

The Faith-Culture Dialogue in Asia: Ten FABC Insights on Inculturation

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The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has been the most influential body in the Asian Church since the Second Vatican Council. It has strengthened the bonds of communication among Catholic communities and their bishops and has contributed to the development of a shared vision of the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia. The FABC asserts that the pathway for the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity is to continually engage in a three-fold dialogue: with Asian peoples (especially the poor) [integral development], Asian cultures [inculturation], and Asian religions [interfaith dialogue]. This programmatic vision of a "triple dialogue" has constructively guided the FABC for over three decades. In a word, one can validly assert that the FABC is truly "Asia's Continuing Vatican II."

An FABC Introduction. Before addressing inculturation, the specific topic of this presentation, a brief background to contextualization on the FABC appears necessary. The FABC is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together fourteen bishops' conferences from the following countries as full members: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. FABC has eleven associate members drawn from the ecclesiastical jurisdictions of East Timor, Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Thus, in total, twenty-eight countries are represented in the FABC, which grew out of the historic gathering of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI during his 1970 Asian visit.

Aside from a modest central structure, there are nine FABC offices, which carry out many concrete initiatives and projects. The offices, purposely scattered among various Asian nations, are focused on evangelization, social communication, laity, human development, education and student chaplaincy, ecumenical and interreligious affairs, theological concerns, clergy, and consecrated life. Each of these offices sponsors a wide variety of activities that promote the growth of the Asian local Churches.

The supreme body of the FABC is the Plenary Assembly, which convenes approximately every four years. The themes, places, and dates of the eight plenary assemblies include the following: "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia" (Taipei, Taiwan: 1974); "Prayer—the

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Life of the Church in Asia" (Calcutta, India: 1978); "The Church—Community of Faith in Asia" (Bangkok, Thailand: 1982); "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia" (Tokyo, Japan: 1986); "Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium" (Bandung, Indonesia: 1990); "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life" (Manila, Philippines: 1995); "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service" (Samphran, Thailand: 2000); and, "The Asian Family toward a Culture of Life" (Daejeon, Korea: 2004). The 2009 ninth plenary assembly is planned for Bangalore, India with the theme: "Living the Eucharist in Asia."

The basic documents of the plenary assemblies and the initiatives of the FABC offices are available in the four volumes of *For All the Peoples of Asia* [FAPA] (Manila: Claretian Publications). The *FABC Papers*, continuously published since 1976, are available in print form and on the UCANews website with its *FABC Papers* link; see number 100 for a comprehensive index. The four FAPA volumes and the individually numbered *FABC Papers* are indispensable resources for FABC material; both will be copiously utilized for this presentation. Thirty-four authors are cited in the selected bibliography; particularly apropos to the FABC and inculturation are the following: Bevans, FABC:TAC, Kroeger, Nemet, Phan, Tan, and Wilfred. To date (2008), twenty-six doctoral dissertations have been completed on various FABC themes.

FABC Perspectives on Inculturation. The Asian local Churches are aware, enthusiastic, and committed to the pivotal challenge and obligation of inculturating the Christian faith in the Asian milieu, an assertion this presentation seeks to elaborate. "Asian" Church workers, both indigenous Asians as well as expatriate missionaries, view the inculturation of the Christian faith as a specific missionary and pastoral commitment.

An FABC statement, made over three decades ago, validly expresses their vision: "the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia—Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others.... If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (FAPA I, 70). This quote succinctly captures the urgent imperative of both building and strengthening each local Church to be, in the words of the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974, "a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated" (FAPA I, 14).

Capturing the FABC vision, extending over nearly four decades since its 1970 beginnings, may be a formidable task in a paper of modest length. This writer has chosen to identify ten pivotal "inculturation" themes as his approach to digesting the impressive body of FABC materials that are incredibly rich, amazingly visionary, and deeply inspirational. Each theme will be accorded a separate presentation, introduced by a short caption or title. In addition to the author's brief narrative, the FABC documents themselves will receive pride of place; pivotal quotes will form the bulk of the presentation, thus allowing the fresh, insightful vision of the FABC and the Asian Churches to emerge. Readers are encouraged to appreciate the spirit inherent in each of these ten themes and discover the action of the "befriending Spirit" at work fostering the emergence of genuine Asian Christian communities. This writer asserts that because the inculturating Asian Churches

are discovering their own identity, they have a bright and hopeful future! The FABC continues to foster an "Asian Pentecost"!

(1) An Urgent Imperative. A little known fact is that the word *inculturation* was used for the *first* time in Church parlance in Asia. When the Asian bishops met with Pope Paul VI in Manila in 1970, they reflected, as noted in their final statement, on "the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia" (FAPA I, 6). Since that historic meeting from which the FABC eventually emerged, rooting the faith in Asian soil has remained a leitmotif of FABC concerns and reflection. The Christian communities of Asia continue to search for appropriate means to make the Church truly Catholic and truly Asian.

This struggle to integrate faith and life involves a process of ecclesial self-discovery. As noted above, Asians' desire is to be "Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others," because they are convinced that if they "do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (FAPA I, 70). It is imperative "to deepen the dialogue in Asia between the Gospel and culture, so that faith is inculturated and culture is evangelized" (FAPA III, 27). A constant refrain in FABC literature on evangelization is the desire for "intensifying our efforts, especially in the area of inculturation" (FAPA III, 215). One must also note that for the FABC the question of the faith-and-culture integration is primarily encountered *concretely and pastorally* as the local Churches engage with people and all the life-realities of Asia.

For Asian Christians, this is an *urgent imperative* due to the perceived "foreignness" of the Church. A 1991 FABC theological consultation stated the challenge quite starkly: "As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering colonial image survives.... The Church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and religious and cultural identity.... The Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structure, in its worship, in its western trained leadership and in its theology. Christian rituals often remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian.... Seminary formation often alienates the seminarian from the people. Biblical, systematic and historical theology as taught are often unpastoral and unAsian" (FAPA II, 195-196).

While honestly admitting the enormity of the challenge, Asian Christians do see significant opportunities emerging. "As Asia comes out of the colonial period, its people have become more aware of their national identity. There is a renewed sense of pride in their religious and cultural values.... Reviewing the life of the Church in Asia since Vatican II, we find that the Churches in Asia recognize the indispensable necessity of inculturation as a path of mission. This has been constantly reiterated by the official documents of FABC and the National Episcopal Conferences.... The emergence of indigenous theology, spirituality, religious life, creativity in liturgical celebrations, etc. are clear evidence of the commitment the Churches have made to achieve this goal [inculturated evangelization]" (FAPA III, 217). Yet, the urgency of the imperative remains.

(2) A Descriptive Definition. One looks in vain in the FABC literature to find a consistent definition of culture and inculturation. For example, in the early FABC documents, terms like "adaptation," "incarnation," "acculturation," "indigenization," and "inculturation"

were often used interchangeably. Yet, this lack of a single term has resulted in a wide variety of descriptions of the inculturation process, some of which border on the poetic. While maybe not sociologically or theologically precise, these various descriptions elicit a vision or dream of the mission to be accomplished.

In 1970 the Asian bishops committed themselves to “develop an indigenous theology and to do what we can so that the life and meaning of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historical cultures of Asia, so that ... Asian Christianity may help promote all that is ‘authentically human in these cultures’” (FAPA I, 9). The 1974 FABC plenary assembly states: “Indigenization renders the local church truly present within the life and cultures of our peoples. Through it, all their human reality is assumed into the life of the Body of Christ, so that all of it may be purified and healed, perfected and fulfilled”; the same assembly listed several key tasks in the preaching of the Gospel in Asia, one of which is “*Inculturation*, which renders the local church present within the life of our people” (FAPA I, 16, 23).

The 1979 mission conference in Manila devoted one workshop precisely to inculturation as an Asian missionary task. Precious insights were forthcoming. “Inculturation is not mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation, but rather a creative embodiment of the Word in the local church. This is the basic and fundamental process of inculturation.... In this process of inculturation a people receives the Word, makes it the principle of their life, values, attitudes and aspirations. In this way they become the Body of Christ in this particular time and place—a local church.... The community discovers a new identity, losing nothing of its cultural riches, but integrating them in a new whole and becoming the sacrament of God’s liberating love active among men” (FAPA I, 138).

As the FABC vision of inculturation matured over the years, an earlier “uni-directional” view [from faith into culture] is clearly replaced by a dialogical understanding. “Inculturation is a dialogical encounter process understood in its deepest meaning that comes from the salvific movement of the Triune God, because evangelization itself is above all a dialogue between the Gospel message and the given reality” (FAPA I, 138-139).

The “Theses on the Local Church” by the FABC Theological Advisory Commission notes that mutuality and reciprocity are essential to inculturation. Thus, an inculturated Church “comes into existence and is built up through a deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture and tradition.... Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium, but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating them through the cultural resources of a people. As a result, the concrete shape of the local church will be, on the one hand, conditioned by the culture, and, on the other hand, the culture will be evangelized by the life and witness of the local Church” (FABC Papers 60, 18).

A comprehensive analysis of the copious FABC material shows that through time and experience an integral view of culture and inculturation emerges. Both elements are to be understood in a holistic sense; they incorporate “all the life-realities” of a given people; they encompass “whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its

aspirations, its thought and its language, its songs and its artistry—even its frailties and failings its assumes, so that they too may be healed” (FAPA I, 14). Because culture is dynamic, inculturation will address “the emergent cultures of Asia, a combination of many diverse elements of modern civilization, yet still rooted in local traditional values” (FAPA II, 198). In the FABC perspective, the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit is imperative, given the complexity of culture and the challenge of inculturation (FAPA I, 73, 130).

(3) A Dialogical Approach. The FABC is eminently clear in stating its conviction about what approach is needed for rooting the faith in Asia. “Dialogue is a primary means and way for *inculturation*” (FAPA I, 142). “We perceive dialogue as a necessary condition and instrument for *inculturation*” (FAPA I, 249). These assertions are consistent with the FABC’s comprehensive view of mission and evangelization. “Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode [dialogue].... 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” (FAPA I, 281-282). “The local Churches of Asia will proclaim Jesus Christ to their fellow humans in a dialogical manner” (FAPA I, 346).

A dialogical approach is the only possible avenue, given the multiracial, multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural reality of Asia, the earth’s largest continent and home to nearly two-thirds of the world’s population. Such a dialogical approach is not a mere external methodology that the Church in Asia will adapt; the Church herself is called to be “a community of dialogue. This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church” (FAPA I, 332).

As a community of dialogue, the local Church “is never centered on itself but on the coming true of God’s dream for the world” (FAPA I, 333). Such an engaged Church “will necessarily be transformed in the process. In other words, it will become inculturated—at a level which includes but goes deeper than changes in ritual and symbol. Such a Church may at last become a Church of Asia and not simply a Church in Asia. It may then be perceived as no longer an alien presence. In this model of Church, dialogue, liberation, inculturation and proclamation are but different aspects of the one reality” (FAPA I, 333).

The dialogical approach finds its roots in the earliest FABC sources. The programmatic document, “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,” from the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974 outlined a unique kind of dialogue. It noted that building up a truly local Church, one that is “indigenous and inculturated,” demands a faith-community that is in “continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions—in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own” (FAPA I, 14).

This “triple dialogue” paradigm has been verified in subsequent FABC assemblies; the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000 noted that the “triple dialogue” that the FABC developed “over the past thirty years ... is still valid today” (FAPA III, 4). The dialogue approach revolves around three key poles: local Church, dialogue, and the Asian peoples and their realities. Almost simplistically, it can be represented in a schema:

Asia’s Peoples, focus on poor

Local Church
(subject)

<<< **DIALOGUE** >>>
(approach)

Asia's Cultures
Asia's Religions

One must point out that the arrows on either side of the word *dialogue* move in two directions. Certainly, this indicates that this dialogical approach is always a two-fold process of dynamic interaction. There is always mutual reinforcement; this means that while the Church influences the people, their cultures and religions, the Church herself is concomitantly being shaped and molded. In a word, the dynamic of inculturation is always at work.

This *operative paradigm* of holistic evangelization [the “triple dialogue” approach] is the *interpretive key* to understanding and appreciating the inculturation process in Asia today. This is how the Church “lives and breathes” in Asia. Here one finds the Holy Spirit at work. This is an authentic reception and continuation of the Second Vatican Council in Asia.

(4) Primary Actor: Local Church. Explore any major document that has emerged from the extensive reflection of the FABC and you will probably find several creative insights on the local Church in the Asian context. It was the 1970 Asian pastoral visit of Pope Paul VI with the Asian bishops that gave the impetus for the local Churches to begin formulating a vision of Church and mission adequate to the “new world being born” in Asia in the post-colonial period. They asked themselves: How would the Churches incarnate a decisive “turning to history” and a “turning to the Gospel” within history “for all the peoples of Asia”? How would the FABC articulate an overall vision that captures what “being Church in Asia today” truly means? This is the context for appreciating the role of the local Church in the inculturation process.

The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly held in Indonesia in 1990 added new clarity and focus by asserting that it is the local Church which is “the acting subject of mission.” The final document stated: “The renewal of our sense of mission will mean ... that the acting subject of mission is the *local Church* living and acting in communion with the universal Church. 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” (FAPA I, 281).

The statement continues: “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. This local Church, which is the acting subject of mission, is the people of God in a given milieu, the whole Christian community—laity, Religious and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic Ecclesial Community and other groups. Their time has come for Asia” (FAPA I, 281).

As the FABC asserts that the local Church is the “acting subject of mission,” it concomitantly affirms that it is the “acting subject of inculturation,” since inculturation is essential in contemporary mission. In addition, since the local Church is the *entire* people of God, the inculturation process demands the involvement of *all* members of the Christian community. Authentic inculturation presumes—even demands—a fully participative

Christian community.

The FABC corpus is rich with statements affirming the pivotal role of the local Church in inculturation. "Dialogue with cultures or inculturation takes place when the local Church lives its faith and the Gospel in terms of the cultures of its peoples, the Church being enriched internally by these cultures and in turn transforming them from within" (FAPA I, 266). "Local Churches, servant and inculturated, are the subject of the evangelizing mission" (FAPA II, 202). As a living cell of the local Church, the Basic Ecclesial Community or Small Christian Community is to serve as "a seedbed of inculturation" (FAPA III, 110).

In the FABC perspective, becoming truly local Churches, an urgent task in Asia today, demands that "more and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church.... We grasp something of the significance of local Church and inculturation in this context; those who cannot understand this fail to resonate with the signs of our time, and the heartbeat of our peoples" (*FABC Papers 60*, 52).

"Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls on the part of the Churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage" (FAPA I, 72-73). Indeed, "if the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (FAPA I, 70).

(5) An Interfaith Linkage. A previous section of this presentation was devoted to the dialogical approach essential to inculturation in the Asian context. It spoke about FABC's "triple dialogue" paradigm and noted that the Asian religions are one of the key "dialogue partners" of the local Church. Building upon that previous discussion, this section turns to the place of Asia's venerable religions in the inculturation process.

Eighty-five percent of all the world's followers of other living faiths (besides Christianity) are Asians. Christians in Asia are less than three percent of the total population. In short, except for the Philippines and East Timor, Christians are a small minority. There are seven times more Muslims in Asia than there are Christians; the four largest Islamic countries in the world (2007) are in Asia: Indonesia (216 million), Pakistan (161 million), India (147 million), Bangladesh (122 million). These brief Islamic statistics (not to mention Buddhism and Hinduism) are concrete realities confronting the Church, her vision and praxis.

The FABC is very aware of the challenge posed by these demographics. In addition, there is "a strong interrelation in Asia between religion and culture" and often "Asia tends to identify nationality, religion and culture" (FAPA II, 194). "Religion, providing ... contact of the human with the Divine, is the soul of culture" (FAPA II, 21). "Each culture provides the context for understanding reality and expressing religious faith" (FAPA II, 23). A pivotal question surfaces: How does the FABC view these Asian religions vis-à-vis inculturation?

In brief, the FABC takes a positive approach to the religions, promoting constructive collaboration, dialogue, and critical interaction. The presence of the “seeds of the Word” and the action of the Holy Spirit in these religions is affirmed. Thus, they have insights, values, and virtues that can inform the Church’s inculturation process. No detailing of the numerous FABC interfaith workshops and activities is possible or necessary; it is sufficient to sensitively listen to the FABC perspectives, perceiving how they can positively influence an in-depth inculturation.

The First Plenary Assembly in 1974 gave this orientation toward the religions in its final statement—expressed with poetic elegance. It asserts that building up a truly local Church “involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations” (FAPA I, 14).

Springing from this positive assessment, the bishops continue: “How then can we not give them reverence and honor? And how can we not acknowledge that God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them? Only in dialogue with these religions can we discover in them the seeds of the Word of God (*Ad Gentes*, c. 1, 9). This dialogue will allow us to touch the expression and the reality of our peoples’ deepest selves, and enable us to find authentic ways of living and expressing our own Christian faith. It will reveal to us also many riches of our own faith which we perhaps would not have perceived. Thus it can become a sharing in friendship of our quest for God and for brotherhood among His sons. Finally, this dialogue will teach us what our faith in Christ leads us to receive from these religious traditions, and what must be purified in them, healed and made whole, in the light of God’s Word” (FABC I, 14-15).

Dialogue with Asia’s religious traditions is also an occasion to give witness to Christian faith: “On our part we can offer what we believe the Church alone has the duty and joy to offer to them and to all men: oneness with the Father in Jesus His Son, the ways to grace Christ gives us in His Gospel and His sacraments, and fellowship [in] the community which seeks to live in Him; an understanding too of the value of the human person and of the social dimensions of human salvation” (FABC I, 15). Indeed, this is a wonderfully balanced assessment of Asia’s religions—and a clear rationale for involving them in the Church’s efforts to foster inculturation.

(6) An Asian Pastoral Method. As noted earlier, in Asia the “faith-and-culture integration” is primarily encountered *concretely and pastorally*, rather than theoretically or theologically; this reality is reflected in the FABC documents themselves. It also has another ramification related to the pastoral methodology promoted by the FABC. To facilitate the growth of an inculturated local Church, the FABC has evolved a unique approach of pastoral engagement. This four-stage “Asian” methodology has been termed: the “Pastoral Spiral” (cf. FAPA I, 231-232).

The process begins with *exposure-immersion*; it may also be called “entering into a dialogue-of-life.” Exposure-Immersion follows the basic principle of the Incarnation; local Christians seek to share the daily lives of their neighbors and communities. They seek to understand and appreciate—through direct experience and interaction—the life situation shared by Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. In a word, all are invited to practice “good neighbor-ology.”

The second stage of *social analysis* follows. Communities try to evaluate the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious systems in society. They observe and analyze events and trends, discerning the impact of rapid social change on human lives. They evaluate the signs of contemporary times, the events of history, as well as the needs and aspirations of people and communities. It is an interfaith effort to comprehend the realities that shape their lives.

Asians have seen the necessity of integrating social analysis (stage two) with the *contemplative dimension* (stage three) of integral evangelization; this third stage of faith reflection emerges from Asia’s religio-cultural heritage. Through this contemplation people discover God’s presence and activity within social realities, discerning not only negative and enslaving social aspects, but also the positive, prophetic aspects of life that can inspire genuine God-awareness and spirituality. This stage in the total process has proven very beneficial; for example, it enables the poor to make their unique contribution to inculturation; it brings prayer and spirituality into the endeavor.

The third stage of ongoing spiritual-theological reflection issues into the fourth stage called *pastoral planning*, which seeks to translate the previous three stages into actual, realizable mission plans of action. Indeed, concrete, inculturated programs of evangelization are ultimately necessary, but they are better conceived through this Asian process that actively discerns what the Lord of history is challenging the Church to be and to do.

One should note that this process is a *spiral*—it must be repeated frequently; hopefully, at each turn or cycle it moves upward and forward. The FABC, committed to this approach of inculturated evangelization, has further developed it through numerous AsIPA programs [As = Asian, I = Integral, P = Pastoral, A = Approach] (cf. FAPA II, 107-111; FAPA III, 107-112). These initiatives concretely respond to the criticism: “At times our efforts towards inculturation have remained too theoretical and failed to resonate with the people at the grass-roots level” (FAPA III, 216).

A final, brief “footnote” may be added to link the FABC pastoral spiral and AsIPA programs with the “see, judge, act” methodology, traditionally associated with programs of Catholic Action. This approach to social transformation encourages Christians to “see” (observe concrete social realities), “judge” (analyze and evaluate these realities), and “act” (make decisions and take concrete steps to transform the reality). FABC has enunciated a similar approach, expressed with the “3-D” terminology; Asian Churches must “dialogue” with life’s realities, then prayerfully “discern” the situation in faith, and lastly, engage in appropriate Christ-like “deeds” to transform the situation (cf. FAPA I, 281-285). There are, ultimately, many parallels in these inductive pastoral approaches (whatever one names

them); the crucial factor is that the Christian community, motivated by Gospel faith and anchored in concrete life situations, remains actively engaged in the transformation of the world. The result is true inculturation, the result of faith-filled praxis.

(7) Pastoral Concerns and Ministries. FABC pastoral-theological reflection is decidedly inductive—emerging from life’s concrete realities. Consequently, many FABC documents frequently identify specific pastoral concerns, because the Church seeks to be—in fact, not only in theory—the “Church of the poor” and the “Church of the young”; she shares the vicissitudes of the “Church of silence” in several parts of Asia (cf. FAPA I, 5-6, 18). Her pastoral priorities concern the displaced (refugees and migrants), women and the girl-child, youth, workers, families, the indigenous peoples, etc. (cf. FAPA III, 9-11). As the Church addresses these specific concerns, she tries to develop a theology and praxis which will be “a service to life”; she “initiates and develops a process of inculturation” (FAPA II, 226-227).

Considering the numerous areas of pastoral concern that beckon the Asian Church’s compassionate involvement, the FABC organized the highly successful 1977 Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church [ACMC] (FAPA I, 67-92). The FABC noted the intimate link between pastoral concerns and the necessary ministries to meet these same concerns. Thus, the APMC investigated “the theological context and the experiential reality of the Church’s ministries”; it focused on the “endeavor to make the ministries of our Churches more relevant to our times and better suited to meet the needs of our peoples” (FAPA I, 67-68).

The colloquium proceeded with the awareness that each local Church as she is led by her servant Lord “has to discover time and again what ministries and what ministerial structures she requires in order to fulfill her mission to offer to a human society the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ” (FAPA I, 72). In a word, the APMC was about developing “inculturated ministries.” The gathering strongly affirmed that “Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things” (FAPA I, 72)—including her ministries and ministerial structures.

The APMC was not about getting additional workers for Church apostolates; its focus was development of “appropriate” ministries, inculturated ministries. The APMC noted: “The servant Church can never adequately exercise her ministeriality through one uniform type of ministry”; the Church accomplishes mission “by creating new forms of ministries, alongside the existing ones.... The exact form of these ministries will depend to a great extent on the local situations in our countries” (FAPA I, 78).

A 1988 FABC assembly noted: “Inculturation appears to us as indispensable to prepare Christian communities and their leaders for dialogue.... Hence we suggest that the process of inculturation in our Christian communities be deepened and that the formators (pastors, seminary professors, catechists, community organizers) be given specific training in inculturation...” (FAPA I, 311). The process of fostering inculturated ministries in Asia remains an ongoing FABC commitment.

(8) Links with Spirituality. The Second FABC Plenary Assembly in 1978 focused on “Prayer—The Life of the Church of Asia”; it was held in Calcutta, India, the land of prayer

and pilgrimage centers where the Christian ashram movement has flourished in recent years. The final 1978 statement is a rich resource for appreciating how the Church can both give and receive from the spiritual treasury of Asia's venerable religions. This is a fertile ground for inculturation.

Asia's bishops noted: "In keeping with the economy of the Incarnation..., the prayer-life of our local Churches should 'take over the riches of our nations, which have been given to Christ as inheritance.' Important above all, in our present context, are those ways of prayer which have been developed by the native genius of our peoples.... We are daily more convinced that the Spirit is leading us in our time, not to some dubious syncretism (which we all rightly reject), but to an integration—profound and organic in character—of all that is best in our traditional ways of prayer and worship, into the treasury of our Christian heritage" (FAPA I, 34-35).

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

The FABC Theological Advisory Commission has also shown the "inculturation potential" of Asia's religions. They write: "The life in the Spirit, which is spirituality, must be attuned to and reflect the experience of the Spirit by a people in their culture and tradition. For we know that the Spirit is present and active among peoples of Asia, in their histories, traditions, cultures and religions. *Inculturation will be thus a meeting of the Spirit with the Spirit*, fostering the bonds of spiritual communion and solidarity with the people among whom the local Church lives and grows [emphasis added]. The spiritual riches and religious values by which the people of our continent have been nourished through millennia and centuries must flow into the life of the local Church to enrich it" (FABC Papers 60, 29).

(9) The "Asian Way" of Being Church. The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly in Indonesia used a phrase that has captured the imagination of many Asian Christians; the bishops' final statement speaks about "a new way of being Church." The phrase is meant to envision "alternate ways of being Church in the Asia of the 1990s." Several key dimensions of this "new" community were noted: the Church is to be "a communion of communities," a "participatory Church," a "prophetic sign," a "Spirit-filled community" (FAPA I, 287-288).

For some unfamiliar with the growth of the local Churches in Asia after Vatican II, the phrase "new way of being Church" may raise questions. The phrase implies no rejection of essential dimensions of ecclesiology; it attempts to capture the aspirations of Asian Christians to live their faith in the Christian community in an "Asian way." This "new way of being Church ... is nothing more and nothing less than a following of Jesus-in-mission, an authentic discipleship in the context of Asia.... For the spirituality of the new way of being Church is the spirituality of those who place their complete trust in the Lord." Their lives are marked by "Gospel values [that] resonate deeply with the cultures of Asia"

(FAPA I, 288). In a word, the phrase expresses well the deep desire to be an inculturated Christian community.

Building on the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly and its vision of “a new way of being Church,” the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000 spoke about “the challenge of discerning the Asian way.” While noting that “Asia is a cultural mosaic shining with its rich diversity,” Asia’s bishops stated their position: “We are committed to the emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia. This means that the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life” (FAPA III, 8).

The bishops noted: “For thirty years [since the founding of the FABC in 1970], as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another.... 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’.... Inculturation, dialogue, justice, and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do.” Rejoicing in the “Asian Way” of being Church and seeing it as a gift of the Spirit, the bishops stated: “We are aware that this Asianness, founded on solid values, is a special gift the world is waiting” (FAPA III, 8-9). This is Asia’s gift to the entire Church.

(10) Special Themes—Not to be Lost. This final section is, in fact, a kind of potpourri of many smaller insights on inculturation from the FABC perspective. One will not find a detailed “theology of inculturation” in the FABC material, which is decidedly pastoral in its orientation. However, solid theological underpinnings are found in several FABC documents. Some brief “theological roots” are noted.

The Church as a pilgrim in history “needs to be conformed to Jesus and his Reign, lest the quality of her witness be impaired.... The same conformity of the Church to her master is the decisive theological foundation for the inculturation of the local Churches” (FAPA II, 201); in a particular way, this is related to the theology of the Incarnation (FAPA I, 14, 34, 46).

In several places the FABC notes that inculturation will follow the pattern of the paschal mystery. “This Paschal Mystery thus constitutes the law and meaning of the life and mission of the Church. The process of incarnation/inculturation thus calls for the process of death and resurrection, so that the Church, and the local Church in its own time and place, may become truly the sign and instrument ... [of] the Crucified and Risen Lord” (FABC Papers 60, 34). FABC notes the process of inculturation: “This necessary but painful and complex process is the cross and resurrection of inculturation” (FAPA I, 150-151); it also “demands a *kenosis* modeled after that of Jesus [and] ... *Kenosis* implies death and resurrection” (FAPA I, 331).

Several additional themes related to inculturation surface in the FABC corpus of documents. One finds an emphasis on the theology of harmony (FAPA I, 249, 317-322; FAPA II, 163-164, 229-298). Special care must be taken to preserve the cultures of Asia’s many indigenous peoples (FAPA III, 227-229). The Church appreciates her task of promoting a culture of integral life (FAPA IV, 18) and the challenge to evangelize culture (FAPA IV, 33-34). The

“faith-culture” dynamic should receive special attention by the Church (FAPA III, 28-29). Other FABC topics relevant to inculturation could be noted; those mentioned here suffice to emphasize the continuing role of Asia’s dynamic Churches in the whole inculturation process.

Conclusion. This presentation has focused on the dialogue of faith and culture in Asia; it has surfaced ten thematic insights of the FABC. In this endeavor, the journey of the Churches in Asia to become “truly local Churches” and “truly Asian in all things” has emerged; they struggle to en flesh “a new way of being Church” in the Asia of the third millennium.

This journey of nearly four decades, since the beginnings of the FABC in 1970, has been perceptively described in the final document of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000. The “call of the Spirit to the local Churches in Asia ... to be truly inculturated local Churches” can be understood as “a concerted series of movements toward a renewed Church,” captured in eight overarching movements.

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

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

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