

The Christian formation of the Laity and lay missionary efforts in Asia

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INTRODUCTION

The title of the reflection seems to suggest 2 different questions, but they are rather two correlative aspects or steps of the same reality. A good christian formation should open the mind and the heart of the lay faithful to the mission, because, according to the decree *Ad Gentes*, “the Pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature” (AG 2). Thus, “as members of the living Christ, incorporated into Him and made like unto Him through baptism and through confirmation and the Eucharist, all the faithful are duty-bound to cooperate in the expansion and spreading out of His Body, to bring it to fullness as soon as may be (Eph. 4:13). Therefore, all sons of the Church should have a lively awareness of their responsibility to the world... they should spend their forces in the work of evangelization.” (AG 36). The missionary commitment is the culmination of the long process of the christian formation.

For the sake of clarity, the reflection will be divided in two parts. The first part tries to offer an overview of the formation of the Laity in Asia. Keeping in mind the intimate connection of the formation and the mission, as we have said, this part is not simply a description of the formation of the Laity and of the mission of the Laity in Asia, but it rather tries to see if the formation of the Laity in Asia is open to the missionary perspective.

The second part offers a reflection on what should be done so that a formation program may contribute to the missionary efforts of the lay faithful.

THE CHRISTIAN FORMATION AND THE MISSIONARY EFFORTS OF THE LAITY IN ASIA

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1. A overview of the formation of the Laity

The formation of the Laity, object of our reflection is not the basic christian formation of the preparation for the Initiation Sacraments and the preparation for the marriage, but the advanced christian formation of the Laity.

In Asia, the question of the role of the Laity in the Church and their formation has been raised in different local Churches and it became particularly clear in 1982 when the FABC decided to establish the Office of Laity (OL) and in 2004 following the 8th Assembly General of FABC on Family, the Office of Laity was entrusted with the question of Family and it became Office of Laity and Family (OLF). But it was the Synod of Bishops on Laity in 1987 which gave an impetus to the reflection on Laity. In Asia, the Synod of Bishops was prepared with the IV FABC Plenary Assembly in 1986 on the theme: “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia”.

Since then, we can find from the declarations of Bishops, as individual bishop and as Bishops Conference and even as Federation of Bishops Conferences (FABC) uncountable affirmations on the importance of the Laity and of their formation.

Declarations are followed then by facts and at present, the Churches in Asia are very active and animated with numerous initiatives for the formation of the Laity which is conducted in different levels and dynamics: Dioceses, Bishops Conferences or a Commission of Bishops Conference, Lay Associations or Movements, Religious Congregations or Institutes.

The initiatives of the formation for Laity in different countries of Asia, particularly in India and Korea and Philippines, where the ecclesial forces are major and where the Church can enjoy more political freedom, are so wide and numerous that it makes impossible to give a comprehensive description, or simply to mention the presence of all the initiatives of the formation for Laity. For this reason, I shall offer some programs which can be considered representative of the initiatives of different levels of the Churches: Office of Laity and Family (OLF) of FABC (Continental level), Lay Formation Center (LFC) of the Archdiocese of Lingayen-Dagupan, Philippines, Institute of Formation – Fondacio Asia (IFFAsia); Formation course for lay leaders of Suwon (Korea); Courses of Biblical Apostolate.

a) Office of Laity and Family (OLF) of FABC¹

Since 1982, when it came to life, Office of Laity and Family has organized many Meetings and workshops on Laity and on their Formation. We can recall here the Meetings at Regional and Continental level.

Regional Laity Meetings

From 1986 the National Laity Commissions held in cooperation with the FABC Office of Laity regular regional meetings for mutual support, sharing of experiences and building awareness of the important role of Lay people in the life of the Church.

EARLM (East Asian Regional Laity Meetings for Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan):

- EARLM 1 (1986, Taiwan): “The Role of the Laity in the Growth of the Local Churches in East Asia”
- EARLM 2 (1989, Japan): “Spiritual Crisis amidst Material Affluence and the Role of the Laity”
- EARLM 3 (1992, Korea): “The Participation of the Laity in the Life of the Church”
- EARLM 4 (1996, Macao): “The Role of the Laity in Human Development”
- EARLM 5 (1999, Hong Kong): “Formation of Laity towards a Renewed Church”
- EARLM 6 (2002, Taipei, Taiwan): “The Family in East Asia: Pastoral Challenges for the 3rd Millennium”.

SEARLM (Southeast Asian Regional Laity Meetings for Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam):

- SEARLM 1 (1996, Thailand): “The Role of the Laity in Church Mission in South East Asia, with Special Emphasis on Implementing the Church social Teachings”
- SEARLM 2 (1999, Philippines): “Authentic Human Development and the Social Teachings of the Church”

SARLM (South Asian Regional Laity Meetings for Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka):

- SARLM 1 (1995, India): “Towards a Participatory Church”
- SARLM 2 (1998, Nepal): “The Role and Mission of the Laity in the multi-religious contexts of South Asia at the threshold of the third millennium”

¹ <http://www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/olaity.html>

Continental Laity Meetings

- ALM I (First Asian Laity Meeting) was held 1994 in Suwon Diocese, Korea: “The Commitment of the Laity in Church’s Mission with special reference to implementing the Church’s Social Teachings”

- ALM II (Second Asian Laity Meeting) 2001 in Thailand: “Laity as a moving force of love and service in a renewed Church.”

b) Lay Formation Center (LFC)²

The Lay Formation Center (LFC) was established by Archbishop Oscar V. Cruz and the Clergy of the Archdiocese of Lingayen-Dagupan, Philippines, for the formation “especially of the Laity.” It opened on the feast of San Lorenzo Ruiz de Manila, the first Filipino Saint, who is a Filipino and lay person on September 28, 2005. Since then, LFC has housed more than 500 groups from the entire country for retreats, recollections, conferences and seminars.

Following the directives of the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* of Pope John Paul II, the Center offers programs on different level of formation:

- The spiritual formation of the Laity – their continual growth in communion with Christ is nourished by the help to holiness offered by the Church.

- Doctrinal formation – which will enable them to explain to the world the reason for their hope. Systematic catechesis is also necessary.

- A proper formation of a social conscience, especially in the Church’s social teaching.

- An integrated program of formation that cultivates the human values and skills necessary for the lay faithful’s apostolic activities.

c) Institute of Formation – Fondacio Asia (IFFAsia)³

Fondacio *Christians for the world* is an international association of the lay at the service of the world. It has pontifical recognition and is present in more than 20 countries. Fondacio is Catholic and ecumenical and works with youth, professionals, couples and

² <http://laydagupan.blogspot.com/>

³ http://www.fondacio-asia.org/?Institute_of_Formation

families, the elderly and marginalized to bring hope and renewal. In Asia, Fondacio is located in Quezon City – Philippines.

IFFAsia proposes an integral and holistic approach to formation which includes various currents of formation in the Church and Society. Our focus is discipleship-mission.

HUMAN FORMATION	SPIRITUAL FORMATION	SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT	PASTORAL FORMATION
Taking the existential path of self-discovery, growth, healing and transformation in the context of a living Community.	Understanding and growing in Christian faith, scripture, traditions and respect for other faiths and cultures.	Experience and understand the challenges of the times through exposure/immersion, critical analysis and integration of faith & life.	Equipping person with necessary tools and skills to be effective workers and leaders.

d) *Lay Leaders Formation Course in Suwon*⁴

An advanced lay leader’s formation course has been organized by the Suwon Diocese in Korea. It is a 10-week Course specifically for lay leaders, including parish council members, coordinators of Small Christian Communities, and heads of devotional groups.

The course aims to provide lay leaders with good quality education based on the spirit of the Vatican Council II. The diocese started the course in 2008 and 300 people on average participate each year.

Subjects of the course include the *Church and Laity, Christian art and spirituality, Youth ministry, Catholic ethics on life, Church architecture and faith, Korean history and the Church, Shamanism and Christianity.*

e) *Biblical Apostolate*

Through the Biblical Apostolate, the formation of the Laity is particularly vivid, because in all countries, this is some initiative, some form of instruction offered to Laity. Here, I want to mention only one initiative from India, in Tamilnadu: St. Paul’s Bible Institute (Chennai, Tamilnadu, India)⁵

⁴ www.ucanews.com/.../korean-lay-formation-course-proving-a-hit/

⁵ <http://www.spbibleinstitute.org>.

St. Paul's Bible Institute was started in 1982 by the Tamil Nadu Catholic Bishop's Council as a wing of Tamil Nadu Biblical Catechetical Liturgical Centre (TNBCLC) and collocated directly under the Tamil Nadu Bible Commission. This Institute aims at giving intensive training mainly to Lay People and sometimes to Religious Sisters and Brothers through the following programmes:

- One Year Residential Bible Course: Every year the Residential Bible Course is conducted in Tamil, starting from July to March and is offered to laymen, laywomen and religious sisters alternatively.

- Bible Correspondence Course: The Bible Correspondence Course for adults is being conducted by the Bible Institute since 1993. It is a two years course. In every cycle more than 4000 candidates follow this course and even those people from outside the state of Tamil Nadu are also taking part in this programme.

- Bible Exhibition / Museum: From 1989, a Bible Exhibition is conducted every academic year in many parishes of the archdiocese of Madras – Mylapore and some parishes of the other Dioceses of the region.

- *Vivilia Virunthu* – a Tamil Bible Monthly: The Bible Institute is publishing a Bible Monthly in Tamil by name: *Vivilia Virunthu*. It has become very popular within a short span of time so much as 7000 subscribers are receiving the copies every month. Among the subscribers there are about 500 from Srilanka and 500 from Tamil speaking Catholics of Malaysia.

- Vacation Bible School: The Vacation Bible School (VBS) is conducted in the month of May at the Parish level for ten days covering a specific theme of the Bible. This programme is very popular among the Children, both school going and the drop-outs. For the last ten years this VBS is conducted in all the 16 catholic Dioceses of Tamil Nadu and there is an increase in the number of participants year after year. In 2002 summer (April – May) the VBS was conducted in which more than 60,000 children participated and benefited.

- Basic Bible Seminars: The Bible Commission is regularly organizing every year the basic Bible seminars in dioceses and some centers. It is a ten months programme in which the whole Bible is covered in ten full day seminars. The lay people, both men and women, coming from various nearby parishes, would participate in this. By this programme a lot of biblical awareness is created among the simple people.

- On-going Biblical Formation: From 1996 onwards the Bible Commission is organizing in the regional level the On-going biblical formation for the lay people and religious sisters. The system of the Formation: Lay leaders and biblical animators who are actively involved in biblical apostolate are to be selected by every Diocesan Bible Commission. The Commission is also taking up other Bible Classes and Seminars for various other people, thus covering more than 3500 people in a year.

- Summer Bible Diploma Seminar: The Bible Commission has been conducting the Summer Bible Diploma Seminar since 1976 at TNBCLC, Tindivanam . More than 200 Participants have taken part every year. It is a three year cycle course in which we cover the whole Bible.

- Bible Sunday/Bible Week: Since 1974 Bible Sunday is celebrated all over Tamilnadu by the initiative taken by the Tamilnadu Bible Commission. As years went on, along with the Bible Sunday, Bible week is also celebrated in most of the parishes in the state in the month of September every year.

- Audio/Video Cassettes on Bible: The Commission is cooperating with the Santhome Communication Center run by the Catholic Bishops Council. The Center is producing many audio and video cassettes in Tamil on Biblical themes. Also it is dubbing in Tamil the video cassettes on Bible produced by the Lux International (Italy). This is an effective effort to disseminate the knowledge of the Bible among the illiterate.

- Bible Conventions: The Commission is organizing from time to time Bible Conventions in which more than 1500 people attend every time. Through this type of conventions one can motivate the people to have much interest for the Word of God and also we are able to distribute the Bible materials to a large number of people of the state.

2. *Missionary efforts of Laity*

As for missionary efforts, the lay faithful in Asia are also very active. Perhaps the most well known case is the Church in Korea where the Laity has been present and active from the very origin of the Church in the country.

In many local Churches, particularly in the countries with difficulties of religious or political character, the missionary actions are undertaken by the Laity rather individually or

by a small group. In other local Churches, the missionary actions of the Laity are well organized by the Pastors.

There are then missionary efforts accomplished by various Ecclesial Associations or Movements. Particularly numerous are the Lay missionary groups in connection with a religious or missionary congregation from whom they are inspired or founded, sustained and guided. They may remain always auxiliary missionary groups of the religious congregation from whom they are originated, but sometimes, a group develops to become an independent Lay Missionary Group. Among many, we may mention two Lay Missionary groups of this kind: *Philippine Catholic Lay Mission* (PCLM) and *Japan Lay Missionary Movement* (PLMM).

a) *Philippine Catholic Lay Mission (PCLM)*⁶

PCLM traces its beginnings to the Maryknoll's missionary charism and the growth of Small Christian communities (SCCs) in the then Prelature of Tagum in Davao in the 1960s. The Maryknoll evolved a program for SCCs in the Tagum prelateure, and as the communities matured, it became a natural consequence for them to become missionary by helping neighboring villages, parishes and dioceses form SCCs.

In response to the growing missionary spirit and upon seeing the talents, acquired skills and willingness of many lay people to preach God's Kingdom, the Maryknoll developed the concept of Filipino lay missionaries. After years of discussion and two experimental mission teams (in Hawaii and in Agusan del Sur), the Philippine Regional Meeting of Maryknoll formally established on March 1, 1977 the then called *Philippine Lay Mission Program*. The Philippine bishops have recognized it (along with the Mission Society of the Philippines) in the documents of the 1991 Second Plenary Council of the Philippines.

Starting 1994, the PCLM prepared for turnover to fully Filipino and lay administration, and the dream of Maryknoll for PCLM to stand on its feet was finally fulfilled in January 1999 when a lay missionary became the first Filipino and first lay director.

⁶ http://www.philcatholiclaymission.com/about_us.php

Since its foundation, it has sent 185 lay missionaries to 132 mission areas within and outside the Philippines including Hawaii in the USA, Venezuela, Tanzania, Kenya and in Japan.

b) *Japan Lay Missionary Movement (JLMM)*⁷

JLMM was founded in 1981 by Fr. Michael Siegel and immediately in the following year (1982) it started sending missionaries. In 1983, it was registered with Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan. In 1987, it was named *Lay Missionary Movement*. In 2002, it changed the status from an organization of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan to an authorized organization of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Japan and was renamed *Japan Lay Missionary Movement*

Members of JLMM are volunteers sent to Asia and Pacific-region. They live together with the local people sharing joys and sorrows through various activities for medical care, environment, agriculture; through the support of women and children together with the local people, and support of social welfare and development organized by local Catholic churches. In 2007, at the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the foundation, it was decided to form the *JLMM Gospel Choir*, starting a new missionary activity through singing.

Since the first missionary was sent in 1982, until now, 76 missionaries of JLMM have been sent to 16 countries.

3. *Some remarks*

At this point, we need to make a reflection on the formation programs of the Laity and their missionary efforts.

What has been said is indeed very short in comparison with the reality. Yet, it is sufficient to show the richness and the vitality of the formation programs and of the missionary efforts of the Laity in Asia. However, in relation to the perspective indicated by the title, as we have pointed out at the beginning of the reflection, one question should be raised and it is on the missionary perspective of the formation programs and even of the “missionary” efforts of the Laity.

⁷ <http://www.jlmm.net/english/>

According to the informations offered by the FABC Office of Laity⁸, since the creation of the Office of Laity, the formation program of Laity has been focused on four topics:

a) Social Teaching of the Church: implementation of the Social Teachings of the Church in the specific areas of living and working of Laity and in their networking with people of other faiths.

b) Participatory Church: training of Trainers in order to promote a Participatory Church, that is a Church “Communion of Communities” through the application of the Asian Integral Pastoral Approach (AsIPA)

c) Youth: to carry out the recommendations given in FABC Plenary Assemblies with regards to youth, allowing the voice of the young to be heard and creating more channels for their participation.

d) Women: focusing on issues and concern that affect women and in a particular way, to encourage and offer ways for greater recognition and channels of partnership of women and men in carrying out the Church’s mission.

Four topics indicated in fact can be resumed into two principal realms of action, that is, deepening and implementing the Social Teachings of the Church and getting the Laity, particularly the Youth and Women, more active in the life of the Church according to the vision of the Church as a “Communion of Communities”, applying particularly the methodology of *Asian Integral Pastoral Approach* (AsIPA). The same vision we can find also in the formation program of other institutions.

In this vision, the formation programs are not clearly open to the missionary perspective, in the sense of “mission *ad gentes*” intended by the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RMi 33-34), that is, apostolic action of the Church towards and in the midst of all those who do not know Christ as the Saviour and in the reality which is not enlightened and transformed by the Gospel so that Christ may be known, loved and accepted. Thus, the missionary perspective or “mission *ad gentes*” is an action “ad extra”, tending towards the world outside the Church, while the formation programs deal with the needs in the Church. In this sense, even some missionary activities may lack the missionary dimension.

This does not mean that the missionary spirit in Asia is not alive. We can recall here the example of the Church in Korea where, according to Cardinal Nicholas Cheong Jin-suk,

⁸ www.fabc.org/offices/olaity/asipa.html

Archbishop of Seoul, “over the past ten years (1996-2006) the Catholic Church in Korea has gone from less than three million faithful to over five million... In Seoul, we make up 14 percent of the population, and we have launched an initiative called the *Evangelization Twenty Twenty Movement*, with the aim of reaching 20 percent by 2020.”⁹ In the context of all Asia, we certainly can recall the First Asian Mission Congress celebrated at Chiangmai, Thailand, from 18-22 October 2006, on the theme “Telling the story of Jesus in Asia” where the missionary spirit was particularly vivid and we may say, burning the heart.

The formation programs with the priorities as they have been done, may be required by the needs and the realities of the Church at the time. But now the moment has come that the formation programs must be open decisively to the missionary dimension so that every faithful may “tell the story of Jesus” to share with everybody the joy of knowing Him and being with Him. This missionary vision is particularly necessary in Asia, where Christ, the Saviour of the world is still an unknown or at most, insignificant to most of Asians.

In this case, what are the most important aspects which should be integrated in a formation program for the Laity? This question will be examined in the next section.

MISSIONARY ASPECTS IN THE FORMATION PROGRAM FOR THE LAITY

In the context of the multiple reality of cultures, religions, political regimes, social systems, life standard, history, races, languages, and particularly the rhythm of changes and transformations of mindset and of societies in Asia, the missionary action of the Church is not easy and not simple. Dealing with all these questions goes beyond the limit of this reflection. Taking the inspiration from the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* and the Message of the *First Asian Mission Congress* in Chiangmai (Thailand), I would point out three aspects which should be present in any formation program of the Laity: Personal and intimate friendship with Christ; Being leaven in the secular reality and Docile to the Holy spirit.

1. *Personal and intimate friendship with Christ*

⁹ Interview published in “Avvenire”, November 22, 2006.

The First Asian Mission Congress starts its Message with vivid words as follow: “Jesus lives! Christ is Risen! Our Savior is with us; his life is our life... we express the same joyful faith as Christ’s first disciples, who proclaimed: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18); "It is the Lord" (Jn 21:7); "It is true: The Lord has risen" (Lk 24:34)... Jesus comes personally to his followers. He calls them by name: Mary of Magdala, Thomas, Peter, James, John. They recognize him.”

This Message is not simply a new missionary methodology; it is an expression of a heart which has been touched by Christ and, therefore, it brings us to the root and the essence of Mission: the personal encounter and intimate friendship with Christ, the Saviour, promised by the Father from the very beginning of the history.

The missionary, by definition, is a person who has been conquered by Christ, who has discovered that he is loved by Christ without condition, without measure and who has experienced that life with Christ is different from life without Christ. This is the meaning of the affirmation of the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: “Mission is an issue of faith, an accurate indicator of our faith in Christ and his love for us.” (RMi 11).

Talking of mission, one thinks spontaneously of terms, such as, “going”, “serving”, “helping the poor”, “preaching”, “cultures”, “religions”, that is people to be served, things to be done, problems to be resolved. No doubt, these are important and necessary issues to be dealt with in mission, but the fundamental question is the reason and the foundation which gives the “missionary” qualification to all those activities.

The most profound reason of the mission are not the problems of the world, but it is the desire of God “who loves the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). The ultimate newness which christians are sent to announce, to transmit and to give witness to the world is that in order to save the world, God did not send simply a messenger, but He came personally; He did not come simply in form of a man, but He became a man, sharing the human condition of every person to invite everyone to enter in his comunion, so that “they may have life and have it to the full” (Jn 10:10). All this manifests His tremendous love for the humankind and it is this unconditioned love of God which has changed the world and the course of the history.

In the light of this vision, the formation program for the Laity cannot be confided simply to a theological instruction or to a pastoral skill learning. It is essential to introduce

the lay faithful into a personal and intimate relationship with Christ. Although one often claims that the faithful in Asia are all practising Catholics¹⁰, a life with a personal and intimate relationship with Christ cannot be taken for granted. One may conduct a sacramental and devotional life, but the heart and the spirit are far away from Christ; one may know by heart the psalm of the Good Shepherd, but one does not know the Good Shepherd; one may talk of God, but one does not talk with Him, not even encounter Him.

This is the reason why in the world today, according to *Redemptoris Missio*, there is a temptation “to reduce Christianity to merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being.” (RMi 11). In Asia, there is still another temptation. Because of many difficulties and opposition the Church has to face, there is a temptation to confine the mission simply to the values of the Kingdom, such as, peace, justice, dialogue, human dignity, etc. hiding the person of Christ. No doubt, these values are necessary and they invite the actions of the lay faithful, but the question is the perspective and the source of all these values. How can one understand the true meaning of the values of the Kingdom without Christ? Moreover, as we have said, the absolute newness which the Church is sent to proclaim to the world is not a system of values or philosophy, but a person, who is Christ, God made man because of the love for the humankind. This is clearly affirmed also by the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*: “It is obvious to all that the Church's unique contribution to the peoples of the continent is the proclamation of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, the one and only Saviour for all peoples. What distinguishes the Church from other religious communities is her faith in Jesus Christ; and she cannot keep this precious light of faith under a bushel (cf. Mt 5:15)... The Church wants to offer the new life she has found in Jesus Christ to all the peoples of Asia as they search for the fullness of life, so that they can have the same fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit”. This faith in Jesus Christ is what inspires the Church's evangelizing work in Asia, often carried out in difficult and even dangerous circumstances.” (EiA 10).

Therefore, a formation program for the Laity should aim at leading the lay faithful to a personal and intimate friendship with Christ so that they can say “I know Him”; “I have met Him”, or in the words of the Apostle to the Gentiles: “I know in whom I have put my trust” (2Tim 1:12). This is a loving knowledge which enables the lay faithful to accept being in minority because of Christ and to make use of everything to serve God. Then, they will

¹⁰ *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, 25 February 2000. Special Insert.

really go out, telling the story of Christ just as the faithful in the Acts of the Apostles, when “a bitter persecution started against the church in Jerusalem, and everyone except the apostles scattered to the country districts of Judaea and Samaria... Once they had scattered, they went from place to place preaching the Good News.” (Act 8:1.4).

2. *Being leaven in the secular reality*

The question examined here is the specific field where the lay faithful exercise their mission. In this regard, the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, recalling the teaching of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* affirms that the field of evangelizing activity of the Laity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society, economics, culture, sciences, arts, international structures, mass media. It also includes the realities of human love, family, education of children and adolescents, professional works.¹¹ The evangelizing action of the lay faithful is so needed today in this field of secular realities, when so many changes are taking place and creating so much confusion.¹²

However, many lay men and women are keeping themselves aloof because of difficulties and dangers; others are getting lost because of the temptations. According to the apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, there are two temptations, that is “the temptation of being so strongly interested in Church services and tasks that some fail to become actively engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural and political world; and the temptation of legitimizing the unwarranted separation of faith from life, that is, a separation of the Gospel's acceptance from the actual living of the Gospel in various situations in the world.” (ChL 2).

The temptations indicated by *Christifideles Laici* in the context of the Universal Church are very real in Asia. The first temptation prevents the lay faithful from being active in the society. The church communities certainly need the service not only of the clergy and the religious, but also of many lay faithful. The situation becomes a problem when all or the majority of the lay faithful think of the service only in the context of the church community, without being able to understand their christian responsibility beyond the boundary of the church community. The vast field of the society is left open to all the forces, except to the Gospel, because of the absence of the lay faithful.

¹¹ Cfr. *Christifideles Laici* 23; *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 70.

¹² Cfr. Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave*, Batam Book, 1981, p. 289.

The second temptation makes the lay faithful become a meaningless, insignificant presence in the society. They are present in the secular realities, but they hide their christian identity and conviction. Instead of bringing the light of the Gospel to enlighten the world, they rush behind the environment in their behaviour, choices and life style; hence their presence as christians is meaningless.

Therefore, it is urgent that the formation programs contribute to make the lay faithful aware of their responsibility to bring the Gospel into their specific field of secular realities and to encourage them to take bold initiatives personally to transform the society from within.

The lay faithful in their missionary commitment in the secular realities do not treat simply the impersonal aspects of life, but they have to face people who are dealing with those secular realities, often with a secular heart and mind. This fact requires from the lay faithful an open mind and a loving heart which are transformed by the saving love of Christ in order to enlighten the realities and to transform the hearts of people. Doing so, the lay faithful will be like salt, light and leaven in society.¹³ Their presence and their actions, penetrated by the perfume of the Gospel will edify the environment, enlighten the mind and raise up the heart,

However, in the religious and political context of many countries of Asia, taking a direct action in secular realities in the name of the Gospel, and even planning a formation program in the perspective of training people to be active in the secular realities, may be risky and dangerous. To persevere in the responsibility and to be faithful to the Gospel, one needs a token of courage, a sense of prudence and particularly the strength and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

3. *Docile to the Holy Spirit*

All the Church documents of reference of this reflection, *Christifideles Laici*, *Redemptoris Missio* and *Ecclesia in Asia*, insist on the presence and the action of the Holy Spirit. To simplify the question, I just recall a short text from *Ecclesia in Asia*:: “The Church is convinced that deep within the people, cultures and religions of Asia there is a thirst for "living water" (cf. Jn 4:10-15), a thirst which the Spirit himself has created and which Jesus the Saviour alone can fully satisfy. The Church looks to the Holy Spirit to

¹³ Cfr. *Christifideles Laici* 15.

continue to prepare the peoples of Asia for the saving dialogue with the Saviour of all. The Church well knows that she can accomplish her mission only in obedience to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.” (EiA 18).

It is a habit to say that the Church in Asia must respond to threefold challenges, that is the challenge of the cultures, the challenge of the religions and the challenge of the poor and therefore, the Church must learn to dialogue with them: cultures, religions and the poor. Without minimizing the importance of the above mentioned challenges, I see the utmost challenge which the Church must respond to in Asia is the challenge of the Holy Spirit. He is present visibly and forcefully in Asia today as He was in the primitive Church narrated in the Acts of the Apostle. According to the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, “the Spirit who moved upon Asia in the time of the patriarchs and prophets, and still more powerfully in the time of Jesus Christ and the early Church, moves now among Asian Christians, strengthening the witness of their faith among the peoples, cultures and religions of the continent. Just as the great dialogue of love between God and man was prepared for by the Spirit and accomplished on Asian soil in the mystery of Christ, so the dialogue between the Saviour and the peoples of the continent continues today by the power of the same Holy Spirit at work in the Church.” (EiA 18).

The teaching of the apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* can be confirmed by the life and the mission of the Church in Asia. Two facts would be sufficient and for one of these two facts, I am a witness.

Many years ago, I visited the Archdiocese of Ranchi in India whose Archbishop is Card. Telesphore Topo. During my stay, two priests and one seminarian of the same parish were murdered. The church was all crowded at the funeral mass and together with the parishioners, all the Hindu population of the village of origin of the seminarian, including his relatives were present. It so happened that the seminarian was a convert from Hinduism and he was the only son and the only convert in his family. For solidarity, all the Hindu village came and at the funeral mass, the Cardinal explained the example of the Crucified Christ who offered himself for all humanity and a whole Hindu village was there to listen to him. In a normal situation, no one in India, not even an archbishop can gather a Hindu village to talk about Christ. Moreover, the catholics of the parish instead of being frightened and discouraged, became even more courageous and more steady in the Faith, contrary to

the calculation of the fanatic hindu murderers. "How rich and deep are the wisdom and the knowledge of God" (Rom 11:33). This is the real strength and the hope for the Church.

Second fact comes from Viet Nam and narrated by a Vietnamese bishop: "A sign worthy of being mentioned to show that the Word of God continues to support the Church in Vietnam. This would be the mass conversion of the thousands of persons of the ethnic minorities shortly after the canonization of the 117 Martyrs of Vietnam in 1988. What is curious about this is that many admitted to listening to the Protestant Radio in Manila, in the Philippines, but converted to Catholicism in Vietnam. Thus, the Protestants sow the seed and the Catholics harvest. The Word of God echoing from afar, reaching their ears, has become the source of hope for these persons lost in the mountains, deprived of all and without a future."¹⁴

It is the Holy Spirit who leads the Church in the mission or in the words of *Redemptoris Missio*, "the Holy Spirit is indeed the principal agent of the whole of the Church's mission" (RMi 23); "The Spirit gives them the ability to bear witness to Jesus with 'boldness'. When the first evangelizers go down from Jerusalem, the Spirit becomes even more of a 'guide,' helping them to choose both those to whom they are to go and the places to which their missionary journey is to take them. The working of the Spirit is manifested particularly in the impetus given to the mission which, in accordance with Christ's words, spreads out from Jerusalem to all of Judea and Samaria, and to the farthest ends of the earth." (RMi 24). In the context of the threefold challenges, we may say analogically that it is the Holy Spirit who helps the Church in Asia to perceive the threefold challenges and all other challenges in a right way, and to respond to them in an appropriate way.

This affirmation has a direct and concrete consequence for the formation programs of the Laity. It should be a program which helps the lay faithful to be attentive and docile to the actions of the Holy Spirit; which enables them to discern the inspirations and the actions of the Holy Spirit. The capacity of discernment of the Spirit is particularly necessary to the lay faithful who must operate in the ambiguity of the secular realities.

CONCLUSION

¹⁴ Bishop Joseph Nguyen Chi Linh, Bishop of Thanh Hóa (Viet Nam), *Bulletin of the Synod of Bishops*, 14.10.2008.

Still much more remains to be said. But at the conclusion, I just reecho few sentences of the Message of the First Asian Mission Congress: “Jesus comes personally to his followers. He calls them by name: Mary of Magdala, Thomas, Peter, James, John. They recognize him. He speaks words of peace and reconciliation. The disbelieving disciples are transformed. Yet, Jesus, the Crucified-Risen One, expands the dimensions of their faith. He challenges them further. He sends them on mission: "Go forth to every part of the world, and proclaim the Good News to the whole of creation" (Mk 16:15); "Go forth and make all nations my disciples" (Mt 28:19); "You are witnesses to all this" (Lk 24:48); "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn 20:21). And so the disciples set out to tell the Jesus story. They go to places, near and far: James to Jerusalem, Peter and Paul to Rome, Thomas to India. Indeed, to encounter the Risen Lord is to be sent on mission”.

May all the formation programs for the Laity contribute to enable the lay faithful to hear the voice of Jesus and may all the lay faithful of Asia today are able to hear the mysterious call of Jesus!