ECCLESIA OF WOMEN IN ASIA

GATHERING THE VOICES OF THE SILENCED

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Church in Asia: Following the 'Mystery' Model or Imitating the 'Mastery' Model?

Clemens Mendonca *

The Problematic
In presenting Pope John Paul II’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (EA) to the Bishops of Asia, Cardinal Paul Shan pointed out that "the big question presently confronting us, given the religious and cultural context of Asia, is not why we should proclaim the Good News of Christ's Salvation but HOW" (EA 29).1 EA also speaks of a "new evangelization" (EA 29). This new evangelization, according to Cardinal Darmaatmadja, concerns the Churches in Asia taking on the "face of Asia" so that it responds to the specific needs of Asia and becomes more meaningful for Asian society, particularly for the poor and the downtrodden.2 In view of this he proposes a "new way of being Church in Asia."3 This essay asks: how can the Church in Asia be Asian? It calls for a radical change, a *metanoia* (a going beyond *noein*, beyond thinking and reasoning to *being*) on the part of the Asian Church.

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1'Clemens Mendonca is Executive Director of the Institute for the Study of Religion, Pune, India. She has a Ph.D. degree in Theology from Tubingen University, Germany.


3Ibid.
There are two principles operative in the functioning of our world: the principle of making and mastering (Mastery approach) and the principle of listening-and-discovering (Mystery approach).\(^4\) "Making" refers to action, production, manipulation, possession, imitation, etc. "Listening" refers to openness, understanding, receptivity, sensitivity, discovery, response, etc. These two principles are also embodied in the functioning of the human person. A human being is primarily a listening, receiving and open being. According to Raimon Panikkar it is "...the Mystery of the Word which makes Man\(^5\) aware that he is primarily a spoken rather than a speaking reality, a spoken rather than a speaking Word, a receiver rather than a giver, created rather than creator."\(^6\) But what is predominantly operative in history is the making principle. Making is the horizon that is common both to the West and the rest of the entire world.

**The Model of Mastery**

Our world and our values are constructed on the model of making. The paradigm of making comprises manipulating and producing, supported by reason and the will to power. Reason is the sole arbiter of what is right and wrong. Our reliance is solely on human reason and human capability. Not surprisingly, individualism is one of the devastating results of modernity.\(^7\) Man is the measure of all things, the master of the universe, and the crown of creation. Among the attitudes inherent in this way of thinking are: deep-rooted blindness, self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, overconfidence (hybris), one-sidedness, domination, and control. Our fears, loneliness, insecurity,

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\(^5\) Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1982, footnote 1, ix. Panikkar employs the word Man with a capital letter for 'human being'. In this usage Man refers to human being in its totality. It also implies that "Man is an irreducible reality standing side by side- with all the necessary ontological distinctions - with God and the world."
mistrust, prejudices, hatred, revenge, violence, oppression, etc., originate here. With this in mind, Raimon Panikkar argues that "Reason is not the whole of Logos; Logos is not the whole of Man; Man is not the whole of Being."²

This model is the backbone of the patriarchal system. It affects the entire world and our approach to it. It has led to all kinds of dehumanization (women, children and the poor are the special victims here), instrumentalization of the world (treating the earth merely as an object) and ignorance and blindness in our understanding of God (the emerging problems of religious fundamentalism, absolutism, etc.). A glance at the situation of our world today helps one understand the deleterious effects of this model on the world (environment) and on humanity.

Effects of the Mastery Model in the World

1. Globalization and Militarization

Globalization is the new form of colonization today. It has become instrumental in creating a system of militarization and is accelerating the already existing problem of marginalization of peoples. As a result, the contemporary world is deformed into a militarized zone with a huge arsenal of weaponry. The effects are seen in the growing violence of our times (even among children) on the one hand and in the inventions of new and more sophisticated weapons of mass destruction on the other. There is competition between these two ideologies. Our younger generations are fed on a war-culture that is built on hatred and revenge. Over and above this, the world stands under the threat of a nuclear holocaust!

2. Marginalization

If globalization is a system supported by militarization, then marginalization is its natural outcome. It is a symbol of human degradation and fragmentation. Marginalization is rooted in and founded on poverty and injustice.

3. **Environment**

The pollution of vital elements such as air, water and soil is an agent of death both to humanity and the earth. The planet is constantly sending us danger signals such as global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer and drastic climatic changes all over the world resulting in desertification, deforestation, floods, droughts, etc.

4. **Political, Social and Economic Systems**

Our political, social and economic systems are becoming more and more corrupt, egoistic, competitive and power hungry. Democracy, equality, justice, etc., have become mere ideologies. Society has a place mostly for the rich, powerful and beautiful. The poor live a sub-human life.

5. **Religions**

Religions are meant to show the way to peace and happiness and discovery of meaning in life. But today there is a crisis in this search for meaning. Religions are often politicized and used as a means to acquire power. Often they silently side with the rich and the powerful and have become a major hindrance to peaceful, pluralistic living. Far from being liberative and liberating, they are gradually becoming systems and ideologies that bind people even more intensely. There is a tendency to absolutize one's own religious tradition. A few examples of this are: a literal understanding of 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus' of Christianity, the 'Hindutva' ideology of Hindu fundamentalists and 'Sharia -Islamisation' in Islamic countries. Absolutism has given rise to religious fundamentalism and communalism. The outcome is ongoing human carnage, destruction of life and property and above all the nurturing and perpetuating of revenge and hatred for one another's traditions.

**Effects of the Mastery Model in the Church**

The Church is not an exception here, as it too, functions and speaks the same language as the contemporary world. However well
meaning the church may be, its approach to reality is one-sided. This can be seen from the following examples:

1. **Rigid Hierarchical Structures**

The hierarchical Church is based on a patriarchal model, like all the social systems of today. All kinds of one-sidedness in the Church originate from this system. This is especially clear with regard to women. *Mater Ecclesia* has been turned into *Meretrix Ecclesia* i.e., at the disposal of men. Women and laity can still be found on the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder.

2. **Rigid Discipleship**

Quite often "dogmatic" discipleship is given more importance in the Church. Accordingly, a disciple is the one who follows the letter of the law and who fulfills all the external requirements. There is little room for spontaneity and creativity. Accidentals take priority over essentials. The tendency is to hold on to the letter of the law without listening to the Spirit who animates it.

3. **Stress on Other-worldly Spirituality**

The stress is still on an 'other-worldly' and one-sided spirituality, that is, the denial of body, a negative attitude to the world, etc. Creativity, experience, spontaneity, flexibility, life and growth are often side-lined. It is a spirituality that rigidly holds on to the letter of the law and is suspicious of whatever contributes to fullness of life through modern myths or symbols. A spirituality that is not down to earth does not touch our lives.

4. **Over-stress on Biological Purity**

This refers particularly to the state of women in the Church. In our culture and society virginity and motherhood have become agents of death instead of being life-giving factors. This is due to the stress on biological virginity and objectified motherhood. Theological virginity (total openness to God) and holistic motherhood are yet to be given importance. The Church still holds on to the notion of an idealistic biological purity and refuses to open herself to the changing times with regard to women's rightful place and function in the
Church.

Traditions, hierarchy, structures and dogmas are important but they should not be absolutized since reason, and not the Spirit of God, is primarily active in them. They should be means of arriving at the heart of a spirituality that is people-oriented. To realize this, the Church needs to discover another model of functioning in the world and so respond to contemporary problems in a holistic way.

The Model of Listening (Mystery Model)

Rationality is indispensable for the smooth functioning of the world. But it is not enough. There is another principle, namely, that of listening that leads to awareness and discovery. Listening presupposes silence and silence opens one to the working of the Spirit. It makes space for others. Listening is not passive but involves a passionate activity or doing. This "doing" emerges as a genuine response and not as manipulation. Here the approach to reality is through understanding, contemplation, receptivity and harmony. The attitude is one of readiness to listen, openness and gratitude. This corrective model can be named the listening model - a model in which the Spirit is primarily at work.

Openness is a response because it is evoked by the One who is giving. It does not come from the one who is receiving. This human response emerges in contemplation, awareness or understanding as we open our hands to receive something or someone. For example, my eyes have to be open to see, ears to hear sound, mouth to receive food, the heart has to open up to receive friendships. Openness to a particular situation, to a particular invitation, etc., leads to new discovery, to glimpses of Mystery. Such a listening attitude can animate the Church and the world at large with a fresh sense of meaning.

Effects of the Listening Model in the World

The listening model is also active in the world. People are gradually becoming aware that the way the world presently functions will only lead to destruction and despair. This awareness is founded on
the realization that humans are inter-dependent beings and are part of the earth. Today there is a retrieval of the insight that the universe is sacred, that humans are a community and that, life becomes meaningful only when there is a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. This awareness of the problem is a great step forward. It can usher in a metamorphosis, a transformation of our whole being. In this regard significant efforts are seen all over the world as shown through the following examples:

All over the world there are people who are committed to the cause of human rights and the welfare of the world. This growing self-understanding is bringing the world together as a community. Nations are trying to come closer to one another in peace despite constant threats of war.

There is also increasing solidarity among nations. This again is a sign of humans coming together as a world community as in the United Nations Organization (UNO) and its other international agencies that work for peace and harmony among nations. There are other organizations that are committed to peace and justice like the International Red Cross Society, Amnesty International, as well as agencies that work for human rights and various other peace projects. Though these institutions often become victims in the hands of the super powers (mastery model) and have to struggle constantly to keep their goals focused, they are still symbolic of a new awareness that is leading humans towards the formation of a world community.

The same is also true with regard to religious traditions. According to Murray Rogers, the advent of the new millennium saw something like a "world consciousness" being born in our world.⁹ There are visible movements of openness now among many religious traditions that call for a broader understanding of one another's beliefs and traditions (encounter of religions, intrareligious and interreligious dialogues, etc.). All these struggles may be fragile but they are expressions of the listening model.

Effects of the Listening Model in the Church

From the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has gradually opened itself up in this direction. Definitely there is some openness in the attitude of the Church with regard to structures, hierarchy, collegiality, priesthood, laity, critical interpretation of the Scriptures, interreligious dialogue, liturgy, etc. For example, the awareness that Dialogue is a new way of being the Church\(^{10}\) is indeed a major step in the life of the Church towards an encounter of religions. Although the Church is still facing enormous obstacles in this area there is still a gradual attitudinal change with regard to other religions.

All these efforts though commendable are not enough. They cannot be compared to the magnitude of the problems that need to be faced. We need to capture these positive moments and invite the Spirit to guide us in this venture of rebuilding our world through understanding. The listening model needs to become part of our being and consciousness, so that we function not merely as rational beings but also as beings that first listen to the Word of God and respond to it. Here the Blessed Virgin Mary is the model par excellence.

Mary as an Embodiment of the Listening Model

The Church, if it is to be genuine, has to be like Mary: virgin, disciple and mother. To understand all three, it is necessary to recall Jesus' hermeneutic principle: "My mother and my brethren are those who hear the Word of God and do it" (Lk 8: 21). "Doing" is the result of listening (hearing the Word of God) i.e., doing the will of God, responding to the Word, conceiving and bearing fruit. Mary exemplifies both of these attitudes of listening and responding (doing). She is Virgin-Disciple-Mother.

Virginity, discipleship and motherhood refer to listening, following and bringing forth fruit. These three metaphors -virginity (listening, total openness), discipleship (following) and

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motherhood (bearing fruit) - constitute one 'spiritual' process in that the first (listening - openness) leads to the second (following) and both lead to the third (bringing forth). Mary embodies this process beautifully.

As virgin, Mary is fully open to God and to God's Spirit. In faith she listens and responds to God's Word (Lk 1:26-37). The Word continues to dwell in all its vitality within her. She ponders the Word in her heart (Lk 2:41-52); she is a woman of deep contemplation. In silence she lives the Mystery of the Word that becomes incarnate in her (Lk 2:15-19). Deep contemplation of the Word releases God's power within her and her response is service. She calls herself the handmaid of the Lord (Lk 1:38-45).

As disciple, Mary follows (understands) her Son fully and that is why she follows him wholeheartedly with single-minded commitment. Thus she can say at Cana: "Do whatever he tells you!" (Jn 2:5). She meets the Gospel criterion of discipleship: a disciple is one who does God's will, who takes up one's cross and follows the Lord, who lives in deep communion/relationship with God. Mary is not only the handmaid of the Lord, she is also His follower, His intimate friend. She belongs to His household. She is part of His world (Mk 3:31-35).

Mary's motherhood comes about not through human intervention but through the action of the Spirit (Mt 1:18, Lk 1:35). She listens, conceives God's Word in her womb and enters into a unique relationship with God. When life becomes authentic, it also becomes fruitful. Mary's life of communion with God is a life that is fully offered to God and later becomes a co-offering with her Son at the foot of the Cross. It is there in the perfect gift of herself to God that Mary lives fully her motherhood (Jn 19:25-27). As a mother she gathers her children (Ecclesia) and becomes an authentic source of new life for the Church. In this sense, Mary is model of the Church.

**Church in Asia: Virgin, Disciple & Mother**

The Mission of the Asian Church will become meaningful only
when we have a better grasp of its Sitz im Leben. The church is a reality deeply rooted in this world and cannot exist in isolation. Given the contemporary global situation, today's 'world' needs to be understood in an intercultural perspective. One can no longer speak of cultures, religions, nations or continents in isolation for to speak of one global culture is to speak of a monoculture. Culture is meaningful only in an intercultural perspective. The same is true of religions. Religions take roots within their respective cultures and need to speak of religions from an interreligious context."11 This is equally true of nations and continents. We need to have a broader vision of collaboration with one another be it on cultural, religious, national or continental grounds.

The Church in Asia is also an interrelated reality. Its problems are part of the world's problems and vice versa. But because of its multi-religious and multi-cultural background, Asia has some specific areas of concern. We have already seen in a nutshell the problematic in a global context. We now turn to the specific Asian context which gives an inkling of how the mastery model is at work here too.

**Asian Context**

Asia is caught up in the mastery model. It has failed to listen to the Spirit and to the deep aspirations and spirituality embodied in its various religious traditions, cultures, and sages. The spirituality of Asia is profound, open, experiential and insightful. Interiority, contemplation, Yoga, Sadhana, silence, and tolerance are values familiar to her. But she has yielded to the temptation of sidelining all these natural treasures and had recourse to the Western model of mastery. The results have been devastating.

The Asian context comprises Asia's ethnic groups, cultures and languages, and the problems of political and socio-economic corruption, over-population, illiteracy, unjust wages and a hoard of

11Colloquium with Raimon Panikkar, Interdisciplinary Seminar of Psychology, Spirituality and Social Justice, Sadhana Institute, Lonavala, on December 3-5, 1999.
other problems. There are some specific areas that need to be considered. George Soares-Prabhu maintains that the Indian context is characterized by three interrelated factors i.e., massive economic poverty, pluriform religiosity, and an institutionalized inequality legitimized by religious sanctions. This is true of the context of Asia as a whole, with a slight difference in institutionalized inequality. In the first case (massive economic poverty) Asia is part of the third world problem; the second (pluriform religiosity) is typically the reality of Asia; but the third case, institutionalized inequality (caste system) is unique only to India. This institutionalized inequality has many phases. In my opinion, the women of Asia come under this category. Their de-humanization is another dimension of the "institutionalized inequality" that thrives under the banner of the religions in Asia.

1. **Massive Economic Poverty**

The poverty in Asia is a telling forecast of it's future. Despite modernization Asia still finds no solution to poverty, hunger, illiteracy, disease and oppression. Furthermore, Asia is confronted with the problem of child labor and slum dwellers. An increasing number of street children are condemned to live as beggars. The future of Asia will be determined by the future of these children. Globalization and the population explosion (especially among the lower middle class and the poor) have further intensified the problem. Institutionalized corruption, bribery, vandalism and scams are on the increase.

2. **Inter religious Conflicts**

Asia is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Apart from the primal religions, it is home to the many major religious traditions of the world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity to name a

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few. These religious traditions embody age-old religio-cultural values that have become part of Asia. They have generally influenced one another and shared in the common secular interests of the nations. However, there is a danger in absolutizing one's own religion. This is the emerging problem of our times: religious fundamentalism and fanaticism in many major religious traditions are responsible for violence and bloodshed all over Asia.

3. **Institutionalized Oppression of Women**

Women's oppression is deeply rooted in the mastery model (patriarchal system) that has become part and parcel of our social, cultural, legal and religious ideology. Violence has a social and cultural pattern in Asia which determines the way that a female is to behave in a particular situation and the manner in which she is to be treated by society. The Asian woman is brought up in such a way that she internalizes this exploitation under the guise of religious sanction. Despite the growing awareness of gender equality, the common myth of purity/pollution is still causing great havoc in our societies.

Beginning with the denial of the right to life (seen in the increasing numbers of female foeticide and infanticide), many women are subjected to various types of oppression at home and at work. They are often denied mobility, education, freedom of expression, freedom of decision-making, job opportunities, property rights and legal justice. In short, they are mere commodities and sex objects.

These stark realities of Asia reveal deep-rooted ignorance, insensitivity, animosity, and fragmentation. The mission of the Asian Church is to respond to these existential concerns of the Asian people.

**The Response of the Asian Church: Listening, Following, Bearing Fruit**

The response of the Asian Church needs to correspond to the Asian context. It needs to be the outcome of openness to listening to the problems. To do this the Asian Church, like Mary, has to be virgin,
disciple and mother. This implies the characteristics of listening, following and bearing fruit i.e., doing the will of God.

1. *A Listening Church*

The Church discovers her virginity, that is, her real identity, by listening to what God's Spirit is saying and doing in the heart of the world. Listening with the heart is essential because it is an intrinsic principle of being human. The Asian Church has to be virgin - a church that is totally open to God and listens only to God. It has to listen to God's Word operative in the "signs of our times." Listening to the "signs of the times" means being open to the reality of the Asian context that creates one-sidedness in our societies and local Churches.

Firstly, the Asian Church has to listen to the workings of the Spirit within her own life. She should be open to listen to the contemporary prophets within the Church, who through their writings, theological reflections and various movements of the Spirit (women's movements, Basic Christian Communities, Basic Human Communities, Charismatic movements, movements of inculturation, encounters between religions and dialogue etc.) are pointing to a new direction in discovering a meaningful understanding of the Church.

Secondly, the Asian Church has to listen to the poor and the underprivileged, to women whose voices are riot heard, to youth who search for meaning in life, to the cry of the earth that is being constantly devastated, and to the truth embodied in various religious traditions. Thus, the church will be able to recognize the workings of the Spirit who gathers and unites all peoples. In short, the church has to listen to the Spirit of God who blows how and wherever She wills.

However, listening is only the first step. It leads to the following of Jesus, that is, the way of discipleship and commitment to the Person of Christ.

2. *A Following Church*

Discipleship contains the essence of following Jesus, i.e., following
what Jesus says and following in his footsteps. Again only the virgin i.e., one who is wholly open to and dedicated to God, can really follow. The Asian Church has to be a disciple i.e., one who follows Christ totally. The one who follows the Lord wholeheartedly will have the same mind as the Lord. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). The church must be deeply rooted in Him and become part of His world, a world that finds its fullest significance only in his life, suffering, death and resurrection. Such following (discipleship) is a bond that makes the church free for others.

As a follower of Christ the church must develop a liberating spirituality that touches all spheres of life and is meaningful to all groups. This calls for a change in approach towards hierarchical structures, rituals, dogmas, institutions, liturgy, sacraments, etc. All these should be means of uniting us in the Spirit (and thus arriving at a holistic spirituality) and not a weapon of division. Furthermore, her commitment is not just to her own flock but it is to reach out to all. The call is to bear witness to Christ, to be the salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13-14).

3. A Church that brings forth Fruit

The Asian Church has to be a totally dedicated virgin and a faithful disciple if it is to be a fruitful mother. Only in listening to the Word of God (to the Spirit of God operative in the Asian context) and following in His footsteps, does the church conceive God's children and gather them around her. This conception is of the Spirit of God, not the spirit of the world, of power and domination.

The attitudes of listening and following transform the church into a 'fertile' place where virgins-disciples gather together to listen to the Word of God and in this listening they too 'receive' and 'conceive'. This 'conception' brings forth fruit (doing God's will Lk 8:21). What is born is sacramental, making the Sacred present in the world. This is precisely her mission of evangelization.

Evangelization is no longer considered solely a work of adding new members to the church. The understanding of evangelization
is much broader today, as taught by the Council Documents and the encyclicals *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Redemptoris Missio*. Evangelization includes integral human development. This means not only religious and spiritual uplifting of people, but also their physical and economic development. Emphasis is to be placed on spreading and sharing the Good News of God's Kingdom to all people of good will. In short, evangelization includes the promotion of peace and justice - reaching out to all people irrespective of class, caste, creed, and sex and working towards the transformation of society. In this regard, Raimon Panikkar gives the following thought-provoking insight:

Panikkar translates the Gospel of Mark 16:15 as follows: "Walking into the whole cosmos proclaim (sing, dance) the good news to the entire creation." Further he comments: "The text says, walk, step in, simply go as a pilgrim, without instruments or aids of any kind. The text continues: into the whole cosmos; and we know that cosmos is not a geographical category. Penetrate the inner fabric of reality. The text continues: proclaim, i.e., sing, dance, manifest, contagiate... What? The Good News, namely that the prisons should be open, the hungry fed, injustices healed, hatred overcome. And this is to the entire creation, and not to humans only."

The Asian Church has to embody this Good News of caring for the poor and the downtrodden, bringing comfort, healing and hope to the broken hearted, freedom to those in bondage, light to those who grope in the darkness of ignorance and error, and proclaiming peace and reconciliation where hatred, revenge and injustice abound. In doing this, the church has to keep in mind the context of massive poverty, religious pluriformity and institutionalized inequality. How can the church concretely accomplish this gigantic task?

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The Asian context is not the concern of the Asian Church alone. Because of the cultural rootedness and historical limitedness of religions, no single religion alone has the capacity to bring about healing and wholeness. This is the common concern of all the religious traditions of Asia. Poverty, interreligious conflicts and the institutionalized oppression of women are evil forces that cannot be defeated by individual traditions. We need the collaboration of all [religious and secular] traditions as every religion has its specific and indispensable contribution to make. Together they can take a stand against these evil forces. Hence the Asian Church has to realize the importance of dialogue. Dialogue is the future of Asia and it has to revolve around the common concerns found within the Asian context. Such concerns lead to a common response that expresses itself in joint action for the welfare of all.

**Conclusion**

The mission of the Asian Church today clearly spells out this need for dialogue and collaboration. It should be the first one to dialogue with other religious traditions and work towards this goal. Only then can she truly inspire, fill people with the Spirit of God and make the Divine present here in our midst. The proposed model of listening is one of the ways in which the Asian Church could become a pioneer in creating a world of peace and justice. The Kyoto Declaration of the World Conference on Religion and Peace is worth noting here: "the things which unite us are more important than the things that divide us." The things that unite us are none other than our common concerns. The Asian Church has to decide between the two: following the Mystery model (listening model) or imitating the Mastery model (making model).

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15 Colloquium with Raimon Panikkar.
16 Cf., Clemens Mendonca, Dynamics of Symbol and Dialogue: Interreligious Education in India, Tiibinger Perspektieven zur Pastoraltheolgie und Religionspadagogik Bd. 13, Munster: LIT, 2002, 212.