



**To be used and released by the press
only after 19:00 [THA] on October 12, 2022.**

Inaugural Welcome Address H.E. Oswald Cardinal Gracias

Your Eminence Cardinal Bo, President of the Federation of the Asian Bishops Conferences,

Your Eminence Cardinal Kriengsak, Archbishop of Bangkok, our gracious host,

My dear brother Cardinals, my dear brother Archbishops, Bishops, respected officials from the Government of Thailand, members of this assembly: distinguished guests, delegates and representatives from Asia and beyond, Reverend Fathers and Sisters, ancillary staff and everyone joining us here, both in person and virtually.

Warm greetings and hearty welcome to each one of you. I want to specially greet those following us online. A special welcome to you. Thank you for joining us.

Today marks a momentous step in the journey of the federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, a landmark for the FABC. We come together in the spirit of Synodality to conduct our first ever General Conference. We have had several Plenary Assemblies - 11 of them. We met every few years. Every participant cherishes memories of those enriching meetings, most recently at Colombo. Before that, in Vietnam, and earlier in Manila, in South Korea, and in the year 2000 in this very place, Baan Phu Waan, Samphran in Bangkok.

Most of us are surely aware that this General Conference has been years in the making. May I briefly go through that lengthy process mainly to recognize how Synodality and Fraternity that was put into the preparatory

phase has enabled us to be here today with joy, hope, enthusiasm, and expectation. We can thus also document the history of the Conference.

All Participants at recent global ecclesial events will have noticed how Bishops in South America have invariably been referring to Puebla, Medellin, and now Aparecida in their reflections. Today rare is a Church document emerging from South America that does not refer to Aparecida. These names refer to the all-important decennial Conferences organised by CELAM, the Federation of Latin American Episcopal Conferences - the Latin American equivalent of the FABC. Pope Francis, then Cardinal Bergoglio of Buenos Aires, was the main architect of the Aparecida final document. How much that document has influenced the Pope is seen in the many references to Aparecida in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Speaking at one of our meetings, the Holy father stated that *Evangelii Gaudium*, among the first documents issued by him, outlines the pastoral priorities he wishes to set for the Church of today. The question, therefore, arises: isn't it time for the FABC to have something similar in Asia? What helped South America can surely help Asia. Would such a Conference not help our Churches in Asia to renew and revitalize our pastoral thrust so that the Church could become and what the Lord calls her to be? A vibrant Church working for a better Asia.

After discussing this with the past presidents of CELAM, especially the much remembered, and recently departed to the Lord, Cardinal Claudio Hummes, we collected suggestions of how to organize such a Conference. Since it was an International Conference, it was necessary to get the Holy See's approval. I shared this proposal with Pope Francis who enthusiastically gave wholehearted support and encouragement and invited us to go ahead with the planned General Conference for Asia. The idea was formally presented at our Central Committee Meeting and was unanimously approved. Details had now to be worked out and so we began discussing the material requirements, refining the concept, and planning the logistics.

I shared this idea with Cardinal Tagle, then still in Manila, and then we shared the idea with members of the FABC Office of Theological Concerns. Ideas got crystallized and it was pointed out that we were going to meet on the 50th anniversary of the First Asian Meeting of Bishops on the occasion

of St. Pope Paul VI's visit to Manila. We had found a special occasion that called for a celebration, so it was named FABC 50.

Then things moved swiftly. Bishop Allwyn D'silva was appointed as Secretary for this General Conference and members of our Office of Theological Concerns constituted the first Core Committee with which we began our brainstorming. I want to single out Misereor and its President, Msgr. Pirmin Spiegel and also its past President, Msgr. Josef Sayer who together with Dr. Ulrich Fusser several times specially came down to Rome to discuss the idea with me and take it forward. Their role in assuring support and sharing of their personal experiences in Latin America with CELAM was crucial at this initial stage. So too the assistance of our late Fr. Raymond O'Toole, then FABC Secretary General who meticulously prepared the material we needed for our discussions, regularly giving good practical advice.

Bishop Allwyn set to work quickly and organized Regional Meetings. Their conclusions were condensed in a Consultation Paper so that our General Conference could be conveniently held in 2020 to mark the Golden Jubilee of the FABC.

It was just when your responses to the FABC Consultation Paper began coming in that we were struck by the COVID 19 pandemic. It hit us badly and many lives were lost. We also lost several of our confreres - brother bishops. We acknowledge the grief the pain, the loss, the suffering, and the isolation that we all went through but from which we hopefully emerged spiritually stronger. (Silence)

We adapted in response to the new circumstances. Though we were compelled to postpone FABC 50 more than once, our planning continued online. From 2020 till as recently as last week, the core group, now evolved into an expanded Organizing Committee has met digitally two to three times each month, usually on Mondays. Fr. William LaRousse, the Assistant Secretary General of the FABC kept detailed notes both before and after the meeting and thus our documentation is complete.

Our FABC 50 Guide Document was released in November 2020, and you will see your responses to it synthesised in an FABC Paper published

thereafter. These papers have helped us to come to FABC 50 better prepared to help us to fulfil the theme "going by a different way", just as the Magi did, guided by the Holy Spirit, after their meeting with the Christ Child.

We had the Inauguration of FABC 50 on the Feast of the Queenship of Mary, confident in her intercession for the FABC. A campaign of prayer was started, praying for the success of the General Conference, specially at Sunday Masses.

From today October 12th up to 30th of the month, the process intensifies. In particular, the Bishop Members of this Assembly will undertake, with great responsibility, the monumental purpose of FABC 50 - of reaffirming, renewing and revitalising the Church in Asia, a Church living and working for a better Asia.

Our first three days will be spent in "visiting Asia". All the twenty-nine countries belonging to the FABC have been invited to present an exposition of the present situation in their countries: political, social, economic, religious and any other special challenges for the Catholic Church. While these are not being livestreamed as they are aimed to the participants of the Conference, do look forward to our online interactions during the Talk Show on Sundays. Details will be available on the FABC 50 website. Sunday, October 16, will be the link between our "visiting Asia" and the next week when we will have a six day in depth study of the special challenges in Asia. On Sunday we will interact with several people in the field and those directly affected by new realities in Asia.

From October 17th to 22nd, we will reflect on and deepen our understanding of the emerging realities impacting the Churches in Asia, and we will do so in dialogue with recent papal documents. The Guide Document and subsequent consultations have already highlighted these realities- the pandemic, globalisation, digitalisation, urbanisation, climate change, the migrant crises, political governance, a transformation of cultures, religions in our society, changing family values - and the issues of gender; indigenous people, yearnings of the youth, how our human dignity is being impacted and how the Church is also being transformed. In the coming weeks, we will connect these realities with reflections on the latest

documents of Pope Francis, specially *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Fratelli Tutti*, *Laudato Si'*, *Amoris Laetitia*, and *Predicate Evangelium*. We will not just have talks on these realities but focus on the lessons we need to learn in order for us, as Church in Asia, to respond to them. In this digital age, a number of sections will have virtual voting as we explore how to revitalise the life of the Church. This revitalisation must necessarily come about through new pathways - new pathways for the pastoral care of families, for worship, formation, and the digital ministry, for dialogue, peacebuilding and reconciliation, for giving urgency to the voice of youth, for the role of women in the Church, for proclaiming the Gospel through interreligious dialogue, for leading and governing the Church in a synodal way.

To effectively do so, we will intersperse our meetings, workshops, and sessions with moments of silence and recollection, and readings from Scripture. Pope Francis has taught us the importance of silence. The four-minute silence after every few interventions at the World Synod of Bishops, which many thought strange at the beginning, has now become an invaluable asset, a necessity for us to assimilate and personalise what had just been shared. This ensures that we remain guided by the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Paraclete, who is ever present with us, moving through the world and sustaining us with His breath of life. On Mission Sunday, October 23rd, the shepherds of Asia will be making virtual visits to parishes in different Asian countries to galvanise ourselves with the "smell of the sheep," to guarantee that our deliberations do not remain just theoretical, and deviating from our duty of building up the Kingdom through loving service.

Thus fortified, we will go on to spend the first few days of the following week discerning and envisioning new pathways for the Church working for a better Asia. An expert will guide us

using a new methodology. I cannot stress how vital our role at this General Conference is. We are undertaking to become and remain a prophetic, relevant and responsive Asian Church at the service of the people of Asia. We cannot do this without being in communion with all you people of Asia, without the active participation of those who are members of this assembly and without adhering to our mission of a renewed and shared evangelical outreach. I know everyone will be praying throughout this time

for the success of the FABC 50 General Conference. Thank you and please continue to do so even more fervently during this phase.

We need the guidance of the Holy Spirit to go ahead with courage and perseverance: with wisdom and vision, identifying the priorities of the Church in Asia and restructuring the FABC as needed. May we have the courage to let go when things need to be changed, the wisdom to discover new paths to fulfil our mission and the strength to walk along these new pathways.

By the end of that week on October 30, FABC 50 will come to a close, articulating a new vision of the Church's way in Asia through a Message and final Document. Plans for a restructured FABC will also have been finalized, or at least a direction for them set. Cardinal Luis Tagle has been appointed by the Holy Father as his delegate and he will formally conclude our Conference.

But let me emphasise that this is not where we disembark and disperse. Our journey continues. Next year, we will further commit ourselves to reflect on the new pathways and directions that will emerge at this General Conference both during the annual FABC Central Committee Meeting and at the Asian Continental Synod, which will take place in March 2023. Our final FABC 50 statement will be worked upon in the coming months and we will commit ourselves to putting into operation the new pathways thus revitalising the Church in Asia in the years ahead and into the next decade.

My dear friends may I request you to recite the FABC prayer specially at all Sunday Masses till the end of the Conference and let us celebrate together during this grace-filled time by often singing the Song of Asia. May the heart of the Asian Church throb with the music of the Song of Asia.

May the Lord direct our hearts, minds and selves and permit us to be co-creators of a future of peace, joy and hope. May Mary, the Mother of the Church, and her blessed spouse Saint Joseph the Worker, intercede for us. May God grant us a revitalised Asian Church that will emerge after this General Conference. May the Triune God bless each and every one of us as we actualise FABC 50! Onwards we march together in Synodality in the General Conference FABC 50 which, we are confident, will make a

difference to Asia. I wish you a happy and fruitful stay in Baan Phu Waan!
Thank you.