
Periodic Paper #2

God's Asian Tapestry

Reflections on the First Asian Mission Congress

By James H. Kroeger, MM

This Periodic Paper comes in two parts. The first part is James H. Kroeger's reflections on the First Asian Mission Congress held in Chiang Mai, Thailand last year. The second part is the official statement of the said event.

Tapestries are a specialized form of art. Using subtle colors and richly textured fibers, the artist weaves an inspiring piece, capturing people in their uniqueness, geometric designs in their intricacies, animals in their diversity, and nature in all its beauty. The vision and skill of the artist serve to create a moving work of art, often a masterpiece.

Peoples and cultures across the centuries have used and perfected this form of hand-woven fabric. Through the skill and artistry of the weaver, great beauty and refinement can be achieved. Viewing a tapestry means appreciating the wonderful intricacies displayed and the artist's attention to detail. Tapestries can evoke deep reflection and insight into the beauty of life.

The First Asian Mission Congress, held in Thailand in October 2006, noted in its final message: "All the colors, peoples, languages, cultures, values, religions, and arts of Asia's peoples formed one great tapestry." The story of Jesus became the unique congress thread that wove all these dimensions and experiences of life into one multifaceted design. With hindsight, one can partially capture the beauty of this Mission Congress by examining some of the diverse threads that were woven together into a great tapestry, into "God's Asian Tapestry."

CONGRESS VISION. The Mission Congress was not envisioned as a symposium or seminar; rather, the gathering in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand was to be "a celebration of faith and life." The first stated congress goal was "to share the joy and enthusiasm of our faith in Jesus Christ" and to "celebrate our faith in Asian language, song, story, art, music, symbol, and architecture." Next, this approach sought to move from a celebratory phase into concrete "Asian ways of mission through witness

in the midst of life realities." It also moves to a deepened awareness about "the renewed understanding of mission *ad gentes* during and since the Second Vatican Council" and to "priorities for a renewed mission animation."

Here one hears echoes of Paul VI's *Evangelii Nuntiandi* where he focused on "encouraging our brethren in their mission as evangelizers" so that they may accomplish their task "with ever increasing love, zeal and joy" (EN 1). In the Asian context where the Church is a small minority, truly a "little flock," (less than 3% of the vast multitudes of Asia), mutual encouragement is constantly needed and appreciated. Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, congress delegates experienced renewed joy in being truly Catholic and truly Asian; they departed for their home Churches with renewed enthusiasm. Many hearts were set ablaze in that New Upper Room (the congress hall of the Lotus Hotel in Chiang Mai). A renewed "joy of evangelizing" permeated the more than 1,000 participants!

AN ASIAN APPROACH. The Mission Congress tapestry was to be woven through a carefully chosen methodology: "story-telling in faith" or "narrative missiology." One can appreciate this approach by recalling the basic elements of a story. In brief, stories tell us who we are; they link us together and deepen our identity, revealing many aspects of the mystery of our being. Stories are windows through which we view the world; they possess tremendous power to influence faith and life. They probe the heart, illuminating our relationships with God and others.

The keynote congress address by "master-weaver" Bishop Luis Antonio Tagle identified eight

dimensions of story-telling that help the Church understand her evangelizing mission in Asia: (1) Good stories emerge from experience; the Church tells the Jesus-story from its experience of Jesus; (2) Stories reveal personal identity and the formative influence of people and events; the Jesus-story manifests the identity of the Church among the peoples (especially the poor), religions, and cultures of Asia; (3) Stories are dynamic and transformative; the Church keeps the memory of Jesus dynamically alive; (4) Stories help interpret spiritual, doctrinal, and ethical symbols, and the Jesus-story provides meaning to the Church's symbols of faith.

Tagle continued weaving his artistic design by showing: (5) Stories create community; the story of Jesus generates the Church; (6) When received, stories transform the listener; the Church must listen to Jesus' story and be renewed by it; (7) Just as stories can be narrated in a variety of ways, the Church can tell the Jesus-story with a multiplicity of approaches; finally, (8) Stories of individuals and whole peoples can be suppressed; thus, the Church must give voice to society's victims and their suppressed stories. Tagle succeeded in winning people's hearts and minds; convincing them that story-telling is a very valid insight into evangelization in Asia today.

EXPERIENCING "ASIAN-NESS." For all the participants, the Mission Congress was a rich experience of the great diversity of Asia and her 3.6 billion people. In the congress itself over forty countries were represented in the more than 1,000 participants. Asians came from remote places such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, from Mongolia, Myanmar (Burma), and China, from Bangladesh, Nepal, and Cambodia. They brought with them their stories, cultures, experiences and, above all, their faith and love of Jesus and his Church. One heard numerous languages being spoken—as diverse as those heard on the first Pentecost. People eagerly shared their persons and experiences—in hotel corridors and dining rooms, in the 100+ small discussion groups, in their mission expositions, in their national dress, songs and dances during the final banquet and grand socialization. The "people tapestry" at the congress was overwhelming and marvelous.

This first Asian Mission Congress was the

largest event ever sponsored by the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences); delegates to the FABC plenary assemblies held every four years—there have been eight to date—usually number around 300 persons at the maximum. To have participated in this congress meant a total immersion in "Asian-ness." And, for the majority of delegates, it was a new, enriching encounter that they had never before experienced. People, God's People, coming from every race, family, and nation in Asia—all assembled, hearing about "the marvels of God." Everyone was amazed and astonished; "they asked one another what it all meant" (cf. Acts 2:11-12).

FABC's TRIPLE DIALOGUE. Since its first plenary assembly in Taipei in 1974 which focused on *Evangelization in Modern Day Asia*, the FABC has developed an "Asian Paradigm" for missionary evangelization. The paradigm focuses on the building up of truly inculturated local Churches. The operative approach is the distinctive mode of dialogue. The "dialogue partners" of the local Church are Asia's peoples (especially the poor), Asia's cultures and religions. This "Asian Way" of being Church, commonly termed the "triple dialogue," shaped the thematic structure of the entire congress.

Brief opening ceremonies were held on the evening of October 18. The first full day (October 19) was devoted to the story of Jesus in the **Peoples** of Asia. The "faith sharers" or "story-tellers" focused on the elderly and the family, two key segments of Asia's population. Delegates met for the first time in their workshops and reflected on their personal faith story, responding to the question: "How have I encountered Christ in my life?"

Continuing the work of the congress, the second full day (October 20) focused on the role of Jesus in the **Religions** of Asia. An interesting panel presentation addressed four of the living faiths in Asia: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Tribals/Indigenous. Workshops responded to the question: "What do I appreciate in the followers of other religions in my country?"

The morning of the next day (October 21) centered on the **Cultures** of Asia; participants

heard “faith sharings” on consumerism, media, migrants, youth, and interfaith relationships. Afternoon workshops reflected on this question: “What practices or traditions in my culture best express the Gospel of Jesus?”

The final day of the congress was World Mission Sunday (October 22). The final “faith sharer” focused on the Thai Tribals and their journey in faith. A congress synthesis was presented; the **congress message** and **mission orientations** were read publicly [see separate documents]. The final highpoint was the World Mission Sunday 2006 Eucharistic Celebration, presided by Crescenzo Cardinal Sepe, the Special Envoy of the Pope.

Five days, October 18-22, 2006, days filled with stories of faith, enriched by intercultural sharing, deepened by theological reflection, celebrating faith and life! These days added new meaning to the FABC and its mission in Asia. Terming the FABC as “Asia’s Continuing Vatican II” is no misnomer! Pentecost continues to unfold in Asia!

REFLECTION, FAITH, AND PRAYER.

The tapestry of the Asian Mission Congress would be incomplete if one failed to mention the role of theological-missiological reflection that was integrally interwoven into the fabric. Each day time was allotted for a formal **reflection** on the Church’s understanding of her evangelizing mission in Asia. Fathers Julian Saldanha, SJ, Proper Grech, OSA, Savio Hon Tai Fai, SDB, James Kroeger, MM, and John Prior, SVD were invited to enhance and deepen the faith sharers’ storytelling and the feedback from the discussion groups. Once again, this missiological reflection followed the FABC’s “triple-dialogue” pattern.

The full title or theme of this First Asian Mission Congress was: “The Story of Jesus in Asia: A Celebration of Faith and Life.” **Faith** was clearly evident—in many and diverse ways. Participants seemed to be brimming with joyful faith and enthusiasm from their arrival until their departure; their spontaneous faith perdured through a very full and exhausting congress schedule. Indigenous saints and blessed—especially the martyrs—continue to be vibrant faith influences on

Asia’s Catholics. A clear expression of gratitude was heard for the self-sacrificing missionaries who labored to bring the Christian faith to Asia. A marvelous musical drama with over 400 student performers portrayed how the faith arrived and took root in Thailand. Personal journeys of faith were spontaneously shared in the small discussion groups.

Prayer in many forms seemed to be like a golden thread integrating the five-day assembly. Solemn daily celebrations of the Eucharist were presided by five cardinals (Crescenzo Sepe, Papal Envoy; Ivan Dias, CEP Prefect; Michael Michai Kitbunchu, Bangkok; Ricardo Vidal, Cebu; Telesphore Placidus Toppo, Ranchi). Creative morning prayers, based on the themes of light, color, and water, invited participants to focus on God’s presence in the congress.

There was perpetual Eucharistic adoration in a special chapel. National groups sang their indigenous songs for communion-time meditation. There was the recitation of the mission rosary and a holy hour before the Blessed Sacrament on the Friday evening of the congress; confessions were available during morning prayer and the holy hour. A large “Jesus-Asia” mission cross was given to each country delegation during the closing Eucharist; each delegate received a smaller necklace version of the mission cross. All received a special papal blessing during the mass on World Mission Sunday. In a word, prayer was woven well into the design of the congress.

AN ASIAN TAPESTRY. As a specialized art form, tapestry is unique. Woven from various threads—silk, wool, and cotton, bright and dark—a tapestry reveals the artist’s imagination and design. Each tapestry narrates a story, it captures life, it invites reflection.

At the Asian Mission Congress, the Holy Spirit wove a unique tapestry of the Story of Jesus in Asia. How beautiful it was to witness the master-weaver at work! Even the less than perfect threads helped shape the final design.

Mission belongs to God, it is his project, his

work, his masterpiece. Only God's weaving is important. His thoughts, his ways, his artistry shape the final tapestry—a masterpiece not made by human hands (cf. Heb. 9:11)!

James H. Kroeger, M.M. has served mission in Asian (Philippines and Bangladesh) since 1970. In addition to his work in education and formation, he has published several materials (books and articles) on the Church's mission of evangelization in Asia today. His most recent publication are: *The Future of the Asian Churches* (2002), *Becoming Local Church* (2003), and *Once Upon a Time in Asia* (2006) [Claretian Publications, Manila].

TELLING THE STORY OF JESUS IN ASIA

The Message of the First Asian Mission Congress

Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18-22, 2006

Jesus lives! Christ is Risen! Our Savior is with us; his life is our life. These affirmations capture our sentiments as the participants of the 2006 Asian Mission Congress. Gathered in Thailand, October 18-22, 2006, we express the same joyful faith as Christ's first disciples, who proclaimed: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn. 20:18); "It is the Lord" (Jn. 21:7); "It is true: The Lord has risen" (Lk. 24:34); "My Lord and my God" (Jn. 20:28). The first disciples rejoiced: their friend, their teacher, their prophet, their compassionate healer, their beloved was miraculously—mysteriously—alive. Fear and disappointment, trauma and devastation became faith and rejoicing. Who could have expected? Who would have dreamed?

Jesus comes personally to his followers. He calls them by name: Mary of Magdala, Thomas, Peter, James, John. They recognize him. He speaks words of peace and reconciliation. The disbelieving disciples are transformed. Yet, Jesus, the Crucified-Risen One, expands the dimensions of their faith. He challenges them further. He sends them on mission: "Go forth to every part of the world, and proclaim the Good News to the whole of creation" (Mk. 16:15); "Go forth and make all nations my disciples" (Mt. 28:19); "You are witnesses to all this" (Lk. 24:48); "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (Jn. 20:21). And so the disciples set out to tell the Jesus story. They go to places, near and far: James to Jerusalem, Peter and Paul to Rome, Thomas to In-

dia. Indeed, to encounter the Risen Lord is to be sent on mission.

In God's gracious providence, over 1,000 of us contemporary disciples of Jesus assembled for the first-ever Asian Mission Congress. A spacious, sprawling hotel in Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, became the New Upper Room. We gathered to share our experience, to tell our stories, to meet other disciples from across the vast Asian continent, from Lebanon to Japan, from Kazakhstan and Mongolia to Indonesia. We heard inspiring stories, too numerous to count, stories of life, faith, heroism, service, prayer, dialogue, and proclamation. An infectious mood of joy pervaded us. No one doubted the active presence of the befriending Spirit of God. Together we celebrated our faith and our life as disciples of Jesus through sharing, listening, praying, celebrating the Eucharist. The multiplicity of cultures and languages added light and color to the celebration of our one common faith.

This pastoral-catechetical congress explored a unique methodology of evangelizing: story-telling or faith-sharing. We listened to narratives about the elderly, families, youth, children and women, BECs. We heard perspectives from Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the Tribals. Contemporary contexts were highlighted: Consumerism, Media, Migrants, and Interfaith Dialogue. How significant these are to the mission of evangelization in the present context of ethnic conflicts and religious tensions!

The Story of Jesus was the unique thread, weaving all these life experiences into one grand narrative. All the colors, peoples, languages, cultures, values, religions, and arts of Asia's peoples formed one grand tapestry. Lord, how marvelous are your ways! How deep your designs!

The world is full of stories. Human life is unimaginable without stories. Stories tell us who we are and they link us with other peoples, all across Asia and even throughout the world. Through them we explore life's deeper dimensions, including the mystery of our own being. Stories impact our life and our faith. They transform perspectives and values. They form commu-

nity. Stories contain a hidden dynamism and transforming power, incalculably so when they emerge from experience. They are remembered much longer than lessons learned in school or books that are read.

Jesus was known as a story-teller. As a *rabbi*, a teacher, his favorite method of instruction was telling parables, insightful vignettes that revealed the depths of God's Reign. Who does not know the parable of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son? Jesus' parables challenge us with new possibilities in our relations with God and all our brothers and sisters. Many might think of Jesus, who was born in Asia, as merely akin to the great Asian wisdom teachers, such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, and Gandhi. But more marvelously, we Christians believe that Jesus is the God who became Man, sent by the Father. He is God's love story in the flesh—God's Incarnate Story.

The Asian Mission Congress sought to en-flesh many of the challenges found in Pope John Paul II's *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA): "narrative methods akin to Asian cultural forms are to be preferred. In fact, the proclamation of Jesus Christ can most effectively be made by narrating his story, as the Gospels do" (EA 20f). Pope John Paul II recommends following "an evocative pedagogy, using stories, parables and symbols so characteristic of Asian methodology in teaching" (EA 20g).

The local Churches in Asia can be faithful to Christ's mission mandate by telling and retelling the Jesus story both in words and effective deeds of service. Repeatedly, the Church communicates its faith that originates in its experience of Jesus. The Holy Spirit, the Great Storyteller, guides the Church in all situations to tell, especially through the witness of a transformed life: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands"; it is none other than "the Word of Life" (cf. 1 Jn. 1:1). Mission means keeping the story of Jesus alive, forming community, showing compassion, befriending the "other," carrying the Cross, witnessing to the living person of Jesus.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus observed: "Did we not feel our hearts on fire as he

talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us (Lk. 24:32)?" For us, the way to Chiang Mai has become our Emmaus road. At the Mission Congress we shared our experiences of faith. Stories from Bangladesh and Hong Kong, from Thailand and China, from Japan and Nepal—from all across the Asian continent—set our hearts on fire. Echoes of *Ecclesia in Asia* resounded loudly: "A fire can only be lit by something that is itself on fire" (EA 23b). The Church in Asia is to be "a community aflame with missionary zeal to make Jesus known, loved and followed" (EA 19a). Jesus casts fire on the earth and prays that it be ablaze (cf. Lk. 12:49). "The Church in Asia shares his zeal that this fire be re-kindled now" (EA 18c). We know that our 2006 Mission Congress, sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences and its Office of Evangelization, thanks to the Holy Spirit, was able to set many hearts ablaze.

The Asian Mission Congress, particularly the exchange of our faith-stories, has provided new perspectives for our task of dialoguing with the peoples (especially the poor), the religions, and the cultures of Asia (cf. FABC V: 3.1.2). The stories of Asia's poor today (beggars, people living with AIDS, migrants, the outcasts) must be read within Jesus' story and his Paschal Mystery. Asia's many venerable religions may be seen within God's universal design of salvation—that all would be saved (1 Tm. 2:4). The riches of Asian cultures can be a most suitable vehicle for communicating the Jesus story. This task has "a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia" (EA 21b). The insightful "triple dialogue" promoted by the FABC for over three decades can be accomplished in "new and surprising ways" (EA 20f)—one of which is in the exchange of gifts through the sharing of our life's story.

At this First Asian Mission Congress we re-discovered the "joy of evangelization." Pope Paul VI's words ring true; effective mission is to be done "with ever increasing love, zeal and joy" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, EN 1). Jesus' disciples must "proclaim with joy the Good News which one has come to know through the Lord's mercy" (EN 80).

We, the Congress participants, commit ourselves to carry home to our own communities, new

insights into the story of Jesus, particularly its Asian dimensions. We seek to be on fire, ready to bring home vivid and inspiring stories, which could light the flame of mission in young hearts. We wish to follow Jesus' words to the possessed person (the scriptural passage we adopted at the Congress): "Go home to your own people and tell them what the Lord in his mercy has done for you" (Mk. 5:19).

We seek to approach evangelization in an Asian way, an evocative way through stories, parables and symbols, a method so characteristic of Asian pedagogy, as Pope John Paul II has so perceptively noted. It is, therefore, a way of sharing our faith with others, an authentic path of dialogue. Still, we who believe in this distinctive approach to evangelization will also "not be timid when God opens the door for us to proclaim explicitly the Lord Jesus Christ as the Savior and the answer to the fundamental questions of human existence" (FABC V: 4.3).

On this World Mission Sunday we thank the Lord of the harvest for the countless missionaries who have come to serve in Asia through the centuries. We prayerfully commend to the Lord's love and protection the thousands from Asia who now serve in various parts of the globe.

We beseech Mary, our Mother and the Star of Evangelization, to intercede for us that our hearts may remain on fire with love of Jesus her Son, whose story we shall tell and retell through words, deeds and the witness of our lives.

MISSION ORIENTATIONS AND PRIORITIES

First Asian Mission Congress

Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 18-22, 2006

Moved by the experience of the First Asian Mission Congress, we the participants have identified the following important areas of concern which we consider as priorities for our missionary task in Asia, and we commit ourselves to implement them:

The Story of Jesus in Our Life

We will make the story of Jesus come alive through our personal encounter with the Risen Lord through:

- a deeper study and living of the Word of God in such a way that the
 - power of Jesus' story transforms our life
- cultivating a habit of recognizing the story of Jesus in one's own personal
 - life, in all our experiences, particularly, in our struggles and pains, joys and sorrows
- making the celebrations of the community especially the Eucharist as
 - powerful moments of encounter in which the story of Jesus comes alive
 - through the symbols used in the liturgy (the breaking of the Bread, etc.)
- fostering the attitudes and values of humility and openness before the
 - mystery of God at work in the peoples of Asia especially in those who suffer, such as the poor, the marginalized, migrant workers, the sick, women and children
- promoting the participation of the laity especially the youth who are the
 - future of the Church in Asia
- proclaiming Jesus especially through witness as the distinguishing mark
 - of our missionary identity
- living and promoting a spirituality of the dialogue of life with the peoples
 - of Asia
- learning to recognize the presence of the story of Jesus in the stories of
 - trauma, exclusion, sufferings and poverty as well as in their other varied experiences of life
- learning the art of eagerly awaiting the opportune moment to share
 - Jesus' story as God's gift for the fullness of life

The Story of Jesus in Peoples of Other Faiths

We will:

- recognize our ignorance and prejudice (individual and collective) by
 - taking concrete steps to acquaint ourselves with other religious traditions
- develop in our educational and formation institutes, especially in our
 - seminaries, such positive attitudes of understanding and respect
 - towards other religions
- form families to grow in openness and a humble attitude to the mystery
 - of God at work in other religions
- make similar efforts to remove misunderstanding and prejudice from the
 - people of other faiths in regard to the Christian faith and practices
- offer more effective pastoral care for those in mixed marriages and other
 - interreligious situations

The Story of Jesus in the Cultures of Asia

We will:

- integrate positive cultural values of Asia as mentioned in *Ecclesia in Asia*
 - into our Christian living—at personal and

collective levels—all the more

so when such values are being eroded by consumerism, materialism

and other forces with the support of the media and the market

- promote a culture of service, compassion, disciplined life, meditation,

silence, simplicity, reconciliation and harmony

- take concrete steps to integrate local festivals and cultural forms of

expression such as dance and music, art and architecture

- introduce with proper catechesis inculturation at all levels of our life so

that we can effectively present the Asian face of Jesus to our sisters and

brothers in Asia

Follow-up

We appeal to each Episcopal conference to organize national/regional Mission Congresses in such way as to effectively promote a renewed sense of mission of TELLING THE STORY OF JESUS in an Asian way to the peoples of Asia. We hope that the above measure, among others, will revitalize our missionary dynamism with a sense of urgency and with a spirit of enthusiasm and joy.

For He is indeed Risen and Alive in Asia!

Periodic Papers are published by USCMA

USCMA

Hecker Center, Suite 100

3025 Fourth Street, NE

Washington, DC 20017-1102

Phone: 202-832-3112

Fax: 202-832-3688

E-Mail: uscma@uscatholicmission.org

Web site: www.uscatholicmission.org