

FABC 50 General Conference

Guide Document

Theme:

FABC 50: Journeying together as peoples of Asia

“... and they went a different way.” (Mt 2:12)

Preamble

Fifty years have passed since the beginnings of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). On the occasion of this anniversary, the FABC plans to gather the Church in Asia in a General Conference to commemorate, celebrate and chart the directions for the coming years. It is only appropriate that we celebrate this journey, despite the challenges, by gazing into the past, the present and the future. In order to assist us in this process, the underlying premise of the FABC 50 – General Conference (FABC 50) would be to reflect on some key questions: (i) How can the Church in Asia continue to become the good news in the light of the emerging realities? (ii) How could the FABC more effectively serve and support the Bishops and their Conferences in Asia? (iii) How can a renewed appreciation of the blessings and richness of Asia contribute to the Church? (iv) How can the Church in this part of the world contribute to a better Asia? (v) How can the Church in Asia contribute to the Universal Church?

Pope Francis, during his visit to Thailand, encouraged the FABC to undertake this General Conference for the renewal and revitalization of the Church in Asia:

“I realize that you are making plans for the 2020 General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, which will mark the fiftieth anniversary of its foundation. This is a fitting occasion to revisit those 'shrines' where the missionary roots that left their mark on these lands are preserved, to be guided by the Holy Spirit in the footsteps of our first love, and to welcome with courage, with *parrhesia*, a future that you yourselves must help develop and create. In this way, both the Church and society in Asia will benefit from a renewed and shared evangelical outreach. In love with Christ and capable of bringing others to share in that same love.... The memory of the first missionaries who preceded us with courage, joy and extraordinary stamina can help us take stock of our present situation and mission from a much broader, much more transformative perspective. In the first place, that memory frees us from the belief that times past were always more favorable or better for the proclamation of the Gospel. It also helps us to avoid taking refuge in fruitless discussions and ways of thinking that end up making us turn in on ourselves, paralyzing any kind of action. 'Let us learn from the saints who have gone before us, who confronted the difficulties of their own day' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, EG 263). Let us cast aside everything that has 'stuck' to us along the way and that makes it harder for us to press forward. We know that some ecclesial structures and mentalities can hamper efforts at evangelization. Yet even good structures are only

helpful when there is a life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them. Ultimately, without new life and an evangelical spirit, without 'the Church's fidelity to her own calling', any new structure will soon prove ineffective (cf. *ibid.* 26) and detract from our important ministry of fervent prayer and intercession. Sometimes this can help to give us perspective when dealing with enthusiastic though unwise methodologies that appear to be successful but offer little by way of life." (Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness at Meeting with the Bishops of Thailand and FABC*, Bangkok, 22 November 2019).

With this in mind while being faithful to the Church's missionary call, we now embark on this journey as the Church in Asia together with all the peoples of Asia as we seek to reinvigorate the evangelical spirit through new pathways for the glory of God.

Objectives and Methodology

Guided by Matthew 2:1-12, the overall objective of FABC 50 is **to reaffirm, renew and revitalize the whole Church in Asia**, with the following general objectives:

- **To affirm and celebrate the journey of the past 50 years** (*Wise men came to Jerusalem from the east asking, 'Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage' – Mt 2:1-2*)
- **To become aware of the current and emerging realities and challenges confronting Asia and the Church** (*When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem – Mt 2:3*)
- **To search for the face of Jesus in Asia** (*... And falling to their knees they did him homage – Mt 2:11*)
- **To trace a vision of the Church in Asia [Asian Church] at the service of the peoples in Asia and in communion with the Church throughout the world** (*... they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts – Mt 2:11*)
- **To envision new pathways of service and journeying together as peoples of Asia** (*... they returned to their own country by a different way – Mt 2:12*)

As a preparation for this General Conference, a widespread consultation was made and was recognized as an important step towards this renewal process of the Church in Asia and the FABC. Consultations were carried out at various levels: (i) Four regional gatherings; (ii) FABC Offices; (iii) An online survey to capture the aspirations of the general public.

Based on these above consultations, this guide document looks to expand the emerging realities and challenges confronting Asia and the Church, along with the Church's presence in that Asian context. It may not be possible to encapsulate in this paper all aspirations and expectations of the Church in Asia, but it is the hope that this document then will act as a catalyst for greater and more profound reflections for the benefit of the Church in Asia at the General Conference.

PART ONE

Emerging Realities and Trends of Concern in Asia

1. Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has probably caused the greatest disruption and human suffering in recent times. Emerging as an atypical pneumonia in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the World Health Organization characterized the novel COVID-19 sickness as a pandemic on 11th March 2020. The severity of a new disease to which humanity had hitherto no exposure to, put the world into a 'pause' with governments enforcing lockdowns, travel restrictions and mandatory quarantines to contain the spread of COVID-19 and shore up public health infrastructure. Asia has had mixed success in managing its pandemic response – some countries have been doing fairly well in containing the spread of the virus, while others have not. Restrictions are expected to continue, albeit hopefully at smaller scales, as and when hotspots emerge. The pandemic has also affected the working of the Church in her worship and pastoral initiatives.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of preventive and management measures for its control has interrupted everyone's life, cutting across age, social status and other boundaries. Healthcare, economy and livelihoods, food security, education, recreation and socialization, safety – everything has been impacted and altered. The implications are many and effects critical, particularly with respect to equity of access. This unprecedented deviation from normal has prompted a collective examination of life as a whole.

On the other hand, the lockdowns also brought about another kind of impact on the environment, evident from a near-global fall in pollution levels. It is an unequivocal indication that the "normal" of hitherto human activity is not sustainable. This time of trial, Pope Francis has said, is an opportunity to prepare our collective future. He emphasized the need to reconnect with our real surroundings, contemplate the natural world, rethink our priorities and eliminate inequalities.

2. Globalization

The process of globalization in Asia has had positive and negative impacts on the social, cultural, religious, economic and political aspects of human life. Globalization, when understood as a worldwide process of *integration and interaction*, could bring peoples closer together. For example, we see a growing solidarity in situations of disasters, and a growing search for strategies to deal with overarching problems such as combatting climate change, poverty, hunger and diseases. There is a greater awareness of mutual dependency and associated with this an ongoing exchange of experiences, there is greater access to knowledge and technologies. Globalization has also brought about a growing awareness to overcome unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. Seen in this light, one can say that globalization favors a multi-faceted dialogue among peoples and could be a means to promote harmony.

However, when driven by the neoliberal economic system or self-serving political power struggles, globalization can also lead to the concentration of economic and

political power to a few hands and transnational companies. This then causes neglect for multilateralism in solving worldwide problems at the expense of the weaker countries, small companies, the indigenous peoples, the poor, the vulnerable, and the environment. With the goal of maximizing profit and exerting power by transnational companies which are often connected with the governments, they take advantage of the relative absence of rules and controls that should guide global liberal markets. They disrupt and destroy local production and markets, dictate the work conditions, thwart the ILO standards, exploit the poor ruthlessly and violate human rights, at times corruption may be involved. The greed for profit and unlimited growth also increases inequality in Asia and leads to asymmetric development processes.

This type of globalization is also characterized by the concentration of decision-making processes rather than engaging broad participatory processes, subsidiarity and inclusiveness. Globalization also tends to impoverish human lives by cutting off people from their roots and traditional cultures and languages and imposing a dominant cultural uniformity.

The question must not be neglected of who will have a profit or loss from globalization. Who has a special interest in globalization? What kind of internationalization of businesses and economy are they talking about? What about the *regional* economic areas and now what about the shift in the axis of influence to Asia in the 21st-century? Goldman Sachs for example in its economic forecast, highlighted the trend towards mainland China becoming the largest and India the second largest economy by the year 2050 in terms of GDP. The shift in the axis of influence, the underlying concepts and its consequences for the different peoples in Asia and worldwide must be observed and, in doing so, not to forget the crucial orientation towards the “world common good” as described in the social teaching of the Church, especially in *Laudato Sì* (LS) and *Fratelli Tutti* (FT).

3. Climate Emergency

The current COVID-19 pandemic affecting the world has interrupted our lives to an extent that many other aspects of our lives have taken a back seat. Nevertheless, here in Asia, we recognize that the long-term challenge facing humankind in the 21st century is the human-made climate change and the associated ecological crisis. The well-being of many future generations both in Asia and worldwide, depends on us making significant lifestyle changes and learning to cope with them. In the Paris Agreement 2015, all states unanimously committed to reducing global warming to below 2°C, preferably to 1.5°C. Scientific data shows that we have only a very limited time window to take counter-measures and therefore, there is an urgency to act. However, according to IPCC reports so far governments together with their people and the economy have not taken sufficient measures to address this emergency. It has been noted that there is a lack of will to act in more developed nations because climate change is not considered a common challenge in their daily life. Such apathy only leads to the deterioration of the planet, our “common home”.

Countless people in Asia are already suffering due to weather extremes, drought, typhoons, deforestation and forest fires, and even conflicts over water use. Changes in precipitation and water availability have also direct consequences to

the food supply. Given that Asia is home to many of the countries that are vulnerable to climate change, millions of people will suffer due to rising sea levels, air, soil and water pollution (e.g., mobility, industrial and mining activities, non-sustainable agriculture), the “throwaway mentality”, the loss of biodiversity, and waste management. All of these are crimes against nature and the future generations.

With Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si* on environment and social challenges, the Church now has a Magna Carta to deal with this crisis, there is a need for greater dialogue within the Church as well as with other religions, social groups and those responsible for politics and for the economy. As Church, we need to turn the sufferings of nature and the poor (cf. LS 49) into our personal sufferings (cf. LS 19) in order to achieve a real conversion in lifestyle, production models and consumption patterns (cf. LS 206). In view of the common destiny of future generations and the integrity of creation, there is an urgent need to bring everyone together to a new dialogue.

4. Digitalization

Since the dawn of this new millennium, the world of digital communication and interaction has developed in a rapid upward curve so that this has become the part and parcel of the human way of life. Human communities are able to communicate with each other with greater ease and the communication of information can be swift. Even though digitalization is part of the millennial way of life, many others too have also adapted to these new forms of multi-faceted modes of communication and social interaction. The greater implications of digitalization on ordinary human life can also be seen in the way businesses are operated, consumer buying, entertainment, medical, and even worship. In more ways than one, digitalization has improved efficiency and productivity at various levels of human life.

Despite the benefits that digitalization and its culture have brought to our lives, we also see the challenges they impose. Issues concerning personal security and privacy, crime and terrorism, media manipulation and objectification, depersonalization and hate crimes, fake news and identities, over reliance and social disconnect, bullying and addiction are just some of the challenges that the digital culture brings together with the benefits. It can also be said that digitalization may also have contributed to the decline in the spiritual lives of the people and also vocations to the priestly and religious lives. We also see digitalization being used by governments and corporations to exert power and to influence culture. Moreover, a digital divide is emerging between those who have access to the Internet-based services (educational, financial, government, religious) and those who don’t.

The rapid progress in the area of artificial intelligence also presents new challenges to the human person. All of these and even more warrant our attention as we move into newer digital and virtual worlds.

5. Urbanization

Around half of Asia’s population lives in cities and this trend of moving to cities will continue to increase. There are positive implications of urbanization that include easier access to employment opportunities, cultural activities, social

services, technological advancements, transportation and communication, quality educational and medical facilities, improved standards of living and a more open and tolerant environment as people of many social layers, races and religions live and work together.

The culmination of the Gospel is symbolically a city, the city of the New Jerusalem which forms part of the peaceable home that fulfils God's promised justice for the poor, salvation for the humble, and the renewal of creation (cf. Rev 21-22).

Urbanization also presents challenges such as insufficient space for new houses causing the expansion of cities into rural areas. In cities we are seeing a wide gap between the rich and the poor, joblessness, development of slums, child labor, high cost of living, impersonal relationships, water and sanitation problems, environmental damage, poor health facilities, spreading of diseases, insufficient and inconvenient of mobility, and crime. Many young people from rural areas migrate to cities in hope of a better life, leaving behind the older generation. In the cities, they often take up menial jobs to support themselves and their families. They are most vulnerable to economic downturns with job losses and even incurring debts as with the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we also notice how urban dwellers are moving to the rural areas for a more laid back, healthy and simpler lifestyles. Impacts of the rural-urban shift and interdependence need to be explored from both sides. The expanding suburbia around major cities in Asia could also be an interesting study of socio-economic and cultural development.

6. Migrants and Refugees

Asia is a continent of "people on the move" in search of a better life through employment and educational opportunities. Many migrants find refuge in their adopted city, country, or region. Where local, national, regional, or international policy welcomes, protects, and integrates migrants, their welfare is promoted, their rights are upheld, and they contribute to the culture and economy of society. Migrant Catholics bring new opportunities and vigor to local Churches.

When migration is not properly regulated through bilateral treaties or similar instruments, irregular and clandestine migration become prevalent. This results in the criminal trafficking of persons, organized smuggling, and tourists and workers overstaying visas. Irregular migrants thus suffer in inhumane ways that include arrest, detention, deportation, exploitation, and alienation of inherent human rights.

Although migrant workers contribute much to the economies of their own countries and regions, these suffer the dislocation of human and cultural capital and other social costs. Migrant workers must contend with unfair labor practices (contract substitution, unjust wages, etc.), limited rights, lack of accommodation, prejudice, discrimination, verbal, physical, sexual, and other forms of abuse. Although they lift their families out of poverty, their children are usually adversely affected by the absence of one or both parents in their early development.

Asia is home to countless refugees and internally displaced persons who flee war, violence, religious persecution, natural disasters, and extreme environmental events. Populations, especially indigenous peoples, are invaded by development projects that deprive them of their ancestral domains. Lack of civil recognition or forced displacement render some residents and refugees stateless – a status which

the Geneva Convention has not recommended. The Church needs to recognize and act on the status of refugees in Asia.

7. Political Governance

In a world of globalized politics, the necessity for a new and far-sighted integral way to handle pandemics, social, economic and ecological crises of our times must be desired so as to build greater resilience against threats that impede justice, peace and harmony (cf. LS 197; EG 183). There is a need for a politics that provides safe space for the people's voice, respecting human dignity, and at the same time respecting the principle of subsidiarity. Politics engaged in promoting the *global common good* is a "lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity" (EG 205).

The COVID-19 and the climate crises show clearly that politics should not be driven by a neoliberal economic system, an "efficiency driven paradigm of technocracy", or even an "absolute power of a financial system" (LS 189). Similarly, political governance must be subjected to a constitution. The fundamental law of the land should provide the appropriate checks and balances against the abuses that arise when the separation of executive, legislative and judicial powers is not respected, when the secularity of the state is undone by religious intolerance, when military leaders do not recognize the priority of civil authority, and when any political party or ideology marginalizes others. We recognize that bureaucratic red tape, graft and corruption, violent language, extrajudicial killings, disregard of the human and social rights, and many other issues across Asia are affecting different groups of people especially the minorities, the poor and the vulnerable in such a way that causes disequilibrium to the overall peace and harmony in our societies. We also see rising situations where freedom of expression and especially freedom of the press are being suppressed. Ethical principles, respect for just laws, and principles of subsidiarity are being manipulated and even not upheld where legitimate opposition is undermined by the use of power and corruption.

8. Transformation of Cultures

Asian cultures are predominantly collective and therefore the individual is most often seen as embedded within a group where the individual finds one's ancestry and meaning. The Asian culture has never been static and therefore it has been evolving over centuries as greater exposure to other cultures can only enrich one's own. To a large extent, the Asian culture is also shaped by one's faith and beliefs because they in turn shape the cultural values of the communities. The diversity of Asian cultures is not only the uniqueness of Asia but also adds value to the world community. Much of the Asian cultural diversity is seen not only through its languages, culinary expressions, and costumes, but also in attitudes, demeanor and behavior which characterizes the Asian people.

With the dawn of colonialism, the idea of progress was often associated with imitating the colonial culture. This then led to traditional cultures being weakened and thus giving rise to a hybrid-form of a culture. The wave of globalization is also impacting traditional cultures, values and human behavior. The greater movement of peoples and the migration phenomenon adds to cultural transformation and adaptation. In this way, Asian spiritualities, wisdom, and values that have shaped these communities in the past are now less significant and important in the face of homogenized forms of living in a global village. Retracing the Asian customs,

traditions and values could contribute to the overall global human community in its quest for a better living.

9. Youth

“The youth of Asia are often at the vanguard of social and religious transformation in many countries, leading various social emancipation and advocacy movements, participating in movements of renewal in the Church, and emerging as leaders in the Church’s pastoral programs and in Basic Ecclesial Communities” (FABC VIII 33). They “experience a deep thirst for spiritual values, as the rise of new religious movements clearly demonstrates. (*Ecclesia in Asia*, EA) 6). In the young, “we can see a desire for God... an ideal of human fraternity... a genuine desire to develop their talents in order to offer something to our world... a special artistic sensitivity, or a yearning for harmony with nature... a great need to communicate... a deep desire to live life differently”, which are “real starting points, inner resources open to a word of incentive, wisdom and encouragement” (*Christus Vivit* 84).

Expanding mass and social media provide the youth with transnational and intercultural venues for developing forms of verbal and non-verbal communication for an increasingly pan-ethnic generation. This has also empowered them with the awareness and opportunities to effect positive change in matters concerning justice, human rights, climate change, gender, animal welfare and a range of other issues that they are passionate about.

However, where the youth have access to the internet, they are also vulnerable to being exposed to online gaming and pornography. Many develop internet addiction, which provides a virtual escape from stress but contributes to depression, social anxiety, and other ills. Many young people fall prey to violence, abuse, risky sexual behavior, trafficking, prostitution, and ideologies that devalue marriage and family. We see this especially where education, employment, and societal safeguards (robust family life, cultural and religious values, and criminal justice system) are lacking. Moreover, many young people whose parents migrate for work are deprived of a stable family life at a stage when the presence and guidance of parents are crucial.

10. Gender Issues

Harmony and love for family have generally guided gender roles and responsibilities in Asian societies. A recent international research has noted some improvements in terms of gender equality in different areas of life. For example, women in Asia have come a long way in terms of making themselves heard and recognized for their own intrinsic value. They have taken on responsibilities traditionally given to men and continue to rise above the challenges of a patriarchal society. Pope Francis reminds us that “the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions on the social, political, economic and religious level which cannot be lightly evaded” (EG 104). However, we still hear stories of discrimination, violence and oppression against women in many areas of life throughout Asia. Their leadership capabilities have been undervalued, their contributions ignored, and some societies still treat women as sub-human. We have many reports of biases against women involving wage gaps, laws of ownership and inheritance, educational opportunities for girls, abortion of the

female fetus, less access to healthcare, decision making and in many other areas. Alarming, gender-based violence continues to exist and gender issues which includes shifting gender identities, are largely unacknowledged even as LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) communities continue to make themselves heard in the midst of rejection in families, communities and society at large.

11. Family Values

As “the normal place where the young grow to personal and social maturity” and “the bearer of the heritage of humanity itself”, “the family occupies a very important place in Asian cultures... family values like filial respect, love and care for the aged and the sick, love of children and harmony are held in high esteem in all Asian cultures and religious traditions” (EA 46). The people of Asia “hold the family to be a vital source of strength, a closely-knit community with a powerful sense of solidarity” (EA 6), hospitality and stability.

Many children in Asia grow with both parents in extended/joint families. Death due to human tragedies, violence, wars and natural disasters deprive some of them of one or both parents. Migration to work in urban centers and abroad forces members of families to separate. Nevertheless, the support of close kin (grandparents, uncles, aunts, elder siblings, cousins, etc.) usually enable children left behind to face difficulties and imbibe traditional values. Although Asians believe that children are happiest when raised by both a mother and a father, they support working mothers, house husbands and single parents.

Wherever possible, parents – or their surrogates – provide for the education of their children. Most of those who can study enter the state education system. The Church’s schools, colleges and universities make a significant contribution to the private education system.

In areas with greater access to mass and social media, attitudes towards the family are slowly being transformed by cultural globalization (EA 39). Moreover, government population control policies also greatly impact attitudes towards marriage, childbearing, and childrearing.

12. Indigenous People

In recent decades, we have seen a greater sensitivity and awareness for the indigenous peoples, especially for their very precarious life situations. It is recognized that Asia comprises a majority of the world's self-identified indigenous groups. They not only represent the immense cultural riches but also offer the rest of world wisdom and practices for better human living. In many parts of the world, indigenous knowledge and agricultural practices for adaptation to climate change are increasingly being given recognition.

The cultural diversity that indigenous peoples offer is sometimes considered by governments, and even church leadership, as a “problem” that affects unity. We acknowledge that dealing with a vast plurality of cultures isn't always easy. Thus, there are times when the identity of the indigenous peoples is not adequately respected. In some cases, arbitrary demarcations don't respect their existence for centuries. The right to an autochthonous territory, to land, their own language and ways of thinking, their forms of expression and rites, their sustainable economy and lifestyle adapted to the environment, their individual and social rights are often in tension with the interest of governments. Political and economic interests

(access to land and water, mining, logging, etc.) can also lead to exploitation, displacement, oppression and even in some places to extrajudicial killings. Social disregard, neglect of access to education and health systems are becoming widespread in a capitalistic economy. The pressure to conform to a globalized world influenced through social media also does not escape the indigenous communities.

The socio-cultural, political, economic and ecological challenges would require an increased accompaniment and support. In situations of exploitation, the Church, given her prophetic tradition, should be the voice for the indigenous peoples and bridge builder in socio-cultural conflicts. As she seeks to accompany and support more vigorously the indigenous peoples, the Church must be an ally and advocate for their fundamental rights and dignity. In the same way, she should increasingly regard the different indigenous cultures in Asia as an opportunity to express the Christian faith in a creative way for a culturally sensitive evangelization.

13. Human Dignity

The respect for life and the human person is of great importance in Asian societies. Since the individual cannot be seen apart from a larger community, human dignity is not only respect but also embraces sanctity and autonomy which are intrinsically imbued in the human person. The values of respect for children and reverence for the elders, are somewhat trademarks in an Asian household. Care for the poor, the vulnerable, and those on the margins of society are also considerations that are included in the non-formal education of the young. From conception to the end of life, the dignity of human life has to be protected. The sacredness of the human life and its connection with the divine is yet another important trademark in the Asian communities.

However, due to human greed, selfishness and even exploitive economic structures, the human person can be quite easily reduced to merely an object or even a commodity. Sex tourism and human trafficking, voiceless and stateless people, caste and gender discrimination, child brides, the poor and marginalized, gender and religious violence, kidnapping, child labor and inhumane working conditions, and many other issues that are on the rise, confront and challenge the Asian peoples.

Violation of human rights by the state and exploitation of the Asian peoples are also threatening the human persons right to live a dignified life as this prevents the ability to fulfil one's full potential. Despite having constitutional guarantees to protect human dignity there still remain gaps in the upholding and implementation of personal and social rights in many countries in Asia. Recognizing this lack of respect for human dignity must impel the Asian churches to be protagonists and promoters of justice, mercy, respect for persons, reconciliation and harmony in this vast Asian continent.

14. Religions in Society

Religious and ethnic diversity is a feature of Asian societies. All religions can contribute to the good of society and harmony among believers of different faiths. Generally, there have been good relationships among the different religions in Asia. There are also interfaith marriages and families all over Asia. Religious beliefs and practices contribute significantly to the formation of personal moral

criteria, sound judgment and give meaning to life and provide an ethos that integrates and links social, political, economic and cultural values.

However, in spite of the positive and constructive interreligious relations, there is a sense that this situation has incrementally worsened. Secularism has promoted a divided and polarized society which leads to more “religiously” motivated conflicts. There is the presence of religious fundamentalism and extremism often used for self-serving ends. There are places where religious freedom is limited, and it is estimated that at least 60% of Asian countries have problems with religious freedom. According to the Pew Research Centre, between 2007 – 2017, there has been an increase from 4% to 4.8% in the Asia-Pacific region relating to laws and policies restricting religious freedom.

Multi-religious societies usually have a majority religion that often may be identified with the society or nation as a whole. The manipulation or use of religion, including the emotional attachment to it, for ideological, ethnic or partisan political reasons can lead to conflictual situations and violence.

The minority religious populations in each country need to have their religious freedom and human dignity protected. There are experiences where the rights of minorities are not respected and women from minority communities are being abducted, forced to convert to the majority religion and to marry. Belonging to a minority group could also lead to being involved in fake legal cases and employment opportunities being negatively affected. Unfortunately, religion is sometimes used in these cases and there could be cover-ups of malevolence.

15. Transforming Church

The Church in Asia has come a long way from the time the first missionaries arrived in this vast continent. In the modern era with the arrival of Christianity over four centuries ago, Asia has seen steady growth in Catholicism and now represents almost 12% of the world’s total Catholic population (approximately 61% of the Catholic population of Asia is located in the Philippines). According to the World Christian Database 2010, Catholicism started the twentieth century as 1.2 % of the Asian population, but ended the twentieth century at 3%, making significant growth. Regions, where early missionaries found it difficult to enter for mission activity, are now beginning to flourish in the faith. The peoples of Asia have also become missionaries in their own right as they also give life to the Church in many other parts of the world. Despite the challenges faced in Asia, the Church remains vibrant and energetic in many places.

The growth of the Church in Asia has been marked by several factors: the increase of local and indigenous clergy and religious, greater lay participation in the life of the Church, access to education (formal and non-formal), the Church’s involvement in social justice issues, integral human development, community building, interreligious and ecumenical dialogue, and a host of other ministries that have been integral to the life and mission of the Church in Asia.

Despite a growing Church, she is not without hurdles and challenges. There are places in Asia where the Church is discriminated against due to the lack of religious freedom. The Church is still too self-referential (self-absorption), she is not sufficiently open to processes for transformation in society and challenges from the globalized world. The Church is also challenged by the scandal of sexual abuse

of minors especially when the “culture of silence” is prevalent in these parts of the world. The abuse of power (misuse of authority) poses to the Church challenges that she has to contend with. This is often seen in the lack of collaborative lay participation in decision-making processes which could impede the promotion of an accountable and transparent check and balance in the Church. These are just some of the many other hurdles and challenges the Church in Asia has to confront as she looks towards transforming herself for the future.

Asia today, once again, is in a period of transformation. The changes are vast, deep, and swift. There is also a grave crisis of polarization which seems to be sweeping through most Asian countries. Composed as they are of many racial, linguistic and religious groups, the Asian nations have not yet found a cohesive stability whereby all groups can exist in harmony.

PART TWO

Church in the Asian Context

The Church in Asia is cognizant of the variety of challenges faced in an ever changing future. The concerns raised in the previous section are probably only a fraction of the wider concerns and realities confronting Asia and her peoples. The attempt to articulate some of these “macro concerns” are intended to stimulate deeper reflections and finding new pathways amidst the changing and at times fluid situations that impels the Church to action. Despite these challenges, the Church in Asia has been responding in a variety of ways within this vast continent, recognizing that the diversity that cuts across Asia makes it more demanding as there cannot be a “one solution fits all” approach. In this light then, we are aware that not only is the Church involved in short-term or immediate relief works, which is often seen by many, but also in long-term efforts to effect change through formation, systemic and structural changes, advocacy, and also defending the vulnerable. Many of these are also carried out by collaborating and networking with non-governmental and civil society organizations for the good of all. These partnerships have only accentuated the fact that the Church does not exist for herself, but she is at the service of all the peoples of Asia as she continues to announce the kingdom of God and transforming our realities in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, LG 5).

Recognizing that the concerns raised have far-reaching consequences in the lives of the people, the FABC renews its commitment to be at the service of the Churches in Asia as we journey together as peoples of Asia. The Church’s response cannot just be an automatic, involuntary, and unthinking reaction but must be a response that is well discerned, grounded in Scripture, tradition, magisterial teaching, and pastoral practice that promotes unity and sustainability. As we begin to envision new pathways within this changing social, political, economic, ideological, religious and pastoral landscape, it is necessary to provide some foundations for an expansive reflection. These should include identifying the kind of Church we are called to be, discovering the aspects of Asian culture that deepen being Church in Asia, and living the Christian mission in a given context. While doing this, we continue to search new ways as to how the FABC can facilitate this reflection based on a three-fold foundation as proposed here: (i) Aspects of Asian Culture for A Prophetic and Responsive

Church, (ii) Images of Jesus for Asia and (iii) Envisioning an Image of the Church in the Asian Context. As we broaden our reflection, may we be assisted to visualize future pathways for the Church in Asia and the FABC.

1. Aspects of Asian Culture for a Prophetic and Responsive Church

Asia is the birthplace of many religions and religious diversity is one of the characteristics of this region. Given that Asia is the world's most populous and most extensive continent, accounting for 60% of the global population, it is not surprising that Asian cultural expressions are not homogenized. This heterogeneity is due to the diverse cultures and languages, ethnic composition and also historical background that shapes the Asian landscape. For these reasons then, values, customs, and beliefs, which are important to the Asian people, are often laced with elements of mysticism and spirituality into the different cultural expressions.

The Churches in Asia are born and continue to grow within such contexts and therefore the aspects of being Church in Asia cannot be void of the experiences of Asian cultures that are already imbued in the lives of the people. It is in this background that we realize that what is quite common across Asia is that there exists a sense of the divine in Asian societies and aspects of prayer, meditation and contemplation are somewhat integrated into the Asian ways of life and also the Church. The integral relationships with the divine also expresses itself in the way Asian people think and relate with one another. There is a sense of harmony, respect, sensitivity, care, and generosity that flows from this awareness of the divine – an interconnectedness that finds meaning in relationships with the self, the other, God and the cosmos.

It must also be acknowledged that these relationships don't always express themselves in ways that they are intended – violence, discrimination, and prejudice are but some of these negative manifestations that use cultures and religions to justify many of these actions. However, Asian cultures with their diversity provide the Church with a locus to be prophetic and responsive in ways that promote wider avenues for dialoguing and engaging with others for the growth of the kingdom of God and to also define the way of being Church in Asia. It is from this cultural framework that helps us envision the image of the Church and ultimately the Asian face of Jesus.

2. Images of Jesus for Asia

God took on flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus (Jn 1:14) and shows us in Jesus' life, behavior and teaching (especially the parables) how God extends His love and care for every person and community, for humankind and for creation. Since God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8), God loves us all first and unconditionally.

In Jesus we can “see the face” of God (cf. Jn 14:7-11). Jesus as the Good Samaritan (cf. Lk 10:29-37) shows us God's unconditional compassion in situations of personal, socio-cultural, economic and political deficiencies. He sees the “victims” and does not pass them by for He cares for them without considering where they are coming from, their social status or if they belong to “my clan”, “my tribe”, “my country”, “my religion” or “my culture”. Inspired by the narrative of the Good Samaritan, our Holy Father Francis in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* calls for the

transformation of humanity into a responsible community of sisters and brothers to resolve the current crisis.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd (cf. Jn 10:11-16) knows us all by name. He offers a familiar relationship with him (cf. Jn 10:3-16). Therefore, he feels sorrow for the lost and seeks for them everywhere until he finds them (cf. Lk 15:1-7). He protects the flock against the “robbers” and the violence of the “wolves”. In a prophetic way, Jesus praises the peacemakers and those who thirst for justice. In contrast to human arrogance in certain socioeconomic, technocratic or political patterns of behavior and acting, He proclaims blessed the poor in spirit, the humble, the gentle, the pure of heart, the merciful and those persecuted for the sake of justice (cf. Mt 5:5-10). He aims for harmony. He cast out evil spirits (Mt 12: 18). His “Our Father” prayer (Mt 6:9-13) claims that God’s will is to be done everywhere and everyone should have the daily bread. Forgiveness of sins and compassion are principles of behavior (Mt 18:21-35). God’s kingdom is a kingdom of integral peace. Jesus came that all may have life and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10).

By declaring the poor blessed (cf. Lk 6:20-23) and that the kingdom of God is theirs, Jesus regards the needy and the other as “neighbors” and takes the option for the poor (cf. Lk 4:16-21; Mt 25:31-40). Jesus’ spirituality is rooted in God’s love and linked with the social reality of the people. Jesus also welcomes and blesses the children, and He defends their rights (cf. Mk 10:13-16; Mt 18:1-3,10). He appreciates the poor and the marginalized widow (cf. Mk 12:41-44). Transcending restrictive social, cultural and religious norms, He touches the unclean, the outcasts and re-integrates them into the community recognizing their inviolable God-given dignity (cf. Mk 1:40-45). He heals the sick (Lk 13:10-17; Mk 5:25-34). He eats with sinners (cf. Mk 2:15-17) and as Son of God, He forgives sins (cf. Mt 9:1-8) and gives hope and new life in desperate situations (cf. Mk 5:35-43; Mt 8:5-13).

He knows what families need to live on and calls for just wages (cf. Mt 20:1-15) and warns against gluttonous unsustainable lifestyles and consumerism (cf. Lk 16:19-31), envy and greed (Lk 12:13-21).

Through Jesus, God gives women a special place in history of salvation, according to the gospels. Mary, a young woman from insignificant backgrounds was chosen to become Jesus’ mother. She and Elizabeth praise the mystery of the incarnation and God’s rule in salvation history (cf. Lk 1:26-56). Mary contemplates occurrences in Jesus’ life in her heart. Women care for Jesus. Jesus’ dialogue with Martha reveals Him as Lord over death (cf. Jn 11:20-44). The dialogue with a Samaritan woman leads to the self-revelation of Jesus as Messiah (cf. Jn 4:6-26). Women persevere under the cross of Jesus at the hour of His suffering and death (cf. Mt 27:55f; Mk 15:40f; Lk 23:49; Jn 19:25).

Jesus forms community by gathering common men (cf. Mk 1:16-20; Lk 6:12) and women around him as disciples and they journey with Him (cf. Lk 8:1-3). He has special meals with them (cf. Lk 22:7-27; Jn 21:9-14). He calls them ‘friends’ including them into his friendship in the deepest sense which means offering his life for them (cf. Jn 15:9-15).

Jesus instructs them to detect His presence in the faces of the suffering (cf. Mt 25:40). He teaches them the fundamental rule of discipleship that He, the Son of God, didn’t come to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for the

many (cf. Mk 10:45). As Teacher and Lord, He washes the feet of His disciples, setting an example for them to follow (cf. Jn 13:3-15). As Jesus loved us, we also should love one another for this is His new commandment (cf. Jn 13:34f) that includes even the love of the enemies (Mt 5:43-48, Lk 6:27-36).

Jesus calls all humanity to conversion, every person, family, community and people with responsibilities. He proclaimed God's reign in a coherent manner and therefore got in conflict with selfish narrow minded religious and political authorities. They saw their rule questioned and ultimately condemned Jesus to death on the cross.

Jesus lived in mystical communion with His Heavenly Father, spending nights in prayer (cf. Mk 1:35) and especially in the Garden of Gethsemane before undergoing His Passion (cf. Mt 26:36-46). He persevered in an intimate communion with His Father until His last moment on the cross (cf. Mk 15:34, Lk 23:34, 44-46).

In the resurrection of Jesus, God's love and life overcomes death. Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene and other women and sends them as apostles to His fearful and paralyzed disciples as witnesses of His resurrection (cf. Mt 28:1-10; Jn 20:11-18). With this, He passes far beyond the social, cultural and religious patterns of His society towards women.

Journeying with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, He listens to their grief and then proceeds to enkindle their minds and hearts while opening the Scriptures to them. He reveals himself as the Risen One by opening their eyes in the "breaking of the bread" (cf. Lk 24:13-35).

Through the resurrection of Jesus, God shows us that His love goes beyond the human structures of injustice that are linked to the premature deaths of children and the destruction of his creation. His love goes beyond the egoisms, sins and ideologies that are seen in the world. Showing His disciples His hands and His side - with the signs of the crucifixion, the Risen Jesus Christ imparts His peace and breathes on them, giving His Holy Spirit and sending them to proclaim the kingdom of God (cf. Jn 20:19-23).

Listening to His Holy Spirit the disciples are moved to bear testimony of how God's love works in Jesus and through him in the world. As members of His Church, they become sensitive to the acting of the Holy Spirit in all peoples and cultures. In His Spirit they recognize that He wants to bring forward a humankind of fraternity and in social friendship.

3. Envisioning an Image of the Church in the Asian Context

The emerging realities call for the Church in Asia to greater participation, integration, and transformation, by promoting a culture of encounter.

This Church is compassionate, humble, respectful, and filled with merciful deeds. She is a people-oriented Church that is open, welcoming, and inclusive. She focuses on the family, but she is also a family and home that leaves no one behind. The Church is present where there are people suffering as a mother that heals, a sanctuary of the oppressed. While this Church is mystic and prophetic, she remains a sign and sacrament of personal, communitarian, ecological and economic conversion.

She is a Church of the poor, a servant Church, an outgoing mission-oriented Church that works for harmony based on reciprocity, complementarity, equality and justice. She is a synodal church, where everyone is a subject, a church that listens to the other, especially to the most vulnerable and marginalized, a church and discerns the signs of the times. Witnessing to God's Kingdom, she engages the public sphere and collaborates with civic society for integral human development.

Aside from the triple dialogue that the Church in Asia has been known for (dialogue with the poor, with religions and with culture), there is a need to add more areas of dialogue, for example, with the youth, with women, and even with those the church considers as 'sinners', with the environment and with technology. Considering that majority of its population are young people, the Church is therefore the "Church of the Young". As manifested with *Laudato Si'*, she is also a "Green Church" which recognizes the environment and social crises as a singular complex crisis that the Church needs to confront.

Furthermore, the unprecedented challenges of COVID-19 have extended us more than ever into being a "Digital Church" as she experiments with different formats and opportunities to connect with people and minister to them. She is very much aware however that the poor - which means majority of our people - do not have connectivity. The Church is challenged on how she can be an egalitarian digital Church where the poorer members are empowered with connectivity so their voices too can be heard and enrich us all.

The Church is grounded in the local contexts. She is a church where the word of God is taking root in her soil and her faith is expressed through her own rich cultures. She is also an intercultural church, respecting the diversity of peoples and cultures, as well as celebrating the many symbols and traditions of Asian peoples. She promotes a community-based Church built in many different ways - for example the Basic Ecclesial Communities or the Basic Human Communities - as a locus and dynamic structure or space to live out the above vision of the Church in Asia. This includes cooperation with all who are working for a more humane world with the Church as a partner in networking with others, a communitarian church.

Finally, the Church in Asia is a Church of martyrs. Jesus' little flock is God's family, God's holy people on a pilgrimage through history in the company of all the peoples of Asia, welcoming the helpless and the hopeless, sharing the healing and grace of the Crucified and Risen One. Just as Jesus stands in the midst of the world as Truth and Life (Jn 14:6), so are his disciples both salt and light (Mt 5:13f), whose flavor and fervor may not wane. The prophetic voice of Jesus' disciples is still being silenced in many parts of Asia, but their blood continues to water the fields of Asia, making it God's garden, offering a witness of faith and bringing forth new generations who hope for the Kingdom of justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rm 14:17).

PART THREE

Envisioning Possible "New Pathways" for the Church in Asia and the FABC

In the light of the changing realities and challenges that Asia is constantly having to confront, it is inevitable that as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the FABC, the

Church in Asia is also being propelled to look at new pathways to continue to be of service to the peoples of Asia. The founding of the FABC at a certain period in our history was in response to the particular needs and vision of that time, which was for a church of the poor, of the young, and of dialogue. In our time, based on the concerns and vision that will come from this General Conference, the Church in Asia will need to reaffirm, renew, and revitalize herself and the FABC so that it be aligned to the new directions while being equipped to face these changes. Having received feedback from the various consultations, here are some points for consideration. These are not exhaustive but meant to provide a framework not only at the assembly but especially beyond, for envisioning the future role of the FABC.

1. The foundational vision of the FABC since its inception has expanded along the lines of the “triple dialogue” - with the poor, with cultures, and with religions in order to bring about a “New Way of Being Church”. This has been the theological-pastoral axis of the FABC. Recognizing the changes all around us, there may be a need to revisit this “triple dialogue” and explore new concerns for a new era. In Asia, dialogue is the mode of being for the Church. As we do so, always keeping in mind that the focus should be on the ongoing “renewal of the Church” (cf. LG 8) to form a “community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice” (EG 24).
2. The FABC was conceived with the hope of creating a network among the Bishops of Asia. The sense of “collegiality,” “communion,” “solidarity,” and “synodality” formed the backbone of the FABC which also bore fruit in the bonding that was built through the years (cf. LG 23). The FABC concentrates its efforts on assisting bishops and episcopal conferences by offering support mechanisms that facilitate ongoing formation especially in the areas of leadership and collaborative ministry at the missionary service of the People of God. In this light then, the FABC could offer more platforms for listening and learning so as to assist bishops to be “Apostles of listening” (Pope Francis, *Address to Bishops participating in the course promoted by the Congregation for Bishops and by Congregation for the Eastern Churches*, 12 Sept 2019). “The bishop must always foster this missionary communion in his diocesan Church, following the ideal of the first Christian communities, in which the believers were of one heart and one soul (cf. Acts 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and - above all - allowing the flock to strike out on new paths” (EG 31).
3. Over the past 50 years, the FABC has produced and facilitated a wealth of resources through its many initiatives, programs, and collaborative efforts. However, these resources are at times either underutilized or remain unknown to houses of formation and institutes of higher learning. These resources cover a wide range of topics and issues that concern the peoples of Asia. A greater promotion of these resources in the seminaries and other formation institutions could further be encouraged. It is the hope that this will inspire deeper reflections for more creative pastoral applications since “we need a church

capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a church that accompanies them on their journey" (Pope Francis, *World Youth Day*, Rio de Janeiro 2013). The FABC resources further provide a locus to "enter into fruitful dialogue with the contemporary world" while "taking into account the cultural and historical circumstances" (cf. *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, 2016 116, 118).

4. In an era where the means of communication has proliferated in ways never envisaged when the FABC was founded, the new digital era gives us the opportunity to improve communications and interaction among the churches that form the FABC. This should assist us in promoting greater ownership of and participation in the FABC by the respective churches. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we have extended ourselves to also have a digital pastoral approach. The use of the digital means of communication has given the Church new possibilities for online video catechesis, prayer services, conferences, meetings and bringing people together. We recognize that online technology has already been successfully utilized in many countries that broadcast the celebration of the Eucharist via digital media to assist those who are home bound, the hospitalized, the elderly and those caring for them who are unable to attend the Eucharist on Sundays. This provides many people the opportunity to share in some ways the fervent prayer of faith and adoration while being united with the Church digitally. The broadcasting of the celebration of the Eucharist via digital tools has been an approach to spiritually support many people during the lockdowns caused by the pandemic. Though nothing can replace the physical presence of persons at the Eucharist and its community dimension, it has to be acknowledged that the broadcast of the Holy Mass has provided the Church a way to minister to her flock at a time when community celebrations were almost impossible. This use of the digital means of communication for meetings and conferences can be further utilized by the FABC as a new way for its operations. The FABC from the beginning has tried to bring a Christian ethos to all its activities in order to support Christian living and the service of the Gospel. These "tools" now provide the FABC "greater possibilities for communication thus turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone" (EG 87).
5. Over the years, the organizational structure of the FABC has expanded to serve the various needs of the peoples in Asia, which include office structures, decision making processes, and collaboration at all levels. All of these demonstrate that the FABC has been responding to the needs of the churches in Asia. As we step into the future, it is an opportune time to re-look at the organizational structure in order to serve better in the midst of the emerging realities-challenges since "every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling" (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 6). Bearing in mind that "all renewal in the Church must have mission as its goal if it is not to fall prey to a kind of ecclesial introversion" (*Ecclesia in Oceania* 19).
6. In order to promote the effectivity and efficiency of the FABC, there is a greater need today more than before to enter into partnerships for the promotion of the common good of all. Working in tandem and in a multi-disciplinary manner with other continental associations of Bishops' Conferences and organizations,

the Church can only strengthen and widen the outreach even to the remotest parts of Asia. In recent times, the world has not only become a global village, but also a “virtual village”. There are many shared concerns which can be the starting point for this communication, collaboration and sharing of resources for the good of the local and universal Church. “When we feel that God is calling us to intervene with others in these social dynamics, we should realize that this too is part of our spirituality, which is an exercise of charity and, as such, matures and sanctifies us” (LS 231).

7. The future of the FABC is dependent on the commitment of all the local churches in Asia who continue to share their gifts and resources, including human and financial. In its 50 years of existence, the FABC has been supported by the sacrifices and generosity of the sister churches throughout the world. The Churches in Asia now continue this generosity by committing to greater human and economic resources in order to promote and implement new pathways for engaging ever more fully in mission and dialogue. “Though it is true that this mission demands great generosity on our part, ... for it is first and foremost the Lord’s work.... This conviction enables us to maintain a spirit of joy in the midst of a task so demanding and challenging that it engages our entire life. God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us” (EG 12).
8. The foundations of the Church in Asia were laid by the missionaries who made the difficult journey to arrive in Asia and share the good news of Jesus Christ. Their conviction and zeal for the gospel led many of them to be martyred for the faith together with the peoples of Asia. Their Christian witnessing not only reminds us of a past but also inspires us today to be faithful to the mission of Christ. Today the Church in Asia not only acknowledges having received missionaries but now also contributes to sending missionaries, both lay and religious, throughout the world. The growing Church in Asia has much to contribute to the universal Church through its variety of religious and cultural experiences which are often rooted in the Asian communities. Finding new pathways is not just for the Church in Asia but ultimately for the growth of the universal Church. “With the Lord, she can experience the wonder, the amazement, of the missionary adventure without the need, conscious or unconscious, to be in first place, to seek or occupy any possible place of preeminence. How much we can learn from you, who are a minority in many of your countries or regions, and sometimes are overlooked or impeded or persecuted minorities, yet have not let yourselves be carried away or corrupted by an inferiority complex or the complaint that you are not given due recognition! Go forwards: proclaim, sow, pray and wait. And you will not lose your joy!” (Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness at Meeting with the Bishops of Thailand and FABC, Bangkok, 22 November 2019*).

These considerations are meant to provide some salient discussion points that may assist and inspire the FABC 50 – General Conference to seek out new pathways and for the Bishops to respond to the needs of the Churches in Asia in the years to come. It is hoped that the parameters provided here will act as a springboard to encourage a prophetic revisioning for the posterity of the Church in Asia and the FABC.

Conclusion

It is said that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” (ancient Chinese proverb) and 50 years ago, we as Church in Asia, took that “single step” of forming the FABC with hopes and aspirations of renewing our church in this part of the world. We have indeed come a long way since the conception of an idea to bring together Bishops across Asia for greater collaboration and partnership. As we stand here fifty years later, bearing testimony to the joys of this fraternal communion responding to the needs of Church in Asia with every changing decade, we can only give thanks to God for His faithful love and guidance.

As we move into a “new phase” and look towards the future, we take heed of Pope Francis’ call to “prepare the future” rather than “prepare for the future” as he asks of us to prepare a future full of hope amid chaos and uncertainty. Remembering the words of Pope Benedict who said, “to hope is to be open to the future and to be open to the future is to be open to God”, we need to look towards a collective future with an all-embracing vision for the Church in Asia. The consultations that have been carried out thus far that have culminated in this guide document gave us not only a glimpse of the challenges faced across Asia but also the aspirations of the Church in Asia to prepare the future with faith and confidence in our God.

It is our collective hope that the FABC 50 – General Conference can be the stepping stone to help us as the Church in Asia to rethink our commitment in relation to mission, worship and pastoral strategies. The pandemic has reminded us that we need a renewed vision for the Church in Asia and as we prepare for our General Conference, may we be guided by the Holy Spirit, who is the source of all renewal and regeneration. May our Blessed Mother accompany and sustain us with her intercession in our quest to journey together as peoples of Asia in finding new pathways for the glory of God (EG 31).