), self-actualization (a psychological concept) and individuation processes (a concept in the field of psycho-analysis) depending on the worldview of educators.

Indeed, the responses of the Church, concerned about the total salvation of the person in a modernizing world can be traced back to the issuance of her social teachings since 1891. A renewed consciousness of the social dimension of the Faith was precipitated by the Second Vatican Council (1963–65) which then had its reverberations in all Catholic Churches in the various continents. A holistic view of the world catalyzed the aspirations of people for a more integrated view of the human and the divine, the material and the spiritual, the body, mind and spirit unity, Catholics and other Christian groups, non-Christians and other major faith groups. The Church hierarchy grew closer to the people. What was stressed is that it is the people who make up the Church. This was manifested by the changes in Liturgy. The vernacular of different groups became the language in the Eucharistic celebration. In the Holy Mass, the priest celebrant faces the people and the people could receive Communion with their hands. The community aspect of the Eucharistic celebration is emphasized. The Church has become more aware of the world with the mission to transform it for people to have a taste of God's Kingdom on earth. The Gospel of St. John 10:10 is often

enon of oppression but also those relations within wider social, cultural and institutional contexts that confront individuals with the logic of domination...”.

⁷ Ivan Illich is known for his radical critique of institutionalization that dehumanizes, of commodification of knowledge, of experts and expertise. On this topic, he opines that “experts and an expert culture always call for more experts. Experts also have a tendency to cartelize themselves by creating ‘institutional barricades’ – for example proclaiming themselves gatekeepers, as well as self-selecting themselves. Finally, experts control knowledge production as they decide what valid and legitimate knowledge is, and how its acquisition is sanctioned” (cf. Smith, Mark, “Ivan Illich: Deschooling, conviviality and the possibilities for informal education and lifelong learning”, INFED, sourced from the Internet).

quoted “that all may have life and have it more fully”. It is given an articulation by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (1967) where he advocates for the materially poor “to have more so that they could be more”. Church leaders became protagonists in charting their own destiny towards total wellbeing in changing contexts. This movement, of course, is not without a struggle amidst the dominating influence of big powers in politics and big business. These organizations, movements and groups mediating between government and/or big business and the people-at-large are what President Mary Ann Glendon refers to as Civil Society. The Catholic Church through her social teachings has been, if not the author, the advocate of a Civil Society rooted in spiritual values to guarantee the continual humanization of the world that recognizes God as the beginning and end of all creation. In and through Jesus Christ Who has given His Life as an act of complete surrender to the Will of His Father, believers have, in and through this Truth of Faith struggled to witness to God’s Love in the world. The social fabric of society cannot remain strong with a stable evolving dynamism without the absolute moral authority that emanates from our personal relationship with God. As His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI puts it for our own reflection on Love as the motive life force of our projects and programs...

Even in this most difficult and complex times, besides recognizing what is happening, we must above all else turn to God’s love. Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God’s providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace. All this is essential if ‘hearts of stone’ are to be transformed into ‘hearts of flesh’ (*Ezek* 36:36), rendering life on earth ‘divine’ and thus more worthy of humanity. All that leads to salvation: ‘the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s (1 *Cor* 3:22-23)[CV, no. 79]

The Catholic Church of Asia

Pacem in Terris (PT) referring presumably to a significant countries of Western Europe and some regions in North America, points to the lack of integration of Faith and Action. Pope John XXIII says that ... *in traditionally Christian nations, secular institutions although demonstrating a high degree of scientific and technical perfection and efficiency in achieving their respective ends, not infrequently are but slightly affected by Christian motivation or inspiration.* The lack of integral Education in Catholic schools, colleges and universities is contained in the following statement of his Holiness of blessed memory, the Pope of Change,

*Indeed, it happens in many quarters and too often that there is no proportion between scientific training and religious instruction. The former continues and is extended until it reaches higher degrees, while the latter remains at elementary level.*⁸

It is indispensable therefore, that in the training of youth [which comprises the great majority in Asia], education should be complete and without interruption, namely that in the minds of the young, religious values should be cultivated and the moral conscience refined in a manner to keep pace with the continuous and ever more abundant assimilation of scientific and technical knowledge. And it is indispensable, too, that they be instructed regarding the proper way to carry out their actual tasks.⁹

A question that we could ask ourselves is: What has been the social impact of the Catholic Church in Asia, considering that it is a continent that constitutes three-fifths of the world's population and yet has only barely three percent (2.7%) of baptized Catholics?¹⁰ The world population as of 2011 is 7 billion and 3.9 billion of these are in Asia.¹¹ Christians in Asia comprise an estimated 10%.¹² The 90% of the rest in Asia belong to various religious persuasions; a small minority identify themselves as non-believers specifically coming from the Republic of China. The world's major religions and belief systems include: Baha'I, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Orthodox Eastern Church, Protestants (Amish Mennonites, Baptists, Church of Christ, Church of England, Episcopal Church, Lutheran Church, Methodist, Pentecostal Churches, Presbyterian Church, Seventh Day Adventist Church, United Church of Christ, The Church of Jesus of Latter-day Saints popularly known as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Religious Society of Friends-the Quakers, Unitarian Universalist Association), Roman Catholicism, Rosicruciansim, Shintoism, and Taoism (list as of 1993).¹³

⁸ Pope John XIII, *Pacem in Terris* (PT), Program for World Peace. Saint Paul Publications. Printed by the Daughters of St. Paul, Pasay, Metro-Manila, p. 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38. This passage echoes a similar idea in *Mater et Magistra* (M.M.) of John XXIII.

¹⁰Thavis, John, "Vatican Stats: Catholic Church growing, especially in Asia, Africa", February 12, 2007, Catholic News Service (www.catholicnews.com).

¹¹The world population figure is from www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/pressreleases; the Asia population is sourced from www.trueknowledge.com/q/population_of_asia_2011

¹² [wiki.answers.com/Q/What is the percentage of Christians in Asia](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_percentage_of_Christians_in_Asia)

¹³ www.cftech.com/brainbank/otherreference/religions/majorreligions.html

While Catholics in particular and Christians in general are a minority in Asia, it is to be noted that Asia is rich in its spiritual traditions, it being the home of major religions dating back to 2000 to 600 BC – Judaism (with 18 million followers founded in 2000 BC by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), Hinduism (with 648 million followers as of 1996, 1500 BC), Buddhism, (307 million followers, between 5th and 6th century BC) and ancient philosophies – Confucianism (5.6 million followers, 500 to 600 BC), and Taoism (number of followers uncertain, 604 BC).¹⁴ These ancient religions constitute the dynamic element of their diverse cultures.¹⁵ The religions that have emerged and/or have been disseminated shortly after Christ (AD) have been the following: Roman Catholicism, the largest Christian church in the world. It claims direct historical descent, perceived by many as founded by the apostle of Christ, Peter. Islam (840 million followers, AD 610), Orthodox Eastern Church (with 158 million followers, a break-away from Roman Catholic Church in 500 AD, the break having been finalized in 1054 AD), and Protestant Denominations (1500–1957) However, the term “Protestant” originally referred to the break-away group from Roman Catholicism led by Martin Luther from 1521, Shintoism (with 3.5 million followers specifically in Japan, considered an ancient native religion founded in the fifth century AD).

My interest on this topic, “International Civil Society, Focused on the Catholic Church in Asia” stems from my past personal involvement with the International Young Christian Workers founded by the author of the See-Judge/Discern-Act method, Monsignor Joseph Cardijn who later became a Cardinal. The appeal of this Monsignor who spoke convincingly of the dignity of work and the worker in one of the forums in a college run by Belgian missionaries, made me join the young worker’s movement based in my parish. To make a long story short, it was the YCW that brought into my life the realization of the gap between the Truth of Faith and the experience of reality. The experience of the social contradiction and the implications for action and advocacy not only on the national level but also on the Asian and international level, has brought me to what I am today. Little did I know that the resource person, the late Rev. Fr. Dr. Francis Senden, CICM, who as YCW president I used to invite to enlighten us on the socio-philosophical under-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ “Religion is alive and vital in Asia, probably more than on any other continent; no one will ever understand Asia if its religions are brushed aside”, a statement of Francis X. Clark, S.J. in the preface of his book titled, *An Introduction to the Catholic Church of Asia*, Q.C., Philippines: Cardinal Bea Studies IX. 1987, p. ix.

pinnings of Christian Social Teachings, would be the Founder of the Asian Social Institute (ASI), a Graduate School of the Social Sciences of which I became one of its first batch of students. When this missionary priest passed away in 1973, I was tasked by the then Provincial of the CICM (who later became the General of the Congregation) to take over as Director and then President of ASI, an assignment beyond all my and my colleagues' expectations. Amidst severe objective limitations financially and organizationally, ASI, as it were, had to sail through rough waters. The first lay collaborators of the Founder had only the socio-pastoral ideals of the Founder lighting the path of ASI towards the fulfillment of a social mission – education to justice and peace through a social science based academic program.

The purpose of ASI as an Asian Graduate School of Social Transformative Praxis towards Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) is to give opportunities for students of modest means but with leadership potential in Asia to take up graduate studies. ASI's dream is that the graduates of ASI through their social science based training will have a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural situation of society from the micro-mezzo and macro-levels, reflect on the situation and attempt to transform it in the light of Christian Social Teachings. Masteral students in Economics, Sociology, Social Work, Social Services and Development and Education and in the doctoral program of Applied Cosmic Anthropology hopefully will continue to take an active part as leaders of institutions with the marginalized persons, families and communities as the frame of reference in a movement of transformative ideas based on experiences; of research and inquiry; of action and advocacy towards JPIC. This concern has been voiced out by His Holiness, Pope John XIII in his *Pacem in Terris* – and I quote:

Every effort should be made to ensure that persons be enabled, on the basis of merit, to go on to higher studies, so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts and take on responsibilities in human society in accordance with their natural gifts and the skills they have acquired.¹⁶

The Philosophy of Relatedness and Interconnectivity – the philosophy of part and whole is an important element of the awareness building for our graduate students to contribute as members of their respective families, communities, bio-regions, institutions, countries and the world to a people centered integral development and/or integral evangelization where the interest is not merely for people to progress economically but in the various

¹⁶ PT, p. 6, which also refers readers to the Radio Message of Pope Pius XII, Christmas Eve, 1942.

dimensions of their life exemplifying body-mind and spirit unity or as Christians in creating the conditions for total well-being rooted in transcendental values of human and divine dignity, integrity of creation, common good, social justice, respect for differentiation, subsidiarity, solidarity and communion.

Our graduates from diverse cultures, religions and social ethnic origins are in organized networks of Civil Society but for this movement to be sustained, a socially engaged spirituality, we believe, is to be imbibed by all of us. How to instill values in a socialist country, for instance, where ASI in partnership with an international NGO – Community and Family Services International (CFSI) – is currently giving basic social work education to 400 managers (CEOs) of Vietnam’s Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) and its branches in the different districts of the country. The Vietnamese Government while still highly centralized politically is economically-speaking connected with the international market. It has made a policy decision to train 20,000 professional social workers in the next ten decades. According to the government, inevitable social consequences of the market economy in the global capitalistic system are the following “social evils”: homelessness, HIV-AIDS, drug addiction, child and woman trafficking. The state university in Vietnam – University of Labor and Social Affairs (ULSA), the academic arm of MOLISA, requested from ASI scholarship grants for three of their faculty members to get a Master’s Degree in Social Work (MSSW) with the view to develop the master’s program in Social Work. Three students who are members of the party of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam are with the majority of Christian students who are formed in the Philosophy of Commitment to Total Human Development (PCTHD).

ASI has been chosen by the International NGO to partner with it in this project of SWEP (Social Work Education Program) because more than fifty percent of professional social workers in Vietnam are ASI graduates, not to speak of the ASI graduates of other courses: bachelor’s, master’s and/or doctoral program(s) in Applied Cosmic Anthropology as well as the Diploma Course in Community Development (IDCCD). That this is possible is due to church-related development agencies and/or integral evangelization centers abroad that have been in support of ASI since 1974 in its educational social mission. Because ASI has graduates in practically all countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia, another Catholic Foundation is inviting ASI in its mission – the educational and internal capacity building processes to facilitate the self-empowerment of marginalized persons, families and communities. Philippine Australian Community Assistance Program (PACAP) requests for ASI’s partnership in their aim of giving

opportunities for leaders in conflict areas of Mindanao (Southern Philippines) to take up graduate studies. According to the agency the matrix of courses being offered by ASI is currently relevant to PACAP's social interests and concerns. ASI's study master's programs have philosophy of commitment to total human development (on the graduate level) deepened by creation spirituality on the post graduate level as foundational courses to students in economics, sociology, education, social work and applied cosmic anthropology. Exposure-immersion programs of both students and faculty in the long-range social development program, the theme of which is "Co-Creating Sustainable Bio-Regional Communities (CSBCom)" are integral to ASI's pedagogy that along with research is described as participatory, contextual, processual and experiential.

Christianity took root in some parts of Asia via a circuitous path. Examining the history of the Judeo-Christian apostolic mission, we all know that from the Hebrew world St. Paul preached the Gospel among non-Jews. Jewish scholars like St. Paul "whose *native city was Tarsus in Cilicia* (southeastern modern Turkey, a center of Hellenist culture) and according to Luke, "*he and his family enjoyed Roman citizenship and traveled westward to preach the Good News in Asia minor, Macedonia, Greece, Illyricum and Italy*". In his preaching, "*he showed some familiarity and facility in the use of Hellenist philosophical terminology*".¹⁷

That Faith was being explained in Greek-Roman categories quite different from thought patterns of the various cultures in Asia may be one of the reasons why Catholicism appeared "foreign" among the different religions in Asia. It led to persecutions of Catholics and martyrs from among a big number of lay women and men especially in East Asia – Korea, Japan, China and Vietnam within the span of 1550-1900.¹⁸

The apostles moved westward rather than South and East Asia except for St. Thomas the Apostle, who preached the Good News in Kerala, India. A significant number of Christians in Kerala are descendants of the Christians of St. Thomas since 52 AD. However these ancient local communities

¹⁷ Taylor, Michael, J., S.J. *Paul. His Letters, Message and Heritage, a Reflective Commentary*. Makati City: St. Pauls Philippines. 2007, pp. x-xi.

¹⁸ Clark, Francis X., S.J. *An Introduction to the Catholic Church of Asia*. Cardinal Bea Institute, Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila University, 1987, pp. 11-13. It is significant according to Francis Clark, S.J. that "there are over 400 ... saints and blessed, from six countries (China, India, Japan, Korea, Philippines and Vietnam) and two facts especially concerning them are striking. The first is that by far the majority of them are lay people, ordinary men and women. The second fact is that they are so little known throughout Asia itself. Many Asian Catholics have hardly heard of them..." , p. 23.

split into so many branches – the first Christians took different faith paths. They first were co-opted by the Syrian Orthodox Church, then they split into several sects – such as the Mar Thoma Church, considered to be a Protestant denomination, and others. Kerala is known as the most Catholic part of India.¹⁹ Asia predominantly has been home to Hinduism, Buddhism and other belief systems – Taoism and Confucianism. Of the Abrahamic communities (Jewish, Christianity and Islam), Islam took root in Asia earlier than Roman Catholicism (610 AD).

St. Francis Xavier, S.J. in the 16th century was the missionary that was responsible for baptized Catholics in India, (particularly in Goa), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Melaka, Malaysia; Japan and China.²⁰ The Philippines has been known to be the only Christian country of Asia with 82% Roman Catholics. Now as an independent country, Timor Leste, also may be considered like the Philippines as predominantly inhabited by Roman Catholics.

Catholicism in the Philippines was introduced through the Spanish conquistadors/colonizers and spread rapidly in the various lowlands, where the dominant belief was animism. The only parts of the Philippines that remained entrenched in their original belief systems are the Muslims in Mindanao, Southern Philippines and in the Cordilleras (northern Philippines), although in the latter region, through Belgian missionaries, many “natives” were converted to Catholicism through the Catholic schools and parish mission stations established in the different provinces.

Catholic Education in Asia as a Springboard for a Humanizing and Civilizing Culture

It must be noted that Catholic education in the various Asian countries where Catholics are a small minority, has been an approach by missionaries to establish their qualified presence in Asia. Catholic schools, colleges and universities in Asia have gained the respect of Asian republics and states where in basically non-Christian countries, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Protestants and Catholics study together and are taught also by a multi-religious faculty.²¹ Why

¹⁹Cf. www.anathapuri.com/kerala-history.asp?page=christian

²⁰ Cf. www.newadvent.org/cathen/06233b.htm

²¹ Clarke, op. cit., p. 7; see also the following references, “Catholic Identity and Jesuit educational mission in South Asia”, by Frazer Mascarenhas, S.J., www.jheasa.com/~jheasa/docs/CatholicIdentityAndJesuitEducationalMission.pdf; see also: “Understanding Teachers’ Commitment to Their Profession in St. Euphrasie’s Girl’s High School: a Phenomenological Study”, by Sr. Shilipi Mabel Costa, RNDM, unpublished master’s thesis. Asian Social Institute (ASI), Manila, 2011.

has Catholic education been highly recognized in most Asian societies? Rev. Fr. Francis Clarke, S.J. explains: “People highly esteem Catholic schools for various reasons: their respect for the individual student, the just, reasonable discipline, the serious standards of instruction, the solid general training that assures many graduates future employment and dignity in society”. The acceptance of Catholics in the various Asian countries has been achieved through their graduates who have obtained positions as professionals in different institutions as well as statesmen and women schooled in colleges and universities that have been set up by the Catholic missionaries primarily to be of service to society and the local Churches which in turn through their diocesan and parish structures through which they catechized their members, established also their respective parochial elementary and high schools with students and teachers from different religious persuasions.

The oldest university in Asia is the Pontifical University of Santo Thomas, founded in 1611. In 2011 the university celebrated its 300 years of existence. We find Salesians with their technical schools all over Asia. The universities, colleges and schools of the Jesuits, the Dominicans, the Society of the Divine Word, the Franciscans and many congregations of religious sisters and brothers are well recognized by societies in Asia. Likewise, contemplative religious orders – Carmelites, Benedictines, the Cistercians, the Trappists, the Sisters-Servants of the Holy Spirit of Perpetual Adoration popularly known as the Pink Sisters, to name a few – are actively present no less. The non-acceptance of Catholic educational institutions happened in Socialist countries; educational institutions have been perceived as a power in the country and thus the state ruled out missionaries’ involvement in secondary and tertiary education. In Vietnam the religious congregations are not yet allowed to set up secondary, tertiary and higher educational institutes. They are allowed to offer only primary education. And yet in a significant number of countries in Asia, educational institutions run by Catholic missionaries of priests, brothers and sisters and the diocesan clergy have been a great source of leadership in government and non-governmental organizations in non-Christian countries.

The Organization of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC), a Source of Leadership in Civil Society

In 1970, following the example of CELAM, the acronym for Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (the organization of the Episcopal Conferences in Latin America, organized in 1957), the Federation of the Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) was born, an attempt to bring isolated Churches in Asia together and renew the Face of the Church in Asia. An

introductory statement in a publication of this milestone event is the following:²²

We see the face of an Asia at long last coming to birth in a true community of peoples. For barriers which have so long isolated our nations from one another are falling one by one, and the desire grow among us to know each other and find each other as Asian, sister-nations among whom relationships of friendship and trust, of collaboration, sharing and genuine solidarity may be firmly, lastingly wrought.

Francis C. Clark, S.J. wrote a book titled *An Introduction to the Catholic Church of Asia* (1987). In this book, a composite picture of the Asian Church is described:

The Catholic Church's presence is in almost all countries of Asia. The church is active in many fields – in education, (universities, colleges, high schools, grade schools and kindergarten schools); in caring for the sick through their clinics, hospitals, leprosariums, nursing schools, medical schools; among poor and the oppressed, they are involved with social action institutes, credit unions, cooperatives, labor and management schools, grassroots activities for organizing and conscientization; in the mass media, there are periodicals, newspapers, audio-visuals centers, radio, television and film projects; centers of formation – retreat houses, ashrams, guidance centers, centers for contemplation and other such spiritual bases, to offer inspiration for human suffering and searching.

Fr. Clarke, singles out two works that serve the whole of Asia – *Radio Veritas* (founded in 1972) which broadcasts shortwave in thirteen Asian languages; and the *East Asian Pastoral Institute* (EAPI), on the campus of the Ateneo de Manila University (founded in 1966) as a renewal center for priests, Brothers, Sisters and lay men and women active in all the cultures of Asia. Each year it sends them back with fresh dedication and plans for service, with updated knowledge and upgraded skills. He then makes a comment on two activities which he perceives as polarities: education and work with the poor and the oppressed.

The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) was in effect founded in 1970 during the first meeting of bishop-representatives of the

²² *For All Peoples of Asia: The Church in Asia, Asian bishops' Statements on Mission, Community and Ministry, 1970-1983*. Manila IMC Publications 1984, p. 13 cited by Clarke, Francis, S.J. *An Introduction to the Catholic Church of Asia*. Cardinal Bea Studies. Loyola School of theology. Ateneo de Manila University, 1987, p. 1.

local Churches of different Asian countries as well as their lay counterparts. Soon after, FABC started realizing the imperatives to initiate socio-pastoral programs along the line and spirit of the Gospel in the modern world – the Christian Social Teachings. Vatican II documents signaled the emphasis to be given by the Church in service of the world based on an integral Faith formation.

A relatively well-organized FABC came into being. It is supposed to be a voluntary association of Episcopal conferences in South, Southeast, East and Central Asia established with the approval of the Holy See. Its purpose is to foster among its members solidarity and co-responsibility for the welfare of Church and society in Asia and to promote and defend whatever is for the greater good. Impinged upon by the same global realities that has created an ocean of materially poor and oppressed people in the world, the FABC structured itself for promoting the values and principles of Christian Social Teachings through its General Secretariat coordinating and monitoring the concerns and activities of its various Offices. Its first offices are the following: 1) Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy (OESC), 2) Office for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), 3) Office of Evangelization (OE), 4) Office for Human Development (OHD) 5) Office for the Laity (OL) and lastly, 6) the Office for Social Communication (OSC). It had great inspiration from the experience of CELAM; and for this reason, the Asian constituents of FABC through their offices have been also enlightened by Liberation Theology, adopted the methods of Paulo Friere in giving non-formal education and took as essential thrust – the BEC approach to integral evangelization as a way of being church.

It is to the credit of FABC that to a great extent the life of the Catholic Church of Asia has been renewed especially in its role of organizing immersion programs in the situation of the poor for Asian Bishops. A process of reflection on the situation of the poor has become the basis of the thrusts and advocacies which follow the seminar-workshops. Although not all bishops have been able to avail of the programs, the bishops who have participated in the activities provided the Christian motivation and inspiration for the networks of socially involved groups in their respective countries.

In 1990, the FABC Conference of Asian Bishops came up with a statement which is intended to once again renew the spirit of Christian life in service of the Church and Society. The said conference was held in Bandung, Indonesia. In the biggest continent where three-fifths of the world's population live, where the great majority are non-Christians, a region so culturally and religiously diverse, impinged upon by global realities of the

modern and post modern era, the challenge being posed to the Federation of Asian Bishops is the “witness(ing) of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through Christlike deeds” (“Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium” – the Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC in Bandung, Indonesia, 27 July 1990) From this perspective, the Asian Bishops have set its path of animation in preparation for the 21st century. The significance of the Bandung Conference has in more ways than one articulated the “incessant yearning for the church to see new opportunities to proclaim the saving mission of Jesus in Asia”. This, she has seen following the collapse of the sharp ideological and political divide in the West and the consequent rise of many developing nations into the status of new industrializing economies. Seeing these great economic and political wonders, the “Look East” policy, the gradual gravitation of the rest of the world to Asia to realize the vision of new global partnership has created new situations and systems of relationships in the world community. However, both the fundamental objectives and even the manifest consequences of these developments may be fraught with ambivalence. While both foreign and domestic policies of Asian nations have been reshaped to situate themselves into the new scheme of global relations offering the fruits of development in neat packages, the cultural dislocation, abject misery and increasing marginalization in which the sea of humanity in Asia is sadly enmeshed await the dawning of an era where balance and harmony would be attained, brokenness vanquished, and total well-being experienced.²³

In 1995 (the 25th anniversary year of FABC), the Asian Social Institute (ASI) was tasked to present the results of the commissioned study by the Board of Directors of FABC, a study to assess the impact of FABC’s animation work from the perspective of the Final Statement of the Bandung FABC Conference in 1990.²⁴ Specifically the study assessed the Asian Bishops in

²³ Ramirez, Mina in her Introduction to the *Conclusion of the FABC Impact Study*. Asian Social Institute, 1995, p. 108.

²⁴ Final Statement of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conference, Fifth Plenary Assembly “Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium”, 17–27 July 1990 in Bandung Indonesia is an articulation of the shared reflections of Asian Bishops accompanied by theologians of Asia on the Challenges and Hopes for the Church of Asia – the Challenge of Ferment and Change, the breakdown of the ideological divide, the danger of religious fundamentalism, the ambiguity of the process of modernization where development happens at the detriment of cultural identity and loss of traditional community symbols; the challenge of continuing injustice – unbalanced social structures, with the

terms of their knowledge, perceptions and attitudes towards the FABC, their manner of participation in FABC affairs and their suggestions for improving FABC programs. On the other hand, the goal of assessing the process of animation is obtained by a descriptive profile of the channel of animation work either through some specific activities such as seminars, and workshops or publications and data pertinent thereto as well as future plans.

It was significant that this assessment was completed in 1995 – the year of Social Development, a year declared by the United Nations to remind the world to put people at the center of development in resolving core issues – poverty alleviation, employment expansion, and social integration. This view of development is not new to the Church. Definitely this view has been deepened by the Church’s renewed view of evangelization which is integral (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, of Pope Paul VI). An evangelization that for the Church means to walk with (wo)man – “a way that, in a sense, is the basis of all the other ways the Church must walk, because with (wo)man – every man (and woman) without exception whatever – Christ

poor not having access to basic social services (education, health, media, etc), several issues related to children and youth (child abuse, abortion, child and woman trafficking), generally a crisis of survival: Hope at the Crossroads – a new consciousness, the grassroots groups becoming more self-empowered, more participative, more appreciative of democracy, of dialogue, desire for solidarity and community, a desire for creating conditions open to the Grace of the spirit; the dichotomy disappearing between social action and pastoral care – thus approaching the mission for integral evangelization enunciated by Pope Paul VI, inspired by *Gaudium et Spes* and the Synod of bishops of 1971, the need of a continual reflection on Gospel values concerning the building of God’s Kingdom on earth; the relevance of the social doctrine of the Church to daily decisions in life, the challenge of the Mode of Mission: the importance of interreligious dialogue, of involvement with and for the poor; and inculturation; the role of the lay faithful as primary evangelizers of culture, calling for a thorough education of Catholics in the social doctrine of the Church as well as the formation of their hearts toward just and compassionate living in present day Asian society, evangelizing among peers – young evangelizing young, workers evangelizing workers, professionals evangelizing professionals, etc. – the leaven for the transformation of Asia; the face of the Church in Asia to be partners of other faiths in a quest for God, for a better human life guided by the Spirit of Christ. The Final Statement ended with reiteration of the process by which the Final Statement was drafted – a) dialogue with the realities of Asia from within, b) discerning the movement of God’s Spirit in Asia; and c) translating into deeds what the Spirit bids to accomplish. Pervading Pastoral Imperatives were identified on the Level of Discernment and on Level of Doing. In effect the Final Statement was a response to *Pacem in Terris*’ exhortation to the Church by Pope John XXIII to have unity of Faith and Action; and of Pope Paul VI’s call for integral evangelization, as well as Pope Benedict XVI’s call for a new humanism – when “hearts of stone” are transformed into “hearts of flesh”.

is in a way united, even when one is unaware of it” (*Redemptor Hominis*, 1979), of Pope John Paul II, cited in the Final Statement of the Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC, Bandung, July 17, 1990.

The study result(s) show that only 50% of the bishops in 1995 are aware and/or engaged in the socio-pastoral thrusts of FABC. Two remarks of two bishops show the extremes in attitude towards the FABC. Only about 51.8 percent, just by the fact that they took time to respond to a questionnaire is an indication that at least 51.8 percent are aware and recognize the FABC. Probable reasons why 48.2% did not answer could be that Bishops were too busy or simply lack interest in FABC due to an uneasiness about its preoccupation with changing the face of the earth to create conditions for people’s well-being. Two extreme remarks by bishops are cited below:

the local Church of ___ and her missionaries (in a particular way the foreign missionaries) have placed too much attention to the pastoral concerns listed in 3.3 in our questionnaire and have forgotten the primary mission of the Local Church of ___ – evangelization and conversion of the billion people to Christ our Lord.

Too much emphasis placed by foreign missionaries on socio-political affairs, in one hand exalts foreign values and its superiority, and on the other hand depicts insultingly bad image of the local society, creating thus bad influence to Evangelization, particularly among the ___ intellectuals...

While another quote from a respondent is:

I belonged to the ___ Delegation of Bishops that were in Manila, when Pope Paul VI visited Manila in 1970. I was present when this memorable event ended with the clarion call to establish the FABC... Although I was entitled as Apostolic Administrator to wear the Episcopal paraphernalia, I did not. I wore my Franciscan Habit, and, do so till today...

I have attended the seminar on the “lay Ministries” and a few BISAs (Bishops for Social Action). I enjoyed being present in dialogue and sharing. Just an extra word on the Seminar on the lay Ministries. The workshops I attended were inspiring and was looking forward to the “Conclusions” of this seminar. I was disappointed as it was clear for me and others that the Conclusions were watered down due to the presence/pressure of some “Roman Officials”. In spite of these shortcomings, I must admit that these seminars have helped me personally. I have tried to follow up what I have personally learnt from these seminars in the service of my Diocese, my people, but I was unable to cross the Boundary of my Diocese.

I read the FABC Publications: Newsletter, Communications Info. Edited Books and papers. I am happy to receive them and hope to receive them in the future. The last paper I read was no. 66 entitled “People Everywhere: Open the door to Christ”.

I have read the Final Statement of the FABC Bandung Conference of 1990. In fact, I have used it, when I was preaching a Retreat to the Major Seminarians of our National Seminary (Bishop from ____). The animating work of FABC was through the varied activities organized by their different offices.

Though the Catholics are a small minority, the Church in Asia is relatively well organized. The Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) is always in the process of reflecting on how they could in line with the Vatican II documents and the Gospel and Christian Social Teachings integrate themselves in the lives of Asian peoples of different cultures and religions.

The contribution of Catholic Church in Asia to Justice and Peace in the World is to assess to what extent Federation of Asian Bishops (FABC) founded in 1971 has created a vibrant Church, facilitating the self-empowerment or the God-empowerment of persons, families and communities to be witnesses of the values of the Kingdom here on earth. This implies that the Pastors of the Catholic Church become animators of Christians and non-Christians alike to a life of caring and sharing in the spirit of freedom, charity and truth. In the modernizing and post modernizing context this caring and sharing should be organized.

The education towards human rights with corresponding responsibilities, the right order of relationships on all levels – families, groups, communities, institutions, nations and regions in solidarity and subsidiarity – are summarized in *Pacem in Terris* already fifty years ago and then expounded by *Caritas in Veritate*, in the context of a globalizing world. The Churches are to look up to their Pastors – particularly the Bishops of various dioceses. Socio-pastoral leaders are called to listen to the voices of the people.

The FABC has organized itself as a catalyst and animator of the spirit of the social encyclicals and Vatican II. The result of a process of integrating into oneself the values of the Gospel, made concrete in the context of the globalized world has been the journey of the Catholic Church of Asia rooted in a living faith. They run the following offices: General Secretariat, Human Development, Social Communications, Laity and Family, Theological Concerns, Education and Faith Formation, Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Evangelization, Clergy, Consecrated Life.

The FABC Office of Human Development, Office of Communication, Office of Education and Faith Formation, Office of the Laity and the Fam-

ily are powerful and subtle sources of delivering the Christian message in word and deed to Asian Societies. There is an emphasis on the initiating BCCs. However, the BCCs, except in the Philippines, could be called not Basic Christian Communities, but Christians in Basic Human Communities due to the fact that in Asia, the Christians and specifically the Catholics constitute barely 3% of the population of Asia.

In the FABC, bishops of Asia on a volunteer basis together with their lay counterparts submit themselves to exposure immersion programs which enable them to be in touch especially with the poor and the marginalized. Among the FABC offices that pioneered in exposing bishops to the realities of Asia is the FABC Office for Human Development (FABC-OHD).

It is noteworthy to glean from the programs the involvement of the Church in Asia in transmitting the Christian message in this 21st century.

Posted in late March 2012 in the home page of its website are the following items of interest:

- The FABC–Office of Social Communication invites all bishops to join a five-day seminar workshop on “Social Media: Networking, Blogging, Gaming, Addiction... – A Critical Approach for Pastoral Ministry”. This 8th “Bishops Institute for Social Communications” (BISCOM 8) will be held from 3 to 8 September 2012 at Assumption University, Suvarnabhumi Campus in Bangkok, Thailand.
- The Women’s Desk of the FABC–Office of Laity and Family is organizing the 4th Bishops Institute for Lay Apostolate on Women (BILA IV on Women) on 9–13 July 2012 at Camillian Pastoral Centre, Latkrabang, Bangkok, Thailand. The gathering aims to confront Women’s issues at the Asian level and to renew the ministry and mission towards a more just and egalitarian society.
- The FABC Office of Laity and Family – The BEC Desk will be holding its 6th Assembly on 18–24 October at Chintana Center, Nainamadama, Sri Lanka. The theme of the assembly is “Go you are sent forth” (*Mt.* 10:5) – following Jesus in mission: Small Christian communities serving and ministering.
- The message from the 8th Bishops’ Institute of Social Action (BISA VIII) of the FABC Office of Human Development at Camillian Pastoral Care Center, Bangkok, Thailand from 18–24 January 2012 is now available. The participants proposed a Pastoral-Theological Programme of Action for Asia.
- The Bishops’ Institute of Theological Animation (BITA-IV) on “Youth in Asia: Challenges of Fundamentalism and Relativism” is rescheduled

from May 2011 to 23-27 April 2012 and will be held in Baan Phu Waan Pastoral Centre, Sampran, Thailand.

- The 16th annual gathering of bishops responsible for communication and their secretaries was held at St. Paul’s Pastoral Centre in Hulalien, Taiwan from 14 to 19 November. More than 30 participants came with officials of Radio Veritas Asia, Sigma-Asia, and the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA).²⁵ Msgr. Paul Russel, the Holy See’s charge d’Affaires in Taiwan was also present. The theme “Social Networking for Pastoral Ministry” was mainly treated through a two day seminar-workshop on 15-16 November on the how-to’s of social media e.g., file sharing, micro blogging, visual storytelling, and online gaming. This year’s Final Statement lists guideposts on how the Church should engage in social media. In it, the participants stress the importance of creative engagement through collaborative efforts, as well as research. Social media should be placed at the service of FABC’s three-fold dialogue – with the poor, cultures, and religions.
- FABC met in Bangkok on 19-20 October 2011 to discuss “Church Response to the Challenge of Climate Change in Asia towards a New Creation”. International experts assisted on the urgency of the issue in the context of the Church’s commitment to protect the integrity of God’s Creation in Asia leaving a meaningful legacy for future generations. One significant decision was to create a Desk in the Central Secretariat of FABC with a competent person to follow up on this urgent issue. The seminar was financially supported by the German Catholic Bishops’ Organization for Development Cooperation.

The FABC’s exposure to social realities may have been contributory to Asian people’s closeness to a significant number of bishops who promote and extend moral support to the work of Civil Society (the network of non-governmental organizations involved in advocacies for the rights of industrial workers, fisherfolk, farmers, indigenous groups, cutting across the various sectors – children, youth, women, and the elderly). But while it struggles to foster the networks for a people-centered development thrust, it nourishes those engaged in this humanizing work with the Christian motivation rooted in Gospel values and Christian Social Teachings. In the context of an increasingly globalizing world the Asian Catholic Church is concerned with the continual reality assessment

²⁵ The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is the Protestant Churches’ counterpart of FABC. CCA has more or less the same integral development concerns as FABC.

of Asian realities, reflection and advocacies on issues of poverty, migration, ill-health, lack of participation of people in cultural, economic, social and political affairs and in the overarching issue of sustainable development and the negative effects of climate change. This involvement lends itself to criticism that the Church has involved herself with politics.

Considering the socio-cultural-religious context of Asia, the Catholic Church in Asia, meaning the Catholics in Asia in striving to live the Christian values of human dignity, integrity of creation, common good, social justice, respect for differentiation, communion and solidarity, it is imperative that Asian Catholics in particular and Christians in general engage themselves in the following community building processes: a) poverty alleviation, b) inter-religious dialogue which starts with a dialogue of life, c) inculturation (which is tantamount to asking “how shall we enable Jesus to speak in their respective languages”. Language here can be taken in the broad sense. Culture is a language. Being witnesses is a powerful language (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*). The finest expressions of people’s culture, the soul of a people, are reflected in their arts – painting, song, dance, drama poetry, architecture, sculpture and cultural practices that create and preserve community life as well as their prayer forms. These are a projection of the Godliness of a people.

Here, our model is Jesus Himself. He observed the Jewish spiritual tradition, and yet he shattered some of the assumptions of his own culture. He was promoting a Faith Culture, a life lived in absolute obedience to the Will of His Father. As Christians, followers of Jesus Incarnate – among Us – should we not do less... to see with the eyes of Faith, in constant communication with our Triune God, and discern with these eyes the true state of affairs of our world in a journey towards total salvation.

Inter-religious dialogue which includes dialogue of life which presupposes an attitude of awe and wonder at the mystery of the other and all elements of God’s creation, especially in Asia, is a challenge. Feeling at home with each other despite the enormous diversity of persons, cultures, religions, political systems, and race, are the beginning of integral development, integral evangelization. A Hindu-Muslim scholar, Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, points to Asia’s common ground on which all religions could reflect together:

... like Islam, most (religions) and philosophies (Buddhist, Confucianist, Taoist, Hindu and Christian) acknowledge a) the spiritual destiny of man and the spiritual basis of our existence b) the sacredness of the human being and his moral duty to establish righteousness on earth c) the importance of cultivating ethical values in the individual like kindness, compassion, love and selflessness d) the importance of creating an ethical social order where there is no oppression, exploita-

tion, greed and corruption; where human beings cooperate with, and care for one another; where peace and harmony prevail e) the importance of utilizing nature's bounties in a harmonious manner so that the needs of every human being are met.²⁶

Hopefully the Civil Society in Asia will be with this difference in that the motive force for the civilizing and humanizing movement is a socially engaged spirituality fueled by a "mystic fire" of inner quiet, peace, humility, joy and humor, and a compassion for the other as well as for oneself and a profound respect for integrity of creation.

Asia is replete with multi-faceted divides – economic, cultural, socio-political-religious, race, intergenerational, digital, rural-urban, gender and our alienation from Mother Earth. CV points to the call for dialogue between faith and science, among disciplines – sociology, economics, and psychology, biological and metaphysical sciences – all must be focused on life; otherwise, the result will be fragmentation of oneself, and fragmentation on all levels of society.

Moral evaluation and scientific research must go hand in hand... charity must animate them in a harmonious interdisciplinary whole, marked by unity and distinction. The Church's social doctrine, which has "an interdisciplinary dimension", can exercise, in this perspective, a function of extraordinary effectiveness. It allows faith, theology, metaphysics and science to come together in a collaborative effort in the service of humanity. It is here above all that the Church's social doctrine displays its dimension of wisdom. Paul VI had seen clearly that among the causes of underdevelopment, there is a lack of wisdom and reflection, a lack of thinking capable of formulating a guiding synthesis, for which a clear vision of all economic, social, cultural and spiritual aspects is required. The excessive segmentation of knowledge, the rejection of metaphysics by the human sciences, the difficulties encountered by dialogue between science and theology are damaging not only to the development of knowledge, but also the development of peoples, because these things make it harder to see the integral good of man in its various dimensions. The broadening (of) our concept of reason and its application is indispensable if we are to succeed in adequately weighing all the elements involved in the question of development and in the solution of socio-economic problems. (CV, 31)

²⁶ Muzaffar Chandra. *A plea for EMPATHY. The Quest for Malaysian Unity*. Kuala Lumpur: Zubedy Ideahouse Sdn Bhd, 1947.

A heightened consciousness of this state of affairs compels us to be healers, making whole what we have fragmented in the past. What is needed is to balance the physical, the mental and the spiritual dimensions of our existence. The prayer of quiet may give us the Light of the Spirit of our God of Life and Love for a Synthesis – the Person of Jesus. His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has drawn our attention to the spiritual richness of Asia, a richness that could be harnessed for healing ourselves and the rest of humankind and all creation:

The journey towards a “new humanism” is our journey in faith to look for religion as an experience, that the mystical aspect of religions is an important part of it: religion that offers me contact with the absolute Other. In our historical situation, this means that the mystical religions of Asia (parts of Hinduism and Buddhism), with their renunciation of dogma and their minimal degree of institutionalization, appear to be more suitable for enlightened humanity than dogmatically determined and institutionally structured Christianity (p. 7, Benedict XVI, *Christianity, Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*).

The Church of Asia is a vibrant church in a socio-political-cultural and religious context that is highly diverse. And yet this is its richness. Charity that will embrace all these differences of personalities, various religio-cultural persuasions and bio-diversity to work for and with the poor, facilitating their and our own self/God empowerment. Regular inter-religious prayer of quiet and contemplation may still be the essential element of sustainability, of a fruitful convergence among Civil Society networks towards justice, peace and integrity of creation.