

Final Statement

**Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences-
Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC)
25th Annual Bishops' Meet
Covid Pandemic: Implications for Christian Communication
November 19 -20, 2020**

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC) held its 25th Annual Bishops' Meet via zoom video conference on November 19-20, 2020. The meeting was attended by 30 participants, consisting of the chairman and member bishops and the national secretaries of the office of social communication and delegates from Asian countries. For the first time the meeting was held online using zoom video conference due to the Covid 19 pandemic which prevented travel and person level meeting. The President of the FABC Cardinal Charles Maung Bo inaugurated the meeting with a video message.

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The 25th Annual Bishops' Meet of the FABC-OSC held in 2020, considered it apt to study the challenge and response of social communication in pastoral ministry in Asia in the context of the Golden Jubilee of FABC, and the Covid 19 Pandemic that has seriously affected nations, peoples and the Church globally. The two-day meeting, held for the first time online, considered the role of social communication in the Episcopal Conferences in Asia in responding to the current realities we are confronted with.

Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, President of the FABC, in his inaugural message highlighted the paramount importance of communication in the mission of the Church and urged the participants who represent the various Episcopal Conferences in Asia to reflect on how best social communication can serve the Church in Asia. Bishop Roberto Mallari, Chairman of the FABC Office of Social Communication, called for deeper prayer and action rooted in commitment and courage. Nataša Govekar from the Vatican department of social communication highlighted the role of communication, particularly social media, in the time of the pandemic. Technology has taught us how to better connect with others. The Church has come to accept social media as a way to build a community and how to be connected locally and globally. Peter Gonsalves from the Pontifical Salesian University, Rome, spoke of the rapid spread of fake news and

misinformation, creating a sort of ‘infodemic’ and the need to check it with authentic information. Michael Unland of Cameco, Germany, highlighted the new ways of being present as a Church in today’s technological world. Technology was used in many fruitful ways to build community and connectedness and online presences in the face of lockdowns, or work from home, online schooling, shopping etc. He called for the need for more research on how best we can be Church and pastorally relevant in the changed scenario.

The Meeting studied various pastoral responses in coping with the challenge of Covid 19 from a psychological and communication perspective. Insights into the theme were provided by George Palamattathil sdb, Clinical psychologist and Director of Siloam, a centre for wholeness and well-being in Northeast India. Citing the story of the Emmaus journey, he stressed the importance of listening, showing trust and compassion, and being sensitive as steps towards healing and wellness. Medina Lourdes highlighted the need for pastors and clergy to adopt effective steps to handle stress as they are not immune to mental health problems. Fr. Victor F. Sadaya, stressed the importance of pastoral personnel adopting fresh and creative ideas to stand by and walk with the people as a Church. The Meeting took note of practical ways in which communication could be applied to the mission of the Church in

Asia’s diverse contexts. George Plathottam, Lirio and Arlene Donarber stressed the need for the Church to be committed in adopting technology and effective pastoral planning. The pastoral response of RVA during the Covid pandemic was presented as a case study in this regard.

Recognizing the need to be responsive to the emerging challenges presented by the pandemic and the varied pastoral situations, the Meeting affirmed the importance of pastoral engagement with social communication from newer perspectives. The Bishops’ Meet invited those responsible for social communication in the Episcopal Conferences in Asia to strive ever more strenuously and creatively to respond to the current challenges. In order to do so effectively, the Meeting proposed the following orientations and recommendations:

Orientations

1. We recognize the paramount importance of social communication in the present context of Covid 19 and the many challenges arising from it, and the need to evolve creative and pastoral ways of responding to them.

Communication in the new setting calls for new ecclesiological perspectives focused on people and their pastoral needs.

2. We underline the importance of adopting digital technology and social media and the need to develop greater ease and pastoral competence in carrying out the mission of the Church in the diverse pastoral contexts of the Churches in Asia. The Church should pay greater attention to the dissemination of legitimate and accurate news and information and fight the spread of ‘infodemic’.

3. We acknowledge that pastoral personnel as well as faithful are not immune to the psychological and mental impact of the pandemic, and hence communication offices must strive to work in collaboration with experts engaged in the ministry of psychological counselling, spiritual direction, wellness and other holistic programs.

4. In the ever-growing digital environment, the Church needs to rediscover more seriously its identity as a community that form an ecclesial communion and less as an organization, structure or physical space. The Church’s communication ministry must help embrace the power of story to build connection, communion and community.

5. As digital communication technology and artificial intelligence are ever evolving areas, Church communicators and offices should undertake research and study on their pastoral implication for the peoples and the local Churches in Asia. The Church must create and foster the vital link between online, digital world and the offline community.

6. The Church and all pastoral communicators need to learn from and emulate the teaching and personal witness of Pope Francis regarding how communication can reach out to the most vulnerable, needy and become a pastoral arm of the Church in times of tragedy, pain and death.

Recommendations

1. Considering the importance of social communication ministry in the Church in these challenging times, we reiterate the importance of strengthening the Communication Offices in every Episcopal Conference with suitable personnel, structures and pastoral plans.

2. We earnestly recommend that those who hold responsibility for social communication in the member countries of the FABC participate more actively

in meetings and discussions, development of strategies and plans, and collaborate towards achieving our common goals.

3. Communication Offices should strive to help, support and assist dioceses and parishes in their respective countries to create a communication environment that pays attention to necessary infrastructure, effective communication strategies, plans and practices that are relevant to specific contexts and situations in order to build stronger ecclesial communities.

4. Episcopal Communication Offices should strive to network and collaborate with the FABC Office of Social Communication, the Veritas Asia Institute of Social Communication (VAISCOM), the Radio Veritas Asia (RVA) and other structures at the continental level to enhance research, formation of personnel and pastoral practices in Asia.

5. Social communications should help foster an ongoing and renewed understanding of ‘new way of being Church’, the identity and relevance of the ‘Domestic Church’ and an ecclesial communion rooted in the local and universal Church. The Vatican II documents, *Ecclesia in Asia* and the various documents of the universal and Asian Churches on the subject should form the basis of such an endeavor.

6. The social communication structures and plans need to be periodically reviewed, evaluated, and appropriate changes are to be effected. Those who head communication offices must be open to the many communicative opportunities available to respond to the emerging challenges like the Covid pandemic. Assistance and support of the FABC-OSC and other competent bodies may be availed in this task.