

Doing Local Theologies in the Asian Context— Implications of Inculturation since the Second Vatican Council

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[Abstract] A new era began in the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council. Instead of holding the classicist worldview of a single normative culture, a new and more positive attitude towards the modern world and bearers of modern social, political and cultural movements was employed. New developments in various aspects of the life of the church spread out all over the world, including Asia. Among them is the flourishing of theological thought. Theological works at both academic and more popular levels in Asian churches blossom, with emphasis on their particular contexts and cultures. In spite of this, problems arise in the process of inculturation in theology. Some of them are: Without neglecting cultural diversity and being sensitive to the already presence of Christ in different cultures, how does one respect the normative character of Christianity? If religious faith is at the core of a culture and the goal of inculturation is to transform the culture by the Christian life, will it destroy the religious root of another culture?

In this article, the above issues are explored through examining the notions of culture, local church, diversity of cultures and theological pluralism. It has shown that the Council affirmed the following new understandings: the modern sociological and ethnological sense of culture, the universal church exists only as the communion of local churches, the rich diversity of cultures and the contributions of the local churches, the importance of diversity in proclaiming the good news and in theologizing, and the role of theologians in seeking more suitable ways of communicating doctrine and faith to the people of their times. All these new ideas encourage church members, including theologians of local churches, to find expressions in indigenous ways of thought, symbols and practices, so as to make the Christian faith take root in local culture.

This article illustrates that inculturation can be understood as a two-way process of mutual enrichment and critique between Christianity and the local culture, with the interpretation of the FABC on inculturation. Both the Asian reality and the Christian evangelizer are purified, healed and transformed. In the view of this, inculturation is not a one-way process of replacing the local

culture with Christian faith. Neither does it abandon the Scripture and the Christian tradition. Rather, it stresses that unity and harmony are to be realized in diversity; it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. In doing theology, apart from employing Scripture and church tradition, Asian theologians also engaged in Asian realities and resources of local cultural traditions. Furthermore, the theological works of Indian theologian Felix Wilfred and Hong Kong-Chinese theologian Chi-Fan Ng were used as examples to manifest how Asian theologians theologize in a local context. Wilfred focuses more on the social realities whereas Ng highlights more the cultural and philosophical resources. Both of them demonstrate how these resources can be integrated into their works. They make great contribution in the inculturation of theology and the development of theological methods in doing local theology.

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) proclaimed a new era in the Roman Catholic Church and inspired new developments in all aspects of the life of the church all over the world, including Asia. One piece of evidence can be seen in the blooming of theological thought all over Asia. We can see theological works flourish at both academic and more popular levels in Asian churches, with attention being paid to their particular contexts and cultures. Since the socio-economic, cultural and religious environment in which the Asian churches are located are in stark contrast with those of Western or European churches, the ways of doing theology and focal points of concern between Asian churches and Western churches are different. There is not just one way of doing theology but pluralist ways.

However, before Vatican II, the Catholic Church had a culture of its own, which Bernard Lonergan called a "classicist" notion of culture.¹ At that time, theology thought of itself as dealing with unchanging truth in a largely unchanging world. This classicist worldview was called into question by Vatican II. From the classicist worldview to the open attitude towards other cultures, we can say that it is a great leap forward for the Church to hold a new viewpoint on culture. This also encourages the development of local theologies in Asia.

During the process of constructing theologies, with integration of and dialogue with local cultural resources and religious traditions, problems appear and some of the questions often being asked are: How can local theology be faithful to its own faith tradition and at the same time integrate the sources of local culture? Will local theology lose its Christian identity? Some Asian theologians face tensions and pressure from the Vatican in recent years when conducting inter-religious dialogue in their works. Thus, some scholars argue that the Vatican inclines to giving priority to uniformity and withdrawing its commitment to inculturation or to developing a more equal relationship with the local churches. They claim that assertion, rather than committed dialogue, appears to be the preferred mode of communication.² All these questions and problems prompt me to go back to the foundation and driving force

1 Lonergan claims that the classicist notion of culture was normative, that there was only one culture and it was both universal and permanent; to its norms and ideals might aspire the uncultured, whether they were the young or the people or the natives or the barbarians. When the classicist notion of culture prevails, theology is conceived as a permanent achievement, and one discourse on its nature. See Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p.xi.

2 Robert Schreiter, "Culture and Inculturation in the Church: Forty Years on Dovetailing the Gospel with the Human Kaleidoscope," *New Theology Review*, 18 (2005), pp.24-25.

of the recent development of local theology or inculturation of theology, to examine its meaning and impact.

In this article, I would like to examine the understandings of the concepts in Vatican II which lead to the burgeoning of the notion of “inculturation” in the Catholic Church and how they affect the development of local theologies in the Asian context. To do this, I will first examine the notions of culture, local church, and pluralism in the various documents of Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, and their relationships with inculturation. Some further development and comments on inculturation will also be explored. Second, I will explore how the Asian Catholic Church, being inspired by Vatican II, understands inculturation and from it stimulates the development of local theologies in their local churches. I will first focus on the understanding and interpretation of the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC). After that, apart from the FABC documents itself, I will focus on the works of two Asian theologians, examining how their works exemplify the way of doing local theologies with the use of local resources and pay particular attention to the local context. I will also identify some issues which are still under contention and cannot be neglected when doing Asian theologies.

1. The Concepts Related to Inculturation in the Vatican II and its Impact

1.1 Background

In this section, I will examine the notions of culture, local church, and pluralism in the various documents of Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, and their relationships with

inculturation. Before doing that, let me highlight a few points about the background of Vatican II. Locating Vatican II in history is important because it allows us to see better the context where the Council was located, and where the conciliar experience created great impact on the final shape of the documents.

If we recall the history of the sixteenth century, that is, a century and a half before Vatican II, the situation and atmosphere of the Church was totally different from that of today. At that time, after the Enlightenment, the secularization and pluralization of European societies, and the development of the natural and human sciences, the Catholic Church was characterized by an increasing uniformity and centralization of authority in Rome. In response to modernity, the Church created a world of its own, with a distinct worldview and ethos, defended and legitimated by a distinct mode of philosophy and theology. With a classicist mentality, it was convinced that circumstances were somehow accidental and that “stability, fixity, immutability” were the basic assumptions of theological work.³ There was only one dominant culture of value for cultivating abstract logic. Therefore, for classicists, it was perfectly legitimate to impose their own culture on others.⁴

Under this classicist worldview, prior to the Council, cultural analysis was almost wholly neglected in theological reflection. The word “culture” only had an intellectual or aesthetic sense, with no

3 Lonergan, pp.301, 338, 363.

4 Michael Paul Gallagher, “Inculturation Debates: the Relevance of Lonergan,” *Studia Missionalia*, 52 (2003), pp. 356-358; Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Local Realization of the Church,” in Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *The Reception of Vatican II* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), p.80. For historical background of the Catholic Church before the Vatican II, see Adrian Hastings, “Catholic History from Vatican I to John Paul II,” in *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

anthropological implications. That explains why many participants did not view culture as an instrument for analyzing society at the beginning of the Council. However, in Vatican II, we see a different picture. The council substantively altered the way in which the Church responded to the modern world and called Catholics out of their cultural alienation to assume new and more positive relationships with members of other religions, Protestants and bearers of modern social, political and cultural movements. It abandoned the idea of a single normative culture and called for incarnations of Catholic Christianity in a variety of the world's cultures. In this way, Joseph Komonchak argues, Vatican II must be seen as a historic cultural turning point for Roman Catholicism. He points out that what developed in the local churches after the Council was more than the “*aggiornamento*” or “adaptation” that the council documents used to describe.⁵

A number of scholars also view Vatican II as an ecclesial event of historic importance. As an ecclesial event, church historians such as John O' Malley, Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak argue, the changes and discontinuity between the earlier Catholic tradition and what was effected at Vatican II should not be ignored. They thought that one should not neglect the historical perspective and simply focus on the authoritative status of the final form of the Council documents themselves. Interpretation of Vatican II would not be satisfactory if it were limited only to analysis of the text of the documents.⁶ Ormond Rush also argues that although the Council participants never intended a macro-rupture from the

5 Komonchak, p.81.

6 Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph Komonchak, eds., *History of Vatican II vol. 5* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Leuven: Peeters, 2006), p.643; John O'Malley, “Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?” *Theological Studies*, 67 (March 2006), pp.3-33.

tradition, innovations and discontinuities which can be regarded as micro-ruptures existed. As an ecclesial event with participants holding different viewpoints, there are clear compromises, ambiguities, and juxtapositions of conflicting viewpoints throughout the final documents.⁷ Richard R. Gaillardetz points out that “ecclesiologically, councils derive their authority not from the juridical force of their document but from their status as ecclesial events manifesting, in concentrated form, the reality and faith witness of the church as communion.”⁸

Moreover, Vatican II is also considered as a cultural event, which means the collective cultural experience of the participants and the new attitude of mind which grew within them as the Council progressed should not be neglected when we examine the meanings of culture in the documents of Vatican II. Their lived experience and their formal teaching should definitely not be seen as separate from one another.⁹

It is undeniable that the Council gave the Council Fathers a brand new cultural experience. It was the first time that a Council included a large number of bishops from the Third World, and that the points of view of the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America could be heard. Moreover, the representatives of eastern European countries were also able to share their experiences from the communist world. The presence of these bishops allowed the participants from European and North American countries to

7 Ormond Rush, *Still Interpreting Vatican II: Some Hermeneutical principles* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), pp.7, 27-28.

8 Richard R. Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), p.xv.

9 Herve Carrier, “The Contribution of the Council to Culture,” in Rene Latourelle, ed., *Vatican II Assessment and Perspective: Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987) Volume Three* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), pp.442, 452.

discover the diversity of mentalities and cultures. The truly international composition of the conciliar gathering made the participants aware of its universal character and that Christianity had begun to be a “world-Church.”¹⁰

Furthermore, the participants experienced a deep immersion in the affairs of the Church and the world together at the Council, and they taught one another to use new perspectives to view humanity in the world. This collective sensitization paved the way for a deeper ecclesial awareness and a greater readiness in accepting a new understanding of culture and the use of cultural analysis in interpreting the world. Humanity and the world were indeed at the center of debate at the Council.¹¹ Learning and broadening of horizons were going on in the minds of the bishops during the four years, especially as they moved from discussion of the church *ad intra* to the church *ad extra*. Such developing mind or spirit must have had an impact on the documents, especially the final text of *GS* which was passed at the last session of the Council, with many references to culture and cultural analysis.¹²

The inspiration for the twofold renewal of the Council—the Church purifies and redefines itself, and it makes an effort to renew its understanding of the present world—came from the commitment of the Council Fathers in *ressourcement*, a return to the sources of baptism and Eucharist rather than in law and jurisdiction, and *aggiornamento*, bringing up to date concerns regarding the modern

10 Karl Rahner employed the term “world-church” when he made an analysis of how the Catholic Church truly became aware of its universal character officially with Vatican II. Karl Rahner, “Basic Theological Interpretation of the Second Vatican Council,” *Theological Investigations*, 20 (1981), pp.77-89 (85-86).

11 Carrier, pp.447-8.

12 Ormond Rush, pp.42,44.

world.¹³ The theological perspective of Vatican II cannot be separated from its cultural perception of the contemporary world. One can only find the full significance of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, in light of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.¹⁴

With this background in mind, we now turn to examining the notions of culture, local church and diversity in Vatican II which are related to the inculturation of theology. The notion of culture in Vatican II, especially in *GS*, is of special importance, as it directly relates to how Christianity, mostly with a Western image, responds when it encounters another culture. In addition, the concepts of local church and diversity, which both legitimize the status and activities of the local church, also create great impact on the development of local theology.

1.2 The Notion of Culture

The whole of Chapter Two of *GS* is devoted to “culture” and is often quoted to explain how the Council views this notion. However, we should not neglect other documents relating to culture and the use of cultural analysis as a method throughout the council. The intention of Vatican II in employing cultural analysis was that of emphasizing the close link between culture, evangelization, and the mission of the Church, and this focus spread throughout the various documents. Especially in the four main constitutions of Vatican II, each has dimensions that illumine the relationship between the

13 Gaillardetz, p.xvii.

14 In *Lumen Gentium*, the eschatological character of the pilgrim church was stressed, showing how the destiny of the Church is bound up with the liberation of the whole of humanity. Even in the face of a sinful or hostile world, the Church does not set itself apart from humankind. See Carrier, pp.450-451.

Church and other cultures or religions or between the Holy See and the local churches.

GS offers a two-fold dimension of the modern definition of culture: the classic and the modern. On the one hand, culture refers to “all those factors by which a human refines and unfolds his [or her] manifold spiritual and bodily qualities” (*GS* 53). In this sense, culture is seen as concerned with the progress of the individual, who develops all his or her potential through the application of knowledge and labor. It represents the highest achievements in art, music, literature, and technology in society. This concept of culture is traditionally understood in the classical and humanistic sense. On the other hand, a more modern view of culture refers to the anthropological life experience and the typical mentality of each human group. Culture has a “historical and social aspect,” it carries a “sociological and ethnological sense; in this sense one can speak about a plurality of cultures” (*GS* 53). These two dimensions allows us to understand the relationship between the culture of the individual and the cultures of groups, between scholarly culture and living cultures, for it is humanity that is the subject and the beneficiary of all cultural progress. In analyzing the concepts of culture in *GS*, Carrier argues that the text reveals a dynamic, historical, and concrete view of humanity. It provides an anthropological reflection on the progress offered to humanity both individually and collectively—a modern analytical instrument in order to understand the world better and help it carry out its role in it.¹⁵

Carrier further contends that the method of cultural analysis being employed in Vatican II can be seen at the beginning of *GS*.

15 Carrier, p.453.

Based on the human sciences, this method was used to analyze the contemporary world and allowed the Church better to understand the collective behavior, thought patterns, dominant values, aspirations and contradictions of the modern time. Carrier points out that this approach is indispensable prior to any moral judgment or bringing the gospel to any new culture. The Church is more and more sensitive to the signs of the times, and to the values and counter-values that challenge the Christian conscience.¹⁶

In *GS*, the Church saw the world from the point of view of the gospel, and is aware of the close bonds between culture and the message of salvation:

For God...has spoken according to the culture proper to different ages...Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with various cultural modes, to her own enrichment and theirs too...by the very fulfillment of her own mission the Church stimulates and advances human and civic culture (*GS* 58).

The Council further noted how the Church preached the Word through different cultures. "Living in various circumstances during the course of time, the Church has used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message

16 In *GS*, it is stated explicitly that the Council reached beyond the members of the Church to address the whole human family about issues of common concern (*GS* 2). It saw itself walking with the world in the face of challenges and problems of humanity. It acknowledged that "the human race is involved in a new age of its history" (*GS* 4), an age in which it "is passing from a more static notion of the order of things to a more dynamic and evolutionary notion" (*GS* 5), an age marked by a new respect for the variety and diversity of cultures. Thus, gradually, "a more universal form of human culture is developing, one which will promote and express the unity of the human race to the degree that it preserves the particular features of the different cultures" (*GS* 54), an age that requires a "new humanism, in which man is especially defined by his responsibility for his brothers and sisters and for history" (*GS* 55).

of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it, and to give it better expression in liturgical celebrations and in the life of the diversified community of the faithful” (GS 58).

The Church also recognized that it has profited from the riches hidden in various cultures and learnt how to adapt the gospel in various cultures:

The Church learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and languages of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers: it was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all people and the requirements of the learned, insofar as this could be done...In this way it is possible to create in every country the possibility of expressing the message of Christ in suitable terms and to foster vital contact and exchange between the Church and different cultures. (GS 44)

Not only in GS, but indeed the whole Council, as Carrier suggests, became aware that culture as contemporary and historical humanity is always its concern and reflection, and so the analytical framework of the Council is both ecclesial and cultural. In a great variety of contexts, it deals with modern science, its relationship to faith and human development, freedom in research, advances in teaching methods and the human sciences, the human and spiritual formation of priests, religious and lay people, the role of schools and universities, and artistic creation. All these are in some way related to the dimension of culture.¹⁷

17 Carrier, pp.455-7.

1.3 The Concept of Local Church

The emphasis on the approach of cultural analysis in theological reflection brought significant changes to the tone and expression of the various documents of Vatican II. Church historian John O'Malley points out that the new genre in Vatican II documents was more pastoral, positive, and persuasive in tone. This genre is "epideictic:" it is "a form of the art of persuasion and thus of reconciliation. While it raises appreciation, it creates or fosters among those it addresses a realization that they all share (or should share) the same ideals and that they need to work together to achieve them."¹⁸

With this basic attitude, Gaillardetz argues that the ecclesiology of Vatican II shifted from the triumphalist, clericalism, and excessively juridical point of view to one more humble and ecumenical, stressing equality among the faithful, and focusing more on the sacramentality and mystery of the church.¹⁹ Moreover, the image of the pilgrim church in *LG*, that the Church is a people on the way who have the promise of God's presence and guidance but who still await the consummation of God's plan, also affirms the need of the Church for ongoing reform (*LG* 48). This shows a shift from the tone of a triumphalist church to one of more historical consciousness and recognizes the need for reform in a humble way.²⁰

Such a humble attitude, combined with historical consciousness, led the Council participants to assert that the one and universal

18 O'Malley, p.26; Stephen B. Bevans, "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activities *Ad Gentes*," in Stephen Bevans and Jeffrey Gros, *Evangelization and Religious Freedom* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2009), p.8.

19 Gaillardetz, pp.41-43.

20 Gaillardetz, pp.56-57.

Church is realized in and through the variety of local churches. Insofar as they come into being through the call of God, the word of Christ, the grace of the Spirit and the exercise of the apostolic ministry, especially through the Eucharist, local churches are genuine churches, formed after the image of the universal church. They are the local realizations of all that the one Church is. It is “in and from such individual churches there come into being the one and only holy Catholic Church” (*LG* 23; see also *LG* 26; *SC* 42; *CD* 11).²¹

Because the universal church exists only as the communion of local churches, the diversity of culture and circumstance enters into the very definition of the local church. In numerous texts, the Council showed a great sense of respect for particularity and diversity. It made particularly significant contributions to the development of liturgies that show respect for what *Ad Gentes* calls the treasures that “a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth.” It refused “to impose a rigid uniformity” and wished to “foster the spiritual adornments and gifts of the various races and peoples” (*SC* 37).²² The catholicity of the Church thus does not refer merely to the universal geographical spread of a single, uniform church:

This characteristic of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord Himself. By reason of it, the Catholic Church strives energetically and constantly to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ its Head in the unity of His Spirit. In virtue of this catholicity each individual part of the Church contributes through its special gifts to the good of the other parts and

21 Komonchak, p.77.

22 Also see *SC*, 37-40; *AG*, 8-11, 22-23, 26; *GS*, 53-55, 58

of the whole Church. Thus through the common sharing of gifts and through the common effort to attain fullness in unity, the whole and each of the parts receive increase. (*LG* 13)

Catholicity suggests fullness, inclusivity and comprehensiveness. It is a concrete universal because of the variety of the local churches. This unity in concrete catholicity is something achieved everyday. Each local church not only receives from the universal church but also offers to the church universal its own particular gifts and insights as the cultural site in which the gospel is always being proclaimed, received, and lived out.

This view of the Church represents something like a Copernican revolution in ecclesiology.²³ A new ecclesiology in Vatican II represents a move away from the pre-conciliar, universalist ecclesiology to one of manifestations of communion within the one church of Christ. Catholicity is realized dialogically; each local church engages in dialogue with the social, cultural, economic and political context, and within the communion of churches.²⁴

1.4 The Notion of Diversity and Theological Pluralism

With growing consciousness of the rich diversity of cultures and the contributions of the local churches, Vatican II showed appreciation for pluralism in theology, when it said that the gospel message needs to be adapted according to each culture. In the Decree of the Church's Missionary Activities *Ad Gentes*, the Council states that it is necessary that "theological speculation should be encouraged in each major socio-cultural area." This

23 *Ibid.*, 78.

24 Gaillardetz, pp.160-161.

should be done “in the light of the tradition of the universal church,” including the deeds and words which God has made known, which have been unfolded by the Church Fathers and the teaching authority of the Church, but in ways that submit to new scrutiny. In this way, it will more clearly be seen in what ways faith may seek understanding in the context of the philosophy, wisdom, customs, and worldviews of local people. Christian life can be accommodated to the genius and the dispositions of each culture (*AG 22*). Stephen Bevens argues that this interpretation is devoted to the encouragement of local, contextual, or inculturated theologies, although the text used the term of “adaptation.”²⁵

The Council also emphasized the importance of the theologians who endeavor to promote theologies that would be relevant to their peoples. While recognizing the difficulty in harmonizing cultures with Christian teaching, the Council affirmed that these difficulties can stimulate the mind to a more accurate and penetrating grasp of the faith. “While adhering to the methods and requirements proper to theology, theologians are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the people of their times. For the deposit of faith or revealed truths are one thing; the manner in which they are formulated without violence to their meaning and significance is another” (*GS 62*).

The Council also clearly affirms the importance of diversity in proclaiming the good news and in theologizing as the Church stands forth as a sign of fellowship which renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it:

25 Stephen Bevan, “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activities *Ad Gentes*,” p.45.

Such a mission requires first of all to create in the Church itself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, and acknowledge all legitimate diversity; in this way all who constitute the one people of God will be able to engage in ever more fruitful dialogue, whether they are pastors or other members of the faithful. For the ties which unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them: let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything (*GS* 92).

The Council speaks in other documents of a "legitimate diversity" which extends to theological expressions of doctrine (*LG* 13; *UR* 17). It is also the conciliar opinion that differences need not diminish unity, but indeed contribute to it and make more vivid the catholicity of the Church (*LG* 13, 23; *UR* 4, 16; *OE* 2).

Regarding cultural diversity and pluralism, the Council participants demonstrated concern: "what must be done to prevent the increased exchanges between cultures, which ought to lead to a true and fruitful dialogue between groups and nations, from disturbing the life of communities, destroying ancestral wisdom, or jeopardizing the uniqueness of each people? How can the vitality and growth of a new culture be fostered without the loss of living fidelity to the heritage of tradition?" (*GS* 56) These are questions being raised in Vatican II and are also questions on which theologians need to reflect continuously when doing local theologies.

In fact, since Vatican II, local theologies began to emerge in Africa and Asia. Emerging consciousness of the theological significance of these regional churches led to new theological reflections by both local theologians and local church leadership that have challenged the overly Westernized formulations of the faith that were first brought to their continents. Being a minority

community in regions with many other religious traditions, these regional churches have contributed much to the universal church as they struggle to live out their Christian identity. They have worked to distinguish between what is essential and unchanging in church dogmatic statements and sacramental practice and that which may admit of new formulations and customs.²⁶ They address how to affirm church unity without yielding to a rigid and sterile uniformity, on the one hand, and how to celebrate a legitimate and invigorating ecclesial diversity without dissolving into a church fractured by division, on the other hand. This issue must be examined when doing local theologies in Asia.

1.5 Development and Comments on the Concept of Inculturation

Acceptance of the broader and more secular definition of culture demonstrates the Council's recognition of the wider world and many of its values. The role of Catholics is to participate in and to act as leaven within the many cultures of the modern world. Such understanding of culture helped the Church update its location in the world. Although the Council never used the word "inculturation" but rather used "adaptation," the sections on the "multiple connections between the good news of Christ and human culture" and on "the relationships between different forms of human culture" provide a framework for subsequent discussion on inculturation or inter-cultural encounter. Appreciation of the diversity of cultures in the world and of the values within them has continued to grow after Vatican II.

26 Gaillardetz, pp.107-108.

Since the early 1970s, the term inculturation gained momentum in the Church. It often refers to the process by which faith and gospel take root among a people and find expression in indigenous ways of thought, symbols, practices and so on.²⁷ Inculturation gradually became one of the key issues of evangelization and theological reflection for Catholics. It not only opens up new ways of expressing the gospel, but more importantly represents an attempt to form authentic local and regional churches. People in these local and regional churches become active subjects and agents of evangelization who contribute as part of the world-church.

The apostolic exhortation "Evangelization in the Modern World" *Evangelii nuntiandi* of Pope Paul VI in 1975 was considered an official church teaching that was truly imbued with the modern sense of culture and speaking about the pluralism of cultures. Evangelization was defined as entering deeply into the hearts, minds, and customs of a people:

For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new...The purpose of evangelization...seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs...Though

27 A full definition is provided by Pedro Arrupe in his 1978 "Letter on Inculturation to the Society of Jesus": "Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation." Quoted from T. Howland Sanks, "Inculturation: What is to be Done?" *New Theology Review*, 18 (Feb 2005), p.61. Also see Norman Tanner, *The Church and the World Gaudium et Spes, Inter Mirifica* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), pp.75-76.

independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.²⁸

In a document published by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1994, namely “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” there is a section discussing inculturation. It not only provides the theological and biblical foundation of inculturation, it also stresses the "mutual enrichment" in the process of inculturation. On the one hand, the treasures contained in diverse cultures allow the word of God to produce new fruits and on the other hand, the light of the word allows for a certain selectivity with respect to what cultures have to offer.²⁹

Despite this positive development, Robert Schreiter argues that it was the culture of Western societies that has been and continues to be of central interest to Rome. It is true that while both the classical and modern concepts of culture can be found in *GS* and that the notion of diversity appears in various documents, more attention indeed was given to the classical concept in the document. Moreover, since the 1980s, Schreiter further contends that the Vatican appears to have curbed any further development of inculturation; priority is being given to a uniformity of thought in the plurality of the post-modern world. Assertion, rather than committed dialogue, appears the preferred mode of communication. He points out that the

28 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 1975, no. 18 and 20. In website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html

29 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1994. In website: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/PBCINTER.HTM>

tone and genre of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* and the prescriptions regarding liturgical celebration are indicative of this.³⁰

Other theologians also point out a list of problems which might arise in the process of inculturation. Among them are: In the midst of cultural diversity and the needed sensitivity toward the presence of Christ already in the culture, how does one also respect the normative character of Christian tradition? Is it possible for a local church to make a genuine contribution to the local tradition? What does unity mean in the concrete situation of cultural diversity? In doing local theology, what is the relationship between text and context? What is the role of the tradition and doctrine of the Church? These are thorny and conflicting issues which could be seen at the local level and remain theological tensions.³¹

In the article "Inculturation: What is to be done?" T. Howland Sanks even raises the question: "Is inculturation realistically possible? Desirable? Ethical?"³² He argues that "if the center, root, or heart of any culture is its religious faith," and the goal of inculturation is to see that "the Christian life and message becomes a principle that animates, direct and unifies the culture, transforming

30 Schreier, "Culture and Inculturation in the Church," pp.20, 24-25. In the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) document *Dominus Iesus*, strong language is used to spell out the Christian religion as the absolute truth and other religions as only beliefs and not means to salvation. Generally speaking, church leaders and theologians of Asia responded negatively to this document, criticizing it as "ignoring the human and pastoral dimensions of inter-religious dialogue," and as evidence of the lived experience of people who live as though reality were "a Western desk experience." For further comment and response of the Asian Church towards this document, please refer to Edmund Chia, "The Asian Church in Dialogue with *Dominus Iesus*," 2002. In website: http://www.sedos.org/english/chia_2.htm

31 Robert Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1985), pp.95-104. Also see Michael Paul Gallagher, "Inculturation debates: the relevance of Lonergan," *Studia Missionalia*, 52 (2003), p.349.

32 Sanks, "Inculturation," p.67.

and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation (as suggests by Pedro Arrupe),” it seems to be “a direct attack on the religious root of another culture,” and “seek[s] to displace or replace another religious tradition with Christianity.” Sanks quotes the concern of Asian theologian Michael Amaladoss, arguing that “the Christian discourse about inculturation evokes the image of the gospel going out into the world to conquer cultures, expressing itself in them and integrating them and thus enriching the various cultures. This is an image of domination and conquest.”³³ This is a very important issue that Asian Christians need to consider. Should Asian Christians redefine inculturation so that it is not a process of domination and conquest, or should they abandon it altogether? In the face of this question, we now turn to the interpretation of culture and inculturation by the Asian Church and explore how it can shed some insights on our understanding of inculturation.

2. Interpretation by the Asian Church

Prompted by the new ecclesiology and theology of the Council, local theologies flourish and Catholics from the local churches participate in nurturing the field of theological construction using local resources. Although the term “inculturation” implied a negative sense according to some theologians, what had been discussed about diversity of culture, adaptation to local culture and affirmation of the status of local churches at the Council created enormous impact on the new understanding of the mission and theology of the Asian Church. The visit of Pope Paul VI after the Council to the Philippines and the gathering of the Asian bishops in

33 Michael Amaladoss, *Beyond Inculturation: Can the Many be One?* (Delhi: Academy Press, 1998), pp.15-16.

1970 gave birth to the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) which is considered an important platform for invigorating theologies in an Asian way.³⁴ In this section, I will focus on the understanding and interpretation by the FABC on inculturation and local church, and examine how it affects Asian theologies.

2.1 Inculturation in the FABC Documents

In the article "Inculturation of Theology in Asia (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences 1970-1995)," Stephen Bevans, a scholar of theology and culture who worked in Asia (Philippines) for a decade, conducts a survey and an analysis of inculturation of theology in the FABC documents, and highlights the features and development of the understanding of inculturation in the FABC.³⁵ In the first meeting of the Asian bishops in 1970, the bishops of Asia committed themselves to the development of "an indigenous theology" so that "the life and message of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historic cultures of Asia" (resolution 13).³⁶ In later meetings and documents, "inculturation"

34 The FABC was set up in 1972 and the first plenary assembly was held in April 1974 in Taipei, Taiwan. Bishops of various Episcopal conferences met almost every four years. In between plenary assemblies the FABC has sponsored various colloquiums, workshops and seminars. A theological commission to provide greater theological depth to its work was also set up with the suggestion in 1982. Therefore, in the past almost 40 years of activity, an impressive body of documents has been produced. See Felix Wilfred, "The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC): Orientations, Challenges and Impact," *FABC Papers*, No. 69 (1995). For the FABC Papers, please visit the website: <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-0.htm>. Also see Thomas C. Fox, *Pentecost in Asia: A New Way of Being Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), pp.7-21.

35 Stephen Bevans, "Inculturation of Theology in Asia (The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences 1970-1995)," *Studia Missionalia*, 45 (1996), pp.1-23. In the following pages, I will mainly follow the analysis of this article.

36 Asian Bishops' Meeting, 29 November 1970. Resolution 13. In G.B. Rosales and C.G. Arevalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970-1991* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Quezon City, Philippines, 1992),

rather than “indigenization” is used and it becomes one of the major themes being addressed in the FABC. The term may not be the best description of the process by which the variety of Asian religious, cultural and economic contexts are taken seriously in the theological enterprise, nevertheless the search for ways to make the church more truly Catholic by making it more truly Asian, according to Bevans, functions as the leitmotif of every FABC concern.³⁷

In the early documents, inculturation, incarnation, or indigenization is not only linked to Asian cultures and traditions, but also to Asian religious traditions. At the 1974 plenary assembly in which the theme is “Evangelization in Modern Day Asia,”³⁸ the final statement states that inculturation is the way the church becomes authentic within the context of Asian life. The way the church must evangelize in modern day Asia is to “make the message and life of Christ truly incarnate in the minds and lives of our peoples” through the “building up of a truly local church” (9). For the local church is “the realization and the enfleshment of the Body of Christ in a given people, a given place and time” (10). We can see that inculturation is inseparable from the concept of local church in the eyes of FABC. By local church, it means a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions – in brief, with all the life-realities of the people in whose midst it has sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life it gladly makes its own. It seeks to share in whatever truly belongs to

pp.3-10, here p.9. Hereafter the book will be abbreviated as *FAPA* in footnotes; the paragraph numbers will be given in the text in parenthesis.

37 Bevans, “Inculturation of Theology in Asia,” p.2; also see L. Nemet, “Inculturation in the FABC Documents,” *East Asian Pastoral Review*, 31 (1994), p.94.

38 *FAPA*, pp.11-25.

that people: its meanings and its values, its aspirations, its thoughts and its language, its songs and its artistry (12).³⁹

At the 1978 second plenary assembly of the FABC, with the theme "Prayer—the Life of the Church of Asia,"⁴⁰ the final document states that Christianity must "assume into the full Christian life of our peoples what is good, noble and living in our cultures and traditions" (11) as well as bring to fulfillment whatever seeds of the gospel have been planted in Asian cultures prior to evangelization. It also mentions some of the gifts that Asian spirituality can give to the entire church: a holistic view of prayer, traditions of asceticism, techniques of contemplation and popular expression of faith (24). Bevans point out that it is an advance over the 1974 statement, as inculturation is a two-way process of mutual critique and enrichment.⁴¹

The final report of a workshop being sponsored by the FABC states explicitly that inculturation is not "mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation; rather, it is the creative embodiment of the Word in the local church" (6).⁴² The process of inculturation is one of dialogue and results in a "discovery of the seeds of the Word which lie hidden in given cultures and living traditions" of Asia (7). Although the Word, the Gospel, is unchanging, the process of inculturation will purify, heal and transform not only the local Asian culture in which one is searching, but also the church itself—on both the local and universal

39 *FAPA*, p.14. Also see James H. Kroeger, "Local Church, Dialogue and Conversion," *FABC Papers*, No.107. In website: <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-107.htm>

40 *FAPA*, pp.27-48.

41 Bevans, "Inculturation of Theology in Asia," p.5.

42 Final Report of the "Workshop on Inculturation" of the 1970 International Mission Conference in Manila, Philippines. *FAPA*, pp.138-141.

levels (9). Theologizing should be contextual, by taking into consideration the ways of thinking and the sets of meanings and values that shape the lives of the people (19). From this report, we can see that the FABC not only inherits the language of Vatican II of “discovery[ing] the seeds of the Word in cultures,” it goes further in interpreting inculturation as a two-way process, in which both the Asian reality and the Christian evangelizer are purified, healed and transformed.⁴³

The most complete statement on inculturation among all the FABC documents is the “Theses on the local Church” by the Theological Advisory Commission.⁴⁴ In this document, inculturation is depicted as an ongoing process of mutual critical correlation—encounter between Gospel and culture (5.4 & 5.5). The Gospel needs to find roots in the local culture, and often this can be done only by a prophetic critique of that culture (6.8). Nevertheless, the deeply religious culture of Asia also needs to purify the way the Gospel is presented, and can even open up aspects hitherto unnoticed or neglected in the Gospel itself (5.13). The Asian theologians also noted inculturation is “a meeting of the Spirit with

43 In another workshop on theology of dialogue, with a subsection on “Dialogue and Inculturation,” inculturation is again proposed as a two-way process, and it is suggested that the practice of dialogue is to be carried out with deep respect for the other, marked by openness and readiness for transformation on the part of both sides, and attention being paid to culture and religious traditions of Asia. See *FAPA*, p.249.

44 The formal establishment of the Theological Advisory Commission (TAC) of the FABC came in the 1980s. TAC later became the Office of Theological Concern (OTC). Its team of theologians come from the member bishops’ conferences of the FABC. A five-year period of extensive study and consultation culminated in a comprehensive document entitled “Theses on the Local Church: A Theological Reflection in the Asian Context” (*FABC Papers*, No. 60) and was published in 1991. In the opinion of the author, it is probably the most comprehensive document to date on local Church worldwide. J. Gnanapiragasam & F. Wilfred, eds., *Being Church in Asia: Theological Advisory Commission Documents (1986-92)*.

the Spirit" (8.5) because God's Spirit is present and active among Asian peoples beyond the boundaries of Christian faith.

Apart from these explicit discussions of inculturation, the concept of inculturation in fact exists throughout the FABC documents because the reality of inculturation is a complex encounter between Gospel and a local church in the whole Asian reality, made up of religions, cultures, poverty and the poor. If the Christian community truly dialogues with culture, with religions and with the poor, it will truly become "a Church of Asia not simply a Church in Asia," and will no longer be seen as a foreign presence.⁴⁵ Moreover, Bevans points out that there are several recurring notions in the FABC documents which can help us better understand how FABC interprets inculturation, including the methodological commitment to starting with Asian reality and reflecting on concrete praxis, the theological conviction of the universality of divine grace and the subsequent goodness and holiness of the human, and the authenticity of theological reflection as an activity of authentic Christian and cultural subjects.⁴⁶

Each local Church in Asia has received abundant and diverse gifts from the Holy Spirit. Each Church is to give freely because it has received freely (cf. Mt. 10:8). In this manner each local church contributes to the realization of the catholicity of the Church. As Catalino G. Arévalo suggests, "Unless every local church shares in the *koinonia* that is the Church universal, in true equality, in authentic participation, in the interchange of gifts and blessings, the dream of catholicity has not yet been realized. It is part of our

45 *FAPA*, p.333.

46 Bevans, "Inculturation of Theology in Asia," pp.9-18.

deepest duty, as Catholics especially, to help bring this to pass."⁴⁷ Thus, the entire Church becomes, as noted by Vatican II, the *corpus ecclesiarum* (LG, 23), the body of the Churches, the corporate body of local Churches. For the FABC, the more that each local Church becomes truly inculturated, indigenized and localized, the more this same Church through the power of the Holy Spirit becomes universal.

2.2 Pluralism in Theology in the FABC Documents

As shown above, encouragement to promote a unity in diversity can be seen in the Vatican II documents. Thus, according to the FABC, pluralism in theology is officially recognized, provided such pluralism does not lead to relativism. In the FABC activities and documents, we can see the inheritance of this concept. In the Bishops' Institute on Social Action (BISA) and the Bishops' Institute on Interreligious Affairs (BIRA), the significance of diversity or pluralism was stressed. "Pluralism is a necessity once we work through the mediation of secular analysis and worldviews. This pluralism should not be a threat to our Christian unity, but on the contrary, a positive and creative sign that our unity is deeper than whatever the concrete technical analysis or viewpoints might show: a genuine value that emphasizes unity in diversity."⁴⁸

Another document states that: "Unity, peace and harmony are to be realized in diversity. Diversity is not something to be regretted and abolished, but to be rejoiced and promoted, since it represents richness and strength." It also stresses that harmony is not simply

47 See Kroeger, "Local Church, Dialogue and Conversion." Quoted from Catalino G. Arévalo, *Jahrbuch für Kontextuelle Theologien 1995 (1995 Yearbook of Contextual Theologies)*, p.34.

48 BISA II, 1975, no. 10, in *FAPA*.

the absence of strife, described as “live and let live.” The test of true harmony lies in the acceptance of diversity as richness.⁴⁹ It is further pointed out that “[o]ne of the serious obstacles to harmony is the attitude of exclusivity, not willing to open oneself and see the beauty and truth in the other. At the root of this attitude is the failure to view the complementarity which exists between peoples, cultures, faiths, ideologies, world-visions, etc. For the promotion of harmony, it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. This is something very characteristic of Asian traditions, which consider the various dimensions of reality not as contradictory but complementary (*yin yang*).”⁵⁰

2.3 Doing Theology with Asian Resources

In order to demonstrate how Asian Christian theology is a continuation of the tradition of the Church and to examine how Asians do theology and draw nourishment from the Asian cultures and the lived experience of Asian Christians, the Office of Theological Concern (OTC) of the FABC conducted a study and then published a paper in 2000, namely “Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today.”⁵¹

According to the OTC, to theologize in Asia and to be critically conscious of what it means to be a Christian “is not an exercise of translating the experiences of past generations (be they Western or

49 BIRA IV/II, 1988, no.15, in *FAPA*.

50 Ibid., no.20. “Yin yang” is the term of complementary from traditional Chinese philosophy.

51 This document represents the work of study and consultation of the members of the office and other theologians over a period of three years, finally approved at the meeting in Kathmandu, May 2000. This document is offered as a basis for discussion. The Office of Theological Concern(OTC)-FABC, “Methodology: Asian Christian Theology, Doing Theology in Asia Today,” *FABC Paper*, No. 96. See website: <http://www.ucanews.com/html/fabc-papers/fabc-96.htm>

Eastern) into some modern Asian jargon, but rather an attempt to express from the depths of the Asian psyche the ineffable experience of living faith in Jesus Christ. It is the result of a genuine incarnation of the mystery of Christ in the flesh and blood of Asian peoples.” Although there are various cultures and philosophies in the Asian traditions, according to the OTC, there are certain values and approaches that are more important. One of these values is harmony. Because of multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural backgrounds, Asians live in an atmosphere filled with communal tensions. Therefore, a vision of unity and harmony, and a language of reconciled diversity that will enable people of different communities to work together for peace and the building of a more just society, are of utmost importance. It is undeniable that Asian Christians rest solidly on their faith in Jesus Christ in whom the self-communication of God has taken place, but Asian Christians also realize that the mystery of the depth of this self-communication remains to be explored further; they realize that the Spirit is at work outside the visible Christian community, through these various traditions. Given the prominent value of harmony, the OTC points out that Asian Christians seek ways to integrate the experiences of Asia and the experience of their own forebears or traditions into their Christian faith. Though there is but one Truth, that Truth is a Mystery which one needs to approach respectfully. Hence, the Asian Christian is open to dialogue, which is based on profound respect for individuals, communities and their religious traditions. The Asian way is one of integration and inclusion.⁵²

Apart from relying on Scripture and Sacred Tradition to do theology, the OTC points out that Asian Christians also employ

52 OTC-FABC, “Methodology,” introduction.

Asian realities as resources (*loci theologici*), insofar as God's presence, action and the work of the Spirit can be found in them through discernment and interpretation. The totality of life, including the cultures of peoples, the history of their struggles, their religions, religious scriptures, oral traditions, popular religiosity, economic and political realities and world events, historical personages, stories of oppressed people become resources of theology, and assume methodological importance in doing theology.⁵³ This implies theologically that one is using "context" (or contextual realities) in a new way. This is because in the past, the use of contextual realities meant that context was the background against which one did theology. The faith or the Gospel and tradition must address the questions and challenges from the context and respond to them. This kind of theology was concerned with the ways of adapting and applying the message to people in their concrete socio-religio-cultural situations.

From the above interpretation of inculturation and local theology by the FABC, it has shown that inculturation can be understood as a two-way process of mutual enrichment and critique between Christianity and the local culture; it is not a one-way process of replacing the local culture with Christian faith. Moreover, from the vision of the FABC that unity and harmony are to be realized in diversity, and the importance to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking, one can see the many possibilities of doing local theology in diversified ways.

⁵³ OTC delineates the sources and resources of theology in theological method in Asian context which include cultural resources, religious resources, social movements, specifically Christian sources, and theological basis of resources. See OTC-FABC, "Methodology," chapter 3.

3. Development of Asian Theologies in Asian Church

The FABC does not only offer its understanding and interpretation of the concept of inculturation and doing Asian theologies. Being inspired by Vatican II, it also directly involved in doing Asian theologies through its own activities and the documents it produces. Apart from the FABC, a church organization which employs a contextual way of doing theology, many other theologians in Asia, both being encouraged by and getting legitimized power from Vatican II, also participate in nurturing this field in their local churches or in Asia at large.⁵⁴ Moreover, more and more Asian Christian women participate in constructing theology in their own contexts.⁵⁵ In this section, apart from the FABC itself, I will focus on the works of two Asian theologians, an Indian and a Hong Kong-Chinese, examining how these works exemplify the methodology of doing Asian theologies, with the use

54 Some of the works of Asian theologies include: Virginia Fabella, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity: Towards a Relevant Theology*. Papers from the Asian Theological Conference, January 7-20, 1979, Wennappuwa, Sri Lanka (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1980); Aloysius Pieris, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988); Michael Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theology from Asia* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

55 One of the proceedings of Asian theological works which contains works of both Catholic and Protestant women is: Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds., *We dare to dream: doing theology as Asian women* (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Centre for Culture and Theology and the Asian Office of the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 1989). Later, a group of Catholic women theologians has found the "Ecclesia of Women in Asia" and hold conference every two years. So far, four conferences have been held since 2002 and several proceedings have been published, including: *Body and Sexuality: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives of Women* (2004); *Reimagining Women, Marriage, and Family Life in Asia* (2006).

of local resources and paying particular attention to the local context.

3.1 The FABC as an Exemplar of Doing Asian Theology

The FABC, since its establishment, has consistently used contextual realities, including cultures, religions and sociopolitical realities, as resources for theological reflection, with a view to interpreting the mission of the Church in Asia. The FABC has adopted the pastoral cycle which starts with faith, then proceeds to social analysis of the signs of the times, followed by theological reflection to discern these in light of the Gospel, enabling the Church to plan for the future and specify its missionary response. This is a living theology which constantly strives to discern the working of the Spirit in a rapidly changing world. Moreover, the FABC always emphasizes humble, respectful and loving dialogue between local Asian churches and Asian cultures, religious traditions and the poor:

We enter as equal partners into the dialogue in a mutuality of sharing and enrichment contributing to mutual growth. It excludes any sense of competition. Rather, it centers on each other's values. All the partners in dialogue participate in their own culture, history and time. Hence, dialogue brings the partners more deeply into their own cultures and bears the characteristics of inculturation.⁵⁶

Through these three interrelated spheres of dialogue—with the poor, with other religions and with the Asian culture—the Church is able to link with people in all areas and dimensions of their lives. This method of employing Asian resources and interpreting Asian

56 Bishops' Institute of Inter-religious Dialogue, BIRA I, no.12, in *FAPA*, p.111.

realities as embodying God's presence and action in our history and world, as suggested by the OTC, "has come to be accepted and is bearing fruit in the life of the Church."⁵⁷ Not only did it publish a few volumes of documents on all the statements, final reports and reference materials,⁵⁸ both Asian and non-Asian theologians also analyze the methodology and themes of the FABC documents and examine how this method and interpretation of Christian faith can be applied in Asian local churches.⁵⁹

3.2 Indian Theologian Felix Wilfred

Felix Wilfred has been involved in developing and doing local contextual theology in India and Asia for many years and has published a number of articles and books in this area. In his own words, what he tries to do is a "contextual re-interpretation of Christianity with our experiences in India and Asia at large as the point of reference."⁶⁰ His theological works are clearly influenced by the spirit of Vatican II and the FABC; he affirmed the importance of these ecclesial events and the related documents.⁶¹ To demonstrate how he does local Christian theology in an inter-cultural encounter between Indian culture and Christianity, I'll employ his own works, with focus on the more recent *On the Banks*

57 Ibid., section 3.1.

58 For FABC publications, please visit the FABC website:
<http://www.fabc.org/pub.html>

59 According to the FABC, there are 30 doctoral dissertations and four master or licentiate thesis in which the FABC is the research subject. For details of the topics, see FABC website: <http://www.fabc.org/FABCRelatedStudies.html>. For FABC publications, please visit the FABC website:
<http://www.fabc.org/pub.html>

60 Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity* (University of Madras, 1995), p.viii.

61 Felix Wilfred has been a secretary and member of the Theological Advisory Commission of the FABC and wrote a number of articles on and for the FABC.

of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology,⁶² which clearly shows his ideas and methodology for constructing local theology in an Indian context.

For Wilfred, doing theology is part of the process of study and reflection on the problems and questions facing the people and a search for ways and means to meet the challenges of life, just as the first centuries of Christianity when life and faith were very intimately interlinked. Therefore, all genuine theology must be open-ended and dialogical.⁶³ Since India is a great civilization characterized by immense diversity, full of contradictions and conflicts, doing theology in India also means facing unprecedented challenges at all levels. It is only by entering into the universe of Indian life, its tradition, culture, history and the dynamics of contemporary society, that one could make sense of what it means to do theology in India. Theology can be a way to bring the Good News of Jesus closer to the lives of the people. Service to life is the basic framework of doing theology in India, with three inter-related dimensions, namely the materials, the societal and the cosmic.⁶⁴

Wilfred upholds "dialogue" as his method of theology. He suggests that there are several dimensions of dialogue. First, dialogue with the overall situation, which means being present right in the midst of the struggles for life and to immerse oneself like Jesus into the situation and enter into dialogue. Second, inter-religious dialogue with various religious traditions in India. All of them embody in their beliefs, rituals, and other expressions a response to some of the basic questions about human life, its

62 Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002).

63 Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges*, p.xi.

64 Ibid., pp.4-5, 8-9.

meaning, its destiny, and so on. The worldview behind these religious traditions, the values and attitudes they foster have many consequences in real life. Third, dialogue with other sciences, which can throw light on the reality of life and help respond to its contemporary exigencies.⁶⁵ This dialogical model, Wilfred claims, is a genuine process of inter-cultural encounter.⁶⁶ Through this process, certain aspects of faith will acquire greater relief and prominence, whereas the culture of India will also be transformed when meeting the prophetic aspect of Christian faith.⁶⁷

In his own works, we can see that the subalterns or the people of the marginalized in India, the dalits, the poor in Asia in the age of globalization—all those who struggle for liberation and life—are the focus of his theology.⁶⁸ Moreover, he examines the Indian approaches to the concept of the Divine Mystery in which various Indian sources are employed.⁶⁹ He attempts to reinterpret Church and Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ, language of Christian

65 Ibid., pp.9-14.

66 Wilfred argues that whereas inculturation presupposes an understanding of culture mainly in terms of customs and traditions, inter-cultural encounter views culture as the deeper aspect of worldview, symbols, root-paradigms and so on. See Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges*, p.49.

67 Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges*, pp.43, 50.

68 For example, in his book *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, two-thirds of the chapters are devoted to the problems being faced by the marginal peoples in the age of globalization and the rights of the subalterns in Asia, and the mission of Christianity in these situations. He explored a subaltern hermeneutics and theology which focus on the contemporary issues and problems of Asia at the dawn of the millennium. See Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, second edition). In another book *From the Dusty Soil*, Wilfred starts from the real-life world and experiences of the suffering people, the dalits, dalit Christians and protest movements, examining the “Cries of the Times” in part one of the book. Then he attempts to reinterpret some notions of Christian faith in light of the situation being delineated in part one. For details, please refer to Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity* (University of Madras, 1995).

69 Felix Wilfred, “Indian Approaches to the Divine Mystery,” *On the Banks of Ganges*, pp.186-207.

uniqueness, and Christian community in the context of India⁷⁰ and he identifies components of liberating dialogue and calls for such dialogue within and between religious traditions.⁷¹

In reinterpreting the language of Christian uniqueness, for example, Wilfred points out that all christologies are contextual and no particular one is comprehensive. The language of uniqueness has its presuppositions and epistemological background, but Indian experience and interpretations of Jesus do not seem to require such language. Rather, with the long tradition of mutual relationship between the various faith traditions, and with the need for focusing on suffering, Christians can firmly commit to their faith without having to invoke the language of uniqueness.⁷² In this way, Wilfred reinterprets the concept of uniqueness in the Christian tradition and gives it a new understanding in the Indian context.

Wilfred also argues that in doing contextual theology in India, apart from the sources like scripture, tradition and liturgy, the specifically Indian resources for theologizing must be highlighted. These sources include: the meaning of life in the midst of so much poverty, misery and struggle; the various cultures of particular groups, communities or peoples which manifest the embodiment of expressions of life, according to different regions and languages, socio-political situations of castes and classes; Indian literature; stories, narratives and myths in Indian life; the sacred writings of the

70 Felix Wilfred, "Church and Kingdom of God: A Reinterpretation"; "The Language of Christian Uniqueness: Reflections from an Indian Perspective," *From the Dusty Soil*, pp.137-160, pp.176-200; Felix Wilfred, "Interpreting Jesus Christ in Contemporary India"; "Being a Christian Community in India," *On the Banks of Ganges*, pp.138-187, pp.208-242.

71 Wilfred names part three of the book *From the Dusty Soil* as "Summons to dialogue" in which he calls for intra-traditional and inter-traditional dialogues.

72 Felix Wilfred, "The Language of Christian Uniqueness: Reflections from an Indian Perspective," *From the Dusty Soil*, pp.199-200.

religious traditions represented in India; and the saints, sages and mystics of the past as well as of present times.⁷³ He also emphasizes that Indian theology does not result from simply adopting certain Indian concepts. It is the encounter of India with these texts through *dhvani* interpretation—interaction between the text and the reader.⁷⁴

For Wilfred, Christianity can make spiritual contributions to the present circumstances of India.⁷⁵ The religio-cultural and socio-political experience in India could signify for Western Christianity, and consequently for an innovative Western theology.⁷⁶ Wilfred contends that Indian theology needs to develop to support a fruitful encounter between Christianity and the Indian experience, both in its religio-cultural and socio-political dimensions.⁷⁷

To sum up, we can see that Wilfred makes his effort in doing local theology with a dialogical method, employing local sources, such as Hindu way of interpretation, and paying special attention to

73 Ibid., pp.19-22.

74 In the Indian tradition, one of the theories of interpretation is the *dhvani* theory which means that what the text says is the result of an encounter between the text and the reader. Such an interpretation will not be something simply theoretical and epistemological. It will be chiefly a matter of interpretation through life and praxis, history and involvement. For more details, please refer to Wilfred, *On the Banks of Ganges*, pp.22-24.

75 The four inter-related areas are: the culture of prophetic love in new forms and expressions (tackling of the structuring aspects of injustice, oppression and marginalization), creation of community (inter-human and inter-group relationships in fellowship), the message of the Sermon on the Mount, and the option for the poor. Ibid, pp.245-252.

76 These elements include: the inner experience of mystery (through contemplation of the indwelling of the Divine deep within ourselves also allows us to experience ourselves, the world and the entire universe); transcending the externals (search for the spirituality); *Nishkama Karma* or the Spirit of Detachment in Action (while we are fervently engaged, we should interiorly distance ourselves from the world, to keep ourselves free and alert—non-attachment and inner freedom and sacrifice); contemplative spirit and holistic vision. Ibid., pp.252-260.

77 Ibid., pp.245-260.

the Indian reality, especially the subaltern. He also attempts to reinterpret the Christian doctrines so as to make it more suitable to an Indian context. He also gains much respect from the Asian Church as well the other religious traditions in India.

3.3 Hong Kong-Chinese Theologian Chi-Fan Ng

In his recent work *The Universal Salvation of Jesus Christ*,⁷⁸ Hong Kong moral theologian Chi-Fan Ng attempts to examine how the good news of the universal salvation of Jesus Christ can be rooted in the Chinese culture, from the perspective of moral theology, as a contribution to the inculturation of theology in a Chinese society.

Ng notices that since the apostolic age, the problem of adaptation has existed in the process of evangelization. After much effort, the gospel was integrated to the Greco-Roman culture. However, when the gospel was spread to China, similar problems of adaptation occurred again. Local theologians often have to face the problem of how the gospel message can be integrated in the local culture. Ng argues that there are both universal and local dimensions in theology. These two dimensions should not be in opposite positions, but rather should exist in harmony. Local theology should not be separated from the Church. It is innovative but simultaneously reflects the value of the tradition of revelation in it. Meanwhile, Church authorities should provide more space for local theologians to develop this area.⁷⁹

78 Chi-Fan Ng, *Universal Salvation of Jesus Christ* (Taipei: Kuangchi Press, 2008). (in Chinese)

79 Ng, "The Principles of Local Theology," *Universal Salvation of Jesus Christ*, pp.26-27.

For Ng, doing local theology in a Chinese context refers to the theological expression of the experience of Christian faith by the members of the Chinese Church through the special feature of Chinese culture, Chinese language and life experiences, in the context of Christianity-Chinese cultural encounter. He delineates some principles of doing local theology: it should be Chinese people who do local theology, use simple and easy to understand Chinese language, theologians should have religious experience, local theology should be in harmony with the universal theology, local theology and church authority should be complementary and the latter should give the former more space to try, to be able to answer the questions of human persons in real-life reality, and respect and uphold the ethical tradition of Chinese people.⁸⁰

Generally speaking, Ng argues, Chinese people possess a sense of worry and anxiety, thus, local theology in a Chinese context should be able to address this concern. Ethics and morality is, therefore, an obvious meeting space where Christianity and Chinese culture meet and respond to this concern. In the face of this issue, Ng attempts to reinterpret the meaning of sin and salvation in moral theology. He examines the diversified meanings of the notion of sin in the classical texts of Chinese philosophy and its relation to the sense of worry and anxiety among Chinese people. He also points out that in Chinese cultural tradition such as Confucianism, emphasis is on benevolence or humanness rather than punishment. The notion of filial piety and paying homage to ancestors make Chinese people caring about the situation of life after death. On the other hand, he also points out that in Christian faith, the place of sin is overstressed, to the extent that the good news of salvation and

80 Ibid., pp.10-25.

grace is neglected and misinterpreted. He argues that moral theology in the past was too legalistic; the image of a merciful God was covered by the image of a judging God. This can be reflected in the doctrine of eschatology in the Catholic tradition.

To do theology and spread the good news in the Chinese society, Ng contends, there is a need to rethink the issue of hell and the image of God. Therefore, in his work, he reinterprets the notions of hell, sin and salvation, and highlights the image of a merciful and compassionate God and the importance of universal salvation in the Catholic faith.⁸¹ Such reinterpretation of faith is not only more compatible with the notions of benevolence and filial piety in the Chinese cultural tradition, and makes it easier to have dialogue with other Chinese religions such as Buddhism and Taoism, it can also reflect the compassionate image of God, and meet the concrete needs of the faithful in real life.⁸²

To sum up, we can say Ng makes an important step in doing local theology in a Chinese context. His employment of Chinese philosophies and cultural sources, and reinterpretation of the Catholic tradition on sin and salvation after dialogue with the Chinese context make a contribution in Chinese local theology.

Conclusion

Vatican II is considered to be a historical cultural turning point for the Roman Catholic Church. It abandoned the classicist worldview of a single normative culture and assumed a new and more positive attitude towards the modern world and bearers of

81 Ibid, pp.217-250.

82 Ibid., pp.295-296.

modern social, political and cultural movements. The lived experience of the Council participants—bishops from all over the world experienced a deep immersion in the affairs of the Church and the world together at the Council through discussion and debate—paved the way for a deeper ecclesial awareness and a greater readiness in a new understanding of culture and the use of cultural analysis in the Council.

In this article, the notions of culture, local church, diversity of cultures and theological pluralism were examined. It has shown that the Council affirmed the following new understandings: the modern sociological and ethnological sense of culture, the universal church exists only as the communion of local churches, the rich diversity of cultures and the contributions of the local churches, the importance of diversity in proclaiming the good news and in theologizing, and the role of theologians in seeking more suitable ways of communicating doctrine and faith to the people of their times. All these new ideas inspire members, including theologians of local churches, to find expressions in indigenous ways of thought, symbols and practices, so as to make Christian faith take root in local culture.

However, in the process of inculturation in theology, a number of problems arise. The most notable ones are: In the midst of cultural diversity and the sensitivity needed to the presence of Christ already in the culture, how does one also respect the normative character of Christian tradition? If the heart of any culture is its religious faith and the goal of inculturation is to transform the culture by the Christian life, will it become an attack on the religious root of another culture?

Employing the interpretation of the FABC on inculturation, I demonstrated that inculturation can be understood as a two-way

process of mutual enrichment and critique between Christianity and the local culture; both the Asian reality and the Christian evangelizer are purified, healed and transformed. Therefore, it is not a one-way process of replacing the local culture with Christian faith. Moreover, the FABC points out that unity and harmony are to be realized in diversity; it is important to cultivate an all-embracing and complementary way of thinking. In doing theology, Asian theologians not only employ Scripture and church tradition, but also Asian realities and resources in local cultural traditions. The FABC not only produces documents showing how to do Asian or local theology, the way it conducts its activities and theologizes is an exemplar of doing Asian theology.

Apart from the FABC, I also illustrated how Asian theologians theologize in a local context through the theological works of Indian theologian Felix Wilfred and Hong Kong-Chinese theologian Chi-Fan Ng. Each of them has his principles for doing local theology. Wilfred focuses more on the social realities whereas Ng highlights more the cultural and philosophical resources. Both of them demonstrate how these resources can be integrated into their works. Maybe some people will still question, does Wilfred rely too much on social and cultural realities to theologize, or does Ng focus too much on evangelization? Can they achieve unity and pluralism in theology? Do they use the text of the church tradition and cultural tradition in an appropriate way? Will the Holy See disagree with their works? Nevertheless, they establish an important step for doing local theology and developing their methodologies. There is no one way of doing theology and the above questions need to be explored continuously by entering this field of theologizing.

在亞洲處境從事本地神學—— 自梵二以來有關「本地化」概念的含意

阮美賢

【摘要】梵二大公會議為羅馬天主教會開展了一個新階段，它擯棄了從前的單一標準文化的古典世界觀，改而對現代世界以及社會、政治、文化運動持正面的態度。它為世界各地的教會在各方面都帶來新發展。在亞洲各地，無論在學術層面或普及層面，神學思想的蓬勃發展正是一證明，這些神學作品都將焦點放在當地處境和文化之上。然而，在神學本地化的過程中，問題出現了。最為值得留意的包括，在文化多元和意識到基督在不同文化中已臨在的情況下，如何尊重基督宗教傳統的既有特性？如果任何文化的核心是其宗教信仰，而本地化的目的是將原有文化轉化為基督化，本地化會否成為打擊另一文化的宗教根源？

本文探討了梵二以來，教會如何理解文化、地方教會、多元文化和神學多元化，從而試圖析解以上問題。當中指出了梵二的新思維——如普世教會必須指向地方教會之間的共融、地方教會在多元文化的環境中作出的貢獻、神學家為信徒找出更合時宜的方式表達教義和信仰的重要性等——為梵二參加者帶來啟迪，從而接受根據本土的思維方式、象徵符號和習俗等從事神學工作，從而使基督信仰植根於本地文化之中。

採用亞洲主教團協會（亞協）在本地化方面的詮釋，本文指出了本地化可以理解為一個雙向過程——基督宗教和本地文化互相豐富和批評對方的過程，令亞洲實況和傳信者雙方都得到淨化、治療和轉化。因此，本地化並非基督信仰替代本地文化的單向過程，而本地化神學亦不是離棄聖經和教會傳統。而是在多元中實現團結與和諧，培養一種互相補足和包容性的思維。在從事神學研究時，除了聖經和教會傳統外，亞洲神學家更會採用亞洲處境和本地文化傳統中的資源。本文以印度神學家偉爾弗德和香港神學家吳智勳的神學著作為例，指出亞洲神學家如何建構神學。偉爾弗德較著重社會處境，而吳智勳則著重文化傳統，兩者均顯示如何將本地資源作神學塑材結合在神學著作中。他們都對神學本地化作出重要貢獻，發展出做神學的方法論。