

A Contribution from Asia

The Holy Spirit in the journey of our Churches

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The author, born in the Philippines, served as president of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists from 2009 to 2017. He currently teaches at the Pontifical Gregorian University and is spiritual director for the Pontificio Collegio Filipino in Rome. We have chosen to publish the author's original English text here below, which has been adapted for publication in the corresponding Italian language issue (2018/1).

The ethos of Asia in general starts from a conjunctive matrix of culture more than a disjunctive one. This cultural ethos colors an Asian worldview and horizon with the core values of harmony, relationship, connection, family and an acute sense of belonging to a people in the diversity of faiths, cultures and traditions. One can say that the *humus* of being an Asian church essentially points to the priority given to fostering meaningful relationships that build up the community, thus locating personal identity in the context of insertion in the community. Without being naive, however, there are many situations influenced by cultural globalization that, in a way, create pockets of rupture in the fundamental fabric of Asian cultural ethos.

If one takes a closer look at the experience of being Church in Asia today, there seems to be some positive elements that speak of a growth of faith in spite of regime changes, economic downturns, marginalization of indigenous communities due to economic exploitation and political expediency, and systemic political corruption perpetuated by a tacit acceptance of power structure and a fatalistic reading of situations that appear insurmountable.

The church today in Asia can be seen from the following characteristics that speak of the Holy Spirit's ways within the existing cultural fabric.

First, resiliency in adversities and calamities when seen with the gaze of faith, brings about hope not only individually but also communally, and paves the way for the possibility to rebuild lives after any disaster and terrible condition.

One striking story was after typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. A woman opted to continue praying while in religious procession instead of rushing to get her food ration from a food truck. When asked to explain her action, she shared that she could not abandon Jesus who protected her during the typhoon.

The gaze of faith gives her hope. The gaze of faith is experienced in popular piety. Resiliency is reinforced by popular piety that facilitates a personal and communal religious experience and gives meaning to life's struggles and woes. It must be noted that in Asia, and in a particular way in the Philippines, faith is experienced in popular piety that serves both as a direct way of being connected with God and a critique of the poor to the complacency of those who can make a

difference in their lives. *Sensus Fidei* is not a rational experience but an existential need of a living faith.

A second characteristic is generosity in poverty that expresses solidarity as a life-nourishing relationship, and not as a top-down charity. It is heartwarming to note that nobody is so poor who has nothing to give. The value of the “crumbs” has been a revolution in many communities of faith. In fact, an initiative of the Archdiocese of Manila in the Philippines called “Pondong Pinoy”, in which even the poorest can share a cent for others, has generated close to two million euros, thus helping finance many initiatives to help the lost, the last, and the least. Thus, awareness of being God’s people is not abstract because it is basically a daily experience of conversion from selfishness to selflessness, from indifference to mindfulness of others, from apathy to commitment for justice, peace and social harmony. Obviously, there are contrary experiences to these edifying experiences of generosity but what really stands out is that the poor is a powerful agent of renewal and transformation that expresses emblematically the involvement of God’s people in the journey of life rooted in faith (cf. Jn 10,10).

Third, the capacity to listen and dialogue with “Voices that Challenge”¹ as expressed in this song: “Call us to hear the voices that challenge deep in the hearts of all people! By serving your world as lovers and dreamers, we become voices that challenge! For we are the voice of God. Voices that challenge: The Children who long to be heard and respected! The lowly and broken destroyed by oppression! The old and the fearful who hope for a new day! Voices that challenge: The lives and the cries of the poor and the silenced! The young ones who dream of a world free of hatred! The sick and the dying who cry for compassion! Voices that challenge: The ones who seek peace by their witness and courage! The women who suffer the pain of injustice! The people with AIDS and those plagued with addiction! The prophets and heroes who call us to question! The healers who teach us forgiveness and mercy! The victims of violent abuse and aggression! The Christ who gave his life that we might live!” In other words, dialogue is an essential dimension of walking together as Asian people of faith. Faith is essentially dialogical, and thus listening to the voice of God’s people entails listening as a way of life that allows the Holy Spirit to continually journey with God’s people in communal discernment of what is good and true in the present moment of history.

There are three images that can capture the Holy Spirit’s presence in the Asian churches today: Bamboo, Rice, and Water. Bamboo learns to dance with violent winds but it never breaks. Thus faith is experienced as inner harmony in the seeming chaos and trials of life and the destruction of nature. Rice serves as a staple food for many Asian people but at the same time it is emblematic of the truth that a few grains of rice could be enough to feed a community. In this way, faith is experienced Eucharistically not only in the breaking of bread but also in the depth of caring and solidarity. Water is life. Water nourishes, sustains, and supports life. For Asians, more than the image of fire, water can best represent the presence of the Holy Spirit in the community who never ceases to transform everything into the fullness of life.

The challenge of the church in Asia today is to walk together with resiliency, like bamboo, in the trials of the church, to keep the spirit of community like a grain of rice shared generously with others, and to allow constant dialogue and reciprocal listening to nourish the Church like living water, so that faith may mature even more fully in the beautiful garden of the church and bear fruit for the good of humanity.

¹ David Haas, GIA Publications Inc., 1990.