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For a synodal Church  
communion | participation | mission

# CONTINENTAL STAGE REPORT

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"Enlarge the space of your tent" (Is 54:2)

## INTRODUCTION

We, the clergy, religious and laity in the Diocese of Penang have participated in reflecting on the Document for the Continental Stage. We met in three stages:

1. The clergy of the Diocese of Penang
2. The head of ministries and their core team members.
3. The representative of the deanery consisting of priests, religious and lay people.

We went through the document and answered all three questions. It was done in the spirit of prayer, using the spiritual conversion method.

The process used were: listening, dialogue, discernment & reflection.

## OUTCOMES FROM EACH QUESTION

### Question 1

*After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?*

#### **Strong Asian family values and culture**

Asians are viewed to have a tendency to be competitive economically and in education. Though some families are economically challenged they do have strong family bonds. These bonds can help a child to be more grounded in faith. In globalization, the challenge for everyone is to preserve the good values or culture while being opened to changes to poor practices that hinders family bonds. Asians are closed minded in some issues of cultural differences. Some communities have very strong cultural identity and are slower to accept changes. Are we able to accept and celebrate the diversity and still have togetherness?

#### **Sometimes it is a one-way Listening**

It is typical in Asia, for parents, elders or superiors to dictate a certain expectation, with a lack of communication or consultation. This can lead to unseen tensions and occasionally deep resentment that manifests itself years later when parents or elders are abandoned in homes for the aged. In other cases, superiors may impose or make hurtful comments due to lack of appreciation of cultural differences and a personal difference in background.

#### **Need to listen**

“The Synodal process is a beautiful experience.”, says those who have undergone the experience. What about the many that has avoided such exercises? There are diverse Asian perspectives on the need to listen empathetically. Sometimes, the many years of Asian superiority of parents, fathers or men (and women) can be a hindrance to create a humble and opened listening environment.

## **Poverty**

In many parts of Asia, poverty can be a cause of broken families and quitting the faith. It can also be a situation where religious groups can take advantage of the situation to propagate a certain faith. The church is aware of the need to assist the poor and the suffering. We are challenged to respect and treat them as persons, and provide assistance as a community without discrimination. It is a church responsibility, that is not limited to the season of Lent. Fundamental humanity, looking after everyone without discrimination. Humanity can be nurtured through mission work with oneness (unity) and inclusiveness. Food fellowships has gone a long way in helping restore the dignity of the poor.

## **Migration and the Social Consequences**

Migration is now a global norm, (no longer just local). An entire family or a member of a family may be sent far away for education or for work opportunities. In Asia, people migrate from poor countries to rich countries for better prospects. Some from rich countries migrate to a moderate country to improve their lifestyle from better exchange rates. Some migrate due to reasons of politics and religious extremism.

Living in a new environment, migrants have to adapt and their values and faith are challenged. Couples may be separated by long distances to work and earn for the family. Family bonds are affected. Young people sent for further studies may meet others of different cultures and backgrounds. Mixed marriages are very much a norm and may lead to children being brought up in uncertain faith.

## **Faith, Free-thinkers and Atheists**

Children are brought up in the faith. But stepping out in the world, they are surrounded by worldly influences, and temptations of being a free-thinker (and atheism), where a relationship with God becomes secondary. Youths are looking after their own needs, to build a stable future for themselves and find a life-partner. Some churches are looking after these young adults. But it is a challenge to attract them to maintain this personal relationship with God and one another. The church somehow can't fulfill some of their needs. Church relevance is diminishing gradually in Asian churches. The faith of the young people can be robbed. Social media influence is extremely strong.

### **Social Acceptance at All Levels**

There is a strong stirring of the Holy Spirit to call the faithful to move into social acceptance of the marginalized, migrants, the different age groups, LGBTQ, minority communities, divorcees. The call is to welcome everyone especially those pushed aside, and even those who may live a life in conflict with the church, to reject sin but not the sinner. There are varying interpretations that need clarifications on the acceptance of these minority communities.

People rarely seek out help or to work to gain acceptance, but when they are approached in sincerity, it can go a long way in building real relationships.

Young adults have voiced lack of acceptance and respect by others who are older.

There is a strong continued outcry of women discrimination at all levels of society in Asia. Women suppressed, housewives/divorcees discriminated, lack of leadership and career opportunities.

There is a severe lack of understanding and empathy from men, and women harbor a very deep dissatisfaction that goes unheard. The hierarchy is somewhat historically built on men.

It is also a difficult challenge to give fair attention to diverse cultures/languages of minorities. There is also a call to welcome and revere all accepted religious vocations.

### **Church Evangelism**

The Asian churches appear to have moved to being inward-looking. It is difficult to empower young people to take part in active mission, when they step out to the world to build their future. Are there programs to train the young people in catechism to evangelize or reaching out to the lost?

Is the church playing its role as a field hospital?

The laity and the priest may work together to provide a personal touch to reach out to the marginalized, building bridges and relationships.

### **Church Hierarchy**

The Asian culture considers it rude to speak out against a superior. In some cases, the church hierarchy stifles the community. Are we able to question the authority of the church? To move in a synodal way requires a mutual respect between the laity and the clergy, neither superior to the other. Different parishes/diocese may practice different rules. Some have voiced that there are many words but fear that very little action will

be put to implement a synodal church. Many a times, what is practiced is different from what is preached.

### **Ecumenism**

Asia has multi-diversified religions. Are there opportunities for interactions and co-operations with other churches and even other religious bodies for a common good?

### **Final Notes**

Some have expressed that the whole synodal exercise is reflecting Hope - and it is a wakeup call.

Christ went through suffering, death and ultimately, resurrection.

Everyone is wounded and are showing solidarity, there is hope for a church revival.

## **Question 2**

*After having read and prayed with the DCS what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important to Asia? What are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?*

### **Listening and the challenges in a personal encounter**

Asians are generally good at listening to the government, leaders and the authorities as seen in the handling of pandemic lock-downs globally. However, the opposite can be said to be very rare and may be uncomfortable. Some have voiced out the need for training, or even a specialized ministry to learn and formulate guidelines and protocols in moving towards a listening community. How do we deal with empathetic listening and still remove natural feelings that may stem from personal grudges, prejudice, pride and selfish motivations? How do we accept everyone and still come to terms with conflicting values? Discrimination and being judgmental sometimes stems from instinctive survival and self-preservation and may be difficult to eliminate. There are some groups whose voices are not heard, and sadly, sometimes intentionally.

### **Inclusivity and being welcoming**

There is a strong call for the church and her members to be more inclusive, more accepting and more personal in engaging one another especially the marginalized. However, the church has been a rigid institution with her members growing up in a cold and passive environment. To transform into a warm and active community is a complete turnaround. Where and how do we start? Are Asians ready to move away from pews and kneelers, and go beyond nodding and offering a ‘sign of peace’? We may have a big tent but the lack of inclusiveness is deeply founded in culture. The young may readily embrace change, but are there others who may feel great discomfort in a shift from the norms?

### **Liturgy and the need to change**

There is a strong consensus that the liturgies of the church need to change and evolve. The church has developed into a very liturgical-oriented community. The liturgy in many aspects, is beautiful, Christ-centered and profound, uniform and unites, but its rigidity has led to the formation of a rigid community. People fit into the liturgy through the choir, altar servers, reader, ministers etc. However, there is a large community left

out from active participation. People have now grown contented to be passive in mass. There is a strong call for a liturgy that remains Christ-centered and orientates around people, and some room for spontaneity. Some recurring suggestions are to go back to the basics of worship (in spirit and in truth) and simplicity, freedom of expression in worship, spontaneous prayers centered to people's needs, time for testimonies and less liturgical restrictions.

### **Family and community centered Liturgy**

The family is the basic church unit forming the general community. There are many age groups, with different mindsets and needs. The liturgical celebrations and homilies lack focus groups to address the needs and engage the various age groups effectively. Parents lack engagement in parenting. The elderly lack the attention and comfort they seek. The youths face a demanding secular world with very little support from the church. Often the church celebrations come and go with very little emphasis on the mental and emotional well-being of the people. Should the liturgical structure be revamped to foster listening or should a separate platform be established to enable a more personal touch?

The mass is the ultimate form of worship. The breaking of the word and the breaking of the body, the sanctity, the sacredness of the Eucharist cannot be diluted nor taken lightly simply as tradition or ritual. The solemnness in mass especially during the consecration acknowledges these points. Some have expressed their intimate encounter with Christ during the mass. Will an attempt to change the liturgical practices reduce the importance or reverence for the word and the Eucharist? Will the emphasis of listening to one another lead to a compromise in listening to God?



### **Dismantling the Hierarchy**

The church through the centuries is seen by many as a structured institution, that dispenses rewards and punishments, sometimes lacking in compassion. Some have expressed the institution instills fear and is somewhat oppressive. The church is now called to move towards compassion, understanding, empathy and building relationships, to move from being religious to being spiritual, to reduce structure and hierarchy that creates distance. It is notable that in many parts of Asia where people lack the opportunity to celebrate the mass for various reasons, some communities continue to thrive as a church rooted in sharing and relationships. The message flows not just from priests to the congregation but from persons in the community through actions and testimonies.

In the direction to reduce the hierarchy, how will this change the roles and responsibilities of the priests towards the congregation? What are the new expectations on the laity?

### **Secular life and reality**

The economic development and transformation across Asia is phenomenal. Likewise the economic demands, ambitions, lifestyles and consumerism have evolved rapidly. Parenting, culture and upbringing of children have changed. A strong resounding message echoes through Asian families and societies: Build a future grounded in education and establish a career with a stable livelihood, while church becomes secondary. How does the church address the reality of this mindset?

In a path where success is defined by secular standards, the youth have very little time for church, community, listening or other spiritual activities. Young parents struggle to cope with rising costs of living and bringing up children. How does the church provide support to their needs and be more inclusive towards the young adults, single or married, in the limited time they have, without over-burdening their existing commitments? Do we accept these realities as the norm in Asian societies or is there a need to address serious issues in work-life balance?

Some among the older generation, having gone through these realities, have reflected and expressed the emptiness they felt in pursuing secular ambitions. Some have opted for early retirement from the cruel business world that strongly conflicted with values they grew up with. Others are still trapped in these realities due to ever-diversified

financial commitments. In Asia, where children are still committed to religion and are faithful to catechism, is the church actively preparing the children for the harsh realities of the secular world and grounding them in firm experience and relationship with God to face these realities?

For those who have retired and those who have left the rat-race, how do we increase their participation and contributions to the community?

### **Revival and transformation**

The church in Asia aspires for spirit-filled communities, deeply rooted in Christ and the word, filled with excitement and fire to mission and evangelism. But yet we lack the fundamentals for building such communities. We face a wounded church, and often individuals are left to tend to their own wounds (mental and emotional) and shoulder on the mission of Christ. Does the church make time to address these wounds? The many liturgical celebrations of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost bring about very little transformation into the lives of the community. Some have called for a change in the liturgical formalities to move from a celebration of remembrance to a celebration of genuine experience of healing, compassion, reconciliation, the overwhelming love of God, that leads to a real transformation and empowerment of the people of God. Is the church doing enough to allow the Holy Spirit to restore and transform the people? Is the current liturgy ensnared into a ritual that made people distant, disconnected and unable to appreciate the mass?

### **Evangelization and Mission**

Evangelization becomes spontaneous and a lifestyle when people are convinced and transformed by the Holy Spirit. Mission goes beyond the boundary of church organization, and it is lacking. Reaching out is practiced inconsistently and the people are unfamiliar with the acts of mission and evangelization. Asia has large diversified communities of different religions. Do Asian Catholics understand the expectations and boundaries of evangelization, where multi-religious communities exist? Is mission compromised by being respectful to what others choose to believe in? What is the line that permits the sharing of faith and not being disrespectful to someone with a different religion?

People are opened to works of mercy but will feel fear or intimidated by works of evangelization.

### **Question 3**

*Looking at what emerges from the questions previously, what are the priorities, recurring themes, and calls to action that can be shared with other local churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?*

#### **Listening**

The strongest theme that resonates through the church is ‘listening’ to one another. The church as a whole has appeared to have neglected this fundamental necessity. The church has been prompted to practice more inclusivity and accompaniment, building a low and wide tent that shelters many and excludes none. Let us build meaningful and memorable relationships. The church therefore needs to priorities the development of a working model or structure that promotes a listening culture, with guidelines or protocols that may evolve with experience and time.

#### **Family**

Families in crisis or struggling in relationships are often hidden from sight, revealed only to the few genuine friends. The cries for help are often silent. This crisis only comes to sight when the fragile family unit crumbles. There are multitudes of diverse reasons for strained relationships in families. The church is prompted to not forsake these hidden dangers in the community and to constantly address love, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing of relationships.

#### **Poverty**

A large number of people in Asia within and outside the church are experiencing various forms of poverty. The church is asked to priorities the issue of poverty at all levels, be it material, emotional, spiritual or knowledge. Material poverty has been identified as a major strain to relationships and a major cause of broken families, vices and crime, significantly affecting the youth and children.

#### **Hierarchy**

Along the radical call to reduce the hierarchy in the church, how will this change the roles and responsibilities of the priests towards the congregation? What are the new expectations on the laity?

A time of reflection and discernment will be needed to understand and come into terms with co-responsibility and greater participation of the laity.

### **Liturgy**

Does the liturgy need to change to enable greater participation and spontaneity? How do we incorporate the essence of encountering God, healing of brokenness, pain and resentment and foster reconciliation in a more personal way? Is the liturgy open to such changes? Under a new model of a wide tent, do the physical structure and seating arrangements of existing churches hinder the concept of a listening and inclusive church?

### **Revival**

The people are hungry for a taste of the goodness of the Lord. Should the church provide a compulsory formative retreat that provides time for worship and addresses healing, reconciliation, participation and mission? Will such retreats help to bring about transformations in the community and enhance the appreciation and experience of the mass? Should each diocese be equipped with a team that is trained and specialized in running such retreats at a frequency deemed suitable for the diocese?

### **Evangelization**

True evangelization is spontaneous and is a way of life. A team that collaborates and shares in a common goal of evangelization is far more effective than individual effort. Are there opportunities in social mission be it in school, orphanages, home for the aged, hospitals or home visits that can make God's presence known? How can the church be mobilized to play its role in mission and outreach to those in need?

## **BRIEF SUMMARY**

### **Listening**

Listening has been discerned as the first most essential theme. We need listening at every level. We need to reform a structure that empowers listening and dialogue, consultation, reflection.

### **Participation**

Participation in listening and ministries are limited due to personal commitments, work and economic needs.

### **Liturgy Transformation**

There is a call for the liturgy to be open to changes, to be localised, family-oriented and more flexible for individual expressions. Can the liturgy promote reconciliation and healing of family relationships and with one another? The liturgy can be reformed incorporating music for promoting revival and be spirit-filled to cater for the young people. Evangelism becomes spontaneous and natural for those touched in a personal way by God.

### **Inclusivity**

We need to restructure a church that has a lower tent but broader base. We need to focus on the pastoral process rather than on the end product. Women and youth need to be empowered, and their opinions heard.

### **Clericalism and Hierarchy**

There is a call for co-responsibility, a collaboration between the laity and the clergy, and the restitution of their baptismal dignity, reducing the rigid hierarchy and promote consultation. The current structure makes people passive. The church is viewed as an institution that dispenses rewards and punishments (religious) rather than compassion(spiritual).

### **Poverty**

The church is called to address all forms of poverty, be it material, physical, intellectual or spiritual, and to give preferential treatment in this area.

### **Lack of Social Mission**

We need to re-establish social missions, to retain the relevance of the church. We are aware of the challenges of time-constraints and restrictions in regulations and finance.

Migration has become a norm, from students to workers, and the church should seriously address the challenges of migrants and provide a place to belong.

Youths are lacking a personal encounter with God, and facing the world, they can be robbed off their faith. Social media influence is extremely strong.

### **Ecumenism**

Asia has multi-diversified religions. Are there opportunities for interactions, dialog and co-operations with other churches and other religions for a common good?