EXCHANGING GIFTS: CHURCH IN CHINA
AND SISTER LOCAL CHURCHES

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I. INTRODUCTION: EXPERIENCING PARTNERSHIPS

"New Paradigms for Relationships in Mission" is the central theme of this China Conference.¹ Several speakers from various continents and local churches will share their experience and perspectives on the Catholic churches in greater China vis-a-vis other local churches around the world. How are these faith-communities to mutually respond to their call to service and Gospel witness? Allow me to begin and contextualize my contribution with some personal experiences.

For four days last November (Nov. 6-9, 1995) I had the good fortune to be a participant in the European Catholic China Colloquium held in Paris. The 110 participants included bishops, sisters, brothers, priests, laity, missionaries, monks and contemplatives from at least a dozen countries and local churches. About one quarter of the participants were Chinese; their presence and participation was a great joy for everyone.

As the participants gathered and particularly as the colloquium progressed, I had the distinct impression that the context of church relations with Chinese Catholics had definitely moved to a new stage. What had popularly been previously termed "China Watching" had now moved to the plateau of "Inter-Church Exchange." And, as the Paris gathering concluded, I had the firm

1. An abbreviated form of this paper was presented at the Fifteenth National Catholic China Conference sponsored by the United States Catholic China Bureau; the conference was held at the Mont Marie Conference Center in Holyoke, Massachusetts, USA, March 15-17, 1996.
conviction that it had succeeded in promoting "real partnerships" among various local churches. Many important bridges and relationships had been established and strengthened.2

I have also had the happy experience of being associated with a Roman Catholic initiative unfolding in the United States: the "Training of Chinese Seminary Teachers and Formators Project." Over 40 Chinese church-persons, women and men, have come from Mainland China to the United States for theological studies and spiritual formation. They have been sponsored by thirteen church institutions. In 1993, the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers assumed a coordinating role in the project, which until that time had been a very small and a personal initiative.3 Once again, my three years of cooperative assistance with the project have convinced me that a new stage in relationships has emerged. All rejoice in this experience; all are grateful for what has been accomplished.

I hasten to add that many other factors and participants in several countries have contributed to these expanding and maturing relationships with the Church in China. I think of: the Ricci institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History at the University of San Francisco; the initiatives and programs of the United States Catholic China Bureau (and similar bodies in various countries); the Chinese students who have come to colleges and universities in various Asian, European, and North American countries; the development assistance that has gone from several local churches to China; the visiting professors that have volunteered to serve in seminaries in China; those "foreign experts" that have gone to teach in Chinese academic institutions; the deepened awareness that has grown as missionary groups write and reflect on their mission history in China.4

This wide variety of initiatives that has emerged in many local

churches/countries within the world church is heartwarming. For example, in the area of education/formation for Chinese church-persons, programs are unfolding in at least ten countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, United States, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Philippines, Singapore, and Japan. Relationships are growing; activities and projects are developing and bearing fruit. There is significant inter-church cooperation and interaction.

These experiences that have been mentioned provide an entrée to ask: What can best serve as a guiding image/vision/model for understanding, promoting, evaluating, and strengthening these relationships that have developed, particularly over the last decade? Or again, to specifically refer to the theme of this Fifteenth National Catholic China Conference: what are those “new paradigms for relationships in mission”? This reflection on the question arises from the perspective of a missiologist. Although I have visited China and cooperate with the Maryknollers working there, I am not an expert on the church situation in China; this modest input is offered to assist in our common reflection on current “relationships in mission.”

The question is specifically approached from the perspective of being a church-person who interacts with church-people from or within China. Various other paradigms could serve a variety of broad goals, e.g. the paradigm of Universal Human Rights or International Foreign Policy. While recognizing the validity and contribution of other approaches and visions, one must ask: “What paradigm is best suited to our relationship as Christians with the Church of God which is in China” (cf. 1 Cor 1:1; also 2 Cor 1:1)?

II. EXPLORING A PARADIGM FOR MUTUAL RELATIONSHIPS

A truly helpful paradigm to express our relationships as churches is to clearly affirm that our focus is: Exchanging Gifts as Sister Local Churches. This missiological reflection provides guidance on both theoretical and practical levels. The relationship as sister-churches has recently been affirmed by Pope John Paul II in his August 19, 1995 address given to the Bishops of Taiwan on the occasion of their ad limina visit. It is noteworthy that the Pope no longer calls the church in Taiwan or the overseas church
a "bridge church"; he now refers to each of them as a "sister church."  

Each word in the paradigm is important and helpful: Exchanging Gifts as Sister Local Churches. We are churches; we are communities. We are local; we bring our identity and all our uniqueness. We are in relationship; we engage one another in exchanges. We are sisters and our relationship is that of equals. It means we have personal and intimate connections. We recognize the special gifts and faith-insights that each possesses. We are enriched through our exchanging gifts as sister local churches.

A. VALIDITY OF THE PARADIGM

This paradigm is valid for a variety of reasons. In the first place, it has emerged out of the theology of the Second Vatican Council. Secondly, in the post-Council era extensive theological and missiological thought has been devoted worldwide to a deepened appreciation of the theology of the local church. Thirdly, as noted earlier, this paradigm functions on both theoretical and practical levels; it also can function well on the symbolical level. It can creatively engage our imagination; within the world church we dream of sister churches gifting one another!

A final, unique reason for employing this paradigm is the fact that it is the model for church growth and interaction specifically proposed by the community of local churches in Asia. While validly developed in all parts of the world church, the sister local

5. John Paul II, "We Pray for Unity of All Chinese Catholics with Universal Church" (Address to Taiwanese Bishops), L'Osservatore Romano, 30 August 1995, pp. 3, 6.

church paradigm has seen a uniquely Asian development. In short, this is clearly Asian theology (not only Western) and therefore probably more readily acceptable and applicable in Chinese contexts. And yet, it does have a universal validity.

B. ASIAN INSIGHTS ON LOCAL CHURCH AND RELATIONSHIPS

Allow the use of rather extensive passages from Asian church sources to illustrate the paradigm of how relationships in mission are to be anchored in a solid theology of the local church. There has been a twenty-year period of growth in Asian theological reflection on the subject of local church. It has emerged from the impetus of the Second Vatican Council and from the pastoral visit of Pope Paul VI in Asia in 1970. Later that year the Asian


churches formed themselves into the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC). The FABC has truly been instrumental in promoting insightful, inculturated theological reflection on Asian concerns.  

1. FABC I

The First Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Plenary Assembly was held in Taipei, Taiwan in April 1974; it focused on the theme: “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia” (it was also a preparation for the Synod on Evangelization to be held in Rome later that same year). The Asian churches through their bishops defined the central and most urgent mission duty incumbent upon them:

The primary focus of our task of evangelization then, at this time in our history, is the building up of a truly local church. For the local church is the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time.  

It is not a community in isolation from other communities of the Church one and catholic. Rather it seeks communion with all of them. With them it professes the one faith, shares the one Spirit and the one sacramental life. In a special way it rejoices in its communion and filial oneness with the See of Peter, which presides over the universal Church in love.  

The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church 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 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. Even its

8. The best collection of post-Vatican II Asian Church documents is found in Gaudencio B. Rosales and Catalino G. Arévalo, eds., For All the Peoples of Asia (Maryknoll/Quezon City, PI: Orbis/Claretian Publications, 1992).
10. FABC I, 11, ibid.
frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God’s Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery.\textsuperscript{11}

2. ASIAN COLLOQUIUM ON MINISTRIES IN THE CHURCH

Three years later in 1977, during the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (ACMC) held in Hong Kong, the theme of local church received another impetus:

\ldots the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia [China] will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia — Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others. The consequences will be tremendous not only for the ministries the Asian Churches will have to perform but also for all aspects of their life. We should beware of seeing our future mission in categories that belong to the past, when the West shaped the Churches’ history. If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future.\textsuperscript{12}

Each local Church is determined by her human context and lives in a dialectical relationship with the human society into which she is inserted as the Gospel leaven. \ldots Each local Church, in order to be viable, needs to become fully responsible and must have the legitimate autonomy which her natural and harmonious growth demands.\textsuperscript{13}

Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculcation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls on the part of the Churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage.\textsuperscript{14}

Since Christ’s mission is universal, all local Churches are called to live in communion with each other. This bond of unity, visibly expressed in the college of bishops presided over by the Bishop of

\begin{itemize}
\item[11.] FABC 1, 12, ibid.
\item[12.] ACMC 14, ibid. 70.
\item[13.] ACMC 25, ibid. 72.
\item[14.] ACMC 26, ibid. 72-73.
\end{itemize}
Rome, implies that the search of each Church for ministries adapted to her needs is subject to verification and testing by the other Churches. In this bond of union lies the guarantee of the true apostolicity and catholicity of each local Church.  

This creativity in the Spirit shown by the early Church remains with the Church of all ages and places. It must be emulated today by the Churches of Asia. Our Churches can no longer be satisfied with maintaining imported models inadequate for the fulfillment of their mission. Rather, it is their task to devise new structures ordained to meeting their own situation in Asia today in all its newness.

After a series of lengthy reflections on the emerging ministries for an authentic local church, the Hong Kong document articulates the desire for fellowship and communion with other local churches:

As we present these Conclusions as well to our sister Churches around the world, we count on their support and understanding, even as they in their own particular manner and against the background of the needs of their peoples are engaged in their own prayerful reflection on the same issues, so vitally important for all the Churches if they are to meet the needs of our times.

3. FABC II

The Second FABC Plenary Assembly (Calcutta, 1978) was organized around the theme: "Prayer — The Life of the Church of Asia." The Bishops-delegate noted that an important motive for their assembly was "to deepen our knowledge of our local Churches," and they addressed "the tasks which the carrying-out of the mission of the Church in Asia demands: commitment to the upbuilding of Asian communities in the life of the Gospel, to inculturation of Christian faith and life, to the endeavor for total human development and authentic liberation of peoples in justice and love, to interreligious dialogue and to renewed

15. ACMC 27, ibid. 73.  
16. ACMC 28, ibid.  
17. ACMC 134, ibid. 92.  
18. FABC II, 1, ibid. 29.
missionary formation."^{19}

4. INTERNATIONAL MISSION CONGRESS

The successful international (though predominantly Asian) Congress on Mission (IMC) held in 1979 in Manila once again strongly affirmed the centrality of the local church for a "new age of mission" in Asia.

What is the newness of this "new age of mission"? First, the realization in practice that "mission" is no longer, and can no longer be, a one-way movement from the "older churches" to the "younger churches," from the churches of the old Christendom to the churches in the colonial lands. Now — as Vatican II already affirmed with all clarity and force — every local church is and cannot be but missionary. Every local church is "sent" by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding milieux, and to bear it also into all the world. For every local church this is a primary task. Hence we are moving beyond both the vocabulary and the idea of "sending churches" and "receiving churches," for as living communities of the one Church of Jesus Christ, every local church must be a sending church, and every local church (because it is not on earth ever a total realization of the Church) must also be a receiving church. Every local church is responsible for its mission, and co-responsible for the mission of all its sister-churches. Every local church, according to its possibilities, must share whatever its gifts are, for the needs of other churches, for mission throughout [hu]mankind, for the life of the world.^{20}

Once again, what is the newness of this "new age of mission"? We believe that the Spirit of the Lord calls each people and each culture to its own fresh and creative response to the Gospel. Each local church has its own vocation in the one history of salvation, in the one Church of Christ. In each local church, each people’s history, each people’s culture, meanings and values, each people’s traditions are taken up, not diminished nor destroyed, but celebrated and renewed, purified if need be, and fulfilled (as the Second Vatican Council teaches) in the life of the Spirit.^{21}

20. IMC 14, ibid. 130.
21. IMC 15, ibid.
Two workshop papers (V and VII) of the Manila Mission Congress spoke eloquently of the local church. The participants of Workshop VII noted: "We recognize that the local church is the center and source of evangelization." 22 "Just as it is the responsibility of the Christian to work for the growth and development of the local church, in the same way he must become aware of his responsibility toward churches in other parts of the world." 23 This means that "Each local church is co-responsible with its sister churches everywhere, Rome being the foundation and center, for the building up of the kingdom of God throughout the world." 24

The same document affirms that "Missionaries from sister churches are not only living signs of the universality of the Church and the existence of co-responsibility, but because of their different cultural and Christian background, they enrich and fruitfully challenge the local church. The local church should welcome, accept and help integrate them into its life." 25

5. FABC III

The Third FABC Plenary Assembly (Bangkok, 1982) chose "The Church — A Community of Faith in Asia" as its central theme. Again, one finds enlightening words on the local church; the final statement noted:

We have seen . . . how the local church must be a community of graced communion rooted in the life of the Trinity, a community of prayer and contemplation, and of sacramental celebration and life centered around the Eucharist. It must be defined by its life of faithful discipleship in the Gospel, patterned on the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, "a community for others." We have realized that genuine participation and co-responsibility must be essential elements of its existence, and theological reflection and discernment integral components of its life. It is a community which strives to remain in unfeigned unity with its pastors, within the bonds of local and universal communion in the one Church." 26

22. IMC VII, 1, ibid. 155.
23. IMC VII, 9, ibid.
24. IMC VII, 9, ibid. 156.
25. IMC VII, 10, ibid.
26. FABC III, 15, ibid. 60.
6. THESES ON THE LOCAL CHURCH

The centrality of the local church in theological-missiological thought in the Asian area is highlighted by the FABC commitment to study the question in depth. The FABC has promoted indigenous Asian theological reflection since its early years; the formal establishment of the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC came in the 1980s. A five-year period of extensive study and consultation culminated in a comprehensive document entitled “Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context.” This is the longest document ever produced by the TAC (well over 50 closely printed pages); it was released in January 1991. In the opinion of this author, worldwide it is probably the best and most comprehensive document to date on “local church.”

The FABC document on the local church contains several sections. After a lengthy contextualized introduction and clarification of terms, the fifteen theses are presented in two thematic sections: “Biblical Foundations” (Theses 1-4) and “The Birth, Life and Mission of the Local Church” (Theses 5-15). Next, a concluding section follows; finally, a wide variety of practical “Pastoral Corollaries and Recommendations” are presented. Some salient quotes serve to capture the spirit of this insightful piece of Asian theological reflection on the local church:

Already, as we have noted, the First Plenary Assembly of the FABC spoke of building up of the local Church as the present focus of the Church’s mission in Asia. That discernment remains valid today [1991] . . . . More and more the local Churches in Asia must see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church.27

We see the emergence of the world of the Third Millennium already upon us . . . . Whether the Gospel shall be present in this new age with its unpredictable turnings and its manifold diversity will depend greatly on whether local Churches fulfill their vocation in the historic moment which is now upon them. We grasp something of the significance of local Church and inculturation in this context; those

28. Ibid. 82.
who cannot understand this fail to resonate with the signs of our
time, and the heartbeat of our peoples.²⁹

We must surely be grateful that we experience today the "rush of
the Spirit" in our Churches. For it is a privileged moment for local
theological reflection and discernment, for the gathering and spend-
ing of energies, for the upbuilding of authentic local Churches in our
part of the world. . . . We can only pray that we may listen and
be obedient to the Spirit, that we may be guided by his creative power
and be filled by the commitment and courage which are his gifts.³⁰

7. FABC V

Most major documents of the FABC refer explicitly to the role
of the local church in mission and evangelization. The Fifth
Plenary FABC Assembly held in Bandung, Indonesia (July 1990)
focused on "Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium"
and added new clarity and focus by asserting that it is the local
church which is "the acting subject of mission."

The renewal of our sense of mission will mean . . . that the acting
subject of mission is the local church living and acting in communion
with the universal Church. It is the local churches and communities
which can discern and work out (in dialogue with each other and
with other persons of good will) the way the Gospel is best pro-
claimed, 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 com-
munities become truly local churches.³¹

This local church, which is the acting subject of mission, is the people
of God in a given milieu, the whole Christian community — laity,
Religious and clergy. It is the whole diocese, the parish, the Basic
Ecclesial Community and other groups. Their time has come for Asia
[China].³²

²⁹. Ibid. 83.
³⁰. Ibid.
³¹. FABC V, 3.3.1, in Rosales and Arévalo, 281.
³². FABC V, 3.3.2, ibid.
8. CONSULTATION OF THE FABC OFFICE OF EVANGELIZATION

In November 1991 the FABC Office of Evangelization (FABC: OE) sponsored a consultation to reflect upon the theological issues raised by the Asian [China] situation where the Church is a religious minority. The consultation once again affirmed: "Local Churches, servant and inculturated, are the subject [not object] of the evangelizing mission." As local churches they are to closely follow the example of Christ, their servant-master.

We dream of a servant Church: servant of God, servant of Christ, servant of his plan of salvation; servant of the Asian peoples, of their deep hopes, longings and aspirations; servant of the followers of other religions, of all women and men, simply and totally for others. A servant Church has no pretensions and no exigencies. A servant Church does not insist upon its rights; she offers her services, without getting offended when they are not accepted. A servant Church keeps silence when bypassed, forgotten or unfairly treated.

In a servant Church, the structures of the Church herself are at the service of the Gospel and of the people. . . . A servant Church is not afraid of being a minority. She is a pilgrim Church on the way to the Kingdom. She is primarily a faith community, expressing and proclaiming Kingdom values.

9. FABC VI

The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly held in Manila in 1995 in conjunction with the visit of Pope John Paul II for the World Youth Day summarized key themes of the 25-year history of FABC. The final statement entitled "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life" noted that: "The overall thrust of activities in recent years has been to motivate the Churches of Asia towards 'a new way of being Church', a Church that is committed

33. FABC: OE, 36, ibid. 343.
35. FABC: OE, 24-25, ibid.
to becoming ‘a community of communities’ and a credible sign of salvation and liberation.” 36 “It is the Spirit of Jesus that creates the [Church as a] disciple-community.” 37

Many are the challenges of being an authentic local church in Asia and particularly in China. Asian Catholics admit: “We may hesitate because we are a minority group. Indeed we are a little flock in Asia. But it is from this position of weakness that God’s gift of divine life in Jesus Crucified, the power and wisdom of God, is most significant.” 38 Most local churches in Asia (China included) continually discover and live their identities as minorities within their national societies.

10. THEMATIC RECAPITULATION

This presentation has briefly sketched the development of reflection on the local church in Asia over the past quarter century. The eminent Asian theologian, Catalino G. Arévalo, S.J., has recently reflected on the growth of Asian local churches in the Jahrbuch für Kontextuelle Theologien 1995 [1995 Yearbook of Contextual Theologies]. 39 His insights in this document are worthy of extensive citation.

He notes that since the renewal of Vatican II “the Church in the FABC region was seeking increasingly to ‘become Church’ . . . . It was an exciting time to awaken minds and hearts of Asian Christians to the real endeavor of the ‘self-realization of the Church’. “ 40 Arévalo continues:

For me, behind the desire for constructing local theologies [ecclesiologies] lies the “dream of catholicity.” The catholicity of the Church has been a passion, in a way, in my mind and heart since my first contacts with ecclesiology. . . . It is a consequence of Incarnation and Paschal Mystery, it is the meaning of Pentecost, that (rightly understood) the realization of catholicity is the meaning of the Church’s mission. 41

36. FABC VI, 3, FABC Papers (Special six-page reprint), 2.
37. FABC VI, 14, ibid. 4.
38. FABC VI, 14.3, ibid. 5.
40. Ibid. 32.
41. Ibid. 33.
That means that every people, every place in Asia, has a vocation to the realization of the catholicity of the Church. Christ is "not yet complete" until all of humanity, each part of it, has made its contribution to the "Christ of all peoples." Every people has its gifts and riches, and the Father has a place for all these gifts, in the Kingdom, in the Body of His Son. Equality and participation is a calling for each people in the human family. Until each people has made the contribution to the Church's unity-in-diversity which it has a right and duty to make, the work of mission of the Church has not been fulfilled.42

My growing conviction has been that each place and region in Asia has to make its specific contribution to the mosaic which constitutes the catholicity of the Church, which in my mind is one of the most important principles of our faith. Every people has a right to find its place within the church. Every local church can only contribute to this dream of catholicity when it is given a status of equality and participation, because every person in the eyes of the Father is equal to all the others and has a right to be loved for themselves and for the gifts and particular contribution it can make.43

Catholicity implies that we all have need of one another. That is the ultimate meaning of local church for me. A local church is never a means in itself, but in equality and participation every local church helps to bring forth the catholic communion as the ultimate aim of being church.44

The Church catholic is a communion of local churches. Every local Church is a Church in a given time and place, but it is also in communion, both diachronically and synchronically, with the Church in all times and in all the world. Unless every local church shares in the koinonia that is the Church universal, in true equality, in authentic participation, in the interchange of gifts and blessings, the dream of catholicity has not yet been realized. It is part of our deepest duty, as Catholics especially, to help bring this to pass.45

The interviewer framed this question for Arévalo: "You concentrate on the local church in Asia as the operative agent of

42. Ibid.
43. Ibid. 34
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
mission; . . . do you see Asian local churches living up to the ideal that every local church is called to be a missionary, called to be a “sending Church”?\textsuperscript{46} Arévalo responded:

On the local church, this I believe must be said again and again: the concrete, operative meaning of inculturation is the process of letting the local Church be the local Church, assuming responsibility, within the koinonia of all the churches in the catholica, to “realize itself” in its own life and mission. . . . Until the local Churches see their own self-realization as their duty and task, and strive to bring this about, they have not yet “become Church” in the truest, fullest sense. Yet here in Asia, we are still a long way from that!\textsuperscript{47}

The operative center of the Church’s mission today is the local Church: it must discern for its own time and place what the concrete tasks of its own mission are. . . . We will make every effort at a renewed evangelization, but one that is truly inculturated and integral (in all dimensions of our common life). Most of our local communities are far from accomplishing these objectives.\textsuperscript{48}

Arévalo, speaking in another context, continues in an optimistic vein:

The past twenty years of the common journey of the Asian Bishops in FABC have been years of growth for our local Churches, hopefully “in wisdom, age and grace.” In the years ahead the tasks discerned for mission remain in front of us as challenges which we have only begun to meet. Their doing remains.\textsuperscript{49}

III. INTEGRATING ASIA’S WISDOM INTO THE PARADIGM

The experience of the pilgrim local churches in Asia since Vatican II has been an exciting and inspiring faith-journey. It has been an experience in ecclesiogenesis, the birthing and development of local churches. It has verified the ancient adage that the church is always in via, on the road, in process — as she

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid. 35. \textsuperscript{47} Ibid. \textsuperscript{48} Ibid. \textsuperscript{49} C. Arévalo, “The Church in Asia and Mission in the 1990s” (FABC Papers 57b). (Hong Kong: FABC Secretariat, 1990) 20.
awaits her Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The road has not been a well-trodden path; Asian churches are making the pilgrim way in the very process of walking it — under the guidance of the befriending Spirit. Asian Christians are enthusiastic pilgrim-disciples; a renewed church for a new world is being born in Asia.

It is now imperative to return to the paradigm of "exchanging gifts" as a model for our relationships in mission. The Asian overview has provided many "building blocks" to enhance relationships between and among sister local churches. In broad strokes, I believe this vision of local church strengthens our relationships in two key areas by: (1) fostering the growth process of individual churches; and (2) establishing mature (non-dependent) interaction and exchange among Christian communities.

A. FOSTERING LOCAL CHURCH GROWTH

Every local church worldwide is always growing into greater maturity in Christ. Asian wisdom asserts that the "primary focus" of its task at this time is "the building up of a truly local church."50 As the local community matures, it will become "a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculcated."51 It will develop its own proper liturgy, theology, structures, and spirituality. It will address its own particular pastoral problems and priorities [e.g. the challenge of internal reconciliation and mutual forgiveness in the body of Christ in China].52 In short, this involves the process of articulating the church "from below," "from the base." As was noted, "If the Asian Churches do not

50. FABC I, 9, in Rosales and Arévalo, 14.
51. FABC I, 12, ibid.
discover their own identity, they will have no future."  

Local churches, full of vitality through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit, will engage in reading the "signs of the times" (GS 4) and responding to concrete social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realities. They will foster their own inner life (inculturated faith) and be better equipped to dialogue with other Christians (ecumenism) and the followers of other faith traditions (interreligious dialogue). In short, they will experience self-actualization and "see themselves as responsible agents for the self-realization of the Church." They will experientially know that they are "the acting subject of mission." They will rejoice in their "new way of being Church."

B. ESTABLISHING SISTER CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS

Concomitant with the internal growth experienced by local churches, a relationship of adult integrity and mutuality is to be fostered. In popular parlance, it hopefully is an adult-to-adult relationship. When John Paul II speaks about churches being in a "sister"-relationship, as he did to the Taiwanese bishops in August of 1995, he points to a relationship among equals, stresses their intimate connections, and promotes mutual enrichment.

Each church's unique gifts and experiences are graciously proffered as treasures to be given and received. This is to be a generous, mutual exchange of gifts. Yes, "Every local Church, according to its possibilities, must share whatever its gifts are, for the needs of other churches. . . . Every local church is responsible for its mission, and co-responsible for the mission of all its sister-churches." All churches, including the Church of Rome, generously enter this giving and receiving process. Whatever contribution sister churches can make to this mutual process of enrichment will be greatly appreciated [I think

53. ACMC 14, in Rosales and Arévalo, 70.
54. "Theses on Local Church," in Gnanapiragasam and Wilfred, 1:82.
55. FABC V, 3.3.1, in Rosales and Arévalo, 281.
56. FABC VI, 3, FABC Papers (Special Reprint), 2.
57. John Paul II to Taiwanese Bishops, 3.
58. IMC 14, in Rosales and Arévalo, 130.
particularly of the training and formation currently being made available to the Chinese students now in various Western and Asian countries).

Each local church has received abundant and diverse gifts from the Holy Spirit. Each church is to give freely because it has received freely (cf. Mt 10:8). In this manner each local church contributes to the realization of the catholicity of the church. To cite Arévalo, “Unless every local church shares in the koinonia that is the Church universal, in true equality, in authentic participation, in the interchange of gifts and blessings, the dream of catholicity has not yet been realized. It is part of our deepest duty, as Catholics especially, to help bring this to pass.” Thus, the entire church becomes, as noted by Vatican II, the corpus ecclesiarum (LG 23), the body of the churches, the corporate body of local churches. The church catholic is a communion of local churches; the church catholic is built upon the “principle of communion” as John Paul II noted in his message to the Catholics of China from Manila in January of 1995. Or again, in the Catholic experience, the more that each local church becomes truly inculturated, indigenized and localized, the more this same church through the power of the Holy Spirit becomes universal. And, the dream of authentic catholicity grows.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE DOING REMAINS

Paradigms are helpful constructs to engage our understanding, our imagination and dreams. They elicit our commitment. This presentation, drawing on Asian theological reflection, elaborated a specific paradigm “Exchanging Gifts as Sister Local Churches” and has shown its worldwide applicability for relationships in mission. It is hoped that church-persons will embrace the vision, concretize it, dream of its beauty and allow it to shape interchurch relationships. Commitment is needed — as a contemporary beatitude notes: Blessed are they who dream dreams and are willing to pay the price to have them come true.

Being church involves a faith commitment in the Spirit to

59. Arévalo, Jahrbuch, 34.
become a community of Christ’s disciples, to form inter-commu-
nity relationships, and to become a world church of many sister
local churches, truly a corpus ecclesiarum, a communion of
communions, a Church of churches. Such a vision is close to
the heart of any evangelization effort.

Two dynamic poles guide this process of building inter-
ecclesial communion. Christians constantly recall that the Church
is both God’s gift and our task.61 As gift, it is something we
receive from God in Christ and the Spirit; the mystery of God’s
love and life are communicated to us in Word and by grace.
As task, the Church is something we responsibly make through
our generous deeds of faith, hope, love, and service; we are
shaping and being shaped into a community composed of living
stones, into the people of God and the body of Christ, into the
dwelling place of the Spirit.

Paradigms are helpful signposts that serve to indicate path-
ways for the pilgrim Church. As illuminating as a well-balanced
and insightful ecclesial paradigm may be, it must be lived,
actualized, and concretized as a vibrant community called Church.
In exploring and living a paradigm of inter-church relationships
(China and all sister churches), Christians will humbly recall and
frequently meditate on the wondrous mystery that in the power
of the Spirit the Church is for believers donum Dei atque officium
nostri, at one and the same time, both God’s gift and our task!

61. Refer to J. Komonchak, “The Church: God’s Gift and Our Task,” Origins
16 (April 2, 1987) 735-41.