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An Asian Tapestry – Created by the Spirit

Reflections on the Asian Mission Congress of FABC

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Tapestries are a specialized form of art. Using subtle colors and richly textured fibers, the artist weaves an inspiring piece, capturing people in their uniqueness, geometric designs in their intricacies, animals in their diversity, and nature in all its beauty. The vision and skill of the artist serve to create a moving work of art, often a masterpiece.

Peoples and cultures across the centuries have used and perfected this form of hand-woven fabric. Through the skill and artistry of the weaver, great beauty and refinement can be achieved. Viewing a tapestry means appreciating the wonderful intricacies displayed and the artist's attention to detail. Tapestries can evoke deep reflection and insight into the beauty of life.

The First Asian Mission Congress, held in Thailand in October 2006, noted in its final message: "All the colors, peoples, languages, cultures, values, religions, and arts of Asia's peoples formed one great tapestry." The story of Jesus became the unique congress thread that wove all these dimensions and experiences of life into one multifaceted design. With hindsight, one can partially capture the beauty of this Mission Congress by examining some of the diverse threads that were woven together into a great tapestry, into "God's Asian Tapestry."

Congress Vision

The Mission Congress was not envisioned as a symposium or seminar; rather, the gathering in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand was to be "a celebration of faith and life." The first stated congress goal was "to share the joy and enthusiasm of our faith in Jesus Christ" and to "celebrate our faith in Asian language, song, story, art, music, symbol, and architecture." Next, this approach sought to move from a celebratory phase into concrete "Asian ways of mission through witness in the midst of life realities." It also moves to a deepened awareness about "the renewed understanding of mission *ad gentes* during and since the Second Vatican Council" and to "priorities for a renewed mission animation."

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Here one hears echoes of Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* where he focuses on "encouraging our brethren in their mission as evangelizers" so that they may accomplish their task "with ever increasing love, zeal and joy" (EN 1). In the Asian context where the Church is a small minority, truly a "little flock" (less than 3% of the vast multitudes of Asia), mutual encouragement is constantly needed and appreciated. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, congress delegates experienced renewed joy in being truly Catholic and truly Asian; they departed for their home Churches with renewed enthusiasm. Many hearts were set ablaze in that New Upper Room (the congress hall of the Lotus Hotel in Chiang Mai). A renewed "joy of evangelizing" permeated the more than 1,000 participants!

An Asian Approach

The Mission Congress tapestry was to be woven through a carefully chosen methodology: "story-telling in faith" or "narrative missiology." One can appreciate this approach by recalling the basic elements of a story. In brief, stories tell us who we are; they link us together and deepen our identity, revealing many aspects of the mystery of our being. Stories are windows through which we view the world; they possess tremendous power to influence faith and life. They probe the heart, illuminating our relationships with God and others.

The keynote congress address by "master-weaver" Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle identified eight dimensions of story-telling that help the church understand her evangelizing mission in Asia: (1) good stories emerge from experience; the church tells the Jesus-story from its experience of Jesus; (2) stories reveal personal identity and the formative influence of people and events; the Jesus-story manifests the identity of the church among the peoples (especially the poor), religions, and cultures of Asia; (3) stories are dynamic and transformative; the church keeps the memory of Jesus dynamically alive; (4) stories help interpret spiritual, doctrinal, and ethical symbols, and the Jesus-story provides meaning to the church's symbols of faith.

Tagle continued weaving his artistic design by showing that: (5) stories create community; the story of Jesus generates the church; (6) when received, stories transform the listener; the church must listen to Jesus' story and be renewed by it; (7) just as stories can be narrated in a variety of ways, the church can tell the Jesus-story with a multiplicity of approaches; finally, (8) stories of individuals and whole peoples can be suppressed; thus, the church must give voice to society's victims and their suppressed stories. Tagle succeeded in winning people's hearts and minds, convincing them that story-telling is a very valid insight into evangelization in Asia today.

Experiencing "Asian-ness"

For all the participants, the Mission Congress was a rich experience of the great diversity of Asia and her 3.6 billion people. In the congress itself over forty countries were represented in the more than 1,000 participants. Asians came from remote places such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, from Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma), and China, from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Cambodia. They brought with them their stories, cultures, experiences and, above all,

their faith and love of Jesus and his church. One heard numerous languages being spoken—as diverse as those heard on the first Pentecost. People eagerly shared their persons and experiences—in hotel corridors and dining rooms, in the 100+ small discussion groups, in their mission expositions, in their national dresses, songs and dances during the final banquet and grand socialization. The “people tapestry” at the congress was overwhelming and marvelous.

This first Asian Mission Congress was the largest event ever sponsored by the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences). Delegates to the FABC plenary assemblies held every four years — there have been eight to date — usually number around 300 persons at the maximum. To have participated in this congress meant a total immersion in “Asian-ness.” And, for the majority of delegates, it was a new, enriching encounter that they had never before experienced. People, God’s People, coming from every race, family, and nation in Asia—all assembled, hearing about “the marvels of God.” Everyone was amazed and astonished; “they asked one another what it all meant” (cf. Acts 2:11-12).

FABC’s Triple Dialogue

Since its first plenary assembly in Taipei in 1974 which focused on *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, the FABC has developed an “Asian Paradigm” for missionary evangelization. The paradigm focuses on the building up of truly inculturated local churches. The operative approach is the distinctive mode of dialogue. The “dialogue partners” of the local church are Asia’s peoples (especially the poor), Asia’s cultures and religions. This “Asian Way” of being church, commonly termed the “triple dialogue,” shaped the thematic structure of the entire congress.

Brief opening ceremonies were held on the evening of October 18. The first full day (October 19) was devoted to the story of Jesus in the **Peoples** of Asia. The “faith sharers” or “story-tellers” focused on the elderly and the family, two key segments of Asia’s population. Delegates met for the first time in their workshops and reflected on their personal faith story, responding to the question: “How have I encountered Christ in my life?”

Continuing the work of the congress, the second full day (October 20) focused on the role of Jesus in the **Religions** of Asia. An interesting panel presentation addressed four of the living faiths in Asia: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Tribals/Indigenous. Workshops responded to the question: “What do I appreciate in the followers of other religions in my country?”

The morning of the next day (October 21) centered on the **Cultures** of Asia. Participants heard “faith sharings” on consumerism, media, migrants, youth, and interfaith relationships. Afternoon workshops reflected on this question: “What practices or traditions in my culture best express the gospel of Jesus?”

The final day of the congress was World Mission Sunday (October 22). The final “faith sharer” focused on the Thai Tribals and their journey in faith. A congress synthesis was presented; the **congress message** and **mission orientations** were read publicly [see separate

documents]. The final highpoint was the World Mission Sunday 2006 Eucharistic Celebration, presided by Crescenzo Cardinal Sepe, the Special Envoy of the Pope.

Five days, October 18-22, 2006, days filled with stories of faith, enriched by intercultural sharing, deepened by theological reflection, celebrating faith and life! These days added new meaning to the FABC and its mission in Asia. Terming the FABC as “Asia’s Continuing Vatican II” is no misnomer! Pentecost continues to unfold in Asia!

Reflection, Faith, and Prayer

The tapestry of the Asian Mission Congress would be incomplete if one failed to mention the role of theological-missiological reflection that was integrally interwoven into the fabric. Each day time was allotted for a formal **reflection** on the Church’s understanding of her evangelizing mission in Asia. Fathers Julian Saldanha, SJ, Proper Grech, OSA, Savio Hon Tai Fai, SDB, James Kroeger, MM, and John Prior, SVD were invited to enhance and deepen the faith sharers’ story-telling and the feedback from the discussion groups. Once again, this missiological reflection followed the FABC’s “triple-dialogue” pattern.

The full title or theme of this First Asian Mission Congress was: “The Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life.” **Faith** was clearly evident—in many and diverse ways. Participants seemed to be brimming with joyful faith and enthusiasm from their arrival until their departure; their spontaneous faith perdured through a very full and exhausting congress schedule. Indigenous saints and blessed—especially the martyrs—continue to be vibrant faith influences on Asia’s Catholics. A clear expression of gratitude was heard for the self-sacrificing missionaries who labored to bring the Christian faith to Asia. A marvelous musical drama with over 400 student performers portrayed how the faith arrived and took root in Thailand. Personal journeys of faith were spontaneously shared in the small discussion groups.

Prayer in many forms seemed to be like a golden thread integrating the five-day assembly. Solemn daily celebrations of the Eucharist were presided by five cardinals (Crescenzo Sepe, Papal Envoy; Ivan Dias, CEP Prefect; Michael Michai Kitbunchu, Bangkok; Ricardo Vidal, Cebu; Telesphore Placidus Toppo, Ranchi). Creative morning prayers, based on the themes of light, color, and water, invited participants to focus on God’s presence in the congress.

There was perpetual Eucharistic adoration in a special chapel. National groups sang their indigenous songs for communion-time meditation. There was the recitation of the mission rosary and a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament on the Friday evening of the congress; confessions were available during morning prayer and the holy hour. A large “Jesus-Asia” mission cross was given to each country delegation during the closing Eucharist while each delegate received a smaller necklace version of the mission cross. All received a special papal blessing during the mass on World Mission Sunday. In a word, prayer was woven well into the design of the congress.

An Asian Tapestry

As a specialized art form, tapestry is unique. Woven from various threads — silk, wool, and cotton, bright and dark — a tapestry reveals the artist's imagination and design. Each tapestry narrates a story, it captures life, it invites reflection.

At the Asian Mission Congress, the Holy Spirit wove a unique tapestry of the Story of Jesus in Asia. How beautiful it was to witness the master-weaver at work! Even the less than perfect threads helped shape the final design.

Mission belongs to God. It is God's project, God's work, God's masterpiece. Only God's weaving is important. God's thoughts, God's ways, God's artistry shape the final tapestry — a masterpiece not made by human hands (cf. Heb. 9:11)!

What the Church can learn from dialogue with Asian religions

- From Muslims the Church can learn about prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.
- From Hindus the Church can learn about meditation and contemplation.
- From Buddhists the Church can learn about detachment from material goods and respect for life.
- From Confucianism the Church can learn about filial piety and respect for elders.
- From Taoism the Church can learn about simplicity and humility.
- From animists the Church can learn about reverence and respect for nature and gratitude for harvests.
- The Church can learn from the rich symbolism and rites existing in their diversity of worship.
- The Church can, like the Asian religions, learn to be more open, receptive, sensitive, tolerant, and forgiving in the midst of a plurality of religions.

Source: James Kroeger, *The Future of the Asian Churches*, p. 14.