

## **JOURNEYING TOGETHER AS PEOPLES OF ASIA**

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

### **FABC 50 BANGKOK DOCUMENT**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. Bearing witness to God’s love for all human beings and for his creation is the mission of the disciples of Jesus Christ, journeying together as peoples of Asia. Indeed, in the covenant with Noah, God’s love embraces all peoples and the whole of creation. Caring as a merciful father and a loving mother, God opens new pathways for our journeying in the present time with its multiple challenges and crises.
2. Walking in the footsteps of the Magi, the FABC 50 General Conference invites us to set out on a journey, charting the way together, following the “star” of God in our present history, interpreting the signs of the times. Mathew’s account of the Magi’s journey (cf Mt 2:1-12) became the guide for FABC’s First General Conference in Bangkok from October 12-30, 2022 convened on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the FABC. The evangelist narrates how the Magi, led by a star, embarked on an adventurous journey together. This inspired our Jubilee theme, “Journeying Together as Peoples of Asia, “...and they went a different way” (Mt 2:12). We saw the present time as a propitious one to discern and undertake new pathways to genuinely renew our mission and ministry in Asia of making the Gospel alive and life-giving for all, especially for those on the periphery, and for mother Earth, which groans with wounds of exploitation (cf *Laudato Si [LS]*, 49).
3. Asia is the continent of great religious traditions and of multicultural peoples who share in the common quest for Peace, Justice and Harmony. Drawing on the Gospel, the Catholic Church shares in this common quest. As a minority in Asia, the Church shares the joys and sufferings of our peoples. United with all social forces, organizations, civil society and all people of good will, we contribute our efforts to move from the present socio-economic-political life situation to a world in which the dignity and rights of all are promoted and respected. We want our people to be able to hope again and, through living together in solidarity and harmony, experience the never ending love of God.
4. And so, like the Magi, we as bishops of Asia and as representatives of the People of God, gathered together to read the signs of our times, to discern, to seek guidance and to discover new pathways. We remembered certain phases of the Asian Mission in which Matteo Ricci and others like him proclaimed the Gospel not in a manner tied to the cultures of their country of origin, but in truly inculturated ways. Taking note of the great variety of cultures of the Asian peoples on the one hand, and the emerging realities, challenges and hopes of our peoples on the other, we embarked on a journey together,

listening to each other's stories and learning from each other. We prayed and discerned together what the Spirit is telling the churches and peoples in Asia. We worshipped together and unpacked the gifts the Spirit has generously bestowed on us, to offer them in humble service for the good of the Church and all people. Finally, we moved to new pathways that enable us to live a fully human life. Reaffirmed, renewed and revitalized through our General Conference, we go forth on our synodal journeying with our communities, parishes, dioceses, episcopal conferences on one hand, and with our peoples in Asia on the other. God, in his love, invites us to journey with him building societies and Christian communities which leave no one behind. As a Church in this continent, connected with the universal Church, we want to contribute to a better Asia, to a more peaceful, just and harmonious humanity and to the protection of nature.

5. The Gospel impels us, disciples of Jesus, to dare transcend borders - as the Magi did - to abandon unjust structures of life and embark on a journey together in a common quest for meaning and purpose, as we participate in God's project of building life in fullness (cf Jn 10:10), justice and peace. Keeping the journey of the Magi as our framework, we present this Final Document of our FABC 50 General Conference in five parts:

1. Journeying Together
2. Looking
3. Discerning
4. Offering Our Gifts
5. Undertaking New Pathways.

## **Part One: JOURNEYING TOGETHER**

### **Responding to the call of synodality**

6. Leaving familiar ground to heed God's call, as Israel's leaders once did, the Magi left their comfort zones and found themselves syn-hodos "on the way together," in their common quest for God who invited them to do what He Himself has done. The Chinese proverb says, "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". The first step that began our story of redemption was God taking the initiative to walk with human beings in the Garden of Eden (cf Gen 3:8). That "walk" culminated in the coming of God in our midst as one like us in all things but sin (cf Heb 4:15).
7. Portrayed in Matthew's Gospel as a representation of the Gentiles, the Magi cannot but remind us of our own journey as a Church in Asia. Varied historical circumstances have led us to Jesus Christ, Son of God, who, in His great love has revealed to us the face of God as Emmanuel, "God with us" (Mt 1:23). Not only does he invite us to journey with him; He is himself THE WAY that leads us back home to the Father's house (cf Jn 14:6)
8. Our aspiration for synodality comes with an act of faith in God who takes the initiative to walk with us and invites us to "walk humbly" with Him (cf Mic 6:8) He makes himself known to all honest searchers and pilgrims. He allows his star to become visible for all people of good will.
9. Sometimes, like the Hebrew slaves, we are tempted to give up the journey (cf Num 14:4). Or, like the Israelites in the face of hunger and thirst in the desert, we find ourselves longing for the fleshpots of Egypt (cf Ex 16:3). When we encounter dead ends or seemingly insurmountable barriers, we are discouraged from carrying on with the journey.
10. The Magi made a path for themselves as they journeyed, looking up to heaven for guidance. An atmosphere of prayer and meditation on the Word of God strengthens us to keep going as we engage in our Synodal journey. We are invited, as it were, to keep looking up to heaven to allow the "Star of Wonder, Star of Night...to guide us to the perfect light." Otherwise, even while journeying together we may lose the way.
11. Far too often the way of Christ has been portrayed only as a "Way of the Cross" and made to seem like a morbid journey that glorifies suffering and death. Like the disciples, we can miss out on the meaning of the empty tomb and allow grief or confusion to prevent us from encountering the Risen Christ. We can find ourselves journeying together but, like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, in the wrong direction (cf Lk 24:13-35).

12. It is precisely when we lose sight of the real goal - proclaiming Jesus - that we are tempted to give up. Some of Jesus' disciples found the promise of Jesus about giving us his own body and blood, a "hard saying". They parted ways from him. The question Jesus asked the twelve can be addressed to us also: "Do you also want to leave?" (Jn 6:66)
13. The history of the Church is fraught with many sad episodes of partings of ways, when instead of journeying together we decided to go our separate ways because of issues of doctrine, issues of pastoral care, issues of administration, etc., and each time we have been called back by the voice of Peter: "To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:67).
14. The Church in Asia too has sometimes strayed from the right path. There have been pioneers like Matteo Ricci in China and Robert de Nobili in India who blazed new trails, but by and large the Church followed the beaten track, unwilling to cut off its former moorings. There have been great freedom movements supported by the Church like the 1986 EDSA Revolution (People Power Revolution) in the Philippines and recent prophetic figures in Myanmar and in other places; but the prophetic voice of the Church has sometimes been stilled. She has, at times, also been too cautious in standing up for human rights.
15. Throughout this FABC 50 General Conference in Bangkok, we have endeavored to find new pathways as the Magi did. We have been led to do what Peter did at the very first Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), when in reaction to Paul's reaching out to the Gentiles, some wanted to restrict the mission to the Jewish converts. Assuming his leadership role, at the Council of Jerusalem, Peter stood between James and Paul and took the initiative to keep them together (cf Acts 15).
16. The new route proposed for the Church is the path of SYNODALITY. There are the three essential elements of a synodal church: COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION, MISSION.<sup>1</sup>
17. COMMUNION is the antithesis of our tendencies towards exclusivity. Every baptized member is equal in dignity. We may play different roles, but as baptized members, we all are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, God's own people" (1 Pt 2:9). There are no first and second class members in the Church. The Spirit further empowers us to enter into communion not only with our fellow Catholics but also with every Christian, every human being and every created being. We cannot be agents of communion except by the power of the Spirit of communion which we have received at baptism. Only in communion with the Spirit can we grow into communities of disciples and become builders of basic Christian and Human communities that act like leaven in a mass of dough.

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<sup>1</sup> A Vademecum: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

18. PARTICIPATION is the most palpable sign that the body of Christ is alive and that each part is animated by the same Spirit. What can hinder participation in the Church is the “power” issue<sup>2</sup>. When the roles of the clergy are translated into positions of power, there is a tendency to prevent the other parts of the body of Christ from playing their proper roles according to their charisms. The Church is thus reduced to a ‘clerical’ church. When the ordained ministry, whose principal role is to promote a variety of ministries and coordinate them for the building up of the Church, ends up monopolizing leadership, we need to be reminded of Jesus’ admonition to James and John: “it shall not be so with you” (Mt 20:26). Leadership has to be exercised always in the spirit of servanthood, participating in the leadership of him who came “not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many.” (Mk 10:45)
19. And finally, MISSION is the opposite of our tendencies towards what Pope Francis calls “self-referentiality”. We become self-referential when we forget that we do not exist for ourselves but rather for the world. This happens when our ministries are established primarily with the purpose of getting people to serve the Church alone, rather than serve society as part of a servant Church.
20. Along the way, we are being challenged by the many ‘Herods’. Hence, we cannot be complacent; we need to avoid the common tendency to remain in ‘maintenance mode’, to stick only to the familiar pathway.
21. On the concluding day of our Conference, H.E. Luis Antonio Cardinal Tagle, the Papal Legate placed before us an important challenge. Aware of the FABC’s vision of a Church that engages in evangelization through a triple dialogue (with religions, cultures and the poor), Cardinal Tagle pointed out that dialogue is often understood as just bilateral, meaning a dynamic between two sides. He posed the challenge to explore new ways of engaging in dialogue that are multilateral, what we might call a “multilogue” or the kind that requires precisely the spirit of synodality that has given this particular FABC 50 General Conference its freshest character. He spoke of the necessity for us to take more seriously the spirituality, lifestyle and living out of dialogue in our local churches, *ad intra*, among ourselves, and *ad extra*, in relation to the varied societies in Asia in which we operate.
22. Synodality should not just be among bishops or the ordained leaders of the Church. If synodality has to do with promoting communion, participation, and mission in the Church, then we, the Church in Asia, must make sure that we are able to discern the

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<sup>2</sup> In our General Assembly in Bandung in 1990, we resolved to pursue a new way of being Church by promoting the growth of BECs (Basic Ecclesial Communities) that would serve as our most concrete expression of a truly participatory Church.

“*sensus fidelium*” through synodal consultations and opportunities for community discernment that would also involve, not just bishops but the rest of the faithful—laity, religious, and clergy—as well as other sectors of society that impact the life and mission of the Church. The Church in Asia must constantly remind herself of the words of Isaiah 54:2 which have been used as the title of the Synod document for the Continental Stage “to enlarge the space of our tent”.

## **Part Two: LOOKING AT ASIA'S EMERGING REALITIES**

### **Recognizing the challenges confronting the Church in Asia**

23. “When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying: Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage” (Mt 2:1-2). Matthew characterizes the Gentile seekers as “Magi”, i.e., people of wisdom who make the effort and take time to “look up” to the sky and gaze at the stars. This indicates that they meditated and sought the guidance of heaven about their concerns on earth.
24. The Church in Asia can relate well with the quest that the Magi embarked on. The evangelist describes them in a manner akin to the Asian contemplative character. We can picture them journeying together in silence, asking questions whenever necessary and seeking both divine and human guidance.
25. Like the Magi, we Bishops, gathered at the FABC 50 General Conference, sought for human guidance in the person of experts - sociologists, environmental experts, economists, political scientists, theologians, psychologists, lawyers, activists, persons who can lead us to a better comprehension of the emerging realities in the continent. Above all, we sought divine guidance. We made sure we prayed in silence each time we looked into Asia's multifaceted and diverse realities. Each morning session began with inculturated morning prayers and contextualized scriptural reflections. It was the sustained atmosphere of prayer that enabled us to view our emerging realities from the perspective of faith and spirituality.
26. The Magi were “wise”, not only because they looked up to heaven, but also because they looked around to seek counsel. We ourselves did a lot of looking up and looking around in this FABC 50 General Conference, as we prayed, reflected on the Scriptures, and engaged in spiritual conversations hoping that these could give us the appropriate optic in viewing our current situations in Asia, a perspective that is both human and divine, the perspective of the Incarnate God.
27. We likewise did a lot of looking back at the historical roots<sup>3</sup> and development of our local Churches, especially during our ‘virtual visits’ to every country in Asia. Some of them, such as Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Cambodia, had been literally watered by the blood of martyrs. Each ‘visit’ made us understand and appreciate the beginnings of the Christian

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<sup>3</sup> Our brothers bishops from the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Rites made us aware of the earlier development of a Christian tradition called “Syriac Orient” which had spread through the Asian continent in the early first millennium and after, mostly attributed to the mission of the Apostle St. Thomas, and how because of persecution and other factors they had dwindled by the end of the first millennium, only to be revived through the missions of the second millennium. We await with eagerness the result of a historical research on this topic.

faith in different countries of Asia, the early missionaries who prepared the ground for the first seeds of the Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Each ‘visit’ opened our eyes to both the hopeful and painful realities that are emerging and impacting our respective local Churches. We also had the opportunity to listen to voices from different parishes and sectors in various countries in Asia that are rarely heard.

28. We noted the Church is quietly flourishing in many Asian countries that used to be hostile to the Christian faith. We heard reports of governments that have welcomed the positive contributions of the local Churches to nation-building, to human development, to education, to the care for the environment, to the work against human trafficking,<sup>5</sup> to social communication, etc. Our brother bishops from Korea edified us by opting to use the vocabulary of “neighbour religions” instead of “other religions.” The Indonesians inspired us with an enduring symbol of interreligious harmony in the “tunnel of friendship” that connects underground the Istqilal Mosque with St. Mary of the Assumption Cathedral in Jakarta. The fledgling Church of Mongolia, though functioning mainly as an NGO (non-government organization), has struck an amicable partnership with the Mongolian government. In several countries in Asia, the Church has entered into proactive approaches while partnering with government agencies and civil society in dealing with the Covid 19 pandemic.
29. On the other hand, we heard of adverse situations in several local Churches in Asia that are dealing with the erosion of religious freedom, religious extremism, laws which pose threats to the freedom of conscience and faith adherence, terrorist attacks motivated by religious extremism and the rise of populist and authoritarian governments which employ social media for disinformation. Despite their track record of systemic corruption and violation of human rights, they have managed to get people to vote for them. There appears to be, paradoxically, a new fascination for authoritarian rule and a tolerance for disrespect of civil liberties.
30. The breadth and depth of Asia makes it truly difficult to understand the diversity of issues that impact this vast continent. So we focused on what struck us as the most impactful realities in Asian societies. From these we identified nine major priorities:
  - A. **Migrants, Refugees and Indigenous People**, often displaced from their homelands
  - B. **Families**, the bedrock of society

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<sup>4</sup> Missionaries like St. Francis Xavier, Mateo Ricci, Robert De Nobili, John de Britto and others, who were full of fire to go out and evangelize. St Joseph Vaz is another example; he went from Goa to Sri Lanka to share the Gospel of Jesus. Being rejected and exiled did not discourage him. He still went to Sri Lanka and working at the harbour as a porter he continued his mission of sharing the Good News.

<sup>5</sup> The *Talitha Kumi* program comes to mind.



- C. The evolving role of **Women** in the fast-changing Asian societies
- D. **Gender Issues** confronting the Church and society
- E. **Youth** confronting a new world
- F. The impact of **Digital Technology**
- G. Promoting an equitable **Economy** in the face of Urbanization and Globalization
- H. The **Climate Crisis** which endangers our common home
- I. **Interreligious Dialogue** to bring about harmony and peace in the Asian continent

A. **MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OFTEN DISPLACED FROM THEIR HOMELANDS:**

- 31. Like the Holy Family that had to flee from Bethlehem and seek refuge in Egypt, many among Asia's poor are displaced either as local or foreign migrants. It was pointed out that by 2050 there will be more than 400 million migrants all over the world. While we acknowledge the right of people to migrate in search of a better life for their families, we are aware of the adverse effects of the consequent brain-drain. This continuous migration of professionals - like nurses, doctors, caregivers, architects and engineers - to other countries cannot but aggravate the situation of underdevelopment in their home countries.
- 32. Asia is the scene for a booming migration industry, which operates both legally and illegally at a very high cost of human values. Family life is disrupted; children are abandoned; the social fabric is gradually eroded. For some countries the migrants' remittances is a big contributor to their economy. This accounts for the policy of governments of some developing countries encouraging workers to go to other countries to the detriment of their own countries' development. While the migrants send home their hard-earned money and help their economies, hardly any money is invested by the home governments for the benefit of the migrant workers themselves, some of whom even had to sell their land to be able to work abroad.
- 33. The horrific stories of abuse and exploitation that many experience only prove that slavery continues to exist even in the 21st century. We think especially of Indians, Filipinos, Pakistanis, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankans living as contract workers in the Gulf States, or in the more industrialized countries of Asia. Often, they are treated like undesirable aliens, despite the fact that they contribute to the economies of their host cities and countries. Many of them, separated from their families, struggle with loneliness. In their struggle to cope with homesickness, some find themselves entangled in extramarital relationships resulting in complicated family situations.

34. We think of the many displaced by armed conflicts in Myanmar and elsewhere, of political refugees seeking asylum to avoid political persecution. Some of them, entering other countries as illegal aliens, find themselves hiding from immigration authorities for fear of getting deported. Being undocumented and having no legal status, many are exploited as cheap labor without any social benefits, and are unable to avail of public services, such as education and health care.
35. Many migrants are involved in low-skilled jobs. Most of them, having no fixed contracts, receive unjust wages and endure subhuman working conditions. The lack of governance and laws for the welfare of migrant workers, such as the freedom to form or join unions, are among the many problems that governments need to attend to. Women migrants usually suffer the worst forms of harassment and abuse and are usually the least protected and the lowest paid. It is encouraging to see international and national organizations protecting the rights of migrant workers, listening to their complaints and appealing for their cases.

**B. FAMILIES, THE BEDROCK OF SOCIETY:**

36. The family is an integral part of society. The family is the place where values and virtues are first taught, where love and sacrifice are first experienced, where fidelity and forgiveness are first learned. Most Asians consider harmonious family life as a blessing. Pope St John Paul II affirmed: 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...” (*Ecclesia in Asia* [EA], 46).
37. However, families in Asia are currently facing many challenges that threaten their tranquility, stability and unity. Death due to human tragedies, violence, wars and natural disasters deprives some children of one or both parents. Migration for work in urban centers and abroad forces members of families to separate. Fortunately, the support of close kin (grandparents, uncles, aunts, elder siblings, cousins, etc.), usually enables 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. The Church’s schools, colleges and universities make a significant contribution to the private education system.
38. While mixed-Christian and interfaith marriages certainly pose some problems, they are also perceived as the first school of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. Concerned for the welfare and future of their families, the young and old participate in society and promote care for the earth, our common home.

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

C. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF **WOMEN** IN THE FAST-CHANGING ASIAN SOCIETIES:

40. The FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document stated: “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 are largely unacknowledged.”<sup>6</sup>
41. Asian women are often marginalized in the Church and in society because of the patriarchal mindset of some in the Church and because of the notions of purity and taboos in some Asian religions and certain South Asian cultures. Although many Church teachings, such as the Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem [MD]*, and Pope Francis’ Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Christus Vivit [CV]*, stress the dignity of women<sup>7</sup> there is still a big gap between theory and reality. Although women are undoubtedly the majority in number when it comes to animating a Parish, they are not proportionately involved in decision-making in the Church. The internalization of patriarchal values and attitudes by women is also an important factor that impedes the dignity and mission of women in the Church. Their suffering is linked to sexism, classism, and racism.
42. However, things are changing. A recent Pew Research Center Survey<sup>8</sup> 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: “Demands 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

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<sup>6</sup> FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document, p. 8

<sup>7</sup> See especially *MD*, 29 and *CV*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/04/22/how-people-around-the-world-view-gender-equality-in-their-countries>.

cannot be lightly evaded” (*Evangelii Gaudium [EG]*, 104). Women dream of an alternative society where no hierarchical structures would oppress them.

**D. GENDER ISSUES CONFRONTING THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY:**

43. LGBTQI+ people are highly marginalized and face varied forms of stigma and discrimination based on their distinct sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions.<sup>9</sup>For instance, while Georgia, Singapore and Thailand show some kind of leniency towards gay relationships; Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen on the other hand affirm that homosexual activity is punishable with the death penalty.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, after the Taliban takeover, in 2021, LGBTQI+ persons have found it even more difficult to live in peace.<sup>11</sup>
44. *The Economist*, through a survey that it conducted in 2019, declared that while 45% of respondents in the Asia-Pacific believed that same-sex marriage is inevitable in the region, 31% of the respondents categorically found it unacceptable.<sup>12</sup> Gender issues are indeed contentious matters and so need to be dealt with great sensitivity, discernment and care.

**E. YOUTH CONFRONTING A NEW WORLD:**

45. Youth, defined by the United Nations as persons between the ages of 15 and 24, represent almost 18 per cent of the current global population. A vast majority of the 1.2 billion youth in the world today live in developing countries. In 2005, 61.8 per cent of the youth population of the world lived in the Asia Pacific region. Owing to the different demographic factors, the Asia-Pacific Region has recently witnessed a ‘youth bulge’ whereby 20 per cent or more of the national population is aged 15 to 24 years.
46. Due to a combination of several factors, youth in the Asia Pacific region today are better poised than ever before to participate in, and benefit from social, economic and political developments. Compared to previous generations, a higher proportion of young people in the region have completed primary schooling. They are better educated, with the gross enrolment rate at the tertiary level reaching 18 per cent and 15 per cent respectively for male and female youth. Across the region, young people have taken initiatives to participate in local, national and regional development as important and equal participants, rather than as passive bystanders unable to shape their own future. “The

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<sup>9</sup> Being LGBTQ in Asia and the Pacific, in <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/projects/being-lgbti-asia-and-pacific>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/13/here-are-the-10-countries-where-homosexuality-may-be-punished-by-death-2/>. Accessed on 17 February, 2023.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/01/26/even-if-you-go-skies-well-find-you/lgbt-people-afghanistan-after-taliban-takeover>. Accessed on 17 February, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> <https://lgbtq-economics.org/research/lgbt-adults-2019/>. Accessed on 17 February, 2023.

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 renewal movements 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". (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" (CV,84).

47. Although the present set of youth has numerous advantages and assets, it also faces a complex and rapidly evolving situation where new opportunities coexist with major challenges. Fierce competition is affecting the marketplace in the region. Youth often remain in a vulnerable situation and lack the requisite knowledge and skills to adapt to the changing economic and social environment. For instance, in Asia, youth made up 20.8 per cent of the labour force in 2004, but unemployed youth accounted for nearly half (49.1 per cent) of the region's jobless people. Long-term unemployment leads to a wide range of social ills, such as delinquency and substance abuse, to which young people are susceptible and often feeds political unrest and violence. Drug abuse and other health risks are particularly high among those who are out-of-school.
48. In this ever-evolving scenario, youth ministry is not simply limited to improving what had been done in the past, but includes searching for new approaches, changed perspectives and evolving structures that will demonstrate the pastors' sincerity and readiness to trust and value them. Furthermore, instead of being called the future of the Church, young people prefer to find themselves in the life and mission of the Church as they are now. No wonder they felt affirmed by Pope Francis who said to them, "Your youth is not an 'in-between time'. You are the now of God, and he wants you to bear fruit" (CV,178).

#### F. THE IMPACT OF **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY**:

49. Since the dawn of this millennium, the world of digital communication and interaction has developed in a rapid upward curve so that it has become part and parcel of life. Digitalization has impacted almost all aspects of life and has improved efficiency and productivity in numerous ways.
50. However, along with the benefits, there are also challenges. For instance, digitalization has thrown up issues concerning personal security, depersonalization and hate crimes,

fake news, social disconnect, bullying and addiction. Furthermore, in these new digital platforms, especially social media, those who own the technology set the rules. The owners make money by owning the data and having power over the consumers. Also driven by advertising, they have control over the narratives they allow to circulate. We also realize that digitalization is being used by governments and corporations to exert power and to influence culture. What is truly heart-rending is the digital divide that 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 these warrant our attention as we move into newer digital and virtual worlds.

51. Our attention was drawn, in particular, to the ill effects of digital technology on the holistic growth of young people. Young people nowadays tend to look at themselves and build their identity or draw their sense of security through social media. Citing recent studies, it was pointed out that, one of the serious consequences of the digital media on the youth and a cause for alarm is the “underdevelopment of empathy among young people”. Equally disconcerting is the realization that the digital media have caused a serious decline in young people’s capacity to engage in “serious reading,” which is essential for the development of logical, inferential, affective, analytical and contemplative capacities on young minds.
52. Catholic media practitioners called on Church leaders to acknowledge that they too are influencers and have a compelling message to proclaim. Their suggestions for effective digital evangelization include setting up the Church’s own secure social media platforms and building up social communication teams in the local Churches. Reminding Church leaders that in the digital world, the story is the strategy, they made suggestions for a creative catechesis that utilizes the power of stories, images, metaphors and the like, to more effectively connect God’s Word to peoples’ lives. Eventually, young people, the so-called “digital natives”, are expected to lead in this ministry.

G. **AN EQUITABLE ECONOMY IN THE FACE OF URBANIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION**

53. The whole world today has become one big global village and the process leading to this is called globalization which has led to the homogenization of culture. This phenomenon seriously impedes the multi-cultural way of life of the people of Asia and is termed ‘Cultural Globalization’. However, there is also ‘Economic Globalization’, wherein the economies of the various nations of the world are tied together. We recall the words of Pope John Paul II, in his 31st World Day of Peace Message (1997): “The vast geopolitical changes which have taken place since 1989 have been accompanied by veritable revolutions in the social and economic fields. The globalization of the economy

and of finance is now a reality, and we are realizing more and more clearly the effects of the rapid progress related to information technologies. We are on the threshold of a new era which is the bearer of great hopes and disturbing questions”.

54. On the one hand, globalization has brought the world together, enabling people to rush to the aid of a country affected by earthquakes or natural calamities in any part of the world. On the other hand, it has divided the world. The gap between the rich and the poor has widened. Far from becoming an inclusive world which embraces all, in the name of development, millions of people have been excluded. Money-profit-market seems to be the determining economic thrust today. With greed for more wealth, the globalizing forces are appropriating the resources of the poor and unjustly exploiting their labour. All this is affected in the name of development, progress and growth!
55. What Dr. Manmohan Singh, the then Prime Minister of India, an economist, stated about India may truly be applied to the whole of Asia, viz. that we “have learnt how to bring about growth, but we have yet to achieve comparable success in inclusiveness?!”<sup>13</sup>
56. This then is the challenge before the Church in Asia: how to direct the economy for the good of all, not just of a few, the “creamy layer”. The Church in Asia could make its own the words of Pope St John Paul II in his Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 27 April 2001 “The Church will continue to work with all people of good will to ensure that the winner in this process will be humanity as a whole, and not just a wealthy elite that controls science, technology, communication and the planet’s resources to the detriment of the vast majority of its people. The Church earnestly hopes that all the creative elements in society will cooperate to promote a globalization which will be at the service of the whole person and of all people”.<sup>14</sup>

#### H. THE CLIMATE CRISIS WHICH ENDANGERS OUR COMMON HOME:

57. If the Magi had lived in the 21st-century perhaps they would not have arrived in time to adore the newborn Jesus in Bethlehem! They would have had to deal, not just with Herod, but also with the extreme weather conditions, floods, typhoons, forest fires, rising sea levels, food shortage, viral mutations, and new diseases. All these would have gotten in the way of their quest for the newborn king.
58. Indeed, we recognize that a long-term challenge facing humankind in the 21st century is the human-made climate change and the associated ecological crisis. Countless people in Asia are already suffering due to weather extremes, drought,

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<sup>13</sup> Planning Commission, Government of India, The Eleventh Five Year Plan Document, Vol 1, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/april/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20010427\\_pc-social-sciences.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2001/april/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010427_pc-social-sciences.html).

typhoons, deforestation and forest fires, and conflicts over water use. Water availability has direct consequences on the food supply. Given that Asia is home to many of the countries that are vulnerable to climate change, millions of people already suffer due to rising sea levels, air, soil and water pollution, the “throwaway mentality”, the loss of biodiversity, and waste management. All of these are crimes against nature and future generations.

59. St. Paul writes, “We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now” (Rom 8:22). Through the help of the experts invited to this conference, the FABC 50 General Conference came to a realization that, instead of going through labor pains preparing for the birth of a renewed and better world, mother earth is now “groaning with wounds of exploitation”.
60. Pope Francis reminds us through his encyclical, *Laudato Si* that only when we can turn the sufferings of nature and of the victims of climate change into our own personal sufferings (cf *LS*,19), then and only then will we renounce our unsustainable capitalistic models of production and simultaneously take seriously necessary measures to reform our lifestyles.
61. Through the sufferings that we ourselves will have to face, we will recognize the little Child of Bethlehem in the faces of so many children and young people in Asia who are deprived of both their present and future dignity on account of climate change. The sufferings of Mary and Joseph are visible in the faces of so many parents who are unable to offer their children a decent home, adequate nutrition, proper health care or education. We see the sufferings of Mary and Joseph also in parents who are forced by circumstances to migrate because of the effects of climate change on their environments, or in parents who have to flee from the violence of wars and armed conflicts as well as consequences of struggles over water shortage, and the disposal of hazardous wastes.
62. Listening to the cry of the earth and the poor together with our neighbour-religions in our continent, along with all social groups of good will and those who exercise responsibility in the realm of politics and economy, our integral pastoral work can open new pathways on our common journey towards a better Asia and a perspective of the wellbeing of the humankind (cf *LS*,49).
63. Indeed, as the Church in Asia responds to Pope Francis’ call for ecological conversion, we are awakened to the great injustice that our present generation is inflicting upon the poor who are most vulnerable to the natural calamities triggered by human abuse of the environment. Ecological conversion also reminds us that when we destroy nature we simultaneously destroy ourselves. Only by realizing how intricately interconnected we are with every fellow creature and every living organism on the planet, which serves as our common home, can we begin to exercise our God given role as stewards of creation.



**I. INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE TO BRING ABOUT HARMONY AND PEACE IN THE ASIAN CONTINENT:**

64. Asia is a land of many religions and cultures. Several world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism and Shintoism have originated in Asia. In this multi-religious context of Asia, with each religion seeking space and autonomy, a spirit of competition can set in. Following the spirit of Christ and the Gospel, Christians should not seek to compete with the other religions. They should rather be concerned about reviving the Christian faith and expressing the Gospel values in their own lives so as to be living witnesses of Christ.
65. If Christianity has to coexist with other religions and worldviews in the modern world, which faces many changes and challenges in the context of globalization, consumerism, materialism, dehumanization, and exploitation of nature, the Church and individual Christians must demonstrate to the world that they have something to offer in terms of values, commitment, beauty, joy and happiness. Indeed, a comprehensive worldview, which can provide viable ethical and moral guidelines to a world paralyzed by value relativism is the need of the hour! Hence, the coming decades present a golden opportunity, as well as a great challenge to Christianity.

## Part Three: DISCERNING

### What the Spirit is saying to the Church in Asia

66. Matthew characterizes the seekers as “Magi”, as people of wisdom and inspiration who take time to LOOK UP to the sky and gaze at the stars. This signifies that they reflect and seek the guidance of heaven about their concerns on earth.
67. The evangelist tells us the Magi saw the star and, journeying together, found their way to Jerusalem, a short distance from their real destination, Bethlehem (cf Mt 2:1). Matthew tells us that their quest for “the newborn king of the Jews” attracted the attention of Herod, the then ruling king of the Jews. “When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him” (Mt 2:3). King Herod enquires from the chief priests and scribes, in order to find out where this “Messiah”, this threat to his power, “was to be born” (Mt 2:4). The chief priests and scribes search the Scriptures and, quoting Micah 5:1, point to “Bethlehem of Judah” as the prophesied birthplace of the “newborn King of the Jews” for whom these Gentiles were looking. Since it was the star that had guided these men this far, Herod “called them secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance” (Mt 2:7). Then he sent them off to Bethlehem with the instruction: “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and worship him.” (Mt 2:8). After finding him, should they return to Jerusalem and entrust to Herod further information on the child’s whereabouts? This question required serious discernment.
68. The Church in Asia has had many similar encounters with political figures like Herod, and local religious leaders like the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem. Our early missionaries also encountered ruling political and religious authorities who felt threatened by their presence – and today’s missionaries too face similar difficulties. Some others offer ‘partnership’ and ‘collaboration’. How to deal with these varied situations demands constant discernment.
69. The Second Vatican Council indicated the significance of discernment when it said that “the entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people’s supernatural discernment in matters of faith when from the bishops down to the last of the lay faithful, they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals” (*Lumen Gentium* [LG], 12).
70. We are able to draw some insights regarding the process of communal discernment from the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, article 2.2. This process, the *Vademecum* explains, entails a listening to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times so that we can discern what God is saying to all of us. This kind of discernment is

an ongoing process and not only a one-time exercise. Ultimately it is “a way of life, grounded in Christ, following the lead of the Holy Spirit, living for the greater glory of God”. The NT Church followed this process so that the apostles could confidently say that the decision taken at the end of the entire process of discernment was a joint decision of the Holy Spirit and them (cf Acts 15:28).

71. In the book of Revelation, John the visionary, addressing the Churches of Asia (Rev 1:4), says: “Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the Churches (Rev 3:22). Keeping in mind these words, throughout the FABC General Conference, we asked ourselves, “What is the Spirit saying to the Churches in Asia in our present times?” In particular we asked ourselves, how do we respond to the nine challenges we have discerned together? We sensed that we are called to:
- A. accompany migrants, refugees, indigenous people
  - B. give special attention to the family
  - C. open new roles of leadership to women in the Asian Church
  - D. address gender issues
  - E. minister to the youth
  - F. encourage the effective use of digital technology
  - G. promote an economy based on inclusive growth in the context of urbanization and globalization
  - H. care for our common home
  - I. be bridge-builders and bridges, instruments of dialogue and reconciliation in Asia

A. **ACCOMPANY MIGRANTS, REFUGEES, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE:**

72. Many of the local and foreign migrants are baptized Catholics who bring their faith with them as part of their ‘spiritual survival kit’. They tend to band together, especially when they feel alone in their host countries. They create their own support groups by joining prayer meetings and Bible study groups, saying the rosary together, or by expressing their popular devotions together. Those who possibly were not active Catholics in their homelands find themselves drawn to their faith as their best way of coping psychologically and spiritually with the challenges and difficult situations they face in foreign lands. They find chaplaincies and ministries for migrants as sources of solace and places of refuge and solidarity.

73. We are deeply grateful to the local Churches that have opened their doors to migrants, refugees and displaced people. We are also edified by parishes that have gone out of their way to provide places of worship for them, defend their rights against those who exploit them and provide pastoral care to victims of human trafficking and sexual abuse. Understandably, the problems related to migration and human trafficking are of such magnitude that they would often require partnerships with civil society, as well as government and non-government agencies. Even more effective would be the proactive partnerships of local Churches in the common endeavor to respond to the needs of migrant Catholics for spiritual and pastoral care. We took note, in particular, of the proposal of the Philippine bishops to create a Personal Prelature to address such needs.
74. In many instances, in predominantly “Catholic” countries where the practice of the faith has radically diminished, Catholic migrants are bringing a new fire to parishes that have already grown cold. For instance, we think of Catholics from Asia who have migrated to other countries and how they are providentially turning into missionaries simply by practicing their faith with fervor, or participating in their traditions like Marian devotions, their Christmas novena dawn Masses,<sup>15</sup> their Lenten and Easter practices and patronal feasts. The popular religiosity of Asia spreads far and wide, be it the procession of the Black Nazarene or the devotion to the Infant Jesus, or the Novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Singapore, or the Pilgrimage to Our Lady of Vailankani or to the Basilica of Our Lady at Sardhana in India or to Our Lady of La Vain in Vietnam and the Shrines of Mariamabad in Pakistan or to Our Lady of Madhu in Sri Lanka. Catholic migrants from Asia bring with them their unique devotions like a hidden wealth that continues to spread far and wide to many countries across the world.
75. The Holy Father encouraged the Catholic Migrant community in Rome last year when he said in his homily, “You received the joy of the Gospel... and this joy is evident in your people... in your eyes, on your faces, in your songs and in your prayers. In the joy with which you bring your faith to other lands.”<sup>16</sup> He said, “wherever they go to work, they sow the faith,” and he regards their “discreet and hardworking presence” as “a testimony of faith...through humble, hidden, courageous and persevering presence.”
76. He could have expressed similar sentiments about Asian Catholics migrants who bring with them the joy of the Gospel and are transformed into missionary disciples as they live their faith and with great heroism witness Christ! We resolved, therefore, to do what we can in the FABC to contribute to the formation and empowerment of Asian Catholic migrants.

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<sup>15</sup> Popularly known in Filipino as “*Simbang Gabi*” in preparation for Christmas

<sup>16</sup>Homily of Pope Francis on the occasion of the Filipinos Catholics’ commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> Year of the Arrival of Christianity in the Philippines.

77. A special category of people needing our care and support comprises indigenous people who are being marginalized and displaced in the name of ‘development’. In recent decades, we have seen greater sensitivity and awareness for the plight of the indigenous peoples. The UN General Assembly in 2007 adopted the ‘Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ and recognized that Asia comprises a majority of the world’s self-identified indigenous groups. Generally they are the earliest settlers of a region and not only represent immense cultural riches but also offer the rest of the world wisdom and practices for better human living in a globalized world which is experiencing ecological and societal disasters. In many parts of the world, indigenous knowledge and agricultural practices for adaptation to climate change are also increasingly being given recognition. The socio-cultural, political, economic and ecological challenges they face would consequently call for an increased accompaniment and support. In situations of exploitation, the Church, given her prophetic tradition, should be the voice for the indigenous peoples and a 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 like manner 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.<sup>17</sup>

**B. GIVE SPECIAL ATTENTION TO THE FAMILY:**

78. The family is the basic cell of society and one of the key factors for an authentic and stable culture. Furthermore, as Pope St John Paul II stated: “the family occupies a very important place in Asian cultures...(hence) 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).

79. Indeed the ‘Church of the home’ has a special vocation to witness and proclaim the Kingdom of God. Parents as the original and primary educators of their children model the practice of faith in a spirit of co-responsibility. As the first catechists of their children, they transmit the Gospel to them and from their children they themselves receive the same Gospel as lived by them! Such a family radiates the Gospel, while becoming an evangelizer of many other families and of the neighbourhood (*FC*,123).

80. The FABC 50 General Conference drew our attention to certain important aspects of family life and ministry:

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<sup>17</sup> FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document, p. 10.

- i) Faith formation of children and youth requires ministry to parents who are the most important mentors in the life of their children. Furthermore, the key moments in the faith journey of the children are the reception of the sacraments.
  - ii) Family movements within the parish can teach and support parents in their role as teachers of the faith. So also, the Parish Family Cell can network with the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs), the Women’s Cell and other parish associations to provide assistance to families in crises.
  - iii) The digital world is making the family a soft target. Hence, the Church needs to take this into account as it seeks to strengthen faith within the family.
  - iv) Interfaith married couples would need special pastoral care so as to be guided and integrated, together with their children into the life of the Church.
  - v) The teaching of the Church with regard to responsible parenthood needs to be specially promoted.
  - vi) Cross-generational mentoring of relationships need to be encouraged
  - vii) Families need to be assisted to develop skills to build and deepen relationships. This can be done through pre-marriage as well as post-marriage programs.
  - viii) There would be need of special support to and care of vulnerable members such as single men and women, sexual minorities, senior citizens, the aged and infirm, the bereaved, sick and differently abled, individuals and families in crises.
81. We therefore seek to promote families where all live together in mutual respect and harmony, and where parents make quality time for themselves and their children so as to assist their growth and development as human beings and Christians. We strive to create Asian societies in which elders are respected and a culture of life is upheld. We hope to build in Asia societies where migrants are integrated and refugees are reunited with their families. We seek to establish a ‘civilization of love’<sup>18</sup>, wherein families help other families, elders mentor younger couples, and safe communities – both real and virtual begin to form themselves – where children and youth can gradually grow as mature citizens and eventually missionary disciples.

**C. OPEN NEW ROLES OF LEADERSHIP TO WOMEN IN THE ASIAN CHURCH:**

82. At a meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) The Cardinal Prefect of a Dicastery was asked: “Why is it difficult to experience gender equality in the

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<sup>18</sup>Paul VI, Homily for the Closing of the Holy Year (December 25,1975): AAS 68 (1976), 145.

Church and society?”<sup>19</sup> He stated: “The problem of walking together, as man and woman, is something that needs to be delved into and explored more and in a deeper fashion. We need to return to the fundamental biblical insights and categorically ask ourselves: What does it mean to be in the image and likeness of God? It means men and women together, for they do not image God by themselves, but only when they are together. Indeed, in God, unity and diversity have never been a problem. For us, this has been a big problem throughout our history. We need to retrieve this aspect of our lives”.

83. Our task then is to recover a sense of the person. The essence of being a person involves individualization. I am different from the other, but I cannot fully be a person without the other. If to be born, there is need for relationship; if to grow, there is need for relationship; how can this not be true in the spiritual life? There is a need for us hence to reconstruct our relationships.
84. At the FABC 50 General Conference we affirmed the following:
- i) Care is an important part of Catholic theology, Church history, and the Church’s mission of spreading the Gospel, where, in the spirit of the common good, we are called to care for others, especially vulnerable groups such as women, as we strive to give each what is due to them in justice. Care and justice are very important for women to move forward in the Church, and are values that the Church needs to continue to foster.
  - ii) Based on the notions of social friendship and political charity (cf. social encyclical *Fratelli Tutti [FT]*, 88, 169), pastoral care should be offered by Church organizations to low-income women workers, foreign domestic workers, ethnic minorities, abused women and other vulnerable women.
  - iii) Based on Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), women as objects and subjects of liberation should be affirmed; they are subjects of history and agents of change.
  - iv) The Church should employ different ways to affirm solidarity with women, empowering them, supporting women self-help groups and advocating social transformation. Indeed the equal dignity of women and men flows from the affirmation that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Furthermore, this must be translated into shared and equal participation of women and men in all aspects of Church life, including leadership functions.<sup>20</sup>
85. The Church of Asia needs to listen to women’s experiences and women need to feel that

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<sup>19</sup> Joshua J. McElwee interviews Cardinal João Braz de Aviz in National Catholic Reporter (August 12, 2013) in <https://www.ncronline.org › news › vatican-religious-pr>. Accessed on February 19, 2023.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. *Predicate Evangelium*, Preamble, No. 10.

they have been heard and have made a contribution to the life of the Church. When lived-praxis becomes the axis for theologizing, the lived experiences of women will not be excluded. The struggle of the women to resist oppressive structures opens new avenues for reconstructing the existing theologies in Asia.

**D. ADDRESS GENDER ISSUES:**

86. Pope Francis in a recent interview affirmed that God loves all his children just as they are, and criticized as unjust, laws that criminalize homosexuality, while calling on Catholic bishops to welcome LGBTQI+ people into the Church.<sup>21</sup>
87. Pope Francis' comments were hailed by gay rights advocates as a milestone and were perceived as being consistent with his overall approach to LGBTQ+ people and his belief that the Catholic Church should welcome everyone without discrimination. He quoted the Catholic Catechism no 2358 which says: "The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. They are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, as Christians are to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition."
88. According to *The Human Dignity Trust*, about 67 countries or jurisdictions worldwide criminalize consensual same-sex sexual activity, 11 of which can or do impose the death penalty. Experts say even where the laws are not enforced, they contribute to harassment, stigmatization and violence against LGBTQI+ people.
89. People of different sexual orientations have sometimes complained of discrimination at the Table of the Lord. The Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian faith (cf. CCC 1324), is the sacrament of God's unconditional love in Jesus Christ, offered to all, to both the righteous and unrighteous, to saints and sinners. It is God's grace offered to all, through the new and eternal covenant which is actualized by the body and blood of Christ. The Eucharist is a body broken for broken people like us, given to us as food, so that we can be changed and be transformed into Christ, into members of his body, the Church. Indeed, the Lord alone can heal our brokenness and restore our wholeness.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. <https://www.npr.org> > 2023/01/25 > pope-francis-says-bei...Accessed on 19 February, 2023.



E. **MINISTER TO THE YOUTH:**

90. Youth need guidance and support as they navigate through the most challenging part of their development and seek to grow in their journey with Christ. Teaching young people in the Church to grow in their relationship with the Lord prepares them to serve Christ in all they do. When we minister to the youth, we are not only preparing them to become future leaders, but also empowering them to contribute to build up the Church. Animating youth for Christ has always been a concern of the Church. Youth need a Church which welcomes them to participate, is patient and forgiving when they fail, guides them in their life choices and helps them grow into mature, responsible, Christian adults. We recall the inspirational words of Pope Francis: “The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this 'art of accompaniment' which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other” (cf. Ex 3:5) (*EG*, 169). Hence the Church seeks to accompany the youth at all times and in all circumstances.<sup>22</sup>
91. The Church needs to periodically review the programs, activities and functioning of its Youth ministry at every level – community, parish, deanery and diocese – to ensure that youth requirements are met and integrated with the family, community and Church.
92. FABC 50 General Conference identified some key areas of youth ministry:
- i) Faith formation: The faith needs to be made relevant and meaningful. If the faith experience and understanding is not authentic, youth run the risk of being vulnerable to the materialistic values of the world, as well as the teachings of sects and other groups.
  - ii) Career guidance: Career guidance needs to be embedded in the context of discerning one’s calling and purpose in life.
  - iii) Counselling: Youth live in a world that is distinctly different from the one their parents grew up in. Both they and their parents need counselling to bridge this gap between two different worlds. Youth also need professional guidance to assist them as they wade through the turbulent waters of their passage to adulthood.
  - iv) Outreach and involvement: Youth need to take responsibility to be part of creating the world and society they would like to live in. They also need to get

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<sup>22</sup> cf. Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI) 29<sup>th</sup> General Assembly 2010.

involved in civic and political issues, beginning by addressing the issues in their neighbourhood and society.

93. Christ-like leaders are needed to serve young members of the congregation and help them to reach their full potential. Investing in youth is necessary for developing the body of Christ. Ultimately, helping youth to grow spiritually in their formative years will equip them to make an impact for Christ both now and in their future.
94. It was in the context of care for the Youth that FABC 50 General Conference reflected on the need to safeguard minors and vulnerable adults. The Guide Document for FABC 50 General Conference states: “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.”
95. The values of respect for children and reverence for the elders, are like trademarks in an Asian household. We are aware that the Church must be involved in efforts to effect long term change through formation, systemic and structural changes, and advocacy in defence of the vulnerable. Many of these initiatives have to be carried out by collaborating and networking with non-governmental and civil society organizations for the good of all. These partnerships only accentuate the fact that the Church does not exist for herself but is at the service of all the peoples of Asia as she continues to announce the Kingdom of God and transform our realities in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. *LG,5*).

**F. ENCOURAGE THE EFFECTIVE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY:**

96. Scientists have been speaking about a “fourth industrial revolution”.<sup>23</sup> At present there are 2.2 billion online users in Asia, with 95% using mobile devices. Although the virtual is never meant to replace actual physical encounters, we need a forward-looking missional response to this reality as the rapid developments in information technology and the digital revolution continue to impact and change our lives. There is consequently a dire need for this generation of “digital migrants” to enter into the digital world so as to effectively use digital technology for the Church’s mission.
97. The pandemic heightened the power and usefulness of digital technology. It allowed the parishes to reach out to people despite the restrictions and lockdowns, enabling them to provide spiritual services and faith formation online.

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<sup>23</sup> Klaus Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution: what it means, how to respond*, World Economic Forum, Accessed on 29 June 2017.

98. However, in these new digital platforms, especially the social media, those who own the technology set the rules. They make money by both owning the data and having power over it. Driven by advertising, they have control over the narratives that they allow to circulate. Catholic media practitioners have called on Church leaders to acknowledge that they too are influencers and so have a compelling message to proclaim.
99. We acknowledge the need for effective digital evangelization, which would include setting up the Church's own secure social media platforms and building up social communication teams in the local Churches. Furthermore recognizing in the digital world that the story is the strategy, we recommend creative catechesis that utilizes the power of stories, images and metaphors, which more effectively connect God's Word to peoples' lives. Inevitably, it is the young people, the so-called "digital natives", who are expected to lead in this ministry.

**G. PROMOTE AN ECONOMY BASED ON INCLUSIVE GROWTH IN THE CONTEXT OF URBANIZATION AND GLOBALIZATION:**

100. Globalization is dictating the world economy today. The Guide Document for FABC 50 General Conference states: "... 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 in 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 ... The greed for profit and unlimited growth also increases inequality in Asia and leads to asymmetric development processes".
101. The present economic order is not favouring the poor, rather, it is death-dealing to millions of people. We keep in mind the inspiring words of Pope Francis: "Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills ... Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape." (*EG*, 53).
102. In his spontaneous message to the Directors of Global Solidarity Fund on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2022, Pope Francis said: "The economy must be converted, (and) it must be converted now. We need to move from the liberal economy to an economy shared by the people, to a

communitarian economy ... We cannot live with an economic pattern that comes from the liberals and the Enlightenment. Nor can we live with an economic pattern that comes from communism....”

103. Since urbanization and globalization appear to be irreversible trends, it is imperative that the Church leaders are adequately informed about this emerging trend in Asia and be prepared pastorally to face the situation. Since cities are places of social, political, and economic influence, the growing urban Christian population in Asia needs to be formed and equipped with a deep faith and social and cultural skills to be a witnessing community of salt and light to minister effectively to the overall urban population. Interestingly, the culmination of the New Testament is symbolically a city – the New Jerusalem which forms part of the peaceable home that fulfills God’s promised justice for the poor, salvation for the humble, and the renewal of creation (cf. Rev 21-22).

#### H. **CARE FOR OUR COMMON HOME:**

104. As disciples of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, we need to enter into an intensive dialogue with creation. We are stewards of creation, not its masters. We owe it to the generations ahead of us that we keep the integrity of our common home as well as guarantee the future and dignity of future generations. Intergenerational solidarity is not an option, but rather a question of justice and surviving with dignity. The environment is on loan to each generation, and we are responsible for the way we leave it for those who follow.
105. We need to learn from nature, as well as from the wisdom of our indigenous people who do not regard nature as something outside of themselves but rather as a mother who nurtures them. It is from them that we all have to learn how to deal with creation in a sustainable way, because they perceive nature as an integrally interconnected system, of which we are only a part. Unfortunately today the Asian countries record the highest increase of emissions. Hence, the governments in Asia on one hand, and on the other hand, the industrialized countries, who over time have been the primary emitters of greenhouse gasses as well as the profiteers of unsustainable production models need to urgently fulfill their part of the decisions relating to the Paris Agreement of 2015.
106. The 2015 Paris Agreement indeed was a landmark in the global response to climate change. To tackle climate change and its negative impacts, world leaders at the UN Climate Conference (COP 21) in Paris reached a breakthrough on 12 December 2015 in this historic Paris Agreement. The Agreement sets long-term goals to guide all nations: i) Holding the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degree Celsius above the pre-industrial level, recognizing that this would significantly reduce the risk and impact of climate change; ii) Increasing the ability to adapt to the adverse impact of climate change and

foster climate resilience and low greenhouse gas emissions development, in a manner that does not threaten food production; and iii) Making finance flows consistent with pathway towards low greenhouse gas emissions and climate-resilient development. The Agreement is a legally binding international treaty. It entered into force on 4 November 2016. As of today, 194 Parties (193 States plus the European Union) have joined the Paris Agreement.<sup>24</sup>

107. We also learned that the costs of inaction are far greater than the costs of action, and if we go on like the past seven years after Paris, we will come out not even at 2.5 degree Celsius with disastrous consequences, especially for the poverty stricken people in Asia and the world over. Due to the high oil and gas prices exorbitant sums have been earned through the selling of fossil fuels. It is now crucial that we do not commit the lapses of the past, but that this money earned is utilized to create renewable energy, ensure energy efficiency and develop more cost-efficient transformative technologies.
108. Responding to the Holy Father's call for ecological conversion and climate action through his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, the Magna Carta of the Church relating to climate change, the FABC 50 General Conference made a strong plea that we put an end to our ecologically irresponsible and unsustainable habits and wasteful ways of life, and raise environmental awareness through the proactive promotion of ecologically-sound solid-liquid and gaseous-waste management, repudiate models of agriculture that depend on hazardous chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, and eschew industries that depend on coal and other fossil-fuel-generated energy. We vowed as well to consciously promote the generation of clean and sustainable energy throughout Asia, starting with our own institutions in our particular Churches. We will also work with our indigenous peoples throughout Asia, as well as with all forces of civil society and representatives of governments, to rehabilitate our forests, our watersheds, and our coral reefs, to conserve wildlife, sustain indigenous biodiversity, and restore the ecosystem and biome.
109. The move of some Conferences of bishops and individual dioceses to divest their institutions from investments in 'dirty energy', such as coal and fossil-fueled power, is one concrete move the Asian Church and society must emulate. We will build awareness in our region and strive to ensure that the Churches in the industrialized countries take the lead. Besides encouraging our Parishes and Religious Congregations to do so, the *Laudato Si* Movement and all Ecclesial bodies need to draw up action plans for their local situation, as well as plans on the level of the episcopal conferences and the FABC itself. In the light of '*Laudato Si*', we also resolved to redouble our efforts towards advocacy, together with the other Continental Federations of Bishops' Conferences, and for awareness building and action backed efforts so as to alleviate the agony of our people. We will furthermore open ourselves to ecumenical and interreligious initiatives related to climate concerns and action, as well as partnerships with civil society groups. We will

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/paris-agreement>. Accessed on 15 February, 2023.

strive to also cooperate with Government and Non-governmental agencies to implement the *Laudato Si* goals of the Church, the targets of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN.

**I. BRIDGE-BUILDERS AND BRIDGES, INSTRUMENTS OF DIALOGUE AND RECONCILIATION IN ASIA:**

110. Becoming “bridges and bridge-builders” is the image that best describes the mission of the Church of Asia and the Good News that we bring to our peoples and the rest of the world. It encapsulates the mission and purpose of Jesus, the one we proclaim as Christ and God-incarnate, who was born in Asia and raised as an Asian, and brought to birth a great spiritual tradition in this Continent. The Biblical narrative (cf. Gen 28:10-19) about Jacob’s dream of a stairway between heaven and earth sums up the story of salvation. It is the narrative about the God of Israel who takes the initiative to counteract the effects of sin, the human tendency to play god and to arrogantly cut off our connection to our Creator, our very source of life. It is sin that has brought about our alienation from God, from one another; from creation, and from our own selves.
111. We have since constantly “wrestled with God” like our ancestor Jacob, and have attempted to overcome sin assisted by God’s mercy. Despite our sinfulness, we are nevertheless called to serve as a “bridge over troubled waters”, as a stairway, through which “angels could ascend and descend” so that God could once again walk with humankind. In due time, Jacob’s dream would see its fulfillment in the very person of Jesus, the Son of God who came to serve precisely as the bridge himself (cf Jn 1:51). As St. Paul says, “For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross [through him], whether those on earth or those in heaven” (Col 1:19-20).
112. We proclaim Christ himself as the bridge, the one in whom we have found “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14: 6). Only in his name can the Church in Asia respond to the call of the Spirit to become a bridge-builder. Since the time the FABC was first convened, we have consistently proposed dialogue as one of the fundamental pastoral priorities of the Asian Church. Dialogue is the best expression of our call to be bridge-builders. We are called to expand our understanding of dialogue beyond the triple contexts of religions, cultures and the poor, to include also dialogue with youth and with women, dialogue with governments and civil society groups, with creation, with technocrats, entrepreneurs and scientists, the hungry, the homeless, the illiterate, the migrants and refugees, the indigenous people, victims of human trafficking, people with disabilities, undocumented people and rebels, as well as people struggling with addictions and other mental health issues.

113. It is within the context of dialogue that we highlighted the role of the Asian Church in peace-building and in the ministry of facilitating reconciliation. We have realized that in the promotion of peace, dialogue with the victims of violence is as essential as dialogue with the perpetrators of violence. Otherwise, there is no way we can arrest the vicious cycle of violence, where the abused become abusers and the victims become victimizers themselves.
114. In many parts of Asia, the Church navigates her way through many situations of conflicts and is called consequently to be an agent of reconciliation. We have much to learn from the wisdom of the four basic elements of the Church's sacrament of reconciliation: confession, contrition, penance and absolution. As these elements are effective in addressing our need to be personally reconciled with God, they are just as effective in addressing our personal, familial, communal and societal conflicts. How is reconciliation possible at all, if we do not even have the humility to admit our shortcomings and failures? If we do not find it in our hearts to express remorse for the harm and the hurt that we may have caused? If we do not resolve to make amends and to carry out concrete acts of reparation? How can we work for reconciliation if we do get people to see forgiveness as strength rather than as weakness?
115. To respond appropriately and effectively to the nine challenges that we have identified, formation becomes a crucial factor. Indeed, the challenges that we face and an appropriate response that needs to be made, would require the concerted response of all - Bishops, Priests, Religious and the Laity - to ensure that we strive to build a collaborative Church. Hence formation programmes of all, particularly of the laity, becomes a priority. Indeed, we cannot respond adequately to the challenges we face, unless we have the committed and coordinated involvement of all the baptized. It follows then that Bishops, Priests and Religious need to be trained to empower the laity to live their baptismal commitment, both in the Church and Society. In this manner will we have a 'renewed Church'. And in so doing, we will have a better Asia for all her peoples. This is the calling the Church in Asia senses as she eventually works for a better world.
116. The Spirit invites the Church in Asia to restore the ministerial priesthood's grounding on the common priesthood of the faithful. This could not have been expressed better than by St. Augustine who once said, "For you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian." There is no way we can meaningfully exercise our roles as ordained ministers for the community of the faithful if we cannot be fellow Christians with them, co-equals in dignity as fellow members of the body of Christ. The Second Vatican Council stated this fact very clearly. "They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they are witnesses and dispensers of a life other than earthly life. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men (cf. 1 Cor 10:33). Their ministry itself, by a special title, forbids that they be conformed to this world; (Cf. Jn 3:8) yet at the same time it requires that they live in this world among men." (*Presbyterorum Ordinis [PO]*,

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117. At the FABC 50 General Conference, we reiterated the resolve made several times in our past FABC Plenary Assemblies to initiate the necessary reform of both our initial and ongoing formation programs for the ordained ministries in a manner that promotes a more participatory Church and empowers the laity for roles of leadership. To be able to do this, we have to attend to the ongoing formation of our seminarians, priests, religious and bishops. We need to come up with programs and structures of formation that are contextualized in our specific cultures and worldviews in the different countries of Asia. The ordained must learn to share roles of leadership with the laity and consecrated persons through the variety of ministries and services that we are all called to assume within the Body of Christ, according to the example of Jesus who at the Last Supper reminded the disciples, “I am among you as one who serves.” (Lk 22:27).
118. The participation of lay people, including women, in their human, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual formation, the close personal mentoring by good role models, the guided immersion of the candidates for the ordained ministries in the life-situations of the poor, their exposure to the basic ecclesial and human communities and their involvement in interreligious, ecumenical and cultural dialogue will create the necessary atmosphere of formation that will raise “shepherds with the smell of the sheep”. We have also pointed out, specifically, the need to include the FABC’s teachings and traditions in their academic curriculum.



## Part Four: OFFERING OUR GIFTS

### Asian Culture and Spirituality

119. “On entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” (Mt 2:11)
120. In Matthew’s portrait of the Magi who allow themselves to be guided by a star to a lowly home in Bethlehem, we see an image that is typically Asian, visitors stopping by and reverently removing the sandals off their feet as we have been taught to do when entering our own homes. This is the Asian way of reminding ourselves that ‘family’ is about creating a sacred space together. And so we shake off the dust that clings to our feet and make acts of ablution that prepare us for the encounter with the Holy One in the inner recesses of our home. It is within the confines of a home that God makes a dwelling place and becomes present among us. We acknowledge that presence, most of all, in the fragile infant that needs all the care and affection of home and family.<sup>25</sup>
121. We find meaning in worshipping God in a little child who kenotically strips himself and embraces our humanity in order to raise its dignity into a true image of divinity. As Pope Francis observes: “Filled with yearning for the infinite, they scan the heavens, find themselves marvelling at the brilliance of a star, and experience the quest for the transcendent that inspires the progress of civilizations and the tireless seeking of the human heart.”<sup>26</sup> He is God who becomes human so that humanity can become divine. He has offered himself as a sacred gift (*sacerdos*) in order to enable us recognize our own lives as gifts and offer them to God, the source of all gifts for the salvation of the world.
122. Whether in the Church or in the world in which the Church in Asia lives, we deal with a diversity of views, religions and cultures, colors and flavors that coexist, in harmony and in tension as well!
123. Like the Magi, we Asians value reverent silence and seek solitude for contemplation in our temples, ashrams and sacred places. We use the same gesture of folding our hands and bowing our heads, not only in prayer and worship, but to show recognition, respect and offer peace, and while blessing the other, accepting an honour, expressing gratitude, initiating dialogue and friendship, begging forgiveness and bidding farewell. Instead of asking for a verbal blessing, some of us simply take an elder’s hand and press it to our

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<sup>25</sup> St Luke’s infancy narrative, often combined with elements derived from St. Matthew’s, has brought about our traditional portrayals of the Bethlehem scene. Instead of a regular house we find ourselves in a manger in a stable that becomes the navel of the world, a meeting point between heaven and earth, God and humankind, where celestial beings and human beings meet, where sheep and shepherds dwell, where paupers and magi prostrate themselves to worship the Divine Infant.

<sup>26</sup> Homily of Pope Francis at St Peter’s Basilica on Friday, 6 January 2023, on the Solemnity of Epiphany.

forehead.

124. It is significant to note that Jesus' kingship is revealed in the absolute poverty of the manger. Recognizing the salvific force of those living in poverty, and putting them at the center of the Church, the poor call us to ponder the mysterious wisdom of God, often revealed to us by their very lives.<sup>27</sup>
125. As Pope Francis observes in *Fratelli Tutti [FT]*, "we need to develop the awareness that nowadays we are either all saved together or no one is saved. Poverty, decadence and suffering in one part of the earth are a silent breeding ground for problems that will end up affecting the entire planet."<sup>28</sup> We believe that "each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable. This also means finding ways to include those on the peripheries of life. For they have another way of looking at things; they see aspects of reality that are invisible to the centers of power where weighty decisions are made."<sup>29</sup>
126. In our time, we may not read the 'signs of the times' in the manner of ancient astrologers i.e., by the position of the stars, yet we continue to read the 'signs' in nature, in the faces of people we encounter, and in the events that happen in our communities and the world around. Our Asian cultures keep us sensitive to the presence of the Divine, of God who takes the initiative to communicate with us, always inviting us to respond with faith and love and leading us towards fullness of life.
127. As *Dominus Iesus [DI]* observes, "Bearing in mind this article of faith [the incarnation of Jesus], theology today, in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God's salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation."<sup>30</sup>
128. Hence, for us Asians, looking is more than locating things with our eyes. It is a disposition of attentiveness that proceeds from a humble admission of our ignorance, a profound desire to know more, and the disposition of awe and amazement about the world. We, Asians, do not see life as a choice between opposites, between black or white, light or darkness. We would rather consciously keep dealing with the tension in a creative dynamic that hopefully will bear fruit within us, amongst us, and around us.
129. The Church in Asia has much to learn from the strong cultural inclination to nonviolence of our ancestors. We have developed self-defence into an art, where the goal is never to

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<sup>27</sup>G. Gregory Gay, C.M., *Superior General's Letter to Members of the Vincentian Family announcing the Vincentian Year of New Evangelization*, 18 July 2014.

<sup>28</sup>*Fratelli Tutti [FT]*, 137.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>30</sup>*Dominus Iesus [DI]*, 14.

harm, hurt or kill the offender but to preempt his moves, avoid his blows, and block his attacks until he perhaps falls under his own weight. The art of self-defence goes by many names in Asia but the principle is the same. When done collectively by a people that rises to oppose injustice in a consistently nonviolent way, it is given new names, such as *Satyagraha* by the Indians, one of the shining legacies of Mahatma Gandhi which led to the end of foreign rule in India, or “People Power”, by the Filipinos, which brought an end to dictatorship in the Philippines.

130. The choice to see in every human being a fellow sufferer opens us to the Asian path to peace and reconciliation, even as we learn to navigate our way through the many conflicts in our societies. We fight for justice in a nonviolent way, and always in a manner that is mindful of the spirit of healing that victims of injustice and violence need, in order to nip in the bud, the vicious cycle of violence. We believe in the option to forgive as strength, and not as weakness. Thus, the power of the cross of Christ as a sacrament of God’s unconditional love resonates deeply within the Asian soul. As Paul rightly states, in the ultimate analysis the greatest virtue is neither faith nor hope, but *agape*, unconditional love (cf 1 Cor 13:13). This is indeed good news that the Asian Church proclaims. It is the lotus that blooms quietly even in the murkiest waters.
131. Dialogue has therefore consistently remained at the top of the FABC’s pastoral priorities from the very beginning. Among its many forms, we have focused in particular on what we call the triple dialogue—with our neighbour religious traditions, with our neighbour cultures and with the poor.<sup>31</sup> In the light of synodality, Pope Francis has inspired us to widen the scope of dialogue beyond interpersonal communication, and to extend it to the synodal notion of accompaniment and conviviality. It never proceeds from a presumption of ill will because it is founded on the basic Christian principle that all human beings, having been created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27), are by nature good, even if that image has been damaged and obscured by sin.
132. When some of our local churches in Asia speak of the need of presenting Jesus with an “Asian face”, it is because they belong to parts of Asia that received the Christian faith in a European garb, through the evangelization efforts of European missionaries. This is even more understandable in countries where the spread of Christianity is connected to their colonial past. It is ironic that some Asians tend to forget that Christianity first took root on Asian soil, and that the Son of God first took flesh in a culture and setting that was Asian. At the very heart of the later Greco-Roman articulations of the faith in the Scriptures, is a culture that is strongly Semitic and Asian.
133. Also often forgotten is the fact that the first mission areas of early Christianity were in

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<sup>31</sup> Thanks to the testimony of our Korean bishops, we have resolved to start doing as they do in their dialogues—namely, to no longer speak of faiths and cultures outside Christianity as “other” other religions and cultures, but as neighbour-religions and cultures.

cities that belonged to what used to be known as “Asia Minor”, such as those mentioned by Luke’s Acts of the Apostles, i.e., the Pauline missionary journeys in places like Syria, Antioch, Phrygia, Galatia, Ephesus, Iconium, Derbe, Lystra and Pisidia, Troas and Miletus. (Acts 16). Even the book of Revelations begins with the visionary’s messages to the “seven Churches of Asia.” (Rev 1:3)

134. It is now also well attested historically that the Christian faith had in fact reached many Asian countries in its originally Asian form in the first millennium. But many circumstances, including persecution, had prevented the faith from taking root in Asia in the first millennium, except in some countries like India, as is evidenced by the oriental rites of the Syro-Malabar and Syro-Malankara Churches that trace their roots from the earliest missionary activities that reached India through the apostle St Thomas.
135. In most other parts of Asia, wherever Christian evangelization work was mediated by missionaries from Europe, such as in the former colonies of Spain, Portugal, France, and Great Britain, or from North or South America, such as those that had reached the Philippines through Acapulco, some western expressions of Christianity remain evident in religious art, architecture, and liturgical expressions. In such instances, there is understandably an effort to give an Asian expression to Christianity. Communion with Rome need not mean the “Romanization” of the Church in Asia.
136. Despite the Second Vatican Council’s manifest support for the inculturation of the liturgy in the local cultures and languages of Asia, as is well articulated in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, much is yet to be done with regard to the intercultural dialogue that should continue to give shape to both the expression and the practice of the Christian faith in various countries of Asia.
137. The shared aspirations of Asia, Africa and Latin America for more contextualized theologies, as well as for culture-sensitive praxis in the realms of pastoral action, liturgical expressions, popular religious devotions and indigenous spirituality are evident in all the documents coming from our continental federations of episcopal conferences. These aspirations are validated by the *sensus fidelium* that the ongoing Synod on Synodality has encouraged to take into account.

## **Part Five: OPENING NEW PATHWAYS**

### **Returning by Another Route**

138. “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.” (Mt 2:12)
139. Matthew narrates when the Magi came to Jerusalem, seeking information, they asked: “Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.” (Mt 2:2). They followed divine guidance - the star - and at the same time, human guidance: the help of others to find the One they were looking for. Having found him, they prostrated themselves before the Infant King, offering him their treasures. Then, they went back to their own country by another route (cf. Mt 2:9).
140. We, the Bishops of Asia did something similar when we came together for the FABC 50 General Conference. As we explained in Chapter Two, we sought divine guidance in prayer and contemplation and human guidance in the person of ‘experts’ in different fields. Together, we looked at different realities through a ‘virtual visit’ to each Asian country. We looked at the realities of Asia, and discerned what the Spirit is saying to us. We offered Jesus the treasures we discovered. Hence, we are now ready to return to our dioceses by “another route”, along new pathways that have been opened out before us by FABC 50. We could trace five pathways along which we wish to travel post the FABC 50 General Conference.

#### **A. FROM FOREIGN EXPRESSIONS TO AN INCULTURATED PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL**

141. Christ, the Son of God assumed a humanity that was Asian. The first missions were to the countries of ‘Asia Minor’. But the later Christianization of many Asian countries around the middle of the second millennium was tied to the European geopolitics, with the Spanish and Portuguese empires dividing the world among themselves. In many Asian countries, Christianity therefore came with an European garb. Often, the missionaries who were sent by their own religious orders rode on the royal patronage of the foreign powers.
142. There were, of course, missionaries who chose to take a different pathway. They followed a different way to prevent their mission from being co-opted by the ruling colonial authorities. Among the most notable examples of such missionaries of the 16th-17th centuries were the Italian Jesuit missionaries Alessandro Valignano and Matteo

Ricci who brought Christianity to Japan and China (respectively),<sup>32</sup> as well as Roberto de Nobili who followed the footsteps of Ricci in the Southern Indian setting.<sup>33</sup> One might say they lived ahead of their times and were ahead of the FABC's insistence on dialogue with Asian cultures and religions by almost four centuries!

143. The Italian Jesuits, Alessandro Valignano and Matteo Ricci, were unique in that they did not just insist on learning the local languages in order to communicate the faith. They also took the local cultures and faiths seriously. They came not just to teach but also to learn by immersing themselves in the worldviews of their host countries. They allowed the Gospel to take root on the soil of Asian culture. They realized "that the conquest model of evangelization would be absolutely fruitless in penetrating the ancient civilizations of Japan and China."<sup>34</sup> The same could have been said of Robert De Nobili and his collaborators in India who sought to root the Gospel in the culture of their host countries. They "rejected the idea of Christendom, viz. the assumption that there was an essential identity between Christianity and European society."<sup>35</sup>
144. This missionary approach of adapting to local customs and respecting the culture of the countries to be evangelized did actually enjoy the support of Rome at the start.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, when other religious orders started missionary work in China during the 17th century, they reacted strongly to the inculturation and adaptation models of evangelization adopted by Valignano and Ricci, igniting a heated controversy that eventually attracted the attention of Rome and led to the so-called "Chinese Rites Controversy". As a consequence, Pope Clement XI, in 1704, issued the Decree *Cum Deus Optimus*, condemning these Chinese ancestor rites and prohibiting Chinese Christians from practicing them. One of the most serious consequences of this Decree was that it caused the formerly sympathetic Emperor to swing to the opposite extreme of

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<sup>32</sup> Since these Italian Jesuits started off mainly from the Portuguese territory of Goa in India as their point of departure for Macau in China, it is possible that their contact with Indian Christians of the Oriental Rites had given them an idea about a different approach to evangelization. The Indian Christians of the Syro-Malabar Rite, for instance, are often noted for their St. Thomas Christian heritage that is uniquely inculturated with traditional Hindu customs, and has been described by scholars as "Hindu in culture, Christian in religion, and Oriental in worship." See Felix Wilfred, *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>33</sup> Another one was a Portuguese Jesuit who became a saint and martyr, St. John De Britto. He was apparently mentored by De Nobili and worked in the second half of the 17th century.

<sup>34</sup> R. Ellsberg, *All Saints*, Claretian Publications 2008, p.37-38.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> For example, in an instruction given to the Missions Étrangères de Paris in 1659, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith wrote: "Do not act with zeal, do not put forward any arguments to convince these peoples to change their rites, their customs or their usages, except if they are evidently contrary to the religion [i.e., Catholic Christianity] and morality. What would be more absurd than to bring France, Spain, or Italy or any other European country to the Chinese? Do not bring to them our countries, but instead bring to them the Faith, a Faith that does not reject or hurt the rites, nor the usages of any people, provided that these are not distasteful, but that instead keeps and protects them. Marcel Launay; Gérard Moussay, *Les Missions étrangères: Trois siècles et demi d'histoire et d'aventure en Asie*, Librairie Académique Perrin, 2008, 77-83.

imposing an imperial ban on Christianity.<sup>37</sup> The controversy over the Chinese Rites would last until the first half of the 20th century, when in 1939, Pius XII, through Propaganda Fide, , finally came up with the new decree *Plane Compertum*.<sup>38</sup>It is very encouraging to note how the recent Popes have consistently upheld a more positive regard for the inculturated and dialogical missionary approaches of Valignano and Ricci<sup>39</sup>. Pope Francis described Ricci as "a man of encounters, who went beyond being a foreigner and became a citizen of the world."<sup>40</sup>

145. At the FABC 50 General Conference, we felt the Church must go back to inculturated evangelization. Inculturation springs from the theology of incarnation and the paschal mystery. In Christ, God saves humankind by embracing our humanity and taking on a human embodiment or enfleshment, through his INCARNATION. St. Paul calls it the KENOSIS of God in Philippians 2:7-8, "He EMPTIED HIMSELF, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross." The underlying truth is: THE WORD BECAME FLESH. "He pitched his tent among us."
146. The mystery of the Incarnation continues with the Church. The Holy Spirit continues to take flesh in the communities of disciples who make up the Church, the BODY OF CHRIST, in the local churches or communities of disciples around the world. FAITH never comes in a vacuum. Evangelization always happens in the context of INTERCULTURALITY.
147. While we do understand that INCULTURATION is indeed an essential aspect of the dialogue between faith and culture, at the end of the day, dialogue is only possible among people who open themselves to an INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTER that can bring about new forms of inculturation. An intercultural encounter creates a kind of dynamic that becomes mutually beneficial for both dialogue partners. And this opens us to what we might call TRANSCULTURATION, namely, the discovery of shared values that allows us to transcend cultures, and even lead to the growth and purification of cultures.

## **B. FROM BASIC ECCLESIAL COMMUNITIES (BECs) TO BASIC HUMAN COMMUNITIES (BHCs)**

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<sup>37</sup> Dun Jen Li, *China in transition, 1517-1911*, Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1969, 22.

<sup>38</sup>This Decree practically vindicated the missiological approaches of Valignano and Ricci, for example over the ancestor rites. Cfr. George Minamiki, *The Chinese rites controversy: From its beginning to modern times*, Loyola University, 1985, 197.

<sup>39</sup> Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis paid rich tribute to Ricci.

<https://christiansforsocialaction.org/resource/heroes-of-the-faith-matteo-ricci;>

[https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20090506\\_ricci.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/pont-messages/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090506_ricci.html). Accessed on???

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/12/17/matteo-ricci-sainthood-cause-244370>. Accessed on???

148. At the FABC 50 General Conference in Bangkok, in the light of the aspiration for a more synodal Church that grows constantly in the threefold aspects of communion, participation and mission, we have resolved to reorient our BECs towards becoming catalysts of renewal in society. Indeed, Synodality goes beyond dialogue; it is not just about fostering communication. More essential than communication is accompaniment, journeying together, conviviality. Our Basic Ecclesial Communities will not be truly incarnating synodality as a lifestyle if our communities only stick to themselves and their own ‘churchy’ concerns. If they are to be true to their mission, i.e., to be like yeast in a mass of dough, then we must build the kind of Christian communities that will lead to Basic Human Communities.
149. We must also be more ready to let go of ministries that no longer serve their purpose and be disposed instead to identify the charisms generously bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit and create new ministries, not just the kind that would get the faithful to serve the Church, but more importantly, those that empower them, as members to serve all society. Our laity should use the best resources of our faith to help especially in managing conflicts at all levels, to engage proactively in the politics of the common good, especially in the work for peace and reconciliation based on justice and mutual respect for human dignity.

### **C. FROM DIALOGUE TO SYNODALITY**

150. Over the past five decades, the FABC has consistently pursued the path of a threefold DIALOGUE—with CULTURES, with RELIGIONS and with the POOR. The way of DIALOGUE is now finding its fuller expression in SYNODALITY. Synodality gives a fresh expression to Vatican II’s spirit of CONCILIARITY. We realize that what makes us comfortable with SYNODALITY is that it has given a better articulation to what we have relentlessly pursued in the FABC. Synodality is not possible without dialogue, even if synodality is more than dialogue. The listening and discerning that go with dialogue are basically the same elements that go with synodality. The objective is none other than to transcend the OTHERNESS of the dialogue partner so that s/he becomes a NEIGHBOUR and partner in communion. The purpose of dialogue is more eloquently spelt out by SYNODALITY which encompasses the aspiration for COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION and MISSION.
151. Throughout the FABC 50 General Conference, we endeavored to find new pathways as the Magi did. We were led to do what Peter did at the very first Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), when some apostles, in reaction to Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, wanted to restrict the mission to the Jewish converts. Assuming his leadership role, at the Council of Jerusalem, Peter stood between James and Paul and made the move to keep them



together (cf. Acts 15).

152. What has lit the way for us as we together discerned the emerging realities in Asia, was the new fire that Pope Francis has ignited in the Church through his reflections, especially those contained in such papal documents as *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), *Laudato Si* (On Care for Our Common Home), *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), *Fratelli Tutti* (On Fraternity and Social Friendship), as well as the recently published apostolic constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium* (On the Roman Curia and Its Service to the Church in the World). The FABC 50 General Conference afforded us time to seriously review these teachings. And we realized that these monumental teachings of the See of Peter have reaffirmed the Second Vatican Council and challenged the universal Church to “return to her sources” (*ressourcement*), while at the same time responding to the “signs of the times” (*aggiornamento*).
153. Since one of the most concrete fruits of Vatican II was the Synod of Bishops, we sense that Pope Francis has invited the Church to take ‘synodality’ seriously, expanding it in both directions—*ad intra* and *ad extra*. *Ad Intra*, within the Church, among our fellow baptized Catholics: the consecrated persons, the ordained, and the laity, especially women and young people. *Ad Extra* with the Church, outwardly directed to fellow Christians, fellow believers, fellow human beings, especially the poor, and all fellow creatures in our common home.

#### D. FROM PROCLAMATION TO STORY TELLING

154. It was the coming of God’s reign that Jesus proclaimed as Good News in first century Palestine. He invited people to discover the dignity and nobility of our humanity in our common aspiration for the realization of God’s reign in our midst. And so Jesus called attention to his message by using whatever medium was available then. While most of the Rabbis in his time stuck to the familiar medium of the Synagogue podium, Jesus proclaimed his message where people were: on a boat by the lakeshore, at table fellowships, on the road, on a hillside, under a tree; just anywhere! And most of the time, through simple, casual conversations.
155. His method is still the most effective one in this day and age: STORYTELLING. The world over people love good stories. There is always that ‘child’ within us that is drawn to listen when someone tells a story and begins with the usual, “Once upon a time...” or “In a far-away village by the sea...” or “One day there was father with two sons...” We recall that the theme of the Asian Mission Congress in Chiang Mai, in 2006 when we reflected on the face of Jesus in Asia, was “telling the Story of Jesus...”. We also determined a methodology of nurturing our Basic Ecclesial Communities by promoting “storytelling” as the most characteristic way of living the life of an Asian Church, one

that enhances true-to-life conversations that strengthen communion and build community.

**E. FROM THE BEATEN TRACK TO NEW PASTORAL PRIORITIES**

156. At FABC 50 General Conference, we Bishops made concrete decisions to move from the old beaten track to new priorities. We can spell out some of these:
157. We will work towards renewing our ministries in all our local churches in Asia towards mission by nurturing our communities in the dynamics of communion and participation. By doing so, we hope to reorient our faithful from self-referentiality to truly living out our calling to be the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world”, with no other motive than to share the joy of Christ’s Good News to a world that is longing to be renewed and recreated according to God’s design. We hope to be able to reorient our ministries from merely serving the Church to serving the world, as part of the mission of a servant Church.
158. We commit ourselves to transforming our parishes from maintenance to mission, by fostering Basic Ecclesial Communities that build Basic Human Communities. We will ensure that all our local churches are safe spaces for children and vulnerable adults, and that they are proactive in addressing and preventing any kind of abuse. We will ensure that they are also welcoming towards the poor, especially the migrants, itinerants and displaced peoples, and maintain an inclusive, gender-sensitive, and participatory atmosphere at all times.
159. We will consistently heed the call to pastoral and ecological conversion in the face of the present climate emergency in a manner that is truly sensitive to “both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” We will go out of our way to partner with agencies that are committed to reducing our carbon footprints by repudiating the use of dirty energy and promoting the generation of clean and renewable energy. In the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, we will unite ourselves with fellow Christians, fellow believers, and all fellow human beings in protecting the earth, our common home. We will consciously call on all our institutions to resolutely divest from investments in industries that are destructive of our environment.
160. We will serve as bridges and bridge-builders, and actively work for reconciliation in the midst of conflicts. We will consciously promote the well-being of all and consistently take part in building societies that are particularly mindful of the welfare of the most disadvantaged sectors in society, especially children and elderly people, people with disabilities, people with substance-use addictions, people struggling with mental health issues, people deprived of liberty, victims of human trafficking and extrajudicial killing, the indigenous peoples, survivors of wars and natural calamities. We resolve to live out the spirit of complementarity and harmony by listening to others in genuine dialogue.

161. In collaboration with our brothers and sisters of Christian traditions and neighbour religions, we will help promote a culture of peace and harmony, the economics of inclusive growth and development, holistic approaches to education and character formation, and the advancement of science and technology geared towards total human development. We commit ourselves to a proper and judicious use of digital technology that is particularly mindful of the welfare of young people. We will unite ourselves with governmental agencies, NGO's, and civic organizations on issues of human rights, poverty mitigation, human trafficking, care for the environment, and the right use of the social media.
162. We will go beyond interpersonal dialogue into multilogues that promote critical thinking and communal disciplines of discernment. We will uphold the freedom of all communities of faith to contribute to nation-building through the formation of the moral character of citizens. We will resist the ideology of secularism that excludes faith, religion and spirituality from the public discourse. We will work with all people of goodwill towards fostering a better and a more humane world, towards building a civilization of justice, peace and love. Our mission is to contribute to a better Asia, to work for a better world.

## CONCLUSION

163. To be all things...for the Asian people
164. In his letter to the Corinthians St Paul describes his understanding of being a disciple and missionary of Jesus Christ: "To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all... All this, I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it." (1 Cor. 9:22-23). It is in the light of these words that we humbly present this Final Document of FABC 50 General Conference which was convened in Ban Phu Waan, Bangkok, from October 12-30, 2022. We have laid this out only "for the sake of the gospel", which is God's Good News of love, peace and justice for our peoples in Asia and the whole of humanity.
165. The Church in Asia can only bring the liberating, empowering and revitalizing Good News of Jesus Christ if she learns to witness this love and to lay down her gifts as the Magi did before God, who became a child, one of us, in Jesus Christ. In his teaching and through his life, death and resurrection he reveals to us the love and mercy of God, the creator of all people and nature. He teaches us to respond to God's love, serving and loving our "neighbours", the hungry and thirsty, the sick, foreigners and migrants, the indigenous, oppressed and needy (cf Mk 12:29 ff and Mt 25:31ff), and journeying together in a synodal, inculturated church with intercultural relationships with our neighbours in religions, cultures and societies for a better Asia.

166. We entrust the Church in Asia and the Asian peoples to the intercession and protection of Mary, our Blessed Mother.

*Blessed Lady, Mother of Jesus  
Draw us near your Son's embrace.  
All that we have we offer to him,  
Just as all that he is he has offered to us as gift.  
May the seeds of his Gospel continue to take root on Asian soil.  
May he continue to take flesh in our Asian cultures.  
May we learn to empty ourselves as he did,  
That the world may see in us his Asian face  
And that in us, amongst us and through us  
his light may radiate to the rest of Asia!  
AMEN.*

167. We find it fitting to close this Document, with the beautiful lyrics of the song, entitled "The Song of Asia", composed for our FABC 50 General Conference. Inspired by Matthew's narrative of the Magi's journey to Bethlehem, it is a prayer written in poetry and cast in Asian music, that is youthful, hopeful and uplifting:

*THE SONG OF ASIA*

*Bless our God who walks with us*

*On our shores we see love coming, casting seeds on all our land  
To our night comes suddenly shining, a great sign to set us free  
And at dawn we see your sun, all our shadows now have a meaning  
We now see a sister, a brother, no more strangers in our land*

*God the Father, mercy is your name, o Lord Jesus redeem our pain  
Holy Spirit fill us with your fire of great love,  
Bless our God who walks with us  
Bless our God who walks with us*

*And the poor will proclaim your praises, our young your mission will embrace  
And creation's groaning will now be heard  
Holy peace to all will be served  
Holy peace to all will be served*

*You have woven us together, different shades now shining as one  
We are gifts to one another, salt and light to everyone  
And at dusk we see your star, pointing to a new direction  
We now serve every sister and brother, we are one family in our land*

*God the Father, mercy is your name, O Lord Jesus redeem our pain  
Holy Spirit fill us with your fire of great love,  
Bless our God who walks with us  
Bless our God who walks with us*

*And the poor will proclaim your praises, our young your mission will embrace  
And creation's groaning will now be heard  
Holy peace to all will be served  
Holy peace to all will be served*

*To the margins we will go,  
and behold the face of the Lord*

*And the poor will proclaim your praises,  
our young your mission will embrace  
And creation's groaning now will be heard  
Holy peace to all will be served  
Holy peace to all will be served*

*God the Father, mercy is your name, O Lord Jesus redeem our pain  
Holy Spirit fill us with your fire of great love,  
Bless our God who walks with us  
Bless our God who walks with us*

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