



The Holy See

**LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS DELEGATES TO THE FIFTH PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

*To my Brother Bishops Delegates to the Fifth Plenary Assembly
of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*

1. It is with great joy that I address you who have gathered in Bandung, Indonesia, for the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC. Through you I cordially greet all the Bishops, clergy, religious and laity of the Church in Asia. In the words of the First Letter of Peter, I pray: "May grace and peace be multiplied in you" (*1Petr.* 1, 2).

As Pastors who are called to read "the signs of the times", you intend during your Meeting to discuss the subject "*The Emerging Challenges to the Church in Asia in the 1990s: A Call to Respond*". After a preliminary study conducted with pastoral sensitivity, you now wish to give a joint response to common problems. As the Church's Universal Pastor, I too wish to open my heart in a spirit of collegial affection and concern in order to reflect with you on the Church's earthly pilgrimage in Asia. I offer you my fraternal encouragement and support, and I do so in the confident hope that your Assembly will offer clear and concrete leadership from which your local Churches will derive inspiration and strength for the future.

2. What are the *challenges* faced by God's people in Asia as they seek to follow Christ in the world today? A principal challenge is found in *secularization and materialism*, two distinct but interrelated phenomena which increasingly permeate the thinking of ordinary people in their quest for a better life, as well as programmes introduced by governments and cultural institutions. I share your concern that a growing number of young Asians, especially in the more developed countries, tend to measure happiness and success by material possessions. Given the rich and ancient spiritual traditions of Asia, it would indeed be tragic if in our day the people of the Continent failed to achieve their full and authentic realization as human persons as a result of increasing disregard for the transcendent and religious dimensions of life.

Another serious challenge is posed by the fact that many countries of Asia are still under the oppressive sway of *Communism*, with a consequent loss of human freedom. In lands traditionally known as places of harmony, Communism has introduced a shocking disharmony. It hinders integral human development by demanding a break with traditions, often violently imposed, and subjects large numbers of people to great suffering, including hunger, through unrealistic economic plans and misguided priorities such as costly armaments.

A further cause of grave concern is the *violation of human rights* in certain parts of Asia. Within this context we find the tendency on the part of some to dismiss as foreign to local cultures the aspirations of those who seek recognition of the inalienable rights of persons.

The question of human rights prompts us to note the signs of *religious intolerance* manifested in some Asian countries. Under the pressure of particular groups, for example, certain governments in nations where there are many followers of Islam have assumed postures which seem not in keeping with that tolerance which is a part of the venerable Islamic tradition. Attempts are sometimes made to change legislation, introducing policies which effectively deny the rights of religious minorities. The intransigent attitudes of some, which leave no room for other religions, recognize as authentically Asian only that which can be expressed within their own religious categories. The regrettable phenomenon of intolerance is not however restricted to any single religious tradition.

Finally, an especially alarming problem which the Church cannot ignore is *widespread poverty*. While some Asians are experiencing the benefits of technological development, others are being forced into modern forms of slavery. I am thinking of the exploitation of workers, the exclusion of vast numbers of people from the benefits of an advanced society, the lack of social assistance, illiteracy, the use of drugs and other "artificial paradises", the spread of gambling and violence, the corruption to be found in the great cities and the inhuman living conditions which millions of people are forced to endure in the teeming outskirts of urban centres. To these many social ills we have to add the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources and the pollution of the environment at the behest of influential economic interests, to the detriment of the peoples which are technologically least advanced.

3. Dear Brothers, your deep pastoral concern for the difficult social and economic conditions in which so many of your people must live - conditions which defy easy solutions and which are often reinforced by evils and injustices which in some cases have become permanent "structures" of society - is already a stimulus for you to renew your commitment to the task of evangelization. As Bishops you know that your principal task is not only to denounce evil, but also *to proclaim a message of conversion and hope*.

As men of faith, you firmly believe that the Gospel's power to overcome evil is rooted in a living person who is the Saviour of the world. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "only in the

mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). Christ is that "perfect man" (*Ibid.*) who in a certain sense united himself with every human person and restored in all of Adam's children - regardless of nation or culture - that likeness to God which had been disfigured by sin. Accordingly, it is *the light of Christ* which enables you to proclaim boldly the dignity and fundamental rights of each and every person in the face of great injustices. It is *the love of God revealed in Christ* which leads you courageously to apply the Church's social teaching to the real-life situation of the peoples of Asia and to foster social progress and a wider material and cultural development. It is *service of Christ* which sustains your educational and charitable institutions, and which summons even more of your faithful to follow the example of people like Mother Teresa of Calcutta in ministering to the needy and downtrodden.

At the same time you know that the search for meaning and well-being must also be a *quest for salvation*. The salvation with which you are concerned as Bishops is the salvation achieved and offered by Christ: *the salvation of the whole person*, a salvation that is complete and universal, unique and absolute, full and all-embracing. The Christian apostle is not just a social worker; nor is the Christian faith merely an ideology or a humanistic programme. The Church must always and everywhere strive to lead people to the realization of their eternal vocation in Christ, a call to personal communion with the Living God. Even when engaged in the work of human development, Christians should be ever mindful of the words of Saint Paul: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (*1Cor.* 8, 16).

4. On the eve the Third Christian Millennium, an ever *greater commitment to evangelization is imperative* for all the local Churches in Asia which, though small, have shown themselves to be dynamic and strong in their witness to the Gospel. Their special challenge is to proclaim the Good News where different religions and cultures meet, at the very crossroads of social, political and economic forces in today's world. In the light of this fundamental duty, your Meeting is an opportunity to seek new ways of strengthening awareness in the local Churches of the need for first evangelization.

Although the Church gladly acknowledges whatever is true and holy in the religious traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam as a reflection of that truth which enlightens all men this does not lessen her duty and resolve to proclaim without fail Jesus Christ who is "the way, and the truth, and life" (Io. 14, 6; cfr. *Nostra Aetate*, 2). We should not forget Pope Paul VI's teaching on the matter: "Neither respect and esteem for these religions nor the complexity of the questions raised is an invitation to the Church to withhold from these non-Christians the proclamation of Jesus Christ" (Pauli VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53). The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God's grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people (Cfr. *Ad Gentes*, 7). It is a contradiction of the Gospel and of the Church's very nature to assert, as some do, that the Church is only one way of salvation among many, and that her mission towards the followers of other religions should be nothing more than to help them be better followers of those religions.

5. The mission of God's people, dear Brothers, is twofold: to bear witness to Christ and "the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (*Col. 3, 1*), and to be a leaven of love and goodness in the affairs of this world until Christ returns in glory. Today, *Christian lay people* in ever greater numbers *wish to share in this mission* and to do so with ever greater commitment. We welcome this sign of the times and recognize the indispensable role of lay men and women in spreading the Good News.

As pastors and leaders of the faithful of Asia, you will find it necessary to respond to the desires of the laity, expanding their *participation in accordance with that distinction of roles* which has its foundation in a decision made in Apostolic times when, under the action of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles said that "it would not be right for us to neglect the word of God so as to give out food... we shall continue to devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word" (*Act. 6, 4*). Thus the clergy, freed from many administrative tasks undertaken to meet supplementary needs, can be models of a deep spirituality, witnesses to transcendent values expressed in prayer and contemplation, and ever attentive to the presence of God in the lives of those whom they serve.

In conformity with their specific ministry, priests should be particularly active in the *Christian formation of lay people*, whose irreplaceable vocation is the sanctification of the world in all of its temporal realities. Lay men and women are called to be courageous in expressing their Christian convictions in the public forum at the service of the common good. Yet educated Christians often suffer from the dichotomy of being experts in their professional fields but having an inadequate religious formation. Nevertheless, the history of evangelization, in Korea and Vietnam for example, as in ancient Rome itself, testifies to the excellent work of evangelization carried out by members of the laity. The Church in Asia today is increasingly blessed with the deep faith and infectious enthusiasm of lay people from all ways of life who serve the Church's mission successfully and convincingly, yet often in a discreet and unobtrusive manner.

The relationship between clergy and laity is above all one of complementarity. The Church in Asia owes an immense debt of gratitude to those courageous and dedicated missionaries, both men and women, who implanted and have sustained the Church on your Continent out of love for Christ and his Gospel. As the number of priests in particular decreases, there is a temptation to think of the growing participation of the laity as a replacement for priestly ministry, especially where vocations are few. But this way of thinking both hampers the work of evangelization and impoverishes the Church from within. Priests are absolutely essential for the continuation and fruitfulness of her life and mission. I therefore urge you to make every effort to continue to promote vocations to the priesthood among your people, with trust that God will shower his blessing on so important an endeavour. As the experience of some of your local Churches has shown, the participation of a dynamic and active laity, far from diminishing priestly vocations, serves rather to increase them.

6. Dear Brothers, I deeply share your conviction that this is a *significant hour for the Church in*

Asia. Your hopes and aspirations for the growth of your local Churches are my own, and I present them daily to the Lord of the harvest in constant prayer for you all. May your Meeting in Bandung resemble the scene in the Acts of the Apostles, when the Apostles were gathered before the day of Pentecost, "continuing with one mind in prayer with... Mary, the Mother of Jesus" (Act. 1, 14). May she who is Mother of the Church obtain a further outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon you all.

Accept this expression of my spiritual union with you, and my encouragement in your pastoral responsibilities. With my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican on the Feast of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, 23 June 1990.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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