

Preface

As observed by Jean Paul II in *Ecclesia in Asia*, the Church's mission across the vast and populous Asian continent is faced with "multiple philosophical, theological and pastoral challenges" (EA 9). Proclamation and dialogue in countries where Christians live side by side with Muslim, Buddhist, Hinduist or Confucian majorities, require a constant work of discernment to figure out the most suitable approaches in the witnessing of the faith vis-à-vis other religions and cultures that have millennial roots. Furthermore, the widespread poverty and multiple forms of predicament that degrade and disfigure human dignity, call for increasing charitable efforts with a view to advancing justice and human integral development.

Amid the complex "social, political, religious, cultural and economic realities of Asia" (EA 5), how can the particular Churches overcome the "difficulties in proclaiming Jesus as the only Savior" (EA 20)? How can they best prepare the faithful to perform their tasks as Jesus' missionary disciples? What are the modes of effective Christian presence and witness to be followed? *The Future of Evangelization in Asia: Theological Reflections*, the latest editorial endeavor of the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) within the series "Omnis Terra – PMU CIAM Publications", provides insights and food for thought on how to address these major issues that keep testing the Church's mission throughout the Asian continent.

This collection of essays springs from the research and study work carried out by scholars from South Korea, China, Japan and India, coordinated by Rev. Fr. Clarence Devadass, Director of the Catholic Research Centre, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Executive Secretary for the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences' Office of Theological Concerns. His references to the *Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019*¹ highlight the importance to bring about in

¹ The publication of *The Future of Evangelization in Asia: Theological Reflections* is part of the PMU contribution to the engagement of the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS) in laying the groundwork to the *Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019* announced by Pope Francis in conjunction with the 100th anniversary

Asia the missionary awakening urged by Pope Francis to revitalize the Church's mission "as engine and horizon of the faith" worldwide.² Mission needs to regain its actual significance, life force and evangelizing drive among Asian *Baptized and Sent*,³ in order for them to strengthen their process of Christian conversion in terms of conviction regarding one's personal faith and membership in the Church. The result would be a deeper personal encounter with Jesus Christ, an absolutely free giving up of oneself to Him, a spiritual discernment and a lifelong vocational commitment that would engender a firmer belief in the transformation of oneself, of the Church's life and pastoral activity,⁴ as well as of the whole existence (human relations, affectivity and labor) in the social and cultural structures of Asian countries.

In *Evangelii Gaudium*,⁵ Pope Francis recalled John Paul II's message to the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops: "If

sary of Pope Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*. On 22 October 2017, the same day as the Angelus Prayer held on the occasion of the World Mission Sunday, Pope Francis sent a letter to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and President of the PMS Supreme Council, entrusting him with "the work of preparing for this event, especially by raising awareness among the particular Churches, the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and among associations, movements, communities, and other ecclesial bodies". The letter is available at <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/22/0727/01588.html#ing>.

² POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, 3 December 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151203_plenaria-propaganda-fide.html/.

³ The chosen theme for *Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019*, "Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World", reveals "the missionary dimension of our Baptism", as being sent on mission is a call that comes with Baptism and is for all the baptized (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 1 June 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180601_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html).

⁴ POPE FRANCIS, *Letter of the Holy Father Francis for the Centenary of the Promulgation of the Apostolic Letter "Maximum Illud" on the Activity of Missionaries in the World*, 22 October 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20171022_lettera-filoni-mese-missionario.html/.

⁵ In *Evangelii Gaudium* 23, Pope Francis refers to Jesus' Great Commission (Mt 28:16-20) and encouraged the faithful "to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear". See also

the Church ‘is to fulfil its providential destiny, evangelization as the joyful, patient and progressive preaching of the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must be your absolute priority’ (EA 2)” (EG 110).⁶ The insistence of John Paul II on the “need for a renewed commitment to the proclamation of Jesus Christ” (EA 19), as “the supreme service which the Church can offer to the peoples of Asia” (EA 20), was endorsed also by Benedict XVI.⁷

Accordingly, the following chapters put forward useful guidelines and recommendations for all Asian “agents and co-workers in the Church’s mission” (EA 47) – pastors, consecrated religious and lay persons, catechists⁸ and lay faithful, especially the youth⁹ –, who reach out to their many brothers and sisters adhering to different faith traditions.¹⁰ In proclaiming the Gospel in the varied

POPE FRANCIS, *Go Forth: Toward a Community of Missionary Disciples*, American Society of Missiology Series, Orbis Books, New York – Maryknoll 2019.

⁶ The Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops took place in the Vatican from 18 April to 14 May 1998.

⁷ Cf. *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Ordinaries of Central Asia on their “Ad Limina” Visit*, 2 October 2008, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081002_adlimina-asia-centr.html; *Letter of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Card. Stanisław Rylko on the Occasion of the Congress of Asian Catholic Laity*, 10 August 2010, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100810_rylko-congress-asia.html/.

⁸ Among the laity, “catechists deserve special recognition and praise” (EA 9). To bolster the missionary and evangelizing capacities of the Catholic education system in Asia, the urgency to shore up their key role can no longer be disregarded. Catechists, baptized lay men and women, are essential actors in the proclamation of the Gospel and witnessing of the faith, prayer, preparation for sacramental life and liturgy, formation of the faithful, and community leadership. They are deeply rooted in the territory, live ordinarily in the cultural and social fabric of their brothers and sisters in the faith whom they serve in their ministry, ensuring a widespread and stable presence.

⁹ “A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity” (EA 22).

¹⁰ “The Church has the deepest respect for these traditions [...]. The religious values they teach await their fulfilment in Jesus Christ” (EA 6). Some “have no problem in accepting Jesus as a manifestation of the Divine or the Absolute, or as an ‘enlightened one’” (EA 20, which quotes *Relatio ante disceptationem* 5 drafted by the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops and available in *L’Osservatore Romano*, 22 April 1998).

Asian contexts, the particular Churches shall firstly uphold their long history of strong evangelizing commitment, belonging to the Church and Catholic identity. At the same time, their engagement in proclamation is deeply intertwined with dialogue and Christian witness, which is a “characteristic mode of the Church’s life in Asia” (EA 3).

Dialogue is of paramount relevance to Asian Christians, primarily where their very existence, both as communities and individuals, and the everyday pastoral ministry are confronted with unforeseeable challenges and threats. The escalation of extremism and violence in some countries has greatly contributed to shape an overall regional ambience characterized by conflicts, ethnic and sectarian clashes, lack of religious freedom. Some Asian governments politicize religions and add political components to social and cultural tensions.

Yet, the doors of Asia remain “open wide to Christ” (EA 4) and, in support of the mission, the *Theological Reflections* featured in this book define an inclusive ecclesiology that makes the Church the *sacrament of communion* between herself and Jesus in dialogue with other religions, through Christian witness, contemplative prayer life and world transformative engagement. Mission theology shall encompass all multiple facets of the Asian dimensions (including the impact of secularism, technology and media communications on the long-established Asian systems of beliefs and values), and associate them to Christ’s Paschal Mystery, so that the particular Churches may adopt the appropriate pastoral methodologies for proclamation, witness and dialogue in tune with the local scenarios.

The popular religiosity, religious devotion and piety relating to other creeds are given special attention. Touching, kissing, prostrations, pilgrimages and simple bodily rituals performed with holy images, holy water, candles, vegetable offerings and the repetition of words or sounds: these manifestations imply a search for meaning and for the existential support necessary to bear the struggles and challenges of human life. Open proclamation of the faith can at times be illegal, yet processions and popular devotions are unofficially tolerated and even allowed. Therefore, they represent for Christians a *locus theologicus* for evangelization, as much as for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue.

Interactions at the grassroots level offer the mission *ad, inter* and *per gentes* the opportunity to manifest the truth while working to

build bridges of acceptance and respect. Asian Catholics are fully aware of their call to play a major role in promoting reconciliation and unity. Because of their belonging to the Universal Church, they transcend the local patterns and, even if considered a minority and treated unfairly, their hearts and minds continue to be opened to the encounter with other religions. A major channel conducive to this encounter is charity.

This book emphasizes that social and charitable engagements – not to be understood as a paternalistic action, but a launch pad for hope – remain in Asia of great importance to proclaim “the gift containing all gifts, namely, the Good News of Jesus Christ” (EA 19). Evangelization is always challenged facing tens of millions of poor people, who need concrete help to address poverty, illiteracy, sickness and other troubles. Moreover, the Christian presence among the suffering offers a concrete entry point for undertaking a process of dialogue.

By reconciling diversity and achieving unity through dialogue (cf. EG 230), the Church restores the Kingdom of God both in the human heart and history, acting as the *sacrament of salvation*¹¹ and fulfilling the project of the Holy Spirit, “the prime agent of evangelization” (EA 17).¹² “Looking to a new outpouring of the dynamism of the Holy Spirit” (EA 42), the book also outlines a set of principles for discerning His presence and activity in the Church’s mission¹³ of “proclaiming the Gospel, faith and the witness of

¹¹ Mission makes the Church a community of the saved, a true family of God, of sons and daughters in the only Son. Therefore, she is much more than an instrument for salvation or a sign that will one day be discarded. The Church is an eschatological design of all creation (Easter, Baptism, and Eucharist), she is the *universal sacrament of salvation* (cf. F. MERONI (ed.), *Mission Makes the Church*, Aracne Editrice, Canterano (Roma) 2017).

¹² Mission does not respond to a human initiative: it is *missio* and *actio Dei*. Therefore, the principal agent of the mission is the Holy Spirit: mission is His project (cf. *Redemptoris Missio* 21). It is the Holy Spirit who sends us, accompanies us and inspires us. He is the source of our mission. It is He who guides the Church forward, not us. [...] He, the Holy Spirit, does everything; we are simply His servants” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*).

¹³ Church’s mission is to proclaim the Gospel and to witness it among those “who have never encountered the person of Jesus in any clear and conscious way” (EA 19) and the Christian faith is absent. In doing so, the Church opens the way

charity” in Asia.¹⁴ Despite serious hardships and injustices, millions of Asian *Baptized and Sent*, women and men, have not abandoned the “missionary outreach” (EA 25). Their admirable “boldness” and “courage” recalls the “zeal of those who first proclaimed the Gospel”,¹⁵ and allows for the opening of new prospects of formal and informal dialogue, which the particular Churches shall continue to seek irrespective of the frustration caused by the lack of immediate results concerning peaceful coexistence, human rights and religious freedom.

This is the “witnessing Church” (EA 42) that Catholic communities, religious Orders and internal Church structures are called to embody for *The Future of Evangelization in Asia*, so that the third millennium may fulfil the hope that “a great harvest of faith will be reaped in this vast and vital continent” (EA 1).¹⁶

Vatican City, August 6th, 2019

Transfiguration of Jesus

Fr. FABRIZIO MERONI
PMU Secretary General
CIAM and Fides Director

to the divine action of the Holy Spirit in places where women and men, religions and nations still yearn for salvation from sin and death (cf. F. MERONI, “The Mission of the Church and the *Missio Ad Gentes*: Some Initial Observations”, in CEP-PMS, *Baptized and Sent. The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, EMMS OCT2019, San Paolo, Milan 2019, 70).

¹⁴ F. FILONI, *Speech at the General Assembly of the Pontifical Missionary Societies*, 27 May 2019, www.fides.org/en/news/66103-VATICAN_Cardinal_Filoni_at_the_PMS_Assembly_Extraordinary_Missionary_Month_catechist_formation_renewal/.

¹⁵ The “community of missionary disciples” that began evangelization from “Jerusalem [...] to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is the main source of “inspiration” and guiding star for the *Baptized and Sent* of all times in the mission of evangelization they are called to execute as members of the Church. Their “regular book for prayer and meditation” cannot but be the *Acts of the Apostles* (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*). See also F. MERONI (ed.), *Missio Ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles*, Urbaniana University Press, Rome 2019.

¹⁶ A precious contribution in coordinating the publication of this volume was provided by Mr. Emiliano Stornelli, Chairman of the Religion & Security Council.