

## **Ecclesiology of Communion and its Implications for the Local Church in Asia**

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Vatican II was a new Pentecost which renewed the face of the Church. One important change that has been taking place in the field of ecclesiology since the Council is the shift of emphasis from the universal Church to the local Church. History bears out that for several centuries the Church was immersed in a highly centralistic and monolithic conception of the Church, which hampered the growth and curtailed the growth of the local Churches to a larger extent. The Council's rediscovery of the local Church as a result of its relentless effort to renew the face of the Church in accordance with the vision of the New Testament and the emergent signs of the time has generated enthusiasm in Asia to construct authentic local Churches, taking into account its context. As a result, today we witness in Asia an ongoing discussion on the life and mission of the local Church at various levels, namely continental, national, regional, diocesan, parochial etc.

Needless to say, the ecclesiology of communion is the theological basis for the new perception of the Church and for the local realization of the Church. In this article an attempt is made to make a study on the implications of the ecclesiology of communion for the local Church in Asia.

**Communion: Core Element of the Church**

Human persons are not scattered individuals living in isolation or solitude. They are essentially community beings. They are born in a family, grow up in a society and live with others till the end of their life. Community – fellowship – communion is a fundamental reality and a fundamental human longing. More than ever before, today there is among people, living in a society torn apart by communalism, casteism and religious fundamentalism, a real longing for a life of communion and fellowship. Only in the company of fellow human persons can they find happiness and fulfillment. Only in the ties of affection, in mutual sharing, and in concern for others can they find happiness and contentment. This longing for communion is exactly the concern of God, particularly of Jesus whose very purpose was to make all people into a community of love and fellowship by establishing the Kingdom of God in this world. Therefore, the Church, founded by him, is called upon to become a community of disciples bound together in communion.

The communion is the central element of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. Leaving aside the institutional, authoritative and juridical character of the Church, it underscored the communitarian dimension of the people of God. This awakening of the Church as a communion could be called a historical necessity, as some theologians even before the Council had paved a way towards this theological orientation and made a clarion call that the Church should become a community of disciples committed to the mission of Christ.<sup>1</sup> Walter Kasper points out, “Together with the biblical, liturgical, patristic and pastoral revival which took place in the first half of the century, the awakening of the idea of the Church as communion provided the historical pre-condition for the Second Vatican Council, and for its ecclesiological renewal. One of the guiding ideas of the last Council – perhaps the guiding idea – was *communio* – communion.”<sup>2</sup> The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in 1985, marking the 20th anniversary of the closing of Vatican II, observed, “the ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents.”<sup>3</sup>

In the ecclesial vision of the Council, communion is the very nature and fundamental character of the Church. It can be called the mystery of the Church. The Church is a sacrament of the unity and communion – communion of believers with God and among themselves under the impulse and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Communion is basically a participation or sharing in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit – a divine life that is fostered by the Spirit of God. All the members share in, “the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (2 Cor 13:14). They are brought into fellowship with the Triune God and participate in the divine nature by virtue of baptism.<sup>4</sup> Sharing in the divine life is experienced in a special way in the Eucharist. This life of communion is the basis for the equality and dignity of all the faithful and for their responsibility of building up the Church.<sup>5</sup>

### **Rediscovery of the Local Church:**

We can say that it was the Council’s rediscovery of the true nature of the Church, namely communion or *koinonia* which led to the rediscovery of the local Church. It is a fact that Vatican II was primarily focusing on the Universal Church. But one of the great achievements it made was the recovery of the ecclesial significance of the local Church which had been completely lost in the Western Church. The Council, affirming that the communion of believers in a locality is the Church of Christ, declared: “The Church of Christ is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful, which in so far as they are united to their pastors, are also quite appropriately called Churches in the New Testament.”<sup>6</sup> It is a community of believers, which proclaims the message of the Kingdom of God, celebrates the Eucharist and other sacraments, practises love and fellowship and continues the liberative mission of Christ in a particular socio-economic and cultural context. This recovery was supported by the scholarship on the early Christian communities which brought to light that the Church was local by character. The word *ekklesia* was used first to refer to the Christian community of a given region or city, in accordance with its original Greek,

namely the assembly of citizens in a city to decide matters affecting the Church. This recovery has enabled the contemporary Christians to experience that the Church is “always first of all a concrete reality, *this* group of men and women, at *this* time, and in *this* place, within *this* culture, responding to the Word and grace by which God gathers them in Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

### Local Church: A Community of Fellowship

Drawing inspiration from the ecclesiology of Vatican II, the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference firmly affirmed that the local Church is basically a communion. It is a “communion in the Spirit, a community of sharing and fellowship, of witness and service.”<sup>8</sup> The *koinonia* is its fundamental character. The local Church, envisaged as communion or *koinonia* has a twofold dimension, namely vertical and horizontal. Communion is basically a participation or sharing in the life of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit – a divine life fostered by the Spirit of God. The Church becomes local, only when the saving event of Jesus Christ takes root in a particular situation with all its social, cultural and other characteristics, which makes up the life and thought of the people living in that place. The new life offered by the Christ event is the life of communion. It is a life of communion with God the Father in fellowship with the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ. This communion with the Triune God is the source and foundation of the local Church.

The vertical dimension of communion, as described above, is bound to lead to the horizontal dimension. The participation in the life of communion with the Triune God fosters among the members of the local Church a bond of solidarity and fellowship. It forms them into a Church of God gathered in the name of His Son Jesus Christ and makes them all brothers and sisters to one another. Since all proclaim the same faith, share the same Word of God and participate in the same sacraments, all are called upon to love one another, participate in the joys and sufferings of one another and particularly care for the oppressed and marginalized among them. Each member assumes

responsibility for the welfare of all in the community. "Openness to one another in sharing, mutual concern and self-giving, attitudes of being *with* others and *for* others, making the joys and sorrows of the community truly their own" are some of the indispensable characteristics to be nurtured in the local Churches as pointed out by the bishops in their Statement of the Third Plenary Assembly.<sup>9</sup>

The love and concern for others, at the same time, should not remain within the confines of the local Church and imbibe the sectarian spirit. It is imperative that it goes beyond the denominational, religious and ethnic borders to embrace every one in the society as the son and daughter of God. The communion with God and with one another in the Christian community liberates them from every form of selfishness and invites them to build up relationship with other Christian Churches and collaborate with them in evangelical witness and service of the people.<sup>10</sup> In order to make inter-religious fellowship a concrete and viable reality dialogue is to be initiated and promoted at all levels with people belonging to various religious traditions. This is the reason why the bishops, in the very first meeting at Manila in 1970, pledged to, "an open, sincere, and continuing dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia, that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of human development."<sup>11</sup>

Another important area of concern for the members of the local Church to express their solidarity and commitment is the massive poverty and social oppression, which is deeply rooted in the Asian soil. The Asian bishops emphasize that the poor are deprived of access to material goods and resources for human life, because they live under oppression and live in social, economic and political structures which have injustice built into them.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the local Churches in Asia, as a fruit of their experience of *koinonia*, must make an option for the marginalized and involve themselves in creating a new humanity marked by love, justice and solidarity.<sup>13</sup> This preferential option for the poor and the oppressed is seen by the FABC as an act of faith.<sup>14</sup>

### Local Church: Communion of Communities

Another point to be noted in continuation with what we discussed above is that the model of the local Church, as envisioned by the Asian bishops, is a communion of communities. In accordance with the new vision of the Church that has been blooming after Vatican II, the Church, instead of being perceived as a huge, powerful and authoritative structure controlled by the hierarchy, is understood in terms of smaller Christian communities in which all are considered to be equal in dignity and responsibility; all are endowed with the charisms and gifts of the Holy Spirit and all are committed to the mission of Christ.

The communion of such smaller communities is the new model of the Church adopted and promoted by the Asian bishops. In one of the meetings of the Bishops' Institute For the Lay Apostolate of the FABC held in Pakistan in 1993, they clearly stated that, "we decide to adopt as our vision the model of the Church as a "COMMUNION OF COMMUNITIES" so that the Kingdom of God may become a reality in our land."<sup>15</sup> Prior to this, the Fifth Plenary Assembly spelt out the meaning of communion of communities within the Church in line of Basic Christian Communities. The laity, the religious and the clergy are, "called together by the Word of God, which regarded as a quasi-sacramental presence of the Risen Lord, leads them to form small Christian communities (e.g., neighbourhood groups, Basic Ecclesial Communities and covenant communities). There they pray together the Gospel of Jesus, living it in their daily lives as they support one another and work together, united as they are in one mind heart."<sup>16</sup> The Seventh Plenary Assembly considers the Basic Christian Communities as an ecclesial movement flourishing in Asia through which the local Church "desires to be a community of faith, love and service and to be truly a community of communities and to open to building up Basic Human Communities."<sup>17</sup> The Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* also underlines, "the value of basic ecclesial communities as an effective way of promoting communion and participation in parishes and dioceses."<sup>18</sup>

However, we must note that although the BCC notion has gained very wide attention and encouragement in official texts and documents of the FABC, the concrete emergence of BCC in Asia is only at the beginnings, except perhaps in a few parishes. Thomas Vijay, in his study on the participation of the laity in the Church, admits that "Many dioceses and countries have introduced BCCs as a *New way of Being the Church* to make the Church participatory and collaborative. Yet in many cases, BCCs have not been given the importance and support needed to truly make it the *New way of Being the Church*. It has been noticed that whenever clergy showed enthusiasm and interest, BCCs flourished and people grow in apostolic consciousness. Often the change of priest or cooling of his enthusiasm, has led to the collapse of the BCCs. Could BCCs be the thrust and focus of a renewed Church in Asia in the spirit of Church as communion in mission?"<sup>19</sup>

### Ministries of the Local Church – Responsibility of All

The understanding of the Church as communion calls for a new understating of ministries and a new way of exercising them. More often than not, the communion with God and with one another remains an abstract concept without affecting the life and ministry of the people. It can become a concrete reality and pastorally meaningful only to the extent that, "all the persons are equal, co-responsible and interdependent."<sup>20</sup> Communion can be created among the people not in vacuum, but concretely in the joint exercise of their ministry.<sup>21</sup> We must remember that collegiality and co-responsibility in the local Church proceed from communion

It is to be noted that the ministries are those services which are officially recognized by the Church and performed by her members for the sake of building the local Christian community into an authentic community that is committed to the mission of Christ. Any spontaneous and occasional services rendered by any individual for the community are called *diakonia*. But ministry in the proper sense applies to those services for which the members commit themselves in a stable manner. As the Asian Colloquium

on Ministries in the Church expresses, "Ministries apply more properly to those services which Church members undertake with a certain stability and exercise on a sufficiently broad sense, thus sharing formally in the Church's responsibility to signify the presence to men of Christ's saving action. All such ministries must be recognized by the community and authenticated by it in the person of its leader. Thus, every service and ministry of the Church supposes a charism but not every charism blossoms into a ministry."<sup>22</sup> The Colloquium also makes a distinction between two types of ministries, namely ministries conferred by installation and ministries conferred by ordination. The first one is rendered by the lay people and the second by the bishops, presbyters and deacons. It must be clearly remembered that the lay people exercise their ministries in their own right and they should not be considered as auxiliaries of priests.

In continuation with what we have stated we observe that the Asian bishops, having been enlightened by the new ecclesial vision of the Council, emphatically affirm that the local Churches must become communities of God in which all the members, true to their vocation, actively involve themselves in different kind of ministries. The Asian Colloquium on Ministries reiterates that the mission of Christ, which is universal by character, is not entrusted to a few individuals, but, "is incumbent on the entire community of each local or particular Church in its own situation and human environment."<sup>23</sup> Since the whole community is missionary, all the members participate in the common mission, though in various ways. The Seventh Plenary Assembly of the FABC harped on the same point by affirming that the ministry of the local Church cannot be confined to one or any specialized groups, but "the whole community, every group, every person, with whom we relate in service, is an agent of evangelization."<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, the Spirit of the Lord, who is the source of communion, bestows the members with a variety of charisms, which are to be exercised in the community, contributing to that community, continually building it up and serving all people in love. In the words of the bishops, all people, endowed

with charisms, render, "different services, thereby contributing, each in his or her own manner, to the Christian mission."<sup>25</sup> Hence there is no non-charismatic member and no one should be considered useless in the local Church. All occupy a decisive place in the community and all enjoy equal dignity. However, we should not forget the fact that even though all are not charismatic by vocation, by virtue of their baptismal consecration, all are now engaged in the ministry of the Church in the same manner and with the same intensity.

The spirit of communion and solidarity also demands the development of team ministry in our parishes and dioceses. Team work implies working together with mutual trust, acceptance and understanding. The members involved in it can learn, mutually encourage and help each other. The team ministry should not be conceived only in terms of clerics. Ways and means must be explored to make it collaborative venture of all sections of the people of God. Understood thus the ideal would be that the team ministry is exercised by priests, religious and laity jointly. Further, it cannot be a team ministry exclusively of men. Lay women also need to form the part of the team ministry. Such collaborative ministry will certainly pave the way to overcome the idea of identifying ministries only with the priestly ministry and to realize a ministry which is the responsibility of the whole community. At this juncture, we have to bear in mind that the role of an ordained minister is to coordinate the different kind of ministries exercised by the members of the parish community. He has to recognize and promote a plurality of ministry carried out by all. As Hans Keung has pertinently pointed out, "It (ordained ministry) is placed among a multiplicity of diverse functions and charisms; its task is to stimulate, coordinate and integrate; it serves the communities and other ministries."<sup>26</sup>

**Participatory Structures for Strengthening of Communion and Promotion of Co-responsibility**

It is to be underlined that in the local Church, understood as a communion of communities, communion assumes a participatory character. It becomes participatory only when all the faithful – clergy, religious and the laity- exercise their charisms for the building up of the community and to fulfill the vocation of the Gospel. For this the participatory structures have to be established and continuously strengthened and activated. In this participatory communion, “all are equal, co-responsible and interdependent.”<sup>27</sup> Since, “communion represents both the source and fruit of mission; communion gives rise to mission and mission is accomplished in communion” all the members of the local Church, true to their vocation, are bound to participate in the mission of the Kingdom of God with a collaborative spirit.<sup>28</sup>

The participatory structures such as Diocesan Pastoral Council, Diocesan Finance Committee, Parish Pastoral Councils and Parish Finance Committee need to be taken with utmost seriousness, as they are the means or opportunities which contribute to the creation of the very being of the Church as communion. They are structural means wherein the Spirit can act and lead the believers to mutual respect and recognition of the role of one another, deepening the bonds of fellowship through dialogue, exchange of views, common decisions and selfless collaboration. They are also the occasions for the charisms of the laity to blossom. In this respect, the bishops, in their Fourth Plenary Assembly, have made a pertinent observation: “We cannot afford to destroy our communion by words or acts of domination and discrimination. A magnanimous spirit of understanding and a recognition of the gifts of the other must be promoted. In this respect, the clergy leadership has a duty to make the initial move to foster lay involvement and to recognize the emerging leadership of the laity.”<sup>29</sup>

But it is disheartening to note that most of the local Churches in Asia are still dominated by the clergy and the decision-making power is still concentrated in their hands. Lay people are still dependent on them. Only

when the demands of the co-responsible local Church such as launching team ministry in the parishes, entrusting responsibility to the laity, establishment of participatory structures, on-going formation of the laity are seriously implemented, the local Churches in Asia can really become participatory communities. What Kurien Kunnumpuram says about the Indian Church holds good for the whole of Asia:

The Indian Church of the future will have to set up structures and organs of participation, for without them the desire for a participative Church will remain just a pious wish... And lay people in the Church are asking for a more active role in the thinking, planning and decision-making process in the Church. If we believe that the Spirit of the Lord is present and active in every member of the Church, it is important that we listen to everyone. Through him/her the Spirit may be speaking to the Church.<sup>30</sup>

### **New Vision of Power and Authority – A Demand of Communion Ecclesiology**

A proper understanding of authority is urgently needed today to build up a Church that is essentially a communion of persons - fellowship. The authority is given to the members of the hierarchy only to foster this communion and fellowship. The power does not come merely above, namely from God, as it was understood till Vatican II, but it also equally flows or emanates from below, i.e., from the community. The leaders are chosen from the community, for the community and by the community. For instance, as we find in the Acts 6: 1-6, the seven deacons were chosen and presented to the apostles by the community. Finally it was the community, which appointed them by laying hands on them. The laying on of hands by the apostles was a symbolic expression of the participation of the entire community. Similarly when Barnabas and Saul were sent off on their mission, the whole community of Antioch got united in prayer and empowered them by the laying on of hands (Acts 13: 1-3).

The source of any authority in the Church is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord endows all the leaders with his power as a gift. Hence, authority must be seen as charism. It is given to leaders to serve the members of the community and make them as one people of God and one body of Christ. At the same time, we should not forget the fact the same Holy Spirit has given a variety of charisms to lay people to enable them to contribute to growth of the Christian community. These charisms of laity have to be respected, encouraged, properly motivated and also properly channelized for the common good of the community. The exercise of authority must be directed to free our people from inhibitions and make them mature. Imposing servility on others and fostering immature dependence is against the spirit of Jesus and his Kingdom. It is be noted that Jesus of Nazareth resisted the temptation of domination at the very beginning of his ministry and conceived of power as service, as a stewardship of which there are many examples (Mk 8.27-38; 9.30-37; 10.35-45; Mt 23.1-12) that we should not sidestep.

**Conclusion:**

The history of the Church has been marked for several centuries by a sharp division of the faithful into clergy and laity. Clericalism sidelined the lay faithful and stifled the flowering of their charisms for the good of the Church. The Second Vatican Council made a Copernican revolution in the ecclesiastical history by rediscovering the local realization of the Church. The mystery of the Church is communion. Communion can become a concrete and vibrant reality only in relation to the understanding of the Church as a people, as a community endowed with a variety of charisms and ministries. Communion demands participation. The Collaborative ministries, participatory structures, participatory leadership are the inevitable outcome of the ecclesiology of communion. From our analysis it becomes clear that the ecclesiology of communion is not an abstract and intellectual concept that remains only at the level of theological thinking and discussion, but a concrete and down-to-earth reality which steadily and progressively finds expression in the Christian communities.

### Footnotes

1. For the rediscovery of the Church as communion, the following works are important: Yves Congar, *Divided Christendom: A Catholic Study of the Problem of Reunion*, London: The Centenary Press, 1939; Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to the Corporate Destiny of Mankind*, London: Burns & Oates, 1950; Jerome Hamer, *The Church is a Communion*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1964.
2. Walter Kasper, *Theology and Church*, London: SCM Press, 1989, 149.
3. Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, *Message to the People of God and the Final Report*, Washington: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986, 17.
4. *Lumen Gentium*, Nos. 7, 11.
5. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 32.
6. *Lumen Gentium*, No. 26.
7. Joseph Komonchak, "The Church Universal, as the Communion of Local Churches," *Concilium* 46 (1981) 32.
8. Asian Colloquium, "Ministries in the Church," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1970 to 1991*, Vol. I, ed., Gaudencio B. Rosales and C. G. Arevalo, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1987, 72 (Hereafter cited as *FAPA*, Vol. I).
9. Third Plenary Assembly, "The Church – A Community of Faith in Asia," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 57.
10. Office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue, "Our Pilgrimage of Hope," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1992 to 1996*, Vol. II, ed., Franz-Josef Eilers, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, 195-196, 179 (Hereafter cited as *FAPA* Vol. II).
11. Asian Bishops' Meeting, "Resolutions of the Meeting," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 9.
12. Asian Bishops' Meeting, "Message of the Conference," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 5.
13. Third Plenary Assembly, "The Church – A Community of Faith in Asia," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 56-57.
14. BISAI, "Final Reflections," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 200.
15. BILA VII, "Formation addressed to the Church in Pakistan," in *FAPA*, Vol. II, 89.

16. Fifth Plenary Assembly, "Journeying Together Toward the Third Millennium," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 287.
17. Seventh Plenary Assembly, "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," in *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents from 1997 to 2001*, Vol. III, ed., Franz-Josef Eilers, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2002, 3 (Hereafter cited as *FAPA* Vol. III).
18. Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia*, no. 25.
19. Thomas Vijay, "Lay Ministries in the Renewed Church of Asia," *FABC Papers* No. 92J (Hong Kong: FABC, 2000), 17-18.
20. Asian Colloquium, "Ministries in the Church," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 73.
21. Fourth Plenary Assembly, "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 194.
22. Asian Colloquium, "Ministries in the Church," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 74.
23. Asian Colloquium, "Ministries in the Church," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 73.
24. Seventh Plenary Assembly, "A Renewed Church in Asia: A Mission of Love and Service," in *FAPA*, Vol. III, 12.
25. Asian Colloquium, "Ministries in the Church," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 73-74.
26. Hans Kuneg, *Why Priests?* London: Collins, 1972, 61.
27. Asian Colloquium, "Ministries in the Church," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 73.
28. Third East Asian Regional Laity Meeting, "Participation of Laity in the Life of the Church," in *FAPA*, Vol. II, 98.
29. Fourth Plenary Assembly, "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia," in *FAPA*, Vol. I, 194.
30. Kurien Kunnumpuram, "The Indian Church of the Future," *Jnanadeepa* 1 (1998), 165-166.