ASIA’S NEED FOR CHRIST*

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Dear sisters and brothers in Christ.

1. These days spent in community together have been full of beautiful moments of prayer and sharing. Now, nearly at the end of this Assembly, I am here to speak to you on “Asia’s Need for Christ.” First, though, I want to think with you about “Our Need for Christ.” We can only talk about Asia’s need for Christ as Asians who have experienced that need in our own lives. We should also not forget that our need for Christ, as individual Koreans, Filipinos, Indians, Chinese . . . is no different from the need for him experienced by Africans, or Europeans, by every human person. We all need Christ, I believe, every one of us needs him. That is a matter of faith, and of experience.

“If we go back to the beginnings of the Church, we find a clear affirmation that Christ is the one Saviour of all, the only one able to reveal God and lead to God” (RM 5).¹ All of creation, human-kind included, was created by God through Christ and for Christ (Col 1:16). All things have their foundation in Christ, and tend towards him. When human sin destroyed this basic order, bringing death and the ruin of nature, Christ offered himself for our redemption, gaining for all humanity the forgiveness of sins, the hope of resurrection, the promise of eternal life.

* Cardinal Kim of Seoul, South Korea, delivered the present paper at the Asian Congress on Evangelization held in Manila from 16 to 21 November, 1992.
1. John Paul II, Redemptoris missio, no. 5.
Nearly 20 years ago, in 1974, when we, the bishops of Asia, met for our first FABC General Assembly in Taipei, we issued a statement in which we stressed that it is "only in and through Jesus Christ and his Gospel, and by the outpouring of his Holy Spirit, that the quests of our peoples can come to realization." We went on to say, "We believe that it is in him and in his good news that our peoples will find the full meaning we all seek, the true liberation we strive after, the brotherhood and peace which is the desire of all our hearts."

2. What this means is that God's love in Christ is strong and effective. As Christians, we have recognized our need for this love, the love of God made visible in the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. Does Asia need this love? Surely, yes! Surely, every person in the world needs this essential love which forgives, heals, and restores the dead to life. God is Love, and what person in the world does not long to encounter the absolute Reality of love? In every human heart there is a thirst for God, a dissatisfaction that keeps us searching, until our souls at last find their true rest in God.

Asia has many different religious, cultural, and moral traditions; it has a very rich heritage which has influenced the whole world. Every one of the great religions now found in the world began in Asia: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, to name only the most famous. Yet this has not made Asia into an earthly paradise. Asia is divided, divided by religious, cultural, and racial differences. To this, recent history has added new divisions, as economic inequalities and differences of ideology have raised walls between, and even within nations. I think especially of the tragic division of our own Korean Peninsula, and of the difficult relationships between the communist Peoples Republic of China on the mainland, and the Republic of China in Taiwan.

All these differences have given rise to tensions, even to physical conflicts, to wars, that have left deep and difficult-to-heal resentments and wounds. Besides, how many millions in every part of Asia live in great poverty, or in the pain resulting from disease and from natural disasters? How many have lost all hope of living truly human lives? Who will show them a way forward or give meaning to their lives? If Asia, indeed the entire world, is to
advance towards peace and reconciliation, these are questions that need to find answers.

3. Who or what can bring this kind of peace? Or heal the wounds resulting from so many conflicts and divisions? What can bring about forgiveness and reconciliation? At one time, many people looked towards Marxism and Communism for the fulfillment of such hopes. With the collapse of the regimes of Eastern Europe, it has become clearer that this was a false dream, betrayed by those announcing it, although certainly the idea, the ideals, of a united world, and of a just and equal division of wealth, have by no means lost any of their meaning. They spring in fact from people's unfulfilled thirst for the Kingdom of God.

I also believe that there is no way in which capitalism can heal the wounds in Asia resulting from conflict and division. If properly controlled, capitalism, with its principles of economic development, might be able to promote the economic development of the whole region, and so reduce the gap between poor and rich countries. But it, too, has no answers to our basic questions: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Why should we do good and avoid evil? Why is there suffering and death? Capitalism has no vision of humanity, no worldview, no system of values, it offers no redemption.

4. We might venture to ask whether the religions and religious cultures of Asia have any answer to these questions? In almost every country there are forms of popular religion, to which the poor, especially, turn in times of need: Taoism in China, Shamanism in Korea and elsewhere, Shintoism in Japan. Often they have deep value for those who practice them, yet they have no universal appeal, no outreach beyond a particular area, no message of living hope for all human beings.

It is a different matter when we turn to Confucianism or Buddhism, to Hinduism, or those other religions that have developed sacred writings and rituals which are widely studied and practised in a variety of nations, having over the centuries until today exercised a deep influence on their moral philosophy and religious thought; these clearly reveal the depths of human existence, and facilitate virtuous living, so that insofar as they evoke a longing for eternal life they may be considered helpful for the achievement of salvation in Christ.
The virtue of benevolence taught by Confucianism, the compassion found in Buddhism, are worthy to be compared with the Christian doctrine of Love. The Taoist notion of Tao, meaning 'the Way' in Chinese, seems to have depths of meaning close to those of 'Logos' in Christianity. Yet no one has ever said that Confucius, or the Buddha, or Lao-tzu, was "true God and true Man," or "Emmanuel, God-with-us." They themselves never claimed to be that. We may see in them guides and teachers, in some ways leading us towards God, preparing the way to Christ who is the true Life.

5. Two hundred years ago, Catholic Christianity came to Korea. It came in a very significant way: not through missionaries sent to teach, or because colonial powers imposed their own culture, but because Korean Confucian scholars happened to come across Matteo Ricci's book written in Chinese, "The Real Meaning of the Lord of Heaven." Those scholars were not only deeply grounded in the Confucian traditions, they were also well acquainted with the values of Buddhism. But as soon as they discovered the Church's teaching about God, heard about and met Christ, they felt that they had at last found the way, the truth, the life, that they had so long been searching for. Since then, others like them have made the same discovery. I am thinking of someone called Choi Nam-sun (1890-1957), a prominent scholar very well-known in Korea, who died less than forty years ago. He had penetrated the depths of both Confucianism and Buddhism. Then he became a Catholic, and wrote to explain why: only the faith of the Catholic Church is eternal and universal, he said, only it has the truth of salvation that all people seek. And that truth, of course, is the living, risen Christ.

6. That is true everywhere, not just in Korea. Asia needs Christ, as the Holy Father has recently stressed in Redemptoris missio 55, where he says: "I recently wrote to the Bishops of Asia: 'Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all men, this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is the way, and the truth and the life'... The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has
established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people.”

7. In Christ, God is present to every person, humbly waiting for their hearts to open to the offer of his love. Christ, too, is a model of humility; for our sake he emptied himself, took the form of a servant and became like us in every way (Phil 2). He charged himself with the world’s sins, conquered death by his death, and rose to restore us all to life. The living Christ is the constant companion of every person, even the poorest, even the most sinful. A few years ago, Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Redemptor hominis* these words:

> the human person, — every person without exception, — has been redeemed by Christ; because Christ is in a way united to every human person, — every person without exception, — even if the individual may not realize this fact. ‘Christ, who died and was raised up for us all’, — for every human being and for all human beings — ‘can through his Spirit offer man the light and strength to measure up to his supreme destiny’.2

God so loves the world that he came down in order to experience it directly, and shared our life, our pains, our dying; so he became their true meaning. Christ becomes the friend, the brother, of every person who suffers: “Truly he bore our infirmities and carried our sorrows” (Is 53, Mt 8).

Thus Christ reveals to us the wonder of the Compassion of God. The word “Compassion” comes from Latin, it means “to share the suffering of one who suffers.” In his own suffering, Christ shows us the Father, and allows us to understand that God suffers with all who suffer, because of his love for them. Pain is never sent by God; his will is that all be united with himself in eternal joy.

8. There is very much suffering in Asia! Poverty and disease, oppression and exploitation, ignorance and violence. Yet, when we see how the very poorest of our Christians come with so much love around the Cribs, the “Belen” as you call them here in the Philippines, that are set up in churches and chapels at Christ-

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mas; when we see their tears during the Way of the Cross, or as they venerate the death of Jesus on Good Friday, we realize that for them, God is really present, with them in their sufferings. For the poor in the Church, God’s love is experienced as the heart of their daily struggles for dignity and human rights.

I want to read to you what the German evangelical theologian Jürgen Moltmann has written about this presence of Christ:

The Christ who loves with a passionate love, the persecuted Christ, the lonely Christ, the Christ who suffers over God’s silence, the Christ so utterly forsaken in his dying for us and for our sake, is the brother, the friend, to whom one can entrust everything, because he knows everything and has suffered whatever can happen to us — and even more.\(^3\)

Yes, we can entrust everything to him, when we feel overwhelmed by the thought of our own limitations and weakness; we know that “God’s power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Salvation comes from the cross of Christ, not from us.

Compassion also means asking “What can I do to help?” Mother Teresa has taught us that it makes all the difference to a dying person, if someone is simply holding their hand, loving them as they die. Even when there is almost nothing we can do, there is always something we can do, to bring alive the loving presence of God to those around us.

As members of Christ’s Church, we have experienced our own need for Christ, the joy and fulfillment his Presence brings; and if there has once been a true meeting with him in our lives, we will want to echo the words St. John wrote near the beginning of his first Letter:

Life has revealed itself! We have ourselves seen, we witness and announce that eternal life which was ever in the Father, and has now manifested itself. We proclaim to you the things we have seen and heard, so that you may share in this treasure with us. That treasure is union with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. I am writing this to you so that we may have joy to the full (1 Jn 1, 2-4).

9. Christ is not far away from us, he is very near; he is never absent, even from those who do not know his name or his story. But his loving presence only comes alive by being recognized and responded to by each individual. Christ longs to be known. That is why the Church, why we all must speak of him to those who do not yet believe, in order to enable all people to enjoy the happiness of living in Christ, the way, the truth, the life, accepting the good news of redemption from this world. If only the Church can enable all to live united in one faith, one hope, one love, all sisters and brothers as children of the one Father, so that by love more human and more beautiful communities come into being, in peace, until at last all become one with Christ, all made like him, united in his Body!

Caritas Christi urget nos! The love of Christ compels us! (2 Cor 5:14). We must announce the Gospel, because by it people are brought from darkness into light, from death to life, from ignorance to sure knowledge. People need this Christ, they long to hear his Gospel; Asia is thirsting for Christ; Asia needs Christ; we need Christ.

10. Then we must not delay; here is our most urgent task. Its name is Evangelization. The Church, each one of us, must first be evangelized again and again by Christ. He must fill our hearts with the message of his love, his compassion, his life. The Church in this part of the world must become Christ-like in terms of Asia, a shining-through of Jesus. The Church is the visible sign, the sacrament, of Christ’s presence in the world today. Like Christ, the Church here in Asia has to set out on a humble pilgrimage, discovering how to proclaim the good news to the poor, embrace the small and weak, heal the sick, bring joy to those in need, and take away the burdens of sin by the power of his death on the Cross.

See, Lord Christ, the sufferings of Asia: the children injured in their innocent trust, the women abused, the poor despised, so many who walk in darkness and sin. Our lands might become a paradise of peace if only the cruelty of the world would yield to the gentle wonder of your Compassion.
Open our eyes, the eyes of all who wait, longing to catch even one brief glimpse of a new dawn of hope. Come to each one of your Asian children and through your Church make your love known to them all.

Open our hearts to your love and our lips to your praise, because all around us are souls thirsty for God. We too, Christ Jesus, are thirsty for the day when your love so overflows in our lives that people will know that our message is true: God is love, and his Compassion is everlasting joy.