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CCA-FABC Relations: Challenges to the Catholic Side

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A recent book published by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), entitled *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia*,² appropriately captures the diverse ecumenical initiatives which the CCA has been involved in, either directly or indirectly. One article in particular, written by Maryknoll Sister Virginia Fabella, relates its ecumenical engagement with the Roman Catholic Church.³ While Fabella's article is in the main descriptive and faithfully recounts the many activities and efforts of the Catholic Church as a participant in the Asian ecumenical movement, there is the other side of the coin which is little known. I am referring to the hesitations, setbacks and challenges which go along with the task of ecumenism. This is something seldom talked about since reports which come out of ecumenical events do not normally include the "dark" side of the picture.

This paper attempts to shed some light on this in an attempt to put into perspective the advances (or lack thereof) of ecumenism in Asia. The paper limits itself to the experience from the side of the Roman Catholic Church. In particular, the paper will explore the ecumenical cooperation between the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) and the CCA. It will thus be an examination of what has been happening between two pan-Asian level organizations, namely, the Asian Church of the Roman Catholics and that of the Protestants. Also, instead of focusing on the ecumenical activities as such the paper will speak to some basic principles and dynamics commonly found in ecumenical relations in Asia. This is done with the hope that it can somehow help us to understand some of the same or similar dynamics which can be observed in ecumenical relations at the national and local levels.

The CCA and FABC

For the benefit of those who may not be too familiar with the structures of the two organizations, let me begin with an overview of how they came into being and, especially,

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² Ninan Koshy, ed., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia* (Hong Kong: CCA, 2004).

³ Virginia Fabella, "The Roman Catholic Church in the Asian Ecumenical Movement" in *Ibid.*

how they see their role and function. First, let us look at what the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences is all about. The idea of the FABC was mooted in 1970 at the first gathering of the Asian Catholic bishops on the occasion of the visit of Pope Paul VI to the Philippines. This was followed up upon and the FABC was subsequently inaugurated in 1972 and had its first plenary assembly in 1974. In keeping with the original intent the FABC takes on the function of a voluntary and fraternal organization which brings together all the Episcopal Conferences of the various countries in Asia. At present this is represented by about 25 countries, including countries from Central Asia. In other words, practically every Asian country with a Catholic population and an organized structure such as the Episcopal conference is represented in FABC. Its latest member is East Timor, admitted after it achieved its independence.⁴

Note that only full-fledged Episcopal conferences can join the FABC; countries with not enough bishops to form an Episcopal conference participate as associate members. No other entity or organization is allowed to join the FABC. That is why the FABC is a federation of the bishops' conferences; it is by no means a federation of the Catholic churches in Asia. It does not, therefore, claim to be a representative structure for the entire church, the people of God in Asia. The FABC is but a structure for the bishops to meet and thus speaks on behalf of only the bishops' conferences and not so much for the entire Catholic Church in Asia.

Of course, in so far as the bishops are the spokespersons for their own local dioceses and Episcopal conferences, then the FABC does in fact speak on behalf of all the Catholic churches in Asia. But the point of importance is that only the bishops are represented in the FABC. No non-bishop is a member nor can they join or speak on behalf of the FABC. In other words, the priests, the religious and the laity have absolutely no rights as such over what happens to the FABC; it is not their organization. They merely serve in an assisting capacity although they have hitherto been actually the ones providing the organizational assistance to ensure the smooth functioning of the FABC. They serve in one of the nine Offices which assist the FABC General Secretariat. Each Office is under the charge of a commission of several bishops who are in turn answerable to the FABC Central Committee which is comprised of the presidents of all the Episcopal Conferences.

As for the Christian Conference of Asia it is an institution whose membership is not in any way limited to the National Council of Churches (NCC) but also includes individual member churches. At present the CCA is represented by more than 100 such members and they come from close to 20 countries, including Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, but excluding the countries of Central Asia. The idea of the CCA, or more accurately its predecessor, the East Asia Christian Conference, was mooted at Parapat, Indonesia, in 1957 and the institution eventually came into being in the year 1959. It exists primarily to serve as an organ or forum for ecumenical relationships and to facilitate active cooperation among its members and across churches and national-level Christian organizations within and also without Asia. Not only is its membership diverse, CCA representatives are also very diverse, ranging from bishops and other ordained clergy to lay theologians, students and youth. These representatives are the ones elected into the various committees and offices at

⁴ For a comprehensive exposition of the FABC see Edmund Chia, "Thirty Years of FABC: History, Foundation, Context and Theology," in *FABC Papers No. 106* (Hong Kong: FABC, 2003).

the General Assemblies. A full-time staff is employed to help implement the programs and decisions of the committees.

Challenges to Ecumenism

As can be seen from the description of the two organizations there are indeed some similarities between them but at the same time they are not exactly parallel systems and so the differences are as important. First, if FABC is a structure where only the Episcopal Conferences are members, CCA is one where the diversity of its membership means that an individual church with several hundred members is equally a member as a National Council of Churches with tens of thousands of members. This is very much the dynamics in the relationship between many of the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches at the national levels in the various countries throughout Asia. For example, the Roman Catholic Church of a particular country is usually represented by one person or a single entity, i.e., the bishop or Episcopal conference, whereas there is no such counterpart structure amongst the hundreds and sometimes thousands of Protestant churches in the same country. Even the National Council of Churches is comprised of only some, and not all, of the Protestant churches. In most countries there is also the National Evangelical Fellowship whose membership encompasses the various Protestant churches which are evangelically inclined, many of which are newer and smaller independent churches as compared to the older and bigger mainline churches. Such arrangements at the local level do not necessarily encourage the Roman Catholic Church to be enthusiastic about ecumenism. There is the feeling that the parties are not really equitable or on the same level since the Catholic bishops view themselves as, using military language, generals of whole armies with numerous priests under their charge while the Protestant representatives are merely captains of their own platoons where some pastors head only one independent church or several churches at most. The problem, as viewed from the side of the Catholic bishops, is that the one general has to deal with many captains all at once, with none of the captains having the right or authority to speak on behalf of or to represent any of the others.

There is also the question of size. Members of CCA together represent a constituency of some 50 million Protestant Christians all across Asia while that of the FABC a constituency of more than 100 million Catholic Christians in roughly the same geographical region. In most countries the Catholic Church is as big as or bigger in number than all the Protestant churches put together. For example, there are about 700,000 Catholics in Malaysia; likewise all the Protestant churches put together will have a membership of close to about 700,000. This latter 700,000, however, might come from as many as 1,000 different churches. Thus, when one Catholic bishop comes to the ecumenical dialogue table he is in a way representing as many people as all the Protestant leaders jointly represent. As someone once put it, "it is like an elephant sitting down with a bunch of rabbits." That accounts for why in most, though not all, countries across Asia the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of the National Council of Churches.⁵ The subject has been raised often enough and even at the Third Asian Movement for Christian Unity (more on this later).

⁵ Taiwan is one exception where the Roman Catholic Church is a full member of the National Council of Churches.

As far as the Catholic Church is concerned it is not in its interest to be merged into an entity where it will be but one voice amongst many and have one vote against the many other votes which smaller churches are also entitled to. Independent of the NCCs the Roman Catholic Church is already a force to be reckoned with and in most countries (especially where Christians as a whole are but a very small minority) they are the ones recognized by the governmental authorities as the legitimate representative of Christianity. Thus, from the perspective of the Roman Catholic Church there is little incentive to participate in ecumenical activities as such. There is little to gain and much to lose. Ecumenism may be good in theory but problems abound when it comes to the real practical implementation of it. Problems such as self-identity, ecclesiological vision and issues of power and control are very real and can be threatening to those with little commitment to the ecumenical agenda.

This brings us to the next issue, namely, the difference between the two bodies. CCA is by nature an ecumenical body while FABC is a confessional structure. In other words, the *raison d'être* of CCA is to promote ecumenism while that cannot be said of FABC. Thus, as far as CCA is concerned, it is in its interest to engage the FABC since Roman Catholics constitute the vast majority of Christians in Asia. However, because of its present set-up, the only option for a full and total engagement is for the Roman Catholic Church to eventually "join" the CCA. This would be the ideal situation as far as CCA and ecumenism are concerned as then it would truly be an ecumenical body representing the vast majority of Christians in Asia, Catholics included. Such an arrangement, needless to say, is not really in the interest of the Roman Catholic Church since it would see itself being swallowed up by the many bodies represented in CCA. Joining the CCA is therefore more or less out of the question as far as the Roman Catholic Church is concerned. An alternative structure where the Roman Catholic Church be given its due prominence might be more enticing if ever it was open to a full and total engagement with the churches represented in the CCA.⁶

On the other hand, there is also the reality that on the side of the Roman Catholics there is the secret wish and dream that eventually all Protestants will find their way back to the "true mother Church." This continues to be the ecclesiological vision of many when speaking about ecumenism. If such a wish and dream is not likely to be fulfilled then there is little interest in pursuing the matter. This accounts for why by and large Roman Catholic churches in many countries in Asia are not altogether enthusiastic about ecumenical involvement. I must hastily add that within every country or diocese there are also others, bishops, priests as well as Catholic lay persons, who do not harbor such "return" visions and who can be visibly seen at the forefront of promoting ecumenism. But, the point still stands that the majority of Catholics are really not all that excited when it comes to ecumenism.

On the other hand, because of the demands of the Second Vatican Council that the Catholic Church be engaged in ecumenical relations, FABC has made an effort to work out

⁶ The Christian churches in Malaysia have a structure called the Christian Federation of Malaysia. This is comprised of the three main organizations, viz., the Catholic Church, the Council of Churches of Malaysia, and the National Evangelical Fellowship. Together they represent almost all the Christians in Malaysia. I say almost as some independent churches do not belong to any of these three organizations.

alternative arrangements for relationship with CCA. This is through one of its offices, namely the Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA). With such an arrangement, ecumenical relations for FABC means that only this one department for ecumenism is involved with the CCA. It effectively means that only the bishops responsible for OEIA are involved with CCA while the bishops of the eight other offices of FABC need not have anything to do with ecumenical affairs.

This is about the same set-up in the various local dioceses and Episcopal conferences throughout Asia. Even the Vatican has a similar arrangement. The World Council of Churches' primary contact point with the Vatican is the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU), which is but one among dozens of dicasteries operating within the Vatican. Thus, when the Secretary General of the WCC wishes to meet the Roman Catholic Church's counterpart, it is the president of the PCPCU who is met and not the pope or the Secretary of State. The implications of this are significant. The OEIA can only speak for its own office and not for the entire FABC. The CCA, on the other hand, if it decides upon something commits its whole organization to that decision and not merely a single department or desk. With such an arrangement it appears that the carts are being reversed. It is now the turn of CCA or WCC to feel like the giant partner sitting in dialogue with a minuscule entity of the Catholic Church, as is the case when the CCA sits with the OEIA or the WCC with the PCPCU.

Opportunities for Transformation

Despite the difficulties and challenges outlined above the ecumenical engagements between FABC and CCA have borne much fruit. This, I believe, is realized more by way of a variety of indirect and subtle consequences. For instance, the difference in organizational structure and membership has afforded a great opportunity for transformation. In this regard FABC, as was mentioned earlier, is solely and primarily represented by Catholic bishops while the CCA representation is very diverse, with non-ordained members, women and youth sitting in some of the highest offices such as the presidium or General Committee. This, in itself, alters the dynamics of the CCA-FABC relationship. For one, officially, only the member-bishops are entitled to represent the FABC. But because only ordained clergy and males are allowed to be bishops in the Catholic Church today the FABC contingent would be comprised of 100% male clerics. This group of ordained and consecrated men would then be meeting in dialogue with the CCA contingent, which would almost always have equitable representation in terms of gender, ministerial diversity and even age group.

It is in view of this glaring difference that the FABC has been more or less forced to be flexible and has invited non-bishops to also participate in ecumenical activities acting as representatives on its behalf. Thus, FABC representatives in the Asian Ecumenical Committee, which is the highest joint-body between the FABC and the CCA, is comprised of some bishops as well as theologians and women church leaders. This is but an example of some of the positive effects of such ecumenical and collaborative arrangements. The relationship can in itself facilitate some sort of transformation on one party and, in the case of the FABC, encourage it to be more inclusive and to take seriously the principle of non-

clergy participation in decision-making, especially those most often underrepresented such as the laity, women and youth.

One other aspect where the ecumenical relationship can help shape and gently transform the way the Catholic Church operates is in the realm of worship. In most, if not all, FABC events there is always the inclusion of the celebration of the Eucharist as part of the program. This is not surprising especially when the majority of the participants are bishops and clerics. However, in an ecumenical event where half of the members present are not necessarily Catholics a predicament sets in. What forms of worship can we have together so as to be inclusive of all the participants? This is often a challenge since a non-Eucharistic liturgy will probably be regarded as an incomplete form of worship by the Catholic participants. On the other hand, a Eucharist will see the exclusion of half the participants. FABC and CCA have struggled with this for many years now. A solution is yet to be found.

But what is important is that the issue has been raised and put out for open discussion. I can still vividly remember an Anglican bishop commenting that he gets to celebrate Mass everyday of the year except when he attends ecumenical events. This is because he is usually the only Anglican present as a member of the CCA contingent, whose representatives come from a diversity of churches. This would probably go unnoticed if there was an acceptable common worship that is celebrated ecumenically. The problem is whatever form the worship takes there is surely at least one party who will not be satisfied. The other thing is that the Roman Catholic contingent almost always insists on having their own Eucharistic celebration, even if outside of the officially scheduled program. This is usually scheduled before breakfast, before everyone else wakes up, and this Mass is specifically for Roman Catholic attendees with an open invitation to others who might also want to attend. The reality is that usually many of the Protestant participants also attend this Roman Catholic Mass.

Then comes the question of Holy Communion. What does a bishop do when a Protestant friend and dialogue partner whom he has been sitting down with for days to discuss ways to promote Christian unity comes up to receive Holy Communion? Frankly, I have never seen a bishop or even cardinal refuse Eucharistic hospitality to anyone in such situations. I'm sure it is the same at all levels, even with cardinals from the Vatican. For example, recent reports indicate that when Cardinal Walter Kasper, the head of the PCPCU, celebrated a requiem Mass for the great ecumenist the late Brother Roger Schutz of Taizé Holy Communion was freely distributed amongst all the attendees, Catholics and Protestants alike. Reports also have it that when Brother Roger himself attended the funeral Mass of the late Pope John Paul II it was none other than then Cardinal Ratzinger who offered him Holy Communion.⁷

Of course it is certainly well-known, especially to then Cardinal Ratzinger, that Brother Roger is a practicing Christian of the Swiss Reformed tradition. That he distributed Holy Communion to someone who is not a baptized Catholic in a concrete situation of ecumenical relationship speaks louder than all his teachings and pronouncements

⁷ See Christopher A. Ferrara, "Vatican Explains Communion Scandal" *The Remnant* <http://remnantnewspaper.com/Archives/archive-2005-0831-taize.htm>, accessed October 1, 2005.

forbidding the same. Thus, ecumenical events have a way of indirectly shaping and transforming our long-held teachings and practices. In this particular case the Roman Catholic Church is helped to rethink some of these, especially with regard to the issue of Eucharistic hospitality. If more and more bishops are engaged in ecumenical dialogues where such dilemmas are confronted it might even call into question the necessity of an announcement which continues to be made in many local churches throughout Asia that only baptized Catholics are welcome to receive Holy Communion.

Concrete CCA-FABC Ecumenical Cooperation

Looking at all these problem areas and possible setbacks one might conclude that ecumenical collaboration between the Roman Catholics and Protestants in Asia is all but impossible. Add to this the historical baggage that the various churches were established under very different circumstances, oftentimes by rival colonial regimes, and one's conclusion is probably that the two bodies would never meet. But the fact of the matter is that they did. Among the first cooperative ventures between FABC and CCA were programs co-sponsored by FABC's Office of Human Development and CCA's Urban Rural Mission. Programs such as the Asian Committee for People's Organization (ACPO), the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (ECTWT), and advocacy programs on behalf of women workers were jointly sponsored by the two bodies. Another highlight was a program co-sponsored by CCA and FABC's Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (OEIA) where, in 1987, they came together in Singapore to explore the theme, "Living and Working Together with Sisters and Brothers of Other Faiths in Asia."

As can be seen from these examples, most of the initial cooperative ventures between CCA and FABC were really in the areas of ad extra church concerns. These were social action concerns for the benefit of society at large which both bodies were already engaged in as independent bodies. They were concerns where any form of partnership can only serve to be of mutual benefit since resources will then be shared, thus enabling a more concerted effort to address the social ills or to explore the challenges of living as Christians in multireligious Asia. Such ecumenical collaborations are almost without any threat whatsoever to the ad intra church concerns such as one's self identity or ecclesiological vision. In other words, cooperation in the realm of social action such as justice and peace and interreligious dialogue are safe, useful and practical. They are not forums where there will be any need to raise sensitive ecumenical issues and challenges such as those I have outlined earlier in this paper. These social actions, addressing commonly held concerns, are usually the first modes of collaboration between any two bodies, especially those which are radically different and which have diverse visions and modes of operation. These forms of collaboration are often called the "dialogue of action." They do not really tread on any issue that might be deemed ecclesiological or theologically sensitive. The FABC and CCA engage in such dialogues with each other as they would with any non-religious body, such as an NGO. The goal is the transformation of society, not of the Church. It is therefore something very do-able and also resonates well with the message of the Gospel.

Hence, it was not until the early 1990s that the two bodies finally decided it was time to actively pursue the agenda of ecumenism per se. CCA initiated a task force with FABC which resulted in the formation of the Asian Ecumenical Committee (AEC). This is a high-

powered committee of seven representatives from each side tasked with exploring concrete means for the promotion of Christian unity in Asia. Amongst its first and most tangible fruits was a series of programs entitled Asian Movement for Christian Unity (AMCU). These AMCU seminars brought together equal number of representatives from both CCA and FABC to study and deliberate together on issues of specific concern to Christian unity. It was here that ecclesiological and theological issues were raised, exploring how we can arrive at a common vision for Christian unity in Asia. Arising from these AMCU seminars were follow-up programs in the form of Joint Ecumenical Formation (JEF) courses and the Asia Conference of Theological Students (ACTS). The former is a program devised to discuss modules for the formation of grassroots leaders so as to encourage active involvement in ecumenism and the latter a forum which brings together students from seminaries and theological institutions to explore common issues with the hope that the participants will be the ecumenical leaders of the future. They have been highly successful and continue until today.

But all of these are not without their problems and difficulties either. For instance, only those bishops who are open to or interested in ecumenical concerns participate or send participants to such programs. There is no way the FABC can force others, especially those who probably are more in need of them, to be involved in these joint activities with CCA. Another thing is that because these joint-programs are still in its infancy stages more work still needs to be put into the planning and execution of them. Coordination between the two bodies can sometimes be a problem, especially in ensuring equitable representation. At times we have participants from one country who are predominantly Catholic and from another who are predominantly Protestant. There is therefore no correspondence as the ideal would be where each participant will have a dialogue partner of the other organization with whom to plan follow-up activities and programs upon returning to their home country.

Also, because AMCU, JEF and ACTS are still very new they have not actually dealt with the sensitive ecumenical issues at any great depth or length. Right now the priority remains with cultivating relationship so that the participants are open to and comfortable with one another. The reality is that oftentimes it is at these AMCU meetings that the Methodist bishop from a particular country is for the first time meeting up with the Catholic bishop from her/his very own country. Or, we once had the director of ecumenical affairs for the National Catholic Episcopal Conference meeting for the first time his counterpart from the National Council of Churches; and this meeting had to take place outside their own country, even though both of them had held their respective positions for several years prior to the AMCU meeting!

Another project which has enhanced the CCA-FABC ecumenical relationships has been the joint staff meetings which both sides saw as a necessity. These are meetings that brought together the staff members of CCA and the executive secretaries of various offices of FABC. They are effective in that the staffs on both sides are then introduced not only to each other's counterpart working in the other organization but also to the programs and resources of the other side. A consequence of these meetings is that they then actively plan on sharing resources as well as have greater collaboration when attending to similar concerns.

Again, this has not been altogether easy as the two bodies have very distinct modes of operation. CCA is very much centralized with its headquarters in Hong Kong (which is soon to move to Chiang Mai) but FABC is very de-centralized with each office located in different cities all across Asia. On the other hand, at times it is precisely because of this decentralized structure at the level of FABC (as opposed to the monolithic structure that the Catholic Church is known for) that has encouraged more profound initiatives. While there is the danger of the “do your own thing” phenomenon, where each office does its own thing without any form of consultation with another office or with CCA, there is also the possibility that the decentralized mode of operation allows for more personal initiatives and greater creativity. Whatever it is, there is certainly more room for progress if CCA and FABC sincerely desire to actualize the prayer of our Lord: “That they may all be one that the world may believe that You had sent me” (John 17:22).

Lessons for Local-level Ecumenism

What I have shared thus far is really what I perceive as the dynamics of the ecumenical relations happening at the Asian-level, specifically between CCA and FABC. Now, what can we learn from such dynamics? How can the situation inform us about parallel relationships in ecumenical work at local levels in the different countries and dioceses? What lessons can we draw from these CCA-FABC relationships so as to be more effective as we engage in our ecumenical ventures throughout Asia? I offer a few reflections in the form of questions and, by way of conclusion, with the hope that we can then go on to draw further insights and lessons from similar situations.

To begin, any ecumenical venture will have to look carefully at the parties being represented. Who is representing whom? What churches are coming together to the dialogue table? Is there at least a perceived equitable relationship amongst the dialogue partners? How many Christians are the various churches each representing and how does that factor into the voting rights and decision making?

Within the Catholic Church there is always the question of hierarchy and with that comes bureaucracy. Being a somewhat monolithic organization with clear-cut structures about leadership and authority can sometimes also mean a tendency towards inertia and non-action, especially in areas of novelty and risk. How can we ensure that the Catholic Church is adequately represented and that the representation does indeed have the right to speak on behalf of the whole Church, and not just a desk or commission? Another thing which probably needs to be attended to is the fact of clericalism. The reality is that most churches across Asia continue to be in the main clergy-centered. In such a situation how do we facilitate a process that will see the inclusion and empowerment of the laity and especially women and youth.

Finally, what sorts of agenda do the ecumenical relationships have? Are they strictly limited and confined to acts of mercy, social justice and development concerns? What motivates these activities and how is the faith dimension factored in? How are such collaborative actions different from similar works performed by non-religious groups? What is the eventual aim of such ecumenical endeavors? Is the promotion of Christian unity an explicit

or long-term goal? Is unity thought of in terms only of works and collaborative actions or are there larger visions of unity? How is that being brought about? To what extent will the ecumenical relationship deal with ecclesiological and theological issues? What kinds of models will be invoked and how can a common theological vision evolve? What do we do about the call to promote an explicit manifestation of Christian unity, especially in terms of worship and other religious practices? How will a common witness be expressed, especially to peoples of other religious ways who have little understanding of the structures of the Church and the divisions within it?

These are but just several questions that come to mind as I reflect on the ecumenical relationship that has been going on between CCA and FABC. To be sure, we have certainly come a long way. But, the journey, I must quickly add, has only just begun. I trust that the ecumenical endeavors in the various countries are similarly on its way and that some day the various churches (Catholic and Protestant) will truly mean it when they claim that they each belong to the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."