



EMBARGO UNTIL SPEECH DELIVERED

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Testimony

“TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES”

THE ASIAN JOURNEY INTO SYNODAL LEADERSHIP

Estela P. Padilla,
FABC-OTC

The title of our last module B3 is: Participation, Governance, Authority which can be collectively incorporated into the term ‘leadership’. I wish to share how our Asian synodal journey helped me learn about synodal leadership as a lay woman. I have three points to share in the ten minutes given to me: 1) authority is rooted in respect; 2) governance means being led by the Spirit; and 3) participation is a prophetic task.

The Asian Synod Teams: Authority rooted in Respect

Our practice of taking off our shoes in entering homes and temples shows a deep respect for the people whose lives we are entering into (“the Divine in me greets the divine in you”). A Singaporean woman, in one of the consultations, a single parent with two kids, told us it pains her so much when she hears church people call them a ‘broken’ family. She feels she has brought up her two kids to be wholesome, and she herself feels fulfilled. Why call them ‘broken’? After I heard her, I do not use that word anymore. So, we take off our shoes, showing deep respect, not just listening but listening that converts us, because this person before us has the authority of the baptised, a member of the very body of Christ.

I experienced also such deep respect in the Asian teams I belonged to: the Core Team which planned the synodal assembly and the Discernment Team which wrote the synodal report - composed of the bishops (now cardinals), two priests, three men religious, 1 woman religious, one lay man and one lay woman (myself). You know in Asia we have this culture of silence, perhaps belonging to the minority (Christians are only 1-3% of the population), we want to fade in the background. So as a minority, the sole lay woman member of the team, I never felt discriminated against or without a voice. I have always felt listened to. Moreover, the bishops are also specifically concerned about my mother, who was hospitalised several times in the course of our synodal preparations. Always asking about her, I realised they were listening to me not just as a theologian but as a human being. I also remember when we were reading the national reports in preparation for the Continental Draft report, we spent an hour of silence

every morning, praying that we could really listen to the voices of the country reports, especially of the silent cries contained between the lines. These country reports have the authority of the baptised community, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and we are called to remove our shoes.

The Asian Synodal Assembly: Governance means being Led by the Spirit

In one of the synodal consultations, an Indian bishop said: “I have a problem with the Holy Spirit. I doubt if the Holy Spirit can really lead the church. We were full of Spirit after Vatican II” yet sixty years later, the Church is on its lowest credibility standing due to sexual and other forms of abuse, etc. This was also my biggest question at the very start of the synodal journey. Diversity describes Asia: from Hong Kong to Bangladesh, from Kyrgyzstan to Thailand, with 2,300 languages spoken (which really means a 1000 cultures), with different political systems operating, and so on – the diversity in Asia is mind-boggling! Can the Spirit really lead in such a diverse continent?

My biggest learning in this Synod is communal discernment. In our Asian Assembly, we sat in small sharing groups (each one composed of bishop/clerics, religious and laypeople from different countries too). We have employed this two-minute silence to listen deeply to what the Spirit is telling us after every round of sharing; or even after every main input at the plenary. All throughout the synodal assembly, we enter a longer silence (from 20 minutes to one hour) when we have to make decisions as a community. When the camera pans across the crowd, I really see people in deep silence. We were getting really good at these silences. I remember when we decided to have a good drink after the Assembly, after the first sip – an Indonesian church leader said: “Wait! Two-minute silence before we take the next sip!” I realised that decision making, an important governance function, can only give glory to God when we go through and grow into a communal spiritual discernment process. To walk barefoot in front of the Spirit is to be radically open in sensing the will of God for our times.

The Asian Synodal Report: Participation as a Prophetic Task

What does it mean to walk barefoot as a prophet? It means to be grounded in the realities of our situation in Asia. To be barefoot means to be one with the poorest and with the earth. One priest asked me why is our report so full of negative things happening in the Church? Where is the good news there? I told him, the good news was the honesty in facing all the woundedness of our world and our failure of bearing witness to the Good News in the midst of poverty, violence brought by terrorism and political oppression, etc, and these, adding to the pain of clericalism and hierarchical leadership. I actually found these negative comments in the Church liberating because as Asians, we don't like conflicts; we always seek harmony. I remember Sr. Nathalie telling us: “You are discussing the tensions without tension!”. Harmony is of course positive except when it hinders us from naming what is wrong.

Walking barefoot together, the synodal journey – from small communities to the parish, diocesan, national and Continental levels - was a participatory process of being a prophetic community. In our Final Asian Synodal Report, we proclaimed who we are as church: reading the signs of the times and heeding the call of God to be bridges of peace and become peace

builders, to continue to dialogue with the poor, religions, and cultures, to entrust the young and women with important leadership roles, and to care especially for migrants and refugees, among other things.

The FABC as a LEADERSHIP BODY

The full synodal report was submitted to the Central Committee (all the bishop presidents of all the member countries of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences or FABC) and from their additional discernment, the report was submitted to the General Secretariat in Rome. As a special leadership body, I have noted three learnings on the role of FABC arising from our synodal experience:

- 1) Formerly perceived as a support group among bishops to converse and to accompany one another in solidarity, now I see FABC as a decision-making body. In the relationship between the universal and the local church, this regional conference has a specific role as a synodal network of local churches. What is this specific role? Moreover, how much authority does it have among the particular churches in this network?
- 2) For FABC, inculturation is the self-realisation of the local church. FABC is a foremost agent of inculturation in its leadership of the synodal process. With the active participation of the local churches, it has proclaimed who we are and how are to live as churches in Asia, in the midst of our deepest pains and noblest hopes, in dialogue with the living Word and our living cultures.
- 3) The FABC synodal process is enriching the Magisterium or the magisterial tradition of the Church. Being prophetic does not just mean speaking with *parrhesia*, but learning by doing.

When I woke up this morning, I asked the Holy Spirit “how are we doing, dear Holy Spirit?”. I was brought to *Prov.* 8, esp. verses 30-31. In this verse about the creation of the world, Wisdom – the Spirit of God - was hovering over the world, delighted to be with God and with humanity. I know that Wisdom is walking with us here at the Synod Hall. Just look for the barefoot one! Thank you!