

Communication Challenges in Asia

Bishops' Meet '96

Tagaytay City, Philippines

July 8- 12, 1996

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the Spirit of a new way of being church in Asia (FABC Plenary, Bandung 1990) and of Christian Discipleship in the Service to Life (FABC Plenary, Manila 1995) the bishops and secretaries of 16 Asian countries assembled in the Divine Word Seminary of Tagaytay City (Philippines) from July 8 to 12, 1996 and discussed the "Communication Challenges for the Church in Asia".

The FABC Plenary Assembly in Manila, January 1995, said in their final statement, that the Asian bishops "did not miss the value of the discovery of mass media for the promotion of values and support of peoples' movements and rights". At the same occasion Pope John Paul II reminded the bishops that on them "rests the responsibility for fostering with wisdom and fidelity the most suitable means for communicating the Gospel to the various Asian cultures". In a letter of the Secretariat of State for the FABC-OSC Bishops' Meet '96, the Pope states that "the fast approaching 2.000 anniversary of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ presents both a special opportunity and a special duty to proclaim the Good News of Salvation through the communications media. In Asia this special opportunity is favored by the rapid and widespread introduction of new communications possibilities in all the media, as well as by the Church's increasing presence in this important field..." (Letter of Angelo Cardinal Sodano dated June 27, 1996 to Archbishop Oscar Cruz). The participants of the FABC-OSC Bishops' Meet '96 took up these challenges with the following considerations and proposals:

The Church is, by her essence, communication, which flows out of the communication of the Holy Trinity. She is founded to continue the communication of Jesus Christ in word and deed. Communication ought therefore to mark the life of the Church in Asia. Communication then must be a constitutive dimension of all ministries of the Church. Home of the great religions, Asia and its evangelization, call for dialogue as a way of life.

Unfortunately, the demand of the Church for Offices of Social Communication on the national and diocesan level is not yet executed in all parts of Asia. A Pastoral Plan for Communications to carry out the prophetic, proclaiming task of the Church in a media-conscious society must be established both on the national and diocesan levels.

We are not to lose sight, however, of the truth that it is the person and not the technology that is the best means of communication, especially in Asian cultures. It is the witness "of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbor with limitless zeal" (Evangelii Nuntiandi # 41) which communicates first. For Asia, being a religious continent, our own religiosity and love for humankind is the best means of communication.

"The New Culture created by modern communications" (Redemptoris Missio, #37c) while bringing about economic progress in our Asian societies, is also often destructive of Asian and Christian values and traditions, especially among the youth. The Church of Asia perceives this as a new call to integrate Gospel Values into this 'New Culture'.

The calling posed by the new media culture offers an opportunity for interfaith cooperation in communication activities, because it affects all religious communities in Asia. Hence, interfaith dialogue leading to understanding and cooperation should be an aspect of all our communication programs and activities. It is imperative to make it clear to our brothers and sisters of other faiths that we are not in any way aligned with destructive forces in the new media culture. Failure to do so will alienate them further from us. As in many Asian countries, Christianity is still seen as an alien, western religion of the colonizers.

We should be careful, however, not to brand everything that belongs to the new media culture as decadent or evil. We should not also panic and throw up our hands in despair, thinking there is nothing we can do. As believers, we should have the confidence that we can face this problem - that we can educate our people so that they will allow themselves to be nurtured by what is positive in this new media culture but will firmly reject anything that does not correspond to true Christian faith and to traditional Asian values.

Media Education, understood not simply as skills training but as awareness and understanding of the representations of reality generated by media in a media shaped society, is for all: Bishops, priests, religious, seminarians, lay leaders, parents, teachers, youth, children, NGO's and grassroots. Hence, Media Education ought to be an essential and integral part of any Pastoral Plan. Training should be provided from a simple to a more comprehensive form and approach. For this, curricula, syllabi and programs need to be elaborated by special teams on the Asian level, and models of training be offered.

On the basis of these considerations, the participants agreed upon the following concrete measures to be taken:

1.0 Every Bishops' Conference must have a pastoral Plan for Communication, which includes also the communications dimension for every ministry of the conference. Such a pastoral Plan is to incarnate the prophetic, proclaiming mission of the Church in a media-shaped and media-conscious society.

Elements constituting such a plan are:

- a. an analysis of the state of the conference;
- b. resources available for communication, including traditional and local means such as street theater;
- c. a strategy for making use of all these existing resources;
- d. performance objectives supported by action plans;
- e. mechanisms for monitoring their achievement.

2.0 Communication at all levels should focus especially on FABC concerns as expressed in the considerations of FABC plenary assemblies and activities of the different FABC offices. These include concerns like women and girl child, the family, displaced persons, ecology and the Asian youth.

3.0 As much as possible, networking with Christians of all churches and denominations and with people of other faiths in the areas of production, training and sharing of resources should be encouraged.

4.0 Bishops' conferences should:

4.1 see Public Relations as an important concern and act accordingly. Guidelines for better awareness and use should be formulated.

4.2 make attempts to link themselves and also individual bishops of Asia by E-mail.

4.3 National Communication festivals (e.g. video festivals) or communication training institutions, such as the one planned in India, should be open also to participants from other Asian countries.

5.0 Every country needs an Episcopal Commission/National Office for Social Communication whose activities are carried down to each diocese with their duties clearly spelt out.

5.1 National Communication Offices of Bishops' Conferences should encourage talent scouting among the young, especially lay people, for communication ministries. Such talents could be shared on the continental level with the support of the FABC-Office of Social Communication.

5.2 Any important document sent to bishops should have an executive summary, which is prepared in a simple, palatable way by the National Office of each country.

5.3 The Bishop-chairman of the National Office of each country should send a one-page information highlighting the major trusts of this FABC-OSC meeting to his fellow bishops and other interested persons in communication.

5.4 For Media Education, a formal attempt should be made by the Bishop-chairmen of the National Offices for their respective countries -

- to make Media Education and Communication Awareness Education mandatory at all levels, especially in the seminaries;
- to organize a National Association for Media Education;
- to arrange Training of Trainers programs to provide sufficient people for Media Education on the national and continental levels.

6.0 The FABC - Office of Social Communication should organize -

6.1 an annual FABC-OSC Bishops' Meet like this one, at least for the coming three years, to keep the fire burning and give an opportunity to follow up developments in a responsible and effective way;

6.2 Bishops' Institutes of Social Communication (BISCOM). The results of these 'institutes' should be carried down to the local levels by the National Offices for Social Communication of the Bishops' Conferences.

7.0 Attempts must be made for a greater cooperation between Unda/OCIC and UCIP on all levels in the Asian continent.

7.1 The Bishops-chairmen of the National Episcopal Communication Commissions and FABC-OSC representatives should attend Unda/OCIC, UCIP General Assemblies and yearly continental study days.

7.2 Information about trainings, productions, publications of the Catholic Media Organizations in Asia should be shared, possibly through a common information bulletin.

8.0 World Communication Day should be re-evaluated in the way and for the date it is celebrated in different countries.

8.1 A series of programs should aim at a greater communication awareness;

8.2 People working in the different means of communications including secular should be encouraged especially by the bishops;

8.3 We should aim as much as possible at a common date for the celebration to bring this day also into the greater awareness of people on the Asian continental level.

9.0 Bishops should be aware of the importance and possibilities of:

9.1 Radio Veritas Asia (RVA) for reporting and sharing the Church's teaching and Church events, People should be encouraged to listen to RVA and give feedback on the programs.

9.2 The initiative for a Catholic Satellite Television Program for Asia via Thai Sky Cable which should be supported by all.

10.0 There is an urgent need for Communication Research, systematic thinking and criticism for the Church in Asia. Networking and bringing together all resources available should be promoted. The 'Communication Research Award' of the FABC Office of Social Communication is to be seen as one step in this direction and is highly recommended.