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THEOLOGIZING METHODOLOGY IN ASIA. A BRIEFING

It is generally accepted today that an Asian Christian theology that is relevant to Asia can be built up from the encounter of Christian faith and Asian reality which comprises social, economic, political, religious, cultural and traditional factors in its totality. Theological reflections that take place from such a standpoint will affect certainly the theological method and the theological thrusts in Asia. Such an undertaking, nevertheless, calls for fidelity to the Christian revelation and faith response while being true to the 'Asian soul', the reality in which we Christians live.

In this short write up, an attempt is made with the guidance of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), to take a cursory view of the way in which Christian theologizing takes place in Asia. However, at the outset, the promptings of the Second Vatican Council for pluralism in theology are outlined. Then the theological methods and thrusts in Asia are mentioned with a concluding note.

PROMPTINGS OF SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Before going into an illustration of the prompting of the Second Vatican Council for pluralism in theology, let me take a bird's eye view of the nature of the inceptual theology in the Church. In theology, the Church has a long history of pluralism. As the Church historians affirm, each of early Christian communities had its own experience of Jesus and hence its own theology. The Scripture scholars agree that in the Old and the New Testaments there is a variety of theologies. Such pluralism in theology is evident in the four Gospel accounts which complement each other. In fact, while all the four Gospels speak of one faith in Jesus Christ, there is a rich variety of experiences of the same Jesus. Already, in Christian Tradition and in the Scriptures we see an enriching pluralism of theology with its traits of unity in diversity.

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Conscious of this rich diversity of theological pluralism within the Church down the centuries, the Second Vatican Council prompted pluralism in theology, when it said that the Gospel message needs to be adapted according to each culture (GS, no. 44). The same Council urged each local Church to plant the seed of faith within the rich soil of the customs, wisdom, teaching, philosophy, arts and sciences of its particular people (AG, no. 22; SC, no. 40).

The Council further noted how the Church has used different cultures to preach the Word of God thus enabling pluralism in theology. The Council also clearly affirms the importance of plurality in proclaiming the Good News, when it says: "In virtue of its mission to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel and gather together in one Spirit all peoples of every nation, race and culture, the Church shows itself a sign of the spirit of fellowship which renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it..." (GS, no. 58).

Moreover emphasizing the freedom which Christians enjoy for various forms of the spiritual life, for variety of liturgical celebration and the theological elaboration of the revealed truth, the Council says: "For the ties which unites the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them. Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything" (GS, 92).

While the Council speaks of a "legitimate variety" that extends even to theological expressions of doctrine (LG, no. 13; UR, no. 17), it affirms that differences need not diminish unity, instead contribute to it and make more resplendent the catholicity of the Church (LG, no. 23; UR, no. 4, 16; OE, no. 2). The Council also emphasized the importance of the theologians who endeavor to promote theologies that would be relevant to their people, thus once again affirming the validity of pluralism in theology (GS, no. 62). It is such promptings of the Second Vatican Council that made the peripheral local Churches come out with their innovative and creative faith reflections and responses, being rooted in the local soil.

ASIAN THEOLOGICAL BASIS

With the impetus and the inspiration drawn from the Council's instructions, and with the awakening to the pluralistic factors of Asian reality, Asia will use conceptual tools and a philosophical approach arising from the various concrete social, religious, cultural situations in which Asians live, such as, a sense of the sacred in all Asian cultures which is fundamental, a cosmic view found in the Asian traditions which integrates the question of the human salvation into unified view of the whole cosmos, Asian way of integration and inclusion and the value of harmony. Besides these salient and fundamental values, a Christian theology in Asia is a new enterprise marked by a certain experimental character, a certain

ambiguity, uncertainty and tenuousness. Moreover, Christians in Asia must also be in touch with the twenty first century Asia in which they live.

Doing theology with Asian realities as resources means that these contextual realities as *loci theologici* are discerned and integrated in theological enterprise. In other words, insofar as we discern in them God's presence, God's action and the work of the Holy Spirit in them, integration is done in our faith reflection, hence theologizing. (FABC Papers, no. 96, 'Methodology: Asian Christian Theology...', pp. 38-39).

First, Christian faith considers the whole universe, all creation as manifestation of God's glory and goodness. Christian tradition and Christian spirituality have recognized that the universe reveals God and is also a sacrament of God's love for all creatures. The whole of creation bears for us a reflection of God's truth, goodness and harmony to serve the well-being of humanity and integrity of creation (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 339). Secondly, Christian tradition affirms that God is the Lord of history and that God is redemptively present and active in and through His Spirit, leading all to the eschaton of God's Kingdom.

It is to be noted that the Second Vatican Council speaks of the action of the Spirit in the heart of every one, and "seed of the Word," found in human enterprises, including religious ones, and in the efforts humans make in search of truth, to attain goodness and God (AG, nn. 3,11,15; GS, nn. 10-11, 22, 26, 38, 41, 92-93). In the *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II, says "the Spirit's presence and activity affect not only individuals but also society and history, peoples, cultures and religions" (28). The totality of life and of creation is the locus of the presence and the action of the Spirit of God. The Word taking abode among us is the salvific event of all humans. This affirms the need of redemption of all. While reading the signs of the times (GS, no. 4) and interpreting the contextual realities as resources of theology, one must discern and be attentive also to the negative reality of evil and sin.

Setting oneself in such expanded horizon, gaining insight into God's mystery and his ways of operation among the peoples of the Asian Continent, the theological enterprise in Asia evolves as a pilgrimage. The theologians in Asia have taken seriously the Second Vatican Council's theme of a pilgrim people. They journey together with the Christians of Asia and the Church universal, in the hope that the Church universal will be enriched by an encounter with the culture of Asia, as the early Church was once enriched by a creative encounter with Greek culture.

As Asian theologians, from a prayerful and systematic reflection, on events, encounters and movements in Asia in the light of the Revelation, have attempted to understand the religious traditions of their own cultures and dialogue with people of other traditions, it is important to note the willingness of the others to listen, and then to dialogue. FABC, in its Plenary Session of 1978, insists that

“we are to recognize the voice of the Spirit bearing witness to the marvelous variety of God’s self-revelation to humans and able to influence the way we lift up our hearts to the Lord.”

ASIAN THEOLOGICAL METHODS

The Asian theological methods based on FABC is best described as fivefold contextual theological methodology which comprises: Commitment to service to life, Dialectical social analysis, Critical contemplation (awareness/ mindfulness), Triple dialogue with Asian cultures, religions and the poor, and the quest for harmony in the task of theologizing in the Asian milieu (FABC Papers, no. 108, pp. 32-34).

Commitment to service to life is the starting point in the theological methodology of FABC. Such commitment and service to life arises out of the holistic view of life together with a traditional sense of the sacred and reverence which sees God’s Spirit as active in the diverse pluralistic Asian milieu. To understand its call for commitment and service to life in the Asian context, FABC V Plenary Session states “We join Jesus in service of life, by washing the feet of our neighbors” (art. 14.3) using the imagery of Jesus’ foot washing, which is the culminating example of Jesus in the series of his table fellowships with the ‘poor’ who longed for wholeness of life. Such commitment also reveals the communal character of the theological methodology. This first step in theologizing calls for one’s rootedness in the local community’s experiences of life, rather than in the intellectual arena of the academy. Life experiences are not merely starting points for theologizing but also foundation, frame work and continuous reference for doing theology in the Asian milieu for theological perspective is the rootedness in the mystery of the incarnation and the Paschal mystery. Such a perspective undergirds God’s solidarity with the humans, especially the poor.

Commitment to service of life in the context seeks to identify and analyze the structural causes of and the impact of social, economic, political and cultural forces which cause many faces of suffering to Asian peoples. Such analysis is carried through the “reading the signs of the times” and confronting “the dark realities in the heart of Asia”. Having “May your Kingdom come” (Lk. 11:2) as a plea and a vocation, this analysis aims at overcoming the destructive forces in various concrete life contexts of peoples so as to foster human dignity, freedom and a fuller human life and to create a more genuine communion among peoples of pluralistic Asia. This stage in theologizing, Dialectical Social Analysis is the ubiquitous aspect of the FABC’s theologizing method (FABC Papers, no.108, pp. 12-15).

The above-mentioned contextual Analysis, FABC recognizes, runs the risk of a distortive emphasis on the material side of salvation, if it does not lead to a Crit-

ical Introspective Contemplation (CIC) in the context. CIC is a quest for holistic understanding of the interaction between the liberative aspects of the inter and intra religiosity and the contextual life experience of peoples. So this holistic understanding leads one to more than a preferential option for the poor, to the pursuit of integral human liberation. Unless the liberative aspect emerges out of and nourished by CIC, it cannot transform the lives of the Asian peoples and thus be truly liberative/salvific.

A commitment to service of life together with the afore-mentioned two stages demands a suitable theological response in the concrete diversified contexts in Asia. In this respect, FABC has chosen Dialogue as “manifestation of lived Christianity” to form the basis of such theological response. Dialogue for FABC is “a process of talking and listening, of giving and receiving, of searching and studying for deepening and enriching of one another’s faith and understanding” (For All Peoples of Asia (FAPA), Vol. 1, p. 111). The stated objective of dialogue is promotion of mutual understanding and harmony in view of fuller life. This deliberate choice reveals its sensitivity to the non-confrontational Asian mindset and world-view. Dialogue is also perceived as “receptive pluralism,” namely the many ways of responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, continually being in conversation with the poor, religions and cultures of Asia. Thus the dialogue as a theological response is triple in character (FAPA, Vol. 1; FABC Papers, no. 108).

This triple dialogue is to be a bi-directional encounter of mutual critique, enrichment and conversation for both the Asian local churches as well as the multitudes of the Asian peoples within their rich diversity of cultures and religions, as well as their social, economic challenges. In the absence of such a dialogue, the FABC recognizes that its theological methodology runs the risk of ending up merely as a unidirectional process.

The quest for harmony in the task of theologizing in the Asian *Sitz-im-Leben* represents the fifth stage of the FABC’s contextual theologizing methodology. The FABC asserts that the task of theologizing has to be at the service of the restoration of Asian *Sitz-im-Laben* to its original, namely to God-given cosmic harmony amidst the rich and profound diversity and pluralism. For FABC harmony is not the absence of strife and differences in order to arrive at consensus at any cost (FABC Papers, no. 108; FABC V, in FAPA, Vol. II; FABC Papers, no. 96). FABC’s vision of harmony is one that involves the “whole person”, “the entire family” in view of a “cosmic harmony of all life and all things. It is a vision aimed at alleviating the disharmonies in order to build true communion. Such a global and universal vision of harmony originates from the Asian approach to cosmic Reality and the Trinitarian understanding of One God. Hence, this fifth stage of the Asian theological methodology is especially prophetic and poignant today.

CONCLUDING NOTE

From the various FABC official documents, one sees the development of a new way doing theology with the pluralistic Asian resources. It may be described as the contextualization of the salvific message of the Christian Revelation in the diverse and pluralistic Asian *sitz-im-laben*. It is also an acknowledgement and acceptances of an ontological, stereological and existential relationship between the salvific message of the Christian Gospel and the Asian peoples in their diversity.

As a new way of doing theology, in the Asian milieu, FABC's methodology seeks to theologize with Asian resources in response to the many pressing challenges which arise out of the concrete "context/s". It is primarily pastoral and missiological in orientation, seeking to be shaped by and as well as to shape the life experiences of peoples of Asia.

Theologizing methodology in the Asian milieu recognizes the fact that social, cultural context play a very important role in all attempts to live the soteriological Message of the Christian Gospel within the context. It does not preclude the possibility of the need for the Christian Gospel to be counter-cultural or trans-cultural in a specific context of Asia. It insists that the Christian Gospel cannot be presented as the other worldly, ignoring the suffering, pain and injustices within the particular context. It perceives the social, cultural realities are constantly in a state of flux, as result of increasing globalization, thus it is dynamic in character.

From these theologizing approaches flow a few following Asian theological thrusts. First, FABC's overall vision of mission of the Church takes on a different stance. It is an understanding of the mission of the whole Christian peoples in Asia, "along with our Asian brothers and sisters jointly to make the Kingdom of God more visibly present, hence a reign of freedom, justice, love and spirit" (Rom. 14:17). Secondly, the Gospel is leaven for liberation and transformation of society (GS. No. 3). Thus the purpose of proclaiming the Message of Jesus Christ to all, is to call them to the values of the Kingdom. In affirming faith in Jesus Christ, FABC is explicit in asserting that the other religions are "significant in the economy of God's design of salvation (FAPA, Vol. 1, pp. 13-14). It is asserted that dialogue and proclamation are integral dimensions, but dialectical and complementary of the Church's mission in Asia, because God's action in the world is beyond the grasp of the Church and thus the Church is called to discern constantly the ongoing activity of God.

The Office of Theological Concerns (OTC) of the FABC sums up the Asian methodology when it states: "The Asian way of doing theology is historically rooted and concrete, a method in which we learn to face conflicts and brokenness, a method we value as one of liberative integration, inter-relatedness and wholeness, a method the emphasizes symbolic approaches and expressions,

and is marked by a preference for those at the periphery and “outside the gate” (Heb. 13:3).”

METODOLOGIA UPRAWIANIA TEOLOGII W AZJI

Streszczenie

Ojciec Gerard de Rosairo OMI w swoim artykule *Theologizing methodology in Asia* porusza kwestię specyfiki uprawiania teologii w Azji. Autor rozpoczyna analizę od nakreślenia ogólnych założeń metody teologicznej, która w ogólnym kształcie ma polegać na spotkaniu się wiary chrześcijańskiej z egzystencjalnymi problemami Azji. Sama idea stworzenia specyficznej azjatyckiej teologii, zdaniem ojca Gerarda, jest inspirowana Soborem Watykańskim II, który zachęcał do tworzenia pluralizmu teologicznego. Jedną Ewangelią o Chrystusie i jedną wiarą w Chrystusa przejawia się bowiem w wielkiej różnorodności form, które płyną z doświadczenia samego Jezusa. Autor artykułu podkreśla, że Ojcowie soborowi kładli szczególny nacisk na potrzebę adaptacji przepowiadania Dobrej Nowiny w taki sposób, aby przynosiła ona obfite owoce w każdej kulturze. Podstawową zasadą owej adaptacji powinno być, według ojca Gerarda de Rosairo, zdanie Augustyna: „Niech w rzeczach koniecznych będzie jedność, w wątpliwych wolność, a we wszystkich miłość” (GeS 92).

W dalszej części artykułu autor nakreśla założenia bazowe oraz metodologiczne azjatyckiej metody teologicznej. Ma ona być zakorzeniona w Ewangelii, ma być odpowiedzią na problemy, które przynosi życie, oraz ma respektować specyficzne uwarunkowania kulturowe tego kontynentu. Kontekstualna metoda teologii azjatyckiej powinna być rozpięta pomiędzy takimi polami semantycznymi, jak: służba życiu, dialektyka społeczna, kontemplacja, dialog z kulturami, religiami i ludźmi ubogimi oraz harmonijne zespolenie namysłu teologicznego ze specyfiką *Sitz-im-Laben* Azji. Metoda, jaką proponuje ojciec Gerard, ma być odpowiedzią na liczne wyzwania i problemy rodzące się na tym kontynencie.

(opr. Michał Kosche)