



RIVER ABOVE ASIA OCEANIA ECCLESIAL NETWORK

Listening to Indigenous Peoples and Talking as Church from Where We Are

**A Reflection on the Bishops' Conferences in Oceania and
Asia**

December 2022



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Listening to Indigenous Peoples and Talking as Church from Where We Are A Reflection on the Bishops' Conferences in Oceania and Asia

RAOEN as an ecclesial network has made an initial review of the 23 Conference Synthesis Reports of Oceania and Asia for the Synod on Synodality in order to highlight what in particular the Church can learn about the **cry of the indigenous and the cry of the earth**.¹ The purpose of this summary is to focus on these two integral themes and as an ecclesial network to present this as a reflection of the responses coming from the '2-continents' of FCBCO (Federation of the Catholic Bishops of Oceania and FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences) in an effort to come together for the sake of the Ocean, Lands and Peoples. The Church's growing relationship with Indigenous Peoples is acknowledging their inbuilt relationship with the sea and land scape and the depth of their diverse cultural heritage, their faith and ways forward that can be shared with everyone. The different cultures' shared sense of broader territory and that of biome are often used to encapsulate these interrelations.²

"In this sense, it is essential to show special care for indigenous communities and their cultural traditions...For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values. When they remain on their land, they themselves care for it best." -Laudato Si' 146

It is humbling to read the different Conference Synthesis Reports, first for their acknowledgement of the shortcomings and injustices, second for the humbling view of the context and state of the Church as community, often as a minority faith, and third for the hope this listening and reflection bears. We pray that we may have the strength to engage and include others in the responses seen as just, necessary and creative.

Recognizing the differences of each Conference precisely highlights the uniqueness and leadership in each Conference and their contribution to the whole, and where people can both learn and enable each other in greater participation and communion. The review of the summary documents (23 Conferences of Bishops) is presented starting with the Pacific and moving across Asia. In shifting across the Conferences and their contexts, moving from one country to the next can help people be aware of the differences and what might be learned from further engagement.

¹ The RAOEN Steering Board and Extended Consultative Group are about twenty percent indigenous. We have compiled this initial and necessary summary of summaries in an effort to strengthen awareness and listening to the local indigenous context where the ecological crisis is foremost. The Church today in many countries has limited and structured dialogue. This could be greatly enriched so that Indigenous People can feel deeply welcomed and have a more active part in the Church to speak for themselves.

² Biome, meaning life as a large group or mass, usually refers to a major ecological type, like tropical rainforest or ocean system maintained under the climatic conditions of such a region. Now with climate changing it is the seasonal weather shifts that are impacting the broader ecosystem and biodiversity.

The term is used here to emphasize how the climate is part of the greater ecosystem. At a large scale the climate of the Pacific Ocean as an ecosystem is now changing and it is so great it also determines or greatly impacts the viability and vulnerability of the biodiversity of ecosystems across the Asian land mass and in this sense Oceania-Asia form one giant biome.

For many local and Indigenous Peoples there is also a spiritual relation with the land or sea and with the Spirit Creator. These relations give strength and care to the daily living and needs in community, respecting and caring for all life and sharing with others, never talking all and recognizing that people are passing visitors that hand on a balanced way of living to the next generation.



1. Episcopal Conference of the Pacific (14 dioceses, 2 apostolic prefectures and 2 missio sui-iuris).

Ten of these entities contributed to the synthesis. CEPAC (Episcopal Conference of the Pacific) covers an enormous area of the Pacific Ocean with many small and scattered islands. The distances are great and the languages many. This presents many communications challenges and varied social and economic settings from village-based to urban, forest, fishing, mining or tourism-based economies, differing colonial backgrounds and the current interest of contemporary great powers. Many low-lying atolls are in danger of rising sea-levels.

Following the introduction is a synthesis of the reports on the life of the Church in the region. It covers the various questions posed for the synod such as difficulties obstacles and wounds in the Church, how are laity listened to – especially women and youth, what the Holy Spirit is asking of us, how are our goals identified, relations with other Churches, communities etc. These sections give a fairly unvarnished image of different aspects of Church life in far-flung sections of the Pacific.

References to Care of the Earth: The CEPAC document begins with reference to the creation especially to the sea, referencing the image of the sea in the beginnings of the (biblical) Creation story. This section functions as the introduction and setting for the other parts of the submission. The introduction speaks of the sea as giving an identity to the CEPAC Churches as well as the importance of the sea to the survival of the Pacific Peoples.

"We are conscious that the Pacific Ocean gives an identity to the various dioceses of CEPAC... It is our desire to protect this part of God's creation, as the well-being of our people depends on the ocean in so many ways. In some of our countries the major threat is the ocean as changes in climate have drastic outcomes for the actual survival of these countries.

"Within the Church, we need to be more active and well informed about the significance [of] our global climate by ways of workshops and community outreach programs to educate the Church and community.

"Our people's reliance and dependence on the ocean to provide for our sustenance has always been reflected in our understanding and practice to take only what is required and to give back from what was taken through individual and communal respect and care of the ocean." (p2).

Our responsibility in caring for the environment should always be at the forefront of how we exist, especially on our small islands. The Church could do better in bringing about more awareness of this issue." (p.4)

The Conference shares perhaps the most graspable expression of environmental destruction and need for action. Care for the Ocean and the resources (as biodiversity), in the face of carbon impact on changing waters, deep sea mining (there is also coastal extraction) and commercial over-fishing. There is a clear call for action to bring us beyond awareness and "prayer warriors but also (to) become protectors of our environment and our spiritual health." (p2). The people in Oceania are very integral in their living and livelihood with their surrounding and traditional spirituality and want to see all of this alive and active with the youth remaining steadfast in their love of life and community. It concludes with an appeal to the Church to give more attention to the situation of the earth and the sea in its parish programmes, in cooperation with other governmental and non-governmental agencies, data collection and protection and preservation programmes of waterways and shorelines.



This most unique and startling reality of Great Ocean Nations suffering ongoing devastation point to a chaos out of which the cosmos was created: “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together and let the dry land appear.” (Gen 1:9). Now with the climate crisis these boundaries are being broken and the islands are being submerged! The destruction of how creation has been ordered affects every other part of the landscape, the waters of the heavens and of the seas and the land thousands of miles away in Asia where there are increasing sequential flooding and droughts.

References to Culture: There is little reference to ‘culture’ as the national culture or ethnic cultural identity – as with Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands – are so much to the fore and taken for granted in most islands. However there are references to aspects of Church culture which could also be a reflection of the wider cultural settings of the Pacific. For example there are references to the ‘cultural practices of catechists and a ‘culture of silence’ around some issues and the need for courage to speak up when needed.

Some areas of tension in local Catholic communities are touched on in reference to the ‘need to have priests who speak the local language’ and a reference to ‘immigrants not being welcome’ (places not identified) which seem to speak to the question of immigrant communities (which in some countries can dominate aspects of the economy) and possibly non-locally-born priests coming to some places where there is a lack of local clergy.

Culture was referenced in terms of dialogue and Church life: ‘Culture was a factor that challenges participation’, especially the respect for elders, gender differences, age differentials. It was said that at times this led to not challenging priests (because of their status) and not tackling financial mismanagement, or other difficult issues, etc. There was also a reference to moving away from an ‘authoritarian style of leadership’.

2. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands (PNG 19 dioceses, Solomon Islands 3)

Both countries have many cultural and language groups and, although not explicitly stated anywhere in the synthesis, this cultural and language diversity in fact shapes day-to-day pastoral work. Both countries have forestry and mining as significant parts of their economies and challenges around environmental destruction due to this. So while there is no direct reference to culture(s) or care of the earth in the document (except possibly indirectly through references to Catholic Social Teaching), indirect references can be noted by carefully looking at some of the forms of organization mentioned in the plan, and by knowing some of the context in which PNG/SI find themselves.

The report notes that most dioceses did something in terms of the Synod process and that many of the ways of the synodal process are already practiced in PNG/SI. The Bishops Conference held a General Assembly of the the Catholic Church of PNG/SI (6 days) in Mingende, Kundiawa diocese to share the experiences of the synodal journey, celebrate the faith and propose a renewed 5-Year common pastoral plan. Unfortunately because of the Covid pandemic restrictions, the Solomon Islands dioceses were not able to participate. There were 111 participants at this assembly, praying, talking and eating together (experiencing synodality). From this a renewed Bishops Conference 5-Year Pastoral Plan (2022-27) was shaped.

References to Care of the Earth: The synod synthesis is mostly a presentation of this plan. The aim of the plan is that the Catholic people will be ‘salt and light for the earth’ having experienced Christ through Word, Sacrament, catechesis and Catholic Social Teaching (n.1.3). The section on Mission states that the PNG/SI Church will proclaim the Good News



in the spiritual, social, political and economic life of PNG/SI (1.2). Number 1.2.3 states this will be done by working for justice and peace and the integrity of creation.

References to Culture: So despite the multiplicity of cultures and languages in PNG/SI there is not any specific references to those in the document. Nor was there any particular application of Catholic Social Teaching to specific challenges in PNG/SI. Perhaps because this was a general framework document and the application is to be at the local diocesan level.

3. Catholic Bishops Conference Aotearoa (NZ has 6 dioceses).

Acknowledges the Treaty of Waitangi and the need to address the cultural injustices, the importance of diversity, of minorities feeling at home in the church and of bi-cultural leadership are recognized. In mission there is mention of the cry of the earth and the very focus on the Māori People and culture includes a deep commitment to care for the health and diversity of the landscape. Others can all learn from these ways to better respond in their own context.

References to Culture and Indigenous Peoples: There are several references to cultures and indigenous people but relatively few to care of the earth, spirituality of creation etc.

The unique place of the indigenous people (Māori) in New Zealand's constitutional set up is noted right at the beginning of the document (Introduction n.5). This has led to a growing place for expressions of Māori language and cultural forms in the public life of the country, including the use of an indigenous name for the country (Aotearoa) alongside the English name.

This constitutional place is sometimes referred to as 'bi-culturalism'. Alongside this official and constitutional aspect there is recognition of the increasing ethnic diversity in the Church and how to recognize this (Introduction n.6). An illustration of this is in the photo on the cover page of the synthesis. It features a new image of Mary the Mother of God, patron of the country, as an indigenous woman surrounded by school pupils from various ethnic backgrounds.

A concern that the Māori people themselves, their language, their customs be present in Church life also appears in a couple of places in the document (eg, n.18) and similarly for cultural minorities (n.19). In n.18 the document remarks that the first Catholic mission in NZ was to Māori, but the bicultural partnership is not reflected in Catholic congregations, liturgies and leadership. And n.23 likewise speaks similarly of the involvement of ethnic minorities in these areas. A need for education of Catholic communities around the use of Māori language (te reo) in Masses is stated in n.26.

Under the theme of education and formation, n.62 looks to more training of seminarians in biculturalism and general cultural sensitivity. In n.68 – under the theme of synodality and change - the possibility that Māori, through their use of the *hui*³ process can help the Church grow in understanding of discernment and synodality is raised.

As a general comment the NZ and Australian syntheses mention culture and first nations/indigenous people more for two reasons. First, because of their histories in terms of the colonial displacement of the aboriginal populations. Second, because of the growing recognition in the dominant parts of those societies of the need for reparation. On the other hand, in the PNG/SI and CEPAC conferences, the populations indigenous to those countries

³ Hui cultural practice refers to the local framework for building effective relations between doctors and Māori patients.



are still the majority and mostly in lesser danger of extinction. However, other challenges come to the fore and other strategies to face them.

Care of the Earth is directly raised in 2 places: one is under the theme of prophetic leadership where it is mentioned that some are looking for such leadership around ‘the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor’ and the care of our common home (n.53). The second is in the conclusion of the document (n.82) where the ‘cry of the earth and cry of the poor’ is mentioned.

4. Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference (Australia’s 35 geographical and non-geographical dioceses)

References to Culture and Indigenous Peoples: Following the introduction and a declaration of commitment to the synodal path and the inclusion of all voices especially those on the margins (n.15) there is a commitment to journeying with Aboriginal and Torres Strait (ATS) peoples (n.16). This is for the purpose of growing ‘towards unity in faith’. There is a recognition of past failings by the Church, intergenerational trauma suffered by ATS communities and the need to complement this with a deliberate welcoming of ATS people into parish communities and offering them practical support. Also an openness to the possibilities of new ways of being Christian and forms of Church life better suited to First Nations peoples. The Australian Church also reinforces the Uluru Statement of the Heart that affirms the sovereignty of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples with the land.

In dioceses with greater numbers of ATS peoples and under the theme of the importance of liturgy for faith there is the recognition for greater recognition of ATS spirituality in liturgy and Church life both locally and in national Church life (n.33). When talking of a wecloming Church and being inclusive there is mention of this including indigenous Australians, migrants and refugees (n.37).

References to Care of the earth: These come under ‘key themes on mission’ and alongside ‘commitment to social justice and care of the earth’ (nn.51 and 52). Perhaps this aspect of Church life would also be one of those included under the section on evangelization as ‘new and emerging areas of mission’ (n.64).

5. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Timor Leste

The national average age of the Timorese population is 18 years old. Youth tend to leave the villages to find better employment opportunities in the city.

Timor Leste also faces a number of ecological challenges such as drought and susceptibility to climate disasters. The Church seeks to respond by delivering humanitarian aid through its social action centers such as Caritas.

There is also a recognition and acknowledgement that the Timorese Church has to learn to be poor and to live among the poor, and that its pastoral actions need to respond to the signs of the times. “To be a missionary is to be with the discouraged, marginalized, excluded, and minority groups so they can in turn experience God’s love in their hearts” (p.45).

The use of the ‘Tetum’ language as the lingua franca of the Timorese and its use in liturgical celebrations helped encourage participation from the faithful.



6. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Indonesia

The Church in Indonesia acknowledges how it has not fully paid attention to the needs of the margins: the geographically unreachable, different tribes, and those who are of different denominations and beliefs.

This is attributed to the Church's apparent reluctance to stand up for justice and truth, human rights, and ecological concerns that the marginalized experience most. The Church needs to stand up more and use its voice, through dialogue and collaboration. "Cooperation can be done, for example, by fighting for justice and truth together, struggling for the human rights come to real, fighting for the poor and overcoming ecological problems" (p.11).

While young people are recognized as partners in the life and mission of the Church, they need to be listened to more seriously. Leadership trainings and programs for young people can encourage their participation in the Church and in society.

7. Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines

The Church in the Philippines recognizes its distance from the margins (laylayan). The marginalized is acknowledged by many dioceses and that the poor feel left out (p.3). A common sentiment is that the Church fails to stand up for their social and ecological rights, and to speak out against conflicts "among tribes, between military and NPA (the New People's Army, an insurgent group)". A farmer questioned why the Church is not doing anything to address the increasing price of fertilizers and farm implements. A fisherman lamented that the seashores and beaches were desecrated because of ongoing coastal road construction." (p.5).

It is also acknowledged that the indigenous are often seen as "objects of missionary help." There is little attention it is giving to recognize the cultural identity of Indigenous Peoples (p.8). Their practices and traditions sometimes clash with Church teachings, which is often a cause of confusion and distance from the Church. The Philippine Church is seeking to learn and better recognize the depth of Indigenous Peoples' wisdom and spirituality which can "help explore the depth of communion, participation, and mission in Filipino culture." (p.9). To bridge the distance between the Church and the margins, there is a resounding call to create "new ministries" that involve community engagements and social communications. Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) can help foster this space of encounter and bring the Church closer to the margins and other sectors of society (p9).⁴

8. Chinese Regional Bishop's Conference (Taiwan)

There is an acknowledgement that the Church in China needs to do more to provide platforms for the youth to participate and partake in the life of the church. The platforms could include "faith formation and companionship for individuals." (p.13)

While the church is doing what it can to extend services to remote villages which come in the form of medical care, social assistance, and education, there is a recognition that the Church needs to listen more to the voices of the marginalized – the indigenous population, migrants, and the youth. This reinforces the recurring call of how the Church needs to be of the poor and for the poor.

⁴ For all FABC country synod reports: <https://fabc.org/document-category/papers/>. The country reports are found in FABC papers 171-179.



The synodal process is an opportunity to be able to reach out to the margins. The Church in China echoes the need for greater participation and representation from the voiceless. “To promote communion, it is necessary to care for one other, to listen, to build up relationships, to put aside rank and position, to be empathetic, to show respect, openness, acceptance, without criticizing and moralizing, and without prejudice.” (p.6)

Not much has also been said about ecological concerns and what the church’s responses are. There is also recognition of animating BECs to reach out to people in their respective communities, and engage them to participate in the church’s mission.

9. Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Japan

The Church in Japan humbly acknowledges its difficulties in listening, such as its “sense of privilege, listener fatigue, indifference, prejudices, and intolerance” (p.3). There is also an acknowledgement that engaging in ecological issues has not yet been deepened in the Japanese Church, citing that there is “apathy and passivity” (p.6).

The Church recognizes the need to engage society more in dialogue especially in light of the differences of the Church’s teachings on divorce, gender, and bioethical issues.

As many of the laity proactively engage with the socially vulnerable and the excluded, and with some of them engaging in environmental concerns, their participation in the life of the Church is important. Being a minority, they have also expressed their openness to “promote mutual exchange, continue open dialogue with society, and contribute to the evangelization of society” (p.8).

There is also recognition of how faith is nurtured in communities. Thus, it is important for its members to cherish and care for one another, and to be spiritual companions for each other.

10. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Korea

It is acknowledged that the Church in Korea is not using its voice to speak out against societal injustices and ecological concerns as “sufficient discussions on social issues are not made in the Church” (p.38). There is a need for the church to proactively engage in such issues for societal change.

There is also a call for the church to listen more to the cry of the Earth, and to “show more interest” in ecology, and protecting the natural environment. “The People of God cannot separate themselves from the world and all creation of God” (p.45).

The Church is also challenged to be a “church of the poor” and not a “church of almsgiving to the poor” (p.33), thus calling for greater social engagement especially in the margins by proactively listening to the excluded.

It is also recognized that Small Christian Communities are key in reaching out to the minorities.

11. Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Laos and Cambodia

In Laos and Cambodia, Christianity and Catholicism is considered a minority, with many practicing traditional beliefs. There is a concern that the Catholic faith may be getting diluted with other faiths, yet the Church in Laos seeks to foster mutual understanding and respect through interreligious dialogue; this has yet to be organized in a systematic manner.



The Church in Cambodia creatively proclaims the Word of God through art performances, with hymns sung in the local language, and finds that the people are able to connect and relate better.

Interreligious dialogue at the community level comes in the form of sharing in faith traditions and practices. This dialogue at the community level fosters respect, and helps resolve conflicts. “The Church needs to do more to adapt to the local culture” (p.59). Not much has been said about ecological concerns in the Laotian and Cambodian context, yet there is an acknowledgement of the richness of its natural resources, and how the Church can accompany communities in protecting the natural environment.

12. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam

The report highlights the impacts of the pandemic on the political, economic, cultural, educational, and faith dimensions, and how it has affected farmers and migrants the most. In response, dioceses mobilized parishes to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable by providing food and assistance to migrants.

There is an acknowledgement on how globalization brings more opportunities to developing countries, yet its negative impacts include the widening gap between the rich and poor, and the risks of natural resource exploitation.

In response, the Church in Vietnam seeks to engage youth through spiritual and formation programs. The Church emphasized the importance of being ‘one’, especially in responding to the cry of the Earth as “we are living in the same garden, a common household” (p.41).

13. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Thailand

There is an acknowledgement on how the Church needs to better walk alongside the poor and to seriously listen to the voices in the margins: ethnic groups, workers and migrants.

The Church needs to be reminded on how it needs to “be with the poor and for the poor,” how it stands up for human and ecological rights (pp. 24-25).

Parishes and Catholic schools are key in engaging communities to participate in the Church’s mission to promote justice, protect human rights, and care for Creation. Local dioceses are key to animate this. In some dioceses, there is a majority of ethnic Christians with their own identities and language, who can then help forward the Church’s mission through catechism in the local context.

The Church in Thailand speaks of the “dialogue with God’s creation by taking care of creation in the local community” (p.30). It also recognizes the importance of learning from the wisdom and traditional practices of Indigenous Peoples that will make the faith celebration and experience more meaningful. These include forest rituals, blessing of rice fields, watersheds, and fish.

14. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunel

The Church of MSB constitutes diverse cultures and ethnicities. Their participation in animating the life of the Church is crucial, and not only the privileged. “By realizing that there is unity in diversity, the local Church can serve its people through more creative and innovative approaches” (p.3).



During the consultation process in Malaysia, there was strong participation from the *Orang Asli* and *Orang Asal*⁵ in which they raised their plight of being deprived of basic rights and opportunities.

To reinvigorate the Church's identity as a missionary Church, there is a resounding call for the MSB Church to creatively work with local communities through faith deepening programs, providing livelihood opportunities especially in the margins, and providing avenues for people to share their concerns.

There is a strong call to better listen to the margins, as this listening posture encourages people to share their concerns and hopes with the Church. "There is a need for compassionate churches, not administrative centers" (p.11).

Given the multicultural and ethnic context in MSB, local dioceses are in the best position to tap into the wisdom and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples to foster a dialogue for decision making and reconciliation.

While there is no comment about the environment, in the communities of Sabah and Sarawak, there are many engagements with the cultures living on the lands with great concern for the forest and rivers.

15. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar

There is an acknowledgement of the broken relationships between the Church and Ethnic Tribes due to inflicted wounds in the past.

To heal broken relationships with Ethnic Tribes and to better reach out to the margins, the Church seeks to: 1) find ways to integrate cultural practices in liturgical celebrations, 2) provide spaces for listening and dialogue by visiting the people in the peripheries, 3) hold annual meetings so concerns from the faithful can be listened to, and 4) provide avenues for intercultural dialogue to help bridge differences towards a mutual understanding.

The Church in Myanmar also hopes to assure the faithful that their culture should not be abandoned "to embrace the Christian faith" (p.30).

It is important to have conversations with culture and nature which are inextricably linked, which will enable reflections on the lifestyle changes needed, and enable a deepened appreciation for the natural environment.

16. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Bangladesh

The Church in Bangladesh is undertaking efforts to reach out and listen to the margins especially in times of need through humanitarian aid. Yet, there are "practical difficulties" in terms of less time and less attention that inhibits this listening. There is also a humble recognition that these voices are being "avoided and sometimes silenced." Formation to "live a missionary spirit" is important (p.12).

The following are efforts undertaken by the church in Bangladesh to listen to the margins: 1) meetings, seminars, and workshops, 2) through its social action centers such as Caritas, 3) traditional social organizations and village leaders.

These are the following key areas in the mission that the Church has identified, that they need to pay attention to: upholding good customs and traditional feasts of indigenous peoples, and care and protection of the Common Home.

⁵ The Orang Asli are the Aborigines' Peoples of Peninsula Malaysia, and Orang Asal are the Indigenous Peoples from the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Borneo.



There is recognition to “strengthen the works of evangelization among the tribal and other communities” (p.22). The participation of representatives from different ages, cultures, and genders, in the Church’s decision making is needed.

Bangladesh has over 400,000 Catholics and about 50% of the Catholics are from the indigenous communities. Of the eight dioceses, four have more indigenous Catholics and two bishops are from among the indigenous community. Charity works through education and health services are visible as entry points and hold a bright future for evangelization.

17. Vicariate Apostolic of Nepal

The Church in Nepal describes the situation of the Nepali as “characterized by ‘poverty, inequality, injustice and oppression. Most of our people lack the necessities of life: food, clothing, shelter, hygienic conditions and even the minimum education.’” Other social issues include “caste system, child labor, illiteracy, gender inequality, superstitions, religious conflicts” (p.13).

Given this context, the youth in Nepal feel angry and frustrated given that many young people in the country are disadvantaged. “They seek genuine God-experience and stand for justice and social change” (p.21).

A key focus of the Nepali Church is to “build up and contribute to the faith-development of our Catholic people in Nepal” (p.10). This is where catechism is seen to play an important role in animating the Church’s mission in light of the social context, especially among young people. “Catechesis is fostering. Fostering indicates nurturing, nourishing, and caring” (p.17). Catechesis can also be a way of building Christian communities.

Caritas Nepal and other religious institutions are recognized in their role in reaching out to the margins in terms of education, care for the environment, relief and rehabilitation during natural calamities.

18. Conference of Catholic Bishops of India

The Church in India acknowledges its slow response against socioeconomic and ecological challenges, describing it as “disturbing.” Particularly in terms of ecological challenges, a common sentiment is that the Church’s actions “have not had the desired impact” (p.45). As a result, people in the margins who feel the brunt of these impacts feel the most left out. “Discrimination based on caste, language, ethnicity, economic, academic and social status” (p.47) is also a cause of societal divisions that hinders community building.

There is also an acknowledgement on how the Church in India has become institutionalized, with priests dealing with administrative matters instead of responding to the “faith needs of the community.”

To bridge the distance between the Church and the peripheries, the church can animate Basic Ecclesial Communities as BECs “have been found have been found to be the most effective means of building community and improving synodality in the parishes” (p.38). The diversity of the Church in India should be a reason for “celebration and not division” (p.39), as this enables diverse representation and participation from different groups in society in the life and mission of the church.

In terms of better responding to socioecological challenges, the Church in India seeks to do the following: a) train lay faithful to speak up against social injustices, b) initiate environmental awareness programs for children and young people, c) organic farming and tree planting to build the community, and d) collaborate with NGOs and networks on ecological movements.

**19. Syro-Malabar Church (India & parishes overseas)**

There is an acknowledgement that the Church needs to nurture more in its people a sense of being a missionary, giving witness to life, and share in the experiences of faith.

“Catechism for the children should be more experiential” (p.53). Mission orientation classes and social activities are ways to share in the mission of the church.

The Syro-Malabar Church also needs to reach out and listen more to the margins by “giving consideration to the opinions of ‘the poor, the voiceless, the indifferent, the marginalized and those with low self-esteem, to seek the lost, and listen those who are in the peripheries especially differently abled, transgender, the convicted, the mentally and physically challenged, Dalit Christians, newly baptized etc.’” (p.54).

The laity especially women, youth, and Dalits need to participate in all forms of dialogue in the Church.

There is also a call for the Church to strengthen its collaboration with other Churches and faith communities. This includes strengthening unity in light of sociopolitical injustices on the marginalized by issuing joint statements.

20. Syro-Malankara Catholic Major Archiepiscopal Church (India)

It was echoed back that the Church needs to overcome clericalism and how it “must not try to silence others by establishing their supremacy” (p.79). This is a call for the church to listen more and “shift towards a more missionary model of service” by building “heart-to-heart” relationships with people, especially those who belong in Indigenous Communities (p.80).

Instead of adhering to institutional structures and administrative duties, the Syro-Malankara Church is called to build “communities grounded in faith and love wherein communion is lived out” (p.74). There is also a call for the church to use its voice in speaking out against social injustices and ecological concerns.

21. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka

One of the biggest challenges that the Church in Sri Lanka is facing is its political situation that has yet to stabilize following “three decades of civil war” that has disrupted relationships with ethnic groups (p.44). Another challenge is religious extremism. In 2019, hundreds of people awaiting Easter Sunday services were killed and injured due to suicide bombers (p.47).

In response to these challenges, the Church in Sri Lanka “has never been reluctant to raise its voice for the good of the country and the welfare of its people” (p.45). Following the 2019 Easter Sunday attack, the CBCSL issued “strong statement and met with political leaders, security, and intelligence officials” to bring justice for the victims.

To animate its pastoral mission, the Church is also concentrating on building up and strengthening Small Christian Communities “centered around the Word of God and the Sacraments” (p.49).

22. Pakistan Catholic Bishops' Conference

Christianity and Catholicism in Pakistan are considered minorities. One of the major challenges that the Church is facing is religious extremism, causing fear among the Christian community, especially among the people in the margins.



During the synodal process, the Church in Pakistan made an effort to reach out and listen to the margins by starting dialogues at the grassroot levels with parishes, the poor, cultures and religions. This ensures that people in the remote areas are listened to and heard. There is also an acknowledgement on the “hurdles” of listening due to deep rooted social and cultural wounds, and how there is little room for their acceptance. “Tribal Parishes and Dioceses should work to engage more people in the Church” (pp. 43-44).

There is also recognition on the importance of providing adequate opportunities for the youth to participate in the life of the church, especially among those in remote areas. Not much has been said about ecology, and how the church is responding to the challenges but it is obvious that they are giving focus on the present disastrous circumstances.

23. Catholic Bishops' Conference of Central Asia

The newly constituted CBCCA consists of the following countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and also covering the Catholic structures of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Being in a predominantly Muslim community and with Russian Orthodoxy as the main Christian denomination, one of the main challenges that the Catholic Church in Central Asia is grappling with is self-identity “amidst a society that opened to freedom of religious practice only three decades ago” (p.30) and given that communities are very small.

Given this struggle with identity, a common sentiment echoed back during the process is the perception that the Church is a “relief organization.” Another observation is the lack of activities beyond masses and catechesis. There is a genuine challenge on how the local church can engage different groups in society and accompany them “in their personal and communal faith journey” (p.78).

Points for further reflection:

In all the Conference reports there are direct and indirect connections made and realities shared between the cry of the poor and cry of the earth. Many acknowledge that the people in the margins need much greater inclusion, listening and supportive words and actions. The web of integral responses clearly includes a greater sense of compassion, welcome and participatory pastoral responses from the whole Church. Some common and specific voices and concerns from Oceania and Asia can be drawn out for further reflection and discussion. *Within the Church, we need to be more active and well informed about the significance of our global climate. Our responsibility in caring for the environment should always be at the forefront of how we exist, especially on our small islands. The Church could do better in bringing about more awareness of this issue.” -CEPAC Synod Synthesis Report*

1. The economic, political, social and religious history and context of each country and conference is directly and indirectly acknowledged in their reflections, limitations and scope of action. Where the Church is a minority, and in some countries persecuted, the focus is obviously on sustaining the small community while always aware of others in need. The healing of broken relationships between the Church and the Indigenous is recognized in many areas and also the importance of the spirituality of local islanders and Indigenous Peoples in deepening faith experiences while going beyond theological structures.

“... what does this mean for a Christian theology, based on largely European philosophical frameworks, which has been carried, developed and shared, throughout this Oceania region, through ‘missionary’ endeavour for hundreds of years? What does it mean for the



Indigenous Peoples in this region who have accepted, in faith, this Christian story and its teachings and who have worked to integrate this into their existing cultures and practices? What is the promise for the people we spoke to who are not indigenous but who are growing in awareness of Indigenous peoples' relationship to land, and are taking a journey together, as Church, to try to articulate this in their new understanding of a theology and spirituality of God as Creator Spirit? What can it mean for those who are still unaware of the richness of this new theological understanding as the basis of why we must care for our common home?

- Sr. Adele Howard, RSM, Australia. *⁶

2. There is limited space and opportunity for Indigenous communities in the way the local church is often structured, yet **many hope for greater welcome and cultural inclusion in a new way of being Church.** It is important to know and respect the culture of indigenous communities and to give space and voice as they often suffer from neglect and are separated from the dominant culture. There is also a growing diaspora of Indigenous Peoples as migrant communities coming from the vulnerable islands and previously productive lands, and who are welcomed and recognized in other countries by Church communities. The Dicastery for Culture and Education, Apostolic Constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*, on the Roman Curia and its Service to the Church in the World seeks to be more inclusive by promoting and encouraging “dialogue between the diverse cultures present within the Church, thus fostering mutual enrichment.” (PE Art. 156). This reality continues to need attention with particular reference to indigenous cultures if full human needs and participation are to be met.

*“I come from Tuvalu, a small island to the north of Fiji, which is highly affected by climate change-related sea level rise. Tuvalu is only 26 sqm of land with a 10,000 population. So, our language, our culture, our identity, who we are as Tuvaluans or who we are as people from the Pacific, we are determined by the land. So, we still have that spiritual connection. So that’s why migration, relocation for our people is not easy as what others may think. Tuvalu is literally submerging now. We are heading towards the point of no return.” – Maina Talia, Tuvalu.**

3. The indigenous are constantly sensitive to the welcome they receive in the Church and many times find themselves left outside. **Community engagement entails being involved in the cultures’ concerns and celebrations.** This is a way for the Church to move its mission and to engender self-growth and the identity sought.

*“We’re built on spirituality we understand about taking care of country. That’s our role, you know, it’s passed down through our bloodlines from generation to generation to take care of the land. She’s our mother. All of our ceremonies, our rituals, our celebrations are all to pay respect to the Creator Spirit, to God. We have had God with us since the beginning of time. Thousands of years, before the birth of Abraham, God was here working with my people. I think for so many years, our culture, our language has been suppressed in this country. We have so much to share. Please let us share it, let our contribution be joyfully received. We’re ready to give it. Are you ready receive it?” – Sherry Balcombe, an Olkola and Djabaguy woman, Australia. **

⁶ Quotes are marked with this asterisk (*) are from the Project: “Doing Theology from The Existential Peripheries, Oceania Region,” DPIHD, 2022.



The cry of the indigenous is not always recognized and it is not a matter of charity and relief but of growing and developing with local community and recognizing this in the mainstream Church with greater diversity of social pastoral and ministry engagement. There is a broad call for reenergizing formation at all levels. Furthermore, Indigenous communities seek to be heard and for many self-determination is yet to be acknowledged (French Polynesia, East Caledonia and West Papua).

4. Some Conferences share the need to integrate community engagements in the Church's mission and pastoral work, the accompaniment of marginal groups and gives importance to Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs). **There is much to learn from BECs and how they might operate**, especially in the context of the indigenous and how a better dialogue might form with greater participation.

"My relationship with the Church has gone back and forth. Church laws are severe, the pain I experienced was intense. I had a strong desire to enter religious life so I stayed with the sisters for five years as a working student. After a long reflection, I realized I wanted to get married and start a family. I wished to get married in Church, but because of the law, I was accused of being rude. I got very frustrated with the Church, and the people who serve in the Church. I no longer went to Church until I gave birth. We got married first in the traditional rite then got married eventually by another priest in Catholic rite. I am now the leader of KRISKA (neighboring families formation). I am still sad because many indigenous people, no longer attend mass. They have moved to other religions. But I hope that our fellow indigenous will come back. Sometimes, I wonder why the Church is so strict when it should be for the people." – Maura Lipanda, Pulangiyēn, Philippines.

The best way to deepen the relations in basic human communities is to explore the links and cultural ways of community dialogue calling for greater engagement and entering into their traditional processes of welcome and storytelling. It is important to accompany through the family and community traditional systems of social organizations in Indigenous areas. The Acts of the Apostles documents how they went around and helped build communities, they met other cultures and grew as they established the early Church. Today a new kind of ecclesial networking is finding relevance in the Church and emerging across the world and the challenge is in how this could contribute to the Churches of Oceania and Asia.

5. We are called to appreciate human vulnerability in personal and family trials, particularly when we spend time with the poor. Knowing the poor as friends rather than just as those in need transforms our experience of life. The experiences and needs of vulnerable people are reflected in Pope Francis's teaching. He elevates these concerns to be heard globally, while at the same time they are still understood locally. Increasing vulnerability and fear of the loss of home, community and land grows with the disastrous impact of the climate crisis.

The local encounter with Pope Francis was uplifting when he visited the Philippines after Typhoon Haiyan. Though his presence changed nothing about the disaster, he brought deep consolation and changed people's attitudes. Such spirituality enables people to embrace suffering with hope, this then becomes the occasion for conversion and motivation to act. Pope Francis has since spoken of this globally in Laudato Si': 'Our goal is ... to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal



suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it' (n.19). What justice and reconciliation this truth embodies when lived!

*"We give thanks for those voices from Oceania, speaking strongly to us, but what their voices did as we listened and listened and listened. They aggregated to such a point that we could not ignore the challenge and the question in those voices, particularly the Indigenous Peoples, because we learned that it is because loss of land and their fear of further loss of land, is a loss of who they are, people connected to land, not as titled owners, but as related in a spiritual connection of presence to the sacredness of the land of their birth. Such is the intrinsic relatedness of self, place, land, and spirit in their lives. They cannot exclude care of the land lest they exclude their very selves from having existence. – Sr. Adele Howard, RSM**

6. Human-environmental vulnerability now defining the lives of millions is acknowledged as an integral reality by the local to the universal Church. It is most directly and clearly expressed where and when it is at the forefront of how people exist from Pakistan to the Pacific evident in the continuing wake of disasters. With the failure again of the United Nations UNFCCC in November to reduce carbon production environmental vulnerability in terms of loss of food production and security from the oceans and the lands along with the loss of stabilizing biodiversity is of famine proportions that produces long term waves of migration. Our responsibility in caring for the environment calls for a greater faith participation in support of those suffering and the greater awareness and equitable action needed across the nations of the world.

"In the light of the insights which have emerged from the listening exercises on ecological conscience in the Oceania region, Christian systematic theology could be expanded to name the author of the intrinsic relationship between people, place, and all of creation as the Creator Spirit of God,

The insights of Pope Francis in Laudato Si' become a bridging document for two theological/world views - the rational logic of the scholastic theological tradition and the approach of participatory spiritual presence with its intrinsic relationship of people, place and all creation within the energy and mystery of the Creator Spirit.

*Indigenous People can lead the response to this most critical contemporary concern of our planet, that is, the need to take action to prevent the increasing damage and life-threatening effects of climate change. Why? Because they do not separate the problem and the concern from the reality of their faith tradition, their spirituality and their theology. It is all one. It is who they are. It is where they are. It is of God. It is the energy and mystery of the Creator Spirit." – Sr. Adele Howard, RSM**

The Asian context of the laity is expounded in FABC's Plenary Statements and the Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (1977); and "the prevailing socio-economic-cultural-political challenges as having significant effects on the laity" has long been discussed.⁷ Included in this is reference to Peter Senge's reflection that "Just as we are destroying biodiversity, we are destroying cultural diversity, the "gene pool" for cultural evolution,"...

⁷ Bertille, Charles. *Empowering Asia's Laity*, Claretian, 2014.



“Societies and cultures are being reengineered and religious institutions are under attack.”⁸ The challenge remains to bring this to action.

7. Common in many summaries is the focus on **the need for reflection and growth in self-identity, engagement in community and formation for mission** if there is going to be a greater cultural inclusion and response with care for creation. Story-telling and the teaching voice of the elders are critical in the formative process of sharing the vision of hope and peace amongst young people.

“According to the Pulangiyēn elders, the root word of Pulangi is ‘pulang,’ which means to sit up all night and wait to resolve a dispute. Pulang is a true characteristic of a serving datu (tribal leader). He takes upon himself that which must be sacrificed to maintain the peace.” Recognition of integrity gives the local context the strength to create opportunity with the youth. With opportunity comes responsibility, greater relationship in community and a leadership of service. The presence as accompaniment opens dialogue, so that the youth can define their identity, and sense of belonging in this world, bridging in a way so we can hear the other.

This is what gives peace, hope and integrity. When a culture can express a gratitude for life, a people can look for a way of life that will form a more sustainable livelihood. Here we recognize a culture’s uniqueness and contribution to society and work with society emerges.” - “Cultural integrity, rights, and accompaniment”, Promotio Iustitiae (No127, 2019/1)

8. There is a call to put more emphasis on the liturgy of the Church and not just practices, to **find more creative ways in how the Indigenous feel at home in gatherings** and can express themselves. Cultures and dialogue with forms of enculturated liturgy are acknowledged by the Dicastery for Liturgy (89 #3).

The indigenous have a deep sense of life and relationship with all of creation and the cosmos that is lived daily, seasonally and during the different stages of life from birth to death. Many can share a deep sense of incarnation that is surprising to those of an urban context where the professional life, personal growth and faith are often compartmentalized in time, space and human and other living company. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is thought to save the whole cosmos to the tiniest of diversity of creation and this is understood and lived by many indigenous.

*“All living reality is caught up in the energy of the Spirit of God, the active, engaged Creator, constantly being revealed through the Word who became flesh. And who lived among us fully and who is, forever, inextricably linked with all lands, oceans, waterways and with all creatures in the vastness of the cosmos. That is what the Indigenous peoples of Oceania brought us to see in a new way.” – Sr. Adele Howard, RSM**

9. The Church is reawakening to FABC when it gave importance to **the need for new types of ministries and new ways of including people and being Church**. The Church fulfils her prophetic function through “witness and service of the whole community” and not any one group. The bishops call on the Churches of Asia to create “new forms of ministries, alongside the existing ones.”⁹ They believe “the Lord never fails to endow His Churches,”

⁸ Senge, Peter. Rethinking the Future, ed. Rowan Gibson (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1998), 126.

⁹ Asian Colloquium on Ministries in the Church (Hong Kong, 1977) (FAPA I [ACMC, art. 51] 78).



but it is the duty of the Churches of Asia “to identify their present and future needs and also to recognise and encourage the corresponding charisms” ([art. 52] 78).

The bishops were convinced that the Church in Asia will “grow into her true self only if the love and service of Christ becomes more evident to all” ([art. 130] 91). This is the call for Asia and thus the urgency in developing the Church’s ministries. The development of varied forms of ministries “heralds a new era” in the life of the Church in Asia—more people reached, needs better met, communities served, Church more clearly seen as the Servant Church, a vibrant witness to Christ ([art. 114] 88).

The Spirit endows new forms of the charisms as needed. The need is to open spaces and acknowledge charisms given locally. “Enlarge the space of your tent”¹⁰ for dialogue allows for the emergence of new charisms and provide new spaces in the ministries.

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, the general rapporteur for the Synod, recently emphasized that in our apostolic and missionary discernment at this stage of the synodal process, we need to walk together, with the Pope, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus, “in order to mend our Church.”

Reinvigorating the Church’s voice on ecological and social justice is a call for all. The visions and actions shared need to be continuously redrawn to be inclusive of the marginal and indigenous and wide enough to see the state of creation and be more conscious of impact and needed care.

*RAOEN Steering Committee and Extended Consultative Group,
December 2022.*

¹⁰ The “Enlarge the Space of Your Tent” DCS
<https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/continental-stage/dcs/Documento-Tappa-Continentale-EN.pdf>



Listening to Indigenous Peoples and Talking as Church from Where We Are

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