FIRST ECHOES OF THE SYNOD FOR ASIA

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Asia extends from West to East, from the lands of the Gulf to Japan. The southern part of the continent includes Southern Asia, Southeastern Asia and East Asia. In the North are found the republics of Central Asia; in the Northeast, Siberia and Mongolia. This immense territory covers a multitude of races, religions and cultures. Asia represents more than three-fifths, almost two thirds, of the population of the world, with one of the largest proportions of young people. All economic models and all political regimes are represented there. Alongside countries with flourishing economies and others in the process of rapid development, Asia also includes many of the poorest countries in the world, in which masses of men and women live in dehumanizing poverty. It has become banal to describe the Asian reality as composed of three elements: masses of humanity in need of liberation; the wealth of numerous ancient cultures; a multitude of religious traditions.

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With regard to those religious traditions, Asia, taken as a whole, is the cradle of all the great religions of the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. Asia is also the home of numerous other religious traditions: Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikkhism, Shintoism, etc. With the Philippines as the sole exception, Christianity represents only a tiny minority. For example, China and India at present together number over two billion people, but their Christian population is estimated to number only a little over 25 million! These figures suffice to demonstrate the magnitude of the challenges that the Asian continent poses to the mission of the Churches as they move toward the third millenium of Christianity.

Of Christianity, as I have just said; for in the Asian context, it must be insisted that the new millenium will be a Christian event, not an international, universal event. For if it is true that the Christian era is the received measure of time for the world, this does not prevent other Asian religions from rightfully retaining their own identity, even their own manner of measuring time and writing history.

Under the mark of service

The millenium, in Asia more than in other parts of the world, should thus be celebrated under the mark of humility and service. It should be an occasion for the Christian churches to become more conscious of, and to make more evident in action, their vocation to be at the service of human beings and peoples, in view of the Kingdom inaugurated by God in Jesus Christ, which embraces all humanity and goes far beyond the frontiers of Christianity and the Churches. Is not the model to follow that which Jesus taught us himself, who came not in order to be served but to serve? The Church, which continues his mission, must follow him on the narrow way and reproduce in herself the kenosis of the incarnation. In Asia specially, she...
is called to be the yeast that disappears into the dough to make it rise, the salt of the earth that must likewise disappear. The Church must empty herself of herself, in order to be entirely centered on the Lord.

Many of the responses of the Episcopal Conferences to the lineamenta for the Synod — to which we shall return later — note in a pertinent fashion this exigency for service in forgetfulness of self:

*In the work of evangelization, the Church in Asia needs to be aware of the image she has among believers of other faiths and non-believers. While the Church is admired for her organizational, administrative, educational, health services, and developmental works, these people often do not see the Church as totally Asian, due to the fact that she receives much of her financial support from Western countries. In many cases, the Christian faith itself is perceived as something that has been imported into Asia from the outside. This is the reason why some people do not accept Christianity, fearing a loss of their national identity and culture.*

The responses similarly note that “the Western Christian missionary approach to other Asian religions... oftentimes lacked a full appreciation of those cultures... the Church’s rediscovered appreciation of other religions and cultures should find greater expression in her missionary approach.”

These affirmations are very measured and made with great

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1 *Instrumentum Laboris*, no. 13; *La Documentation Catholique*, no. 2179 (5 April 1998): 13. The French text from the General Secretariat of the Synod does not entirely correspond to the English text.

2 Ibid., no. 14.
discretion. They hardly reveal the magnitude of the problems; they say enough however to allow one to glimpse the immense challenges which the mission of the Church encounters today in the Asian context, challenges the continental synod had to face. Before coming to the work of the synodal assembly, however, it seems useful to take rapid note of its preparatory phase, through the two presynodal documents.

**The Lineamenta critiqued**

The *Lineamenta*, produced, as is the custom, at the Roman Curia under the responsibility of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, were published on September 3, 1996. Circulated among all the Episcopal Conferences, they were the object of numerous reactions, mostly negative. It is not necessary to examine in detail this provisional text. It is useful however to take note of the most important negative reactions submitted to the Vatican by the Conferences about this first document, and to note the remarkable convergence existing among these different responses.

A first negative comment was that the theological and pastoral reflection developed for over twenty five years by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), eloquently represented by an impressive number of documents, was, if

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3 The text was not published in *La Documentation catholique*. The text can be found in *Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service*: “... That they may have life, and have it abundantly” (In 10:10), Lineamenta, Vatican City, 1996.


5 Cf. the two volumes of documents: G. Rosales and C. G. Arévalo, S.J., eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia. Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1987); E.J. Eilers, ed., *For All the*
not entirely passed over in silence, at least hardly represented—and sometimes even unfavorably. The theological vision of the mission of the Church in the Asian context, elaborated by the Federation with a remarkable consistency over the course of the years, was thus totally ignored. It was painful to observe, in the almost complete absence of references to the documents of the FABC, a notorious exception aimed at discrediting Asian theology. This concerned "those theologians [who] may be a minority, but are a vociferous minority," who put into question the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Savior by aligning themselves with the thesis of the "Myth of Christian Uniqueness." The text deplores in turn "the debilitating effect" that such a thesis does not fail to exercise on the motivation for mission or on missionary vocations themselves. (n. 23) This citation was in fact taken from a "Report," issued by only one "Working Group" during the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC held in Bandung, Indonesia (1990). However, the lineamenta seem to attribute the responsibility for it to the entire assembly of bishops. Taken as a whole, according to the responses of the Episcopal conferences, the attitude of the lineamenta toward the Asian churches is paternalistic, and their theological perspective, centralist and Eurocentric.

A second negative comment made concerning the lineamenta was the narrow, ecclesiocentric perspective of their theology of mission. This perspective was expressed, for example, in the identification, made repeatedly (see no. 26 and 29)—and in contradiction to the teaching of recent documents of the Central Magisterium—of the Kingdom of God and the Church: the mission of the Church, it is said, "is to be the Kingdom of God." This explains why the document adopted a notion of the mission of the Church which insists in a unilateral fashion on the proclamation or announcement of Jesus Christ, while the role of interreligious dialogue and that of involve-


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ment for justice are, if not passed over in silence, at least greatly diminished. A Regnocentric perspective on mission, conceived in the manner of the documents of the FABC, would have permitted the development of a holistic vision of evangelizing mission. In the Asian context, it cannot be doubted that mission must express itself first of all through dialogue and involvement for justice. The priority of proclamation is affirmed in the document specifically in opposition to an "opinion [which] has been expressed from some quarters in Asia during the last three decades that the age of mission is over." (No. 30)

The responses to the lineamenta underline too the absence of pneumatology. The universal presence of the Spirit of God, especially in Asian religious traditions, should have been spoken of, for this would have permitted the development of an open and positive theology of the value of religious traditions and their significance in the order of salvation. The omission of the pneumatological dimension in the lineamenta resulted in the loss of the meaning of interreligious dialogue; for if it is true that the Church must witness to her faith in dialogue, it is also her duty to recognize what the Spirit has accomplished and continues to accomplish in others.

The lineamenta were further critiqued for their failure to take account of the way in which Asian reflection insists on the felt need of the Churches to put on "an Asian face." The theology of the local church is underdeveloped in the document. For such a development to become a reality, it is necessary to emphasize, not only in theory but also in praxis, the ecclesial reality of the local Church in its relationship to the universal Church, through the concrete application of the principles of collegiality and subsidiarity, as opposed to a tendency to an exaggerated centralization. It is necessary that the local Church enjoy a "legitimate autonomy" in order for it to be able to develop its own identity in different aspects of ecclesial life.
In this regard, the vision of the first General Assembly of the FABC in Taipei in 1974 should be recalled, a vision which has remained constant through the years. There, mission in Asia was spoken of as the building up of a truly local Church, that is to say, a Church engaged in a triple dialogue: with cultures, with religions, and with the poor. From this vision are drawn the threefold priority tasks: inculturation, interreligious dialogue, involvement toward human liberation. These three tasks, moreover, are inseparable, and should be pursued together.

The recentered Instrumentum Laboris

These brief notes are, no doubt, sufficient to give an account of the strongly critical reactions to the lineamenta expressed by the Episcopal Conferences — such as those of India and Japan, of Vietnam and Singapore, of the Philippines and Indonesia — to mention only some of the most explicit. Going through the working document of the Synod (Instrumentum laboris), published last February 20,6 one is happy to observe the considerable difference that exists between the new document and the preceding one. A detailed comparison of the two documents would demonstrate this clearly. The very structure of the document has changed, to give place to new sections responding to the requests of the Conferences, which were taken seriously into consideration. Something of the ecclesiological and missiological vision of FABC now shines through: the negative and defamatory references have been suppressed; the overly narrow ecclesiocentric perspective gives way to a Regnocentric perspective, in which the Church is understood as placed in the service of the Reign of God (no. 34). As a result, a more generous place is granted to interreligious dialogue and action for justice. "The need to elaborate an Asian understanding of evangelization in which

6 Text in La Documentation Catholique, no. 2179 (5 April 1998): 306-35.
interaction, dialogue, witness, service, and proclamation are all seen as integral elements of the Church’s evangelizing mission” (No. 47) is now explicitly noted.

Another important new element of the Working Document, as compared to the lineamenta, concerns the Church as a communion of local churches and the necessity of applying “the principles of unity of faith, charity, collegiality and subsidiarity” (No. 38) to the relationship between the local churches and the central authority. This means that “more autonomy should be given to the local Churches in areas of dialogue, inculturation, and adaptation,” in view of which these Churches must have the necessary structures. The need for inculturation is brought out, even in the fields of theology and theological formation (no. 50). Without wishing to say everything, one can affirm that, taken as a whole, with this new document, the Synod had in its hands a useful instrument to undertake its work. It remains to see what became of it.

A preliminary report

The opening salvo was made through the Preliminary Report of Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi, bishop of Kaohsiung, reporter general of the synod, on April 21.⁷ Let us note from the start that the Cardinal-reporter constantly referred to the Working document, an evident sign that the latter represented a valuable point of departure for the work of the Assembly.

The report brought out all the great themes of an Asian vision of mission. Let us mention them rapidly: the broad notion of the mission of evangelization, with its triple imperatives of action for justice, inculturation and interreligious dialogue; a positive theological evaluation of Asian religious traditions, based on the active presence of the Spirit of God in cultures and religions; the

urgent need of inculturation in all aspects of ecclesial life, including theology (in particular, christology), liturgy, sacred art, spirituality, social organization; an ecclesiology of communion in which the principle of collegiality is operative (the principle of subsidiarity was passed over in silence), in view of a greater autonomy of the local Churches, which must present themselves with an Asian face; the Church at the service of the Kingdom of God; a Church which reproduces in herself the model of the "Suffering Servant" and follows her Master in his kenosis; a Church which is not only for the poor, but with the poor; the primacy in the Asian context of the experience of God in Jesus Christ over doctrines; an experience which is transmitted though witness which incarnates the values of the Gospel. In brief, Churches which are not or no longer "copies conformed" to the model of Western societies.

Days of individual interventions of the fathers in the General Assembly followed. These interventions re-enforced in many places the perspectives first recovered by the Working Document and corroborated afterwards by the first Report. It is neither necessary nor possible to go over, even rapidly, these interventions of the synodal fathers. These were, in their turn, incorporated, although imperfectly, in the second Report of Cardinal Paul Shan — which was also subjected to other influences.

A New Document

It is first necessary to note the difference in structure between the new document and those preceding it. In fact, the first section is no longer devoted to a preliminary analysis of the situation of the churches in the Asian continent, but immediately treats of the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Asian context, however, is quite present. The propositions of the Fathers concerning the manner in which Jesus should be proclaimed in their contexts is reported in this section: personal experience prevails over doctrine, the person of the Jesus of history over dogmatic formulas; the necessity of emphasizing
the *kenosis* of the Word and his identification with suffering people. The Report also insisted on underlining the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Spirit in the work of salvation.

The second and third parts of the Report are devoted to the evangelizing mission of the Church in Asia. Let us note that, among the diverse constitutive or integral aspects of the mission of the Church, the second part is devoted to Proclamation, which thus seems to obtain here the same “permanent priority” that was found in *Redemptor Hominis*. The third section mentions the other aspects of mission; among others: integral human development (liberation is not spoken of) and social involvement, education, health, inculturation, interreligious dialogue, ecumenism...

**New requests**

Let us recall some salient aspects, following the order itself of the *Relatio*:

An inculturated liturgy is a part of evangelization. In view of this, the use of sacred texts of other religions in the liturgy and prayer of the Church is suggested. (No. 16) The local Church, subject of evangelization, should be an inculturated Church. This means that local Churches should enjoy a “legitimate autonomy” within the unity of the faith, and thus, that the “principles of collegiality, subsidiarity and legitimate autonomy” (No. 18) be respected. Local Churches should also be “communities of participation” at all levels, a “communion of communities.” (No. 22) Priority should be given to the evangelization of indigenous populations and minority groups. (No. 26) Education should be perceived as a true activity of evangelization. (No. 28) Local churches should assume “an Asian face” in all their dimensions: theological, liturgical, organizational and spiritual; this is what “a new way of being Church in...
Asia" means. Only an authentic process of inculturation can change "her western image and give an Asian countenance to the Church." (No. 32) The vocation of the Church is to become "an even more perfect image of the Kingdom of God and to invite others to do the same" (No. 33); she must "take on the image of a servant." "Since she desires to be of service to the peoples of Asia, she is to pursue in Asia the values of the Kingdom." (No. 34) "The Church has a duty to engage in a manifold dialogue with the followers of other religions in order to build more just, humane and harmonious societies." (No. 38) Integral human development implies not only the promotion of the values of the Kingdom of God in the world, but also the struggle against the structures of sin in society. (Nos. 38-39) Inculturation is the call made to Christians to root the values of the Gospel in every culture. It can perhaps be seen as "a dialogue between people and the Holy Spirit." (No. 48) It should inform every aspect of the life of the Church. In the field of liturgy, "there is a felt need for greater flexibility and creativity." In the area of theology, inculturation will lead to bringing out certain aspects of the person of Jesus; for example, presenting him as Guru or as Liberator. (No. 49) Interreligious dialogue, in its different forms, takes on a special importance in Asia; in dialogue, Christians must learn not only to speak, but also "to listen and learn." (No. 51) The scandal of the division of Christians remains "one of the great obstacles to evangelization." (No. 52) The question of whether the discipline of the Church could be reconsidered was raised, so that Eucharistic hospitality might be extended "to all Christians who believe in Christ's real presence in the Eucharist." (No. 53)

These remarks obviously do not exhaust the content of the Relatio. They are highlighted as signs of openness in a text which was not afraid to put forward suggestions or requests of far-reaching impact, made in the Assembly of the Synod. These suggestions take up, in fact, reflections and hopes kept alive for many years in the Asian Churches during the period
of the renewal of the Church which followed the Second Vatican Council. Are these hopes, unfulfilled at that time, closer to fulfillment today? One can get some idea of the answer by examining what sort of echo the official propositions of the Synod furnish.

Final Propositions and perspectives for the future

The final list of propositions handed over to Pope John Paul II by the Synod contains 59 propositions. They cannot all be reviewed here. One must content oneself with showing that, on certain important points, they adequately reflect the second Report, although certain more controversial points are “passed over in silence.”

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8 It is doubtless not out of place to observe that, in India, for example, since the 1970’s, experts and consultants working in the name of the Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Conference, prepared a Eucharistic Prayer and a complete Ordinary of the Mass for India. Three volumes of second readings (lectio altera), alternatives for the Office of Readings of the breviary, covering the entire liturgical year, were also prepared. This enormous labor did not prosper, because the Roman Congregation did not approve it. Concerning the possibility of making use of sacred readings from other religious traditions in the liturgy, Cardinal Joseph Parecattil, archbishop of Cochin, declared in the Plenary Assembly, during the 1974 Synod on evangelization in the modern world: “In theory, the introduction of readings from non-Christian sacred books into the Divine Office and even into the Liturgy of the Word is not objectionable. But the times are perhaps not ripe, because the faithful are not prepared for such an innovation, having been accustomed to view non-Christian religions as superstition and idolatry, an attitude that should be rectified as soon as possible.” (Cf. the intervention in D. S. Amalorpavadass, Evangelization of the Modern World (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1975): 137-38.) It is known that the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has recently published an instruction, “On certain aspects of the calendar and the proper liturgical texts,” according to which, “the writings of non-Christian authors must be totally excluded” from the lectio altera of the Office of Readings. Cf. La Documentation Catholique, 94 (1997): 1068. Concerning the “legitimate autonomy” of the local church, the document took up the very expression which the Asian bishops used in the Synod of 1974.

The concern for inculturation of Asian churches remains primordial. These Churches must be immersed in the diverse, contrasting and perhaps conflictual Asian realities (proposition 3). The different aspects of evangelization are enumerated as follows: witness, dialogue, proclamation, catechesis, conversion, baptism, insertion into the ecclesial community, implantation of the Church, inculturation and the integral human promotion (proposition 6)—one hardly finds a dynamic order, while the effects of the proclamation are strongly underlined.

The proclamation of Jesus Christ remains primordial, but it must be inculturated. Jesus will thus be presented as the Teacher of wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the compassionate Friend of the poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the obedient Servant (proposition 6). The Synod encourages theologians to pursue their work, which consists of developing an incultured theology, in sincere union with the Magisterium (proposition 7). The Spirit of God, who has been at work since creation (proposition 11), must be discovered in Asian realities, cultures and religions; he is the principal agent of evangelization in the multi-cultural and multi-religious context of Asia (proposition 12).

The Church-communion, "communion of communities," must be marked at all levels by participation; the spirit of communion and of collegiality is recommended (propositions 13-15). "Basic ecclesial communities" represent "a new way of being Church in Asia" (proposition 30). The Church should institute "new ministries for women," in view of their effective participation in the church's mission (proposition 35). Religious life should be inserted into the reality of Asia, while remaining faithful to respective charisms (proposition 27). Action for justice is an integral aspect of evangelization (proposition 22). Human promotion is a constitutive dimension of
evangelization. The “preferential love for the poor” presupposes on the part of the Church that she make their cause her own, by becoming a Church of the poor and for the poor (proposition 44). Indigenous and tribal populations are specially disposed to receive the message of Christ; the Church must respond to their expectation (proposition 38). Interreligious dialogue seeks to promote collaboration and mutual enrichment in respect for one’s distinctive religious identity (proposition 41). Concerning ecumenism, it is suggested that Episcopal Conferences explore with other Churches the possibility of new structures, in view of promoting the union of Christians (proposition 42).

Coming to the inculturation of the Gospel in the diverse cultures of Asia, the different fields of application are enumerated as follows: theology, liturgy, the formation of priests and religious, catechism, spirituality, popular religiosity, etc. (proposition 42). One might note the absence of the structural aspect of the Church and her legislation from this list. It is said, moreover, that “the local Churches need the authority and freedom to inculturate the liturgy and to adapt it to local cultures, all the while recognizing the need of dialogue and communion with the Holy See, principle of unity in the Church.” (proposition 43). In particular, the Synod asks the concerned Roman congregations to accord to Episcopal Conferences “the authority and the competence to approve translations of liturgical texts in indigenous languages.” (proposition 43). That is all and that is so little! This request is limited to a relatively derisory application of the competence that should be recognized of Episcopal Conferences, if it is true that they enjoy an authority, equally doctrinal, in their respective territories. The “legitimate autonomy” of the local Church is no longer spoken of, nor is the principle of subsidiarity, which, as was noted, appear and disappear along the way in the preceding synodal documents.

A contrasting assessment

The last observation above brings us to some reflections on
the synod itself. Should one have expected more? The situations are in fact so diverse in all their elements, including ecclesial traditions from the "Middle East" (referred to as Western Asia) to Southeast Asia, or again from the countries of the Gulf to Japan, that a common synod for all of Asia was doubtless condemned to content itself with generalities.

In his remarks at the end of the Synod, Cardinal Julius Darmatmadja, archbishop of Jakarta, president delegate of the Synod, noted:

_We have been able to listen to the opinions and ideas of others, which have been influenced by different situations, and to seek what is positive in them. We may still find ourselves in disagreement with certain propositions and with the vote we have heard.... But as in the Council of Jerusalem, St. Peter gave the final word. So also we await the last word from the Holy Father in the forthcoming post-synodal apostolic exhortation._

In fact, the theological vision developed through the years by the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC), the absence of which in the _lineamenta_ was regretted by Episcopal Conferences, hardly appeared in the final propositions. The hope was expressed that the apostolic exhortation, which should serve as the crown of the synodal process, could itself, in its presentation, reflect an Asian character (proposition 3); but this hope is poorly served by the propositions themselves, of which all the references come from, besides the texts of the Second Vatican Council, documents of the Central Magisterium. There is not a single reference to the documents of the Asian Federation, often so rich and more adapted to the context.

**Words and silences**

Without doubt, the subjects that have become in fact es-
sentential in all continents are treated. The different dimensions of the evangelizing mission of the Church were spoken of; in this case, the triple dialogue of the local church with cultures, religions and the poor. But the place given to interreligious dialogue seems meager in comparison to that given to proclamation of the Gospel, especially if one considers the minority status of the Church in so many Asian countries, where the witness of life or interreligious dialogue often represent the only possible ways of evangelization. In other situations, dialogue with the majority religion is almost non-existent, if not perhaps impossible. The imperative of inculturation in local churches is emphasized; but the necessary conditions for its realization, touching on the relationship between local Churches and the central authority of the Church, are hardly touched upon, and the concrete suggestions articulated during the course of the work of the synod either disappear entirely in the final propositions, or are no longer found except in a form so toned down that they have become insignificant.

One cannot obviously claim to make a final assessment at this time, before even the publication of the forthcoming apostolic exhortation. But one cannot fail to raise questions concerning the vitality of the synodal institution in its present form. It is, doubtless, true to say that all the questions posed here have been raised before, perhaps at a more profound level, yet without receiving the pertinent answers. There will be occasion later, no doubt, to speak of the “words and the silences” of the Asian Synod, as has already been done with regard to the recent African synod.