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**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR APOSTOLIC CONSECRATED
LIFE
AND THE THEOLOGY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN ASIA: SOME
REFLECTIONS**

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The Asian continent is home to 60% of the world's population and to 85% of the world's non-Christian religions. Asia is the birthing continent of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, and many other faith traditions that have spread to the whole world. These religions have molded the soul and psyche and cultures of Asian people. There is no ONE Asian reality or culture against which we can reflect on religious life in Asia. Nevertheless, beneath Asia's rich diversity there are some commonalities. For example, a sense of the sacred is fundamental to all Asian cultures. Asians, in general, have been sensitive to the mystery of life and find meaning in an enduring spiritual quest for the divine. The basic values of religion and religious practices, marriage and family, harmony and non-violence are still present in most Asian hearts. It is important to note that although the Church hardly makes up 2.7% of the entire Asian population, like the gospel "leaven and light" she contributes immensely to the development of this continent and to the universal Church and beyond. The Church in Asia radiates hope!

As the topic we are dealing with is very large, let me focus on a few points that are very significant for consecrated life in Asia at this time. Globalization has ushered in a gradual and steady socio-cultural, economic and cyber-age transformation of Asia that will have lasting impact on the future of Asia. Although a good number of Asians enjoy some of the positive impact of globalization, today we experience that our traditional Asian values are being replaced by the globalized post-modern culture of materialism, consumerism, individualism and secularism. Asia has her own small percentage of rich and middle class and, above all, the multitudes that live in immense poverty and destitution. The main casualties of globalization, in addition to our Mother Earth, are those who are most vulnerable and defenseless – the poor and the marginalized and in particular, women, children, and the elderly.

Asia offers to the world a deeper understanding of mysticism based on her centuries of spiritual pursuit and her accumulated spiritual heritage. She is familiar with a life of passionate search for God and prophetic renunciation. The greatest challenge and

opportunity before us as Asian religious is to be mystics who are impelled by a passion for Christ and his mission of compassion. If we are serious about being a transforming presence in Asia, then we must embrace a lifestyle that witnesses to our people, regardless of their cultural and faith traditions, the age-old Asian values of true holiness, contemplation, renunciation and asceticism, detachment and simplicity. Our discipleship enables us to own these values and to enrich them with the transforming power of the Good News of Jesus and to live his prophetic mission amidst the Asian complexities and the growing persecution in some parts of Asia. Even in these difficult times, our message for Asia will be accepted when our Asian brothers and sisters see in us the marks of God-realized persons, compassionately involved with those most in need. Our growing emphasis on professionalism and success in ministries in our competitive society runs the risk of replacing this inner spiritual flame and radical living of the Gospel with a more comfortable and secure life that takes the prophetic and the mystic out of the seeker's heart!

Religious in Asia are very much appreciated and known for their commitment and their most efficiently managed institutions of education, health care, pastoral and social services. Asia still needs these essential services. However, often we religious are not perceived and experienced as God-realized men and women and spiritual guides in keeping with the Asian tradition of holy persons. Our professionalism, our comfortable and secure middle class lifestyle can leave our people untouched by our life as they do not always see in us credible witnesses of Jesus and his radical commitment to the Reign of God. WITNESSING is key to our being religious in Asia today. If we truly are passionately in love with Jesus, if we have seen him, heard him and touched him in our personal lives, we cannot but make him known by our lives, by our harmonious and compassionate presence and action. We, as consecrated persons in Asia, must ask ourselves why we are not having the impact we could have on the Asian people who do recognize and value holiness, renunciation and detachment, contemplation and silence, simplicity and love for Mother Earth, the lifestyle of men and women who have embraced the life of Sanyasa. Witness becomes powerful when we open ourselves to a radical conversion to live the evangelical counsels with visibility and credibility among a people who understand the meaning of a thirst for God, a life that dares to renounce and risk all in search of the divine, in the service of those most in need.

Dialogue is a key issue in Asia. The Asian Bishops have addressed the urgency of entering into a triple dialogue with Asia: dialogue with the poor, with the religions and with the cultures. They pointed out that integral liberation, interreligious dialogue and inculturation are priority concerns of the Church and religious life in Asia. This is an area of tremendous prophetic opportunities for consecrated persons in Asia provided they have the necessary formation and competence. An increasing number of congregations are making serious efforts to reconnect with the world of poverty, with the poor and marginalized persons, and struggle with them for dignity and justice. During my many years of living and ministering with the poor and destitute people of Bihar, India, I have had many life-transforming experiences. During the first year of my life with the poor, a very poor, illiterate old woman in the village made me reflect deeply on my readiness to enter into a life of this triple dialogue! She had accepted me as her dear daughter. I used to see this poor old woman doing her "puja" worship very early every morning by pouring some of her very meager supply of oil and milk on a stone that she kept in the worship corner of her mud hut. I was young and inexperienced about her religious practices. After our relationship became stronger, one day I decided to call her attention to the fact that her God was not in the

stone that she worshipped but rather in her heart. Of course, I sounded so theologically correct! She just smiled and continued with her "puja" and prayer. The following Sunday a priest came for Mass for the few Catholics from that village. We were all huddled together in a little mud hut for the Mass and my old Hindu friend came and sat next to me with deep reverence all through the Mass. As I closed my eyes in prayer after Communion, she nudged me several times and whispered in my ear: "Daughter, the other day you told me that my God is not in the stone that I worship. But now it seems your God is in the Bread that you ate just now!" Her remark cut through my soul and something changed deep within me. To be women and men of true dialogue is one of the greatest challenges of consecrated life in Asia. How prepared are the Asian religious for an ongoing, open dialogue based on profound respect for individuals, communities and their religious traditions?

According to FABC: "In Asia, millions of people still suffer from massive poverty. The victims of deprivation, dispossession, humiliation, exclusion and oppression who struggle for dignity, freedom and solidarity and a life worthy of their humanity, are privileged resources for theology. The anawim are the medium par excellence for a God-encounter." (FABC Papers No.96) Any reflection on the identity and significance of apostolic consecrated life today in Asia must be done in the above context. Evangelization is most effective in its mutuality! To evangelize in Asia is a matter of deep spirituality and witness of life and not just the preaching or teaching of doctrines and Church laws. Gandhi is reported to have said to a group of Christian missionaries: "You talk too much. Look at the rose. It too has a gospel to spread. It does it silently, but effectively, and people come to it with joy. Imitate the rose." A presence that is holy and authentic is the key. We are encouraged by the many Asian religious who do imitate the rose and make a huge difference in our society and in the Church in spite of many challenges!

Most religious congregations, especially those which are international in their origin, will have to make a conscious effort to free themselves from their perceived identity as "foreigners" with foreign financial resources and higher and better lifestyle, as professionals who run big institutions and are a "special" class in themselves! I wonder if instead of being a transforming presence in Asia, some of us are losing our mystical and prophetic "sting" by becoming increasingly co-opted by a consumerist culture, reinforcing a secular and comfortable lifestyle! At times our religious membership can make us feel entitled to a more comfortable and secure life because we convince ourselves that we have left all things to follow Jesus and He has promised us a special hundredfold return! Being religious in Asia can be seen as a way of upward socio-economic mobility. The way we live our vows, especially the vow of poverty, does not make sense to average Asians who must fight poverty all through their lives. We need to create a new identity and lifestyle that give more credibility to our being Asian disciples of Jesus who are consecrated to be an incarnational and prophetic presence for mission especially among those on the margins of our society where life is threatened and insecure. I hope that theologians, especially Asian theologians, will continue to work towards rewriting Asia's traditionally Western-based understanding and theology of religious life and allow it to spring up from the Asian soil, from our Asian experience of Jesus and his Good News lived and shared among our people. How can consecrated life find renewed relevance and vibrancy in responding to the agonies of the Asian soul in our present globalized, post-modern, socio-cultural cyber-age context? Our response cannot be different from that of Jesus!

Amidst all the challenges, we also witness many signs of hope and vibrancy in the Asian Church especially in her many vocations to religious life. Among the religious there is a growing openness to mission ad gentes and a willingness to move into new and frontier missions where the presence and service of religious are needed. There is also a rising awareness of and action for justice, peace and integrity of creation, direct involvement with and for those who are poor and marginalized especially women in their struggles for dignity and justice. There are efforts to nurture better integration and harmony among all people. Small as we are, our presence and ministries as committed women and men religious do make a difference in Asia. Today Asian religious have many opportunities to reach out to the West in their missionary efforts for new evangelization. The Asian way of doing mission, being missionary, will be different. We can only go as women and men who carry the wealth of our deep faith in Jesus and our commitment to his mission, but without power or money. To accept this reality is very liberating!

In keeping with the Asian tradition, to be a disciple, the religious must go through a rigorous period of formation, silently being at the feet of Jesus, her Guru, learning to be the compassion of God that transforms our wounded world. Both initial and on-going formation must prepare the religious to live the radicality of the evangelical counsels. The future of religious life in Asia depends on who we choose to BE, where and among whom we choose to live and what we choose to do. In the Asian context, religion and religious life will always have a deep social implication as religion is not just a private affair. In this sense, religious life in Asia may not lose its visibility and identity. Consecrated life needs to be recognized and valued more within the Church, not only for the wonderful work done by religious, but for their greatly needed charismatic and prophetic presence. An increasing number of women religious in Asia risk frontier ministries empowering the poor, especially women, while they themselves are far from being accepted as equal partners in the mission of the Church. We need to challenge ourselves for the "more" that our discipleship demands of us in Asia. In the context of our Asian realities, what new understanding of consecrated life, of the evangelical counsels can theology offer to the Asian religious? Will the accumulated spiritual wealth, wisdom, lived experience and hope of the Asian people give birth to a new way of being religious in Asia and a new way of theologizing that will enrich and challenge the universal Church to a closer following of Jesus?

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