



Council 50

Towards a Church- Inspired by the Gospel-for the world
Rumbo hacia una Iglesia-inspirada en el Evangelio-para el mundo
Vers une Eglise-inspirée par l'Évangile-pour le monde
Verso una Chiesa ispirata dal Vangelo per il mondo

A Voice of Asia for Reform of Church

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Background

I would like to begin this essay with Pope Francis' well known ideas of Church as "field hospital" and which "goes forth" to the marginalized. In the papal exaltation *Evangelii Gaudium*, he mentions Church to go forth many times by which he means as follows: "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures." (no. 49) This ecclesiological view goes well with and is more strongly expressed in his view on church as "field hospital". He said, "I see the church as a field hospital after a battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugar! You have to heal his wounds."¹

However, realities of the churches in Asia and the world including Roman Curia hardly find a right subject or force to push through the job within the church communities. There has been an urgent need for their renewal about which Francis points out: there is "ecclesial structures which can hamper efforts at evangelization" (no.26). Yes, it is a problem of structure or "structural sin" seen in the current hierarchical structure of the church everywhere. He goes further that the renewal of structures demanded by "pastoral conversion" can only be understood in this light.

Therefore, now the question is to identify who will be the right one that makes the church a "field hospital" to go forth to the poor and wounded. In this sense, the presence and

¹ His statement was appeared in an interview with Father Antonio Spadaro, the editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, one of the oldest Italian Catholic periodicals, in August, 2012.

roles of lay run NGOs is more distinguished than ever. Pope Francis has showed his recognition and willingness to work together with social actors in and out of the church in a recent meeting. He urged grassroots activists to struggle against the “structural causes” of poverty and inequality in an international gathering of Church-related NGOs. In that, he delivered the remarks with a strong note of personal encouragement to the activists, telling them: “Today I want to join my voice to yours and accompany you in your struggle.”²

In Asia, Catholics make up only three percent of its population, these Catholics need each other; they need to network with each other. This is especially true for Church NGOs that are involved in “social ministries” such as human rights work, justice and peace building, work with migrants, with women and young children and with ecological concerns. These are often lonely and thankless tasks. These groups have already been highlighted in the Fifth and Sixth General Assemblies of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), which took up their “special pastoral concerns.” As we emphasize the need to assist Catholic lay NGOs and related Catholic organizations in Asia, we are in fact following the lead of the FABC and its stated pastoral concerns.

Pope Francis recognized the unique and pressing needs young people face in Asia, deciding to travel to South Korea in August, 2014 to participate in Asian Youth Day. During his visit he stressed the need to reach out to the marginalized and the otherwise needy. The pope urged the young to reject “inhuman economic policies” that disenfranchise the poor. He spoke of an idolatry of wealth, power and pleasure, which come at a high cost to human lives.

Unavoidable Change for Churches in Korea and Asia

Pope Francis’ ideas and drive for church reform is similar to the foundation spirit of Woori Theology Institute (WTI) created and run by lay leaders. WTI rather prefer the term “Church renewal”, one of greatest terms from Vatican II, together with another focus on “Social transformation” (or participation in democratization of the society) as its goal from the beginning of the institute some 25 years ago.

For the past 25 years of experiences, WTI based in Seoul, South Korea, has often witnessed that there have been “beautiful rhetoric” found in the local Church hierarchy’s documents or statements without any implementation of what it has spoken out for justice and peace, human dignity and so on especially when it comes to the “internal matters”. The local church has been well known to people in and out of Korea including non-believers as a symbol of “prophet” who cried out for justice, peace, human rights for the oppressed in 1970s and 80s.

The church, however, has never done the same to church workers within the church institutions who have been dealt not well compared to those in “secular” work places in terms of fair wage and human rights often ignored by clergy often. And worse, they have not been allowed to form a labor union so far. In this sense, such a “double standard” of the church

² Francis Rocca, “Pope urges activists to struggle against ‘structural causes’ of poverty”, *Catholic News Service*, Oct. 28th 2014. The Vatican-sponsored international gathering called World Meeting of Popular Movements was held in Rome on Oct. 28, 2014.

hierarchy has looked and been criticized as a “hypocrite”. Therefore establishment of proper structures that guarantee “internal dialogues” among the “People of God” has become crucial more and more.

There’ll never be such a prophet without internal dialogues at all levels between lay people and clergy through which we could and should make it “communion of communities”. It is not only matter of Korean Catholic church but other churches in Asia such as Indian’s.

Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) and other NGOs have recently submitted a complaint with the United Nations accusing the Vatican of not doing enough to curb discrimination faced by Dalit with the Catholic Church.³ According to the “untouchable”, the discrimination against Dalit Christians in the Catholic Church is a human right issue. They argue that there are separate cemeteries and seating arrangements for Dalit Christians in Catholic church, and even some churches the dead body of a Dalit Christian is not allowed to inside for funeral Mass. Although Dalit Christians form 70 percent of the total Catholic population in India, they point out, Dalits are not recruited for the priesthood and are rarely permitted to be appointed as bishops.

They also blame the Catholic Bishops’ Conference in India (CBCI) for not pursuing the issue with the Vatican, criticizing that CBCI has come out and declared caste as sin but the bishops themselves are practicing it. The two cases of Korea and India are just an example which is truly the case with many other churches in Asia. Therefore, “structural sin” is not only something outside but within the churches which we need to get over through “internal dialogue” in a new structure in the churches.

For this, I would suggest possible alternatives to the current structures on four levels: Parish, diocese, nation (bishops’ conference) and the Vatican.

- Parish – Full participation of lay leaders/activists in a decision-making body not just remaining a “consultation” one like the current Parish Council here and there in the world in order to simply manage or run it. All parishioners are requested to and not immune from joining establishing a Christian community to reach out to the marginalized in order to realize the Kingdom of God.
- Diocese – Establishment of a Diocesan Council that also includes lay leaders for making its policy on pastoral concerns for the people in need who live in and around the diocese as its neighbors. Election of a bishop which was a part of church traditions should be reintroduced like the cases of Bishops John Chrysostom, Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose of Milan were elected by laypeople themselves at that time⁴. However, if a direct vote to a bishop in order to elect a right and fair one might be expected to have a “technical difficulty” considering it almost

³ Ritu Sharma, “Dalit Christians in India file complaint with UN against the Vatican”, *UCANews*, June 30, 2015.

⁴ For more details about the matter, see Megan Fincher, “Lay groups seek to offer input on bishop selection”, *NCR*, Jan. 28, 2014. It was Middle Ages when noble families and civil rulers began to control bishops selection until 1917 when a Canon Law code was established. According to the code, the Church was able to declare that no rights in the selection of bishops were granted to civil authorities.

the same procedure we have practiced in general elections for law makers, mayors, governors and other politicians, then pay a good attention to the two “indirect” ways to choose one which are practicing now in Asia as follows:

One is the way of Vietnamese church and the other is that of Chinese. In the case of Vietnamese church, the negotiation between the government and the church goes first in which the government has the right of rejecting or accepting the proposed candidates by bishops’ conference in the country, without contesting the right of the pope to approve bishops. That is quite different from that of Chinese: “self-election and self-ordination” (自選 自聖) for the past 58 years without papal approval. (Although that incurs an automatic excommunication according to Canon Law, once the diplomatic tie between Vatican and China is reestablished, the situation is expected to dramatically change.)

I am not proposing the two are the only and exclusive model for choosing or electing a bishop but we need to pay more careful and serious attention in the name of being a “genuine” local church. It is a quite important point because many churches in Asia and other continents as well have a tendency to demonize “open” church in China. We should pray and help Chinese church to be an authentic local church by establishing a reconciliation of and harmonizing the “underground” church with open one, not by dividing the two.

- National level - A Pastoral Council of (a local church in Asia, e.g., Korea) should be formed first and held once or every other year in which lay leaders check and update the churches’ dialogue with the world. In a study session in the council meeting, they will come up with pastoral policies dealing with crucial social and spiritual matters, as well as internal issues.
- Vatican - The world seems to divide into two extreme poles: Confrontation between Christian and Islamic civilizations again. Since 9/11, confrontation between the two has been getting harder, wider and deeper. While Islamic extremist groups (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Taliban and many others) have now influenced Southeast Asia especially Malaysia and Indonesia, local Churches and Vatican seem to have no effective and relevant solution or make concrete endeavors to wrestle it.

In this regard, I suggest that since there are many related bodies such as councils and committees in Vatican, they should move to a place where diverse religious traditions and cultures have been rooted in people’s lives themselves in many countries in Asia such as Korea, Vietnam and India for East, Southeast, and South Asia respectively. In these places, Vatican could learn a real meaning of interreligious dialogue based on realities in lives of ordinary people. If not Vatican’s Congregations and Roman Curia, the Councils or Committees especially related to Migrant, Indigenous Peoples (IPs), Interreligious Affairs, and Culture could be relocated to the countries where such a rich diversity is regarded as a gift not a curse.

In order to reach these goals, I suggest to review realities of Small Christian Communities (SCCs or BEC) which FABC has pushed so far but has become more and more

isolated within a parish. It is time to change and open it to our neighbors as the actual implementation of establishment of such structures mentioned above. SCCs or BEC declared as the official ecclesiology of FABC as a “new way of being Church” in Asia, in its 5th Plenary Assembly in Bandung, Indonesia in 1990, should involve in some issues or problems facing people especially the poor in and outside parishes.

But it has a clear limitation because SCCs have been adopted “from above” as an administrative unit for running a parish in many countries in Asia. It is why we should move from that to Basic Human Community (BHC, FABC officially mentioned it and some Asian theologians like Aloysius Pieris and Julio Labayen also use the term) which includes people in the region where the parish is located is difficult but is necessary, and needs to make a steady efforts. It is a “paradigm shift” from the church “for and within the church” itself to the church “reaching out” to the poor and marginalized at the street and many places where they struggle to survive. In that, Church-related NGO activist leaders play a role as a bridge to make a connection between the parish and the society. It is why their presence is important.

Bishops’ Synod on Family in Rome and Asia

We have now been witnessing the historic bishops’ synod on family in 2014 and 2015: the latter is taking place in Rome. I believe it should be a part of the church reform driven by the Pope Francis supported by 9-member Committee of Cardinals whose works have succeeded especially in restructuring Roman Curia. We welcome CDF’s “doctorial assessment” hit hard LCWR in the US for the past 6 years has finally found a “peaceful” solution after a positive meeting of the pope with LCWR representatives. It is also positive for Francis to keep making efforts minimizing or restructuring other Vatican institutions. Despite such a positive view on Francis’ reform drive, I suggest a few things in the light of “global south” especially Asia.

Discourse of those three main issues on family discussed in the 2014 bishops’ synod in Rome was limited to a typical or classical definition of “family”. How about that of the migrant workers, refugees, Indigenous Peoples (IPs), Dalit (“untouchable”), landless peasants and many other marginalized in Asia? Those people are “special pastoral concerns” together with women and girl children, youth, and ecology, declared by the 6th and 7th plenary assemblies of FABC. The bishops’ synod in Rome this year should discuss such realities of people in crisis in Asia and other continents too.

How do the Churches in Asia deal with the bishops synod? Although the synod has just begun on Oct. 4th, many bishops from Asia are not prepared well. It is simply because they have no interest or seem not to want to spend their energy for wrestling the family issue.

Dr. James Kottoor pointed out that no Indian bishop did anything in the “extraordinary bishops’ synod” last year nor he hasn’t heard of any survey done by any Indian bishop, nor have done anything for this year synod either.⁵ In the case of Korean church, I would say there is not much difference from one another: Korean bishops are proximately the same as Indian’s.

⁵ James Kottoor, “No Indian Bishop Responds to Papal Call? – Church in India & Oct.4-25 Family Synod”, *Indian Currents*, July 12th, 2015, 43.

The Korean bishops are not known to have done any national or regional study or survey at parish or diocesan levels to collect data for last year synod nor this year's either. One local church source told me that none of dioceses among 15 of them including a military ordinate collected data on the family matter. Then how they came up with a report to Rome? It is simple: according to the source, it was the one official from each diocese who was designated to do the job as "paper work" out of the already-made data done in the past.

That means the pope's good intention and seriousness on the matter has not been dealt with just and fair in many countries in Asia. I had a chance to confirm this from an international conference organized by myself which was done with 75 young lay leaders, theologians and church actors from 15 countries last August, 2015. When I asked them about it, any participants from the churches in Asia responded positively. There has been little or no "Francis effect" as long as Asian Churches are concerned especially when it comes to the bishops' synod on family.

Here, I would like to express my hope for the synod. After release of the encyclical *Humane Vitae*, all methods for an artificial birth control including using condom were confirmed to be banned. Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI dispatched Vatican officials to countries in Africa and even had them set fire to massive piles of condoms under the situation in which countless innocent infants are dying because of infection of AIDS/HIV through their mothers' breast-feeding. Moral theologian such as Charles Curran strongly criticized the Pope Paul VI's encyclical but got silenced by CDF of Vatican.

Although it is late but not too late, I do hope Vatican reinstate Charles and acknowledge his works in a fair way. Also hope that the Church as mother and teacher for the world do not and should not let such innocent babies especially in Africa die endlessly! Using a condom is not an ultimate solution for preventing such terminal disease, of course not. But in realities, it has become common practice among people including Catholics because people need to manage their lives which is also the case with poor people too. It is a clear message from Pope Francis who has just made a historic visit to the US during which he never brought or mentioned the issue of abortion or same-sex marriage. Even Francis said in his first interview as pope that the church had been too "obsessed" with abortion.

He went further to more focused on the issues of inequality, immigration, the death penalty, migrant workers and climate change which came as a shock to Republicans.⁶ If we remember this, church hierarchy need to deal with people as adult not children who could manage their life in a mature way. If the church is afraid of respecting people as mature humans, that undeniably proves that it has no belief in God at all

Conclusion and A Way Forward

Getting back to the first part of this writing, I remind readers of what I have emphasized: structural change and lay formation especially for young lay leaders working for social actions

⁶ Paul Vallely, "Has Pope Francis just cast the first vote in the US presidential race?", *the guardian*, Sept. 26, 2015.

are crucial to what Francis and I call “church reform” in the church of Asia. Again the thing is how to identify the right force that makes the current church a “field hospital” to go forward to the poor and wounded and how to give the force, that is, church NGOs a solid and secure formation platform and programs. make it . In this sense, not only their presence and roles but also their on-going formation is more important to achieve church reform.

Regarding this, I wrote an article carried in an Asian News media a couple years ago: “I am sensing that change is coming from within. But at this crucial juncture, we need to make even more effort.... We need systematic support for lay formation in general, especially for young lay leaders. I would like to see an appropriate body or committee set up to deal with these issues positively. That would be a giant step in making the wind of change in the Church visible and realized.”⁷

Up until now, however, in the churches in Asia in general, almost nothing has changed on the levels of parish, diocese and nation/continent. Neither has the church hierarchy any move nor even any endeavor to have been made so far. I have organized an international program in which “church reform” especially for the local church and FABC as well is one of main themes which was done with 60 young lay leaders from 15 countries youth last August, 2015. That was good but not strong enough. We need a more solid platform to make our voice heard to clergies in the church of Asia in the name of “internal dialogue’ without which we can’t imagine a real church renewal or reform.

For this, we as lay people themselves could establish a pan-Asian lay organization aiming especially for young lay leaders and their formation in Asia on the one hand and effective communication with clergies to be a “community of communion” in Asia.

⁷ Paul Hwang, “Why the Asian Church Need the Winds of Change”, *UCANews*, Sept. 2, 2013.