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Telling the Story of Jesus in Asia

The Message of the First Asian Mission Congress of FABC

Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18-22, 2006

Jesus lives! Christ is Risen! Our Savior is with us; his life is our life. These affirmations capture our sentiments as the participants of the 2006 Asian Mission Congress. Gathered in Thailand, October 18-22, 2006, we express the same joyful faith as Christ's first disciples, who proclaimed: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn. 20:18); "It is the Lord" (Jn. 21:7); "It is true: The Lord has risen" (Lk. 24:34); "My Lord and my God" (Jn. 20:28). The first disciples rejoiced: their friend, their teacher, their prophet, their compassionate healer, their beloved was miraculously—mysteriously—alive. Fear and disappointment, trauma and devastation became faith and rejoicing. Who could have expected? Who would have dreamed?

Jesus comes personally to his followers. He calls them by name: Mary of Magdala, Thomas, Peter, James, John. They recognize him. He speaks words of peace and reconciliation. The disbelieving disciples are transformed. Yet, Jesus, the Crucified-Risen One, expands the dimensions of their faith. He challenges them further. He sends them on mission: "Go forth to every part of the world, and proclaim the Good News to the whole of creation" (Mk. 16:15); "Go forth and make all nations my disciples" (Mt. 28:19); "You are witnesses to all this" (Lk. 24:48); "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn. 20:21). And so the disciples set out to tell the Jesus story. They go to places, near and far: James to Jerusalem, Peter and Paul to Rome, Thomas to India. Indeed, to encounter the Risen Lord is to be sent on mission.

In God's gracious providence, over 1,000 of us contemporary disciples of Jesus assembled for the first-ever Asian Mission Congress. A spacious, sprawling hotel in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, became the New Upper Room. We gathered to share our experience, to tell our stories, to meet other disciples from across the vast Asian continent, from Lebanon to Japan, from Kazakhstan and Mongolia to Indonesia. We heard inspiring stories, too numerous to count, stories of life, faith, heroism, service, prayer, dialogue, and proclamation. An infectious mood of joy pervaded us. No one doubted the active presence of the befriending Spirit of God. Together we celebrated our faith and our life as disciples of Jesus through sharing, listening, praying, celebrating the Eucharist. The multiplicity of cultures and languages added light and color to the celebration of our one common faith.

This pastoral-catechetical congress explored a unique methodology of evangelizing: story-telling or faith-sharing. We listened to narratives about the elderly, families, youth, children and women, BECs¹. We heard perspectives from Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the

¹ Basic Ecclesial Communities.

Tribals. Contemporary contexts were highlighted: Consumerism, Media, Migrants, and Interfaith Dialogue. How significant these are to the mission of evangelization in the present context of ethnic conflicts and religious tensions!

The Story of Jesus was the unique thread, weaving all these life experiences into one grand narrative. All the colors, peoples, languages, cultures, values, religions, and arts of Asia's peoples formed one grand tapestry. Lord, how marvelous are your ways! How deep your designs!

The world is full of stories. Human life is unimaginable without stories. Stories tell us who we are and they link us with other peoples, all across Asia and even throughout the world. Through them we explore life's deeper dimensions, including the mystery of our own being. Stories impact our life and our faith. They transform perspectives and values. They form community. Stories contain a hidden dynamism and transforming power, incalculably so when they emerge from experience. They are remembered much longer than lessons learned in school or books that are read.

Jesus was known as a story-teller. As a *rabbi*, a teacher, his favorite method of instruction was telling parables, insightful vignettes that revealed the depths of God's Reign. Who does not know the parable of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son? Jesus' parables challenge us with new possibilities in our relations with God and all our brothers and sisters. Many might think of Jesus, who was born in Asia, as merely akin to the great Asian wisdom teachers, such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Gandhi. But more marvelously, we Christians believe that Jesus is the God who became Man, sent by the Father. He is God's love story in the flesh—God's Incarnate Story.

The Asian Mission Congress sought to en flesh many of the challenges found in Pope John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA): "narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do" (EA 20f). Pope John Paul II recommends following "an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching" (EA 20g).

The local Churches in Asia can be faithful to Christ's mission mandate by telling and retelling the Jesus story both in words and effective deeds of service. Repeatedly, the Church communicates its faith that originates in its experience of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, the Great Storyteller, guides the Church in all situations to tell, especially through the witness of a transformed life: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands"; it is none other than "the Word of Life" (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1). Mission means keeping the story of Jesus alive, forming community, showing compassion, befriending the "other," carrying the Cross, witnessing to the living person of Jesus.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus observed: "Did we not feel our hearts on fire as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us (Lk. 24:32)?" For us, the way to Chiang Mai has become our Emmaus road. At the Mission Congress we shared our experiences of faith. Stories from Bangladesh and Hong Kong, from Thailand and China,

from Japan and Nepal—from all across the Asian continent—set our hearts on fire. Echoes of *Ecclesia in Asia* resounded loudly: “A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire” (EA 23b). The Church in Asia is to be “a community aflame with missionary zeal to make Jesus known, loved and followed” (EA 19a). Jesus casts fire on the earth and prays that it be ablaze (*cf.* Lk. 12:49). “The Church in Asia shares his zeal that this fire be re-kindled now” (EA 18c). We know that our 2006 Mission Congress, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences and its Office of Evangelization, thanks to the Holy Spirit, was able to set many hearts ablaze.

The Asian Mission Congress, particularly the exchange of our faith-stories, has provided new perspectives for our task of dialoguing with the peoples (especially the poor), the religions, and the cultures of Asia (*cf.* FABC V: 3.1.2). The stories of Asia’s poor today (beggars, people living with AIDS, migrants, the outcasts) must be read within Jesus’ story and his Paschal Mystery. Asia’s many venerable religions may be seen within God’s universal design of salvation — that all would be saved (I Tm. 2:4). The riches of Asian cultures can be a most suitable vehicle for communicating the Jesus story. This task has “a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia” (EA 21b). The insightful “triple dialogue” promoted by the FABC for over three decades can be accomplished in “new and surprising ways” (EA 20f) – one of which is in the exchange of gifts through the sharing of our life’s story.

At this First Asian Mission Congress we rediscovered the “joy of evangelization.” Pope Paul VI’s words ring true; effective mission is to be done “with ever increasing love, zeal and joy” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, EN 1). Jesus’ disciples must “proclaim with joy the Good News which one has come to know through the Lord’s mercy” (EN 80).

We, the Congress participants, commit ourselves to carry home to our own communities new insights into the story of Jesus, particularly its Asian dimensions. We seek to be on fire, ready to bring home vivid and inspiring stories, which could light the flame of mission in young hearts. We wish to follow Jesus’ words to the possessed person (the scriptural passage we adopted at the Congress): “Go home to your own people and tell them what the Lord in his mercy has done for you” (Mk. 5:19).

We seek to approach evangelization in an Asian way, an evocative way through stories, parables and symbols, a method so characteristic of Asian pedagogy, as Pope John Paul II has so perceptively noted. It is, therefore, a way of sharing our faith with others, an authentic path of dialogue. Still we who believe in this distinctive approach to evangelization, will also “not be timid when God opens the door for us to proclaim explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (FABC V: 4.3).

On this World Mission Sunday we thank the Lord of the harvest for the countless missionaries who have come to serve in Asia through the centuries. We prayerfully commend to the Lord’s love and protection the thousands from Asia who now serve in various parts of the globe.

We beseech Mary, our Mother and the Star of Evangelization, to intercede for us that our hearts may remain on fire with love of Jesus her Son, whose story we shall tell and retell through words, deeds and the witness of our lives.