REFLECTIONS ON THE ASIAN SYNOD

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The Philippine bishops attending the Asian Synod in April and May this year were all lodged at the Collegio Filipino and commuted twice a day to the assembly hall at the Vatican. The trips back were great occasions for editorializing on the day’s events, and there was no lack of penetrating (and not so penetrating!) commentaries made. On one such trip, after the General Superior of a religious order had spoken on the floor, the bishops were quite exercised over his intervention: “Nice but pointless—out of place—puzzling, to say the least—nothing to do with the Synod.” The Father General had given a brief disquisition on the spiritual life which, some of the bishops felt, could have been given anywhere, anytime, to any audience.

I had a chance to talk with this same Superior General later and in the course of our conversation, he mentioned how he had had more than his quota of Bishops’ Synods, having attended so many of them since becoming General. His verdict on the Synods he had been at: Nothing of any real substance had happened as a result of them.
I thought his judgement rather severe, but he was, to those who knew him well, a man of especially great discernment. His passing comment compelled me to look at his intervention at the Synod hall in a vastly different light. And I started to wonder: Had he been trying to tell us with his “pointless” intervention that it was the fine and brave speeches the Synod delegates were making that were pointless because in the end they were not going to amount to anything much? I didn’t ask him, but if that was his intent, his innocuous-seeming contribution to the Synod’s collective wisdom might not have been all that innocuous after all.

Yet, by all accounts—not least the testimony of delegates and press people who had participated in or reported on previous continental Synods—the Asian Synod has been the most promising and exciting of the three held so far. The promise was in the way the delegates faced up to the enormous problems of the Church’s evangelizing work in Asia, forthrightly identifying the obstacles in themselves and, more notably, in Rome, to its better fulfilment; the excitement was in that same fact: In their blame-setting they did not spare themselves or the Roman “Dicasteries” (to the un-initiated, the Congregations of the Roman Curia), speaking freely, forcefully, of the difficulties put in the way of the Church’s preaching of the faith in Asia and not unsuitably, putting part of the blame squarely on the shoulders of Rome. Understandably, the Roman Congregations didn’t like it one bit, but they sat up and listened.

The Church as Communion, inculturated theologies and liturgies, the social doctrine of the Church, interreligious dialogue, lay ministries, etc.—post-Vatican II Synods had discussed all these ideas, I would think, repeatedly and at length in the past. There was nothing new about them by any means, yet it was the rehearsing and discussion of these simple ideas that in the end made the Asian Synod all of a sudden promising and exciting.
The reason might well have been the wide diversity of problems the bishops were concerned with—and the equally wide diversity of national situations that were the context of their discussion of them. The *Instrumentum Laboris*, speaking of the realities of Asia, pointed up the tremendously wide array of racial, political, cultural, economic, and, not the least, religious diversities that can be found only in Asia. Those diversities are the context of the Church’s work of evangelization and in the Synod they made for quite a dizzying, constantly changing perspective for the bishops as they listened to delegates speak of the problems and concerns of their local Churches.

If there was one reality that stood out among the many that were peculiarly Asian, it was the fact of the minority status of Christianity in all countries but the Philippines. The fact is all the more striking in the light of another fact, namely, that Asia is the continent of birth of Christianity itself and, as well, of all the major religious traditions of the world—Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism, not to mention Judaism, Jainism, Sikhism—and is the home likewise of the greatest number of cosmic religionists.

Diverse as the problems and situations were of the various Churches of Asia, they really had only one concern—and it was this concern that made sense out of the Synod’s multitude of problems and situations. *The one, unifying concern was how to preach the Gospel of Christ in the hugely varying situations of the continent and make it meaningful and acceptable to people who belong to—and deeply and proudly profess—ancient religious traditions that have become integral to their way of life and the ordering of their very society.*

True, there were a host of other commonalities: widespread poverty, ecological degradation, the inroads of a globalized economy, the exploitation of women, children, tribals and low-
caste people, grave social injustices and violations of human rights (committed on the plea that Asian values are different), incipient democracies, authoritarian governments, etc. But these too were just a few more added challenges to the general concern of preaching a Gospel that would be meaningful to those suffering from the evils mentioned.

Considering how half of the Synod's time was spent listening to interventions—episcopal speeches which often seemed to be random and capricious ramblings of individual speakers with no clear connection with preceding speeches—one wondered how it was possible to make sense out of the turmoil of ideas. Yet, as important themes started to surface from the confusion, it was amazing how in the end they hung together in some organic way. The Church as Communion was one such theme and a most important one. It implied sharing in all manner of ways: in the life of the Trinity, and hence in its holiness; in the life of the Church, and hence in its essential task of preaching; in the life of people and their communities, and hence in their "joys and hopes, their griefs and anxieties." Connected with it, flowing from it, were other equally key ideas: the triple dialogue with religions, cultures, peoples; hence concern with the development and strengthening of the local Church, inculturation and the empowering of the laity to take a more active part in the Church's mission of witness and service, etc.

From all the above and the strong concern for them came what I thought was the strongest—and most poignant—message of the Synod (even though it was explicitated in neither the Nuntius nor the Propositiones): "Trust us." The "us" was the local Churches the bishops were representing; and the plea was addressed to Rome and its several "Dicasteries" or Congregations. The field for the exercise of the trust sought was quite wide, including, among other things, the appointment of bishops (in the Oriental Churches especially), the approval of (vernacular) liturgical texts by the Local Churches, the development of genuinely inculturated theologies.
"Trust us" meant, at bottom: "Allow us to make mistakes and to correct them ourselves like mature, responsible Churches in trusting communion with each other in our attempts to make the Gospel live among our people."

In the light of the above, it is quite easy to come to the conclusion, as our farmers in Bukidnon used to say about Marcos' New Society: "Mao guihapon—it's the same as ever, nothing has changed!" The Synod was nothing, it would seem, but words, a surfeit of words in fact, rehashing the same old concerns, indicating that no real change had taken place at all and vindicating the Cui Bono judgement on Synods of the Father General referred to earlier. But will nothing in truth happen as a result of the four week gathering of the Asian bishops in Rome?

I am not too sure. At Synod's end, the really crucial question for the delegates, to my mind at least, was not what the Pope would decide to say about the bishops' propositions in his forthcoming document on the Synod (although what he will say and how he will say it will, of course, be of immense significance); nor what changes will take place in the "Dicasteries" because of the bishops' critical recommendations (although, yes, hope springs eternal that there will be action on them too at their level of responsibility). The really crucial question is about what they, the bishops themselves, are willing to do back home about perceived consensuses, about their own learning from one another and the richness of Synod ideas, about the very spirit of the Synod—and the Spirit who presided over it all.

That last thought about the Holy Spirit may well be, everything considered, the pivotal question after all. The holding of continental Synods in Rome is often interpreted, at best, as simply another manifestation of centralized Roman power; at worst, an attempt of that same power to manipulate the Synod
process to go along “safe” lines. The charge probably holds more than just the proverbial grain of truth. And not just probably, but most certainly, but only I would think, if one were to look at the Synod from a purely human point of view, see it as a purely human event. But the fact is a Synod is not a purely human event—it is an ecclesial one too. And if authentically ecclesial, I would like to believe—we must believe?—that the Holy Spirit was in there somewhere, breathing gently yet powerfully all the time, despite whatever manipulation, witting or unwitting, might have taken place.

My own reading of the Asian Synod? It was a human event, certainly, and there was no dearth of interesting human foibles and idiosyncrasies displayed in its course. And if there was manipulation at all, the bishops were quite alert and didn’t go along, by and large, with what they perceived as manipulation. This was especially true in the discussion in the small groups. But it (the Synod) was also—and foremost—an ecclesial event and the Spirit’s breathing was quite palpable all through its conduct (even when the human elements noted above seemed to be in the ascendancy). It remains to be seen what the bishops, and, yes, the Pope and the Curial Cardinals will do under the Spirit’s persistent breathing.