

THE ASIAN CHURCH

Topic: The Asian Church: Methodology, Theology, and Ecclesiology
Convener: Gemma T. Cruz, St. Ambrose University
Moderator: Christina Astorga, Duquesne University
Panelists: Edmund K.F. Chia, Catholic Theological Union
Peter C. Phan, Georgetown University
Respondent: John S. Cummins, Bishop Emeritus of Oakland

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), which has been in existence for just thirty something years, is attracting much attention in part because of the progressive theological statements it produces but also because of its *modus operandi*. While promoting the triple dialogue of the church with the cultures, religions and the poor in Asia, it also adopts a very dialogical style in running the FABC. Lay collaboration is key to its operations, even if officially its membership is confined to bishops.

Edmund Chia, who served from 1996–2004 as one of FABC's executive secretaries, talked about this *modus operandi* from an insider's perspective. He spoke on how the FABC works, especially its difficulties and challenges given the diversity of its membership. Of significance is that because the language of communication is English, bishops from countries such as Indonesia, Japan, Vietnam and Korea, where English is rarely used, are often disadvantaged. On the other hand, bishops from the Philippines and India, especially those with a good command of the language, dominate FABC discussions. The Episcopal conferences from these two countries are sometimes even viewed as powerhouses within the Asian church. Chia shed light into the dynamics of FABC assemblies and bishops' institutes and pointed out that the participants of these come from all walks of life, including at times people who adhere to religions other than Christianity. It is out of these experiences of community and also of reflecting on the social realities of Asia that the bishops draft the FABC documents.

Peter Phan, who has researched and written extensively on the Asian Church, then explored the theological and ecclesiological implications of all in view of pointing to what can be shared with the church in the United States and elsewhere. His primary observation was that the Asian church was not so much preoccupied with issues of ecclesiology as with soteriology, especially in how the church can better contribute to building the Reign of God. Thus, Phan opined, one seldom sees the Asian bishops discussing issues which seem to be of concern to Western theologians, such as papal primacy, women's ordination, and institutional reform. The problems of the massive suffering of the Asian poor and life and death issues of interreligious conflicts and relations take on a priority to specifically internal ecclesiastical issues. This is also the Asian church's way of saying that mission *ad extra* precedes mission *ad intra*. So, while there is no question that the Asian bishops are emphatic about proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and savior there is a difference in approach, namely, how this proclamation is done. Of significance is that in Asia the proclamation through deeds and life takes precedence over words. Another point of interest is that proclamation is through the mode of dialogue rather

than a one-sided affair. In all of this, great attention is given to the role of the Holy Spirit and its presence in Asia.

Bishop John Cummins, who served as the USCCB-FABC liaison for more than a dozen years, offered a response to the two presentations based on his numerous encounters with Asian bishops as well as personal presence at many FABC assemblies. Cummins began by acknowledging Asia's emphasis on the Holy Spirit especially in its theology. He noted, for example, that in the concluding document from the 1998 Synod for Asia, an entire chapter is devoted to the Holy Spirit, whereas the document from the Synod for America in 1997 devoted only a handful of pages to the subject. Cummins praised what he referred to as "Asian poetry," especially in how Asian theology speaks of Jesus as the "enlightened one" and "compassionate friend of the poor." He expressed great admiration for the sense of camaraderie which is so evident in the Asian bishops' assemblies, especially the collaborative spirit manifest amongst the laity and the priests and the bishops. The thrust towards harmony seems to be shaping the dynamics. In conclusion, Cummins expressed a hope that the Asian presence in the American church be promoted and added that he personally wished to see more Asian-American leadership in interreligious dialogue in the United States.

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