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Statement and Recommendations of the First Asian Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists- Manila, 18-23 June 1975

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STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE
FIRST ASIAN CONGRESS OF JESUIT ECUMENISTS
MANILA, 18-23 JUNE 1975

Pedro S. de Achútegui

Several International Congresses of Jesuit Ecumenists have been held in past years — almost all of them in the First World. The Beirut Congress in 1973 decided that it was high time that a Congress be held in the Third World. So Yaounde, Cameroon, in Africa was designated as the seat of the Sixth International Congress. Moreover the Beirut participants thought that regional congresses could be the answer to the vexing problem of limited participation from certain areas in these international meetings. Manila was then recommended as the seat for an Asian Congress.

While the recommendation aimed at a broadened participation, it was also felt that the approach to ecumenism in the difficult conditions of the Third World could provide new avenues of thought and action more universal in their application. The fact that the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity goes even further than the Decree on Ecumenism itself gave impetus to this optimistic view.

The Manila Congress gathered forty-six representatives from thirteen different Asian countries. It became somewhat "open" because of the fact that non-Jesuits and representatives from other Christian denominations took an active and prominent part in the meetings. The Catholic Archbishops of Taipei, Stanislaus Lokuang, and of New Delhi, Angelo Fernandes, the Secretary General of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Bishop Mariano G. Gaviola, as well as the Chairman of the Philippine Bishops' Commission for Promoting Christian Unity, Bishop Cornelius de Wit, also participated in the discussions. The Secretary General of the Christian Conference of Asia, Methodist Bishop Yap Kim Hao, the Director of the Association of Theological Schools in South East Asia, Dr. Emerito Nacpil, the Chairman of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines, Rev. George F. Castro, and several others were likewise among the speakers and participants.

While the general topic of the Manila Congress drew inspiration from the theme of the World Council of Churches General Assembly for Nairobi (November 1975), still the focus was on the *Asian* scene: "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites Us for Common Christian Witness in Asia." Asia had to be in the forefront of our reflections. Hence also the prominence given to lectures on Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

The end result of the Congress was much more than what is formulated in the "Statement and Recommendations." It implied a kind of radical *metanoia* whose consequences may appear to some as somewhat revolutionary. What came out prominently was the fact that the interdenominational or strictly doctrinal approach to ecumenism — perhaps the proper approach in the European or North American contexts — was *not* found to be suitable in the Asian situation. Divisions in the Third World are mostly "imported"; and there is also a danger of an "imported" ecumenism. Such an import would not respond to the concrete needs of Asia, where men of other living faiths and the great Asian religions are the *locus* of the Christian drive for unity. A mere transplantation of problems ecumenical or otherwise, to the thoroughly different religious and cultural situation would run counter to the new approaches of "Evangelization in the World Today," the theme of the last Synod of Bishops in 1974.

"Dialogue of life" was the phrase that summed up and concretized the various elements discussed during the Congress. It implied not only the manifold problems of the Asian religious context but also the existence of *ideologies*.

A questionnaire filled out by the participants brought to light those factors that had a bearing on the final resolutions. Is the emphasis in Asian ecumenism different (or should it be different) from the European or American emphasis? Can common goals for the future be discerned? What guiding principles emerge for Asian ecumenism? Is it really worthwhile to meet for a discussion of ecumenical topics — if we consider "ecumenism" only in the traditional sense? What special contribution can Asian Jesuits/Jesuits in Asia render, in keeping

with their own traditions and resources, to ecumenism in Asia?

These and similar questions spurred the participants to think seriously about our own responsibilities to the Church, to Asia, and to the task of evangelization in the Asian context. The "Statement and Recommendations" that follow intend to give our answer to some of these problems. The "Statement" is fundamental. It catches in six paragraphs the thrust of the Congress:

- (1) Ecumenism in Asia must be understood and experienced within the larger context of evangelization in Asia.
- (2) While there is great diversity among the peoples of Asia, there is also a common reality that makes Asia different from other continents.
- (3) "Dialogue of life", springing from the concrete Asian context and directed to it, and the stress on *orthopraxis* are of great importance in our ecumenical endeavor.
- (4) Our concern for ecumenism has wider connotations in Asia than in Europe and America.
- (5) The dialogue is to take place both in the field of religion and of ideology.
- (6) Dialogue in the usual Western sense or dialogue with Asian religions and ideologies "is functional to the construction of the true human community in and through which the Kingdom of God becomes present in our midst."

The Recommendations offer concrete suggestions applying the guidelines of the Statement to the Asian situation. As such, they are of less transcendence than the ideas of the Statement, but they complement it. The reader may judge for himself whether the thrust of the Congress and the results presented may give at least an opportunity for reflection on matters that in the past have often been taken as a matter of course.

FINAL STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Statement

1. We, the delegates of the First Asian Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists, have gathered in Manila to share experiences and to reflect on the meaning and practice of ecumenism in Asia today. As we attempt to formulate in words the fruits of our meeting, we discover a striking convergence of the main themes which have emerged in this Congress with those of the First Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. The Bishops of Asia, addressing themselves to particular tasks which the proclamation of the Gospel in this part of the world demands in our times, called attention to three major concerns of evangelization, i.e., incarnation of the Gospel and the Christian life in the local Church, dialogue with the great religious traditions of Asia, and service to our peoples, especially the poor, through the promotion of justice. We have reached a consensus that these are the very same major concerns of ecumenism in Asia today. This causes us no surprise, for we believe that ecumenism in Asia should be understood and experienced within the larger context of evangelization in Asia, the bringing to birth of the reign of God in the heart of Asian man and woman.

2. This conference has brought us to a keener and clearer awareness of the great diversity of races, cultures, religious traditions, historical experiences and concrete problems which exists among the peoples of Asia. It has also made us conscious of Asia's common experience of brokenness, unfreedom, and blocked growth, resulting in massive poverty side-by-side with fabulous wealth, situations of domination, injustice and dependence, both intra-national and international. We have come to see at the same time that Asia as a whole with its internal variety and community is a different reality from Europe, Africa, and America.

3. We believe that ecumenical concern in the Asian context must give primacy to *dialogue of life*. Two things are meant by this:

a. Dialogue of life means in the first place that work for unity and accompanying theological reflection must spring from and be directed to concrete contexts and genuine Asian "human situations" at grassroots levels of local people, their needs, problems and possibilities. It is necessary to make sure that the dialogue has local roots in each place and group, each with its own particular culture. It means dialogue at the level of persons, dialogue not only of experts and clerics, but of men and women from all walks of life. This calls for fuller, deeper knowledge and understanding of the human reality of local situations, and a true grasp of the view of man and of community found there. It is only thus Asian Christianity can find its own identity and its own style of Christian living.

b. Secondly, dialogue of life means emphasis on *orthopraxis*, on the practice of unity and love and justice, in the conviction that the truth involved in theological differences will best be served by our growth in

charity. We transcend conceptual distinctions and doctrinal discussions, and seek to share experience of God and of life, of prayer, in mutual openness. This can open up for us opportunities for critical collaboration across denominational and ideological boundaries for the promotion of the Human. And this collaboration can lead to the discovery of God's spirit, active on behalf of man in places and movements in which our Christian tradition has not trained us to expect him.

4. We believe that concern for ecumenism has wider connotations in Asia than in Europe. Here it extends beyond Christian denominations with their theological and organizational (faith and order) pre-occupations, and reaches out to all the religious traditions of Asia. Dialogue with men of these religious and spiritual traditions is the central area of ecumenism in Asia. This conviction is based on the awareness of difference in Asian historical experience. The divisions within Christianity have neither roots nor context in the history of Asian peoples. They are imported realities and have little meaning for the believing peoples, especially with the disappearance of ancient hostilities between the churches in which the divisions originated. Asian ecumenism therefore consists primarily in dialogue with the millions of men and women of faith in the various traditions of Asia, among whom we live.

5. We have come to see the necessity of dialogue, across all religious and ideological lines, in the shape of a common struggle for man, for the liberation of the masses, for the construction of a just and fraternal, humane and participative society; and therefore for conscientization and cultural change in order to motivate people for action to overcome alienation and the unconscious acceptance of dependence and value-sets which belong to systems of oppression. We get involved in justice-issues of every kind in collaboration with all who are concerned for the quality of human relationships and structures, and with social, political and economic realities in which the human and the spiritual are realized. We believe it necessary in particular to enter into critical dialogue both of thought and of life, with Asians who follow Marxist ideology in its various forms, which is increasing daily in importance on the Asian scene. We are convinced that unity envisaged by our Lord and gifted and commanded in the Eucharist and in our Trinitarian Faith has social, political and economic dimensions and consequences, and that the promotion of justice and human freedom is part of our service to the coming Kingdom of God. Struggle for liberation and for justice together with all who are concerned and committed is sure to enable us to realize more concretely than we have realized till now these demands and dimensions of the Gospel of Jesus.

6. We hold that "ecumenism" understood in the usual Western sense as directed to Christian denominations, and faith and order concerns, is functional to the dialogue of life, and to dialogue with men of various religious traditions, and especially to the struggle for a just and authentically free and human social order. Even the dialogue with religions

is functional to the construction of the true human community in and through which the Kingdom of God becomes present in our midst.

II. Recommendations

Among the many practical suggestions voiced by the participants of the FACJE, the following have been accepted by the General Assembly as recommendations for the Jesuit ministry in Asia.

1. To the Jesuits working in the ecumenical field we recommend that they be aware of the characteristic features which determine the ecumenical work in Asia, such as:

- a. the complex nature of the Asian reality;
- b. the strong sense of belonging to a community and sharing in a common human experience;
- c. the importance of the dialogue at the "grass roots level";
- d. the importance given to spiritual experience, and to prayer, poverty and "homeless existence" as ways leading to it;
- e. the necessity of close collaboration within the local church;
- f. the need of integrating the service to faith with the promotion of justice according to the 32nd General Congregation.

2. Ecumenism as described in the preceding section of this text (I) is not a field of activity for a few specialists, but should characterize the ministry of all Jesuits working in Asia. There is a special need to develop this attitude in educational work, the formation of clergy and religious, the use of mass media, the Spiritual Exercises.

3. Bible study and translation is a key area for ecumenical collaboration.

4. The Congress recommends that a group of Jesuit theologians meet together for a common study of the great religious traditions of Asia within the history of salvation, and of the relation between the ecumenical dialogue and the wider dialogue.

5. The Congress suggests that the Cardinal Bea Institute serve as the clearing house for the ecumenical work of the Society in Asia.

6. In the ecumenical endeavor of the Society in Asia, the Jesuits in West Asia should be encouraged to participate, so that the rich complexity of the Asian reality may be more fully taken into account.

7. For the dialogue with ideologies in Asia, especially with various forms of Marxism, collaboration is recommended with the Delegation for Chinese Studies.

8. In the formation of Ours in Asia, especially for philosophical and theological reflection, definite and marked emphasis should be on fuller

knowledge and deeper understanding of Asian realities and the humanistic and religious traditions of our peoples.

9. There is need of more extensive and intensive "conscientization" of Jesuits in Asia with regard to a *renewed* understanding of the tasks of ecumenism in our countries in this part of the world. (We have tried to grasp and formulate for ourselves as well as for them what this renewed understanding is, in the course of this Congress.)