

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

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#### 4. Poverty

The challenge of poverty for religious life may be considered from two points of view. We may consider it from the aspect of the poor or from the connection between poverty and the search for the Absolute.

There is poverty in Asia, very evidently so in some countries. However, it is also present in those countries which have become economic tigers for the West. The progress of some economies has given greater emphasis to incentives deriving from cultural factors (Confucianism of Chinese extraction), political factors (freedom of initiative) and geographical factors (Pacific area). In any case, the poverty of the poor is a challenge for the Church and especially for religious. The first assembly of Asian Bishops in Taipei in 1974 discussed the question of commitment to the poor as one of their three challenges. They spoke of it as dialogue with the poor, a life dialogue which promotes awareness (cf. nn. 19-24). The postsynodal Exhortation reminds us of that fact. «The option for the poor is inherent in the very structure of love lived in Christ. All of Christ's disciples are therefore held to this option; but those who wish to follow the Lord more closely, imitating his attitudes, cannot but feel involved in a very special way. The sincerity of their response to Christ's love will lead them to live a life of poverty and to embrace the cause of the poor. For each institute, this involves adopting a simple and austere way of life, both as individuals and as a community» (VC 82).

This choice for the poor may be seen not only in the educational and assistance works developed in the continent, but also in a presence among the ethnic minorities (e.g. the Dalit in India and the minorities in almost every country). I think that this presence is not merely a consequence of their positive response to faith, but is an almost spontaneous choice of those considered to be the last. However, in this matter I believe we must not be exclusive: the challenge of the poor must be one with that of culture. A missionary presence requires that account be taken of the majority culture in a particular area or country, the culture which is most influential in promoting the human and spiritual promotion of the masses. Historically, the Jesuits have been attentive to this dimension which must not be underestimated in general planning and in respect for a particular charism. The Exhortation emphasizes this dimension (cf. VC 96-99).

The challenge of poverty also arises from the traditional connection between poverty and the search for the Absolute. In the Hindu and Buddhist traditions the search for the Absolute is realized in detachment from worldly things and therefore in affective and effective poverty. Hindu religious

searchers even go as far as total nudity. Therevada Buddhist monks beg for their food every day; what is left over is given to the laity and to the animals. They have only one change of monastic clothing. In Islam and in Confucianism goods are a gift of God to be shared.

In the apostolic Exhortation poverty is seen as a challenge which becomes generosity for the mission, promotion of solidarity and charity (cf. VC 89-90). It is also presented as the search for the Absolute. Poverty proclaims that God is man's only real treasure. When poverty is lived according to the example of Christ who, though he was rich became poor, it becomes an expression of the total gift of self which the Three Divine Persons make to one another. This gift overflows into creation and is fully revealed in the Incarnation of the Word and in his redemptive death» (VC 21). The value of Christian religious vows does not lie in their being instrumental in the search for perfection. They are above all a way and sign of the following of Christ. «The consecrated life truly constitutes a living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren. It is a living tradition of the Saviour's life and message» (VC 22).

#### 5. Creative fidelity to the charism

With the exception of women contemplatives, missionary life has always required a certain type of presence and action from religious. The emergence of local Churches and the deeper theological understanding of the nature of the Church and of religious life has brought out the concept of the charism, a gift of the Spirit for the building up of the community of believers.

The Church as a community is made up not only of three states of life (laity, ministers, religious) but also of a variety of charisma and consecrated life is one of them. In this context, the category of charism means not only consecrated life in general but also the totality of essential values which are proper to each institute. This is most useful in understanding religious life and in promoting its renewal. The exhortation adopts this outlook, although it will take some time to see all its practical consequences.

In Asia it is important that religious charisma be developed according to their original intuition, taking into account the challenges of a socio-religious nature in a particular context. In particular I think there is a special challenge for contemplative and mendicant orders whose charisma correspond to certain searchings and expressions in Asiatic religions.

Besides, the charisma concern not only the members of individual Institutes. They are gifts coming from the Spirit to enrich and renew the Church. They may be considered, therefore, as families or spiritual ecosystems or as constellations, that is, as groups similar to solar systems, moving around kinetic centers, made up of schools of sanctity and even more so of saints who have incarnated and taught these ways to holiness. In this way we can speak of Carmelite, Dominican, Franciscan constellations etc. This might be a way in which to involve and prepare the laity to take their place in the local Asian Churches which are conditioned by religious traditions, in which the laity continue to be subordinate if not marginal.

#### 6. Proclamation

Statistically Asia is the non-Christian continent par excellence. In 1995, of the almost six thousand million (5,759,276,000) people, three thousand million live in Asia. Christians among them are 304 million of whom 152 million are Catholic. That is not to deny the values in the continent, nor the historical progress of its peoples and religions

accompanied by divine grace, nor the real possibilities of salvation. However, acceptance of Christ is not a reality of secondary importance for persons and for communities. Christians and especially religious cannot feel that the Lord's command is foreign to them. Proclamation is a requirement of the new life in Christ. It is not possible to be a Christian without feeling the need to transmit this tremendous gift although it must be done with respect for the freedom of the other person and for the action of God. «Faith is strengthened when it is given to others» (RM 2). A person's identity is clarified by sharing and measuring up to others.

How, then, are we to proclaim Christ in an Asia which seems so unreceptive if not to the message at least to being incorporated in the Church? How can we transmit the message to believers in religions which are so rich and strongly rooted in the lives of persons and cultures? We must admit that our language and our witness are often incomprehensible. Therefore, we must not only use the same language but we must invent a language which is understandable and give witness which is visible and challenging. The proclamation to be initiated is not an imposition. The most normal proclamation is mutual witness in dialogue, leaving God and the person to make the subsequent steps.

A study of history reveals that Buddhism has often spread almost by osmosis around the monastic communities. That is what still happens today in growth areas especially among the ethnic minorities. The same can be said of Nestorian Christianity which spread along the silk road and during the fourth to the sixth centuries in China. Is it not true that the monasteries in medieval Europe played the same role? That is another motive for emphasizing the importance of the witnessing community. The postsynodal Exhortation suggests that every religious community should be a center of spirituality from which Gospel values irradiate. «The spiritual life must therefore have first place in the programme of Families of consecrated life, in such a way that every institute and community will be a true school of evangelical spirituality. Apostolic fruitfulness, generosity in love of the poor, and the ability to attract vocations among the younger generation depend on this priority and its growth in personal and communal commitment. It is precisely the quality of the consecrated life which inspires the men and women of today, who themselves are thirsting for absolute values. In this way the consecrated life will become an attractive witness» (VC 93). This is especially true in the Asiatic context.

## 7. Theology

In a situation of rapid change and inculturation it is important to have a sound theology. An inculturated theology, which takes account of the overall situation of society and the experience of the local Church, is a challenge and a necessity. I shall comment on three points: the relationship between faith and theology, the concept of the Kingdom and the overall view of mission.

Faith and theology are connected, but they are on two separate levels. Theology is built by starting from faith and therefore accepting the common faith of the Church. There can be no true theology outside of faith, which constitutes the basis for reflection. Faith is unique while theologies may be different. Even the experiences of the same faith may be different, inasmuch as, since they are situated in different contexts, they may emphasize and develop different aspects

which are complementary and respectful of the nucleus of faith itself.

In Asia there has been a development of different and important theological matrices such as theology of harmony and of the Kingdom. The former reflects a cultural approach which is inclusive rather than exclusive. It was developed by the theological Commission of the FABC. The latter is in response to pastoral needs in a context which is majority non-Christian and was developed by the Institute for interreligious dialogue and by one or other theologian. The Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* assumes the theology of the kingdom and points out its different dimensions and requirements. The whole of the second chapter is devoted to this theme and the last two sections bring the old and the new together. It is important to include the different dimensions with exclusivism.

The Christian mission includes a multiplicity of activities, which, because of concrete circumstances cannot always be realized in their entirety. For example, in some circumstances all that is possible is presence alone or only dialogue (cf. RM 51). However, this is not a reason to exclude the other activities which may be more essential to the mission even though they not be possible in a particular context. It is important to have a global view of the Church's mission, even in circumstances where historical or charismatic reasons make it possible to incarnate only one. Problems and tensions arise from a selective or restricted view of the ways of expressing mission. The fifth chapter of the missionary Encyclical points out the more important ways and activities in the present condition of the Church in the world.

## 8. Discernment

In a situation of change and consequently of personal, community and ecclesial choices to be made, discernment is of the greatest importance. Discernment is both a gift and a technique. It must be realized in an atmosphere of faith and prayer, but also by using the objective data available and measuring up to them. It is therefore a challenge for religious in Asia, who can in this way help the local Church. Discernment must, in fact, be a community process in all that concerns the community, such as theology, liturgy, catechesis etc. Therefore there must be a community comparing of ideas among theologians, in the universal or particular ecclesial community.

The postsynodal Exhortation reminds us of the need for discernment with regard to the mission in general (cf. VC 73), to inculturation (cf. VC 79) and to new evangelization (cf. VC 81).

## Conclusion

Asia is not only the continent of mission in the Third Millennium. It is also the continent of consecrated life. In fact, forms of religious life have existed there from time immemorial. They have been ways to perfection, forces of religious purification for the masses, a means of missionary irradiation by witness, factors of culture. Is Christian religious life, in its truly Christ-centered identity, not called to respond to these challenges? In this way it can be what it is supposed to be in the Church. •