

## ON THE NEED FOR AN ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

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The way the Catholic Church was established in Asia can account for much of the way in which she operates "still. The Church came back to most parts of Asia through Rome and Europe and latterly North America. At the time when the missions were undertaken on a fairly intensive scale in Asia, the Catholic Church was in the post-Reformation period. The Counter Reformation was on; the Council of Trent had given the Church its ideology and physiognomy for the coming three centuries.

The Church in Asia grew up rather haphazardly. Her establishment was dependent on the vagaries of political power of the European countries. In the 16th and 17th centuries, it was mainly the Spanish and Portuguese who were able to support the Missionary Endeavour of the Church; later on the French, Irish, Belgians, Dutch and Italians joined in. The North Americans came in a big way to Asian countries mainly after the Second World War., Each of these countries tended to transplant in Asia the type of Christianity that was existing in their home countries.

The *Religious Orders* and *Congregations* were largely responsible for the missionary expansion of the Latin Church in the past few centuries. When a Church was established in Asia its links were with Rome and the country from which the missionaries came. Thus the Church in Indo China was linked to France and in Indonesia to Holland, and in more recent times the Church in the Philippines to the United States. The lines of contact were hence vertically with Rome and the mother countries of the missionaries which often coincided with those of the colonizers. The decision on matters concerning the Asian Churches was taken either in Rome where the European and Europeanizing outlook in fact prevailed or in the seats of government of the missionary congregations which had to decide according to their rather limited experience and often according to the perspectives of those who administered the Congregation from somewhere in Europe or America.

There was thus no real consultation among Asian missionaries themselves regarding the problems of establishing the Church in Asia. Even the missionary Bishops in Asia hardly met on Asian soil or anywhere in the world to discuss Asian problems. If they met it was at some jubilee celebration in an atmosphere more conducive to a manifestation of triumph than to a sober assessment of their mission in Asia. This must be seen in the context of the overall policy of the entire Catholic Church which did not meet in ecumenical council between 1870 and 1962. The bishops had thus no occasion to meet collegially as a body to rethink their problems,. They merely visited Rome and home individually once every five to ten years somewhat in the same way as Roman pro-consuls of the days of the Roman Empire returned home to meet the Emperor.

*The absence of ecumenical councils* had thus a rather disastrous effect in not fostering inter-Asian dialogue within the Church. The only other occasion when the Bishops met were when jubilees were celebrated in Rome, or missionary exhibitions were held. Since

Asians were seldom, if ever, canonized, there were not even canonization ceremonies to bring several Asian bishops together. The Missionary Exhibitions of 1925 and 1950 helped somewhat to create an awareness of the potential contribution of the Asian Churches— but these too were rather triumphalist and paternalist in tone and hence unable to bear authentic fruits of dialogue with Asia.

The *first generation of Asian bishops* began to be appointed after the first world war in the 1920's. They had generally been educated in Rome (usually at Propaganda College) or in the European Scholasticates of religious congregations. They had been brought up according to the tradition of theology and spirituality that prevailed in Europe in the early decades of this century. That theology was very much that of the Church under siege after the capture of the Papal States by the Italian nationalists, and very much authoritarian and monological after the definition of Papal infallibility and supreme immediate jurisdiction over the Whole Church in Vatican I. These Bishops were in many ways more 'Catholic' and more Roman than even the Romans themselves. Hence it was difficult to expect them to see the deficiencies of a system which had produced them. They could hardly be expected to exercise a critical judgment towards the system which had been buttressed strongly by the prevailing Theology and Canon Law, Hence we see the continuance of the earlier type of Church in Asia even when the colour of the episcopate changed because its frame of mind remained the same.

It was only with the Second Vatican Council that new thinking began to permeate the Asian Episcopate and Churches. Their earlier perspectives can be understood by considering their contribution to Vatican II; in the first sessions the Asian bishops were generally silent and if anything a trifle alarmed at the course of events and ideas. It was only towards the end of the Council that some of the younger Asian Bishops began to exercise a certain leadership in the Council.

Not only the Bishops, *but the entire Asian Churches* were brought up in a relatively passive mentality which was heightened by the subject position of the Asian peoples and the minority situation of the Asian Christians. There has hardly been any serious dialogue among Asian Catholics. Even now the few international conferences of Catholics that are held in Asia or about Asia find few articulate Asian Christian leaders. This was the position in the Asian Catechetical Conference held in Manila in April 1967. Very many representatives from Asian countries were not Asians, or if Asian, were rather conspicuous by their silence and passivity.

*There has been little freedom of discussion within the Asian churches. To the other inhibitions on freedom had to be added the oriental notion of reverential awe and respect which did not encourage subjects to discuss matters of Church policy. There are very few priests or laymen in Asia who speak their mind in public on matters affecting the Church. The communication within a country or among the countries is very restricted.*

## ***Asian Co-operation in Secular Matters***

It is quite strange that while the Catholic Churches in Asia have thus developed and lived in isolated ghettos, the secular leaders of Asia have been in close contact with each other specially during the period after 1945. The Independence struggles of the Asian countries were influenced by the movements of the rest of the Continent. After freedom the Asian leaders cooperated to help each other as at the Bandung Conference of 1955. Even in their rivalries they are conscious of the interrelation of their fortunes.

The *ideological togetherness* is very significant. Almost all Asian leaders are attracted by the main trends of contemporary thought. They are keen on development by either free enterprise or socialist means or both. Asian countries have cooperated very closely in the working of the United Nations General Assembly and specialized organizations such as ECAFE. They sponsored and profited by the Colombo Plan for technical cooperation. Recently they have been pressing together for better trade conditions at the UNCTAD conference in New Delhi. Prior to the UNCTAD sessions they met in Bangkok and Algiers to thrash out a common policy for it.

How different this process has been from the relationship among the Asian Churches. Even at the Vatican Council the Asian Bishops did not meet in a coordinated manner — even though all the other Continents did so.

## ***Problems Common to Asia***

It is quite true that Asia is the biggest continent; that it has nearly two-third of the human race and that its peoples are of varied racial and cultural groups which have historical traditions going back to millennia. Yet in the present world situation the countries of Asia have many common characteristics and problems both with reference to their general development and the life of the Christian communities in Asia. The issues connected with development are related to the poverty and technological backwardness of many Asian countries. These have a profound impact on Christian witness.

However, there are certain specific problems which have a deep bearing on the life of the Church. Asia is the continent of the great world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam and Shintoism. The Church is meeting these religions almost for the first time as equals and in a spirit of dialogue. Prior to recent decades these religions were politically in a relatively inferior position. They suffered much under colonialism and are keen on living their own lives in their independent countries. *The Church must therefore determine her missionary approach to these religions; and it is now clear that the methods of the past four hundred years in Asia are neither successful nor would even be tolerated today in these free countries. The Church must decide how to:*

1. Present the word of God in a manner relevant to Asia,
2. Orient the entire Christian liturgy to suit modern Asian situations and aspirations,

3. Exercise her pastoral mission among believers and others in a modern Asia that is largely secular in tone and impatient of development.

These problems are all inter connected and can find some inspiration for their solution from the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. Yet the entire tradition of Church life in Asia is such that changes are very slow and gradual inspite of Vatican II. Hence the necessity for a fairly big push to be given by or to the hierarchies of Asian Churches — preferably all together.

There is also a trend in the course of evolution of Asian countries — towards Independence and thereafter. Hence we see that problems faced by one country have a tendency to present themselves elsewhere after a certain lapse of time. This is true with reference to secular affairs as well as within the Church. The comparison of experiences in the different countries of Asia can help us to understand the forces that are operating in our countries. Thereafter it would be easier to discern the good and the bad in them and accordingly decide on our attitudes. The common trends will help the Church in Asia to read the signs of the times and accordingly bear witness to the values of Christ within the events that rock our continent today.

### ***Presenting the word of God in Asia***

The preaching of the gospel to Asia has been done in the categories which had been evolved in Europe during the modern period. These are being given up in the West itself, thanks to the *modern catechetical revival* that seeks to present the central message of Christian revelation: of God as a loving father who sent his Son Jesus, as man and His Spirit for man's sake. It is not intended to repeat here the main themes and directions of a content of modern Catechesis. Likewise there is a change in the method of Catechesis which now tries to begin with the data of a human situation in order to present Christ as the deepest answer to the values which are expressed in such situations.

Both content and method of Catechesis need to be renewed in Asia, first with reference to the overall renewal in the Church. This too is painfully slow due to our lethargy. Yet this alone is not enough; for in Asia we need a further incarnation of the content and an elaboration of the method to suit the Asian backgrounds. The application of the anthropological method of modern Catechesis to Asia requires that we begin with a knowledge and appreciation of the Asian environment including psychology of the peoples, their literature and culture, religions, history and contemporary aspirations: "their hopes and their joys, their grief's and their anxieties." These should be a point of departure of an Asian Catechesis. The method of presenting the teachings of Christ must be such as to be suited to the different peoples of Asia.

Alongside such a renewal there must also be a rethinking of the *context of Catechesis in Asia*. The fundamental Christian doctrines do not change, but their presentation can and must change according to the requirements of different times and countries. The context of Catechesis must be presented to persons who have not had the same background as the Jews who had many centuries of God's revelation prior to their

meeting Jesus Christ. While the Old Testament has its wonderful lessons for all, it is hardly meaningful for Asians to have Christ presented as the fulfilment of the Jewish expectations in the era before Christ.

*The presentation of Christ to Asia must be as the fulfillment of the expectations of the Asian peoples who through many long centuries have sought spiritual values almost to the neglect of terrestrial riches. This is an approach that we find in the early Church when the Fathers of the Church respected the spiritual leaders of the peoples to whom they preached. St. Paul himself began thus in his preaching to the people of Athens (Acts, ch 17) which was quite distinct in approach from his preaching to the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia (ch 13). This approach must be worked out in detail in each different religious and cultural group in Asia. But it is very unlikely that individual dioceses or even countries would take the initiative in this regard. Nor can we expect Western countries to do this work for us, though we must gratefully acknowledge much that has been contributed by the studies in the West.*

The reorientation of the Gospel message in such a way that its point of departure is its incarnation in different Asian contexts must therefore take place in Asia and as a collective effort of the Asian Churches. There is no other body better suited to spearhead this work than the joint hierarchy of Asia meeting in a plenary session. The entire hierarchy together can give the green light to the work in this direction, obtain the necessary sanction and help from the Holy See and perhaps even establish some common centres for study, research and formation of the leaders of the catechetical movement in Asia. This need was felt very strongly at the deliberations of the Asian Catechetical Seminar held in Manila in April 1967. (c). *'Teaching All Nations', Manila*).

### ***The Renewal of the Liturgy***

The renewal of the approach towards worship is also a necessity of the universal Church. Prayer has tended to become stereotyped and without much relevance to the daily lives and commitment of the men of our day. This has been connected with the tendency to regard God as a far off abstraction that we meet "up there" and has had a consequence of making faith and religion seem rather individualistic and pietistic in outlook. Vatican II has given certain norms and orientations for a renewal of the liturgy so that all the faithful may participate in it actively and intelligently.

While this world wide renewal is progressing gradually, in the Asian countries there should be further dimensions in the renewal of the liturgy. In Asia the social problems and those of development are most acute and Christians should be inspired by their contact with God in worship to devote themselves ardently to the work of upliftment of the peoples of Asia Hence it is all the more necessary that the liturgy should be meaningful to the daily struggles of the people. In this respect the Roman' liturgy needs a deep and far reaching transformation in order to be in tune with the aspirations of the Asian masses.

A further and almost unique line of renewal of the liturgy in Asia has to be in relation to the *cultures and religions* of these countries. The present Roman liturgy is steeped in Jewish literature and culture with a "superimposition of Western attitudes and ceremonies. The culture of most countries of Asia is different from both these. Hence a re-adaptation of the central liturgical mystery must be effected with reference to the different cultures of the different peoples: e.g., relating to literature, music, art, architecture and customs. Vatican II has already called for this change—but the progress of the adaptation is extremely slow.

*An even more important, though difficult, line and level of renewal of our liturgy must be relation to the ancient religions of Asia. If the Asian peoples are to feel at ease within the Christian liturgy there must be a certain continuity between the worship they have been used to in the other religions and Christian worship. Given the thinking of Vatican II we can accept many of the sacred writings of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucius and Lao-Tzu, the traditional founder of Taoism. These texts should find a revered place in the Asian Christian's liturgy. They are in many senses our Old Testament-God speaking to our peoples in many and diverse tongues over the ages.*

*Not only can we accept the texts, we might be able to go further and incorporate some of their ceremonies themselves in our liturgy. This is the way in which the Roman liturgy was evolved in the early centuries. We must evidently use our discretion and discern the good from mere superstition. The difficulty of the task should not deter us, because this is one of the most important ways in which the liturgy can be rendered meaningful to Asians. Some slight progress has been made in the adaptation of some dance and flower offerings in certain areas. But very much more needs to be done. We must begin with a sympathetic study of the ceremonial of other religions; we need to exclude from acceptance only what is bad or meaningless.*

An even more difficult level of renewal would be in our *acceptance of the religious leaders* of the other religions, like Prophet Mohamed and the Buddha. They do not claim to be God—but only leaders who show the way to deliverance. These spiritual leaders have had an unmeasurable influence on the lives of the peoples of Asia through numerous generations. No religious appraisal of Asia can "exclude them; not have they been bad influences; on the contrary much that is good in Asian countries has been influenced by them. Can we Christians therefore not honour them as some of the greatest spiritual leaders of mankind? How can we incorporate such an attitude into our liturgy? (cf LOGOS, Dec 1967, Vol 8, No 3 &4, article on "Renewal of the Liturgy in Asia")

### ***The Catechumenate***

A consideration of the renewal of catechesis and of liturgy leads us to a reflection on the need of adapting the Catechumenate in Asia to suit our needs. First of all the Catechumenate as such is as yet organized only in a few Asian countries; it is often left to the private initiative of the missionaries. Secondly, the Catechumenate in an Asian country must be somewhat different from what it is in Europe or Africa.

The Catechumenate is a stage of initiation to the faith. It must therefore take into account the terminus a quo and the terminus ad quem. The former is often the religion which a catechumen has been used to accept and worship in. A general principle of the instruction and formation of the Catechumen should be that we do not ask him to give up anything that he has so far believed unless it is seen to -be positively wrong. Hence the instructor must have an understanding of the religion from which the Catechumen wants to join the Church. He should be able to tell the Catechumen what he can continue with reference to both belief and worship. *A liberal attitude in this regard can be respectful of other religions and also help to classify what is specific, original and transcendental in Christianity. It will also make the acceptance of Christianity much less a segregation from the normal society in which Asians live.*

As in the case of the orientation of Catechesis, in the matter of liturgy and Catechumenate too it is essential that the Asian hierarchies give a collective lead for otherwise little change is likely in Asia even in the next decade.

### ***Reform of the Canon Law***

The entire Catholic Church has to be interested in the reform of Canon Law for it has an effect on the life of the Christian communities. There are however certain aspects in which the Churches in Asia can make a special contribution to the change in the Church Law. Canon Law was codified at a time where there was scant respect for the other religions among canonists—in fact even the Christian laymen have hardly any rights in the present Canon Law. Hence many attitudes towards persons who are not Christian are based on a view that it is dangerous for Christians to associate with others. The approach of Canon Law is thus negative and prohibitive concerning relations with non-Christians. This has had a great impact on the creation of the ghetto mentality among Christians.

It is now necessary to liberate ourselves from many prescriptions of Canon Law which have been suspended by the decisions and spirit of Vatican II. The Asian Christians can contribute to the understanding of the dignity and respect due to all men whatever be their religion. Many prescriptions which are exclusive e.g., concerning marriages, baptism of children of mixed marriages, education of children, "Communicatio in sacris", sending of books, burial grounds, etc., need rethinking and modification. The Asian Christians have to face perhaps more than Christians elsewhere the implications of living as small minorities within vast pluralistic and secularized countries. Sometimes they are a small group within countries which have accepted another religion as the only official faith of the country - e.g., Islam in Pakistan.

Canon Law needs to be reformed in order that Christians may participate more fully in the life of the people of the Asian countries. This indication of the need and direction of reform would be much easier and more effective if the Bishops of Asia were to meet together to deliberate on it. Their collective recommendations are likely to be taken much more seriously by the Commission for Reform of Canon Law than if individual bishops or Christians were to write separately to it.

### ***The Church's Social Action***

Not only must the preaching of the word and the worship of God be rethought in Asia, but the entire tenor of life within the Church must be recast to suit the Asian societies. The Asian Churches and clergy were generally established after the model of their Western counterparts. Hence we find a serious gap between the organized Christian life and that of the majority of the Asian peoples.

The Churches in Asia have been deeply involved in the spread of education and the provision of social services. These have had very beneficial effects on the peoples of Asia and have contributed to the creation of an educated elite that has been able to take over the administration of their countries from the foreign rulers. Yet, today, in many Asian countries the State wishes to control education and the social services. The other religions to a large extent are wary of the Churches' ventures in these fields on the grounds that they give undue privileges to the Christians.

We have therefore to rethink the mode of our pastoral witness and social action given the new mood in many Asian countries. What is generally appreciated is totally *disinterested service* and uncompromising championing of the cause of *social justice* by Christians. Yet the way we have conditioned our thinking does not easily induce us to either. For we generally like to control the institutions we run or the services we provide and are also tempted to be rather complacent about social injustice as we easily get compromised with the wealthy by accepting their favours.

It would be extremely useful if the Bishops of Asia could take counsel together to decide what manner of social witness is relevant today. They could learn from the achievements and trials of different areas.

The *confrontation or dialogue with Marxism* would be a very important topic that needs common reflection in Asia, for Asia is today the main Continent in which Marxism is quite active and dynamic. Yet in this respect too we find that the best thinking of the Council and of Christian theologians today is hardly available to the Christians in Asia who have to face the difficult problem of relations with Marxists. The Catholics in Vietnam, for instance, would be helped much if the Catholics of Asia could give them a word of advice after deliberating in Council through their leadership.

Closely connected to this is the problem of understanding *Asian Socialism* in its varied hues. The Churches here are also left to their own resources or given orders from far off without much reference to the nuances of the local situation. If the Asian Christian leaders would consult together and seek to understand this phenomenon of Socialism in Asia a considerable amount of heart burning might be avoided. Further the Church might discover how to be in the vanguard of social reform in Asian countries.

Profound *social changes* are sweeping the Asian continent, the *traditional societies* are *disintegrating*; new cities and urban agglomerations are developing with an astonishing rapidity. The relationships between the social classes, the age-groups and the sexes are evolving fast towards conditions which obtain in the more modernized countries. All these

transformations cause serious problems for the persons involved in them. They have also a vital impact on the attitudes towards religion and spiritual values. A good deal of this development is sponsored by a secularist outlook that is a religious or sometimes regards religion as irrelevant to life of contemporary man.

In the problem of population planning which is so vital to Asian countries, the Asian bishops as a whole have not consulted each other; they have not made a significant impact on the thinking of the Church and perhaps even failed to give the Holy Father the advice he is seeking. Whilst Asian politicians and leaders of socio-economic thinking pay much attention to this issue, the Asian hierarchies have contributed little to reflection on it even though it is one which concerns Asians so much.

In this metamorphosis, there is a grave threat to all religions as well as a tremendous opportunity for them to be a powerful inspiration to draw out and consolidate the immense potentialities for good in the contemporary processes of change. Men of religion should understand the changes; for this they should study them, compare them, see the trends and anticipate the future. Consequently there will have to be adaptations in the pastoral ministry also—in ideas, in relationships and structures to suit the new type of society that is now evolving in Asian countries.

Such a radical orientation of the pastorate of the Church will also be better realized if it is directed by the Bishops of Asia in overall agreement among themselves. The local hierarchies will gain in knowledge and find the necessary strength to push ahead towards meeting the new situations, even if it means a certain soft pedaling of earlier structures. These will also require changes in the use of personnel and funds; which in turn might need the approval of the authorities in Rome. There might also be a development of cooperation among the Asian Churches concerning formation of personnel, exchange of information, use of specialists, etc. All these can be furthered by a well prepared conference of Asian Bishops.

### ***For International Social Justice***

Asia is the continent of poverty in a world of plenty. Asia has been colonized and in many ways despoiled in recent centuries. Europe and America are continents which are rich and have the greater proportion of the world's Christians. Asia clamours for justice from the rich countries of the world—in the matter of trade, aid and a fair -redistribution of the world's resources among the population in the world.

The Asian Christians can be the best interpreters to the West of the hunger for justice among the peoples of the East. They might also be able to communicate to the East the good will of so many in the West. The Asian Bishops, if they meet together, could be extraordinarily powerful advocates of international social justice. They can help the Christians all over the world to form their social conscience according to the exigencies of the present situation.

The Church must be the sacrament of justice and freedom in the modern world. If the Asian bishops would champion international social justice in a strong way, not only will they contribute to its realization, they would also bear a meaningful witness, to the Church among the Asian peoples. This would be one the best ways of dispelling from the minds of the Asians the image of the Church as pro-Western, capitalist and .reactionary. A bishop's conference can be an immense aid to such a witness to justice,

### ***Incarnation within Asian Cultures***

In the modern Asian renaissance, Culture is a most important consideration. While Asian countries have to accept recent Western inventions in the field of technology, it is mainly through the continuity Of the countries cultural traditions that Asians try to maintain their identity in the modern world. Culture therefore is a secret to the understanding of the Asians today. There is almost everywhere a revival of culture—a revival that is strongly backed by the new Governments of Asia.

On the other hand the Church has long appeared alien to Asian culture; it is even accused—not without some foundation of having attempted to impose foreign cultures on Asia in order to help Christianity. Hence in the people's mind there is a hostility to Christianity as it is thought of as inimical to their dearest treasure—that which helps them to be themselves in a fast changing world. The other religions on the contrary, have long identified themselves with the Asian cultures and also inspired them to their noblest achievements in almost every field of culture, art, architecture, painting, sculpture, poetry, literature and music. Even the folklore of the people is bound up almost inextricably with Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism or Islam.

The Vatican Council has given us very clear indications of the direction in which Christians must work for an incarnation in the cultures of Asia while maintaining the specific transcendence of the Christian revelation. The adaptation of the Catechisms, liturgy and arf could all be furthered by an attention to the cultural aspects of our mission to Asia. We can also be of some assistance to Asian cultures to meet the problems of modernization without disintegrating in the face of technological advance. Christianity itself will become more truly Asian by an integration within the cultural milieu of the Asian. This would be an enrichment of Christianity itself.

However, *implementation* of these directives is again an extremely slow process. Sometimes people have to wait for the demise of a whole generation of Church leaders, before they can hope to get the Church as a community moving. An Asian Council can help immensely in bringing about a better understanding of the nature and urgency of the issues; in plodding those less willing to change and in general giving more ^ detailed guidelines for the realization of the objectives.

### ***Inter-Christian Ecumenism in Asia***

The Christian witness in Asia will be profoundly bettered if the Christian communities are not so divided as they are today and if at least these efforts are coordinated. The

divisions of Christianity have little relevance to Asia; they are an export from Europe and a counter witness to Christ.

The pace of ecumenical activity can be much faster in Asia than in Europe as we do not have deep seated historical animosities to overcome. Yet till Vatican II, as far as the Roman Catholics were concerned, ecumenism was practically non-existent among the Churches in Asia. This shows the rather backward nature of our thinking and pastorate.

Since Vatican II slow efforts are made almost everywhere. Yet the leaders are hesitant and halting always awaiting directives from Rome instead of taking initiatives that advance the cause more powerfully. On the other hand the non-Catholic Christians in Asia, have in some instances been pioneers of Ecumenism as when they formed the Church of South India and in the negotiations presently going on for the constitution of the Church of Lanka (Ceylon).

If the Asian Bishops in Council face this issue with a great keenness to advance at least the cooperation of all Christians in our witness, very much could be achieved as at present the Christians are in small minorities almost everywhere and sadly disunited. All what has been discussed earlier can be helped by a ready cooperation of all Christians in Asia. Work such as the translation of the Bible to the numerous Asian languages and the adaptation to the culture and thinking of the peoples, could be particularly fruitful areas of cooperation. The extreme paucity of ministers of religion can also be partly made up for by a greater degree of collaboration among the pastors themselves. Much money can be saved by the common use of places of worship—and also scandal reduced.

Everything that could be said in favour of Ecumenism anywhere in the world can be said of Asia with even greater intensity and urgency. The future of Christianity in Asia is intimately linked to the cooperation among Christians. If Christians cannot cooperate even in missionary witness, can we claim that they deserve to be heard by others. Yet individual bishops can do little by themselves and even entire national hierarchies are often so weighed down by their day to day preoccupations that they hardly give much forward direction to the ecumenical movement.

### ***Training of Asian Clergy and Religious***

The Christian priesthood and the religious life were transplanted root and branch from Europe to the Asian countries during the past four hundred years. This was perhaps inevitable at the time and also had many advantages in that these countries have now an experience of a different type of priesthood and monasticism the Catholic priesthood of the Latin rite countries some of the elements of the Eastern priesthood — e.g., a certain separation from family with an energetic involvement in the works of social amelioration and education. The priesthood of the Asian countries have tended to be rather monastic and passive in their approach to life specially in the countries influenced by Hinduism.

However there is no reason why the formation of the Catholic priests and religious should be so Western and Westernizing. As yet an Asian cannot become a Catholic priest unless he knows Latin or at least a Western language like English. Latin and English are worthwhile acquisitions, but they need not be the media of instruction in our seminaries and

houses of religious formation. They are indicative of the type of formation given in which a priest or religious comes out as a Westernized bourgeois cut off from the average man or woman of his country.

This is only an index of the manner of training given. The Asian Churches need to think out their concept of the priesthood and how they relate it to the religious experience of their people. The priesthood should not be an imported product in Asia. The Vatican Council has decided on directives for the formation of the priests, but yet hardly any Asian country has moved away from the post- tridentine type of seminary. On the contrary in some areas quite imposing buildings with a completely modernized way of life is provided for seminarists most of whom would not have lived in such conditions if not for their call to the priesthood. A greater simplicity of life; an adaptation of the teaching to render it closer to the gospels and to the religious traditions of our countries are called for in our seminaries and in religious life.

Changes in this regard are not easy due to the necessity to think them out and convince both the rank and file laity as well as the superiors of seminaries and religious orders who are responsible for many seminaries in Asia as well as for their religious families. On the highest counsels of the religious orders it is often a point of view that is natural to Westerners that prevail, because they are hardly aware of any other. At present even such aspects as dress are imposed from abroad without adequate consideration to the climate or customs of the people of these countries.

An Asian Bishops' Conference can give a powerful impetus to the reform and renewal of the priestly and religious- life in Asia. Such a help is all the more necessary because the religious have been brought up as minors and dulled in passivity, while the Seminarists are unable to change their conditions. Hence a considerable degree of inertia reigns in this field. A clear and concerted indication of policy from a bishops' council can help to increase the pace of renewal.

### ***The Apostolate of the Laity***

While the Asian people have been fighting for their freedom and struggling for the development of their countries, the Catholic laity in Asia have been generally a passive lot within the Church. A few of them may have shown great initiative in national affairs, but generally the Church did not throw up leaders of great courage and enterprise in Asia. Even in the Philippines their great national leader Rizal felt that he was not wanted by the 'established Church. This is partly intelligible in the context of the type of theology that prevailed prior to Vatican II and specially in the Asian background where the clergy was often foreign and in some instances of the same nationality as the erstwhile colonizers- of our countries. Then the good man was the one who did not question the establishment — and the Church tended to produce many such good men.

The Vatican Council has indicated the responsibilities of the laity in the Church and in the State. In the Church they are adults who must be consulted by the clergy in all that ' concerns them. They can share in the government of the Church. In the world, outside strictly ecclesiastical matters, the laity are the chief witnesses to Christ and his values. Their

main field of action is the secular sphere where the day to day decisions are made concerning most affairs that affect man.

The Catholic laity however have been trained in a different way. The lay apostolate organizations are generally concerned with intra-ecclesial matters. Their members are not urged towards a commitment in the secular concerns of the country where the main battles of truth, peace, justice and equality are being fought today.

How will the lay apostolate movements in Asia be energized according to the new needs of the times and the mind of Vatican II? This cannot be done easily by the laity themselves unilaterally. They need the help and inspiration of the clergy and the Bishops. At present the lay apostolate groups in Asia meet off and on in international or Asian conferences — but they are able to do little. If the leadership of the Church at level of the Bishops were more convinced of the needs of the laity — of their training and their role — the growth of an articulate Asian laity would be better ensured.

It is to be hoped that if there is an Asian Bishops Council, a good number of priests and laymen would also be present there to ensure a fruitful dialogue and implementation at the different levels of the Church.

### ***A help to the Bishops***

An Asian Bishops' Conference would be in the first instance an enormous help to the present Asian bishops who have to face problems, situations and ecclesiastical directions which they did not bargain for when they accepted the onus of the episcopacy. As mentioned earlier most Asian Bishops were educated long before the modern revival of theology. They have little experience even of the normal administrative procedures of modern society even though their position involves much administration.

The Vatican Council has imposed on them the leadership in the updating of the Church. This process necessarily involves difficulties; for as the reins of a hitherto absolute government are relaxed there tend to be trends towards the extremes, Persons not used to freedom are apt to misuse when freedom is suddenly thrust on them. There are at present conflicts between those in favour of a faster pace of change and those who prefer the old order to continue; Where are the bishops to draw the line? How are they to understand the modern mentality in favour of greater freedom, frank dialogue and public discussion of issues? Some Bishops tend to be worried about the course of events; they are concerned about the apparent inroads into authority; they are perplexed at the attitudes of the young and the progressive — do these really have faith? On the other hand a younger or more dynamic bishop might find the rest of the Christian community too slow moving.

A vast transformation of the Church is required in Asia as the brief consideration of the different topics reveals. The Bishops of this generation have to face many more problems than in the past. They need help to get their bearings — to steer a wise course in the midst of conflicting trends. What better agency would there be for them than to meet their

brother bishops and exchange experiences and views with- them? The Vatican Council itself recommends this—in addition to having set the example for it.

The bishop? placed as they are in positions of authority, are the men for the renewal of the Church — and Asia needs such a renewal very much. If they could meet in Council in Asia or at least in different regions of Asia, there will undoubtedly be an effusion of special graces that only a Church-in-Council can evoke as in the first Council of Jerusalem.

The Holy Father can call special sessions of his Synod of Bishops even on a regional basis. Perhaps an Asian Bishops Council— of all bishops, or of representatives — could be called by the Pope to meet somewhere in Asia in order to renew the Church here and advance the mission to Asia. We earnestly hope that such an opportunity would be provided in the near future to the Church in Asia.

In any case the Asian bishops themselves can take the initiative in forming a conference for themselves as the bishops in the other continents. Perhaps the leaders of the national hierarchies could initiate such an apostolic assembly.