Evangelization in Asia in the 3rd Millennium: Challenges and Proposals for the Continent and for the World

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Introduction

The Church and her every member is 'missionary' by divine mandate. The unchanging divine mission of the Church must continue today in the 3rd millennium, also in Asia and indeed, in the world at large. "The Mission of Christ, the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion…this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service"[1].

Sent because "God so loved the world" (Jn 3:16) Jesus Christ, "the Light of the world" (Jn 8:12; Lk 2:32), is the foundation of Christian mission. Witnessing to Jesus Christ and proclaiming him as unique and universal Saviour of all forms the content of Christian mission. The object of proclamation is always Christ who accomplishes the full and authentic liberation of all evil, sin and death and through whom God himself communicates to us His own life. This is the Good News that all people on earth have the right to hear and come to know. In his post-synodal Apostolic Letter, Ecclesia in Asia, John Paul II presents Jesus Christ to the Asian people (indeed to all people) as one who "came that all may have life, and have it abudantly" (Jn 10:10). The Saviour of the world was born in Asia. His proclamation in Asia must be considered as a gift to Asia. The complete revelation of God in Jesus Christ is not hotile to the deepest human desires; moreover, this revelation satisfies, beyond every expectation, the hunger and thirst of every human heart. For this very reason the proclamation of Jesus Christ must not be imposed but proposed in Asia, because it can only be effective if it is freely accepted and lovingly embraced.

The Second Vatican Council had a world-wide or global concern. The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, added a necessary and universal dimension to mission by pointing to areas of the globe, in Asia and Africa especially, whose diverse cultures and teeming populations have not yet been penetrated by the gospel. Against the background of modern man's search for world unity the document emphasises the plan of God, i.e. "the whole human race is to form one people of God". *Ad Gentes* focuses on making the Church an active

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[1] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 1

presence within and native to the diverse and developing non-Christian cultures in which she exists.

The Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, On Evangelisation in the Modern World, places Christian mission in its broad context and sets it a new tone. It defines mission as "bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new"[2]. The theme of renewal whether it be personal, societal or global runs throughout the document, for it says, "…The Church evangelises when she seeks to convert solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs"[3].

Evangelii Nuntiandi presents Mission as a single but complex, interrelated, complementary and articulated reality[4]. Instead of breaking the world into Christian and non-Christian blocks, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* looks at the world as a complex and diversified reality, namely, the dechristianised world, the world inhabited by people of various religious traditions, the world of the non-believers, of the non-practising and those indifferent to religious truth, etc. In keeping with the teachings of the Vatican II *Evangelii Nuntiandi* made mission revolve about man in full respect for his freedom.

Redemptoris Missio articulates identity of today's world with clarity and it shows how that identity influences doing the mission today: migration, urbanisation, relativism, the horizontalization and secularisation of the concept of salvation, pluralism, materialism and the quest for the sacred. *Redemptoris Missio* also takes into account values that are dear to the hearts of the men and women of today and which form characteristics and requirements of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, altruism and charity, the quality of being as superior to having, witness, etc. Apparently contrasting elements in mission are integrated and harmonised in *Redemptoris Missio*: dialogue and proclamation, human promotion and inculturation, witnessing presence and activity, justice and spirituality, social reality and religious reality, Christian renewal and universal salvation, etc.

Redemptoris Missio also clarifies some terms which are frequently used in Mission theology: the term 'mission' is used to indicate the world-wide activity of the Church, while the term, 'evangelisation' is used for the proclamation of the Word in all its forms[5]. Not only is mission a permanent obligation to the Church and each Christian but it is also an opportunity to renew the Church, revitalise faith

[2] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.18
[3] Paul Vi, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 18
[4] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 24
[5] M. Zago, Commentary on <u>Redemptoris Missio</u>, in *Redemption and Dialogue*, Ed. William Burrows, Orbis Books, New York, 1993, p.63

and Christian identity, and offer fresh enthusiasm and a new incentive. In this sense we can say that mission is the "mother of theology" as Martin Kahler said at the turn of the twentieth century[6].

Redemptoris Missio gives a new sense of mission with which to respond to new needs in today's world. It shows that the horizons of mission are limitless because of the universal and salvific role of Christ.

Context of Asia

Geographically Asia may be divided into five regions: 1. West Asia (Middle East) which is predominantly populated with Muslims, with pockets of Christians and Jews, 2. North Asia, or Asian Siberia, predominantly populated by Muslims, 3. South Asia, Indian sub-continent, predominantly populated by Hindus and Buddhists, with sizable pockets of Muslims, influential presence of Christians and some belonging to other religions, 4. South East Asia, including Indochina, predominantly populated by Buddhist and Toaists, with influential presence of Christians, 5. East Asia, China, Japan and Korea, predominantly Buddhists and Taoists, with groups of Shinto and Confucians.

While the Middle East, and also Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Brunei, are predominantly populated by Muslim believers, Hindus form majority population in Nepal and India. The majority population of Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Thailand follows Buddhist dharma. A half of the population of Malaysia is a follower of Islam. A sizable Buddhist population lives in Korea and Japan. With small number of Muslim population the Philippines has majority Christian faithful. Practically in every Asian country followers of Traditional Religions (Tribal, Primal, Native) are not of insignificant number. The followers of Shinto religion in Japan may be relatively few but the influence of Shinto religion on all Japanese people cannot be minimized. There are also followers of Zoroastrianism, Jainism and Sikhism, living mainly in India. It must also be said that every Asian society is, to some extent, multi-religious in its make-up. Although Christians form a minority population as Asia taken together, the presence of the Church must be said to be strong and significant.

One can see a significant impact of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences on the development and growth of the spiritual and theological life of the Asian Church. A few points could be emphasised: 1) Commitment and service to life, 2)Dialectical social analysis, 3) Critical introspective contemplation, 4) Triple dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, and 5) Quest for harmony in the task of theologising in the Asian milieu.

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[6] Cf. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context, A Theology of Mission for Today*, Orbis Books, 2004, p.11

Some characteristics of today's society:

Is today's society not marked with a shattered hope?[7] In the year 2000 we thought that a new page was being turned – from two world wars (millions killed in Germany, Japan, Soviet Union, China) to era of peace. We hoped that peace and prosperity would dominate our society. We had hoped that the fall of Berlin wall in 1989 would end all hostility and conflict paving way to democracy and solidarity. 11 September 2001 and subsequent events throughout the world recalled that conflicts are to continue. Degradation of situations in Iraq and Afghanistan and urgent humanitarian aid in Africa make our uncertainties increase. Today's society is particularly 1) marked by fundamentalism, 2) composed of immigrants, 3) in search for ethnic, cultural and religious identity, 4) marked by growing globalization, and 5) marked by increasing militarism, etc.

Let me elaborate further on each point: 1) *Fundamentalism*, the term invented in 1920s in the protestant Christian circles, is an active and not a passive movement. Initially fundamentalists meant 'those who mean to do battle for the fundamentals'. Fundamentalism is therefore a relatively new concept, both in its origin and development. Here is one definition of fundamentalism: "It means a proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its cultural moorings". Fundamentalists are those who generally refute the radical differentiation of the sacred and secular that has evolved with modernisation. We can show five straits of fundamentalism: A) Fundamentalism *fights back*, it is militant, reacting to that which is perceived as a threat to the core identity of the followers of the movement. B) It *fights for*, defending a world view which it has inherited, by force of arms if necessary. C) It *fights with* a certain number of key ideas which have been selected because they reinforce identity. D) It *fights against* all opposition, whether without or within. It is therefore inclined to be impatient with compromising moderates. E) It *fights under* a religious banner, i.e. under God or in the name of some transcendent reference.

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[7] [**Some facts to remember**: *Every minute*, the nations of the world spend 1.8 millions of US dollars on military armaments; *Every hour*, 1500 children die of hunger-related causes; *Every day*, a species becomes extinct; *Every week* during 180s, more people were detained, tortured, assasinated, made refuge, or in other ways violated by acts of repressive regimes than at any other time in history; *Every month*, the world's' economic system adds over 7.5 billions of US dollars to the catastrophcally unbearable debt burden of more than 1,500 billions now resting on the shoulders of Third World people; *Every year*, an area of tropical forest three-quarters the size of Korea is destroyed and lost; *Every decade*, if present global warming trends contnue, the temperature of the earth's atmosphere could rise dramatically (between 1.5 and 4.5 degrees Celcius) with a resultant rise in sea levels that would have disastrous consequences, particularly for coastal areas of all earth's land masses].

Among the causes of fundamentalism we could say that a) the fear complex is the first one. This fear begins and increases as the contemporary world is going through frantic cultural changes which are brought about by modern technology and communications. These sudden changes bring about the disintegration of cultures. When there is breakdown of culture people are filled with anxiety and fear. b) Sense of frustration at mass level is another cause of fundamentalism. Frustration at the existing situation and the subsequent reaction formation and the overwhelming desire to regress to the original 'purity' and 'authenticity' of the religion in question are the root causes of religious fundamentalism. c) We can also mention psychological needs, such as for power, self-esteem, comfort, protection and security, of those who adhere to fundamentalism.

2) *Society composed of immigrants*: If we take the example of Western society we find that being economically rich and powerful it attracts immigrants from poorer and politically unstable countries. These immigrants very often belong to different religions. With the increasing phenomenon of globalisation of the planet earth many who belong to a particular religious tradition are attracted by New Religious Movements or even by all kinds of sects. In modern society religion appears to be marginalised. People appear to be on the move everywhere – within the country or across the borders. People bring with them their cultures, religious beliefs, histories, etc. Although seemingly a melting pot, the world is inhabited by people who, attached to their own cultures, religions and histories, live next to one another without really encountering each other.

3) *Search for ethnic, cultural and religious identity*: The 'global village' in which people live today, they fear the loss of their cultural and religious identity. This in turn, can breed lack of confidence in believers vis-à-vis others; for example, Hindus in secular democratic India or Muslim immigrants in Western countries. In search for their religious identity it must be kept in mind that, first, no single criterion for meaning and coherence can be used since every religious tradition is spread out across a long time and enormous space. Second, many religious traditions understand their truth claims as universal in nature and relevance. Coming to terms with one's own religious identity cannot be limited to negative sentiments one feels due to historical events (e.g. colonialism) but must take into account the religious tradition's achievements, vitality of its thought and the creativity of its aspirations. Third, distinction between identity and identification must be maintained. They cannot be separated but they are not the same thing. Fourth, search for religious identity should be 'fidelity to roots' and 'not return to some ideology' made up by reviving the past. The task is to trace the stages of growth of a religious tradition as it makes its way through history. Search for religious identity must be a search for 'internal reform'. Through 'return to roots' people can receive nourishment for the new growth in order to live in the

present; they can discover new visions and the new strategies for action. But when religion becomes a manipulating tool in the hands of selfish politicians there results in society merely 'revivalism' of the past. Therefore the issue is not nostalgia for the primitive chaos, but overcoming the current fragmentation of life. It is a matter of re-establishing harmony between all the dimensions of the real. In a certain sense, religions are living entities. Their adherents need to engage continuously in a renewal of spirit by remaining faithful to their roots.

4) *Globalisation*, as self-imposing, powerful and inevitable system, has intensified conflicts in different parts of the world. Perhaps, globalisation is providing opportunities for many of the developing countries but it must be said that globalisation means control of world economies by giant corporations which are accountable to no community and country. As a result then poverty has become deplorably acute in many parts of the world. Globalisation leads to an increased awareness of interdependence because an important consequence of globalisation is an integrated system of markets and communication technologies. There are moral implications of this fact.

Globalisation is also cultural and social and even religious phenomenon. It gives rise to trans-national culture in competition with local cultures. Often this global culture is identified with American pop culture. Globalisation has to do with the hegemony of this trans-national culture. Globalisation succeeds with the help of new communication technologies and consolidation of control over global media by a relatively small number of corporations. The ethos of consumerism often asserts itself as a secularising force in society. The hegemony of global consumer culture requires the relocation of a society's religious traditions to the private sphere. In other words, the hegemony of global culture is not going unchallenged. The intrusiveness of global culture and its consumer ethos is being met by the resurgence of traditional identities rooted in ethnicity, region and, especially, religion. Can we see relationship between the hegemony of global culture and the rise of fundamentalist religious movements like 'Taliban', Al Qaeda or Hindutva? These new groups challenge not only the hegemony of global consumer culture, but also reject the multi-ethnic, pluralistic traditions of the nation-state: a rejection of citizenship and a return to ethnic identity.

Lastly, the secularising power of global consumerist culture pushes religion to a private sphere. This is resisted by religious people and this resistance to the privatisation of religion often takes the form of a resurgent, militant assertion of religious value and identity. Globalisation tends to separate religions from their traditional relationship with locale. The result of all this can be found in the rise of religious motivated violence. Globalisation is disruptive of traditional societies; this fact then causes attempts to revive religion (understood as a nostalgia for a lost sense of community), even in its violent form. The challenge of globalisation can

be responded to by ensuring "a globalisation in solidarity, a globalisation without marginalisation". In this sense, the challenging yet also positive side of the process of globalisation is that we now have at our disposal numerous means for offering humanitarian assistance to our brothers and sisters in need, not least modern systems of distributing food and clothing, and of providing housing and care. Concern for our neighbour transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world. "One of the signs of our times, one particularly worthy of note is a growing, inescapable sense of solidarity between all peoples" (AA, 8, Vat. II).

5) *Secularism*: Globalisation and secularism are two dominant movements embedded within the fabric of contemporary society and the civilizations. The essential difference between secularism and religious belief is that secularism conceives that the world in which we live may be understood entirely on its own terms. There is no need to any other point beyond 'history', 'society' or 'the state' in order to understand one's own purpose and function within it and derive values which will enable to fulfil one's proper role in the universe. Secularism has not been forced to see itself through any eyes other than its own.

6) *Militarism*: Concerning the dramatic increase in military spending (a total of \$900 billion is spent annually on armaments, but only \$60 billion on development aid) I feel that there is an urgent need to commit ourselves to pursue a general and total disarmament through the promotion of a culture of peace, based on the dignity of the human person and on the rule of law, and through a culture of multi-lateralism based on dialogue and honest, consistent and responsible co-operation on the part all members of the international community.

The question we should ask is: Can there something be done to mobilize the resources spent on militarisation towards objectives of peace and authentic human, social and economic development? Paradoxically, the problem of security (which is the concern of governments and motivates increase in militarism) can be seen closely linked to development. Lack of development often results in frustration which, in turn leads people, especially young, to take recourse to terrorist-type activities. Certainly, it must be unequivocally said that nothing can ever justify terrorism.

Today's society is also marked by self-doubt, disillusion with regard to democratic politics, confusion in regard to family life and questions of morality and ethics, degradation of cities into wilderness of poverty and squalor punctuated by fortresses of wealth, the conflict of nationalisms, the rape of non-renewable resources for short term gain, profit-centred economy, hedonism, xenophobia, child bonded labour, exploitation of women, etc.

The Foundation of Christian Mission : Love

Jesus Christ, the final, complete and defintive revelation of God, is the author of the mission of the Church. He tells us how he wishes to be known: he is love. Christians, therefore, acknowledge the centrality of love in their lives, love God has for everyone. God's love, manifest in Jesus Christ, gives decisive direction to our life. Love impels us to go out of ourselves to reach out to others. The ultimate aim of mission is to share God's love with others. "(Love) consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting, my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern…Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave"[8].

"Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to man's sufferings and his needs, including material needs"[9]. I would, therefore, define mission as the Church's service to the world and this service takes many forms.

The totality of Christian mission thus embraces various elements of love (service): a) mission is already constituted by the simple presence and living witness of the Christian life; b) it entails the concrete commitment to the service of mankind and all forms of activity for social development and for the struggle against poverty and the structures which produce it; c) it includes liturgical life and that of prayer and contemplation, eloquent testimonies to a living and liberating relationship with the active and true God who calls all to His Kingdom and to his glory; d) it comprises the dialogue in which Christians meet the followers of other religious traditions in order to walk together towards truth and to work together in projects of common concern; e) it incorporates announcement and catechesis in which the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and its conseqences for life and culture are analysed[10].

Christian Witness

In today's world, the simple witness of an authentically Christian life becomes the first means of evangelisation. In his Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Paul VI says: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses"[11]. Moreover there are contexts where the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is not

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[8] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2006, n. 18
[9] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 2006, n.19
[10] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Vatican, *Dialogue and Mission*, 1984, n. 13
[11] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n.41

possible. In such circumstances the witness of a reverent and chaste life, the witness of detachment from riches, of freedom, in the face of powers of this world, in a word, the witness of sanctity – even if it is given silently is already a fulfilment of the duty of mission.

Lest it be wrongly presumed that to bear witness, as the first element of evangelisation, would mean an attitude of anonymity, ambiguity, mediocrity or passivity, we need to reflect on this theme in the context of the apostolic times. Deriving from the Greek word *martys*, which means "one who bears witness", this term came to be applied at the end of the second and at the beginning of the third century to the baptised persons who bore testimony to Christ and his teaching by offering their lives. The Apostles are those who bear witness to Christ, to his passion, death and resurrection, by sacrificing their own life: "…you will be handed over to the Sanhedrin, you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will be brought before governors and kings for my sake, as evidence to them" (Mk 13:9; cf. Acts 22:17-21).

Far from implying an attitude of passivity and weakness, to bear witness, therefore, means to participate actively and fully in the life and mission of Christ, taking him as the model. It takes firm faith in Jesus and unshakable courage to be true witnesses of Christ. Martyrs are those who not only profess their faith in words but confess it, above all, by imitating Jesus, the Lord and Master, in the willing offering of their lives.

Although for the majority of us it is difficult to imagine being arrested, brought to trial and condemned to death, like a heroic victim, for our faith and practice, we still need to be witnesses in today's world in which evil has become endemic and institutionalised. The world today is dominated by atheism, hedonism, materialism, relativism, indifferentism, etc. All the baptised are invited to respond to these and many other challenges, first of all, by being witnesses. In concrete this means to live in simple fidelity to God in the midst of today's materialistic society in which God and his precepts are often ridiculed and marginalised. Alluding to the supreme testimony of love for all in imitation of Christ, *Lumen Gentium* exhorts Christians: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him" (1 Jn 4:16), God pours out his love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us (Rom 5:5). Thus the first and most necessary gift is that charity by which we love God above all things and our neighbour because of God" (n.42). Witness thus becomes connatural to Christian faith.

In our increasingly secularised society, in a world which is a complex but diversified reality, accent on "witness" is necessary. Without detracting from the profound theological meaning of martyrdom, a Christian is invited to bear witness today by being a person of charity, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness,

self-control, mercy, pardon, reconciliation and peace (cf. Gal. 5:22). May a disciple of Christ never be the cause of division or provocator of polemics or controversies. May she never have antipathy towards anyone; may all triuphalism and spirit of superiority be avoided and may humble spirit be shown before all by Christians. Pope John Paul II exhorts : "The followers of Christ must have the gentle and humble heart of their Master, never proud, never condescending, as they meet their partners in dialogue (cf. *Mt* 11:29)"[12].

Promotion of Human Dignity

Missiology should also provide a source to Christian vocation to respond to questions which many people, especially the poor face in daily life. To put it simply, many people in our world have to struggle to live in dignity worthy of human life. Missiology needs, through discernment, to become aware of the causes of the origins of social conflicts such as the ever growing gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-not, etc. In the light of the Gospel society must change for better and radically transform itself so that the reality of the Kingdom of God continuous to progress.

The promotion of human dignity forms constitutive part of the mission of the Church. Christians, in their struggle to liberate each human person and the whole community of people, need to be in solidarity with the poor, the marginalised, the oppressed, the exploited, the unjustly treated. In concrete this solidarity means to live with these 'anawim', to speak their dialect, to learn their history, to familiarise with their customs and traditions, to help them take their destiny in their own hands, etc. Concrete engagement in favour of justice, in the light of the Word of God, also brings us enriched and original understanding of the same Word.

Thus the "teaching and spreading of her social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelising mission. Since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people's behaviour, it consequently gives rise to a 'commitment to justice', according to each individual's role, vocation, and circumstance.

The condemnation of evils and injustices is also part of that ministry of evangelisation in the social field, which is an aspect of the Church's prophetic role. But it should be made clear that proclamation is always more important than condemnation, and the latter cannot ignore the former, which gives it true solidity and the force of higher motivation"[13].

The socio-cultural context of the world is vast and varies from place to place and from one people to another. The Church can confront the problem by approaching each social milieu taking into account this diversity.

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[12] John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), n. 31
[13] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), n. 41

Collaboration among Followers of Different Religions

The Catholic Church has made a clear and irreversible option to enter into positive relations with people of other religions and their respective followers. The reasons for this could be found both outside as well as within the mystery of the Church, "a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men"[14]. For example, interreligious dialogue is postulated by the fact of religious plurality in our world; it is also affirmed that the reasons for the Church's commitment to interreligious dialogue are not merely anthropological and sociological but primarily theological.

Based on clear, specific and precise guidelines which are rooted in the teachings of *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church understands interreligious dialogue with a definite meaning. In her practice the Church approaches interreligious dialogue in different ways: reciprocal communication, attitude of mutual respect and friendship, constructive common action, obedience to truth which transcends all and repsect for freedom of conscience.

Through their dialogue with the followers of other religious traditions Christians wish to understand themselves better vis-à-vis their partners' religions, get to know others justly and fairly, dispel fears and misunderstandings, be influenced, inspired and enriched mutually by their dialogue partners.

The Catholic Church teaches that interreligious dialogue is part of the Church's evangelising mission. Therefore, while on the one hand, the Church encourages Christians to open themselves up in dialogue with people of other religions and their respective traditions, the Church, on the other hand, also asks Christians to remain uncompromisingly rooted in the essential truth of their Faith. The Church teaches that the more a Christian remains integrally faithful to his/her tradition – faithful disciple of Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh and universal Saviour – without surrender or compromise in matters of faith, the more his/her dialogue will become authentic and fruitful. In other words, while the Church is engaged in dialogue with religions and with their respective followers she also knows that proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of all, is not an option for her but her most important duty, and indeed, the reason for her existence.

Although the Bible does not directly pronounce any definite teaching on interreligious dialogue one can discern, particularly in the New Testament, that Jesus praises one's faith in God and one's readiness to convert even when one belongs to other religious tradition. In fact, what Jesus denounces unequivocally is the practice of idolatry. Some of the Fathers of the Church, in explaining the

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[14] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1

mystery of Jesus Christ as the universal and active saving presence of God in the world (Logos), initiated and developed a profound theological thought which today has been animating a further reflection for the Church's dialogue with other religions.

According to the faith of the Church "the full and complete revelation of God's saving mystery is given in Jesus Christ, while the understanding of this infinite mystery is to be explored and deepened in the light of the spirit of truth, who guides us in the era of the Church 'into all the truth' (Jn 16:13)…(And) connected with the uniqueness of Christ's salvific mediation is the uniqueness of the Church he founded"[15]. Consequently, the Church is fully aware that when interreligious dialogue is actually undertaken it does raise profound and fundamental theological questions[16].

The Christian partner in dialogue must always remain faithful to his/her faith profession. To do this she need not pretend to be superior to the other, nor should she present herself in the spirit of triumphalism to the partner in dialogue. The Christian must not forget that "Equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, not even less to the position of Jesus Christ – who is God himself made man – in relation to the founders of the other religions"[17].

As a result of the practice of interreligious dialogue the Church has become aware of, among other things, 1) there are elements of truth (even partial) and of grace in other religions, 2) dialogue with people of other religions is always a dialogue of salvation, even if people do not come to the explicit profession of faith in Jesus Christ, 3) interreligious dialogue is a source of mutual enrichment, 4) every authentic prayer made by people of other religious traditions is efficacious because there is only one God who hears every prayer, and 5) there is a need always to affirm "the basic unity, hidden but radical, of the human family established among the men and women of this world".

The Church encourages every Catholic to enter into dialogue with other other religions, for "every local church is responsible for the totality of mission. Moreover, every Christian, by virtue of his faith and baptism, is called to carry out to some degree the whole mission of the church. The needs of the situation, the particular position of the people of God, and an individual's personal charism dispose the Christian to direct his efforts principally to one or another aspect of that mission"[18].

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[15] John Paul II, *l'Osservatore Romano*, Eng. Ed. n. 5, 2nd February 2000
[16] Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Vatican, *Dominus Jesus*, 2000, n. 3
[17] Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, *Dominus Jesus*, n. 22
[18] Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Mission*, n. 14

The experience of recent years gives evidence of the many ways in which dialogue is expressed. Four forms of dialogue are identified: 1) dialogue of life – it implies concern, respect, and hospitality towards others; 2) dialogue of collaboration or deeds – it calls every Christian to work together with each and all for goals of humanitarian, social, economic, or political nature which are directed towards the liberation and advancement of humankind; 3) dialogue of specialists – it involves confrontation, deepening and enrichment of respective religious heritage; and 4) dialogue of religious experience – it implies sharing one's experience of prayer, contemplation, faith and duty, as well as one's expressions and ways of searching for the Absolute.

Inculturation is Indispensible for Intense Evangelisation

Inculturation, according to the teaching of the Church, is a vital element for mission which would be rendered weak if this element were to be missing. The Church proposes inculturation in order to do evangelisation. The goal of inculturation is "to achieve true incarnation of the faith within the very core of each culture, so as to assume its values, its true aspirations and its particular standards"[19]. Today inculturation is officially defined by the Church as "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures"[20]. Pope John Paul II spells out further saying that "Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission"; he further warns, "the process of (inculturation) is a profound and all embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church's reflection and practice. But at the same time it is a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith"[21]. Inculturation is an ongoing process by which a Christian community rooted in the local culture expresses/celebrates and lives its faith in a manner which is congenial to that culture. There are two principles which orient all efforts of inculturation: 1) it must always be compatible with the Gospel and 2) It must not separate, lead away or alienate in any way the local Church from the communion with the universal Church[22].

The deepening of the gift of faith comes about when it is allowed to penetrate into our life which is profoundly linked to culture. Although "the Gospel and therefore evangelisation, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent with regard to all cultures… (Nevertheless), the Kingdom which the

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[19] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 63
[20] Final Report,II, *Extraordinary Assembly of Bishops in 1985*, D 4
[21] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 52
[22] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 54

Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelisation are not necesssarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them"[23].

Culture is defined as the historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterise the life of a community. Culture is not a static but a dynamic concept. Thus inculturtion is a process by which a particular culture is received and purified in the light of the mystery of Christ, the principle criterion of all process of inculturation. The Apostolic Community did this with regard to Jewish culture.

The basic identity of Christian communities is the faith of the Church as taught by the Magisterium. This faith of the Church is incarnated because, "faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully received, wholly thought out and faithfully lived"[24]. The faith transforms and purifies culture but there is also a process by which the very faith is re-thought and re-interpreted, obviously safeguarding the integrity of its truth. "Thanks to this action within the local churches, the universal Church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life, such as evangelisation, worship, theology and charitable works"[25]. In other words, the local Church is expected to enrich the universal Church by her specific contribution. This contribution is to be seen in the cultural expression of the same faith of the Church which is professed by the Apostles and guarded by the Church throughout history. On the one hand, essential identity and unity of the Church has to be safeguarded and, on the other hand, legitimate diversity is to be manifested[26].

Process of inculturation is often presented as an abstract encounter between faith and culture or between two systems. We must not forget that it is rather a dialogue between two groups of people. Christians everywhere, need to be encouraged to live their own local culture which once penetrated by the faith of the Church will become transforming and evangelising experience for all others around them. As a process from alienation to harmony inculturation brings us to appreciate who we are as God's creatures and where He has planted us.

Inculturation is a community process, involving "the entire People of God"[27]. However, theologians and experts in the social sciences do play a great deal of their role in the what and how of the process. This is why a solid theological base

[23] Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n. 20
[24] John Paul II, Insegnamenti, V/1, 1982, p.131
[25] John Paul, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 52
[26] Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1204
[27] John Paul II, Ecclesia in Asia, n. 21

for inculturation needs to be created.The Magisterium of the Church has often reminded us of our duty to live our Christian faith which is fully incarnated in the soil of our birth, growth and death. A relatively recent document from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments[28] encourages the process of inculturation, stating clear guidelines. It speaks of language, music and singing, gestures and postures, dance movements and art as possible areas for inculturation. It advises the local Churches to prudently promote inculturation only when something is genuinely and certainly required for the good of the Church. Organic growth, i.e. assimilation of something new, is an essential dimension of the practice of inculturation. Any changes need to be gradual and adequate explanation is imperative to avoid any danger of the outright rejection of efforts in inculturation. An utmost care must be taken so that religious syncretism, even any idea of it, is kept away. Avoiding all ambiguity and remaining ever faithful to the faith of the Church results in producing authentic fruits of inculturation. Pope John Paul II clarifies this point: "Fidelity to roots does not mean a mechanical copying of the pattern of the past. Fidelity to roots is always creative, ready to descend into the depths, open to new challenges, alert to the 'signs of the times'. Fidelity to roots means above all the ability to create an organic synthsis of the perennial values, confirmed so often in history, and the challenge of today's world, faith and culture, the Gospel and life"[29].

Conversion to God who is Finally and Fully Revealed in Jesus Christ

It is difficult to deny the serious sinfulness of men and women also of today as you will have read the brief description which I have presented of the contemporary society at the beginning of this essay. However, "where sin abounds, the grace of God superabounds". The necessity of salvation is ever urgent today and faithful to His promises God in Jesus Christ invites each person and all people to accept his salvation which He offers to all because He wishes that "all people be saved and come to the knowledge of His Truth" (1 *Tim.* 2 : 4). Efforts on our part to proclaim the mystery of Jesus Christ must threrefore become the priority. Consequently, every attempt at evangelising mission of the Church must be intensified and multiplied.

All mission must finally converge into the mission of Jesus Christ, the son of God, who was sent by the Father to save the fallen humanity. "The proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith. Conversion is a gift of God, a work of the Blessed Trinity. It is the Spirit who opens hearts so that they can

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[28] Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of Sacraments, Vatican, *The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation*, 1994.
[29] John Paul II, l'Osservatore Romano, Eng. Ed. July 2, 1997, p.8

believe in Christ and 'confess' him (1 Cor 12:3) of those who draw near to him through faith Jesus says: 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him' (Jn 6:44)"[30].

In the Christian mission theology it is not enough to mention conversion as a movement of turning to God. According to the Faith of the Church turning to God also means converting to Christ at the same time, and becoming integral part of the Church, the Body of Christ, through the sacrament of Baptism. The Church teaches that one converts to God, who has finally and completely revealed Himself in Jesus Christ and who cannot be separated from the Church because she is his Spouse.

Conclusion:

Overwhelming challenges posed by the world today must not make Christians diffident of mission and evagelisation which the Saviour has entrusted to them. God truly counts on us. We would fail him if we were to shy away from His trust and confidence He puts in us. Faithful to his promises Christ is with us as we are 'sent to others' to love them with God's very love. Taking into account these challenges presented by the world today I have presented some themes which all Christians must emphasise in order for mission to be ever relevant, significant and credible today among all peoples of Asia and indeed, of the world at large.

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[30] John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990, n. 46