

**REAPING A HARVEST
FROM THE ASIAN SOIL:
TOWARDS AN ASIAN THEOLOGY**

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and the publication of the results. The actual conference then normally develops its own dynamism in workshops, plenary discussions and the work of the drafting committee. The various documents, separately taken, have their own strengths and weaknesses, given the particular circumstances of the specific conference. Looking at the material as a whole, we find many theological insights and practical suggestions, which taken by themselves may look fragmentary and not conclusive. But over the years, the various FABC-Papers, documents, books and other publications have grown into a corpus of theological statements which constitutes in itself some kind of cumulative Magisterium of the Asian churches. In it we can see the beginning of an exercise of a common Magisterium of Asian bishops in questions of major importance for the Asian churches. Among the challenges facing the Asian churches, the problem of inter-religious dialogue takes a central place. The bishops in Asia have understood that inter-religious dialogue constitutes a genuine task of the local churches in Asia which has to be dealt with not only in their own interest and for their own benefit, but as well for the good of the whole church. This could be seen during the Asian Synod, held in Rome in 1998, where it was acknowledged that the Asian local churches have made great contributions in the field of a theology of religions for the whole Church.

Inculturation In Asia: The Asian Approach of The Federation Of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)

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This essay examines the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)'s understanding of inculturation in Asia through an analysis of the key statements of its Plenary Assemblies, Offices, Bishops' Institutes, as well as relevant statements from FABC sponsored colloquia and consultations.¹ These texts will be examined synchronically as an organic and integrated whole, on the basis that taken together they give a clearer view of the FABC's approach to the foundations, nature and task of inculturation in Asia.

¹ All of the important documents of the FABC have been collected and published in a convenient four-volume collection: *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, eds. Gaudencio B. Rosales & C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. I*); *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 1997, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. II*); *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 3: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997-2001*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 2002, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. III*); and *For All The Peoples of Asia Volume 4: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 2002-2006*, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian, 2007, hereinafter referred to as *FAPA Vol. IV*). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the FABC are taken from this four volume collection.

1. Asian Bishops' Meeting (1970)

The FABC's earliest reference to the term "inculturation" is found in the Final Statement of the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting:

In the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia, there have been hesitations and mistakes in the past, but we are more than ever convinced that dialogue with our fellow Asians whose commitment to other faiths is increasingly important. We also urge on all a deep respect for the culture and traditions of our peoples, and express the hope that the catholicity of the Church, the root of our diversity in the oneness of faith, may serve to help Asians remain truly Asian, and yet become fully part of the modern world and the one human family (ABM, 24).²

Even at this early stage, the Asian Bishops had linked the term "inculturation" to interreligious dialogue and respect for Asian cultures and traditions as the expression of the catholicity of the Church. This statement on inculturation reflected the Asian Bishops' understanding and acknowledgment of Asia's multifaceted diversity and plurality, recognising "the face of Asia that is the continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colours" (ABM, 7).³

2. FABC I – Evangelization in Modern Day Asia (1974)

The Final Statement of the first FABC Plenary Assembly linked inculturation with the local Church in a dialogical encounter with the whole of Asian life realities:

The local Church is a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a Church in continuous, humble and loving

² FAPA Vol. I, 6.

³ FAPA Vol. I, 4.

dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its root deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry. Even its frailties and failings it assumes, so that they too may be healed. For so did God's Son assume the totality of our fallen human condition (save only for sin) so that He might make it truly His own, and redeem it in His paschal mystery (FABC I, 12).⁴

Specifically, this dialogical encounter takes the form of a *threefold dialogue*, which the same Assembly, in its briefer statement outlined as follows:

Inculturation, which renders the local Church truly present within the life of our people. *Dialogue with the great Asian religions*, which brings them into contact with the Gospel, so that the seed of the Word in them may come to full flower. *Service of the poor*, uniting with them in their struggle for a more human world." (FABC I, 20).⁵

This threefold dialogue is not to be seen apart from, let alone opposed to, the proclamation of the Gospel in Asia. Specifically, dialogue is the concrete mode of proclamation in the Asian context, which simultaneously makes the local Church present.

Moreover, this call for a threefold dialogue to be carried out as *equal partners* with the Asian cultures, religions and the poor was re-emphasised emphatically by both the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly⁶ and the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly.⁷ In this vein,

⁴ FAPA Vol. I, 14.

⁵ FAPA Vol. I, 15. See also FABC I, 25-28, in FAPA Vol. I, 16.

⁶ FABC V, 3.1.2, FAPA Vol. I, 280.

⁷ FABC VI, 3, in FAPA Vol. II, 2.

BIRA IV/1 also made it clear: "We perceive dialogue as a necessary condition and instrument for inculturation" (BIRA IV/1, 12).⁸ In other words, inculturation exists neither on its own nor for its own sake, but within a threefold mutually interactive matrix with interreligious dialogue and human liberation. At the same time, the Final Reflections of BISA I cautioned that this threefold dialogue ought to "be truly Asian, employing the procedures for arriving at consensus for action which our people have themselves elaborated, rather than alien techniques which may work well enough in other cultures, but not in our own" (BISA I, 9).⁹

Hence, the FABC has consistently viewed Asian cultures, religions and society not as separate, distinct entities, but rather as an integrated whole. Indeed, this integrated understanding is seen as a distinctive character of the Asian world. As BISA VII explained:

Culture, religion and society are interdependent, interacting and mutually transforming. In our Asian continent, which is the cradle for all the great world religions, culture and religion are integrated. Religion is the dynamic element of culture. Together they form the religio-cultural system, which interacts with the socioeconomic-political system of society, permeating every sphere of human life. Asian poverty is not a purely economic concept, neither is its religiosity merely cultural. Poverty and religiosity are interwoven in the Asian ethos, in such a way that at a certain point they seem to coalesce in order to procreate the specific character of Asia (BISA VII, 6).¹⁰

⁸ *FAPA Vol. I*, 249.

⁹ *FAPA Vol. I*, 200.

¹⁰ *FAPA Vol. I*, 230.

3. Colloquium on Ministries (1977) and the FABC Second Plenary Assembly (1978)

Three years later in 1977, the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (ACMC) acknowledged "the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia - Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others."¹¹ It cautioned that we should not see "our future mission in categories that belong to the past, when the West shaped the Churches' history. If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (ACMC, 14).¹² The bishops then added:

Asian Churches then must become truly Asian in all things. The principle of indigenization and inculturation is at the very root of their coming into their own. The ministry of Asian Churches, if it is to be authentic, must be relevant to Asian societies. This calls on the part of the Churches for originality, creativity and inventiveness, for boldness and courage (ACMC, 26).¹³

This was confirmed by the Second FABC Plenary Assembly (1978) which stated: the tasks which the carrying-out of the mission of the Church in Asia demands: commitment to the up-building of Asian communities in the life of the Gospel, to inculturation of Christian faith and life, to the endeavour for total human development and authentic liberation of peoples in justice and love, to inter-religious dialogue and to renewed missionary formation (FABC II, 3).¹⁴

4. International Congress on Mission (1979)

The FABC-sponsored International Congress on Mission stated in clear terms that "every local Church is and cannot be but

¹¹ *FAPA Vol. I*, 70.

¹² *FAPA Vol. I*, 70.

¹³ *FAPA Vol. I*, 72-73.

¹⁴ *FAPA Vol. I*, 29-30.

missionary. Every local Church is 'sent' by Christ and the Father to bring the Gospel to its surrounding milieu, and to bear it also into all the world. For every local Church this is a *primary task*" (ICM, 14, *emphasis in the original*).¹⁵ ICM devoted a second workshop ("CPW II") to inculturation in Asia. CPW II's Consensus Paper entitled "Local Asian Churches and the Task of Mission: Inculturation" brought out more specifically the link of inculturation with mission and summarized its conclusions on inculturation as follows:

Inculturation is not mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation but rather a creative embodiment of the Word in the local Church. This is the basic and fundamental process of inculturation (CPW II, 6).¹⁶ Inculturation is a dialogical encounter process understood in its deepest meaning that comes from the salvific movement of the Triune God, because evangelization itself is above all a dialogue between the Gospel message and the given reality (FABC I, 12). It is a dialogue conducted in humility and mutual support to seek together with our brothers and sisters the fullness of Christ (CPW II, 7).¹⁷

Inculturation is a discovery of the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in the given cultures and living traditions (*cf.* AG 11). The mutual exchange of their discoveries among the local Churches will lead to their enrichment as well as that of the universal Church (CPW II, 8).¹⁸ As the Incarnation of the Son has been fulfilled in the Paschal Mystery, the inculturation process also involves an experience of death and resurrection. The Church as the

¹⁵ FAPA Vol. I, 130.

¹⁶ FAPA Vol. I, 138.

¹⁷ FAPA Vol. I, 138-139.

¹⁸ FAPA Vol. I, 139.

messenger of the Gospel on the one hand, the given cultures and traditions of the people on the other - both must be purified, healed and transformed by the saving power of the Gospel (CPW II, 9).¹⁹

5. FABC Consultation on Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia (1983)

The Final Statement of the FABC Consultation on Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia (CCPM) defined inculturation in dialogical and existential terms, while at the same time condemning any understanding of inculturation as a tactic to "convert" people to Christianity:

Inculturation like dialogue is not a tactic to convert people to one's faith. It lies at the very core of Christian incarnational faith, life and witness. It is the existential way a Christian lives and witnesses to his faith in the concrete religious, social and cultural milieu in which providence places him. Genuine inculturation takes place when Christians live out as individuals and as a community their double heritage of faith and country. This can come about only through inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue (CCPM, 31).²⁰

In a predominantly Muslim cultural situation the Church tries to live, think, feel, speak and worship in ways which spring from faith and the religio-cultural heritage of the people. Only in such a community can those Muslims who come to visit or to join us feel at home. In our attempts at inculturation we should always keep in mind the legitimate sensibilities and religious feelings of the Muslims" (CCPM, 32).²¹

¹⁹ FAPA Vol. I, 139.

²⁰ FAPA Vol. I, 170.

²¹ FAPA Vol. I, 170-171.

6. FABC V: Journeying Together toward the Third Millennium (1990)

The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly advocated the “renewal of a sense of mission” by “a renewal of our motivations for mission” (FABC V, 3.2).²² It explained that proclamation of Jesus Christ in Asia means, first of all, “the witness of Christians to the values of the Kingdom of God, a proclamation through *Christ like-deeds*” (FABC V, 4.1).²³ It also means to “seek through dialogue to serve the cause of unity of the people of Asia... and thus to be a sacrament – a visible sign and instrument of unity and harmony” (FABC V, 4.2).²⁴ At the same time, the Fifth Plenary Assembly also acknowledged that “we shall *not* be *timid* when God opens the door for us *to proclaim explicitly* the Lord Jesus Christ as the Saviour and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence” (FABC V, 4.3).²⁵

7. FABC Theological Consultation (1991)

The FABC Theological Consultation which met in Hua Hin, Thailand in 1991 addressed the theological foundations of inculturation in Asia in its *Conclusions of the Theological Consultation* (CTC). This was done by giving a Christological and paschal orientation to inculturation:

“The same conformity of the Church to her Master is the decisive theological foundation for the inculturation of local Churches. The Son of God became man in Jesus in a particular place at a particular time of history, two thousand years ago in Palestine. Jesus was a Jew, deeply inserted in the culture of his people. The revelation he conveyed of the mystery of God as well as the way in which he

²² FAPA Vol. I, 280.

²³ FAPA Vol. I, 282.

²⁴ FAPA Vol. I, 282.

²⁵ FAPA Vol. I, 282.

accomplished his messianic and saving mission are steeped in the religious tradition of Israel, even while they fulfil it in an unforeseen manner. The mystery of the Incarnation and the paschal mystery are at once the foundation and the model for the deep insertion of local Churches in the surrounding cultures, in all aspects of their life, celebration, witness and mission” (CTC, 35).²⁶

8. FABC-OTC – Theses on the Local Church (TLC) (1991)

By far, the FABC’s most thorough exposition of inculturation is to be found in the 1991 document entitled *Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context of the FABC Office of Theological Concerns* (FABC-OTC).²⁷ To begin with, the relationship between inculturation and the local Church was stated in the following terms:

A local Church comes into existence and is built up through a deep and mutually enriching encounter between the Gospel and a people with its particular culture and tradition. In current theological and magisterial language, this is known as inculturation. Inculturation consists not only in the expression of the Gospel and the Christian faith through the cultural medium, but includes, as well, experiencing, understanding and appropriating them through the cultural resources of a people. As a result, the concrete shape of the local Church will be, on the one hand, conditioned by the culture, and on the other hand, the culture will be evangelized by the life and witness of the local Church (TLC, Thesis 5).

According to the FABC-OTC, inculturation is the “attempt to contextualize the life and mission of the Church by bringing

²⁶ FAPA Vol. I, 343.

²⁷ FABC Papers No. 60 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1991).

faith and culture into closer relationship” (TLC, 5.01). It is grounded in an *encounter* of “mutuality and reciprocity” between the Christian Gospel and Asian cultures (see TLC, 5.02, 5.04). The rationale for inculturation of local Churches engaging in a dialogue with cultures was explained by the FABC Office of Theological Concerns as follows:

Each culture not only provides us with a new approach to the human, but also opens up new avenues for the understanding of the Gospel and its riches. When the Gospel encounters the tradition, experience and culture of a people, its hitherto undiscovered virtualities will surface; riches and meanings as yet hidden will emerge into the light. That is why it is so important to reinterpret the Gospel through the cultural resources of every people; this reinterpretation truly enriches the Christian tradition (TLC, 5.07).

At the same time, the FABC-OTC warned against a simplistic understanding of culture in instrumentalizing terms, viz., culture as a convenient means of conveying the Gospel to others:

[I]t should be clear that culture, which has its basis in God’s creation of man and nature, should be respected in its inner purpose and goal and should not be viewed simply as a means for something else. Nor should individual elements of culture be isolated from the organic whole. Hence, inculturation cannot be a process in which particular elements of a culture are selected to serve as a garb for the Gospel. This will be a very external and superficial kind of inculturation since it does not respect the inner soul of the culture and its organic character (TLC, 5.06).

On the one hand, there is a necessity for the Christian Gospel to be “experienced and understood through the cultural resources of a people” because, “given the historicity of human existence in a determined context and tradition, it is inescapable that our perception of truth, understanding and experiencing of reality –

including the Gospel and faith – be bound up with a particular culture” (TLC, 5.08). On the other hand, there is also a need for the Christian Gospel in turn to effect a prophetic critique of the Asian cultures because “Asian cultures are ambiguous, in the sense that, along with many lofty ideals, visions and values, they contain also oppressive and anti-human elements, such as caste, which goes against the equality of all human beings, discrimination towards women, etc.” (TLC, 6.08). As far as the FABC-OTC was concerned, “it is not enough to say that culture conditions the shape of the local Church. In the same breath we should also add that the Gospel too acts on culture” (TLC, 5.12).

In addition, the FABC-OTC also made three significant contributions to the discussion on inculturation. First, it highlighted the challenges of multiculturalism and multiethnicism, and the need for inculturation to promote harmony:

[T]he encounter of the Gospel need not always be with one homogeneous culture. It could be with a diversity of ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups living in the same locality. In fact, in some countries in Asia we have in the same local Church the presence of various ethnic and cultural groups. This mosaic of various languages, cultures and peoples is a great enrichment for the local Church. The process of inculturation must take into account this concrete situation as well as the evolution and growth, which these diverse human groups undergo as part of a region or nation. In situations of conflict of ethnic or cultural identities, the local Church can serve as an agent of unity and reconciliation. It will foster the communion of various cultures and traditions and thereby shape its own specific identity as a local Church. *In multiracial, multi-linguistic and pluri-cultural situations the task of inculturation would involve also the promotion of harmony and communion* (TLC, 5.11, *emphasis added*).

Second, the Christological and paschal dimensions of inculturation was expanded by the FABC-OTC to include the role of the Spirit at Pentecost. The FABC-OTC pointed out that “[a] local Church realizes itself through a process of inculturation by following the dynamic of Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and Pentecost” (TLC, Thesis 10). The rationale for this threefold “dynamic” of inculturation was expressed as follows:

The miracle of the Pentecost (Acts 2) provides biblical grounding for the task of inculturation. Pentecost manifests the Church’s unity in the midst of diversity, which is Catholic fullness (*catholica unitas*). It grounds the authentic catholicity of the Church in the creative power of the Spirit. The Spirit alone enables the Church to be one amidst the diversity of peoples and races and amidst the multiplicity of human situations. For the mystery of the Church’s catholicity, as it is actualized in history, is ultimately rooted in the presence and action of the Spirit. Human efforts to create a universal communion without God ends up either in the monolithic uniformity of the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9) or a chaotic heterogeneity and individualism to which history attests. Only in the power of the Word and the Spirit can a world of true human communion be built up on our planet, bringing to fulfilment and fruition all the richness of human cultures and their realizations (TLC, 10.10).

Third, it also made a brief but highly significant reference to the need for liturgical inculturation:

A very important area of inculturation is the liturgy of the Christian community. Liturgy expresses the faith of the Church (*lex orandi lex credendi*). Liturgy must be the outcome of the faith-experience in a particular cultural environment. In turn, such liturgical experience should flower in a Christian life that is fully inculturated. Therefore, true liturgical inculturation of the Christian community

cannot be done from without and introduced through an external and artificial process; it should spontaneously spring forth from the life of the faith lived fully in the context of the culture and the life-realities of the people. Nevertheless, given the long estrangement of the liturgical life of Asian local Churches from their cultural traditions, at this stage of transition to a fully inculturated ecclesial life, certain liturgical experiments and models are very legitimate and necessary in order to facilitate the process of inculturation by the whole community. These experiments, however, should not reflect only the concerns of a few experts, but rather should be in dialogue with the whole Christian community (TLC, 8.03).

This was followed up with further recommendations in the section entitled “Pastoral Corollaries and Recommendations”:

We recommend more leeway be given in inculturating the liturgy. Responsible experiments in the liturgy with “control groups,” accompanied and fostered by due catechesis, should be encouraged so that new inculturated liturgical expressions may be discovered and developed. We urge the Episcopal Conferences eventually to approve and present for general use among their faithful some diverse inculturated liturgical expressions (TLC, Pastoral Corollaries, V, 1 & 2).

9. Christian Humanism: Illuminating with the Light of the Gospel the Mosaic of Asian Cultures (1999)

In 1999, the Pontifical Council for Culture collaborated with the FABC-OESC to organise a convention with the theme “Christian Humanism: Illuminating with the Light of the Gospel the Mosaic of Asian Cultures.” In its final statement, the delegates noted that “Christian living and inculturation are two important ways to bring about Christian Humanism among the peoples of Asia.” They went on to explain that “as the Church

comes into contact with other religions, faith is inculturated and culture evangelized” and concluded that inculturation “calls for a firm rootedness in the Christian faith, a sincere knowledge of the faith of the other for a new self-understanding, leading to enrichment to both through a respectful and loving encounter.”²⁸

10. FABC VII: A Renewed Church in Asia – A Mission of Love and Service (2000)

The Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly met in Samphan, Thailand from 3-12 Jan 2000. In its presentation of the vision of the renewal of the Church in Asia, the Plenary Assembly observed, among other things, that one pivotal initiative in the thirty-year history of the FABC towards renewing the Asian Church has been the “movement toward a ‘truly local Church,’ toward a Church ‘incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated’” (FABC VII, Part I, 2).²⁹ The Plenary Assembly then boldly affirmed: “This is the vision of a renewed Church that the FABC has developed over the past thirty years. It is still valid today.”³⁰

The Assembly sought to lay out an “integrated” approach to the Church’s mission of love and service in twenty-first century Asia. Within this integrated framework, it articulated the role and task of inculturation as follows:

For thirty years, as we have tried to reformulate our Christian identity in Asia, we have addressed different issues, one after another: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the Church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Today, after three decades, we no longer

²⁸ FAPA Vol III, 28.

²⁹ FAPA Vol. III, 3.

³⁰ FAPA Vol. III, 4.

speak of such distinct issues. We are addressing present needs that are massive and increasingly complex. *These issues are not* separate topics to be discussed, but aspects of an integrated approach to our *Mission of Love and Service. We need to feel and act “integrally.”* As we face the needs of the 21st century, we do so with Asian hearts, in solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, in union with all our Christian brothers and sisters, and by joining hands with all men and women of Asia of many different faiths. *Inculturation, dialogue, justice and the option for the poor are aspects of whatever we do.*³¹

The goal of this integrated approach is “the emergence of the Asian-ness of the Church in Asia,” which the Plenary Assembly explains as follows:

We are committed to *the emergence of the Asian-ness of the Church in Asia.* This means that *the Church has to be an embodiment of the Asian vision and values of life, especially interiority, harmony, a holistic and inclusive approach to every area of life.* We are also convinced that only by the “inner authority” of authentic lives founded on a deep spirituality will we become credible instruments of transformation. This is important, because our contacts with those of other religious traditions have to be at the level of depth, rather than just the level of ideas or action. We are aware that this Asian-ness, founded on solid values, is a special gift the world is awaiting. For the whole world is in need of a holistic paradigm for meeting the challenges of life. In this task, together with all Asians, the Church, a tiny minority in this vast continent, has a singular contribution to make, and this contribution is the task of the whole Church in Asia.³²

³¹ FAPA Vol. III, 8, *emphasis added.*

³² FAPA Vol. III, 8-9, *emphasis added.*

11. Consultation on “Evangelization and Inculturation” (2000)

Organized by the FABC’s Office of Evangelization and attended by representatives from the Bishops’ Conferences of Bangladesh, India, Korea, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand, the Consultation on “Evangelization and Inculturation” met from 1-4 March 2000 in Bangalore, India to explore the implications of the relationship between evangelization and inculturation. The Consultation started out by acknowledging the earlier shortcomings in past attempts at inculturation:

At times our efforts towards inculturation have remained too theoretical and failed to resonate with the people at the grass-roots level, sometimes these efforts have become one-sided (e.g. overstress on Sanskritization in India) or have ignored or discarded the traditions (Art, Music, Dance, Festivals, etc.) of the marginalized (Dalit, Tribal, Women, etc)... Inadequate catechesis, lack of effective national and regional bodies for animation, long-standing conservative attitudes within the Church have obstructed the progress of inculturation.³³

Moving on, the Consultation affirmed that evangelization, as “the realization of God’s design for a new humanity and a new heaven and a new earth,” cannot be fully realized unless Asian Christians open up “to the presence of the same plan operating in all religious and cultural traditions,”³⁴ because “it is only through sharing life in all its dimensions that we can become authentic instruments for the realization of God’s plan for the whole human family and the entire cosmos.”³⁵ Moreover, the Consultation also reminds us that inculturation requires a critical assessment of the positive and negative forces in all cultures when it states that “the awareness of the interaction and influence

³³ FAPA Vol. III, 216.

³⁴ FAPA Vol. III, 217.

³⁵ FAPA Vol. III, 218.

of cultures on each other draws attention to the enriching as well as dehumanizing factors that are operative in the values and meaning-systems of all cultures.”³⁶ It also points out that “the locus of inculturation is the local community which is on mission to make the reign of God present in its ‘locality’ through liberative and interreligious engagement for the welfare of all creation” and concludes:

An inculturated Christian community, fully integrated in the life of the local human community will give rise to a new way of being Church in Asia. It will be a community in relationship with people of other faiths; it will be a community that is fully evangelized so that it acts as leaven in society.³⁷

12. Second Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA) General Assembly II (2000)

The Second General Assembly of the AsIPA (Asian Integral Pastoral Approach), which met in Samphran, Thailand from 12-21 October 2000 discussed the significance and implications of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) as the locus of inculturation. AsIPA II affirmed the SCCs as the “seedbeds of inculturation, rebirthing and recreating the local Church” and went on to explain their significance as follows:

Through Small Christian Communities, Jesus the living Word, is being reborned, reinterpreted, incarnated as it were in the local context. Sharing of God’s Word, celebrating life’s joys and pains, reaching out and serving others, getting involved in life issues in one’s particular context, SCCs make Jesus alive and effective in our world (AsIPA II, 3.1).³⁸

³⁶ FAPA Vol. III, 218.

³⁷ FAPA Vol. III, 218.

³⁸ FAPA Vol. III, 110.

13. All-Asia Symposium on Evangelization in the Light of EA (2002)

The Statement of the Symposium on Evangelization in the Light of *Ecclesia in Asia* (SELEA)³⁹ organized by the FABC Office of Evangelization renewed *Ecclesia in Asia's* commitment to the call to proclaim Jesus, while also acknowledging the urgency of a broad yet profound inculturation of our faith, its proclamation and liturgical celebration. Inculturation, the Holy Father stated, is "the obligatory path for evangelizers in presenting the Christian faith and making it part of a people's cultural heritage" (EA 21). Consequently our understanding of God, the human person, and world, our expressions of prayer and worship, our way of being and living as persons of God - our spirituality - as well as the formation of evangelizers would have to undergo the process of inculturation in accord with the way we as Asians think, value things and persons, relate with others and celebrate God and life. Finally, we should not forget that being rooted and immersed in local culture must necessarily influence the lifestyles of believers (SELEA, 9).

The symposium delegates explained the need for inculturation in the following terms: Inculturation is a journey of complementarity and harmony, where faith and its cultural expressions remain truly Christian while becoming truly Asian. It is in fact for us a matter of rediscovering and re-identifying with the "Asian roots of Christianity" (EA 4). When we do this we also realize that a mutual exchange of gifts, a cross-cultural sharing between faith and culture takes place. The integration of the two provides a new dimension to the Church's catholicity or universality (SELEA, 10).

They went on to articulate the following recommendations for inculturation in Asia: We reiterate that inculturation is basically

³⁹ Mario Saturnino Dias, ed., *Evangelization in the Light of Ecclesia in Asia* Bangalore: Claretian Publications, 2003, 310-311.

a community process, involving "the entire People of God" (EA 21). However, theologians and experts in the social sciences do play a great deal in the *what* and *how* of the process. Like the Synod Fathers in 1998 and the Pope in 1999 (see EA 22) we, therefore, encourage our Asian experts and theologians to continue their explorations in the area of Liturgy and in the "delicate work of developing an inculturated theology, especially in the area of Christology... in faithfulness to the Scriptures and to the Church's Tradition, in sincere adherence to the Magisterium and with an awareness of pastoral realities" (*Loc. cit.*; cf. *Propositio 7*; see also RM 54) (SELEA, 12).

CONCLUSION

From the very beginning, the FABC has recognized that inculturation is more than merely an external adaptation of Christian beliefs, structures and practices to the Asian reality and way of living. In the panorama of religious and cultural diversity in Asia, which comprises a kaleidoscope of many of the world's ancient religious, philosophical and sociocultural traditions, inculturation is understood by the FABC as a *dialogical encounter* between the Gospel and the local Church on the one hand, and the Asian reality as an integrated whole of Asian cultures, religions, and the teeming masses of the Asian poor and marginalized on the other. Here, it is the case that not only the Asian realities may be enriched by Christianity, but also that Christianity in turn, may be enriched by the Asian socio-religious realities.

More significantly, the FABC's holistic understanding of inculturation reveals a preferential option for Asian cultures, spirituality and religiosity, in recognition of the fact that the Asian milieu is defined by both a colourful mosaic of cultures and multifaceted religiousness, as well as intense poverty and marginalization. Thus, the FABC's integrative approach to inculturation enables it to respond credibly and effectively to

the “signs of the times” – the multifaceted cultural, social, religious, political and economic dimensions of Asian societies. In this sense, an integrative approach to inculturation is the foundation for the “emergence of the Asian-ness of the Church in Asia,” as the Final Statement of FABC VII made it clear.

In short, the FABC views inculturation as more than simply a pastoral issue or methodology. Rather, inculturation is an existential quest of “immersing” the local Churches and faith communities in the diverse and pluralistic Asian milieu with its myriad cultures, religions and extreme poverty, sharing life in solidarity with the Asian peoples. The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly sums it up succinctly when it states:

Like Jesus, we “have to pitch our tents” in the midst of all humanity building a better world, but especially among the suffering and the poor, the marginalized and the downtrodden of Asia. In profound “solidarity with suffering humanity” and led by the Spirit of life, we need to immerse ourselves in Asia’s cultures of poverty and deprivation, from whose depths the aspirations for love and life are most poignant and compelling. Serving life demands communion with every woman and man seeking and struggling for life, in the way of Jesus’ solidarity with humanity (FABC VI, 14.2).⁴⁰

Clearly, the FABC has great hopes that the local Church may be able to be deeply inculturated in the Asian soil, to the extent that it becomes not simply a Church in Asia, but truly a Church of Asia (BIRA IV/12, 50).⁴¹

⁴⁰ *FAPA Vol. II*, 8.

⁴¹ *FAPA Vol. I*, 333.