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1. INTRODUCTION

A frog had lived all his life in a well. One day he was surprised to see another frog there.

"Where have you come from?," he asked.

"From the sea. That's where I live," said the other.

"What's the sea like? Is it big as my well?"

The sea frog laughed.'There's no comparison” he said.

The well frog pretended to be interested in what his visitor had to say about the sea. But thought, "Of all the liars I have known in my lifetime, this one is undoubtedly the greatest - and the most shameless!”

For centuries we have been living in isolation, in our own self-made wells. The question of respect for other religions, cultures, and the "otherness" of the other was strange to us. Today the situation is changing gradually.

The Mission in Asia can become meaningful only when we have a better grasp of her Sitz im Leben. The Church/Churches in Asia is a reality deeply rooted in this world. She cannot exist in isolation. Given the contemporary global situation, the 'world' needs

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2 The phrases "Church and Churches in Asia" are used synonymously.
to be understood today in an intercultural perspective. One can no longer speak of cultures, religions, nations or continents in isolation. For, to speak of one global culture is to speak of a monoculture. Cultures are meaningful only in an intercultural perspective. The same is true of religions.

That is why the expressions like Mission, Evangelization, and Conversion so vital to Christian faith, are greatly misunderstood in many Asian countries. This makes us aware that the how of the Mission is as important as the why and what of it, if it has to be intelligible in a given society. In presenting Pope John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Asia (EA) to the Bishops of Asia, Cardinal Paul Shan had pointed out that "the big question presently confronting us, given the religious and cultural context of Asia, is not why we should proclaim the Good News of Christ's Salvation but how" (EA 29).\footnote{EA also speaks of "new evangelization" (EA 29). This new evangelization is about the Churches in Asia taking on the "face of Asia" so that they respond to the specific needs of Asia and become more meaningful for Asian society, particularly the poor and the downtrodden.\footnote{Cardinal Darmaatmadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia, "Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection 63 (1999), 888.} The focus of this article is precisely this. How can we understand Mission in Asia today? How can it be understood meaningfully by people of other cultures and religions? This calls for a radical change, a metanoia, a going beyond noein, beyond thinking and reasoning to being on the part of the Asian Church.

The history of religions is full of conflicts and misunderstandings. The effort of understanding other cultures and religions in the past was peripheral and self-centred. However praiseworthy the missionary experiments of the missionaries like
Matteo Ricci and Robert de Nobili, what inspired these great pioneers to cultural adaptation was not so much the love and respect for those cultures and traditions but to make Christianity acceptable to the higher castes and aristocratic classes. Understanding the other cultures and traditions for their own worth hardly played any role there.

The way we understand is symptomatic of the way we are! Once we understand something of the way the other traditions view reality, we shall be in a position to understand them. This in turn puts us in a better position to understand our own faith and the challenges it offers us. Hence we need to move towards a more holistic understanding. In order to do this we have to change our approach. The kind of approach we have towards reality manifests itself in our dealings with others. If our approach is one-sided, absolutistic, from within our own perspective or from within our own understanding then we are in a dangerous position. Quite often our attitude is such that what is right for me/us must be right for everybody or that my/our criteria of truth, right and justice are the only acceptable criteria! Such an approach towards other persons, cultures and religious traditions will not take us far on the path of peace and harmony. Awareness and acknowledgement of the fact that others have their own understanding and criteria of truth and right just as I have mine, will open us up towards a more holistic understanding of religions and cultures. We need to re-form our thinking. Today's awareness of cultural and religious diversity challenges us to move towards a new way of thinking, a new way of dealing with the problem.5

In order to grasp this problem we must first of all contextualize the question. Context throws light on the question at hand and only

5 True, the danger of relativism is latent here but that is not a position that I subscribe to. All our positions are relative to (i.e. related to) our world of faith and belief. They don't make sense outside such a world. Our worlds of faith and belief are not exhaustive. The need for dialogue arises precisely from such a situation. Through dialogue we correct and complement each other's understanding and formulations. The goal of dialogue is truth - which none of our formulations can exhaustively encapsulate.
then do we begin to understand it. Everything is contextualized in our own backgrounds. We have a certain understanding of mission according to our contexts, our cultures and epochs. From this we begin to see how mission could be meaningful today in a world which is conscious of its diversities.

2. ASIAN CONTEXT

Asians constitute 54% of the world's population and the Christian population is just 2.3%. This despite the fact that Jesus was an Asian. Considering the vast population, the percentage of Christians after 2000 years is still very small. The rationale behind this poor response to the message of the Gospel is the failure of the Asian Church in articulating and communicating the Christian faith in a way suited to the Asian genius and relevant to the signs of the times. This is evident in the western life style adopted by Christians, the western ecclesial structures, art and architecture, liturgies, music and above all western theological thought patterns and idioms, christological and ecclesiological formulations, etc. It is only after Vatican II that there is a move towards the development of Asian theology - which however is still looked upon with suspicion. For example, the Asian Church is afraid of being misunderstood by Rome. Ever since the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Cardinal Josef Tomko's description of India as "the epicenter of certain theological tendencies and Asia their main territory", there has been a sort of suspicion and mistrust of the Indian/Asian theologians on the part of the Vatican. The Church has not taken seriously the specific Asian multicultural and multireligious context. Ecclesia in Asia (EA) makes this point clear when it says:

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6 Cf., Michael Jaffarian, "The Statistical State of the Missionary Enterprise", Missiology XXX: 1 (January 2002) pp. 15-32. However, according to Michael Jaffarian "Asia grew from 2.3% Christian in 1900 to 8.5% Christian in 2000" while "Europe began the twentieth century 94.5% Christian and ended it 76.8% Christian".

"...Likewise, the Church lives and fulfils her mission in the actual circumstances of time and place. A critical awareness of the diverse and complex realities of Asia is essential if the people of God on the continent are to respond to God's will for them in the new evangelization. The Synod Fathers insisted that the Church's mission of love and service in Asia is conditioned by two factors: on the one hand, her self-understanding as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ gathered around her Pastors, and on the other hand, the social, political, religious, cultural and economic realities of Asia" (EA 5). To sum up context is the important factor in the mission of the Church. Mission is born of a vision and vision itself originates in a particular context.

The Asian context comprises Asia's ethnic groups, cultures, languages and religions and the problems of political and socio-economic corruption, over-population, illiteracy, and a hoard of other problems. Asia's hopes and anxieties are part of Asian history. Following are some specific areas that need to be explicated.

2.1 Massive Economic Poverty

Seen economically, a number of countries of Asia have made considerable economic progress, but there still exist degrading and inhuman poverty, widening inequality, unequal distribution of resources and opportunities etc. Poverty is a telling forecast of Asia's future. Despite modernization Asia finds no solution to poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease and oppression. Furthermore, Asia is confronted with the problem of child labor and slum dwellers. An increasing number of street children are condemned to live as beggars. Globalization has further worsened the problem. Despite its many positive effects globalization has "worked to the detriment of the poor, tending to push poorer countries to the margin of economic and political relations. Many Asian nations are unable to hold their own in a global market economy" (EA 39). In addition the pandemonium of institutionalized corruption, bribery, vandalism and scams widen the gap between the rich and the poor.
2.2 Social Oppressive Systems

Oppressive systems based on class, caste, race and gender are very rampant in Asian countries and they are the factors of division in the societies. Migration within Asian countries and to other countries is also a major problem facing Asia. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are inhumanly treated. There are also a number of life-threatening and destructive tendencies such as flesh-trade, human rights abuses, disrespect for human life etc., in Asia. Terrorism is another major factor that is creating dread in Asian countries. It has become an organized body that is spreading seeds of revenge and hatred among people.

2.3 Multi-Religiosity and Multiculturalism

In this large continent great distances are spanned by a multiplicity of races, religions and cultures. Unregulated globalization threatens to shatter the deeper values of Asian culture. Sharp contrasts exist among peoples, cultures, religions and conditions of life from country to country and within the countries of Asia. Positively Asia is the birth place of diverse religious traditions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is also the birthplace of other religions such as Taoism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Shintoism etc. All these religious traditions embody deep-rooted religious values. Asia is blessed with the religious experiences of Sufis, Sages, Poets and Saints. "The religions of Asia have molded the lives and cultures of Asian people for several millennia and continue to give meaning and direction for their lives even today. Religions of Asia are living religions, permeating every aspect of the life of the individual, family and society. A deep religious nature is one of the main characteristics of the Asian people, expressed in various ways in the family and social life at critical moments through rites of passage such as birth, marriage and death."\(^8\) Negatively we are affected by the politically motivated interreligious

Asia’s Mission of Dialogue

conflicts leading to religious fundamentalism and communalism. This is one of the grave problems facing Asia.

2.4 Institutionalized Oppression of Women

Oppression of women is not just peculiarly Asian reality. Almost every continent has its own centuries-old story of violence and oppression towards women. Foot binding (mutilating of the feet to restrict the movements) of females in China, sati in India, witch hunting in Europe, female circumcision in African countries, etc., are some of the examples of earlier times but they have taken new forms of cruelty in our days.9 Today 'femicide' or 'crimes of honor' in certain countries are growing in number.10 Oppression of women has become a cultural pattern and hardly any religion questions this inhuman violence. Instead the sacred scriptures are often misused and misinterpreted in order to vindicate the patriarchal system to which religions have fallen prey. Blindness and silence of many religious traditions are a betrayal of what genuine religion stands for. In a society diseased by "macho-patriarchal insanity"11 as Samuel Rayan puts it, discrimination of a girl child often begins in her own mother's womb and is continued right through life, until she is consumed in the funeral pyre. Asia abounds in such 'institutional inequality'.

2.5 Political Disturbance

Politically Asia is diverse: Dictatorship, Democracy, and Militarization - all these are at home in Asia. Constant political upheaval and uncontrolled corruption at all political levels is common to her. "In certain countries, the whole of life is politicized, affecting every sector,

making implementation impossible. Governments are forced to adopt policies and practices such as the Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP), dictated by the IMF, the WB and the WTO. These policies are devoid of a human face and social concern.\textsuperscript{12}

2.6 Militarization

Allegedly militarization is aimed at national security. But despite these apparent security-complexes nations live in constant insecurity and under threat of wars. Wars are instrumental in impoverishing the wealth of the nations because heavy expenses are incurred for the upkeep of military personnel, the weapons etc. More money is spent in preparing sophisticated weapons of destruction than for the welfare of the poor and the needy. While people starve to death in many of the third world countries, these very nations are busy with wars and are spending billions of dollars in manufacturing weapons of destruction.

The horrible effects of recent World-Wars and other major tragedies of such a nature cannot be easily erased from human memory. Technology has invented new and faster methods of destruction: nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, suicide bombs, and the invention of Neutron bombs, etc. The results are obvious in the world today: loss of life and of property, environmental disasters, moral degradation, psychological trauma among people and deep hatred and revenge that is passed on from generation to generation. The effects of militarization are manifested today more than ever in the huge number of refugees. In the face of such militarization we cannot deny the possibility of a nuclear holocaust!

3. MISSION IN ASIA TODAY

The primary mission of the Asian Church is to respond to the existential concerns of the Asian people. In particular, mission in Asia

is inconceivable today if we do not take into consideration its rich cultural diversity and multi-religiosity. Hence dialogue and collaboration are the two important components of mission in Asia. If witnessing is to be the core of mission, and if dialogue is not to deteriorate into disputation and mere discussion, then collaboration and communion will have to enter the mainstream of this enterprise. Both presuppose the fundamental disposition of openness of heart and mind. Such openness implies the ability to listen, to receive - both built on the attitude of hope! Today's understanding of mission has to include "listening" and "receiving" because they embody par excellence openness of our being. Indeed it is these that make dialogue possible. Listening and receiving are important aspects of dialogue.

The Asian Church has to listen to the workings of the Spirit within her own life. She should listen to the contemporary prophets both within and outside the Church who through their writings, theological reflections and through various movements of the Spirit are pointing to a new direction for a meaningful understanding of mission in Asia. Besides, the Asian Church has to listen to the poor and the underprivileged; to the women whose voice is not heard; to the youth who search for meaning in life; to the cry of the earth that is being constantly devastated; to the truth embodied in various religious traditions so that she is able to recognize the workings of the Spirit who gathers and unites. In short she has to listen to the Spirit of God who blows how and where She wills.

Evangelization, inculturation, mission, dialogue etc. are not mere words but worlds in themselves. They are an interconnected reality. Till recently mission was understood independently of dialogue. The word dialogue did not exist in the previous vocabulary of mission. Mt.28 was taken literally and universalized, i.e. made applicable in new contexts; that too independently of the rest of Matthew's gospel and of all other teachings of Jesus in the gospels. In a multicultural context we need to understand mission and dialogue differently. Expressions like evangelization, inculturation, mission, dialogue etc. either have to find a fuller meaning or they will be thoroughly misunderstood in such a context.
In order to understand the meaning of mission we need to understand what inculturation is. But we cannot speak of *inculturation* without interculturalization. Interculturalization is the realization that there are different cultures. Inculturation is the need for and awareness of symbiosis of cultures. Symbiosis is the mutual influence of cultures and traditions.

According to Francis D'Sa mission is the *discovery of the truth of one's own tradition* and the truth of this mission is Good News. Dialogue is the way to discover truth in *other* traditions.\(^\text{13}\) This is also the way to discover oneself in greater depth, a means to discover the wealth of one's own religious and cultural tradition while encountering the other. Every genuine religious tradition embodies its own *Good News* and so has a mission.

Concretely we need to change our *methodology* if we are to be effective in realizing the mission in Asia. This also implies that we are open to a new understanding of evangelization keeping in mind Jesus' own mission, while He was on earth.

### 3.1 Methodology

Asian mission suffered very much from the colonial attitude of "conquest", conquering peoples, cultures and religions. Consequently, the missionaries had a very negative attitude towards the cultures and religions of Asia. The missionary methodology was simply importing the western models of churches, prayers, liturgies, theologies, spirituality and art, rather than inculturating the Christian faith in the cultural and religious forms of the people of Asia. By and large missionaries were planting Churches and increasing the Church membership as if this alone constituted mission. They were not very much involved in *transforming the Asian society* with the leaven of the Gospel.

\(^\text{13}\) Francis X. D'Sa in: Interkulturelle Theologie -Dialog zwischen den theologischen Kulturen - Univ. Prof. Dr. Franz Weber & Univ. Prof. Dr. Francis X. D'Sa, Bildungshaus Batschuns, Batschunser Theologische Akademie (Btha), 1. Mai - 5. Mai 2000.
Evangelization is no more considered solely a work of recruiting new members; the concept of evangelization is broader today, as taught by the Council Documents, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio*. Evangelization includes integral human development (not just religious and spiritual upliftment of the people, but also their physical and economic development). Emphasis is on spreading and sharing the Good News of God's Kingdom to *all people of goodwill*. Evangelization includes the promotion of peace and justice - reaching out to all people irrespective of class, caste, creed, and sex and working towards the transformation of society.14

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) does not view evangelization in terms of the spreading of the Gospel of Salvation throughout the length and breadth of the human geography in Asia. Instead it looks at it as an integral activity involving the whole human community, every group, and every person and has to do with inculturation, dialogue, the Asian-ness of the church, justice, the option for the poor, etc. Thus evangelization is the all-encompassing activity and mutually involves all other activities of the Church including interreligious dialogue. Accordingly "there will be no complete evangelization unless there is dialogue with other religions and cultures. There is no full evangelization if there is no answer to the deep yearning of the peoples of Asia."15 Concretely, the focus of the FABC is on the *new way of being Church in Asia*. This *new way* is the triple dialogue: dialogue with the poor of Asia, dialogue with the religions of Asia and dialogue with Asia's diverse cultures. The dialogue with cultures takes place through the process of inculturation; the dialogue of religions takes place through interreligious dialogue and dialogue with the poor is in view of facilitating integral human development and liberation. "These three

15 Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja, "A New Way of Being Church in Asia", Vidyajyothi63(1999), 891.
ministries are mutually involving components of the evangelizing mission of the Church and constitute what has come to be referred to as the New Way of Being Church in Asia" 16

As Asians, we claim harmony as a core value. Our "new way of being Church" is a communion of communities. The triple dialogue to which the Asian Church has committed herself, asks us to stretch our capacities for relationships that are more inclusive.

To put it succinctly, this triple immersion of the Asian Churches into the life of Asia's poor, into Asia's vibrant cultures, and into Asia's living and fertile religious traditions is the need of the hour. If this triple immersion takes place, Asian Churches will emerge with vitality, newness and originality. The Western Church could follow this method of dialogue with the context in its venture of evangelization.

Finally, evangelization in Asia requires a concrete pastoral action. For this a new method has to be adopted which the FABC calls as the pastorial spiral methodology. It consists of 4 steps: (i) exposure and immersion in the Asian realities; (ii) analysis of socio-economic-religio-cultural realities; (iii) theological reflection and prayer on these findings and experiences; (iv) pastoral planning in an ongoing process of praxis. This has to be introduced in the centers of formation and theological education.

3.2 Triple Responsibility of the Asian Church

In the new understanding of evangelization - liberation, dialogue, and inculturation are seen as essential constituents. But the Asian Church has to keep in mind her triple responsibility while accomplishing this task: Firstly, she has to take her mission of evangelization seriously -she cannot give it up. She is called to proclaim the Good News.

16 Edmund Chia, Towards a Theology of Dialogue, Schillebeeckx's Method as Bridge between Vatican's Dominus Iesus and Asia's FABC Theology, Bangkok, 2003, 83.
Secondly, this mission of evangelization must be proclaimed in such a way that others (i.e. the other religious traditions) understand it. That implies "listening" to their spiritual quest and faith-expressions and from there learning to express in a way that they understand our faith-expressions. This is the function of dialogue.

Thirdly, the mission of evangelization has to be relevant in today's context i.e., it must be contextualized and concretized in our commitment for justice, peace and the well-being of all, inclusive of the earth. This is called diakonia or evangelization in service.

Evangelization in service is a means of sharing the Good News of God's Kingdom with the whole of creation i.e., the recipient of this Good News has to be the whole of creation. Raimond Panikkar gives us a thought provoking insight in this regard. Panikkar translates the Gospel of Mark 16:15 as follows:

"Walking into the whole cosmos proclaim (sing, dance) the good news to the entire creation". Further he comments: "The text says, walk, step in, simply go as a pilgrim, without instruments or aids of any kind. It continues saying: into the whole cosmos; and we know that cosmos is not a geographical category. Penetrate into the inner fabric of reality. And then the text goes on: proclaim, i.e., sing, dance, manifest, contagiate... What? The Good News, namely that the prison should be open, the hungry fed, injustice healed, hatred overcome. And this is to the entire creation and not to humans only."17

This Good News is: caring for the poor and the downtrodden, bringing comfort, healing and hope to the broken hearted, freedom to those in bondage, light to those who grope in the darkness of ignorance, and proclaiming peace and reconciliation where hatred, revenge and injustice abound in the whole world (cf. LK 4:18-19). The Church

should make brave attempts to work towards this goal. Consequently we need to have some basic understanding of dialogue.

3.3 Mission of Dialogue

In dialogue we may disagree (perhaps because we do not understand) but we certainly do not refute the positions espoused by the other! Dialogue does not mean we agree with whatever the dialoguing partner says or that we give up our own position. If this were so, dialogue would be a mockery, not a genuine sharing. In this regard we could take a cue from what the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue [PCID] said about its methodology a few years ago in its self-introduction:

"Dialogue is a two-way communication. It implies speaking and listening, giving and receiving, for mutual growth and enrichment. It includes witness to one's own faith as well as openness to that of the other. It is not a betrayal of the mission of the Church, nor is it a new method of conversion to Christianity. This has been clearly stated in the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II "Redemptoris Missio". This view is also developed in the two documents produced by the PCID: The Attitude of the Catholic Church towards the Followers of Other Religious Traditions: Reflections on Dialogue and Mission (1984), and Dialogue and Proclamation (1991)."

Before entering into an interreligious dialogue certain misunderstandings need to be clarified: Raimond Panikkar points out that there is in interreligious dialogue no merging of religious traditions. The aim is not merging of world's religions into a universal religion. Nor is it to arrive at a total agreement between religious traditions. Instead the ideal foreseen by interreligious dialogue is: To foster communication between diverse religious traditions and different cultures of the world in order to bridge the

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gulfs of mutual ignorance and misunderstandings, giving them the chance to speak their own mythical language, to share the richness of their faith experience. He also points out that there may be moments when some may reach this ideal of communion, but this does not imply a reduction of the rich variety of religious experiences into a single system or tradition.\textsuperscript{19}

Interreligious dialogue is also a means of purification of religions. For example in the face of fundamentalism and interreligious conflicts that are becoming a common phenomenon of our time, interreligious dialogue plays an important role in showing what religion truly is.

Finally dialogue is a "spiritual quest, a school of humility which teaches us that no one is self-sufficient, that there are no monopolies in this wide world where the sun shines for the sinner and for the just alike. Dialogue itself is not a means to get to the other but a means to discover myself in greater depth; a means of going out into the whole world, of meeting that alienated human being.. .”\textsuperscript{20} who is also a child of God.

The Catholic Church from the time of Vatican II with its Decree on \textit{Nostra Aetate} has been gradually opening itself up in the direction of dialogue. The openness of the Church has also occasioned \textit{interreligious dialogue} at various levels (though in a more cautious way!). Hence we have today the document \textit{Dialogue and Proclamation} issued in May 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The Council insists on the constructive and positive interreligious relationship between various religious traditions in order to enhance mutual enrichment and understanding. It recommends a fourfold dialogue:

\textsuperscript{19}Raimon Panikkar, \textit{The Intrareligious Dialogue}, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 1984, 36-37.

• *The dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, their human problems and preoccupations.

• *The dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for the integral development and liberation of people.

• *The dialogue of experience/testimony*, where persons, rooted in their own religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, for instance with regard to prayer and contemplation, faith and ways of searching for God or the Absolute.

• *The dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages, and appreciate each other's spiritual values.  

However we must keep in mind certain prerequisites before entering into such a dialogue:

One must be deeply rooted in, convinced of and be faithful to one's own religious tradition. One must remain loyal to one's own tradition. Panikkar reminds us that remaining loyal to one's own tradition does not mean obeying blindly without a critical understanding of the beliefs and doctrines that have been handed down by a religious tradition. Neither is it just a mechanical repetition of rituals. Instead tradition in its real sense means "continuation and growth". That which is handed over in a tradition for future generations is the "crystallized experience of what has happened" long ago in a particular context. It can become stagnant and mechanical if it does not cater to the changing situation of the recipients. In fact tradition has within itself an inner dynamism of

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growth, open to change to suit the needs of the receivers. A tradition that remains unchanged over the years has no relevance for changing generations and so is bound to degenerate into a dead symbol. In such a case it cannot be called an authentic tradition.  

One must be genuine and be able to understand rightly the traditions of others. We must not violate other traditions; they (other traditions) must be interpreted according to their own self-understanding i.e., we have no right to interpret the religious beliefs and faith of other religious traditions from our perspective. Doing this would be a great violation of these traditions/Violating these traditions is equal to absolutizing one's own religion. This means that we are called to enter and share in the same myth and its beliefs, sacred as they are to their believers. One must also be open to the New i.e., to listen to the Spirit of God and be open to be guided and led by the Spirit.

What we need to avoid is aggression and insensitivity. Our whole project of evangelizing mission will suffer if we are aggressive and insensitive in dealing with other religious traditions. In other words our Mission is: to unite and not to divide; to discern and not to destroy; and to heal and not to hurt. Our path is the path of love (Cf. I COR: 13). The basic principle to be kept in mind in dialogue is: To understand others as they understand themselves so that they understand us as we understand ourselves.

3.4 Mission to be the Light of the World, Salt of the Earth, Leaven in the Dough

The three common examples of light, salt and leaven in the dough which the Gospels give us are powerful symbols of how we

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23 Ibid.
need to go about our mission of evangelization in Asia. The light enlightens so that we can see the lighted objects. No one can see pure light - we only see lighted objects. The salt loses itself in the process of giving taste to the food. It does not convert everything into salt. The leaven is silent in its action andtransforms the whole dough. It does not convert everything into leaven! The Asian Church is called to be the light of the world, salt of the earth and leaven in the dough in order to bring about transformation of our societies.

4. CONCLUSION

Religions are involved in global conflicts. They are still lagging behind the challenges of our times. Every genuine religious tradition has a mission and the mission is to bring metanoia and wholeness to our world. This mission can be accomplished only through dialogue and collaboration. The same applies to the mission in Asia. In Panikkar's view "Too long have we been fighting under all types of pretences, often with religious justifications; too long have we built private empires, religious as well as political and economic. War is no longer about a port or ritual. It is simply a criminal act. Wars begin not only in mind, they mature in the religious heart of humanity. Religious reconciliation is the mission of the religious bodies on earth." Again, Panikkar puts it pragmatically: "Christian mission is specific. It is part of the human mission." What we need today is not expectation but hope of new awareness! Religions are supposed to nurture life in all its fullness and work for peace on earth for all, and above all justice in face of oppressive systems of diverse nature. They are supposed to uproot violence. "Religions cannot 'save' the individual by extricating the individual..."
from humanity. They cannot 'save' humanity by severing human beings from the earth.\textsuperscript{28}

The contemporary situation of Asia beckons diverse religious traditions to come together. No genuine religion can consciously abide by or follow the ideology of any oppressive system. Religions have to take upon themselves this responsibility of making our people aware of the dangers of these oppressive systems. This entails a triple task: reflection and analysis of the situation in which we find ourselves, a deepening awareness of what such a situation does to us in the depth of our being, and an effort towards handling this situation. How can these inhuman and unjust structures be transformed without collaboration! That is why all religious traditions need to do some soul-searching. They have the responsibility of critiquing, opposing and taking a clear stand against these systems and of inspiring the people to reach their human/communitarian destiny. In this sense every genuine religious tradition has a mission to fulfill in today's Asia. This mission is to be reconcilers and bridge-builders between God, world and humans. Propagating hatred and cultural superiority would only worsen our situation. The Asian Church can lead the way in such a venture.

Furthermore, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) pleads for such interreligious collaboration. It points out that interreligious cooperation is no longer an option but a necessity.\textsuperscript{29} It expresses the need for dedicated efforts to "examine how, in a world that is increasingly interconnected, we can find new ways to respect our religious differences while forging peaceful bonds based on our common humanity."\textsuperscript{30} It also states emphatically that "Religion will prosper in this century only to the extent that we can maintain a sense of community

\textsuperscript{29} Symposium on Interreligious Dialogue held in Rome by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Jan. 16-18, 2003 (Zenith News).
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}
among people of different religious beliefs who work together as a human family to achieve a world peace.\textsuperscript{31}

We have enough opportunities to collaborate with one another. There are \textit{common concerns} that \textit{affect all religious traditions} such as: copious oppressive and unjust systems that are widespread in our societies; rampant corruption at various levels; the agony of the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden, women, dalits, tribals, children; religious fundamentalism leading to terrorism and despair; the devastation of mother earth etc. These \textit{common concerns} should bring our religious traditions together. Collectively they should read the \textit{signs of the times} in order to understand what is really going on behind the grave human, ecological and religious problems of our times. They should dialogue and share the way they perceive the world in the light of their respective revelations. An awareness of the \textit{common responsibility} in handling these diabolic forces, urging them to joint initiatives should be the objective of dialogue. This is the mission inherent in every religious tradition.

Similarly, the FABC recognizes the presence of the Spirit of God in history, guiding the salvation of \textit{all} people. Hence dialogue with \textit{other religions}, positively recognizing the authentic values present among them, and holding dialogue with also the \textit{historical socio-cultural movements} is very important. Since the poor masses of Asia are deeply religious, seeking God and longing for spiritual fulfillment, the Church has to become the Church of the poor catering to their needs and aspirations. The cultural elements that are oppressive to the people should be challenged by the Church. Therefore, \textit{evangelization} of cultures, dialogue with other religions, task of transforming the unjust and inhuman social and political structures are understood today in Asia as the essential aspects of evangelization, and these cannot be separated from the proclamation of Jesus Christ and the Gospel.

\textsuperscript{31}\textit{Ibid.}
In view of this, efforts to work out indigenous contextual theologies do abound. This does not mean that full fledged theologies of this kind have arrived. It only means that Asian theologians have become more deeply aware of the fact that traditional credal formulae become meaningless in the cultural contexts of Asia. These formulae were worked out on the cultural and religious background of the Jewish, Greek and Roman worlds. This is the main reason why the salvific story of Jesus has not made any substantial impression on the Asian peoples as a whole. Asia's peoples have admired Jesus enormously but, for example, His 'way of the cross' as the way of salvation doesn't make sense on their religious and cultural horizon. Asian women and men theologians have been absorbed in this enterprise in diverse ways. More contextually theologians from the "dalit" (suppressed and oppressed) and 'tribal'(indigenous people) communities are coming up with ideas which will constitute the bricks of a meaningful and relevant contextual theologies. Asian theologians have also been articulating their own brand of a theology of liberation which is constructed on the quest for justice and peace. Last but not least women theologians have been creatively working towards a theology that is more intuitive and meditative, highlighting a dimension that traditional theology traditionally either overlooks or neglects or perhaps even denies.

The following statement of Panikkar could inspire us to usher in a new style of life, a life of collaboration to guide us in our praxis of interreligious dialogue: "Our dream is precisely this collaboration between a handful of people of all races, colors and religions - perhaps the real Christian Pentecost of our era - working together, not only for an improvement of the programs, or for the relief of others, but for a reform and transformation of the world." This in sum, seems to me, is the mission of the Church in Asia today.

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