

Religious men and women to shape Asian Church Asia

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Asian religious men and women gather in Manila for a celebration. (Photo by Joe Torres)

At a gathering of religious people in Freising, Germany, early last month, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, highlighted that the "Lord's call to bring peace and mercy" is "urgent and significant" in today's world.

Working for peace and sowing the seeds of mercy is a call to all Christians, especially for those who have left the comforts of their homes "to bring the light of the Gospel and the solidarity of the church to the ends of the earth."

Cardinal Parolin was referring to religious missionaries, men and women, who are scattered all over the world to bring the Good News to all.

The cardinal's message reflects Pope Francis' statements — through apostolic letters, books, and homilies — that have radical implications to the life and mission of every religious person, especially in Asia.

We know that religious men and women have a very specific role in shaping the church, but why such particular emphasis on the Church of Asia?

Father Antonio Pernia, former superior-general of the Society of the Divine Word, said that at the turn of the millennium, the "center of gravity" of the Catholic Church has shifted from the "Global North" to the "Global South," meaning Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

In 1900, only 15 percent of the Catholic population lived in the southern hemisphere, but by the year 2000 the figure stood at 67 percent, or two-thirds of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics. By 2050, the southern share of the Catholic population is projected to be at 75 percent.

Asia, although very rich in culture and religions, is however being challenged by widespread poverty affecting the majority of its people.

Asia is also home to a good number of totalitarian and dictatorial governments, finding their roots in the Asian patriarchal society that is embedded in its cultural and religious subconscious. This phenomenon gives rationalization to the reality of violence co-existing with the love for harmony and peace that characterizes Asian people.

It is from this historical and social context that the new Catholic Church according to the vision of Pope Francis would come from. And it is from this same "soil" that religious people are nurtured to help shape the Church of Asia.

The factors that could help Asian religious men and women influence and shape the making of a more merciful church are, however, plenty.

First, the experience of historical poverty will always be part of their "eternal source" to always give preferential option for the poor in proclaiming the joy of the Gospel.

Not only that, the religious who have embraced the poor church as part of their ecclesial identity, will evangelize people from the perspective of the poor and will create an Asian church from the same context.

Second, from the vantage point of the poor, the Asian religious will easily find home in the words of Pope Francis who said "For the church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one."

"God shows the poor 'his first mercy'.... This is why I want a church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they share the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them," the pontiff wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, his apostolic exhortation on "the church's primary mission of evangelization in the modern world."

"The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the center of the church's pilgrim way," he added.

Religious people in the Catholic Church have been historically and traditionally following the Gospel to its extreme radicalism.

St. Francis of Assisi is an exemplar in restoring back the true face of the Christian faith in all its originality, beauty, and simplicity by embracing lady poverty as the way to follow Christ.

The modern day religious woman and recently canonized saint, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, is another witness to the true nature of the church by giving her life and mission to the least, the last and the lost, not only of Indian society, but to all children of God, irrespective of color, culture and religion.

It is these kind of religious men and women, the like of St. Francis and St. Teresa of Calcutta, who will truly shape an authentic Asian church of the future.

Asian religious do have the "right soil" where they can nourish the building of a new church according to the vision of Pope Francis, where the mercy of God will become its very own signature.

Bonifacio Tago Jr. is vice president for academic programs and professor of philosophy at Good Samaritan Colleges in Cabanatuan City, Philippines. He is currently taking up a doctorate degree in Theology in Consecrated Life at the Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia.

Bonifacio Tago Jr., UCAN Manila