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Pope Francis speaks by video message to members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Confe

Pope Francis speaks by video message to members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, Oct. 12, 2022, to mark the federation's 50 anniversary. (CNS screenshot/Vatican Media)

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As bishops across Asia celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, Pope Francis urged them to recognize the dignity and potential of their laypeople and to remember that the diversity that marks their cultures and churches is a gift to the church.

"Go forward, let the laity assume their baptism, their function as laypersons, and let the singularity of each one be respected, because the universal church is not the uniform church, no: She is universal, with respect for the particularity of every church," the pope said in a video message to the federation.

Bishops from 29 Asian countries, along with priests, religious and laypeople, were meeting Oct. 12-30 in Bangkok to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the federation

and look toward the future.

The federation was started in 1970 when St. Paul VI met with bishops from throughout Asia in Manila, Philippines. The anniversary celebrations had to be postponed for two years because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The preparatory document for the assembly said it would focus on five questions: "How can the church in Asia continue to become the good news in the light of the emerging realities? How could the FABC more effectively serve and support the bishops and their conferences in Asia? How can a renewed appreciation of the blessings and richness of Asia contribute to the church? How can the church in this part of the world contribute to a better Asia? How can the church in Asia contribute to the universal church?"

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In his message to the federation, Francis said that when Paul visited Manila in 1970, "he found a continent of great masses, made up largely of young people," and reflecting a diversity of cultures and religions.

"The bishops noted that the masses were awakening from fatalism to a life worthy of man; the young people were also awakening, they were idealistic, aware, concerned, impatient and restless; culturally diverse societies were awakening to become a true community of peoples," the pope said.

"This meant that the church in Asia was being called to be more authentically the church of the poor, the church of the young, and a church in dialogue with fellow Asians of other confessions," he continued.

Francis assured the bishops of his prayers for their meeting and emphasized the importance he sees in frequent meetings of regional bishops' conferences, because "in doing so, the church is formed, is strengthened along the way.