

## **'The FABC Vision of Church in Asia – Lost'**

**By Virginia Saldanha**

The FABC was founded in Nov. 1970, encouraged by Pope Paul VI when he met with 180 Asian Bishops from 15 Asian countries in Manila, a time when most of Asia comprised of emerging democracies who were shaking off the yoke of colonialism which helped establish Christianity in their country, giving it a European face.

The Asian bishops were eager to forge their identity as Asians so that the peoples of Asia could encounter the Asian face of Jesus especially at the community level. The Bishops were bound by a “spiritual affinity and common moral and religious values”. They borrowed from Latin American liberation theology, but developed an Asian theology that was truly contextual. Common to all Asian countries was the reality of poverty, religious and cultural diversity. The single value that bound all was hospitality.

The FABC set about implementing the renewal of the Church to forge a Vatican II vision of the Church through its General Assemblies convened every five years, and through the nine offices it established as they moved along. 1) Office of Theological Concerns 2) Office of Ecumenism & Inter-religious dialogue 3) Office of Human Development 4) Office of Laity, Family, Youth & Women & AsIPA<sup>1</sup> 5) Office of Education 6) Office of Communications 7) Office of Evangelization 8) Office of Clergy 9) Office of Religious Life.

The Asian bishops were very informal, no Roman clothes, they would wear their national bush-shirts, (for India it would be a 'kurta') at gatherings and even present the Vatican representative with the same. They were pastoral to the core. Their plenary Assemblies had representatives from religious, clergy, women & men whom they listened to with respect as observers. They were allowed to speak but not vote on decisions.

At the 5<sup>th</sup> plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) held in historic Bandung, Indonesia, in 1990, the Asian Bishops articulated their Vision of Church for Asia and called it a “New Way of Being Church”. Tom Fox, emeritus Editor and Publisher of the National Catholic Reporter in the USA, was so fascinated with the New Way of Being Church articulated by the FABC that he published a book about it in 2002, called “Pentecost in Asia”. (published by Orbis)

This New Way of Being Church was described as:

- **A Participatory and Co-responsible Church – living as a Communion of Communities.**
- **A participatory Church where the gifts that the Holy Spirit given to all the faithful -- lay, Religious and cleric alike -- are recognized and activated, so that the Church may be built up and its mission realized.**
- **A leaven of transformation in this world that serves as a prophetic sign daring to point beyond this world to the ineffable Kingdom that is yet fully to come.”**

The vision is rooted in Liberation theology that empowers people at the grassroots to take responsibility for their lives as Catholics living in the world, where they are called to be leaven.

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<sup>1</sup> Asian Integral Pastoral Approach.

The Asian Bishops had to constantly deal with the attacks from the Vatican that their mission was not focused on conversion<sup>2</sup>. A Vatican representative was invited to every plenary assembly and often expressed differences over the Asian vision of “Mission”. The Bishops heard the Vatican representative when he was present, but continued with their mission, as they felt they knew best what was good for Asia.

The Synod of the Church in Asia really created tension between the Asian Bishops and the Vatican. The Japanese Bishops were forthright in telling Rome that the synod cannot succeed if non-Asian, Vatican directives were to determine the content and process of the gathering. Instead of answering the Vatican’s *Lineamenta* they came up with a list of their own issues and questions that were in line with Asian realities. They told Rome to stop being like a Central office checking on its branch offices.

The Asian bishops worked hard to make changes towards greater local authority to make pastoral decisions. But the last straw came when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger released his Document *Dominus Jesus*, and said it aimed to combat the Post-Vatican II “ideology of dialogue”, a veiled reference to the Asian bishops’ pastoral initiatives.

However, the Asian Bishops saw their mission differently. They knew that the Asian continent which has a diversity of religions, cultures and most importantly the largest number of the world’s poor people, needed to be presented with Christianity that has the compassionate face of an Asian Jesus and not the imperialist idea of mission that came from Rome, which is – ‘we have the truth, so you have to join us to be saved.’

The structure of leadership in the FABC was non-dominating. We had a Secretary General, no President. There were 9 offices, each with an Executive Secretary who had the power of decision making in their office.

The Office of Laity was run by lay people!

Each office consisted of a Bishop Chairperson, and 3 member bishops whom the Executive Secretary had the freedom to choose. The Executive Secretaries selected the bishop members and proposed their names to the Standing Committee of Bishops who confirmed the appointments.

When the Office of Laity organized meetings, the secretaries insisted that lay people also join the bishops at the meetings. So, every member Ecclesial conference was sent an invitation for a bishop to attend the meeting with three lay persons, a man, a woman and one youth. For the women’s meetings we asked the bishops to come with at least three women who were actively working for women in Church and society. The Bishops’ worked according to their vision of Church in Asia where they saw laity, clerics, and religious as partners in mission. They trusted their Executive Secretaries to run the offices and the offices functioned well.

A desk that worked to promote Small Christian Communities (SCCs), which was at the core of the New Way of Being Church in Asia, was added to the office of Laity. Mostly women were the leaders in these SCCs all over Asia. Women are willing to make sacrifices for the Church and for their faith. In fact, a Japanese Bishop once said, “If women go, we have to close the Church.”

Towards the end of the 1990s the Vatican began to suppress Liberation theology and the idea of SCCs. Perhaps they saw the empowerment of laity and women as dangerous. The work of promoting Small Christian Communities and empowerment of women began to hit road blocks

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<sup>2</sup> See pg 133, 152 Pentecost in Asia – A New Way of Being Church” by Thomas C Fox.

because of increasing clericalism. Priests felt they would lose power. Younger priests just out of the seminary began to come out with an air of self-importance.

The Vatican sent an Archbishop from their diplomatic Corps to a key diocese in India – the Archdiocese of Bombay. He not only succeeded in destroying the post Vatican II developments in the diocese, in an indirect way he also ensured that the FABC reined in its pastoral vision and began to adopt the Vatican methods of functioning.

In the FABC the Executive Secretaries had no terms. If they worked well and were able to continue they stayed on. The FABC began to take on a conservative perspective. The statements of the Office of Theological Concerns were questioned and that Secretary was replaced.

The “diplomat’ Cardinal returned to Rome after 8 years and was replaced by Cardinal Oswald Gracias who immediately was elected as Secretary general of the FABC. Being a Canon Lawyer, he took on the responsibility of changing the statutes as one of his first tasks in that position. He made terms for the Executive Secretaries. In 2009 nine Executive Secretaries were asked to retire and the offices passed into new hands who would do as the bishops would say, not as mission demanded. The eighth plenary Assembly which took place in 2008, had only 10 observers who were mainly priests, with one woman who was a non-Asian traditional religious sister. Earlier there were at least 40 or more observers. The Executive Secretaries were not permitted to participate in the discussions at the Assembly. The bishops talked among themselves. The Bishops had consolidated their power.

In preparation for the 8<sup>th</sup> plenary Assembly, Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle (who today is a Cardinal and a Curia official), was in charge of working with the Executive Secretaries on the preparatory document for the Assembly on the theme “Being Eucharist in Asia”. I asked Bishop Tagle, why was the theme not placed within the framework of the vision of the FABC for the Church in Asia, and I received no answer. I realized that the vision had been put aside.

I carried on working in the office till 2010 because I insisted on accompanying the new Executive Secretary (who I recommended), for a year to help her get accustomed to the vision for women in Asia.

When my successor finished her term in 2018, all the offices passed into the hands of priests. Needless to say, nothing is being done that is significant or meaningful for the laity or women. The FABC has been totally clericalized. The vision of a New Way of Being Church has been lost completely. I heard recently that the Office of Theological Concerns has a woman Secretary who I know. She will not stir the waters.

What is the problem in the Church? In civil society our governments function with three independent arms – The Executive, The Legislature and the Judiciary. This ensures that justice is done and the constitution is upheld.

In the Church the Hierarchy in the dioceses and the Curia in Rome have all the power as they are the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. Canon Law is formulated by the same men who sit in judgement over people. No Checks & balances.

The compassion which Jesus advocated has been replaced by legalisms, as a result people who are hurting never get understanding or justice in the Church. The net result is that Canon law is used to protect the power of the men who have created it and who implement it! When they do anything wrong, the people of God have nowhere to turn but to the same monolithic power.

Our Indian activist Arundhati Roy points out: “Patriarchy, is the underpinning of it all – because if men don’t or can’t control women, they know they control nothing.”

In Conclusion I would like to point out that the FABC Vision of Church would in time begin to change the structures of the Church. Abp. Fritz Lobinger who was a mentor to the AsIPA (**A**sian **I**ntegral **P**astoral **A**pproach) Desk for implementing the vision through the SCC spoke of Community Priests being elected by the community to create a bottom up Church. But that good news fell on the rocky ground of “Patriarchy, hierarchy & clericalism” in the Catholic Church. It could not take root and it died. Can we replant it among the People of God?

To bring about radical change in the Church Structures we are faced with two big questions - Can we push for a radical change in the Priesthood of the Catholic Church? And Can we push for a radical change in Canon Law so that structures change? From the bottom up we can do both by beginning to create that reality at the grassroots. Start creating the SCC at the grassroots and elect leaders who are talented, have a vision and rooted in Gospel values. Leaders can be evaluated periodically and be changed if necessary.