

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND ECCLESIAL SITUATION OF ASIA



Bishop Luis Antonio G. Tagle¹

Asia is not just a geographic space but primarily a human space.

- As a human space, Asia is characterized by a great variety of cultures, languages, traditions and religions. There is not one face of Asia. There are faces of Asia. The most populous continent in the world, Asia is home to those who belong to the poorest of the world and also the richest of the world.
- Long histories of ethnic, religious and cultural development have enriched the mosaic of life in Asia. But equally long histories of ethnic, religious and cultural conflicts have continued to this day, resulting in long standing and deeply rooted injustice, discrimination (like the caste system), violence (especially against women and the girl child), armed conflicts, millions of homeless and refugees, destruction of nature. Thanks to the traditional values embedded in Asian cultures and religions, the peoples of Asia are able to survive some of the untold horrors of their lives and nations.
- Increasingly inserted into the global economy, the economies of Asia are also altered. Pockets of wealth of unprecedented scale exist within Asian countries and in the various regions. The traditional family-based agricultural and trading economies have become more profit-driven with a focus on manufacturing, technology and services. Agriculture and basic needs are sacrificed for the needs of the global market. We have not fully assessed the impact of the easy flow of (foreign) capital and investment in "lower wage" countries. Consumerism and materialism have replaced

¹ Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle was born in Manila on June 21, 1957. He studied Philosophy at the Ateneo de Manila University and San Jose Seminary in Quezon City. He was ordained a priest on February 27, 1982 at Our Lady of the Pillar Cathedral in Imus, Cavite. He obtained his Licentiate in Sacred Theology and Doctorate in Sacred Theology at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., USA. On October 22, 2001, he was appointed bishop of the Diocese of Imus in Cavite.

He was a member of the International Theological Commission, in Vatican (1997-2002). He was also a consultant to the different commissions of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines: such as Commission on the Doctrine of Faith, on Seminaries and the Clergy. At present, he is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II, Istituto per le scienze religiose*, Bologna, Italy. He is also a member of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Office of Theological Concerns.

concern for human development, especially of the laborers. Where economic growth is registered, we fail to see it reaching the communities.

- Cultures, traditions and the social fabric of Asia are all affected. We see an alarming lessening of people and community orientation.

Time is devoted more for work and profit making than for relationships. "Mega-polises", supposed symbols of progress, are places of teeming masses of poor and unemployed people, breeding crimes, prostitution, and addictions. The traditional reverence for persons and the body has given way to commodification.

Migration and displacement due to poverty and war has left children unattended to. The children of migrant workers get enough money for their education and leisure but not enough love from their nuclear family. Information technology and the means of social communication have helped establish human contact beyond space and time zones but have also ruined values particularly of the youth.

- Asia was the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. In God's mysterious plan, the covenant of salvation and the Church were inaugurated on Asian soil.

The Church in Asia

- The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), born in Manila (1970) held its first plenary assembly in Taipei (1974) where the program of mission for Asia was articulated. The mission of the Church is evangelization, bringing the Good News of Salvation to Asia. Evangelization in Asia takes the form of dialogue with cultures (inculturation), with religions (inter-religious dialogue) and with the poor (integral human development). [Pope Paul VI brought the concept of Dialogue to the center of ecclesiology and mission in his first encyclical Ecclesiam Suam (1964)]. The fruit of evangelization is a truly local Church which by its very nature is also a truly missionary Church.
- This over-arching vision of the FABC has been expanded and further localized by the various Episcopal conferences.
- In 1999, Pope John Paul II, in Ecclesia in Asia called dialogue as the characteristic mode of existence and mission for the Church in Asia.
- Since 1990, the FABC has promoted a New Way of Being Church in Asia through basic ecclesial communities forming a communion of communities.

Some Challenges to the Church in Asia

- Dialogue. It is not contrary to the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior. Rather it is a way of proclaiming Jesus and the Gospel suited to situations where the Church is in the minority or even persecuted. Dialogue is a humble witnessing to life in Christ as we engage people in ordinary realities of life. Dialogue of life is another expression used for this. It involves listening to others as much as speaking to them; learning from others as much as teaching them; appreciating them as much as "critiquing*" them. Dialogue is incarnational in approach that makes the Word that is proclaimed quietly a leaven in the life of others.

- Discipleship. The witness of opting for and following Christ is a powerful mode of missionary dialogue. Faith in Christ does not involve only the intellect but the whole person. As disciples, Christians make Christ the central and controlling actor of their lives. This is manifested in a life of discipleship. In Asia, the best and first form of witness in evangelization is the life of the disciples formed by their faith in Jesus Christ. Fidelity to Christ becomes witness to Him. Through their following of Christ, they bring to ordinary life Jesus' values like inclusivity, self-emptying, mercy and compassion.
- Prophetic Call. The Church in Asia is called to live by its prophetic mission for the sake of the Kingdom of God. As a prophetic community attuned to God's will and design as revealed in Jesus, the Church will be interiorly free to conceive of, imagine and try different ways of being Christ's witnesses, always in fidelity to the Gospel. But this entails prophetic critique of what enslaves society and the Church itself so that with new wineskins, we could accept the new wine of God's Reign.

Evangelical Poverty. The Church is called to manifest more clearly how evangelical poverty brings about new attitudes towards the world and nature, new lifestyles, new ways of sharing the goods of the earth, new expressions of solidarity with the poor. The consumerist and materialist worldview instills rugged individualism which in turn brings havoc to human beings, communities and creation. The Church in Asia is challenged to live evangelical poverty in its union with Christ, a union that promotes stewardship of both environmental ecology and human ecology (Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*).

Communion and Solidarity. Asia is the scene of advances in scientific and technological achievements. But the so-called benefits have not produced a more humane existence for the poor. A world structured according to sin, because structured according to the dictates of greed and domination, cannot be pleasing to God. The Church in Asia is called to live by communion and solidarity, especially with the poor and creation. Solidarity rests on the spiritual consciousness of our interdependence and mutuality in the one family of humanity and of life. Communion and solidarity involves a commitment to the pursuit of the common good. This requires a renewed view of other people, especially the poor, as true persons, as neighbors, as brothers and sisters, not commodities. It demands a resolve to defend the poor and their rightful share in the goods of the earth. It calls for a respectful attitude towards differences and a creative integration of diversity into a unity that favors the development of all peoples. It asks of the Church to be an effective force of reconciliation and forgiveness in a continent burdened by war and strife.

Community and Prayer. The Church in Asia commits itself to witness of life, prophetic mission, evangelical poverty, communion and solidarity based on the strength of its faith in the Reign of God revealed in Jesus' person, ministry, death and resurrection. As the Body of Christ, the Church believes that it is the seed, sign and instrument of the Reign of God. So the Church will exert every effort to form and renew itself to be the community that reflects the Reign of God that it serves. As servant of the Reign of God, the Church will untiringly call everyone to conversion, establish witnessing communities, share the values of the Gospel to everyone and to society and pray for the hastening of the coming of the fullness of God's Reign. Conscious of the fact that the Kingdom of God is God's initiative in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit, the Church prays for its coming as it promotes its values.