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Asian Church FABC Perspectives

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FABC at Fifty Years: Negotiating Challenges and Seizing Opportunities

Jonathan Y. Tan

This article explores the five decades of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) theological legacy in its diverse statements and documents. Over this period, the FABC has been articulating a new way of being church – church as a “community of communities” in anticipation of synodality, doing theology, and bearing witness to Jesus and God’s Reign in the intercultural and plurireligious societies across Asia. Its many statements and documents speak of the need to listen to the active presence and saving power of God’s Spirit at work in the multitudes of Asia, so to be able to witness the salvific message of Jesus and the presence of God’s Reign in a threefold dialogue with the cultures, religions, and marginalizing life experiences across postcolonial Asia. It addresses the issues of harmony amidst much cultural and religious strife, as well as harmony and care for the environment predating *Laudato Si’*.

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Abbreviations used:

- FAPA I:** Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arévalo, eds., *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).
- FAPA II:** Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1992-1996* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997).
- FAPA III:** Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 3: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1997-2001* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002).

Books, 2014) and *The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Bearing Witness to the Gospel and the Reign of God in Asia* (Fortress Press/ISPCK, 2021).

At his first general audience after his September 2024 apostolic visitation to Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, and Singapore, the late Pope Francis was grateful that he was able to fulfil his dream he had as a “young Jesuit” to be able to travel to Asia as an “old Pope.” Observing that some Catholics are “still too Eurocentric” in their understanding of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis noted that his experiences in these four nations revealed to him that “the church is much bigger – much bigger than Rome or Europe – and, let me say, much more alive in those countries.”¹ Specifically, Pope Francis rightly noted that the challenge of being the church in Asia is the myriad and deep-rooted cultures, religions, and philosophies across Asia. Asia, where almost two-thirds of the world’s population lives, is defined by the diversity and plurality of the world’s ethnicities, cultures, philosophies, and religious traditions. These religious traditions are very much alive and influential because they are intertwined intimately with the daily lives of millions of Asians and nourish their present spiritual needs. The Vietnamese American theologian, Peter Phan sums it well when he says that “it is in Asia that the question of religious pluralism is literally a matter of life and death,” and more importantly, “the future of Asian Christianity hangs in balance depending on how religious pluralism is understood and lived out.”²

The Challenges and Opportunities of Asian Diversity and Pluralism

Although contemporary theological insights and practices emerging from Asia may not be as well known globally compared to their counterparts from Europe and the Americas, nevertheless they are no less important for Global Catholicism, as Pope Francis himself pointed

¹ Pope Francis, “General Audience,” Saint Peter’s Square, Wednesday, 18 September 2024 <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2024/documents/20240918-udienza-generale.html>.

² Peter Phan, “Review of Introducing Theologies of Religion, by Paul Knitter,” *Horizons* (2003): 113-117, at 117.

out after his apostolic visitation to Southeast Asia. More importantly, Pope Francis' astute observations echoed what the Asian Catholic Bishops, through the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), have consistently addressed in their theological understanding of, as well as pastoral responses to the diverse pluralism of the Asian milieu with its manifold peoples, cultures and religions through the five decades of its existence. From its establishment, the FABC has sought to steer a middle way, eschewing all forms of religious exclusivism and triumphalism, and perceiving religious pluralism as an innate and unique aspect of the Asian socio-religious landscape. Behind the scenes, over a span of fifty years the FABC has articulated a new way of being church, doing theology, and bearing witness as minority faith communities to Jesus and the Reign of God in diverse intercultural and plurireligious societies across postcolonial Asia.

More significantly, the FABC has consistently proceeded on the basis that the Asian milieu, with its rich diversity and pluralism of religions, cultures, and philosophical worldviews, requires a distinctively Asian approach to doing theology that is sensitive to such diversity and pluralism. At the Asian Bishops' meeting with Pope Paul VI in Manila (1970), the Asian Catholic Bishops acknowledged that Asia is "a continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colours" (ABM, art. 7).³ The first FABC Plenary Assembly in Taipei, 1974 recognized that the great religious traditions of Asia are

significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design and 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 (FABC I, art. 14).⁴

³ *FAPA I*, 4.

⁴ *FAPA I*, 14.

For the FABC, the question is rather how the Catholic Church could be at home within the diversity and plurality of the Asian milieu: “We do not ask any longer about the relationship of the Church to other cultures and religions. We are rather searching for the place and role of the Church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world” (Theses on Interreligious Dialogue, art. 0.8).⁵ This comes as no surprise, because many of the Asian Catholic bishops themselves have been born into, and are living amidst such rich diversity and plurality. The Indian Jesuit theologian, Michael Amaladoss notes that the Asian Catholic bishops accept Asian religions as “significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design of salvation” because they have “*a living experience of other religions*.”⁶ In other words, they and their fellow Christians have non-Christian family members, friends, neighbours, and colleagues.

At the same time, many of these Asian Catholic Bishops also have firsthand experiences of sectarian xenophobes and communalists, ultranationalists, as well as religious zealots and fundamentalists who reject such diversity and plurality, and are seeking to impose their narrow vision as normative through coercion, harassment, and at times, violence. As a result, the FABC views diversity and pluralism as lying at the heart of what it means to be Asian, because, ironically, in the absence of such diversity and pluralism, there is no room for the Christian Gospel in Asia, a continent dominated by the world’s great religions. In particular, the FABC observed that in the Asian context:

Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as “live and let live”. The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness (BIRA IV/11, art. 15).⁷

⁵ FABC Office of Theological Concerns (formerly Theological Advisory Commission) [hereinafter “FABC-OTC”], *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, FABC Papers No. 48 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1987), 3.

⁶ Michael Amaladoss, “The Challenges of Mission Today,” in William Jenkinson and Helene O’Sullivan, eds., *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 359-397, at 362, emphasis added.

⁷ *FAPAI*, 321.

Threefold Dialogue

Meeting in Thailand in 1974, the First FABC Plenary Assembly declares that the Asian Church is called to engage “in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions” of Asia (FABC I, art. 12).⁸ For the FABC, the great religious traditions of Asia are:

significant and positive elements in the economy of God’s design and 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 (FABC I, art. 14).⁹

The FABC subsequently developed this nascent dialogue with Asian religions to its well-known *triple dialogue*, i.e., a *dialogue* with the threefold reality of Asian religions, cultures, and poverty. For the FABC, dialogue is “an integral part of evangelization” (BIMA II, art. 14),¹⁰ “intrinsic to the very life of the Church,” (BIRA I, art. 9),¹¹ as well as an “essential mode of all evangelization” (Message of the 1979 International Congress on Mission, art. 19).¹² More particularly, “dialogue is ecclesial: it is the very being and life of the Church as mission” (Theses on Interreligious Dialogue, art. 3.3).¹³

On the relationship between dialogue on the one hand, and mission and evangelization on the other hand, the FABC takes the position that “interreligious dialogue flows from the nature of the Church, a community in pilgrimage journeying with peoples of other faiths towards the Kingdom that is to come” (BIRA IV/4, art. 2).¹⁴ On this basis, the

⁸ FAPA I, 14.

⁹ FAPA I, 14.

¹⁰ FAPA I, 100.

¹¹ FAPA I, 111.

¹² FAPA I, 131.

¹³ FABC-OTC, *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, 9.

¹⁴ FAPA I, 300.

FABC explains that dialogue *does not preclude* the need for the proclamation of the Christian Gospel. There could be a moment when “we shall not be timid when God opens the door for us to *proclaim* explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (FABC V, art. 4.3).¹⁵ Hence, while “mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode”:

The proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, the witness of Christians and of Christian communities to the values of the Kingdom of God, *a proclamation through Christlike deeds*. For Christians in Asia, to proclaim Christ means above all to live like him, in the midst of our neighbours of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds - this is the first call to the Churches in Asia” (FABC V, 4.1).¹⁶

FABC V identifies the triple dialogue with the Christian mission imperative and concludes thus:

Mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God’s Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. *Mission will mean a dialogue with Asia’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions* (FABC V, art. 3.1.2).¹⁷

In its Seventh Plenary Statement, the FABC affirms that the “most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*.”¹⁸ It is only through such witnessing that the “Asian people will recognize the Gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God.”¹⁹ This witness of life is needed more than ever in

¹⁵ *FAPA I*, 282, emphasis in the original.

¹⁶ *FAPA I*, 281-282, emphasis in the original.

¹⁷ *FAPA I*, 280.

¹⁸ *FAPA III*, 12, emphasis added.

¹⁹ *FAPA III*, 12-13.

response to the challenges posed by sectarian violence and religious strife in many parts of Asia. Here, FABC VII reiterates FABC V, art. 6.2: Asian Catholics are called to “live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle and suffer for a better human life” because “the human person created in Christ, redeemed by Christ and united by Christ to himself is the way for the Church, the Church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity.”²⁰ Likewise, the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly challenges Asian Catholics to emulate Jesus in serving the peoples of Asia:

Like Jesus, we ‘have to pitch our tents’ in the midst of all humanity building a better world, but especially among the suffering and the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden of Asia. In profound ‘solidarity with suffering humanity’ and led by the Spirit of life, we need to immerse ourselves in Asia’s cultures of poverty and deprivation, from whose depths the aspirations for love and life are most poignant and compelling. Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life, in the way of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity (FABC VI, 14.2).²¹

Hence, we find the FABC, in recognizing the importance of mission as dialogue and calling for the Asian Church to be a *sacrament of unity and harmony in Asia*, is making an especially prophetic and powerful theological statement in response to the challenges of ongoing religious strife, racial-ethnic violence, and political conflicts which have devastated many parts of contemporary Asia. Clearly, proclamation without dialogue runs the risk of aggressive proselytism which plays right into the hands of religious fundamentalists and zealots who are looking for convenient excuses to crack down on Asian Christians. As far as the FABC is concerned, the Asian Church will have “to discern, in dialogue with Asian peoples and Asian realities, what deeds the Lord wills to be done so that all humankind may be gathered together in harmony as his family” (FABC V, 6.3).²²

²⁰ *FAPA I*, 283.

²¹ *FAPA II*, 8.

²² *FAPA I*, 283.

Theology of Harmony

Reflecting on the diverse realities of Asian pluralism, the FABC notes that “there is an Asian approach to reality, a world-view, wherein the whole is the sum-total of the web of relationships and interaction of the various parts with each other, in a word, *harmony*, a word which resonates with all Asian cultures” (Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony, 6).²³ BIRA IV/11 explains this vision of harmony as follows:

When we look into our traditional cultures and heritages, we note that they are inspired by a vision of unity. The universe is perceived as an organic whole with the web of relations knitting together each and every part of it. The nature and the human are not viewed as antagonistic to each other, but as chords in a universal symphony (BIRA IV/11, 6).²⁴

Amidst the contention and strife which often arise in intercultural and plurireligious Asian communities, the FABC is emphatic on the need to explore new pathways on how the Asian Church could continue to be a sacrament of harmony and unity. The Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC explains this challenge succinctly: “In an Asia marked by diversity and torn by conflicts, the Church must in a special way be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (FABC V, 4.2).²⁵

In response, the FABC’s documents speak of the need to listen to the active presence and saving power of God’s Spirit at work in the multitudes of Asia, so to be able to witness the salvific message of Jesus and the presence of God’s Reign amidst the diverse cultures, religions, and marginalizing life experiences across postcolonial Asia. Specifically, the Third FABC Plenary Assembly urges Asian Catholics to “listen to the Spirit at work in the many communities of believers who live and experience their own faith, who share and celebrate it in their own social, cultural and religious history,” accompanying them “in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute,” and becoming “sensitively attuned to the work of the

²³ *FAPA II*, 298.

²⁴ *FAPA I*, 319.

²⁵ *FAPA I*, 282, emphasis in the original.

Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion” (FABC III, art. 8.2).²⁶

Despite “religious, ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, one can perceive a unity of values and perceptions” that is epitomized in the spirit of harmony because “harmony, in the created universe, within the human family, and internalized in the individual person, has for centuries been an ideal to which peoples of the region have striven” (Harmony among Believers of Living Faiths, 5).²⁷ The Fourth FABC Plenary Assembly: “Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision” (FABC IV, 3.1.10).²⁸ FABC VI speaks of the experience of harmony within an overarching and holistic vision of unity in the Asian milieu:

We envision a life *with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy. It is a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for the earth... At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian *reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness. (FABC VI, 10).²⁹

At the same time, the FABC acknowledges that “harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as ‘live and let live.’ The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness” (BIRA IV/11, 15)³⁰:

Harmony does not consist in levelling off differences in order to arrive at consensus at any cost. Avoiding controversies and bypassing disagreements do not pave the way to harmony. To say that all religions are the same is simplistic and does not promote honest dialogue, but to argue that religions do not meet at all would block any creative interaction” (BIRA V/3, 7).³¹

²⁶ *FAPA I*, 57.

²⁷ *FAPA II*, 174.

²⁸ *FAPA I*, 181.

²⁹ *FAPA II*, 5, emphasis in the original.

³⁰ *FAPA I*, 321.

³¹ *FAPA II*, 158.

The FABC further explains that “Christianity teaches a threefold harmony: harmony with God, among humans, and with the whole universe. Union with a personal God is viewed as the source of all genuine harmony” (BIRA V/4, 5).³² Harmony is also divinely inspired, because “God is the source and summit of all harmony. He is the foundation and the fulfilment of it” (Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony, 5.1.1.4).³³ The marvellous mystery of unity and communion of the Trinity is a model as well as a powerful challenge in our efforts to create harmony in all areas of life (BIRA IV/11, 7).³⁴ The harmony of the universe finds its origin in the one Creator God, and human harmony should flow from the communion of Father and Son in the Spirit, and ought to be continually nourished by the ‘circumincersion’ (*perichoresis*) in divine life (Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony, 4.11.3).³⁵

Harmony and the Care for the Environment

An important development that emerges from the FABC’s theology of harmony is how harmony undergirds the FABC’s theological reflections on the care for the environment and ecology. Peter Phan points out that the FABC is “probably the first official church body to be deeply concerned about ecology.”³⁶ He explains that the FABC is unique and original in rooting its theology of care for the environment which encompasses harmony “with God, with oneself, with others, and with nature.”³⁷ Without a doubt, on the question of harmony with the universe and the environment, the FABC has been prescient and anticipated what Pope Francis would articulate so clearly in *Laudato Si’* as the challenges and tasks for all of humanity on the question of the care for the environment and ecological challenges confronting the world.

³² *FAPA II*, 164.

³³ *FAPA II*, 288.

³⁴ *FAPA I*, 319.

³⁵ *FAPA II*, 285.

³⁶ Peter C. Phan, *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 295.

³⁷ Phan, *Asian Christianities*, 296.

As early as 1986, when care for the environment and ecology has yet to emerge as an important theological question in Europe and the Americas, the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the FABC poses this question for reflection and action:

Asian religious cultures see human beings, society and the whole universe as intimately related and interdependent. Fragmentation and division contradict this vision. In the light of the Gospel, how does the Christian base the struggle for peace, justice and wholeness in this holistic vision provided by the ancient religions of Asia? (FABC IV, 3.1.10).³⁸

Meeting in Sukabumi, Indonesia in 1988, BIRA IV/11 explores the “ecological question” through the lens of “harmony and balance of the natural environment” in relation to human life. It notes that “the destiny of humankind is inextricably bound up with the way they cultivate the earth and share its resources,” and elaborates on this close interconnection between harmony, environment, and ecology as follows:

Harmony and peace call for respect for the earth. She is the mother of whose dust we are made and to whose womb we shall all return. The usurpation of the fruit of the earth by some and deprivation of others of the same results in the rupture of harmony among peoples” (BIRA IV/11, 13).³⁹

In response to this issue, BIRA IV/11 makes the following pastoral recommendation:

Respect for nature and compassion for all living things are ingrained in the Asian religions and cultural traditions. Today in Asia owing to many factors, the natural environment with which man should be in harmony is being wantonly destroyed through deforestation, industrial pollution, depositing of nuclear wastes, etc. Christian life and witness should manifest greater sensitivity to nature and to all sentiments. Hence, we recommend that Christians join forces and cooperate with all movements of followers of other religions and secular groups engaged in maintaining balance and harmony in our ecosystem, and protecting nature and its riches from destruction (BIRA IV/11, recommendation 2).⁴⁰

³⁸ *FAPA I*, 181.

³⁹ *FAPA I*, 320.

⁴⁰ *FAPA I*, 323.

BIRA IV/12, which met in Hua Hin, Thailand, in 1991, takes it one step further when it highlights how Asian religious traditions acknowledge the sacredness of nature and invite Asians to live in harmony with nature. It contrasts this with human greed which leads to the misuse and plundering of nature, resulting in a serious threat to both humans and the world that they live in (BIRA IV/12, 33).⁴¹ BIRA IV/12 then makes the case that Asians of all faith persuasions have a duty to care and protect the environment, grounding this duty within the framework of harmony:

Believers in any place are called to come together in silence and love before creation, to accept the God-given order and harmony of nature, to counteract the forces of exploitation and ruin. Harmony with nature brings harmony of hearts and harmony in human relationships” (BIRA IV/12, 34).⁴²

Building upon BIRA IV/11 and BIRA IV/12, *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony* is able to draw attention to how disharmony affects the environment and ecology negatively. It cites as examples the indiscriminate logging and deforestation, soil erosion, despoiling of watershed areas, pollution of wetlands and fishing zones caused by the use of coastal waters for waste dumping, ruin of farmland, rise in deaths as a result of harmful air pollution, the toxic poisoning of slum-dwellers in Bhopal, India, and fatal toxic spills in South Korea and Thailand (*Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, 1.3).⁴³ It further develops the insights of BIRA IV/11 and BIRA IV/12 as follows:

Harmony with nature requires humans to reject an anthropocentric view of the universe, and to respect all of creation as the *vestigia Dei*. This respect generates a harmony which reflects God’s providential love for his creatures. Humanity is called to discover in the universe God’s very presence (Ps 104, 109), and to cocreate with him, making the earth more fruitful (*Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, 5.1.1.3).⁴⁴

⁴¹ *FAPA I*, 330.

⁴² *FAPA I*, 331.

⁴³ *FAPA II*, 238.

⁴⁴ *FAPA II*, 287.

The robust foundations that BIRA IV/11 and BIRA IV/12 provided paved the way for the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly, which met in Manila in 1995, to articulate an elaborate theology of care for the environment. After identifying and denouncing the “forces of death” that “threatens or destroys life” across Asia (FABC VI, 7)⁴⁵ and calling attention to “movements for the protection of the environment and ecosystem linked to justice” (FABC VI, 8),⁴⁶ FABC VI proceeds to build its theology of the environment – a vision of a “holistic life” of “solidarity with every form of life and of sensitive care for the earth,” uniting Asians among themselves and “with the whole of creation into one community of life.” More importantly, it grounds its theological vision in “the Asian reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred” that regards life as sacred and draws everyone “to experience harmony and inner peace,” which “infuses ethics into all of creation” (FABC VI, 10).⁴⁷ FABC VI calls upon all Asian Christians to confront and act against all forms of death-dealing realities, including “the destruction of eco-systems” and “the tampering with life,” arguing: “As disciples we cannot serve both life and death! ... We in Asia today must prophesy on behalf of the God of life. Refusal to prophesy and speak against the forces of death is to fail in serving life!” (FABC VI, 14.3).⁴⁸ Finally, FABC VI urges everyone to seek life and collaborate against the destruction of environment and ecology:

Ecology is once again brought to our pastoral attention. And urgently so, since we see in the countries of Asia the continuing and unabated destruction of our environment ... Life, especially in a third world setting, is sacrificed at the altar of short term economic gains. The Lord, the Giver of Life, calls our discipleship in Asia into a question on the time bomb issue of ecology. Choosing life requires our discipleship to discern and act with other faiths and groups against the forces of ecological destruction” (FABC VI, 15.4).⁴⁹

⁴⁵ FAPA II, 3-4.

⁴⁶ FAPA II, 4.

⁴⁷ FAPA II, 5.

⁴⁸ FAPA II, 9.

⁴⁹ FAPA II, 11.

The Precursor to Synodality: The Asian Church as a “Communion of Communities”

The FABC was prescient in laying the foundations of *synodality* in Asia decades before it was fleshed out by, and became the new ecclesiological paradigm under Pope Francis. In responding to Pope Francis’ call for a more synodal Catholic Church in Asia, the FABC is not starting from the beginning but building on the foundations laid by the Asian Catholic Bishops over five decades. Taking Vatican II’s vision of collegiality as a starting point and anticipating Pope Francis’ call for synodality, FABC V articulated the vision of the Asian Church as “a communion of communities, where laity, religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers,” called together by the Word of God which leads them to “form small Christian communities” where “they pray and share together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are ‘in one mind and heart’” (FABC V, 8.1.1).⁵⁰ This understanding was reinforced by the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly in Manila, which reiterates the need for the postcolonial Asian Church to move towards “a new way of being Church, a Church that is committed to becoming ‘a community of communities,’ and a credible sign of liberation and salvation” (FABC VI, 3).⁵¹ The Fifth Plenary Assembly in Bandung also explains that this new way of being Church as a “communion of communities” is marked by three characteristics: it is participatory, dialogical, and prophetic.

First, the Church in Asia is called to be “a participatory Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to all the faithful – lay, religious, and cleric alike – are recognized and activated, so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized” (FABC V, 8.1.2).⁵² Second, the Church in Asia is summoned to be “a Church that faithfully and lovingly witnesses to the Risen Lord and reaches out to people of other faiths and persuasions in a dialogue of life towards the integral liberation

⁵⁰ *FAPA I*, 287.

⁵¹ *FAPA II*, 3.

⁵² *FAPA I*, 287, italics in the original.

of all” (FABC V, 8.1.3).⁵³ This echoes the insight of the First FABC Plenary Assembly, which views the Asian “church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions - in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own” (FABC I, 12).⁵⁴ Third, She is challenged to be “a leaven of transformation in this world and serves as a prophetic sign daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come” (FABC V, 8.1.4).⁵⁵

Building on the Bandung Statement, the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly (Manila 1995) outlines an Asian vision of synodality which highlights “a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples” within this “vision of holistic life, life that is achieved and entrusted to every person and every community of persons, regardless of gender, creed or culture, class, or colour” (FABC VI, 10).⁵⁶ Building on the foregoing, it articulates a detailed vision and praxis for Asian Catholics:

Our solidarity requires a resolve to work with our Asian sisters and brothers in liberating our societies from whatever oppresses and degrades human life and creation, most especially from sin. ... Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life in the way of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity. With our Asian sisters and brothers, we will strive to foster communion among Asian peoples who are threatened by glaring economic, social, and political imbalances. With them we will explore ways of utilizing the gifts of our diverse religions, cultures, and languages to achieve a richer and deeper Asian unity. We build bridges of solidarity and reconciliation with peoples of other faiths and will join hands with everyone in Asia in forming a true community of creation (FABC VI, 14.2).⁵⁷

⁵³ *FAPA I*, 287-288, italics in the original.

⁵⁴ *FAPA I*, 14.

⁵⁵ *FAPA I*, 288, italics in the original.

⁵⁶ *FAPA II*, 5.

⁵⁷ *FAPA II*, 8.

Finally, the FABC has implemented the principles and proposals outlined in FABC V and FABC VI in the *Asian Integral Pastoral Approach towards a New Way of Being Church in Asia* (AsIPA) series of workshops. This series of AsiPA workshops have as their goal of building “a participatory way of being Church,” where the “whole community of the faithful are enabled to actively share in the integral, global vision and mission of Christ, in the multi-dimensional context of Asia.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ *FAPAII*, 108.