
A New Way of Being Church in Asia: The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) at the Service of Life in Pluralistic Asia

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This article delves deeply into the official papers of The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' (FABC) to reveal a uniquely Asian ecclesiology. This "new way of doing church" is rooted in six predominant propositions: (1) the Asian Church is called to be a "communion of communities" that is (2) shaped by, and responds to the immense diversity and pluralism of Asia, (3) under girded by a commitment and service to life, (4) inspired by an overarching vision of harmony, (5) oriented toward a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, and (6) seeking to build the Kingdom of God in Asia.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a transnational body comprising 14 Asian Catholic Bishops' Conferences as full members, viz., Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam, as well as ten associate members: Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.¹ The foundation for the FABC was laid at a historic meeting of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops in Manila during the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Philippines in November 1970. Commenting on that groundbreaking event, Indian theologian Felix Wilfred notes: "Never before had Asian bishops come together to exchange experiences and to deliberate jointly on common questions and problems facing the continent. The meeting marked the beginning of a new consciousness of the many traditional links that united the various peoples of this region of the globe" (Wilfred 1992: xxiii).

Since that momentous date, it would certainly be an understatement to say that the FABC has had a significant impact on the development, orientation, and growth of the spiritual and theological life of the Asian Catholic Church for more than three decades. Wilfred himself acknowledges that "the FABC has created horizontal communication

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between the bishops and the bishops' conferences; it has fostered a spirit of collegiality, communion, and cooperation among them" (Wilfred 1992: xxix). In a similar vein, missiologist Stephen Bevans, writing in 1996, observes that "the FABC could look back on twenty-five years of activity which had yielded an impressive body of documents that are incredibly rich, amazingly visionary, and truly worth careful reading and study" (Bevans 1996:2). This "impressive body of documents" is the result of seven Plenary Assemblies,² consultations, congresses and colloquia, Bishops' Institutes on Lay Apostolate (BILA), Missionary Apostolate (BIMA), Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue (BIRA), Social Action (BISA), and Social Communication (BISCOM), as well as the Faith Encounters in Social Action (FEISA), and important position papers from the FABC Office of Theological Concerns (formerly known as the FABC Theological Advisory Commission).

In its official documents, the FABC has proceeded on the basis that the Asian continent, with its teeming masses and their rich diversity and plurality of religions, cultures, and philosophical worldviews require a distinctively Asian ecclesiology, a "new way of being church" that is at home in such diversity and pluralism.³ In this paper, I would like to propose that a careful and in-depth analysis of its official documents⁴ reveal the emergence of a uniquely Asian ecclesiology that can be summarized in the following six propositions: (1) the Asian Church is called to be a "communion of communities" that is (2) shaped by, and responds to the immense diversity and pluralism of Asia, (3) under girded by a commitment and service to life, (4) inspired by an overarching vision of harmony, (5) oriented toward a threefold dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, and (6) seeking to build the Kingdom of God in Asia. In the rest of this paper, I will analyze critically each of these six propositions and explore their implications for the FABC's vision of a new way of being church in diverse and pluralistic Asia.

1. The Asian Church as a "Communion of Communities"

In the first decade of its existence, the FABC focused its attention on defining and exploring the implications of the "local church." This term was specifically defined by the First FABC Plenary Assembly as "the realization and enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time" (*FABC I*, art. 10) that is "incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated" (*FABC I*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992:14).⁵ Beginning in the 1980s, the FABC began to explore the idea of church as communion: "the Church is at its deepest level a *communion (koinonia)* rooted in the life of the Trinity, and thus in its essential reality a sacrament (*mysterium et sacramentum*) of the loving self-communication of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in faith, hope and love" (*FABC III*, art. 7.1, in Rosales 1992:56, italics in the original). This communion is expressed in the church as "a communion of committed disciples — be they clergy or laity — working for the liberation of Asia" (*FABC IV*, art. 4.1.3, in Rosales 1992:191). The turning point was the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly in Bandung, which coined the phrase "communion of communities":

The Church in Asia will have to be a *communion of communities*, where laity, Religious and clergy recognize and accept each other as sisters and brothers. They are called together by the word of God which, regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of

the Risen Lord, leads them to form small Christian communities (e.g., neighborhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and “covenant” communities). There, 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*, art. 8.1.1, in Rosales 1992:287)

This understanding was reinforced by the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly (Manila), which reiterated the need for the 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*, art. 3, in Eilers 1997:3). More specifically, the Fifth Plenary Assembly (Bandung) explained 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 Asian Church 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*, art. 8.1.2, in Rosales 1992:287, italics in the original). Second, it is called 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 of all” (*FABC V*, art. 8.1.3, in Rosales 1992:287–288, italics in the original). This understanding echoes the groundbreaking insight of the First FABC Plenary Assembly, which viewed 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*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992:14). Third, it is called 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*, art. 8.1.4, in Rosales 1992:288, italics in the original).

Since the Bandung meeting, the FABC has implemented its vision of bringing about a “new way of being church” by developing what it calls an “Asian Integral Pastoral Approach towards a New Way of Being Church in Asia (AsIPA)” (see Eilers 1997:107–111, 137–139; and Eilers 2002:107–112). For the FABC, AsIPA is “a participatory way of being Church,” whereby the “whole community of the faithful are enabled to actively share in the integral, global vision and mission of Christ, in the multi-dimensional [sic] context of Asia” (Eilers 1997:108).

2. The Asian Church Responding to the Immense Diversity and Pluralism of Asia

On the one hand, Asia, home to two-thirds of the world’s population, is blessed with a diversity and plurality of the world’s religious, philosophical, and socio-cultural traditions. These traditions are very much alive and influential because they are intimately intertwined with the socio-political and cultural lives of millions of Asians, as well as nourishing their present spiritual needs. But on the other hand, Asia remains the continent with the smallest Christian population despite almost two millennia of Christian missionary activity, beginning with the pan-Asian missionary endeavors of the Assyrian Church of the East in the first Christian millennium. At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, Christians account for approximately four percent of

Asia's population, and the only Asian countries with a significant Christian presence are the Philippines, South Korea, and East Timor. As an Indian commentator, Augustine Kanjamala puts it bluntly, "Asia, with the exception of a few tribal belts, is the most difficult mission in the world" (Kanjamala 1993:197). The then FABC Theological Advisory Commission (now renamed FABC Office of Theological Concerns) arrived at a similar conclusion, observing that the "Church in Asia is truly a little flock, *pusillus grex*, an infinitesimal minority in an ocean of people who profess other religious faiths or belong to other religious traditions" (FABC-TAC 1991:4). Article 13 of the 1991 *FABC Theological Consultation* identifies some reasons for this state of affairs:

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 in its traditional ecclesiastical structures and economic dependence on the west. . . . The church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and to religious and cultural identity. . . . The church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structures, in its worship, in its western-trained leadership and in its theology. (Rosales 1992:337)

The difficulty of doing Christian mission in the diverse and pluralistic Asian world cannot be underestimated. In his review of Paul Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, the Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan points out 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" (Phan 2003a:117). In response, the FABC has sought consistently to work within the diverse pluralism of the Asian milieu with its manifold peoples, cultures, and religions from its establishment, eschewing all forms of religious exclusivism, and perceiving religious pluralism as an innate and unique aspect of the Asian socio-religious landscape (Fernando 2000:864–869). While many Christians consider the diversity and plurality of postmodern Europe and North America as challenges that Christianity has to confront and overcome, for the Asian bishops, the question is rather how the Asian Church could be at home within the diversity and plurality of the Asian milieu. The following statement from the FABC's Theological Advisory Commission summarizes the situation succinctly:

In the course of the last two thousand years the church has encountered and dialogued with various peoples, cultures, and religions, with varying levels of success. Today, however, especially in Asia, in the context of the Great Religions, which are in a process of revival and renewal, the church is aware of a markedly different situation. We do not ask any longer about the relationship of the church to other cultures and religions. We are rather searching for the place and role of the church in a religiously and culturally pluralistic world. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 0.8 1987)

This comes as no surprise because the Asian bishops themselves have been born into, and are living amidst such rich diversity and plurality. They recognize that they and their fellow Christians have non-Christian family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues. At the same time, many of them also have firsthand experiences of communalists, nationalists, 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 Asian Bishops recognize that diversity and pluralism lie 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. Thus, the First FABC Plenary Assembly 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, in Rosales 1992:14)

But more importantly, the First Plenary Assembly insisted that the Asian Church is called to engage "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 it own" (*FABC I*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992:14).

One year after the conclusion of *FABC I*, *BISA II* came out, among other things, with the following statement on pluralism that would under gird all subsequent discussions on pluralism in the various FABC Plenary Assemblies and Bishops' Institutes: "Pluralism is a necessity once we work through the mediation of secular analysis and worldviews. This pluralism should not be a threat to our Christian unity, but on the contrary, a positive and creative sign that our unity is deeper than whatever the concrete technical analysis or viewpoints might show: a genuine value that emphasizes unity in diversity" (*BISA II*, art. 10, in Rosales 1992:204). For the FABC, pluralism is not as something negative,

... but a source of richness and strength: peace and harmony in Asian societies, composed as they are of many cultural, ethnic and linguistic groups, would require recognition of legitimate pluralism and respect for all the groups. Unity, peace, and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced over and promoted, since it represents richness and strength. Harmony is not simply the absence of strife, described as "life and let live." The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness. (*BISA IV/11*, art. 15, in Rosales 1992:321)

Going one step further, the Final Statement of the 1995 FABC Hindu-Christian Dialogue made it clear that the FABC viewed religious pluralism as constitutive of the Asian reality:

Beyond the extremes of inclusivism and exclusivism, pluralism is accepted in resonance with the constitutive plurality of reality. Religions, as they are manifested in history, are complementary perceptions of the ineffable divine mystery, the God-beyond-God. All religions are visions of the divine mystery. No particular religion can raise the claim of being the norm for all others. We religious believers are co-pilgrims, who

share intimate spiritual experiences and reflections with one another with concern and compassion, with genuine openness to truth and the freedom of spiritual seekers (*sadhakas*). In this process we become increasingly sensitive to human suffering and collaborate in promoting justice, peace, and ecological wholeness. (*BIRA V/3*, art. 6, in Eilers 1997:157–158)

This rejection of any religious exclusivism echoes an earlier statement: “When various religious groups lay absolute claim to truth, aggressive militancy and divisive proselytism follow and, in their wake, bitter religious divisions” (*BIRA IV/4*, art. 4, in Rosales 1992:300). Thus, an Indian commentator is able to conclude that the Asian Bishops “consider religious pluralism as a grace and as a God-given call to be co-pilgrims along with the believers of other religions in search of truth in love” (Fernando 2000:865).

At the same time, the FABC has acknowledged that critics of religious pluralism often raise the specter of unbridled relativism or subjectivism. In response to these critics, the FABC Office of Theological Concerns explains in a recent document entitled *Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today* that, among other things, recognition of the religious pluralism does not necessarily lead to an acceptance of subjectivism or relativism:

Pluralism need not always entail a radical subjectivism or relativism, in the sense of claiming that all points of view are equally valid. However, it is also true that the dawn of pluralistic, democratic, modern societies has paved the way to excessive individualism and subjectivism, and a consequent relativizing of all reality. Thus, today there are persons and groups who hold all reality to be relative. For such persons or groups, pluralism means relativism, in the sense that they claim all points of view are equally valid. Such philosophical or theological positions are to be rejected; and, in fact, all the major Asian religions condemn such relativizing of reality, especially the relativizing of basic human values. However, just because certain persons and groups are misled in their search for truth, and just because they tend to perceive pluralism as relativism, or just because they tend to relativize all reality, we cannot conclude that all pluralism leads to relativism. (Eilers 2002:334)

3. The Asian Church Undergirded by a Commitment and Service to Life

The FABC’s vision of a “new way of being church” begins with a *commitment and service to life* that arises out of a holistic view of life together with a sense of reverence that sees God’s Spirit as active in the diverse and pluralistic Asian milieu. As the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly explains:

Ours is a vision of *holistic life*. . . . We envision a life *with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy. It is a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for the earth. . . . At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian *reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness. (*FABC VI*, art. 10, in Eilers 1997:5, italics in the original text)⁶

In point of fact, the theme of the Sixth Plenary Assembly was “Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life” (Eilers 1997:1–12) and the first two sections of its

Final Statement are entitled “25 Years of FABC Commitment to Life” (Eilers 1997:2–3) and “A Vision of Life Amid Asian Realities” (Eilers 1997:3–5). In particular, the Sixth Plenary Assembly uses the imagery of Jesus’ foot-washing to root its call for commitment and service to life: “We join Jesus in serving life by washing the feet of our neighbors” (*FABC VI*, art. 14.3, in Eilers 1997:9). More specifically, the Sixth Plenary Assembly unpacks its vision of commitment and service to life as follows:

Our solidarity requires a *resolve to work with our Asian sisters and brothers in liberating our societies from whatever oppresses and degrades human life and creation, most especially from sin*. We offer the radical freedom of life in Christ. . . . Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life in the way of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity. Without Asian sisters and brothers, we will strive to foster communion among Asian peoples who are threatened by glaring economic, social, and political imbalances. With them we will explore ways of utilizing the gifts of our diverse religions, cultures, and languages to achieve a richer and deeper Asian unity. We build bridges of solidarity and reconciliation with peoples of other faiths and will join hands with everyone in Asia in forming a true community of creation. (*FABC VI*, art. 14.2, in Eilers 1997:8, emphasis added)

The Seventh Plenary Assembly develops this commitment and service to life in the Asian milieu further when it calls for the “emergence of the Asianness of the Church in Asia”: “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” (Eilers 2002:8). As the Plenary Assembly explains:

We are also convinced that only by the “inner authority” of authentic lives founded on a deep spirituality will we become credible instruments of transformation. . . . We are aware that this Asianness, founded on solid values, is a special gift the world is awaiting. For the whole world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life. In this task, together with all Asians, the Church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole Church in Asia. (Eilers 2002:8–9)

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

[We believe in] the innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul; and it is the core around which a growing sense of “being Asian” is built. This “being Asian” is best discovered and affirmed not in confrontation and opposition, but in the spirit of complementarity and harmony. In this framework of complementarity and harmony, the Church can communicate the Gospel in a way which is faithful both to her own tradition and to the Asian Soul. (Eilers 2002:8–9)

More specifically, such a call for a personal commitment to, and active solidarity with the life experiences of the Asian peoples entails more than mere sympathy, empathy, or occasional encounters of theologians, bishops, and other pastoral leaders with the daily lives of the Asian peoples, especially the poor and marginalized. Rather, it calls for their personal commitment, deep immersion, and experiential participation in the lives of these peoples, not as outsiders who drop by to visit, but as insiders

who are bound in solidarity with them. As the First FABC Plenary Assembly puts it, this “dialogue of life . . . demands working, not for them merely (in a paternalistic sense), but *with* them, to learn from them (for we have much to learn from them!) their real needs and aspirations” (*FABC I*, art 20, in Rosales 1992:15). Such a commitment and service to life may be understood from a two-fold perspective, viz., an explicit *epistemological* perspective which allows one to better understand the Asian peoples and their life experiences, but more importantly, an underlying *theological* perspective which recognizes the presence and workings of God in the Asian peoples’ diverse *Sitz-im-Leben*. Accordingly, the FABC is of the view that Jesus Christ is to be encountered in Asia within the specificity of the Asian peoples’ life realities, and especially in the midst of the poor and marginalized:

The Christian community, it seems to us, must live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle, and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress. Because the human person created in Christ, redeemed by Christ, and united by Christ to himself is the way for the Church, the church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity.” (*FABC V*, art. 6.2, in Rosales 1992:283)

4. The Asian Church Inspired by an Overarching Vision of Harmony

The FABC’s overarching vision of harmony is rooted in its firm belief 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*, art. 6, in Eilers 1997:298). For the FABC, the quest for harmony is its contribution to “the cause of unity of the peoples of Asia marked by such a diversity of beliefs, cultures, and socio-political structures,” because “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*, art. 4.2, in Rosales 1992:282). This call is especially prophetic and poignant today, in view of the occurrence of religious strife in many parts of Asia, e.g., the Hindu-Christian conflict in India and the Muslim-Christian conflict in Indonesia.

According to the FABC, the notion of harmony is well-placed to act as this common underlying foundation for communication amidst much diversity and pluralism because it is authentically Christian, yet quintessentially Asian, viz., harmony appears “to constitute in a certain sense the intellectual and affective, religious and artistic, personal and societal soul of both persons and institutions in Asia” (*BIRA IV/1*, art. 13, in Rosales 1992:249). In this regard, *BIRA V/2* presents the following understanding of harmony that speaks to both Christians and non-Christians alike:

Harmony can be perceived and realized at various levels: Harmony in oneself as personal integration of body and mind; harmony with the Cosmos, not only living in harmony with nature, but sharing nature’s gift equitably to promote harmony among peoples; harmony with others, accepting, respecting, and appreciating each one’s cultural, ethnic, and religious identity, building community in freedom and fellowship; harmony in our collaborations as a means of promoting harmony for all in the world; and finally harmony with God or the Absolute or whatever we perceive as the ultimate goal of life. (Eilers 1997:151)

Indeed, the FABC speaks of the experience of harmony within an overarching and holistic vision of unity in the Asian milieu:

In the rich diversity of ancient Asian cultures and faiths is a vision of unity in diversity, a communion of life among diverse peoples. . . . Ours is a 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 color. . . . 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. This deep interiority draws people to experience harmony and inner peace and infuses ethics into all of creation. (*FABC VI*, art. 10, in Eilers 1997:5)

This statement builds on the earlier statement by 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*, art. 3.1.10, in Rosales 1992:181). More importantly, such an understanding of harmony is also rooted in the foundations of a cosmic harmony and unity which accepts the pluralism and diversity of the Asian religio-cultural traditions as a positive and rich expression of the mystery of the divine plan of creation:

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. The whole reality is maintained in unity through a universal rhyme (*Rta; Tao*). This unity of reality is reflected in the human person in that his senses, consciousness, and spirit are organically interlinked, one flowing into the other. When this unity and harmony are manifested in inter-human relationship of justice, order, and righteousness, it is considered *dharmic* (*dharma, dhamma*). Sensitivity in human relationships, close ties of love and cooperation in families are highly valued in our cultures. Furthermore, traditionally, the various groups in Asian societies were held together harmoniously through forces of syncretism, spirit of tolerance, mysticism and through messianic movements. (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 6, in Rosales 1992:319)

As *BIRA V/4* subsequently explains, within the many Asian philosophical-religious worldviews, harmony is perceived as “the spiritual pursuit of the totality of reality in its infinite diversity and radical unity” that “evolves by respecting the otherness of the other and by acknowledging its significance in relation to the totality” (*BIRA V/4*, art. 6, in Eilers 1997:157). Harmony is also predicated upon the commonly held view that since “the ultimate ground of being is unity-in-plurality, the divergent forms of reality [in the Asian milieu] are perceived in the convergent rhythm that harmonizes them” (*BIRA V/4*, art. 6, in Eilers 1997:157).

In the FABC’s view, despite “religious, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, one can perceive a unity of values and perceptions” which is epitomized in the spirit of harmony: “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*, art. 5, in Eilers 1997:174). More importantly, the simplistic and naïve understanding of harmony as a

mere absence of strife is consistently rejected by the FABC: "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, in Rosales 1992:321). Also, the FABC rejects any suggestion that the quest for harmony is reductionistic and willfully ignores valid distinctions and disagreements:

[H]armony does not consist in leveling 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*, art. 7, in Eilers 1997:158)

Moving on to discussing the Christian perspectives on harmony, the FABC points out 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*, art. 5, in Eilers 1997:164). From the Christian perspective, harmony is also divinely inspired, because "God is the source and summit of all harmony. He is the foundation and the fulfillment of it" (*Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 5.1.1.4, in Eilers 1997:288). In this respect, harmony as a theological notion also draws its inspiration and strength from the harmonious unity of the Trinity: "The marvelous 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*, art. 7, in Rosales 1992:319).⁷ The trinitarian dimension of harmony was further elaborated by the FABC Office of Theological Concerns in the following manner: "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 'circumincension' (*perichoresis*) in divine life" (*Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 4.11.3, in Eilers 1997:285). Such trinitarian and cosmic perspectives of harmony give rise to an understanding of harmony which "acknowledges the sacredness of nature and invites us to live in harmony with nature and to foster its growth" (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 33, in Rosales 1992:330). This notion of harmony is inspired by a universal concern that is "geared ultimately to the well-being and peace of the universe and humankind" (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 21, in Rosales 1992:322).

5. The Asian Church in a Threefold Dialogue with Asian Religions, Cultures, and Poverty

From the very beginning, the FABC has always maintained that at the heart of the task of mission of the Asian Church lies the dialogical encounter between the Asian Church and the Asian milieu with its threefold reality of Asian religions, culture, and poverty:

[A] church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the great religions — in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. (*FABC I*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992:14)

Looking back at the First FABC Plenary Assembly, Michael Amaladoss comments that the Asian Bishops saw mission as a dialogue with “the threefold realities of Asia,” viz., “its rich cultures, its ancient and great religions, and the poor” and accepted 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*” (Amaladoss 1991:362, emphasis added).

For the FABC, dialogue is “an integral part of evangelization” (*BIMA II*, art. 14, in Rosales 1992:100), “intrinsic to the very life of the Church” (*BIRA I*, art. 9, in Rosales 1992:111), an “essential mode of all evangelization” (*Message of the 1979 International Congress on Mission*, art. 19, in Rosales 1992:131), and “a true expression of the Church’s evangelizing action” (*BIMA II*, art. 14, in Rosales 1992:101). More particularly, “dialogue is ecclesial: it is the very being and life of the Church as mission” (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 3.3). On the one 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, in Rosales 1992:300). On the other hand, the FABC also points out that dialogue *does not preclude* the need for the proclamation of the Christian Gospel: in fact 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 Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (*FABC V*, art. 4.3, in Rosales 1992:282, italics in the original). However, a distinctively Asian approach of proclamation is needed:

Mission may find its greatest urgency in Asia; it also finds in our continent a distinctive mode. We affirm, together with others, that “the proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and primary element of evangelization” (*Statement of the FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization*, Suwon, South Korea, August 24–31, 1988).⁸ But 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 neighbors of other faiths and persuasions, and to do his deeds by the power of his grace. Proclamation through dialogue and deeds — this is the first call to the Churches in Asia. (*FABC V*, art 4.1, in Rosales 1992:281–282, italics in the original)

On the basis of the foregoing, the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly has equated the FABC’s threefold 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 Asian’s poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions*. (*FABC V*, art. 3.1.2, in Rosales 1992:280, emphasis added)

This identification of proclamation with the “witness of life” builds upon the earlier statement made by the Third Bishops’ Institute for Missionary Apostolate meeting in Changhua in 1982:

It is true that in many places [in Asia] Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words. But He can, and should be, proclaimed through other ways, namely: through the witness of life of the Christian community and family, and their striving to know and live more fully the faith they possess; through their desire to live in peace and harmony with those who do not share our faith; through the appreciation by Christians of the human and religious values possessed by their non-Christian neighbors, and through these same Christians' willingness to collaborate in those activities which promote the human community. (*BIMA III*, art. 10, in Rosales 1992:105)

More importantly, the Seventh Plenary Assembly (Samphran 2000), with the benefit of two months' reflection on John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, reasserted their preference for the "witness of life" as the Asian way of proclaiming the Christian Gospel in Asia:

The most effective means of evangelization and service in the name of Christ has always been and continues to be the *witness of life*. The embodiment of our faith in sharing and compassion (sacrament) supports the credibility of our obedience to the Word (proclamation). This witnessing has to become the way of the Gospel for persons, institutions, and the whole Church community. *Asian people will recognize the Gospel that we announce when they see in our life the transparency of the message of Jesus and the inspiring and healing figure of men and women immersed in God.* (Eilers 2002:12–13, emphasis added)

Dialogue with Asian Cultures

The rationale for the Asian Church engaging in a dialogue with cultures⁹ has been explained by the then FABC Theological Advisory Commission (now renamed FABC Office of Theological Concerns) in its groundbreaking document, *Theses on the Local Church*, as follows:

Each culture not only provides us with a new approach to the human, but also opens up new avenues for the understanding of the Gospel and its riches. When the Gospel encounters the tradition, experience, and culture of a people, its hitherto undiscovered virtualities will surface; riches and meanings as yet hidden will emerge into the light. That is why it is so important to reinterpret the Gospel through the cultural resources of every people; this reinterpretation truly enriches the Christian tradition. (FABC-TAC 1991:20–21)

By living within their particular context according to the "sense of faith aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth" (LG 12), the faithful will learn to express their faith not only in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition, but also in response to their cultural situations. This response is the responsibility of the whole community which discerns God's Word and Spirit in its culture and history. (FABC-TAC 1991:28)

This dialogical encounter "facilitates the Incarnation of the Good News in the various cultures creating new ways of life, action, worship, and reflection, so as to help the growth of the local churches and to realize the catholicity and fullness of the mystery of Christ" (*BIRA III*, art. 5, in Rosales 1992:120).

Dialogue with Asian Religions

The importance of engaging in a dialogue with the Asian religions was first recognized by the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development" (*ABM*, resolution 12, in Rosales 1992:9). It has been suggested that inter-religious dialogue is not merely an activity of Asian Christians, but rather "it enters into the very definition of what it is to be a Christian in Asia. To be Christian is not an abstraction, but a contextual reality" (Wilfred 1988:428). Hence, the First FABC Plenary Assembly has emphasized that it is only through dialogue that the Asian Church is able to give due reverence and honor to these Asian religions and acknowledge that God has drawn these religions to Godself (*FABC I*, art. 15, in Rosales 1992:14). In giving a privileged place to the religious traditions of the Asian peoples, the First FABC Plenary Assembly pointed out that:

In this dialogue we accept them [the great religious traditions] 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 treasuries 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, in Rosales 1992:14)

Elsewhere, the FABC has affirmed that "it is an inescapable truth that God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions" (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 7, in Rosales 1992:326) because:

... the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church. God's saving grace is not limited to members of the church, but is offered to every person. His grace may lead some to accept baptism and enter the Church, but it cannot be presumed that this must always be the case. His ways are mysterious and unfathomable, and no one can dictate the direction of His grace. (*BIRA II*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992:115. Cf. *BIRA IV/1*, art. 10, in Rosales 1992:249)

Hence, interreligious dialogue "is based on the firm belief that the Holy Spirit is operative in other religions as well" (*BIRA IV/2*, art. 8.5, in Rosales 1992:253), because the religious traditions of Asia "are expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 43, in Rosales 1992:344). In particular, the "great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults, and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures" (*BIRA IV/7*, art. 12, in Rosales 1992:310). For the FABC, it is "the same spirit, who has been active in the Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before the Incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today" (*BIRA IV/3*, art. 6, in Rosales 1992:259).

As far as the FABC is concerned, "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, in Rosales 1992:300). In particular, "religious dialogue is not just a substitute for or a mere preliminary to the proclamation of Christ, but should be the ideal form of evangelization, where in humility and mutual support we seek together with our brothers and sisters that fullness of Christ which is God's plan for the whole of creation, in its entirety [sic] and its great and wonderful diversity" (*BIMA I*, art. 10, in Rosales 1992:94).

Dialogue with the Poor

The First FABC Plenary Assembly explained that the Asian Church has to participate in a "dialogue of life" with the poor which involves a genuine experience and understanding of the poverty, deprivation, and oppression of many of the Asian peoples (*FABC I*, art. 20, in Rosales 1992:15). The First Plenary Assembly defines the term "poor" as follows: "Poor, not in human values, qualities, nor in human potential. But poor, in that they are deprived of access to material goods and resources which they need to create a truly human life for themselves. Deprived, because they live under oppression, that is, under social, economic, and political structures which have injustice built into them" (*FABC I*, art. 19, in Rosales 1992:15).

This gives rise to a genuine commitment and effort to bring about social justice in the Asian societies. In so doing, the FABC affirmed the Statement of the 1971 Special Synod of Bishops on Justice in the World, which had insisted that "actions in behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of preaching of the Gospel . . . , for we believe that this, in our time, is part and parcel of 'preaching the Good News to the poor'" (quoted in *FABC I*, art. 22, in Rosales 1992:15–16), and pointed out that "evangelization and the promotion of true human development and liberation, are not only not opposed, but make up today the integral preaching of the Gospel, especially in Asia" (*FABC I*, art. 23, in Rosales 1992:16). Hence, the poor is seen as "ultimately the privileged community and agents of salvation (as has always been the case in the history of salvation)" (*International Congress on Mission*, art. 4, in Rosales 1992:144). The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly explains succinctly:

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*, art. 14.2, in Eilers 1997:8)

Proclamation through Dialogue

In response to the traditional understanding of Christian mission as the proclamation of the Gospel to non-Christians, the FABC has consistently asserted that in the Asian context, the proclamation of the Christian Gospel takes place through dialogue. The starting point for such an understanding may be traced back to the 1987

document *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* of the FABC Theological Advisory Commission (now renamed the FABC Office of Theological Concerns). Of the seven theses enunciated in the document, thesis 6 asserts:

Dialogue and proclamation are integral but dialectical and complementary dimensions of the Church's mission of evangelization. Authentic dialogue includes a witness to one's total Christian faith, which is open to a similar witness of the other religious believers. Proclamation is a call to Christian discipleship and mission. As a service to the mystery of the Spirit who freely calls to conversion, and of the person who freely responds to the call, proclamation is dialogical. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, thesis 6)

As it unpacks this statement, it warns against any facile reduction of one to the other:

The relation between dialogue and proclamation is a complex one. In making an effort to understand this relationship, we must avoid from the beginning any attempt to reduce one to the other. Some would tend to say that dialogue itself is the only authentic form of proclamation since the Church is only one among the many ways to salvation; others would tend to say that dialogue is only a step, though with an identity of its own, in the total process that culminates in proclamation. While the former approach robs proclamation of any specific meaning, the latter instrumentalizes dialogue. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.2)

The document then stresses that proclamation should not be understood in the abstract, but within the context of, and integrated into the threefold dialogue:

The Asian bishops have understood evangelization as the building up of the local church through a threefold dialogue with the cultures, the religions, and the poor of Asia. Inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and liberation are the three dimensions of evangelization. Proclamation is not a fourth dimension added to these three, but is the aspect of witness that is an integral element of all the three dimensions of evangelization. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.4)

Elsewhere, the FABC has reiterated that "dialogue aimed at 'converting' the other to one's own religious faith and tradition is dishonest and unethical; it is not the way of harmony" (*BIRA V/3*, art. 7, in Eilers 1997:158). As for the relationship between dialogue, proclamation and conversion, the FABC has pointed out, rightfully, that "dialogue and proclamation are complementary. Sincere and authentic dialogue does not have for its objective the conversion of the other. For conversion depends solely on God's internal call and the person's free decision" (*BIRA III*, art. 4, in Rosales 1992:120). While the sapiential "Asian" vision of the FABC does not neglect the importance of proclamation, it also values friendship and trust, relationality and relationship-building, dialogue and consensus, as well as solidarity and harmony as constitutive elements of the task of mission in Asia.

On the one hand, the FABC does not exclude the explicit verbal proclamation of the Christian Gospel as mission, but it recognizes that context plays a very important role in determining which is the best approach to mission. Perhaps, one of the inherent dangers of proclamation is that it may result in a triumphalistic *monologue*

that tramples on the legitimate concerns of non-Christian Asians. In addition, proclamation often comes across as being overly discursive, i.e., there is an abundance of words in proclamation that aims to prove or emphasize particular truth claims that the Christian missionary may deem important. By contrast, it has been pointed out that in the Asian mindset, “truth does not impose itself, but rather *attracts* everyone and everything to itself by its beauty, splendour, and fascination” (Wilfred 1988:427) — which is what dialogue is all about. In short, proclamation without dialogue runs the risk of aggressive proselytism with its highly negative connotations. On this basis, Michael Amaladoss is able to say that evangelization in Asia as a threefold dialogue with the realities of Asia “means that we do not import readymade structures of ‘salvation’ from somewhere, but we let the people of Asia dialogue with the Good News in a creative and relevant way” (Amaladoss 2000:340).

On the other hand, through dialogue, not only the Asian socio-religious realities may be enriched by Christianity, in turn, Christianity, too, may be enriched by the Asian socio-religious realities. Otherwise, a one-way monologue opens Christianity to the charge of instrumentalization, i.e., appropriating the soteriological elements in Asian socio-religious realities for Christian use without respecting their integrity within their Asian socio-religious matrix. Corollary to this view is the observation of the Indian theologian, Felix Wilfred:

Any work of mission which does not recognise what God has been doing with a people, with a country and continent, and with their history, is simply and purely arrogance vis-à-vis God’s own bounteous gifts. . . . Triumphalism and exclusivism of any kind are diametrically opposed to spirituality. They fail to recognise and appreciate the thousand flowers God has let grow, flourish, and blossom in the garden of the world; they fail to acknowledge in practice the presence and working of the Spirit in the life and history of peoples. (Wilfred 1990:590)

More importantly, implicit in such a missiology is the acknowledgment and acceptance of a fundamental ontological, soteriological, and existential relationship between the Christian Gospel and the Asian peoples with their rich religious and cultural traditions, as well as their daily socio-economic challenges. Such a deep and profound missiology enables the Asian Church to move away from the *plantatio ecclesiae* mentality, i.e., away from “an institution planted in Asia” towards “an evangelizing community of Asia” (*Theological Consultation*, art. 15, in Rosales 1992:338). Clearly, the FABC has great hopes that the local church is able to be deeply inculturated in the Asian soil to the extent that it becomes not simply a church in Asia, but truly an Asian church (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 50, in Rosales 1992:333).

6. The Asian Church Seeking to Bring About the Kingdom of God in Asia

The FABC’s regnocentric approach to the task of Christian mission is “rooted in the conviction of faith that God’s plan of salvation for humanity is one and reaches out to all peoples: it is the Kingdom of God through which he seeks to reconcile all things with himself in Jesus Christ” (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 2.3). As the document *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* explains: “The focus of the church’s mission of evangelization is building up the Kingdom of God and building up the church to be at the service of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is therefore wider

than the church. The church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, visibilizing it, ordained to it, promoting it, but not equating itself with it" (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.3).

This point was subsequently affirmed at the 1988 FABC All-Asia Conference on Evangelization, which explained that the "ultimate goal of all evangelization is the ushering in and establishment of God's Kingdom, namely God's rule in the hearts and minds of our people" (*BIMA IV*, art. 5, in Rosales 1992:292). At the same time, "the core of Christ's proclamation is the Kingdom of God" (*BIRA IV/10*, art. 6, in Rosales 1992:314) and the Asian Church "is an instrument for the actualization of the Kingdom" (*BIRA IV/2*, art. 8.2, in Rosales 1992:252). The FABC has explained the relationship between the church and the Kingdom of God as follows:

[T]he Reign of God is the very reason for the being of the church. The church exists in and for the Kingdom. The Kingdom, God's gift and initiative, is already begun and is continually being realized and made present through the Spirit. Where God is accepted, when the Gospel values are lived, where man is respected... there is the Kingdom. It is far wider than the church's boundaries. This already present reality is oriented towards the final manifestation and full perfection of the Reign of God. (BIRA IV/2, art. 8.1, in Rosales 1992:252, emphasis added)

Similarly, art. 30 of the *1991 Theological Consultation* insists:

[T]he Reign of God is a universal reality, extending far beyond the boundaries of the church. It is the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ, in which Christians and others share together. It is the fundamental "mystery of unity" which unites us more deeply than differences in religious allegiance are able to keep us apart. Seen in this manner, a "regnocentric" approach to mission theology does not in any way threaten the Christo-centric perspective of our faith. On the contrary, "regno-centrism" calls for "christo-centrism," and vice-versa, for it is in Jesus Christ and through the Christ-event that God has established his Kingdom upon the earth and in human history. (Rosales 1992:342)

The Asian church is perceived as "constantly [moving] forward in mission, as it accompanies all humankind in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom of the Father" (*FABC III*, art. 15, in Rosales 1992:60). In this respect, the FABC also pointed out that:

Christian communities in Asia must 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, and that they (as communities of the Gospel) must accompany these others "in a common pilgrimage toward the ultimate goal, in relentless quest for the Absolute," and that thus they are to be "sensitively attuned to the work of the Spirit in the resounding symphony of Asian communion." (FABC III, art. 8.2, in Rosales 1992:57)

In addition, the 1991 FABC Theological Consultation concluded: "if the Church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, the reason is that she is the sacrament of Jesus Christ himself who is the mystery of salvation, to whom she is called to bear witness and whom she is called to announce. To be at the service of the Kingdom means for

the Church to announce Jesus Christ" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 33, in Rosales 1992:342).

In concluding thus, the FABC is convinced that there is one divine plan of salvation that is wider than the church, and more significantly, the church does not have a monopoly on God's salvation for humanity. As the *Theses on Interreligious Dialogue* makes it clear:

The one divine plan of salvation for all peoples embraces the whole universe. The mission of the church has to be understood within the context of this plan. *The church does not monopolize God's action in the universe.* While it is aware of a special mission from God in the world, it has to be attentive to God's action in the world, as manifested also in the other religions. This twofold awareness constitutes the two poles of the church's evangelizing action in relation to other religions. While proclamation is the expression of its awareness of being in mission, *dialogue is the expression of its awareness of God's presence and action outside its boundaries.* . . . Proclamation is the affirmation of and witness to God's action in oneself. Dialogue is the openness and attention to the mystery of God's action in the other believer. *It is a perspective of faith that we cannot speak of the one without the other.* (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.5, emphasis added)

The basis for this position is that the call to conversion and discipleship points primarily towards God, and only secondarily towards the church:

The pilgrim church witnesses not to itself but to the mystery; and calls to conversion and discipleship refer primarily to the relationship between God who calls and the person who responds. Only secondarily do they refer to the church-community. The identity of the church does not lie in being the exclusive "ark of salvation" but in being in mission to transform the world from within as leaven, without being fully aware of the forms that such transformation may lead to. (*Theses on Interreligious Dialogue*, art. 6.12)

Moreover, far from being an excuse for putting aside the task of evangelization, the paradigm of the Kingdom of God in Asia challenges the Asian church to work "with the Christians of other churches, together with our sisters and brothers of other faiths and with all people of goodwill, to make the Kingdom of God more visibly present in Asia" (*FABC V*, art. 2.3.9, in Rosales 1992:279). Elsewhere in the same document, the FABC pointed out that the ultimate goal of mission in Asia is "to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God: to promote the values of the Kingdom, such as justice, peace, love, compassion, equality and brotherhood in these Asian realities. In short, it is to make the Kingdom of God a reality" (*FABC V*, art. 1.7, in Rosales 1992:275). The inclusivity of the Kingdom of God holds great appeal to the FABC, which "acknowledge[s] the Kingdom at work in socio-political situations and in cultural and religious traditions of Asia" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 39, in Rosales 1992:344). As Felix Wilfred explains, the inclusive nature of the Kingdom of God is able to encompass those people who are followers of Jesus Christ, his life and his teachings and those who are inspired by Jesus Christ and his Good News, but choose for various reasons to remain Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists or Muslims, and who are otherwise excluded from the dialectical set-up of present ecclesial structures (Wilfred 1988:429).

Conclusion: A New Way of Being Church

The Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan has characterized the FABC's ecclesiology as a "sort of Copernican revolution in ecclesiology" that "sees the goal and purpose of the mission of the church to be not the geographical and institutional expansion of the church (the *plantatio ecclesiae*)," but "a transparent sign of and effective instrument for the saving presence of the reign of God, the reign of justice, peace, and love, of which the church is a seed" (Phan 2003b:14). Phan's incisive observation summarizes succinctly the FABC's vision of a new way of being church in Asia, viz., being a participatory, dialogical, and prophetic "communion of communities" in a continent that is marked by an immense diversity and plurality of religions, philosophies, cultures, as well as deep-seated poverty and marginalization among many of its inhabitants. What is most remarkable is the fact that the FABC views such diversity and plurality not as a challenge that has to be confronted and overcome, but as a constitutive, defining aspect of the Asian landscape, such that cultural diversity and religious pluralism lie at the heart of what it means to be Asian. Clearly, Asian Christians live and work with believers of other religions who are their family members, neighbors, friends, and colleagues, sharing with them the joys and sufferings, blessings and misfortunes of daily living, as well as collaborating with them to build a better world in Asia for all.

If that is the case, then it comes as no surprise that the FABC's ecclesiology is rooted, first and foremost, in a "commitment and service to life." In emphasizing the need for commitment and service to life, the FABC perceives the myriad of rich and deeply profound experiences of life in Asia as the underlying foundation, framework, and continuous referent for shaping a new way of being church in Asia. It goes without saying that these life experiences are not abstract, metaphysical, intellectual, or theoretical constructs, but rather, they are made manifest in social, political, economic, and religious dimensions. Such a commitment and service to life may be understood from a twofold perspective, viz., an explicit *epistemological* perspective that allows one to understand the Asian peoples and their life experiences better, but more importantly, an underlying *theological* perspective that recognizes the presence and workings of God in the Asian peoples' life situations. This underlying theological perspective is deeply rooted in the Incarnation and the Paschal Mystery, both of which undergird God's solidarity with humans, especially the poor and marginalized, as well as God's participation in the experiences of pain and suffering in their daily lives. Accordingly, the FABC is of the view that Jesus Christ is to be encountered in Asia within the specificity of the Asian peoples' life realities, and especially in the midst of the poor and marginalized:

The Lord of History is at work in that world of poverty. Seeing the Lord in the poor, making sense out of his action among them, discerning the direction of his action among them — this we felt deeply within us was the more specific challenge we have to face. (*BISA VII*, art. 20, in Rosales 1992:233)

What is clear is a paradigm shift from the traditional *plantatio ecclesiae* to an ecclesiology that calls upon the Asian Church to "live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle, and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress," because "the human person

created in Christ, redeemed by Christ and united by Christ to himself is the way for the Church, the Church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity" (*FABC V*, art. 6.2, in Rosales 1992:283). In addition to being deeply rooted in the existential concerns and aspirations of the Asian peoples, the Asian Church also collaborates with them as they struggle with all aspects of daily living, with the principal goal of bringing about God's Kingdom in the Asian milieu. According to the FABC, such an approach also taps into the movement throughout all of Asia "among peoples of various faiths to break down traditional barriers of division and hostility, and their initiative to reach out to neighbors of other faiths in a spirit of love, friendship, harmony and collaboration," and the FABC "discern[s] the hand of God" in "all these aspirations, movements and initiatives" (*BIRA IV/11*, art. 5, in Rosales 1992:318–319).

Likewise, the FABC's "new way of being church" seeks to immerse the Asian Church in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*, sharing life in solidarity with the Asian peoples and serving life, as Jesus had done. In doing so, the FABC unequivocally privileges solidarity, companionship, and collaborative partnership with the Asian peoples and their myriad religions, cultures, and immense poverty.

In his keynote address at BIRA IV/12 in February 1991, the late Angelo Fernandes, Archbishop Emeritus of Delhi, insisted that Asians of other faiths were not to be regarded as "objects of Christian mission," but as "partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness" (Fernandes 1991:548). Archbishop Fernandes explained that the dialogue between the Asian Church and the Asian peoples should be seen as a "manifestation of lived Christianity" with its own integrity that leads towards the Kingdom of God (Fernandes 1991:548). Here, Archbishop Fernandes' assertions captured succinctly the FABC's threefold dialogue with the Asian peoples and their cultures, religions, and their marginalizing life challenges. For the FABC, dialogue enables the Asian Church, which is in danger of being sidelined in its self-imposed ghetto, to be immersed in the mainstream of Asian societies and life challenges.

Moreover, the FABC sees this threefold dialogue as a collaboration that seeks to realize the fullness of life in Asia, as well as the common destiny of all Asian nations and peoples in God's Kingdom. As the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly made it clear, the Asian Church has "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*, art. 6.3, in Rosales 1992:283). This is because it is "the local churches and communities which can discern and work (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. 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" (*FABC V*, art. 3.3.1, in Rosales 1992:281).

It is the overarching vision of the FABC that "the church is called to be a community of dialogue. This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being church" (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 48, in Rosales 1992:332). As a community of dialogue, the Asian church "seeks not to exclude others but to be truly catholic in its concerns, in its appreciation of the gifts of others, and in its readiness to work with others for a world at once more human and more divine" (*BIRA IV/12*, art. 49, in Rosales 1992:333). As far as the FABC is concerned, the church is at the service of the Kingdom of God, and Asian

Christians are called to contribute to Asian cultures, religions, and socio-economic challenges, even if these cultures, religions and societies do not become institutionally Christian. The church is called, not to conquer Asia in the name of a triumphant Christ or build a triumphant Christendom on Asian soil, but to serve by giving of themselves and bringing the life and hope of God's Kingdom to Asia, a continent beset with challenges and problems in the present age.

Not surprisingly, the FABC prefers a qualitative ecclesiology that seeks to transform and heal the brokenness in Asian cultures and Asian realities, rather than a quantitative ecclesiology that emphasizes institutional growth that can be measured in terms of numerical and territorial expansion of the Asian church. In the final analysis, the FABC accepts that the Asian Church will always be a "little flock" in the sea of diverse Asian religions and cultures in pluralistic Asia. What is more, the FABC is convinced that "if Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (*Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church*, art. 14(ii), in Rosales 1992:70). In the final analysis, for the FABC the way forward is not a defensive and inward-looking church, but a church that seeks to collaborate with others to address the challenges of twenty-first century Asia: "As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters, and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. Inculturation, dialogue, justice, and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do" (FABC VII, in Eilers 2002:8).

Notes

1. All of the important documents of the FABC have been collected and published in a convenient three volume collection: Rosales 1992, Eilers 1997, and Eilers 2002. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the FABC are taken from this three-volume collection. For an excellent overview of the FABC, its history, and theological perspectives, see Chia 2003. For a more popular presentation of the FABC's early beginnings and significant accomplishments, see Fox 2002.

2. The FABC convenes in Plenary Assembly, the highest body, with the participation of all presidents and delegates of member conferences once in every four years. To date seven plenary assemblies have been held: FABC I: Evangelization in Modern Day Asia (Taipei, Taiwan, 1974), FABC II: Prayer — the Life of the Church in Asia (Calcutta, India, 1978), FABC III: The Church — A Community of Faith in Asia (Bangkok, Thailand, 1982), FABC IV: The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia (Tokyo, Japan, 1986), FABC V: Journeying Together Toward The Third Millennium (Bandung, Indonesia, 1990), FABC VI: Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life (Manila, Philippines, 1995), and FABC VII: A Renewed Church in Asia on a Mission of Love and Service (Sampran, Thailand, 2000).

3. This forms the core thesis of Thomas Fox's thought-provoking book, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (2002).

4. For the purposes of this paper, the Final Statements of all seven FABC Plenary Assemblies from 1974 to 2000, as well as the statements of the various Bishops' Institutes, the FABC Office of Theological Concerns (formerly the FABC Theological Advisory Commission), and FABC-sponsored consultations, colloquia, conferences, and symposia will be studied and evaluated.

5. Cf. *Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church*, arts. 25, 26 and 27 (Rosales 1992:72–73), as well as *FABC III*, arts. 3.1, 3.2 and 8.1 (Rosales 1992:54, 56–57).

6. For an in-depth discussion of this point, see FABC-OTC 1998.

7. The late Korean-American theologian Jung Young Lee has used the Chinese notion of harmony as expressed in the philosophical construct of yin-yang with its inherently "both-and" worldview to illuminate a new way of understanding the Trinity. See Lee 1996.

8. The relevant paragraphs state: "While we are aware and sensitive of the fact that evangelization is a complex reality and has many essential aspects, . . . we affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (*BIMA IV*, art. 5, in Rosales 1992:292). "The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity. In the same way, evangelization will gather together the believing community, the Church, through faith and baptism" (*BIMA IV*, art. 6, in Rosales 1992:292).

9. For comprehensive discussions on how the FABC understands and develops its concept of culture and theology of inculturation in its official documents, see Nemet 1994:87–88, Bevans 1996, and Menampambil 1997.

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