

LOVING OUR XAVERIAN VOCATION IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT

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Good day, confreres. The *General Chapter Preparatory Committee* asked me recently to share some insights or inputs on the topic “Loving our Xaverian Vocation in an Asian context”. Without batting an eyelash, I said yes, but soon I realized the challenge of this *forum*. I am neither a theologian nor an expert in missiology in Asia; I have only a conviction and perhaps that is the only thing I relied on to accept this challenge: I am a Xaverian, from Asia and love the Congregation. I spent 10 years in Sierra Leone and since 2018, I am back in the Philippines. Presently, I am the Rector of Philosophy and taking *pastoral* care of a slum area near our house, called *Sitio Militar*.

The theme of the General Chapter (GC) is a practical one. It is all about love. Love is a word that is used, misused, overused, and abused. Love is not so much about a concept or an idea, not even a feeling. Love is a person. That is God. God became one of us. *This is a God who in and through “Jesus pitched his tent among us through the incarnation” (cf. FABC Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality).*

My presentation is divided into two parts.

In the first part, we will look into the 3 realities in Asia and the consequent challenges for evangelization as described by the Federation of Asian Bishop Conference (FABC) in the *Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality* in 2022. **The second part** is a creative attempt to offer some practical suggestions on how to address these 3 realities: the 5 C’s of Love.

Pope Francis at the beginning of the General Conference of the Federation of Asian Bishops in 2022 said: “Paul VI encountered **in Asia a Church of the poor, a Church of the young, and a Church in dialogue**. Fifty years later, the Church of the Poor is a Church that cares for our common home, the Church of the Young is now navigating and evangelizing the digital continent, and the Church in dialogue is called to build bridges between churches, religions, and peoples.” (cf. FABC Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on *Synodality*).

A. Church of the Poor

Church of the Poor: Asia, the largest and most populous continent on earth, is a place of extreme poverty as well as top business ventures. Notable in recent years for its fast-growing economy, it is also the continent in which over 40 percent of the 766 million people living on less than US\$ 1.90 a day (about 306 million people), making it the second poorest continent after Africa. And while most of the developing world’s poor live in rural areas, the proportion of the poor living in urban areas is increasing (cf. Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD, *The Asian Church re-emerging and emerging realities and challenges*).

Moreover, poverty in Asia is more about lack of accessibility to basic services, like employment, housing, water and sanitation, electricity, transport, etc. Given this situation of massive poverty,

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) states that “We have created a “disposable culture” which is now spreading...The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers” (EG 53). With these words, Pope Francis is telling us that massive poverty is no longer just a question of “marginalization” where people are pushed to the margins. It is now a question of “exclusion” where people are pushed beyond the margins, excluded from the society as the “outcasts and leftovers”.

Looking at this reality of poverty, the main challenge for the Church is to be a Church for and of the poor. In fact, in the meeting of the Asian Bishops in Manila in 1970 which led to the formation of FABC, the bishops declared: “It is our resolve, first of all, to be more truly the church of the poor” (cf. Gaudencio Rosales and C.G. Arevalo: *For all the peoples of Asia*). Thus, **a Church FOR the Poor** means a church that addresses effectively the situation of poverty of millions of our brothers and sisters. In EG 187, “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society”.

A Church OF the poor also means a Church that is willing to be evangelized by the poor and be poor itself as what Pope stated beautifully, “I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us... we need to let ourselves be evangelized by them” (EG. 198). St. John Paul II also once underlines that “Asian Catholics have to adopt a lifestyle consonant with the teachings of the Gospel, so that they may better serve the Church’s mission and so that the Church herself may become a Church of the poor and for the poor”.

In addition, in the Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality, there is another call for the Church in Asia which is **to be the voice of the poor**. “There are times when the Church remains silent about the plight and cry of the Dalits, tribals, indigenous people and the poor...the voice of the Church must defend the voiceless and powerless”.

As a Congregation, in our mission to the non-Christians we opt for the poor, as well as to be "of the poor" and "for the poor". This call to be with the poor and to be in solidarity with the poor is stated clearly in our Constitution, “We direct our efforts among non-Christians, in a particular way, to the privileged ones of the Kingdom: the poor, the weak, the marginalized, and victims of oppression and injustice” (cf C9)

In this regard, I would like that the work of the assembly for the upcoming GC would not lose sight of the poor. We, Xaverians are asked to have an intimate encounter with the poor. In mission we are not tourists who are seeking entertainment from the locals. We are missionaries that must involve and incarnate in the lives of the poor, deprived, and oppressed.

Moreover, a true option for the poor, should warn us as well about the danger of using the poor for ourselves or “selling” the poor. In Tagalog there is a word “*bugaw*”. “*Bugaw*” is the person “selling” and “chasing costumers” for his or her prostitute. Regrettably, there is a tendency and hard to quit with us missionaries to sensationalize the poor in order to receive help from abroad by leveraging on the people compassion. We need to overcome paternalism with a deep

understanding of the dynamics of poverty and its causes. Poverty stems from and is maintained especially by system of injustice and inequality in which billion of real people like us try to survive.

B. Church of the Young

The Asia-Pacific region contains 60 percent of the world's youth population, or 750 million young persons with aged 15 to 24 years. Truly, Asia is a church of the young and for the young. Unfortunately, the common trend shows that the youth have been deserting the church. "A common phenomenon noted in the reports is the absence of youth in our churches. Given that they form a significant number in our population (approximately 65%), they are relatively absent in the life of the Church...Though the reports state the youth are missing in the Church, perhaps a point to ponder is that the youth are possibly saying that the Church is missing in their lives" (cf. FABC. *Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality*).

When we talk about the youth, we associate them with social media because the youth practically inhabit the web, they navigate and evangelize the digital continent. As I share some responsibility in our formation house by journeying with some young men, I would like to offer some insights on this new phenomenon:

- a. The "I" identity of the Youth: social media is a blessing in the world and particularly in our Congregation. Social media is a tool and a world; therefore, we need to evangelize (with and through) the world of social media. Social media lead the youth to form identities that are grounded in a form of exhibition (promoting self-advertisement) with users seeking only the affirmation of their own circle.
- b. Artificial Intelligence and the Youth: During the Formators and Professors Meeting in the Philosophy school (where our students here in Manila are studying), the Dean talked to us about the challenge of *ChatGPT*. Some students are using *ChatGPT* for their reflections, assignments, and even their thesis. *AI* makes our minds reliant on technology. Our youth today are not worried about spelling because there is a "spell check"; our youth of today are not good at multiplication table because there is a calculator. Thanks to AI. And not thanks to AI. Because of the development of *ChatGPT*, the Bran, and the other AI applications our youth of today are becoming less and less critical thinkers.
- c. Critical thinking, empathy, and the Youth: According to Cardinal Tagle in his speech to the Bishops in Asia, young people today lack in critical thinking and empathy. For him, the problem lies on the fact that many young people have no interest in reading books. For Tagle, "taking the time to read a book slowly, allows us to develop the analytic and contemplative parts of our mind. It brings us into contact with ideas different from our own, and people with whom we disagree". If we do not pay attention to this lack of development in the skills of reading, we might wake up one day we have Xaverians with no ability to analyze critically the situation. How do we expect the young Xaverians to be prophetic, to read the signs of the times if their minds are not trained

in critical thinking? Paraphrasing the question of Cardinal Tagle, we can ask ourselves, especially in our formation houses, “Are we effectively helping our formandi to develop a critical intelligence coupled with empathy towards those they do not know?”

As a Congregation, recently, I was talking to a confrere concerning the Vocation promotion in the Philippines. Fewer and fewer young people are willing to join us. I am aware of the fact that Filipino youth are bombarded with materialism and consumerism. And yet, at the same time, I believe that vocation to the religious life is still promising in the Philippines. Vocation promoters need to approach the prospected candidate not as a “fish” to be caught but instead as a friend. I came to realize in my experience in the vocation animation and also in formation that the youth of today want to be treated as friends, not as somebody who need to be guided. The church in general and the Congregation in particular, need to make them feel that we are with them and for them.

C. Church in Dialogue

Church in dialogue: “Asia, blessed with diverse cultures, religions, languages, and ethnicity, is the world’s largest continent in terms of both geographical area and population. It has a landmass of 44.6 million square kilometers, about 30% of the total earth’s surface. Asia is home to approximately 4.6 billion people with over 2,300 languages spoken across Asia. It is also considered the birthplace and cradle of major world religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and several others. Islam is the most prominent religion and is practiced by 1.2 billion people, followed by Hinduism with 900 million people” (cf. FABC Final Document of the Asian Continental Assembly on Synodality).

In Asia, dialogue is not an option, it’s a necessity, an obligation. We all know that the FABC has always asserted that the pathway for the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity is to continually engage in a three-fold dialogue: with Asian peoples (especially the poor) [integral development], Asian cultures [inculturation], and Asian religions [interfaith dialogue]. The future of Asia, by its own nature, must be interreligious. As missionaries *ad gentes*, we should never stop learning to understand the meaning of dialogue and how dialogue can be carried on effectively, according to each context. Fr. Antonio M. Pernia, SVD, being in Asia, says that the Church needs “to continue to promote interreligious or interfaith dialogue... Interreligious dialogue not only allows Christians to be in touch with Asia’s deepest self, but also enables them to find authentic ways of living and expressing their own Christian faith”.

Furthermore, in the First Plenary Assembly in Taipei in 1974, the bishops underline that “Asia is beginning to send out missionaries of its own. Some nations, which are older and stronger in Christianity, are sending priests and sisters to other Asian countries with greater need. We feel that the day is approaching when Asia will send missionaries to other continents”. This dream is a reality now even in our Congregation. The transition from being a “mission-receiving” to becoming a “mission-sending” continent has been happening.

Pope Francis in *EG* challenges the whole Catholic Church but more importantly the Asian Church in which we Xaverian Missionaries are at home. Pope Francis dreams of a “missionary option”, namely a Church which moves from the “conservation” mode to the “missionary” mode; in other words, a Church whose structures and resources “are channeled for the evangelization of the world rather than for her self-preservation” (*EG* 15). “Mere administration can no longer be enough. Throughout the world, let us be permanently in a state of mission” (*EG* 25).

In the second part of this presentation, I would like to propose some practical suggestions as responds to the three realities that have been discussed in the first part. These suggestions can be described or summarized in the 5 C’s of Love and hopefully can deepen our love for Xaverian Vocation:

1. **COMMUNICATION:** there is a story of one Bursar and his superior. The superior was in vacation and the Bursar sent a message to his Superior, “Father, I will buy a washing machine worth 1000 euros.” The Superior answered through WhatsApp: “NO PRICE IS TOO HIGH”. When the Superior returned to the community, he was surprised to see a new washing machine. He called the bursar and told him that he said “no” to his request. The bursar showed the message: “NO PRICE IS TOO HIGH” instead of “NO, THE PRICE IS TOO HIGH”.

Communication is very important in our Congregation in general and in the local communities in particular. We don’t need to send a message; we need to call. The story reminds us of the importance of a comma and a period. With the increased usage of social media, I am afraid that we are becoming what Pope John Paul II said: “We are losing the communion of persons and we become experts of the communion of pixels”.

2. **CONCRETIZATION:** God’s love becomes concrete when God became flesh. Why God incarnated because you can’t love that which you can’t put your arms around. We need to concretize our love with one another. I remember the song of Elvis Presley “ALWAYS ON MY MIND”. There is a phrase that says: “Maybe I did not love you quite often as I could have but you were always on my mind. Maybe I didn’t hold you, all those lonely, lonely times but you were always in my mind”. Love is not in my mind, love is not a theory, and love needs to be concretized. As Xaverians in Asia, we are asked to concretize our love to our neighbors: the poor, and the marginalized but we need to be reminded that the first neighbor is our confrere in the community. Sometimes we are generous to the beggars, but we don’t give time to listen to our confrere who is in crisis.

3. **COOPERATION:** It comes from a Latin word, *co-operare* (*co* means with; *operare* means to work) to work with. A missionary who works in Asia is not a lone ranger. It is working with the others. It does not mean uniformity but unity in diversity. One of the signs that our Congregation is “cooperating” to the mission of the Church is when the Congregation opens its door to the *Lay Xaverian*. This is a sign of love that we ask for partners and ‘colleagues’. We need to complete not compete with one another.

4. CONVERSION: Once I was having a conversation with a young missionary priest. He was sharing with me that since he got ordained, he can't do what he wants to do because he needs to follow the decision of the community. He can't go wherever and whomever he wants to go and with whom since he needs permission from his local superior. I challenged him to have a conversion of mind and told him straight: "you are already a priest, therefore, your approach to priesthood shouldn't be a *bachelor* mentality". St. Thomas Aquinas defines love as "the choice to will the good of the other." Unfortunately, many people reverse this definition, it becomes "the choice to will the other as a good", somebody to be used. In fact, and it is sad to say that, in our Congregation, some confreres consider the Congregation as a "good" that needs to be consumed, "to milk the cow" instead of willing to love the Congregation. Conversion comes from the Latin word (*con versare*) *con* means with; *versare* means to shed. Conversion means shedding our blood; who knows, sometimes maybe even literally. Every time we accept the challenge of conversion, be ready to 'bleed', that is, to suffer out of love for the missionary vocation received and for our missionary Family.

5. CHRIST: Jesus is the pattern, the measure, and the bases of our love. St. John Paul II said God loves us with a disinterested love. Disinterested is not uninterested. It means the love of God has no motive, no hidden agenda, and no self-interest. The Bible didn't say, God has love instead God is love. It means the nature of God is love. Following our dear and holy Founder: *In omnibus Christus!* (TL 7; 10).

Conclusion:

St. Conforti, through the inspiration of the life of St. Francis Xavier, found a *treasure* in Asia, the *pearl of East*, the cradle of rich cultures and deep religious traditions. Continuing the missionary pilgrimage of Francis Xavier, St. Conforti saw China and the Asian continent as the very place where "... to fulfill the sublime goals of the Institute, working with ever-increasing zeal for the spreading of the Gospel among the infidels, giving our own modest contribution to the fulfillment of Christ's wish: the formation of a single Christian family embracing all humanity". (TL 1).

Asia is rich in vocations as well. In our Institute, the number of Xaverians from Asia is growing considerably, offering to the Church the fruits of the work of the Holy Spirit. This factor is keeping alive and strong the hope for a brilliant future of our missionary Family (cfr. *Rm.5:5*).

Here in Asia, we Xaverians are challenged to love our vocation and our charism through a *spirit of living faith which enables us to see God, seek God, love God in all things, intensifying our desire to spread his kingdom everywhere* (cfr. TL 10). Asia in general, and China in particular, is the "FIRST LOVE" of our dear Founder. And *first love never dies*.

Thank you for listening to my presentation. It would be nice and interesting to hear other confreres sharing on how to love our missionary vocation, and how to be "better" Xaverian missionaries starting from the particular contexts where each of us is engaged.

Maraming Salamat po sa pakikinig ninyong lahat.

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