Saturday, 5:30 pm

Faith and culture in Dialogue
A Reflective Theological Synthesis

“A faith which has not become inculturated is a faith which has not been fully received, which has not been completely thought through, which has not been fully lived.” (John Paul II, Letter instituting the Pontifical Council of Culture, 20 May 1982.)

Throughout this congress we have heard many moving testimonies. On Thursday the stories highlighted the presence of Jesus among the peoples of Asia, especially among the poor and marginalised. On Friday stories witnessed to Jesus amidst the great religions of Asia. Today testimonies have focused upon the cultures of Asia. In day-to-day life we do not neatly separate these three aspects. As the bishops of Asia stated during their Jubilee Assembly (Bangkok 2000):

“For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelisation, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. These issues are not separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our mission of love and serve. We need to feel and act ‘integrimly’. As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalised, 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.”

EIGHT THEMES

We are sharing experiences of Jesus Christ as our reconciliation. Faith in Jesus opens our eyes to see the world in a new way. We are nurturing a culture of compassion even in the midst of communal conflict. A faith-filled culture of compassion accepts the truth of another, for wholeness has always to include the other. True reconciliation is a way of seeing and accepting, even of celebrating, that we are different. We rejoice to live in pluralistic cultures and societies.

Mission is concerned with incarnation, with the long and painful process of seeking the face of the Divine in human beings. Mission is about seeking out the face of Jesus in and through our Asian cultures. The discovery of the Incarnate Word occurs each time the gospel encounters another culture and responds to its unique way of seeing Reality.
This brief reflection concentrates on our mission of fostering a culture of compassion through our three-fold dialogue across cultures, with the poor and among inter-faith families and communities. This I do by drawing out eight concerns from the testimonies we have been hearing. These are 1) life issues, 2) values and identity, 3) compassion not consumerism, 4) cross-cultural encounter, 5) language, 6) mutuality and complementarity, 7) inter-faith relations, 8) uprooted migrant communities.

**Life Issues**

From India Cardinal Telesphore Toppo recalled that the first generation of cross-cultural missioners learned local languages, listened to people who were ignored, and supported the poor when they were unjustly brought to court. A “no-people” became a dignified people, became “God’s people, a people with a voice, with self-respect and confidence, able to stand up for their rights.”

The ongoing conversation between faith and culture does not primarily take place at the top, among the powerful. It is not in the first place a conversation among elites. We enter the popular culture of the poor, of the tribals and of minorities among whom we find the majority of Asia’s Christians. From this position at their side we reach out to the powerful. Within minority cultures we encounter symbols with which to celebrate our Christian rituals. In indigenous peoples’ struggle for land and dignity, we discover our prophetic vocation as witnesses to the gospel of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. This dialogue between faith and culture takes place within and between families and family networks such as Basic Christian Communities and Basic Human Communities.

The challenge is to root inculturation in life issues.

**Cultural Values and Identity**

Niphot Thienviharn with his team from Chiang Mai, Thailand, are working to develop rural society without destroying the cultural values, dignity and humanity of the people. All of us working among ethnic communities know that ethnic cultural values and gospel values cohere. Among tribals the gospel is expressed in their egalitarian economy, the agricultural rituals and their hospitable lifestyle. Indigenous cultures are rooted in sharing and mutual aid. Tribals put people first, they do not fret about the morrow but accept life as it is. They run an economy of compassion nurturing both people and the land; they foster a natural honesty, they are ever hospitable to every guest whether invited or not. Most tribals are gentle and willingly give way to the aggression of outsiders in order to avoid confrontation unless their very existence is threatened.

Asia’s bishops reflected upon cultural values during their Jubilee Assembly:

... 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. 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. This is important, because our contacts with
those of other religious traditions have to be at the level of depth, rather than just the level of ideas or action ... 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.” (Bangkok, 2000)

Tribal culture is evangelised when the indigenous peoples themselves evolve a counter-culture as a buffer to market-based globalisation. Niphot Thienviharn and his team in northern Thailand are engaged in economic development through family cooperatives owned by the people and inspired by the gospel. Families are thus maintaining their cultural traditions while re-reading them continuously to discover the presence of God in their rapidly changing social situation.

The challenge to inculturation is to seek alternative models of economic development, not based on the greed and individualism of global capitalism that sets the rich against the poor but upon the words and witness of Jesus the Nazarene.

Compassion not Consumerism

The executive Paul Mary Suvij of Thailand told his story of moving from a consumerist mentality to one of service rooted in Christian social teaching. We cannot nurture a culture of compassion if we remain confined within our own prosperous social order. We need to move out to those who are vulnerable for those who are fragile and powerless open up wells of compassion within us. Through such cross-class concern we break out of crass consumerism, away from greed-induced capitalism, and walk towards a gospel based culture of giving.

The challenge to inculturation is to create networks of concern between families across the economic divide in order to nurture a culture of compassion in clear contrast to consumerist capitalism.

Cross-Cultural Encounter

We have listened Sherlyn Kong and her friends from urban, ultra-modern Singapore who came alive after undertaking cross-cultural experience. Comfortably middle-class they went to the Philippines and lived briefly among deprived communities. The poor evangelised the prosperous. After much reflection the Singaporean youths decided to commit themselves to living simply in solidarity and mission. They decided that the poor would always be a reference point in their lives and in their decision making. And so their faith came alive.

We only readily understand how faith converses with culture when we pass over to another’s culture, especially when the rich pass over to the culture of the poor. Then cross-cultural mission really takes off. In a globalising world we cannot remain mono-lingual or mono-cultural. We can better enter into the mystery of faith through a number of ways. To inculturate is to become inter-cultural.
The challenge to inculturation is to break out of our own encapsulated world, our own private comfort zone and become truly bi-cultural.

A Language of Beauty and Insight
As Christian missioners we learn local languages and study local culture, for language is at the heart of culture, it is a fundamental aspect of each and every culture. In learning a local language we enter that culture’s worldview.

Shusaku Endo of Japan has said that Asians will be attracted to the bible only when it has been translated into beautiful language, when it captures the idiom of the language, when it expresses the experience of Jesus in its own vocabulary. Jesus will be known, understood and embraced when the bible and catechetics, the liturgy and prayer are expressed in the deep logic, value and judgment patterns of Asian languages.

Our faith is not second-hand, is no imitation. Our faith is no simulation, no pretence. Our faith is personal, genuine, sincere. Each Asian language, philosophy and culture should express this fresh, unaffected, authentic experience of Jesus Christ who is incarnate in each of our languages and cultures.

The challenge to inculturation is to express our faith and celebrate our liturgy in a language of beauty enriched by Asian images and Asian logic.

Mutuality and Complementarity
While beautiful, dynamic translations are necessary, inculturation goes beyond issues of translation or transplantation. Faith grows from within like a seed. As faith is expressed in Asian cultures, so Asian cultures in turn enrich the faith. This is a two-way conversation.

“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 Office for Theological Concerns, 1991)

Mutual Fertilisation: Thus from the beginning Asia’s bishops have recognised that inculturation is more than merely an external adaptation of Christian beliefs, structures and practices to the Asian reality and way of living. In the panorama of religious and cultural diversity in Asia, which comprises a kaleidoscope of many of the world’s ancient religious, philosophical and socio-cultural traditions, inculturation is understood by Asia’s bishops as a dialogue between the gospel and the local church on the one hand, and the Asian reality as an integrated whole of Asian cultures, religions and the Asian impovdered on the other. Not only are Asian realities enriched by Christianity; Christianity in turn is enriched by Asian social-religious realities.
Reading the Bible with Asian Eyes: The bible is Asian written mainly in Hebrew and Greek. Ancient Greek has roots in Sanskrit. So we do not need to imprison ourselves within Western, post-Enlightenment exegesis. For the past thirty years grassroots networks and movements, accompanied by pastoral agents and theologians, have discovered new ways of reading the bible with Asian eyes. We are not literalists let alone fundamentalists. We read the bible intuitively in dialogue with life, in particular with the life of the poor. Over the past four decades as the bible has been mused over in the light of daily experience, read in both Basic Communities and in the community of scholars, so Asian expressions of faith, that is, Asian theologies have emerged.

The aim of inculturation is not to gather tribals into a clerical church, but to re-birth the church among tribals. We must not be satisfied with a banana church or a coconut church – yellow/brown (Asian) on the outside yet remaining white (foreign) on the inside. We work towards a mango church – yellow (Asian) through and through.

Again in the words of Asia’s bishops, inculturation is,

“… a journey of complementarity and harmony, where faith and its cultural expressions remain truly Christian while becoming truly Asian. It is in fact for us a matter of rediscovering and re-identifying with the ‘Asian roots of Christianity’.”

Yes, “rediscovering and re-identifying with the ‘Asian roots of Christianity’.” Just as early Greek Christians did not need to become Jews before confessing their faith in Jesus, so Asia’s Christians today do not have to become Hellenists or Europeans. Greek philosophy has been a providential development in Europe. However, faith in Jesus the Nazarene can, and must, be expressed in each and every language and culture. To deny this would be to deny the universal significance of Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile we continue to long for the time when our faith can be celebrated in sacramental worship that is truly Asian. For inculturation is grounded in mutuality and reciprocity between gospel faith and Asian culture. In the words of Asia’s bishops:

The challenge to inculturation is to foster the “… emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia – Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others … If the Asian churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future.” (Hong Kong 1977)

Inter-Faith Relations
Where Christians are a small minority in the midst of majority faith communities, the question arises as to how we can create sufficient space to breathe (survive) and inspire (mission). As the testimony from Indonesia has shown, this is possible where Christian families are tough and maintain cohesiveness without becoming exclusive. Cohesive families are found where there is a Christian atmosphere, where family rituals are
celebrated regularly, where the family engages in social outreach. *Inclusive families* are found where love, respect and forgiveness are placed at the heart of relationships with neighbours and colleagues of other faith communities. When honesty prevents advances in our career and where our faith prevents job preferment, this is not a fate to be regretted but rather a vocation to be embraced. This vocation impacts, that is educates, our children. To be both cohesive in a living faith and inclusive in compassionate hope families need to support one another through networks such as Basic Christian Communities. Nurturing a culture of honesty and concern through mutual support, Christian minorities may go with the flow but at the same time they can resist being washed away.

Christian identity among individuals and families is fostered through prayer and bible sharing, but not only through prayer and bible sharing. We witness who we are as Christians when we engage with Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus in social issues such as street children, sex workers, scavengers and poor families. Our Christian identity is not protected by behaving as foreigners but by living out the gospel transparently. Our Christian distinctiveness is clear not in maintaining western ways but in our witness to gospel values.

*The challenge to inculturation is to maintain a clear gospel identity as a minority without being in anyway foreign.*

**Uprooted Migrant Communities**

Mass migration is found throughout Asia. From *The Philippines* Maruja Asis notes that an estimated 191 million people live outside their country of birth. For many Asians, migration as a rite of passage has long given way to migration as a means to improve the economic conditions of one’s family. We witness to the core resilience of so many migrants, despite the fact that many have no rights except the right to work and the right to be silent. Mission entails seeing migrants as people and not as mere commodities to be bought and sold. While migration can entail oppressive conditions, it also presents opportunities for cultural and religious dialogue which can enrich our church.

Asia’s cultures have deep roots and yet are rapidly changing. Asia is a dynamic continent where new composite identities are being forged among peoples who have rediscovered their Asian identities. In individuals, families and nations traditional cultural identities, modern cultural identities and post-modern cyber identities coalesce. The arena of this cultural struggle is the family as parents and their growing children increasingly belong to different cultures. Yet we are aware that without a cultural base we loose our freedom, our rights, our dignity and our identity.

*The challenge to inculturation is to be able to reconstruct our Asian identity even while being uprooted. We are challenged to root the culture of parents and that of their children in our common faith, but each in its own way.*
THE VISION AND GOAL OF INCULTURATION

The testimonies of Congress participants, during workshops and plenary sessions as well as during informal conversation, bring out vividly the vision and goal of inculturation. This was expressed by Asia’s bishops when they gathered for the first time on the occasion of the visit of Paul VI to Manila:

“…dialogue with our fellow Asians, whose commitment is to other faiths, is increasingly important. We ... urge on all a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples, and express the hope that the catholicity of the church, the root of our diversity in the oneness of faith, may serve to help Asians remain truly Asian, and yet become fully part of the modern world and the one human family.” (Manila 1970)

In 1970 Asia’s bishops already saw that the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture necessarily implies dialogue with other faith traditions. They were also aware that Asian cultures have deep roots and yet are rapidly changing.

According to the bishops, this ongoing dialogue with the living cultures of Asia aims to build up local churches, “truly Christian, truly Asian”, “a church with an Asian face and an Asian appearance”, a church “incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated.” (FABC Assembly Taipei 1974)

IN CONCLUSION

The testimonies of Congress participants, in line with the 40-year witness of Asia’s bishops, view inculturation as more than simply a pastoral issue or a question of methodology. Inculturation is an ongoing quest of ‘immersing’ the local churches and faith communities into the diverse and pluralistic Asian milieu with its myriad cultures, religions and extreme poverty, sharing life in solidarity with the Asian peoples and serving life as Jesus has done:

“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 marginalised and the downtrodden of Asia. In profound ‘solidarity with the 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 Manila Assembly, 1995)

The bishops’ holistic understanding of inculturation reveals a preferential option for Asian cultures, spirituality and religiosity, in recognition of the fact that the Asian milieu is defined by both a colourful mosaic of cultures and multifaceted religiousness, as
well as intense poverty and marginalisation. This integrative approach to inculturation enables it to respond credibly and effectively to the ‘signs of the times’, the multifaceted cultural, social, religious, political and economic dimensions of Asian societies. In this sense, an integrative approach to inculturation is the foundation for the “emergence of the Asian-ness of the church in Asia.”

In short, we live in hope that the local church may be deeply inculturated in Asian soil, to the extent that it becomes not simply a church in Asia, but truly a Church of Asia. For, “if the Asian churches do not discover their own identity they will have no future.” (Hong Kong, 1977).

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Note: this paper is based on the book Rooting Faith in Asia: Source Book for Inculturation edited by Mario Saturnino Dias, executive secretary FABC-OE. (Claretian Publications, Quezon City, Philippines & Bangalore, India, 2005). In particular this paper has used the essays of Jonathan Tan Yun-ka.