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Theologizing at the Service of Life

The Contextual Theological Methodology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC)

Looking back at the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting in Manila which gave birth to the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)¹, it would certainly be an understatement to say that the FABC has made a highly significant impact on the development, orientation and growth of the spiritual and theological life of the Asian local churches during these past thirty years (1970-2000)². Writing in 1996, Stephen Bevans has observed that "the FABC could look back on twenty-five years of activity which had yielded an impressive body of documents that are incredibly

I am extremely grateful to Dr. Peter C. Phan, the Warren-Blanding Professor of Religion & Culture at the Catholic University of America for his constructive criticisms and valuable suggestions on this essay. All of the important documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) have been collected and published in a convenient two-volume collection: GAUDENCIO B. ROSALES & C.G. ARÉVALO, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992, hereinafter referred to in this essay as *FAPA Vol. I*) and FRANZ-JOSEF EILERS, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia. Volume 2: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, hereinafter referred to in this essay as *FAPA Vol. II*). Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the documents of the FABC are taken from this two-volume collection.

¹ The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) is a transnational body comprising 14 full members conferences: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos-Cambodia, Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei, Myanmar (Burma), Pakistan, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, as well as ten associate members: Hong Kong, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Macau, Mongolia, Nepal, Siberia, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The FABC convenes in Plenary Assembly, the highest body, with the participation of all presidents and delegates of member conferences once in every four years.

² A brief overview of the history, impact and achievements of the FABC may be found in C.G. ARÉVALO, "The Time of Heirs", in *FAPA Vol. I*, xv-xxii; and FELIX WILFRED, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact", in *FAPA Vol. I*, xxiii-xxx.

rich, amazingly visionary, and truly worth careful reading and study"³. These "impressive body of documents" are the result of seven Plenary Assemblies⁴, consultations, congresses and colloquia⁵, several Bishops' Institutes on Lay Apostolate (BILA), Missionary Apostolate (BIMA), Interreligious Affairs on the Theology of Dialogue (BIRA), Social Action (BISA) and Social Communication (BISCOM) and the Faith Encounters in Social Action (FEISA), as well as important position papers from the FABC Office of Theological Concerns (formerly known as the FABC Theological Advisory Commission). An Indian theologian, Felix Wilfred, has remarked that "the FABC has created horizontal communication between the bishops and the bishops' conferences; it has fostered a spirit of collegiality, communion and cooperation among them"⁶.

While much has been written on the development, thematic orientations and impact of the theological endeavours of the FABC⁷ and there-

³ STEPHEN BEVANS, "Inculturation of Theology in Asia (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970-1995)", *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996) 2.

⁴ To-date seven plenary assemblies have been held: FABC I: Evangelization in Modern Day Asia (Taipei, Taiwan, 1974), FABC II: Prayer — the Life of the Church in Asia (Calcutta, India, 1978), FABC III: The Church — A Community of Faith in Asia (Bangkok, Thailand, 1982), FABC IV: The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia (Tokyo, Japan, 1986), FABC V: Journeying Together Toward The Third Millennium (Bandung, Indonesia, 1990), FABC VI: Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life (Manila, Philippines, 1995), and FABC VII: A Renewed Church in Asia on a Mission of Love and Service (Sampran, Thailand, January 2000).

⁵ These include the Colloquia on Ministries in the Church (Hong Kong, 1977), Social Doctrine of the Church in the Context of Asia (Pattaya, 1992) and the Church in Asia in the 21st Century (Pattaya, 1997), an International Theological Colloquium entitled "Being Church in Asia: Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life" (Pattaya, 1994), an International Congress on Mission (Manila, 1979), and a Consultation on Christian Presence Among Muslims in Asia (Varanasi, 1983).

⁶ FELIX WILFRED, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact", in *FAPA Vol. I*, xxix.

⁷ Some of the more important works in English include the following: PETER C. PHAN, "Human Development and Evangelization (The first to the sixth plenary assembly of the federation of Asian bishops' conferences)", *Studia Missionalia* 47 (1998) 205-227; FELIX WILFRED, et al., "Document: What the Spirit Says to the Churches. A Vademecum on the Pastoral and Theological Orientations of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)", *Vidyajyoti* 62 (1998) 124-133; JACOB KAVUNKAL, "Local Church in the FABC Statements", *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997) 260-271; SEBASTIAN PAINADATH, "Theological Perspectives of FABC on Interreligious Dialogue", *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997) 272-288; STEPHEN BEVANS, "Inculturation of Theology in Asia (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970-1995)", *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996) 1-23; LUCAS THUMMA, "The Dynamics of Evangelization in Asia: A Shift In Methodology", *Indian Theological Studies* 33 (1996) 193-232 (Part I) and 309-355 (Part II); L. STANISLAUS, "The Responses of the Church to Human Development: An Overview from FABC Documents", *East Asian Pastoral Review* 31 (1994) 95-118; LADISLAV NEMET, "Inculturation in the FABC Documents", *East Asian Pastoral Review* 31 (1994) 77-94; FELIX WILFRED, "Images of Jesus Christ in the Asian Pastoral Context: An Interpretation of Documents from the Federation

fore needs no further recapitulation in this essay, one looks in vain for any in-depth discussion on the theological methodology of the FABC other than brief allusions and references within the discussion of other theological and doctrinal issues⁸. In fact, one thing which strikes anyone ploughing through the official documents of the FABC is the lack of any explicit or systematic presentation of a theological methodology⁹. This is not to say that the FABC lacks a coherent theological methodology, because in the first place theological methodology is usually not something which is systematically articulated *a priori*, i.e., at the very beginning before one embarks on any theological endeavour. On the one hand, from a theoretical perspective, one might want to argue that logically, method ought to precede content. On the other hand, from a practical and pragmatic perspective, one cannot but acknowledge the fact that theological endeavours are often carried out primarily based on particular issues, or in re-

of Asian Bishops' Conferences", *Concilium* (1993/2) 51-62; JACQUES DUPUIS, *FABC Focus on the Church's Evangelizing Mission in Asia Today*, FABC Papers no. 64 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1992), reprinted in *Vidyajyoti* 56 (1992) 449-468; Archbishop ANGELO FERNANDES, "Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities", *Vidyajyoti* 55 (1991) 545-560; FELIX WILFRED, "Fifth Plenary Assembly of FABC: An Interpretation of its Theological Orientation", *Vidyajyoti* 54 (1990) 583-592; and JULIO X. LABAYEN, "Dialogue of Life: The Experiences of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences", *Concilium* (1990/4) 126-130.

⁸ Perhaps the most helpful, albeit brief reference to the theological methodology of the FABC is the following observation by Stephen Bevans: "What is clearly evident as one reads the various FABC documents is the employment of a method that starts from experience, from lived, actual realities. In every document issued by a plenary assembly (with the exception of the third plenary assembly which begins with a theology of church) and in many documents that result from the various bishops' institutes, the starting point for reflection is Asian reality. Asia, say the documents, is a continent in transition, undergoing modernization, social change and secularization. These things threaten traditional values in Asia, and so the church needs to witness to the rich spiritual heritage that are the hallmarks of Asian religiosity in all its variety". In STEPHEN BEVANS, "Inculturation of Theology in Asia (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, 1970-1995)", *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996) 10.

⁹ The closest that the FABC came to a systematic articulation of a theological methodology is BISA VII's four-stage methodology of "pastoral cycle": (i) *Exposure-immersion* exposes parties to and immerses them in the concrete situation of the poor (BISA VII, art. 8, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 231); (ii) *Social analysis* focuses on the social, economic, political, cultural and religious systems in a particular context, and seeks to discern the signs of the times with respect to the needs and aspirations of the people within the context of their life experiences and the events of history which affect their lives, while at the same time being attentive to the danger of "deception either by ideology or self-interest and of incompleteness" (BISA VII, art. 9, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 231); (iii) *Contemplation* brings about "a heightened awareness that makes us discover God's presence and activity within social reality", leading to the discernment of the "mystery of God's preferential presence and activity among the poor" (BISA VII, art. 11, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 231); and (iv) *Pastoral planning*, which seeks to complete the first three stages by formulating practical and realistic policies, strategies, and plans of action in favor of integral human development (BISA VII, art. 12, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 232).

sponse to particular needs. Consequently, as is the case with the FABC, theological methodology is something which is presumed, articulated or even improvised along the way in an evolutionary manner as the theological content is being developed. Therefore, any reflection of the FABC's theological methodology calls for a process of standing back and reflecting on the accomplishments of the FABC's theologizing efforts.

Hence, this essay will distil and evaluate the underlying theological methodology of the FABC, as presented in its official documents during the past three decades of its existence¹⁰. It will analyze critically each aspect of the five-fold theological methodology¹¹ of the FABC, viz., (i) commitment and service to life, (ii) dialectical social analysis, (iii) critical introspective contemplation; (iv) triple dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor; and (v) quest for harmony in the task of theologizing in the Asian milieu¹². It will highlight certain foundational principles which undergird this theological methodology, as well as examine its principal elements, its resources, its interpretive matrix and its criteria of authenticity and credibility.

Foundational Principles of the Contextual Theological Methodology of the FABC

From the various official documents of the FABC, one sees the development of a new way of doing theology with Asian resources in multi-religious, multiethnic, multilingual and pluricultural Asia¹³, which may

¹⁰ These documents include the first six FABC Plenary Assembly Final Statements (1974-1995), as well as relevant documents from the Bishops' Institutes and the FABC Office of Theological Concerns. While all these documents have different theological authority, taken together they give a broad picture of the FABC's development and articulation of a contextual theological methodology which emerges from, and speaks to the Asian context.

¹¹ It must be pointed out that the FABC has also not attempted any systematic description of its theological methodology. This division of the FABC's theological methodology into five stages and the explication of each stage is the author's own division, classification and explication for the purposes of this essay.

¹² As a comparison, Clodovis Boff divides and classifies the theological methodology of Latin American liberation theology into three mediations: socio-analytic, hermeneutic and practical: see CLODOVIS BOFF, *Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987). While space does not permit a detailed and critical comparison between the theological methodologies of Latin American liberation theologians and the FABC, perhaps the social-analytic mediation may be indirectly correlated with (i) and (ii), the hermeneutic mediation is implicitly paralleled in (iii), and the practical mediation corresponds analogously to (iv) and (v).

¹³ Asia is home to some 50 nations and 3.5 billion people, numbering two-thirds of the world's population, of which some 97 million are Catholics. Geographically, Asia may

be described as the *contextualization*¹⁴ of the salvific message of the Christian Gospel in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*. Implicit in the FABC's contextual¹⁵ theological methodology is the acknowledgment and acceptance of a fundamental ontological, soteriological and existential relationship between the salvific message of the Christian Gospel and the Asian peoples with their rich religious and cultural traditions, as well as their daily socio-economic challenges. As a new way of doing theology in the Asian milieu, the contextual theological methodology of the FABC seeks to theologize with Asian resources in response to the many pressing challenges which arise out of the concrete specificity of the diverse and pluralistic Asian life experiences.

be divided into five regions: (i) West Asia (Middle East) which is predominantly Muslim with pockets of Judaism and Christianity, (ii) North Asia, i.e., the so-called Asian Siberia which is predominantly Muslim, (iii) South Asia comprising the Indian subcontinent which is predominantly Hindu and Buddhist, (iv) South East Asia comprising Indochina which is predominantly Buddhist/Taoist, as well as the Malay Archipelago which is predominantly Muslim, and (v) East Asia which comprises countries such as China, Japan and Korea, and which is predominantly Buddhist/Taoist.

¹⁴ The term "contextualization" was first coined by Shoki Coe of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches. The use of this term arose out of a growing concern of the need for the Christian Gospel to be made relevant to the needs and concerns of actual human living in the contemporary world. It also arose in reaction against the universalist-positivist approaches of traditional classicist theological methodologies. See SHOKI COE, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education", *Theological Education* 9 (Summer 1973) 233-43, reprinted as "Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform", in DOUGLAS J. ELWOOD, *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980) 48-55. The necessity for contextualization has been succinctly expressed by Douglas J. Hall in the following manner: "Contextuality in theology means that the *form* of faith's self-understanding is always determined by the historical configuration in which the community of belief finds itself. It is this world which insinuates the questions, the concerns, the frustrations and alternatives, the possibilities and impossibilities by which the *content* of the faith must be shaped and reshaped, and finally confessed". See DOUGLAS JOHN HALL, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1994) 84.

¹⁵ Stephen Bevans defines contextual theology as a "way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation". (See STEPHEN BEVANS, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 1). In contrast to classicist theologies which focus primarily on the two *loci theologici* of scripture and tradition, Bevans points out that contextual theology adds a third theological locus, viz., human experience. Accordingly, "theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression". (*Ibid.*, 2). For a further discussion on contextual theology, see ROBERT SCHREITER, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), STEPHEN B. BEVANS, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992) and PETER C. PHAN, "Cultural Diversity: A Blessing or a Curse for Theology and Spirituality?" *Louvain Studies* 19 (1994) 195-211.

In contrast to the traditional discursive orientation of classicist theological methodologies which are invariably metaphysical in orientation, have traditionally focused upon wisdom (*sapientia*) or rational knowledge (*scientia*), and are often detached from the daily living experiences of its target audience, the contextual theological methodology of the FABC is primarily pastoral in orientation, seeking both to be shaped by, as well as to shape daily life experiences in the multireligious, multiethnic, multilingual and pluricultural Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*. In other words, the starting point of the FABC's contextual theological methodology is not the universal precepts of *lex aeterna* and *lex naturalis*, or abstract metaphysical principles pertaining to God, Revelation and the Christian Gospel, or even conciliar, papal or doctrinal pronouncements, but rather the life experiences of the Asian peoples. Thus, the contextual theological methodology of the FABC explicitly rejects an approach of "doing theology in Asia" in favour of an approach of "doing Asian theology," i.e., a theological methodology which takes the Asian milieu as the starting point for theologizing¹⁶.

The attractiveness of such a theological methodology is clear for six reasons. First, it recognizes the fact that socio-cultural contexts play a very important role in all attempts to live and flesh out the soteriological message of the Christian Gospel within new socio-cultural contexts. The need for contextualization may be seen in a simple example: historical time periods such as "Late Antiquity", "Middle Ages", "Renaissance", and "Enlightenment" are certainly important and significant time periods in the history of Christianity in Europe, but these periods have no meaning whatsoever for local Christian communities in Asia, e.g., the Dalit Catholics of India, the Iban Catholics of Borneo or the East Timorese Catholics. Their socio-religious contexts have to be determined by events in their time frame and geographical location, history and tradition, culture and language, ethnicity and identity, as well as socio-political and economic systems. Second, because it takes a highly nuanced view of socio-cultural developments (rather than a simplistic positivistic view), it does not preclude the possibility of the need for the Christian Gospel to be counter-cultural or transcultural in particular socio-cultural contexts. Third, it is dynamic because it perceives socio-cultural realities

¹⁶ For a further discussion on the distinction between "theology in Asia" and "Asian theology", see JAMES A. VEITCH, "Is An Asian Theology Possible?" in EMERITO P. NACPIL and DOUGLAS J. ELWOOD, eds., *The Human and the Holy: Asian Perspectives in Christian Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1980) 216.

not as closed and static systems, but as constantly in a state of flux as a result of increasing globalization. Fourth, it also insists that the Christian Gospel cannot be presented as otherworldly, ignoring the suffering, pain and injustice within particular socio-cultural contexts. Fifth, hermeneutical issues within any theological methodology are necessarily context dependent and local, inasmuch as the context determines the characterization of the issues, their presuppositions and the methodological approaches for resolving them. Sixth, the hermeneutics of contextualization seeks to relate and integrate the Christian Gospel and the diverse mosaic of Asian contexts with each other, because the Christian Gospel is not manifested merely in abstract, philosophical and intellectual ideas and concepts, but rather, in a community's socio-cultural thought forms and processes, viz., it is always a contextualized Christian Gospel¹⁷.

The Five-fold Contextual Theological Methodology of the FABC First Stage: Commitment and Service to Life

The starting point of the FABC's contextual theological methodology is a *commitment and service to life* which goes beyond a mere personal, existential, ontological or metaphysical quest for a systematic way of theologizing. This commitment and service to life arises out of a holistic view of life together with a traditional sense of reverence which sees God's Spirit as active in the diverse and pluralistic Asian milieu. In this regard, one notes that the Final Statement of the 1994 FABC International Theological Colloquium began simply with the following statement: "Life. Vibrant life pulsating in the fecundity of Asia¹⁸". Such a statement aptly describes the panorama of religious and cultural diversity in Asia, which comprises a rich and colourful mosaic of many of the world's ancient religious, philosophical and socio-cultural traditions. As the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly points out:

We Asians are searching not simply for the meaning of life but for life itself. We are striving and struggling for life because it is a task and a chal-

¹⁷ As Jerome Crowe explained succinctly: "The gospel can only be experienced and communicated in the form of a particular human culture. There is no such thing as a 'pure' gospel, untainted by incorporation into a human culture, because the gospel is not a system of divine truths existing somewhere outside this world and untouched by human feeling, language, and customs but God's self-involvement in the concrete circumstances of a people's history and culture". See JEROME CROWE, *From Jerusalem to Antioch: The Gospel Across Cultures* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 153-4.

¹⁸ *Being Church in Asia*, art. 1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 217).

lence. But life is a gift too, a mystery, because our efforts to achieve it are far too short of the ultimate value of life. We speak of life as a *becoming* — a growing into, a journeying to life and to the source of life (FABC VI, art. 9, *emphasis in the original text*)¹⁹.

Ours is a vision of *holistic life*... We envision a life *with integrity and dignity, a life of compassion* for the multitudes, especially for the poor and needy. It is a life of *solidarity* with every form of life and of *sensitive care* for the earth... At the heart of our vision of life is the Asian *reverential sense of mystery and of the sacred*, a spirituality that regards life as sacred and discovers the Transcendent and its gifts even in mundane affairs, in tragedy or victory, in brokenness or wholeness. This deep interiority draws people to experience *harmony and inner peace* and infuses ethics into all of creation (FABC VI, art. 10, *emphasis in the original text*)²⁰.

In fact, the theme of the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly was "Christian Discipleship in Asia Today: Service to Life"²¹ and the first two sections of its Final Statement are entitled "25 Years of FABC Commitment to Life"²² and "A Vision of Life Amid Asian Realities"²³. In particular, the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly uses the imagery of Jesus' foot-washing to underlie its call for commitment and service to life: "We join Jesus in serving life by washing the feet of our neighbors" (FABC VI, art. 14.3)²⁴. In a similar vein, the First FABC International Theological Colloquium describes the relationship between theology and service to life as follows:

We see the work of theology in Asia as a *service to life*. It has to reflect systematically on themes that are important to the common journey of life with other peoples in Asia, to the life of Christians and their churches in Asia, and to the work of the Asian episcopal conferences. To do this service in a way that is pastorally relevant and fruitful to the life, spirituality and mission of the disciple-community, theology has to start from below, from the underside of history, from the perspective of those who struggle for life, love, justice and freedom. The life-long experiences of living the Christian faith by the various churches in their Asian context are the starting points. *Theologizing thus becomes more than faith seeking under-*

¹⁹ FAPA Vol. II, 5.

²⁰ *Ibid.* For the most recent in-depth discussion of this point, see FABC Office of Theological Concerns, *The Spirit and Work in Asia Today*, FABC Papers No. 71 (Hong Kong: FABC, 1998).

²¹ FAPA Vol. II, 1-12.

²² FAPA Vol. II, 2-3.

²³ FAPA Vol. II, 3-5.

²⁴ FAPA Vol. II, 9.

standing, but faith fostering life and love, justice and freedom. It is in this way that theology becomes a dynamic process giving meaning to and facilitating the Asian journey to life. It becomes part of the process of becoming and being Church in Asia (*Being Church in Asia*, arts. 48-50, *emphasis added*)²⁵.

Thus, one sees clearly that this commitment and service to life reveals the communal character of the FABC's contextual theological methodology, viz., theologizing is rooted in the local community's experiences of life, rather than in the intellectual arena of the academy. Theology is not something which is being carried out *for* the benefit of the community, or even *about* the community, but rather, *together with* the community and in solidarity with their life experiences. As the Indian theologian, Felix Wilfred explains: "what we are with the people is more important than what we do for them"²⁶. In particular, such a call for a personal commitment to, and active solidarity with the life experiences of the Asian peoples entails more than mere sympathy, empathy or occasional encounters of theologians, bishops and other pastoral leaders with the daily lives of the Asian peoples, especially the poor and marginalized. Rather, it calls for their personal commitment, deep immersion and experiential participation in the lives of these peoples, not as outsiders who drop by to visit, but as insiders who are bound in solidarity with them. According to the First FABC Plenary Assembly, this "dialogue of life ... demands working, not for them merely (in a paternalistic sense), but *with* them, to learn from them (for we have much to learn from them!) their real needs and aspirations" (FABC I, art 20)²⁷.

Such a commitment and service to life may be understood from a twofold perspective, viz., an explicit *epistemological* perspective which allows one to better understand the Asian peoples and their life experiences, but more importantly, an underlying *theological* perspective which recognizes the presence and workings of God in the Asian peoples' *Sitz-im-Leben*. This underlying theological perspective is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery, both of which undergird God's solidarity with humans, especially the poor and marginalized, as well as God's participation in the experiences of pain

²⁵ FAPA Vol. II, 226.

²⁶ FELIX WILFRED, "What the Spirit Says to the Churches (Rev 2:7). A Vademecum on the Pastoral and Theological Orientations of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)", *Vidyajyoti* 62 (1998)132.

²⁷ FAPA Vol. I, 15.

and suffering in their daily lives. Hence, one could say that the experiences of daily living is the privileged locus where God is to be found and encountered, because God has made a deliberate choice to be identified with the Asian peoples, especially the poor and marginalized. Accordingly, the FABC is of the view that Jesus Christ is to be encountered in Asia within the specificity of the Asian peoples' life realities, and especially in the midst of the poor and marginalized:

The Christian community, it seems to us, must live in *companionship*, as true *partners* with all Asians as they pray, work, struggle and suffer for a better human life, and as they search for the meaning of human life and progress. Because the human person created in Christ, redeemed by Christ and united by Christ to himself is the way for the Church, the Church must walk along with him/her in human solidarity (FABC V, art. 6.2)²⁸.

The Lord of History is at work in that world of poverty. Seeing the Lord in the poor, making sense out of his action among them, discerning the direction of his action among them — this we felt deeply within us was the more specific challenge we have to face (BISA VII, art. 20)²⁹.

Hence, in emphasizing the need for commitment and service to life, the FABC perceives the myriad of rich and deeply profound experiences of life as *resources* for doing theology in the Asian milieu. In particular, these life experiences are not merely starting points for theologizing, but also the underlying foundation, framework and continuous referent for doing theology in the Asian milieu. It goes without saying that these life experiences are not abstract, metaphysical, intellectual or theoretical constructs, but rather, they are made manifest in social, political, economic and religious dimensions. The effects and implications of these dimensions will be critically explored in the second and third stages of the FABC's contextual theological methodology, viz., dialectical social analysis and critical introspective contemplation.

Second Stage: Dialectical Social Analysis

The second stage of the FABC's contextual theological methodology, viz., the stage of *dialectical social analysis*, seeks to identify and analyze the structural causes of, as well as focus attention on the impact of

socio-economic, political and cultural forces on the suffering and marginalization of the Asian peoples. This analysis is carried out through reading the "signs of the times"³⁰ and confronting "the dark realities in the heart of Asia"³¹, a continent which is perceived in dialectical terms as "an arena of conflict and division, the world's exploited market place, the continent of suffering humanity," while at the same time, a "cradle of culture, birthplace of great religions, a continent awakening to new and gigantic responsibilities"³². It also aims to overcome the destructive forces in the life experiences of the Asian peoples and free them from structures which have created new forms of bondage, so as to foster human dignity, freedom and a more fully human life, as well as to create a more genuine communion among the multireligious, multiethnic, multilingual and pluri-cultural Asian communities³³. Therefore, it is not surprising that dialectical social analysis is a ubiquitous aspect of the FABC's contextual theological methodology, such that the Indian theologian, Felix Wilfred is able to comment thus: "Every document of the Federation reflects a vibrant sensitivity of the bishops to the realities of Asia with which they are confronted. There is practically no document which does not start from, or at least include, some analysis of the Asian context"³⁴.

At the same time, it must be pointed out that every effort at dialectical social analysis by the FABC is often prefaced by its admission of a double marginalization of both the Christian Gospel and the Asian local churches. First, the Christian Gospel with its message of the Kingdom of God has had a marginal impact in the lives of many Asians. Christians account for only approximately 2% of the total population of Asia, with a disproportionate number of Christians living in the Philippines³⁵. Sec-

³⁰ As the FABC Office of Theological Concerns explains: "Asia is an immense and extremely complex continent which at present is characterised by rapid social change, by overwhelming poverty in most countries and economic growth in others, as well as by cultural and religious pluralism. The whole process of modernisation is experienced in many Asian societies as a crisis for the individual in the search for his own identity and for society at large. The "signs of the times" point to the necessity for change". (*Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.1, in FABC Papers No. 81).

³¹ FABC IV, art. 3.0.1, in FAPA Vol. I, 179.

³² FABC IV, art. 1.1, in FAPA Vol. I, 178.

³³ See art. 6 of FABC I, in FAPA Vol. I, 13.

³⁴ FELIX WILFRED, "Images of Jesus Christ in the Asian Pastoral Context: An Interpretation of Documents from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences", *Concilium* (1993/2) 51.

³⁵ As the FABC Office of Theological Concerns puts it bluntly: "The Christian communities in this part of the world, taken together, do not make up more than 2% of the entire population of Asia. Except for the Philippines, of whose 60 million population 83% are Catholic and 89% Christian, Christians are minorities in every Asian nation. The

²⁸ FAPA Vol. I, 283.

²⁹ FAPA Vol. I, 233.

ond, the FABC has also acknowledged that the local church in many parts of Asia has been perceived as a *corpus alienum* planted by colonial-era missionaries in the local soil³⁶. Such an acknowledgment is also the acknowledgment of the existence of pervasive Eurocentric ecclesial structures which may affect significantly the efforts to carry out a meaningful dialectical social analysis³⁷.

It is within such an acknowledgement of a double marginalization of the Christian Gospel and the Asian local churches that the dialectical social analysis of the FABC has identified the following socio-economic and cultural-political challenges facing the Asian *Sitz-im-Leben*: poverty and the inequitable distribution of wealth³⁸; economic dependency³⁹; unjust trade and aid conditions⁴⁰; unfair economic policies which discriminates against labour⁴¹; landlessness and the destruction of the rural economy and small family farms⁴²; unemployment and underemployment⁴³;

Church in Asia is truly a little flock, *pusillus grex*, an infinitesimal minority in an ocean of people who profess other religious faiths or belong to other religious traditions". *Theses on the Local Church*, FABC Papers No. 60 (Hong Kong, FABC, 1991) 4.

³⁶ This point has been expressed by the FABC in very blunt terms as follows: "Prejudices are very much alive in Asia. As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering colonial image survives in its traditional ecclesiastical structures and economic dependence on the west. This gives ground for suspicion. The Church is even sometimes seen as an obstacle or threat to national integration and to religious and cultural identity... The Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structures, in its worship, in its western-trained leadership and in its theology" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 13, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 337).

³⁷ In this respect, the 1991 FABC Theological Consultation points out that "[t]he Church remains foreign in its lifestyle, in its institutional structures, in its worship, in its western-trained leadership and in its theology. Christian rituals often remain formal, neither spontaneous nor particularly Asian. There is a gap between leaders and ordinary believers in the Church, *a fortiori* with members of other faiths. The Church has created a powerful priestly caste with little lay participation. Seminary formation often alienates the seminarian from the people. Biblical, systematic and historical theology as taught are often unpastoral and unAsian" (*Theological Consultation*, art. 13, in *FAPA Vol. I*, 337).

³⁸ *ABM*, art. 5 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 4); *FABC V*, art. 2.2.1 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 276-7); *BISA V*, art. 9 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 218); *Theological Consultation*, arts. 2 & 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 335-6); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 235).

³⁹ *BISA VI*, art. 5 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 224); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, arts. 2.2.1 & 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁴⁰ *BISA VI*, art. 5 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 224)

⁴¹ *FABC IV*, art. 3.7.3 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 187-88); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁴² *FABC IV*, art. 3.7.3 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 187-88); *BISA VI*, art. 5 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 224); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 18 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 220); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 234); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁴³ *FABC IV*, art. 3.7.3 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 187-88); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 233).

poor working conditions and inadequate wages⁴⁴; dehumanizing plight of slum dwellers⁴⁵; landless peasants⁴⁶ and migrant workers⁴⁷; unjust exploitation of workers⁴⁸; child labour⁴⁹; marginalization of indigenous people⁵⁰; unjust exploitation and discrimination of women⁵¹; exploitative tourism (including sex-tourism)⁵²; prostitution⁵³; disintegration of traditional Asian societal⁵⁴ and family structures⁵⁵; drug abuse⁵⁶; unbridled consumerism⁵⁷; ethnic minority discrimination⁵⁸; caste discrimina-

⁴⁴ *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336).

⁴⁵ *BISA I*, art. 15 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 201).

⁴⁶ *FABC IV*, art. 3.7.3 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 187-88); and *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336).

⁴⁷ *FABC IV*, art. 3.7.3 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 187-88); *FABC VI*, art. 7 & 15.5 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 3-4, 11); *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.2 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 150); *BIRA V/3*, art. 2(b) (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 156); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 235); *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81); and *Journeying Together in Faith with the Filipino Migrant Workers in Asia* (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 47-56).

⁴⁸ *FABC V*, art. 6.4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 284); *FABC VI*, art. 7 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 3-4); *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 149-50); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁴⁹ *FABC V*, arts. 2.2.1 & 2.2.2 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 277); *FABC VI*, art. 7 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 3-4); *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 149-50); *BIRA V/3*, art. 2(b) (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 156); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 10 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 219); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 233); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁵⁰ *FABC VI*, art. 7 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 3-4).

⁵¹ *FABC III*, art. 9.8 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 58); *FABC IV*, art. 3.3.1 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 182-3); *FABC V*, arts. 2.2.1 and 6.4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 277, 284); *FABC VI*, arts. 7 & 15.2 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 3-4, 11); *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 150); *BIRA V/3*, art. 2(b) (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 156); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 336); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 10 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 219); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 235); *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81); *Final Statement of BILA on Women: Role of Women in Church and Society Toward 2000* (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 91-96); and the *Report of the Consultation on Women: Realities and Experiences of Women in Asia* (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 113-118).

⁵² *FABC III*, art. 9.8 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 58); *FABC IV*, art. 3.3.1 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 182-3); *BISA VI*, art. 5 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 224); *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.3 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 150); and *Final Statement of the Asian Consultation on Tourism: The Promotion of Human Tourism* (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 65-73).

⁵³ *FABC V*, art. 2.2.1 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 277); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 233).

⁵⁴ *FABC I*, art. 4 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 13).

⁵⁵ *FABC VI*, art. 15.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 10-11); *Being Church in Asia*, arts. 10 & 20 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 219, 220-221); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 233, 235).

⁵⁶ *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 233).

⁵⁷ *BISA VI*, art. 5 (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 224); *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.2 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 150); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 21 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 221) and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 234).

⁵⁸ *BIRA V/2*, art. 2.2 (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 150).

tion⁵⁹; religious strife⁶⁰; racial strife and communalism⁶¹; human rights violations⁶²; war, increased militarization and nuclear proliferation⁶³; terrorism⁶⁴; violence arising from religious fundamentalism and fanaticism⁶⁵; the plight of refugees⁶⁶; unrestrained exploitation of natural resources⁶⁷; pollution, environmental and ecological damage⁶⁸; as well as social and cultural dislocation⁶⁹.

In turn, these challenges have been attributed to structural factors such as: secularization⁷⁰; modernization⁷¹; urbanization⁷²; illiteracy⁷³; untrammelled market forces of globalization⁷⁴; non-suitability of Western *laissez faire* capitalism⁷⁵; economic exploitation by huge business con-

glomerates and transnational corporations⁷⁶; export oriented industries which neglect the needs of the poor⁷⁷; corruption which is engendered by a "get-rich-quickly" mentality⁷⁸; oppressive socio-political structures such as feudalism⁷⁹, colonialism⁸⁰, neocolonialism⁸¹, communism⁸²; and dictatorial and totalitarian governments⁸³.

Third Stage: Critical Introspective Contemplation

Although dialectical social analysis is extremely useful in identifying the social, political, economic and technological factors which have enormous impact on the daily lives of the Asian peoples, nevertheless the FABC recognizes that dialectical social analysis *per se* runs the risk of a distortive emphasis on the materialist aspects of salvation if it does not lead to the third stage of its contextual theological methodology, viz., *critical introspective contemplation*. Critical introspective contemplation begins with an acknowledgment that Asia is "a continent of ancient and diverse cultures, religions, histories and traditions, a region like Joseph's coat of many colors" (ABM, art. 7)⁸⁴. It also recognizes that the great religious traditions of Asia are:

significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design and salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer (FABC I, art. 14)⁸⁵.

⁵⁹ BIRA III, art. 11 (in FAPA Vol. I, 121).

⁶⁰ BIRA V/2, art. 2.4 (in FAPA Vol. II, 150); BIRA V/3, art. 2(c) (in FAPA Vol. II, 156); *Theological Consultation*, art. 7 (in FAPA Vol. I, 336); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 13 (in FAPA Vol. II, 220); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.2 (in FAPA Vol. II, 237).

⁶¹ BIRA V/3, art. 2(d) (in FAPA Vol. II, 156); *Theological Consultation*, art. 7 (in FAPA Vol. I, 336); and *Spirit at work in Asia Today*, art. 2.3.3 (FABC Papers 81).

⁶² FABC V, art. 2.2.3 & 6.4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 277, 284); and BIRA V/2, art. 2.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 149-50).

⁶³ FABC V, art. 2.2.1 (in FAPA Vol. I, 276; FABC VI, art. 7 (in FAPA Vol. II, 3-4); and BISA VI, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 224); BIRA V/2, art. 2.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 149-50); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.4 (in FAPA Vol. II, 239).

⁶⁴ FABC VI, art. 7 (in FAPA Vol. II, 3-4).

⁶⁵ FABC VI, art. 7 (in FAPA Vol. II, 3-4); BISA VI, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 224); *Spirit at work in Asia Today*, art. 2.3.3 (FABC Papers 81).

⁶⁶ FABC V, art. 6.4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 284); FABC VI, arts. 7 & 15.5 (in FAPA Vol. II, 3-4, 11); BISA V, art. 9 (in FAPA Vol. I, 218); and BIRA V/2, art. 2.2 (in FAPA Vol. II, 150).

⁶⁷ BIRA V/2, art. 2.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 149); BIRA V/3, art. 2(a) (in FAPA Vol. II, 156); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.3 (in FAPA Vol. II, 238).

⁶⁸ FABC V, art. 2.2.1, (FAPA Vol. I, 276); FABC VI, arts. 7 & 15.4 (in FAPA Vol. II, 3-4, 11); BIRA V/2, art. 2.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 149-50); BIRA V/3, art. 2(a) (in FAPA Vol. II, 156); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (FAPA Vol. I, 336); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 19 (in FAPA Vol. II, 220); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.3 (in FAPA Vol. II, 238); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁶⁹ *Being Church in Asia*, art. 14 (in FAPA Vol. II, 219); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 234).

⁷⁰ FABC I, art. 4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 13); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 234).

⁷¹ FABC I, art. 4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 13); FABC V, art. 2.1.6 (in FAPA Vol. I, 276); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 234).

⁷² *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 234).

⁷³ *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (FAPA Vol. I, 336).

⁷⁴ FABC VI, art. 7 (in FAPA Vol. II, 3-4); BISA VI, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 224); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 9 (in FAPA Vol. II, 218-9); *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 234); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 and 2.3.1 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁷⁵ FABC IV, art. 3.8.2 (in FAPA Vol. I, 189); BISA IV, art. 6 (in FAPA Vol. I, 212); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁷⁶ FABC IV, art. 3.7.3 (in FAPA Vol. I, 187-88); BISA VI, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 224); *Being Church in Asia*, art. 13 (in FAPA Vol. II, 219); and *Spirit At Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.5 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁷⁷ BISA IV, art. 4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 212); BISA VI, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 224); *Theological Consultation*, art. 4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 336); and *Spirit at work in Asia Today*, art. 2.3.1 (FABC Papers 81).

⁷⁸ BISA VI, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 224); FABC V, art. 2.2.1 (in FAPA Vol. I, 277); and *Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony*, art. 1.1.1 (in FAPA Vol. II, 234).

⁷⁹ BISA IV, art. 4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 212).

⁸⁰ BISA IV, art. 4 (in FAPA Vol. I, 212).

⁸¹ *Being Church in Asia*, art. 9 (in FAPA Vol. II, 219).

⁸² BISA IV, art. 13, (in FAPA Vol. I, 213); and BISA V, art. 9 (FAPA Vol. I, 218).

⁸³ BISA V, art. 9 (in FAPA Vol. I, 218); *Theological Consultation*, art. 5 (in FAPA Vol. I, 336); and *Spirit at Work in Asia Today*, art. 2.2.4 (FABC Paper No. 81).

⁸⁴ FAPA Vol. I, 4. See also art. 7 of FABC II (in FAPA Vol. I, 30).

⁸⁵ FAPA Vol. I, 14.

In other words, these religious traditions are still very much alive and influential because they are able to nourish the present spiritual needs of millions of Asians. More importantly, these religious traditions are also very much intertwined within the socio-political and cultural lives of these Asian peoples, leading one to the inescapable conclusion that the religiosity of the Asian peoples is not primarily individualistic in orientation, but rather, it has significant social, public and ecological consequences. As such, critical introspective contemplation is also a quest for a holistic understanding of the interaction between these religious traditions with the cultural and socio-economic dimensions of Asian societies:

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 socio-economic-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*, art. 6)⁸⁶.

In this regard, one could also view critical introspective contemplation as *complementing* dialectical social analysis in a relational model of mutual complementarity, balancing: (i) dialectical social analysis' active struggle against economic exploitation and oppression with critical introspective contemplation's innate spirit of compassion and interiority; (ii) dialectical social analysis' goal of satisfying unmet human needs with critical introspective contemplation's asceticism and renunciation; and (iii) the formal, logical and structural aspects of dialectical social analysis with the intuitive and mystical aspects of prayer and contemplation⁸⁷.

In a nutshell, critical introspective contemplation seeks to present a holistic vision of life in Asia which integrates the liberative action of dialectical social analysis within the wider religiousness and spirituality of the Asian peoples, because this mosaic of rich and deeply profound reli-

⁸⁶ *FAPA Vol. I*, 230.

⁸⁷ Discussions, as well as direct and indirect allusions to such mutual complementarity are interwoven throughout the Final Statements of *FABC II* (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 29-39), *FABC V* (in *FAPA Vol. I*, 274-89) and *FABC VI* (in *FAPA Vol. II*, 1-12).

gious sentiments play a very significant role in shaping the life experiences of the Asian peoples⁸⁸. This holistic perspective of critical introspective contemplation reveals the fact that the contextual theological methodology of the FABC is more than just a preferential option for the poor and marginalized: it is also a preferential option for Asian cultures, spirituality and religiosity, in recognition of the fact that the Asian milieu is defined by both its varying degrees of economic poverty as well as its multifaceted religiousness. It seeks to draw upon the spirit of compassion and interiority, asceticism and renunciation, as well as intuition and mysticism of the religiosity of the Asian peoples to undergird the pursuit of integral human liberation. Unless liberative action emerges out of, and is nourished by introspective contemplation, it cannot be truly liberative and transform the daily lives of the Asian peoples.

Fourth Stage: Triple Dialogue With Asian Cultures, Religions and the Poor

The FABC has consistently argued that a commitment and service to life, together with dialectical social analysis and critical introspective contemplation demands a suitable theological response which enables local communities to affirm and build upon the "life-serving" realities in the Asian milieu while at the same time transforming the "death-dealing" realities in the Asian milieu. In this respect, the FABC has chosen the quintessential Asian trait of *dialogue* as a "manifestation of lived Christianity"⁸⁹ to form the basis of such theological response. Dialogue is defined as "a process of talking and listening, of giving and receiving, of searching and studying, for the deepening and enriching of one another's faith and understanding" (*BIRA I*, art. 11)⁹⁰. The stated objectives of dialogue are "to promote mutual understanding and harmony" (*BIRA I*, art. 15)⁹¹, "to promote whatever leads to unity, love, truth, justice and peace" (*BIRA I*, art. 16)⁹² and "sharing the riches of our spiritual heritages" (*BIRA*

⁸⁸ In a similar vein, the Sri Lankan theologian, Aloysius Pieris strongly argues that dialectical social analysis is inadequate in and of itself, because by focusing exclusively on the political and economic dimensions of poverty, it fails to appreciate the spiritual and religious dimensions of voluntary poverty and renunciation. See ALOYSIUS PIERIS, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) 80-81.

⁸⁹ Archbishop ANGELO FERNANDES, "Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities", *Vidyajyoti* 55 (1991) 548.

⁹⁰ *FAPA Vol. I*, 111.

⁹¹ *FAPA Vol. I*, 111.

⁹² *FAPA Vol. I*, 111.

I, art. 17)⁹³. This deliberate choice reveals its sensitivity to the non-confrontational Asian mindset and worldview, where "truth does not impose itself, but rather *attracts* everyone and everything to itself by its beauty, splendour and fascination"⁹⁴.

As early as 1970, the Asian Bishops' Meeting passed a resolution to engage in "an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development" (ABM, resolution 12)⁹⁵. Four years later, the First FABC Plenary Assembly developed this nascent perspective on dialogue into a call for a *triple dialogue* which comprises mutually respectful and critical encounters and interactions between the local Asian churches and the rich, diverse and pluralistic myriad of Asian cultures, Asian religious traditions and the immense multitude of the poor (FABC I, arts. 12 & 19)⁹⁶. This call for a triple dialogue has been reemphasized emphatically by both the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly⁹⁷ and the Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly⁹⁸. Such a dialogue is to be carried out as *equal partners* with the Asian cultures, religions and the poor:

We enter as equal partners into the dialogue in a mutuality of sharing and enrichment contributing to mutual growth. It excludes any sense of competition. Rather, it centers on each other's values. All the partners in dialogue participate in their own culture, history and time. Hence, dialogue brings the partners more deeply into their own cultures and bears the characteristics of inculturation (BIRA I, art. 12)⁹⁹.

⁹³ FAPA Vol. I, 111.

⁹⁴ FELIX WILFRED, "Inculturation As A Hermeneutical Question", *Vidyajyoti* 52 (1988) 427.

⁹⁵ FAPA Vol. I, 9.

⁹⁶ FAPA Vol. I, 14-15.

⁹⁷ The Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly equated the triple dialogue with the Christian mission imperative: "mission includes: being with the people, responding to their needs, with sensitiveness to the presence of God in cultures and other religious traditions, and witnessing to the values of God's Kingdom through presence, solidarity, sharing and word. *Mission will mean a dialogue with Asian's poor, with its local cultures, and with other religious traditions*" (FABC V, art. 3.1.2, *emphasis added*, in FAPA Vol. I, 280).

⁹⁸ The Sixth FABC Plenary Assembly reiterated that "the Church in Asia must foster a three-fold dialogue: with the many different faiths of Asia, with the cultures of Asia, and with the poor multitudes of Asia". See FABC VI, art. 3 (in FAPA Vol. II, 2).

⁹⁹ FAPA Vol. I, 111.

The cornerstone of the triple dialogue is the understanding that peoples of other cultures and faiths in Asia were not to be regarded as "objects of Christian mission" but rather as "partners in the Asian community, where there must be mutual witness"¹⁰⁰. Such an understanding of dialogue expresses succinctly the FABC's profound understanding of dialogue as a "dialogue of life" which "involves a genuine experience and understanding" and which "demands working, not for them merely (in a paternalistic sense), but *with* them, to learn from them (for we have much to learn from them!) their real needs and aspirations, as they are enabled to identify and articulate these, and to strive for their fulfilment." (FABC I, art. 20)¹⁰¹. In this context, dialogue is perceived by the FABC as leading to "*receptive pluralism*, that is, the many ways of responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit must be continually in conversation with one another. A relationship of dynamic tension may open the way for mutual information, inspiration, support and correction" (BIRA IV/3, art. 16)¹⁰².

The primary implication for the FABC's contextual methodology is clear: through the triple dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor and marginalized, not only the Asian socio-religious realities may be enriched by the FABC's theologizing efforts, in turn the FABC's theologizing efforts too may be enriched by the Asian socio-religious realities. Otherwise, the FABC's theologizing efforts run the risk of ending up as a one-way monologue which lays it open to the charge of instrumentalization, i.e., appropriating the soteriological elements in Asian socio-religious realities for use as *ancillae theologiae* without respecting their integrity within their Asian socio-religious matrix. At the same time, the Final Reflections of BISA I cautions that this triple 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, art. 9)¹⁰³.

In addition, the fourth stage of triple dialogue also anchors the FABC's contextual theological methodology securely to its ecclesial moorings, viz., dialogue is "intrinsic to the very life of the church" (BIRA

¹⁰⁰ Archbishop ANGELO FERNANDES, "Dialogue in the Context of Asian Realities", *Vidyajyoti* 55 (1991) 548.

¹⁰¹ FAPA Vol. I, 15.

¹⁰² FAPA Vol. I, 261.

¹⁰³ FAPA Vol. I, 200.

I, art. 9)¹⁰⁴ and "dialogue itself contributes to a deeper rooting of the Christian faith and to the unfolding of the local church" (BIRA I, art. 13)¹⁰⁵. In this regard, dialogue also "brings to the local churches in Asia which are in danger of being ghettos an openness to and integration into the mainstream of their cultures. Christians grow in genuine love for their neighbors of other faiths, and the latter learn to love their Christian neighbors" (International Congress on Mission, Consensus Paper III, art. 4b)¹⁰⁶. More significantly, it is the overarching vision of the FABC that "the Church is called to be a community of dialogue. This dialogical model is in fact a new way of being Church" (BIRA IV/12, art. 48)¹⁰⁷. As a community of dialogue, the local church "is never centered on itself but on the coming true of God's dream for the world. It seeks not to exclude others but to be truly catholic in its concerns, in its appreciation of the gifts of others, and in its readiness to work with others for a world at once more human and more divine" (BIRA IV/12, art. 49)¹⁰⁸. This methodological approach results in an ecclesiology which views the local church as a community which is called to service to the Asian peoples¹⁰⁹.

Dialogue with Asian Cultures

The rationale for local churches engaging in a dialogue with cultures¹¹⁰ has been 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

¹⁰⁴ FAPA Vol. I, 111.

¹⁰⁵ FAPA Vol. I, 111.

¹⁰⁶ FAPA Vol. I, 142.

¹⁰⁷ FAPA Vol. I, 332.

¹⁰⁸ FAPA Vol. I, 333.

¹⁰⁹ In this regard, the Fifth FABC Plenary Assembly states that "It is the local churches and communities which can discern and work (in dialogue with each other and with other persons of goodwill) the way the Gospel is best proclaimed, the Church set up, the values of God's Kingdom realized in their own place and time. In fact, it is by responding to and serving the needs of the peoples of Asia that the different Christian communities become truly local Churches" (FABC V, art. 3.3.1, in FAPA Vol. I, 281).

¹¹⁰ For comprehensive discussions on how the FABC understands and develops the concept of culture in its official documents, see LADISLAV NEMET, "Inculturation in the FABC Documents", *East Asian Pastoral Review* 31(1994) 87-88 and Archbishop THOMAS MENAMPARAMBIL, "The Challenge of Cultures", in *Evangelization Among the Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, FABC Papers No. 80. (Hong Kong: FABC, 1997).

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 tradition¹¹¹.

By living within their particular context according to the "sense of faith aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth" (LG 12), the faithful will learn to express their faith not only in fidelity to the Apostolic Tradition, but also in response to their cultural situations. This response is the responsibility of the whole community which discerns God's Word and Spirit in its culture and history¹¹².

This dialogical encounter "facilitates the incarnation of the Good News in the various cultures creating new ways of life, action, worship and reflection, so as to help the growth of the local Churches and to realize the catholicity and fullness of the mystery of Christ" (BIRA III, art. 5)¹¹³.

Dialogue with Asian Religions

The importance of engaging in a dialogue with the Asian religions was first recognized by the 1970 Asian Bishops' Meeting: "We pledge ourselves to an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development" (ABM, resolution 12)¹¹⁴. It has been suggested that interreligious dialogue is not merely an activity of Asian Christians, but rather "it enters into the very definition of what it is to be a Christian in Asia. To be Christian is not an abstraction, but a contextual reality"¹¹⁵. Hence, the First FABC Plenary Assembly has emphasized that it is only through dialogue that the Asian local churches are able to give due reverence and honour to these Asian religions and acknowledge that God has drawn these religions to Godself (FABC I, art. 15)¹¹⁶. In giving a privileged place to the religious traditions of the Asian peoples, the First FABC Plenary Assembly pointed out that:

¹¹¹ *Theses on the Local Church*, 20-21.

¹¹² *Theses on the Local Church*, 28.

¹¹³ FAPA Vol. I, 120.

¹¹⁴ FAPA Vol. I, 9.

¹¹⁵ FELIX WILFRED, "Inculturation As A Hermeneutical Question", *Vidyajyoti* 52 (1988) 428.

¹¹⁶ FAPA Vol. I, 14.