

**Challenges facing religious
life in Asia
(1/2)**

**P. Marcello Zago
Superior General O.M.I.**

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The situation in which Christian religious life finds itself in Asia is quite different from that in other continents. In Asia, in fact, there are religious traditions which have developed to a considerable extent over the millennia, and there are forms of spiritual research which are very typical. It is sufficient to mention Buddhist monasticism or the different forms of Hindu worship and their role in popular religious practice in their respective cultures. Not only do they provide a model for the religion of the masses but they are also a dynamic for renewal. The cosmic-social element in Confucianism and in Islam has different expressions but is no less influential in society. Society has, in fact, been formed from these religious realities which incarnate certain values and give rise to certain structures. There are also other social and population factors: poverty and development, tradition and modernity, a variety of cultural areas. In Asia, therefore, religious life is required to respond to some special challenges which vary according to the different contexts.

1. Contemplative witnessing

The first great challenge for all religious men and women in the Asian continent has to do with contemplative *witnessing*, that is the real and visible search for the experience of God and of the Absolute. This is a challenge which faces the Church throughout the continent, especially in countries which have a Hindu or Buddhist tradition. In Moslem society the experience of God is manifest especially in submission to the Will of God while Confucianism emphasizes social relations.

The members of other religions, at one and the same time, admire and criticize the socio-caritative commitment of the Church. In their tradition, a religion, especially as expressed by some persons or states of life, must first of all incarnate and express the search for God and for the Absolute. It is this expression that they do not see in Christian tradition.

The whole Church, therefore, at its different levels, must respond to this challenge. The Bishops showed that they were aware of this need right from the first of their continental meetings. Therefore they chose prayer and contemplation as the theme of the Second General Assembly of the Federation of Asian Episcopal Conferences (FABC) held in Calcutta from November 19 to 26, 1978. «The Church must become sign and sacrament of the presence and action of God in the world of Asia today» (n. 29). She does so especially by giving witness to genuine Christian prayer (cf. nn. 13-20) which must permeate every dimension of life (cf. nn. 21-26), and also by assuming the values of the age-old search for

God by Asiatic peoples (cf. nn. 28-38). The FABC gave special emphasis to the role of contemplatives and the prayer of the poor (cf. nn. 45-46).

Consecrated people are called upon to respond to this challenge by the very fact of their consecration, as has been emphasized by the Synod on consecrated life and the subsequent postsynodal Exhortation. «Consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission, since it manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards her one Spouse» (VC 3). Quoting the words of Paul VI, the Exhortation also states: «at the deepest level of their being they are caught up in the dynamism of the Church's life, which is thirsty for the divine Absolute and called to holiness» (VC 39). Conforming to Christ, virgin, poor and obedient gives a special value and witness to consecrated life, even though charisma are different from one another but also complementary (cf. VC 31 -32). Consecrated persons must give expression to the unity between action and contemplation (cf. VC 74). «By the very nature of their choice they become privileged partners in the search for God which has always stirred the human heart and has led to different forms of asceticism and spirituality (...) therefore they are in duty bound to offer a generous welcome and spiritual support to all those who, moved by a thirst for God and a desire to live the demands of faith, turn to them, (VC 103; cf 39). «The consecrated life is at the service of this definitive manifestation of the divine glory, when all flesh will see the salvation of God» (VC 27).

The role of contemplation has also been emphasized in the missionary Encyclical. «The missionary must be a contemplative in action. He finds answers in the light of God's word and in personal and community prayer. My contact with the representatives of non-Christian spiritual traditions, especially those of Asia, has confirmed me in the view that the future of the mission depends to a great extent on contemplation. Unless the missionary is a contemplative he cannot proclaim Christ in a credible way. He is a witness to the experience of God and must be able to say with the Apostles: «that which we have looked upon concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you» (RM 91).

The postsynodal Exhortation emphasizes the importance of consecrated life in its different forms, and especially in its contemplative form, in countries where non-Christian religions are deeply rooted (cf. VC 79, 59). The importance of contemplative life was also underlined by the bishops of the FABC in their 1978 assembly: «We believe that the power of God's love is the only force that can truly renew the world. This force is the power of the Spirit; it is given to us by the Lord through prayer. Thus we turn to our brothers and sisters in contemplative communities, and to all those whose lives are dedicated to loving prayer and sacrifice. We reaffirm our esteem for their vocation, so precious to the Church. We express here the faith and hope we share with them that their lives, given in all fidelity, can be and are fruitful for their brethren, beyond human reckoning. Their worship speaks to us not only of God on whose mercy and love all human existence and doing finally depend, of the God "who is on the side of man". More than this, their lives of prayer serve to remind us of the God "who is not for the use of man", the God who is truly God» (n. 45).

2. Inculturation

A second challenge concerns inculturation, not only in general but of consecrated life and especially of contemplative life. At one and the same time, our search for God in Christ must be visible and assume the progress of grace as lived by these peoples and these religions. This also concerns contemplative experience and consecrated life. «Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together

with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission» (RM 52).

I remember a number of things which happened during my fifteen years as a missionary in Asia, when I was animator of interreligious dialogue on behalf of the Bishops' Conferences and I visited various dioceses and institutions. In Cambodia, during a Christian-Buddhist seminar, the non-Christians asked why there was no contemplative life in the Church. I gave as an example the Carmelite monastery in Phnom-Penh. The reaction was one of surprise. «Why can't we see these people who devote themselves to contemplation and why can't we visit them? We thought it was a huge high-security prison for unfaithful religious. Why is the monastery surrounded by such big high walls? What purpose does this form of contemplation serve if these persons cannot be seen and if we cannot learn to pray from them?»

I used to frequent Buddhist monasteries of meditation and contemplation. They are always situated in quiet places and the people respect the seclusion and silence of the contemplatives. Dedicated people bring them their frugal daily meal; others go to see them in their little individual cells in the forest, seeking to be edified by them. No one would dream of disturbing them in their recollection. During a prolonged experience which I had in one of these monasteries in Luang Prabang, Laos, a confrere asked if he could come and see me. Perhaps he was afraid I had lost my wits or the faith but he was allowed to see me only from a distance without disturbing me. Only the master spent a while with me every day, checking up on me and asking some questions to see what was my state of mind and what progress I was making. At the end of the retreat, the director of the center asked me to speak to the assembly of bonzes of the monastery and to tell them of my experience. From then onwards he invited me to take part in animating public retreats for the Buddhists of the city. These retreats were held on the first Sunday of each month. There is much to be learned from these age-old traditions. However, we must also make known the rich tradition of Christian contemplation.

There are a number of inculturation experiments taking place, such as Ashrams in India and some centers in Japan. I also know the esteem in which contemplative monasteries are held in Thailand and the support they receive from the Buddhists themselves. In Laos, Christian-Buddhist seminars on meditation were beneficial to both parties and caused a breakthrough in the walls of misunderstanding. The translation of the great mystics into the local languages is another means for promoting mutual respect and inculturation. More important still, however, is contemplation itself, when it is done visibly, understandably and especially in an authentic way.

The Exhortation emphasizes some important aspects of the inculturation of consecrated life. Inculturation can enrich the way in which a particular charism is understood and lived (cf. VC 79). At the same time, the consecrated life in itself, if it is lived authentically, is a factor in inculturation. «The consecrated life itself is the bearer of Gospel values and, where it is authentically lived, it can make an innovative contribution in meeting the challenges of inculturation. As a sign of the primacy of God and his Kingdom, it can, through dialogue, elicit a positive reaction in people's consciences» (VC 80).

The criteria for inculturation are twofold: dynamic fidelity to the charism and the genius of the people. «A genuine inculturation will help consecrated persons to live the radical nature of the Gospel according to the charism of their Insti-

tute and the character of the people with whom they come into contact. This fruitful relationship can give rise to ways of life and pastoral approaches which can bring enrichment to the whole institute, provided that they are consistent with the founding charism and with the unifying action of the Holy Spirit» (VC 80). The international character of an Institute and of local communities is seen as an opportunity for inculturation (cf. VC 47), especially «as signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony» (VC 51).

3. Dialogue

The third challenge is dialogue which may be considered within the consecrated life itself and the Church as well as outside with the faithful of other religions and other forms of religious life.

Dialogue has been the great new element of mission during the last twenty-five years. It is the way of a new relationship and cooperation with the members of other religious traditions. It is also a specific activity: «It has its own guiding principles, requirements and dignity. It is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills» (RM 56).

The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in its documents of 1984 (*Dialogue and Mission*) and 1990 (*Dialogue and Proclamation*), indicated different forms, based on experience: dialogue of life, of cooperation, of experience, of culture, of theology. Religious are engaged in all these forms but I believe that the most significant is that of monastic experience and contemplation.

There is a long tradition of monastic dialogue between East and West. Japanese Buddhist monks and Western Catholic monks alternate their places of meeting. In India there are different experiments in experiential dialogue, both in Ashrams and in seminars or group meetings. The sharing of spiritual experiences reveals the depths of the other person's nature, but it needs to be enlightened by the theological basis of the different traditions.

Dialogue in all its forms makes it possible to know the other person, to grow and to be renewed together, to find ways of inculturation for the religious life and to promote a more meaningful integration in the modern world.

Certainly external dialogue, whether ecumenical or interreligious, is not credible or practicable unless there is internal dialogue within the religious community and the Church. The postsynodal Exhortation makes frequent mention of this fact in its various aspects. «The experience of recent years widely confirms that dialogue is the new name of charity, especially charity within the Church. Dialogue helps us to see the true implications of problems and allows them to be addressed with greater hope of success. The consecrated life by the very fact that it promotes the value of fraternal life, provides a privileged experience of dialogue» (VC 74). This dialogue must be promoted within the community (cf. VC 44, 71, 92), in formation (cf. VC 66-67), among religious institutes (cf. VC 52-53), with the various component parts of the Church (cf. VC 50, 62, 74), with the bishops (cf. VC 49-50), with the laity (cf. VC 54-56), among the various states of life (cf. VC 62). It is this spirituality and communion (cf. VC 51), which is specific to consecrated life, which can give rise to dialogue with culture and religious have a long experience in this field (cf. VC 67, 79, 96-98), to ecumenical dialogue (cf. VC 100101) and to interreligious dialogue (cf. VC 8, 51, 67, 78, 79,102).

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