

Models of the Asian Church

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Abstract: *This paper examines the matrix of ecclesiological models proposed by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) as a new way of being church in Asia. It also investigates the theological foundations and notable features of the FABC's ecclesiology, and provides a tentative evaluation of its strengths and limitations.*

Key Words: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences; FABC; models of the church; Asian Church; Asian ecclesiology; Asian theology

Like Vatican II, which was largely a council of the universal church, for the church, and about the church, the statements of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) are in the main documents of a local church for and about the Church in Asia.¹ Indeed, since their first meeting in 1970, the Catholic bishops of Asia have issued numerous statements addressing various aspects of the Asian Church. In 1982 they devoted the entire Third Plenary Assembly to reflect on the theme of "The Church—A Community of Faith in Asia."² However, consistent with their predominantly missionary and pastoral orientation, they did not develop a systematic ecclesiology. Their ecclesiological interpretations were generally crafted to address the specific challenges facing the churches in Asia. In the first section of this paper, which begins with an overview of the statement of the Third Plenary Assembly, we will trace the development of the FABC's ecclesiology highlighting its basic continuity and gradual progression. We will then proceed with an investigation into the theological basis and features of this theology of the church, and conclude with a preliminary assessment of its strengths and limitations.

¹ All of the important documents of the FABC issued between 1970 and 2006 were published in the following four volumes: For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1970 to 1991, vol. 1, ed. G.B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992); For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference, Documents from 1992 to 1996, vol. 2, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997); For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Documents from 1997 to 2001, vol. 3, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002); For All the Peoples of Asia: FABC Documents from 2002 to 2006, vol. 4, ed. Franz-Josef Eilers (Manila: Claretian Publications, 2007). These volumes will be cited as FAPA Vol. 1, FAPA Vol. 2, FAPA Vol. 3, and FAPA Vol. 4, with the seven FABC Plenary Assemblies cited being referred to as FABC I, II, III, IV, V, VI, and VII. FABC's offices and study institutes quoted in this article will be abbreviated as follows: Office of Evangelization (OE), Office of Ecumenical & Interreligious Affairs (OEIA), Office of Human Development (OHD), Office of Laity (OL), Office of Social Communication (OSC), Theological Advisory Commission (TAC), later renamed as Office of Theological Concerns (OTC), Asian Movement for Christian Unity (AMCU), Bishops' Institute for Lay Apostolate (BILA), Bishops' Institute for Missionary Apostolate (BIMA), Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA), and Bishops' Institute for Social Action (BISA).

² FABC III, FAPA Vol. 1, 49–65.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE FABC'S ECCLESIOLOGY

The statement of the Third Plenary Assembly comprises the main text, which consists of five parts, the “Resolutions of the Assembly,” and the “Syllabus of Concerns.” It focuses on the church “as a community realizing its communion and mission in its own being and life, and in relation to other communities.”³ Its purpose is to develop a deeper understanding of the mystery of the church from a trinitarian perspective, and its application on the local and community level. Its pastoral aim is “to make local communities more and more authentic communities of faith.”⁴ Part 1 of the main text is a rapid survey of the FABC’s activities and achievements from 1972 to 1982. In Part 2 the Asian bishops explicate the identity, vocation, and mission of the church under the rubric of “a community of faith in Asia.” In Part 3 they discuss some of the “inadequacies and failures” of the churches in Asia. This is followed by a more optimistic turn in Part 4 where the bishops identify signs of hope and indications of the presence of the Spirit at work in ecclesial communities in Asia. Finally, in Part 5, they articulate their pastoral vision and priorities.

The title of this statement is significant. It speaks of “a community” “of faith” “in Asia.” The emphasis, then, is placed on a particular local church in communion with the universal church and other local churches, and rooted in the concrete, existential, and historical realities of the Asian *Sitz im Leben*. This community is united by faith, “the first single and shared reality by which the Church exists.”⁵ By this interpretation the FABC appears to adopt the older New Testament understanding of *ekklēsia* as a local assembly—the Pauline view—rather than referring to the church as the universal church.⁶ It also adheres to the patristic notion of the church as communion,⁷ a fertile concept that the 1985 Synod of Bishops proposed as the underlying framework of the church at Vatican II.⁸

After the Third Plenary Assembly, the FABC increasingly turned its attention toward promoting a new way of being church in Asia, which is expressed by four ecclesiological foci: church as communion-in-mission,⁹ as community of dialogue and solidarity,¹⁰ as

³ FABC III, art. 5, FAPA Vol. 1, 55.

⁴ FABC III, art. 14, FAPA Vol. 1, 60.

⁵ Yves Congar, “The Conciliar Structure or Regime of the Church,” *Concilium* 167 (September 1983): 3–9, at 4.

⁶ Analysing the occurrences of the term *ekklēsia* in seventeen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, Raymond F. Collins concludes that *ekklēsia* was used in two senses: the first reflects an older usage to connote a local assembly, and the second, a more recent usage, refers to the universal Church. See “Did Jesus Found The Church? Which Church?” *Louvain Studies* 21, no. 4 (1996): 356–64, at 357, 359, 363.

⁷ J.-M.R. Tillard maintains that “the nature of the Church, as early Tradition understands it” is “summed up in the communion, *koinonia*.” See *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, translated by R.C. De Peaux (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 29.

⁸ Synod of Bishops, “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops.” *Origins* 15, no. 27 (19 December 1985): 444–50.

⁹ OE, “Consultation on Evangelization and Communication,” art. 4, FAPA Vol. 3, 210; OE, “Consultation on Asian Local Churches and Mission Ad Gentes: A New Way of Being Church-in-Mission in Asia,” arts. 8–9, FAPA Vol. 3, 222; OE, “Consultation on ‘Evangelization and Inculturation,’” FAPA Vol. 3, 216–7.

¹⁰ BIRA IV/12, art. 48, FAPA Vol. 1, 332; OEIA, “Consultation on Christian Presence among Muslims in Asia,” art. 4, FAPA Vol. 1, 166; OESC, “Dialogue between Faith and Cultures in Asia: Towards Integral Human and Social Development,” art. 25, FAPA Vol. 2, 25; BIMA 1, art. 11, FAPA Vol. 1, 94; BISA I, art. 2, FAPA Vol. 1, 199; BISA V, arts. 6, 12–14, FAPA Vol. 1, 218–9; BISA VI, arts. 3, 8–9, FAPA Vol. 1, 223, 225; BISA VII, arts. 20–21, FAPA Vol. 1, 233; FABC V, arts. 2.3.3–2.3.4, FAPA Vol. 1, 278; FABC VI, arts. 3, 14.2, 15, FAPA Vol. 2, 2, 8, 10; FABC VII, arts. I.A.8, III, FAPA Vol.3, 4, 8.

community of disciples,¹¹ and as basic ecclesial communities.¹² These ecclesiological understandings do not destroy or reduce, but clarify and complement its primary definition of the church as a community of faith in Asia by relating and re-ordering the reality of the church to the faith experience and the pastoral and missionary needs of Asian Christians. All these understandings of the church in Asia will now be summarised in an architectural model (Figure 1) to highlight their interaction and interdependence. It consists of three concentric circles highlighting the FABC's models of the Asian church. The first, innermost circle emphasises the centrality of the FABC's view of the vocation of the church as a community of faith in Asia. In all the documents of the FABC, no other definition of the church is as fundamental as this one; it is to this community of faith in Asia that all other images of the church refer, and it is this communion in faith that distinguishes the church from all other communities in the Asian continent. The third, outermost concentric band summarises the Asian bishops' vision for the mission of the church. For them, evangelisation is the primary task and the highest priority for the church,¹³ whose purpose is to build up the kingdom of God.¹⁴ Its mission is directed to the world,¹⁵ and its mode "a triple dialogue of life" with the cultures, the religions, and the poor.¹⁶ The second, middle band highlights four main models of the church that the FABC gradually formulated from 1982. These ecclesiological models, which germinated from the basic ideas already existing at or prior to the Third Plenary Assembly, are not distinct from each other but represent different aspects of the vocation and mission of the church that the FABC emphasised in response to the needs and situations of Asian churches. They were developed from the primary, fundamental view of the nature of the church as presented in the innermost circle, and the vision of the church's mission as shown in the outermost band. The arrows used in the outermost band are not meant to indicate any cause-effect relationship between each of these four aspects, but highlight the dynamics and interplay between the various ecclesiological models (in the middle band) and the major aspects of the mission of Asian churches (in the outermost band).

¹¹ FABC VI, arts. 14, 52, FAPA Vol. 2, 1–12, 226.

¹² OHD, "Walking Humbly, Acting Justly, Loving Tenderly in Asia," art. 7, FAPA Vol. 2, 44; OL, "Second Southeast Asian Regional Laity Meeting," art. 8, FAPA Vol. 3, 90; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," art. 2.3.10, FAPA Vol.3, 277.

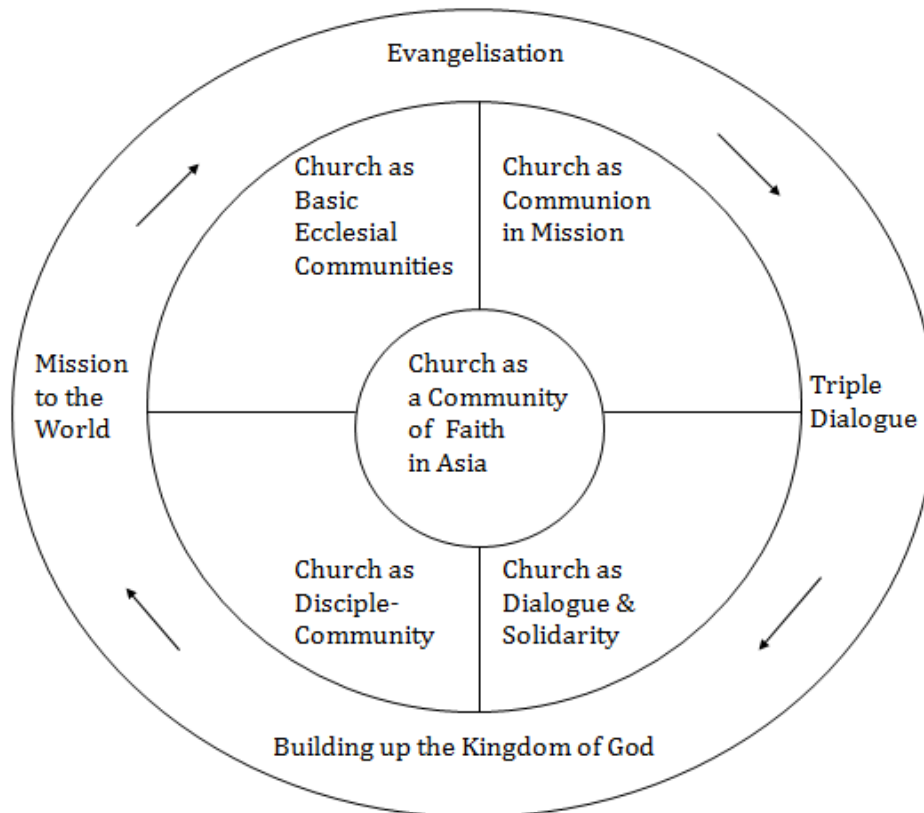
¹³ FABC I, arts. 8, 25, FAPA Vol. 1, 13, 16; FABC III, art. 17.3, FAPA Vol. 1, 60; FABC V, art. 3, FAPA Vol. 1, 279–81; FABC VII, art. III, FAPA Vol. 3, 8; BIMA IV, art. 7, FAPA Vol. 1, 292.

¹⁴ FABC IV, art. 4.4.4, FAPA Vol. 1, 193; FABC V, arts. 1.7, 2.3.9, 4.1, FAPA Vol. 1, 275, 279, 282; BIRA IV/2, arts. 8.1–8.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 252; BILA III, art. 12.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 245.

¹⁵ FABC III, art. 17.1, FAPA Vol. 1, 60; FABC V, art. 3, FAPA Vol. 1, 279–81; FABC VII, art. III, FAPA Vol. 3, 8; BILA III, art. 13.4, FAPA Vol. 1, 245.

¹⁶ FABC I, arts. 12–24, FAPA Vol. 1, 14–6; FABC III, art. 17.1, 17.4, FAPA Vol. 1, 60–1; FABC V, arts. 4.1–4.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 282; FABC VI, arts. 3, 15, FAPA Vol. 2, 2, 10; FABC VII, art. I.A.8, III, FAPA Vol. 3, 4, 8.

Vocation and Mission of the Asian Church: an Ecclesiological Architecture



By defining the church as a community of faith in Asia, the Asian bishops have adroitly combined a theological construct and a sociological category to express the vertical and horizontal, divine and human aspects of the church. However, they have decisively moved forward, and developed other ecclesiological images and metaphors in response to the pastoral needs of particular times and places. Our observation is that by proposing these forms of ecclesiality, or new ways being church, the FABC has implicitly adopted an analogical rather than dichotomous (either/or) approach. We also argue that this approach, which is primarily contextual, theologically consistent, and pastorally faithful to the vision of Vatican II,¹⁷ seems to proceed in the opposite direction from that followed by Avery Dulles who started with an exploration of the richness of the reality of the church under five ecclesiological models, and subsequently, developed an encompassing model of the church as a community of disciples.¹⁸ A clear advantage of the Asian bishops' ecclesiological approach is that, like the New Testament ecclesiology,¹⁹ it

¹⁷ For Joseph A. Komonchak, "the reason for a variety of images [of the church] is to be found in the council's choice of a more biblical, patristic, and liturgical language" ("The Significance of Vatican II for Ecclesiology," in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology in Honour of Patrick Granfield*, ed. Peter C. Phan [Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2000], 69-92, at 76).

¹⁸ Avery Dulles initially identifies five models of the church, as institution, mystical communion, sacrament, herald, and servant. See *Models of the Church* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1976). Later, following the lead of John Paul II's *Redemptor hominis* no. 21, he refines and integrates these ecclesiological images into a new model of the church as a community of disciples. See Avery Dulles, *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom* (New York: Crossroad: 1982), 7-14, 18.

¹⁹ For T. Howland Sanks, "within the New Testament itself we find a plurality of images and a plurality of self-understandings, which at the same time, maintains communion, *koinōnia*, among the churches. We find both unity and pluralism in ecclesiology even then." (See *Salt, Leaven, and Light: The Community Called Church* [New

provides a tensile coexistence of the divergent views of the church, and can avoid the tension caused by the problematic invocation of their teaching to defend conflicting models of the Church in Asia.²⁰ It also reminds Asian Christians that no one image can exhaust the rich reality of the church, and all frameworks are but weak metaphors trying to reflect the mystery of the church. For the FABC, the Church in Asia has a strongly christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian basis.

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE FABC'S ECCLESIOLOGY

Modern Catholic theologians tend to develop their ecclesiology from one of three perspectives: christological, pneumatological, or trinitarian. In a groundbreaking work on ministry, Kenan Osborne champions a vigorous christological orientation, predicting that "Christology in an ever increasing way will be seen as the basis and substance of ecclesiology."²¹ J.-M.R. Tillard, on the contrary, develops his ecclesiology based on the concept of communion, and gives great attention to the guiding role of the Holy Spirit in the church. In his view, "the structure of the Church is justified only by its relationship and service to the action of the Spirit, whether it is a question of sacraments, of ministry or of canonical regulation."²² Focusing on the two poles of Christian faith, "belief in the oneness of the Three Divine Persons and belief in the incarnation of the Second Person," George Tavard accentuates the importance of the Trinity in understanding the church.²³ Here Tavard echoes the view of Hans Küng who emphasises three metaphors of the church as "the people of God, the body of Christ, and the creation of the Spirit."²⁴ In this article we will argue that the FABC's ecclesiology embraces all three christological, pneumatological, and trinitarian dimensions.

Indeed, in the statements of the FABC, one can distinguish those which are christological from those which are pneumatological and trinitarian. The document issued by the FABC's Theological Advisory Commission on "Being Church in Asia" for instance, has a clearly christological focus and tone. It stresses that the context of Asia requires a deeper awareness of the meaning of the Church as a communion of communions, and a new way of being church that can present a new face of Christ to Asian society.²⁵ The bishops further underline the christological basis of their ecclesiology by encouraging Asian theologians to develop a cosmic Christology of harmony. Such a Christology will engender a cosmic ecclesiology that moves beyond its institutional attention "to understand the Church essentially as a centrifugal Church, open to the whole universe and present in and for the universe."²⁶

York: Crossroad, 1992], 51). He also notes that, according to Paul Minear, there are more than eighty "images and symbols that refer to the community in the New Testament." Ibid., 44.

²⁰ The FABC recognises that "within the Church, there are conflicts between different concepts and models of the Church." See BILA V, FAPA Vol. 2, 78.

²¹ Kenan B. Osborne, *Ministry: Lay Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church: Its History and Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 603-07.

²² J.-M.R. Tillard, *Church of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 29, 32, 52-3.

²³ George H. Tavard, *The Church, Community of Salvation: An Ecumenical Ecclesiology* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 244, 29-76.

²⁴ Hans Küng, *The Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), vii-viii, 107-260.

²⁵ TAC, "Being Church in Asia: Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life," art. 24, FAPA Vol. 2, 221.

²⁶ TAC, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," art. 5.2.4, FAPA Vol. 3, 294.

However, in spite of this strong christological anchoring, the FABC's ecclesiology retains its pneumatological dimension as it espouses Vatican II's teaching on the church as a community of believers filled with the living Spirit.²⁷ In accord with the council, this ecclesiology articulates several principles. First, the Spirit is the church's life principle.²⁸ Second, the Spirit helps the church interpret and assess the signs of the times in Asia in light of the Gospel.²⁹ Third, this ecclesiology considers as very important and relevant to the Asian context Vatican II's teaching on the ecclesial elements outside the visible boundaries of the Catholic Church.³⁰ Fourth, the church does not live by its hierarchical structure alone but by the variety of its charisms and ministries, which are bestowed by the Spirit for the general good and edification of the church.³¹ Fifth, the anointing of all members of the church by the Spirit means that they are called to bear a prophetic witness to the kingdom of God, with the Spirit as the principal agent of mission.³² Sixth, full communion in the church requires communion in the Spirit.³³ Finally, according to the FABC, the Spirit "seems to be moving the Church strongly in the direction of small Christian communities."³⁴ And, wherever people come together to build human communities based on love and justice, there is the presence of the Spirit.³⁵

This rapid survey of the FABC's documents reveals that the pneumatological dimension is an essential and vital element of the FABC's ecclesiology. But amidst this pneumatological discourse, it continues to insist that the mission of the Spirit is inseparable from that of the Father and the Son: the Spirit makes Christians one by incorporating them into the one body of Christ and leads them to the kingdom of God.³⁶ The church, according to the FABC, is a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁷ It is essentially "a communication which flows out of the communication of the Trinity."³⁸ Its mission, affirms the FABC, is the *missio Dei*,³⁹ the very mission of the Trinity.

The christological and pneumatological basis of the FABC's ecclesiology discussed above, we argue, underlines its contextual character, by a constant reference to the Gospel

²⁷ *Lumen gentium* no. 4 summarises the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

²⁸ FABC III, art. 15, FAPA Vol. 1, 60.

²⁹ OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," arts. 4.2.2.7, 4.3.1.2, FAPA Vol. 3, 309, 311.

³⁰ FABC III, art. 8.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 57; BIRA II, art. 12, FAPA Vol. 1, 115; BIRA IV/2, art. 8.5, FAPA Vol. 1, 253; BIRA IV/3, arts. 2, 6, 12, FAPA Vol. 1, 258-60; BIRA IV/4, art. 2, FAPA Vol. 1, 300; BIRA IV/7, arts. 12-13, FAPA Vol. 1, 310; BIRA IV/12, art. 7, FAPA Vol. 1, 326; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," art. 3.10.2.4, FAPA Vol. 3, 299.

³¹ FABC, Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (hereafter ACMC), art. 31, FAPA Vol. 1, 73; BIRA IV/3, art. 9, FAPA Vol. 1, 260; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," arts. 4.2.1.1, 4.3.1.2, 4.3.2.1, 5.6, 5.7, FAPA Vol. 3, 306, 311, 314, and 323-4 respectively.

³² OE, "Asian-Born Missionary Societies of Apostolic Life (AMSAL)," art. 2.d, FAPA Vol. 3, 206.

³³ ACMC, art. 23, FAPA Vol. 1, 72; FABC III, art. 7.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 56.

³⁴ OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," art. 4.3.2, FAPA Vol. 3, 313.

³⁵ BIRA IV/3, art. 13, FAPA Vol. 1, 260.

³⁶ FABC III, arts. 7.2, 15, FAPA Vol. 1, 56, 60; BIRA IV/3, arts. 10-1, 13, FAPA Vol. 1, 260.

³⁷ FABC III, art. 6, FAPA Vol. 1, 55.

³⁸ OSC, "Communication Challenges in Asia," FAPA Vol. 2, 185-6; OSC, "Church and Public Relations," FAPA Vol. 3, 185.

³⁹ OE, "Consultation on Asian Local Churches and Mission Ad Gentes: A New Way of Being Church-in-Mission in Asia," art. 5, FAPA Vol. 3, 222.

and an emphasis on the social context,⁴⁰ coupled with a reading of the signs of the times discerned as promptings and movements of the Holy Spirit. The trinitarian dimension, on the other hand, highlights its relational aspect by stressing the theme of the church as a community of faith rooted in the perfect communion of the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This contextual and relational character in turn provides a framework for understanding the main characteristics of the FABC's ecclesiology, which will be discussed in the next section.

FEATURES OF THE FABC'S ECCLESIOLOGY

The first feature of the FABC's ecclesiology is its predominantly "from below" and "from within" methodology, which comprises an inside analysis of the realities of Asia, a reflection of faith, and a plan for action. This methodology reflects a turn to human experience and a reliance on sociological analysis while acknowledging the intrinsic presence and working of God in the very development of human history and society. It has three intertwined elements, namely sociological, christological, and pneumatological. It begins in the faith experiences of local communities, and springs from the Asian bishops' acute awareness of the challenges of Asian societies. It is based on a Christology which is not separated from soteriology, a theme reinforced in the statement of the Fourth Plenary Assembly which highlights the role of the church as the servant and instrument of the liberation of Asia.⁴¹ Therefore, it can also be called a liberation ecclesiology, which is fundamentally contextual and historical.⁴² It is anchored in a pneumatology that is also developed from below, a theological endeavour that the FABC hopes will "not be a separate, isolated area of the theology, but a leaven which will permeate all of the presently emerging Asian theologies."⁴³ Theology, it affirms, must be at the service of life,⁴⁴ and becomes "part of the process of becoming and being Church in Asia."⁴⁵ It is not merely a faith seeking understanding, but a "faith seeking life, love, justice and freedom."⁴⁶ It proceeds "from the underside of history, from the perspective of those who struggle for life, love, justice, and freedom."⁴⁷ This predominantly from below and from within ecclesiology in turn accentuates the communion of local churches realised in basic ecclesial communities.

Indeed, the recurrent emphasis on basic ecclesial communities or basic Christian communities is the second notable feature of the FABC's ecclesiology.⁴⁸ In these communities, members are motivated by love and see things from the perspective of the poor. The study of the word of God and its application to daily life play a central role in

⁴⁰ For the FABC, the statement that "the context determines the Church's mission," is an important principle of the new way of being Church. See OESC, "A Renewed Catechesis for Asia: Towards the Year 2000 and Beyond," FAPA Vol. 2, 31.

⁴¹ FABC IV, art. 4.1.1, 4.1.3, FAPA Vol. 1, 191.

⁴² Camil Menard asserts that Latin American ecclesiology is "contextuelle et historique." See "L'ecclésiologie des théologiens de la libération: Contexte général and analyse de quelques questions ecclésiologiques discutées par Leonardo Boff," *Eglise et Théologie* 19 (1988): 349.

⁴³ BIRA IV/3, art. 7, FAPA Vol. 1, 259; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," art. 4.2.2.1, FAPA Vol. 3, 307.

⁴⁴ TAC, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," art. 1.1, FAPA Vol. 3, 232.

⁴⁵ TAC, "Being Church in Asia: Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life," art. 49, FAPA Vol. 2, 226.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, art. 48, FAPA Vol. 2, 226.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ FAPA Vol. 1, 249, FAPA Vol. 3, 433.

these communities, which are often involved in social and political activities. The pastoral process of basic ecclesial communities is explained by Archbishop Orlando Quevedo of the Philippines, who observes that these basic communities generally adopt a “spiral” method of discernment, an analysis of the situation followed by a reflection in light of faith, decision-making, and planning for implementation.⁴⁹ This process concludes with action and evaluation, and starts again when another situation emerges. In these communities lay people are empowered to play a leading role and the clergy remain in the supporting function. These communities, especially basic human communities which spring from them, grow by building relationships through intercultural and interreligious dialogue, and by reaching out to others in committed service. Through basic ecclesial communities, a contemporary image of the early Christian community depicted in the Acts of the Apostles,⁵⁰ the FABC sees a new way of being church,⁵¹ which is “a communion of ecclesial communities participating in the mission and ministry of Jesus.”⁵² This symbiosis of communion and mission, explicated as the double finality of the church, is the third feature of the FABC’s ecclesiology.

To date, theologians have often explored communion and mission as two distinct but interrelated ecclesiological frameworks through which the church can be understood.⁵³ Like Yves Congar, Jerome Hamer was one of the first Catholic theologians to propose communion as a theological model for understanding the church.⁵⁴ He describes communion as the “permanent form of the unity of the Church.”⁵⁵ A great many of other Catholic ecclesialogists would follow in his footsteps to investigate this theme. Notably among this cohort are Dennis Doyle and Jean-Marie Tillard.⁵⁶ However, the greatest impetus for the emphasis on the church as communion comes perhaps from several official documents, including the concluding report of the 1985 Synod of Bishops, which affirms that “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the council’s documents,”⁵⁷ the letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,⁵⁸ the statement of the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission,⁵⁹ and the joint statement issued by the International Consultation between the Catholic Church and

⁴⁹ Orlando B. Quevedo, “Seeds of the Kingdom,” *The Tablet* (30 May 1998): 696.

⁵⁰ German Martinez, “An Ecclesiology of Peace,” *Theology Digest* 38, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 238.

⁵¹ OHD, “Colloquium on Church in the 21st Century,” art. III, 13, FAPA Vol. 3, 36; OHD, “Walking Humbly, Acting Justly, Loving Tenderly in Asia,” art. 7, FAPA Vol. 2, 44.

⁵² OE, “Consultation on Evangelization and Communication: Orientations and Recommendations,” art. 1, FAPA Vol. 3, 209.

⁵³ See *The Jurist* 36 (Winter and Spring 1976), and *The Jurist* 39 (Winter and Spring 1979).

⁵⁴ Yves Congar, *Ministères et communion ecclésiale* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1970); *Diversity and Communion* (London: SCM Press, 1984).

⁵⁵ Jerome Hamer, *The Church is a Communion* (London: G. Chapman, 1964), 209.

⁵⁶ Dennis M. Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Vision and Versions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2000); J.-M.R. Tillard, *Churches of Churches: The Ecclesiology of Communion*, translated by R.C. De Peaux (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

⁵⁷ Synod of Bishops, “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops,” art. II.C.1, *Origins* 15, no. 27 (19 December 1985): 448.

⁵⁸ The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declares that the concept of communion is “very suitable for expressing the core of the mystery of the church and can certainly be a key for the renewal of Catholic ecclesiology.” See “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Understood as Communion,” *Origins* 15, no. 27 (19 December 1985): 108.

⁵⁹ Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, “The Church as Communion: Agreed Statement of by the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission,” *Origins* 20, no. 44 (11 April 1991): 719-27.

the World Evangelical Alliance.⁶⁰ Literature also abounds on the mission aspect of the church. One of the most articulate interpreters was John Paul II, who declares that “the Church is missionary by her very nature.”⁶¹ We note that in all theological discourses on the church, and perhaps more so in the documents of the FABC, the concept of communion tends to accentuate the “nature” aspect while mission highlights the “purpose” of the church.

By coining the term “communion-in-mission” the Asian bishops have adopted an approach that is “both/and” rather than “either/or,” stressing both communion and mission as the fundamental dimensions of the church. In so doing, they not only reflect the teachings of Vatican II but also integrate papal and synodal teachings such as those of Paul VI and the 1985 Synod of Bishops.⁶² This Synod makes an implicit link between the two concepts of communion and mission by stating that “the Church as communion is a sacrament for the salvation in the world.”⁶³ The Asian bishops do not envisage mission as the sole purpose of the church. Nor do they present communion as relative to mission or vice versa. In fact, they consider both communion and mission are the one *raison d’être* of the church. The advantage of this ecclesiological view is that it avoids the weaknesses identified by Louis J. Luzbetak as associated with the “Church as community” model, such as it “may lead people to become too introspective and not concerned enough about the world outside the Church-community,” or “to forget the Kingdom for which the Church exists,” or “to forget that the Church is mission.”⁶⁴ The twin concept of communion-in-mission is also tied to the sacramental and regnocentric dimension of the church, the fourth notable feature of the FABC’s ecclesiology.

For the Asian bishops, “the Church is at its deepest level a communion rooted in the life of the Trinity,” and a sacrament of “the loving self-communication of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in faith, hope and love.”⁶⁵ They also stress that the local church must endeavour to be a sacrament of unity and harmony of all peoples, because it is the sign and instrument of reconciliation in Christ through the presence and working of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁶ As “the sacrament of God’s message in the world,”⁶⁷ it “constantly moves forward in mission, as it accompanies all humankind in its pilgrimage to the Kingdom of the Father.”⁶⁸

⁶⁰ International Consultation between the Catholic Church and the World Evangelical Alliance, “Church, Evangelization and the Bonds of ‘Koinonia’,” *Origins* 33, no. 19 (16 October 2003): 310-20.

⁶¹ John Paul II, “Redemptoris Missio,” art. 62, *Origins* 20, no. 34 (31 January 1991): 559.

⁶² Vatican II, “Ad Gentes. Degree on the Church’s Missionary Activity,” in *Vatican Council II: Vol. 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery, new. rev. ed., (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Co., 1996), 813-56; Paul VI, “Evangelii Nuntiandi,” *ibid.*, 427-32.

⁶³ Synod of Bishops, “The Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops,” art. II.D.1, *Origins* 15, no. 27 (19 December 1985): 449.

⁶⁴ Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 12 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 377.

⁶⁵ FABC III, arts. 7.1, 15, FAPA Vol. 1, 56, 60.

⁶⁶ See FABC III, arts. 3.6, 7.2, 7.4, 7.9, 13, FAPA Vol. 1, 55-6, 59.

⁶⁷ BIRA II, art. 11, FAPA Vol. 1, 115.

⁶⁸ FABC III, art. 15, FAPA Vol. 1, 60.

In the ecclesiology of the FABC, the notion of kingdom of God is a complex reality which has four preponderant ideas. First, there is an eschatological view in which the kingdom of God is seen to be beyond history.⁶⁹ Second, we find an understanding of the kingdom of God which involves an *already* and a *not yet*.⁷⁰ Third, there is a prophetic view that sees God's kingdom as norms for individual and political morality.⁷¹ Finally, the Asian bishops speak of the church as the humble servant of the kingdom, and highlight the need for it to be truly missionary, because Jesus expended his whole life for the kingdom of God.⁷² By emphasising repeatedly that the church exists for the kingdom of God, they have promoted, according to Peter C. Phan, "a different ecclesiology, one that decenters the Church in the sense that it makes the center of the Christian life and worship not the Church but the reign of God."⁷³ Indeed, for the FABC, the Church in Asia is called to live in faithfulness to the Gospel and to engage in the works of the triple dialogue, which are a contribution to the civilisation of love, a first sketch of the vision of the kingdom of God on earth. In this sense the FABC's ecclesiology touches Christian life in its deepest spiritual recesses as well as its day-to-day secular realities, because its approach is predominantly from below and from within, characterised by an accentuation on local church and basic ecclesial communities, a symbiosis of communion and mission as the twin finality of the church, and a focus on the sacramental and regnocentric dimension. We will now turn to assess the strengths and limitations of this rich ecclesiology.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE FABC'S ECCLESIOLOGY

Like their overall theology, the FABC's ecclesiology is developed from the concrete, existential, and historical situations of Asia, a continent marked by poverty and scarred by war and suffering, and home to a multitude of ancient cultures and religions. That their ecclesiology is contextual can be seen from their faithfulness to the teaching of Vatican II and their primary description of the church as a community of faith in Asia. This contextual character is also discernible in their model of the church as a communion-in-mission, their creative linkage between dialogue and solidarity, and their deeper reflection on discipleship as a new paradigm for understanding the church, realised in basic ecclesial communities. All these ecclesiological appellations are contextual in the sense that they do not merely express the "immanent nature" of the church but more importantly its "economic" mission, not only what the church is, but also who and what it is for in the Asian context.

Another strength of the FABC's ecclesiology is its emphasis on the relational character of the church, which is, at its deepest level, a communion grounded in the life of the Trinity. This trinitarian foundation offers a broad framework for integrating the vertical communion with the Triune God and the horizontal communion that has two aspects: *ad intra* between Christians and *ad extra* with humanity. This relational,

⁶⁹ OE, "Consultation on Evangelization and Communication: Orientations and Recommendations," art. 4, FAPA Vol. 3, 210; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," arts. 4.2.2.7, 5.1, FAPA Vol. 3, 309, 318 respectively.

⁷⁰ BIRA IV/2, arts. 8.1-8.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 252.

⁷¹ TAC, "Being Church in Asia: Journeying with the Spirit into Fuller Life," art. 45, FAPA Vol. 2, 225.

⁷² Ibid., art. 44, FAPA Vol. 2, 225.

⁷³ Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 237.

trinitarian basis of the church seals the intimate connection of communion and mission. The church fulfils its mission to the extent that it is truly a communion, because the mission of the church is first and foremost the mission of the Triune God. In this contextual and relational ecclesiology, the church is not only a community of faith, but also a community of faith, hope, and love in Asia,⁷⁴ because it is fundamentally rooted in the mystery of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity.

While its contextual and relational character proves to be relevant and fruitful for the needs of the Church in Asia, our argument is that the FABC's ecclesiology is still beset by several theological difficulties. The first difficulty relates to "the relationship between the way we understand God's nature and the way we understand the nature of the Church."⁷⁵ Following Peter Fisher, we note that the FABC seems to give an impression that communion "sums up the God-given character of the church, whereas it may, in reality, only represent some aspects of that character," by implying "that we have knowledge of God, the three-in-one, of a kind or quality that we do not really possess" and by drawing "conclusions about *the Church* that may not confidently be drawn from assertions or beliefs about the Trinity."⁷⁶

Secondly, like Vatican II, the Asian bishops emphasise the importance of the church as both a local and a universal reality. For *Lumen gentium*, four elements constitute a local church: the presence of the Holy Spirit (nos. 4, 12), the proclamation of the Gospel (no. 5), the celebration of the sacraments (no. 7), and the apostolic ministry of a bishop (nos. 8, 20).⁷⁷ Citing the same elements, the Asian bishops declare that diocese and parish are genuine communities of faith, and basic ecclesial communities a new way of being church in Asia.⁷⁸ However, there is a certain ambiguity in their statements about the relationship between the local church and the universal church. To date, church leaders and theologians have often co-opted the phrase "in and from which" in *Lumen gentium* no. 23 to argue for the ontological priority of either the local or the universal church. For example, in its letter on "Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states that the universal church is "a reality ontologically and temporarily prior to every individual particular Church."⁷⁹ Walter Kasper, on the contrary, argues for the priority of the local church.⁸⁰ For the FABC, the church is a communion of communions, and the key question is not which, the universal or the local, has priority, but how the universality of the church is experienced and expressed at the local level of the country, the diocese, the parish, basic ecclesial communities, and the family understood as a miniature church, the church in the home.⁸¹

⁷⁴ FABC III, arts. 7.1, 15, FAPA Vol. 1, 56, 60.

⁷⁵ Peter Fisher, "Koinonia and Conflict," *Theology* 104 (November-December 2001): 420-8, at 422.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 422-3.

⁷⁷ These four elements are mentioned in the Conciliar Degree *Christus Dominus*, no. 11. French theologians often abbreviate these elements into four E's: "Esprit," "évangile," "eucharistie," and "évêque."

⁷⁸ FABC V, art. 3.3.2, FAPA Vol. 1, 281; APMC, arts. 38-40, FAPA Vol. 1, 75-6; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," art. 4.3.2, FAPA Vol.3, 312-3.

⁷⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion," no. 9, *Origins* 22, no. 7 (25 June 1992): 108-12, at 109.

⁸⁰ Walter Kasper, "On the Church: A Friendly Reply to Cardinal Ratzinger," *America* (23-30 April 2001): 8-14; Joseph Ratzinger, "The Local Church and Universal Church: A Response to Walter Kasper," *America* (19 November 2001): 7-11.

⁸¹ BIMA III, art. 6, FAPA Vol. 1, 104.

Thirdly, the FABC's ecclesiology could also be enriched by a deeper exploration of the immanent aspect of its Trinitarian theology. To date, the bishops' approach to the Trinitarian question seems to be more economic, presenting the "vitality" of communion as an analogical reality that has a vertical and horizontal dimension with the Trinity and among the Christians. For them, the Church is "the community of those who are restored into communion and fellowship (*koinonia*) among themselves, which is a communion and fellowship with God the Father and his Son Jesus in the Holy Spirit."⁸² They favour the use of symbolic descriptions of the Trinity because symbols can help in the understanding of theological doctrines and facilitate interreligious relationships.⁸³ However, they pay scant attention to the immanent Trinity. Peter C. Phan observes that "there has been little interest on the FABC's part in a purely philosophical or even theological discourse on God," and the bishops concentrate instead on the economic Trinity, on "God's activities in the world and God's relationship to us in history, that is, in what God the Father has done for us and the world in his Son Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit."⁸⁴

Finally, unlike John Paul II who declares that "unless one looks to the Mother of God, it is impossible to understand the mystery of the church, her reality, her essential vitality,"⁸⁵ the Asian bishops almost ignore the Marian dimension, except for the recurrent invocation of Mary for her intercession,⁸⁶ or some brief statements on Mariology and the Marian devotion.⁸⁷ Their ecclesiology is also in contradistinction to Joseph Ratzinger who considers the Marian understanding of the church as "the most decisive contrast to a purely organizational or bureaucratic concept of the Church."⁸⁸ For Ratzinger, "it is only in being Marian that we become the Church."⁸⁹

⁸² TAC, "Asian Christian Perspectives on Harmony," arts. 3.3.3.1, 4.11, FAPA Vol. 3, 274-5, 285.

⁸³ OEIA, "Fourth Formation Institute for Inter-Religious Affairs (FIRA IV)," art. 14, FAPA Vol. 3, 2 285.

⁸⁴ Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 121.

⁸⁵ See "Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year [15 August 1988]," no. 22, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html (accessed 17 December 2008).

⁸⁶ For instance, FABC III, art. 24, FAPA Vol. 1, 61; FABC IV, art. 5.4, FAPA Vol. 1, 198; FABC I, art. 33, FAPA Vol. 1, 25; FABC VII, Conclusion, FAPA Vol. 3, 16.

⁸⁷ OL, "BILA on Women II," art. 4.2.8, FAPA Vol. 3, 76; OTC, "The Spirit at Work in Asia Today," art. 4.3.3.1, FAPA Vol. 3, 315-6.

⁸⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Church, Ecumenism and Politics: New Essays in Ecclesiology* (Middlegreen, Slough, England: St Paul Publications, 1988), 20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the FABC's ecclesiological interpretations, which were crafted to make the identity and vocation of the church more intelligible, the preaching more credible, and the social relevance of the evangelising mission clearer. For the Asian bishops, faith is constitutive of the church, and the church defined primarily as a community of faith in Asia. At its deepest level, the church is a communion-in-mission, rooted in the life of the Trinity, comprising the entire local community, incarnated in a people, a defined culture, a specific place, and at a particular time. This mystery of the local church is realised in the diocese, the parish, basic ecclesial communities, and Christian families. The highest priority of the church's mission is evangelisation, which aims to build up the kingdom of God. This mission is oriented to the world, and contextually expressed by a triple dialogue with the religions, the cultures, and the poor of Asia.

From the primary definition of the church as a community of faith in Asia, the bishops have further explored the vocation and mission of the church in the Asian context. For them, the church is also a disciple-community, a communion-in-mission, a community of dialogue and solidarity, and basic ecclesial communities. These ecclesiological expressions are their vision of a new way of being church in Asia. Together they show both a fundamental continuity and a gradual development in the FABC's ecclesiology, one that is essentially christological, pneumatological, and Trinitarian. This theology of the church is distinguished by notable features such as its from below and from within methodology, an emphasis on basic ecclesial communities, a linkage of communion and mission as the integral finality of the church, and finally, a focus on the sacramental and regnocentric dimensions. Despite these ecclesiological elements, which are both faithful to the tradition and fruitful in the Asian context, the FABC's ecclesiology could be deepened by a clarification of the connection between God's *communio* and the communion of the church. It could also be enriched by a more extensive discussion on the relationship between the local church and the universal church, a fuller treatment of the theology of imminent Trinity, and an in-depth exploration of the Marian dimension of the church.

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