CONTINUING
PENTECOST IN ASIA:
Introducing *Ecclesia in Asia*

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The Church in Asia sings the praises of the ‘God of salvation’ (Ps 68:20).” These opening words set the tone of *Ecclesia in Asia*, the post-synodal document promulgated in November, 1999. Clearly, themes of gratitude, celebration and optimism characterize *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA). The Church sings God’s praises for “choosing to initiate his saving plan on Asian soil,” for sending “his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Savior, who took flesh as an Asian”! This Church sees “the Marvel of God’s Plan in Asia” and exults “in the goodness of the continent’s peoples, cultures, and religious vitality” (1).

Pope John Paul II signed the apostolic exhortation during his Asian pastoral visit to India (November 5-8, 1999). The issuance of EA was the concluding moment of the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, popularly known as the “Asian Synod.” This four-year project of Church reflection and renewal began with the publication of the *Lineamenta* (1996), continued with discussion on the *Instrumentum Laboris* (1998), reached its apex with the month-long Synod sessions in Rome (April 18 - May 14, 1998), and culminated with the proclamation of the post-synodal *Ecclesia in Asia* (November 6, 1999). Yes, “Asia-Church” rejoices and unceasingly proclaims God’s enduring love!

The Asian Synod was a multi-faceted event on many levels. As


_Ecclesia in Asia_ notes, "It was indeed a moment of special grace" (3). It was also "a celebratory remembering of the Asian roots of Christianity" (4). The Synod event became "an ardent affirmation of faith in Jesus Christ the Savior" (4); and, as the local Churches of Asia gathered in Rome, "the Synod Fathers sought to discern the principal areas of mission for the Church in Asia as she crosses the threshold of the new millennium" (18).

The Synod's theme was much debated and carefully chosen: "Jesus Christ the Savior and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia: 'That they may have Life and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10)." As the Pope writes, this particular formulation of the theme was to "illustrate and explain more fully that Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world, to be clearly distinguished from the founders of other great religions" (2). The theme manifests the Church's faith in Jesus and his mission; he is Savior who serves and bestows abundant life; he is to be joyfully proclaimed in Asia.

_Ecclesia in Asia_, a rich, lengthy document, now becomes an important signpost of evangelization for the local Churches in Asia in the new millennium. An analysis of EA reveals three major sections or underlying thematics: (1) Asian Realities relevant to the Church and her Mission of Evangelization (5-9); (2) Theological-Doctrinal Aspects of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit (10-23); (3) The Church's Mission of Love and Service in Asia (24-49). The main body of EA is framed by an Introduction which captures the highlights of the Synod process (1-4) and a conclusion that expresses the Pope's gratitude and encouraging words as well as a final prayer to Mary, "Mother of Asia" (50-51). The entire document is focused on "seeking to discern the Spirit's word to the Churches in Asia" (51).

**Asian Context**

_Ecclesia in Asia_ devotes its first chapter to an exploration of the concrete situation of contemporary Asia—her religious, cultural, economic, social, political, and historical realities (5-9). This inductive approach, characteristic of current Asian theological reflection, mirrors
the method and experience of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC). The Asian Church accepts that “a critical awareness of the diverse and complex realities of Asia is essential if the People of God on the continent are to respond to God’s will for them in the new evangelization” (5).

As EA notes, “Asia is the earth’s largest continent and is home to nearly two-thirds of the world’s population”; its variety of peoples are “heirs to ancient cultures, religions and traditions.” One is amazed “at the sheer size of Asia’s population and at the intricate mosaic of its many cultures, languages, beliefs and traditions.” Asia is “the cradle of the world’s major religions” and “the birthplace of many … spiritual traditions” (6).

Economically, socially, and politically, “situations on the Asian continent are very diverse, defying any simple classification” (7). EA highlights various concrete pastoral concerns: rapid change, migration, nuclear power, tourism, population growth, poverty, women, and a host of additional challenges. In this complex situation, the Church’s one ambition is to continue Christ’s mission of service and love (cf. 50). Her approach is that of mutual exchange and enrichment; thus, EA confirms “the importance of dialogue as a characteristic mode of the Church’s life in Asia” (3). Mother Teresa of Calcutta is proposed as “an icon of the service to life which the Church is offering in Asia … [because of] her loving and selfless care of the poorest of the poor” (7).

This “chosen” continent of Asia, with all its immensity, diversity, and complexity, holds special meaning for the Church. God “sent his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Savior, who took flesh as an Asian” (1); “Behold the Savior of the World is born to us, born in Asia” (2). Yes, Asia is unique as “the birthplace of Jesus and of the Church” (5). This Church thanks God “for choosing Asia as the earthly dwelling place of his incarnate Son” (50; cf. 2, 9, 20). This unique gift implies a task; the Church commits her energies to making Jesus, his Gospel of Life, and his Community the Church truly “at home” (inculturated) in Asia and her peoples (9, 20).

Landes vol 13, no.2 (1999)
Theological Foundations

Three chapters of EA, focusing on Jesus and the Spirit, describe a type of “doctrinal” orientation to the Church’s Asian mission. Yet, the manner of presentation is decidedly “pastoral” in style and focus; it blends theologies “from below” and “from above.” It reads easily; the language flow is smooth; inclusive expression is partially employed. Some insights even enjoy poetic expression: “Contemplating Jesus in his human nature, the peoples of Asia find their deepest questions answered, their hopes fulfilled, their dignity uplifted and their despair conquered” (14).

The thematic of “gift” is a creative optic frequently found in these “theological” chapters. Jesus the Savior is a gift to Asia; this faith-gift is to be both appropriated and proclaimed. “The Church’s faith in Jesus is a gift received and a gift to be shared; it is the greatest gift which the Church can offer to Asia” (10). “Only if the People of God recognize the gift that is theirs in Christ will they be able to communicate that gift to others through proclamation and dialogue” (31; cf. 20). The Church in Asia must ask itself a probing question: How do we “share with our Asian brothers and sisters what we treasure as the gift containing all gifts, namely, the Good News of Jesus Christ” (19).

Proclaiming the Christian faith-gift meets unique challenges, particularly in the “multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia” (21). Asia has its indigenous religions, soteriologies, and savior figures (cf. 14, 19-20). This reality demands a humble, dialogical stance on the part of the Church; “proclamation is prompted not by sectarian impulse nor the spirit of proselytism nor any sense of superiority” (20; cf. 4, 31, 46). And yet, this genuine respect and reverence for the Church’s dialogue partners “does not eliminate the need for the explicit proclamation of the Gospel in its fullness” (20; cf. 31). By her very identity the Church is “a community aflame with missionary zeal to make Jesus known, loved and followed” (19).

Affirming the relevance of Jesus for Asia (1, 9, 10, 18, 50) demands a particular approach to proclamation. The Church “needs to follow a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full apprecia-
tion of the mystery.” She should employ “narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms” and follow “an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching.” In a word, the Church must “evangelize in a way that appeals to the sensibilities of Asian peoples” (20). Engaging Asian peoples, their cultures and religions (FABC’s triple dialogue) demands genuine commitment to inculturation (20-23) and interreligious dialogue (29-31).

EA asserts that Christology is necessarily integrated with Pneumatology as well as Trinitarian faith. It is the “uniqueness of Christ which gives him an absolute and universal significance” (14); one cannot “separate the activity of the Holy Spirit from that of Jesus the Savior” (16). The Holy Spirit, “the prime agent of evangelization,” (17) is “an absolutely vital part of the mystery of Jesus and the salvation which he brings” (15). Jesus and his Spirit are only adequately comprehended within the “Trinity’s plan of salvation” (15); there are no two parallel economies of salvation. There are real, complex missiological questions and the Asian Synod / EA attempted to face them.

A Missionary Community

The longest section of EA (24-49) focuses on the Church and her mission in the vast Asian continent. Four discernable themes emerge: Church as Communion for Mission (24-28), Dialogue (29-31), Human Promotion (32-41), and Agents of Evangelization (42-49). EA presents a vision as well as concrete approaches for mission; these emerge from a particular faith-stance: “the question is not whether the Church has something essential to say to the men and women of our time, but how she can say it clearly and convincingly” (29). EA recognizes “the pressing need of the local Churches in Asia to present the mystery of Christ to their peoples according to their cultural patterns and ways of thinking” (20).

“Communion Ecclesiology” finds strong expression in EA. The Church is a “privileged place of encounter” between God and people; her first purpose is “to be the sacrament of the inner union of the

Landas vol 13, no.2 (1999)
human person with God." She is also "the sacrament of the unity of the human race." This means that "communion and mission are in-
separably connected [and] they interpenetrate and mutually imply each other." Communion is "both the source and fruit of mission." In
short, "Communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion" (24).

The Church in Asia promotes internal communion and participa-
tion on many levels: with the Successor of Peter, among various sister
local Churches, dioceses, basic ecclesial communities ("a positive fea-
ture of the Church’s evangelizing activity"), renewal movements, the
Catholic Eastern Churches, other Christian Churches (cf. 25-27). In-
ternal communion emanates outward toward other groups through-
out Asia: the variety of peoples, cultures and religions with whom the
Church shares life (25), Churches and peoples in Mainland China, North
Korea, and the ex-Soviet territories of Asia (28). Regional and contin-
ental associations of Bishops that foster communion (e.g. FABC) are
recognized and praised (26), but their profound insights are never di-
rectly quoted.

An inherent demand of "communion ecclesiology" is dialogue. This "desire for dialogue ... is not simply a strategy for peaceful coex-
istence among peoples; it is an essential part of the Church’s mis-
ion..., a veritable vocation for the Church" (29). A particularly help-
ful section is devoted to Interreligious Dialogue (31), seen as "a part of
the Church’s evangelizing mission, an expression of the mission ad
gentes."

The advent of the new millennium offers the Church "a great op-
portunity for interreligious dialogue and for meetings with the leaders
of the great world religions." Following the lead of Nostra Aetate, "the
Magna Carta of interreligious dialogue for our times," the Church in
Asia is called to a double fidelity: to affirm her "belief that the fullness
of salvation comes from Christ alone" and to gladly acknowledge "what-
ever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism
and Islam as a reflection of that Truth which enlightens all people." Interreligious Dialogue seeks "mutual advancement ... [and] the elimi-
nation of prejudice, intolerance and misunderstandings” (31).

Dialogue demands will only increase with passing years. Persons must be formed to have “a mature and convinced Christian faith” which qualifies them “to engage in genuine interreligious dialogue.” They need to be “deeply immersed in the mystery of Christ ... [and] happy in their faith community.” The call to dialogue requires the Church in Asia “to provide suitable models of interreligious dialogue.” In the dialogue endeavor it is imperative “to revitalize prayer and contemplation” and to give witness to “the great Christian traditions of asceticism and mysticism” (31).

The entire Chapter VI treats human promotion and Church social teaching. Striving to build a “civilization of love,” the Church views all human development not only as a “technical or economic question; it is fundamentally a human and moral question” (32). An integral, holistic approach to evangelization is employed, encompassing the areas of human dignity (33), preferential love of the poor (34), health care (36), education (37), peacemaking (38), globalization (39), foreign debt (40), the environment (41). In these diverse fields, the Church resists “the culture of death” in accord with her vision of “the Gospel of Life” (35).

Agents of Evangelization

Chapter VII, entitled “Witnesses to the Gospel,” focuses on the Church’s missionary identity in Asia. The Church strives to be a credible witness, because “people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories”; in the Asian context “people are more persuaded by holiness of life than by intellectual argument” (42). EA asserts that it is a “genuinely religious person [who] readily wins respect and a following in Asia” (23).

Gospel witness in Asia needs holy men and women who themselves are “on fire with the love of Christ and burning with zeal to make him known more widely, loved more deeply and followed more closely.” Why? “A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on
fire”; Christian witnessing demands “a true missionary spirituality of prayer and contemplation” (23). Asian peoples, especially the youth, manifest this “deep thirst for spiritual values” (6). In a word, living Christian mission in Asia incorporates, in fact, demands “contemplative action and active contemplation” (23).

EA addresses a variety of Gospel witnesses: Pastors (43), religious and missionaries (44), theologians (22), laity (45), families (46), young people (47), and those whose apostolate is social communications, “the areopagus of the modern age” (48). Striking insights are often presented: “People in Asia need to see the clergy not just as charity workers and institutional administrators but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit” (43). “The Synod Fathers were most concerned that the Church should be a participatory Church in which no one feels excluded, and they judged the wider participation of women in the life and mission of the church in Asia to be an especially pressing need” (45).

The Pope encourages and thanks missionaries (20, 42, 44, 50), urging “the Church in Asia to send forth missionaries, even though she herself needs laborers in the vineyard” (44). Mission is to be central to each local Church; local “missionary societies of apostolic life, characterized by their special commitment to the mission ad gentes, ad exter nos and ad vitam” are strongly encouraged (44). EA calls upon “the great host of Asian martyrs, old and new..., to teach the Church in Asia what it means to bear witness” (49).

**Additional Emphases**

The Asian Synod surfaced crucial questions facing local Churches in Asia; EA reflects several of these pastoral-missionary concerns. The question of Jesus’ Asianess surfaces in various discussions. “Jesus is often perceived as foreign to Asia. It is paradoxical that most Asians tend to regard Jesus—born on Asian soil—as a Western rather than an Asian figure” (20). “It is indeed a mystery why the Savior of the world, born in Asia, has until now remained largely unknown to the people of the continent” (2). To address and overcome this reality, the Church
must open herself to "new and surprising ways in which the face of Jesus might be presented in Asia" (20). How can Jesus be effectively proclaimed—bearing an "Asian face"?

The subject of religious freedom arises, because in various places in Asia "Christians are not allowed to practice their faith freely" (8); "explicit proclamation is forbidden and religious freedom is denied or systematically restricted" (23). Christians are forced "to live their faith in the midst of restrictions or even the total denial of freedom" (28). Governments are enjoined to "guarantee religious freedom for all their citizens" (28), assure "immunity from coercion" (23) in religious matters, and recognize "the right to freedom of conscience and religion and the other basic human rights" (34).

Analysis and comparison between the content of EA and the decades of pastoral reflection by Asian bishops (FABC) reveals many similarities. Since 1974 in its document "Evangelization in Modern Day Asia," the FABC has promoted the local Church's triple dialogue with Asia's peoples, cultures, and religions; this vision is repeatedly found in EA (cf. 1, 15, 18, 20, 21, 24). Again, the FABC pastoral priorities enunciated over the years, particularly the focus on the family, women and the girl-child, youth, ecology, and the displaced (cf. FABC VI: 15) are also highlighted by EA (34, 37, 41, 46, 47, etc.). FABC itself is mentioned (2, 3, 26, 31), though none of its fine work is directly quoted or even noted in the copious endnotes.

The theme of Inculturation received much attention during the Synod, and certain particular areas were identified as requiring concentrated focus: "theological reflection, liturgy, the formation of priests and religious, catechesis and spirituality" (21). Central to inculturating the faith is the biblical word, the message of salvation, the sacred text; sacred scripture is proposed as "the basis for all missionary proclamation, catechesis, preaching and styles of spirituality" (22). One may inquire about criteria for authentic inculturation; EA notes: "The test of true inculturation is whether people become more committed to their Christian faith because they perceive it more clearly with the eyes of their own culture" (22).
The Christian virtue of compassion repeatedly surfaces in EA (e.g. 11, 12, 14, 20, 45, 51). The apostolic exhortation is correct in expressing the Church’s mission in terms of this appealing focus. Presenting Jesus as “the Compassionate Friend of the Poor” (20) will find a resonance and reception among Asians. In the Church’s mission of love and service, women evangelizers contribute greatly “to bringing the compassionate Jesus, the healer and reconciler, to Asian people, especially the poor and marginalized” (45). In Jesus, the God-Man who saves, “Divine compassion had never been so immediately accessible” (11).

As the Church in Asia enters the new millennium, she faces some very demanding challenges; EA highlights some important apostolates: women (7, 34, 45), youth (6, 47), nuclear power (7, 38), peacemaking and reconciliation (38), globalization (39), foreign debt (40), and the environment (41). The authenticity of the Church’s “mission of service and love” (50) will indeed be tested; will it produce “a great harvest of faith ... in this vast and vital continent” (1) of Asia?

Conclusion

Ecclesia in Asia concludes as it began on a clear note of optimism and gratitude. “Blessed be God for the peoples of Asia, so rich in their diversity yet one in their yearning for peace and fullness of life” (50). With committed faith, “the Church in Asia joyfully makes her pilgrim way into the Third Millennium” (50). “Mary, model of all disciples and bright Star of Evangelization..., look tenderly upon the Church of your Son planted on Asian soil.... O Mary, Mother of the New Creation and Mother of Asia, pray for us, your children, now and always” (51)!

In this mood of gratitude and optimism, the local Churches of Asia accept the Holy Father’s gift: Ecclesia in Asia. Its contents are a mixture of the old and the new (cf. Mt 13:52), a summation of Asian reflection and insights in the Vatican II era, a presentation of the mission agenda for Asia’s faith-communities, a program for evangelization in the new millennium. All-in-all, EA is a much appreciated gift. Its
treasures need opening in the coming years and decades; its dream for the Church—God’s holy people—beckons implementation; its theme—abundant life in Jesus the Savior—requires contemplative action. Yes, Jesus’ Asian disciples affirm that the Holy Spirit who moved upon Asia in times past, “moves now among Asian Christians, strengthening the witness of their faith among the peoples, cultures and religions of the continent” (18).

Contemplating God’s salvific deeds and wonders during the Easter Vigil liturgy, the Universal Church proclaims in the Exsultet: “Rejoice, O Mother Church”! In similar fashion, the local Churches in Asia acclaim God’s marvels in their midst; they joyfully affirm the Asian Synod event as a “celebratory remembering of the Asian roots of Christianity” (4). They pray that the proclamation and subsequent internalization of Ecclesia in Asia will confirm the Church in her servant mission to bring Christ’s love and abundant life (Jn 10:10) to Asia and her peoples. Rejoice, O Asia-Church!