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# A congress for the laity in Asia without the 'church of Asia'?

Paul Hwang | Aug. 31, 2010

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**Commentary**

SEOUL -- Tomorrow, Sept. 1, the Korean Catholic church holds a big event, the "Congress of Catholic Laity in Asia." Some 200 clergy, religious and laity from various countries in Asia will take part in the week-long event, along with some 200 local Catholics. As a layperson in the local church, I am delighted and welcome the congress with my whole heart.

It will be a good opportunity for lay people in Asia to discuss realities in the continent and help the church of Asia discern "the sign of the times."

In fact, the Vatican is the "real" host of this event with help from the local bishops' conference and lay apostolate council of Korea. The Vatican holds various meetings throughout the world with no regard for the region and time. The Asian bishops' synod, which took place in Rome in 1996 is a good example. We have seen this kind of thing happen often. It is not a problem; rather I see it positively, because it is a good initiative to gather the "People of God" on the level of not a region or country but the whole continent. In that, the Vatican can take a leading role.

What has disturbed me, however, is the fact that neither the Korean church nor the Vatican consulted with the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, the FABC, the representative body of the national bishops' conferences in Asia with regard to the congress. I asked Virginia Saldanha, who recently retired from the post of secretary general of FABC Office of Laity, what she knew about the congress. She told me in an e-mail that neither she nor her successor have received any news on the event from either the Vatican or the Korean church, except that Archbishop Rolando Tirona, president of FABC Office of Laity, received an invitation in 2009.

On the Vatican's Web site, Cardinal Stanislaw Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, writes that "the congress will be directly organized by the council" in collaboration with the local church. Even if the Vatican had a plan to organize the event directly, it should have consulted the FABC first, simply because the Asian bishops' body is the representative body of bishops in the churches of Asia. They as church leaders are not supposed to be isolated from church activities like this event taking place in Asia.

I could not help but raise the question: Has the Vatican or its Council for the Laity forgotten one of the major teachings of the Second Vatican Council, "collegiality of bishops and laity"? I cannot help but say that the Vatican has made a critical mistake by ignoring such collegiality of the bishops and the faithful.

The Vatican's forgetfulness also implies that the FABC is neutralized or is powerless. Regardless of the

Vatican's intention, that is directly against one of the most important social teachings of the Catholic church, namely, "complementarity."

Since the hierarchical church depends on the order of ranks and classes like pope, bishop, priest -- similar to ranks in the army -- such complementarity can easily be shaken or broken as the order of ranks becomes confused and ruined. In the army, for example, a regimental commander should not directly control company commanders by giving directions or orders without consultation with the battalion commander responsible for the company commanders. If it happens, the battalion commander becomes useless and neutralized. The same is true with the FABC in relation to the congress prepared and managed by Vatican.

The necessary question, then, is: "Is this a Roman laity congress or an Asian laity congress?"

I have seen the prayer written for the congress by the Vatican council. I do not find in it the creative FABC spirit, which originated in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council but has been expressed in the meetings of the Asian bishops since they first met in 1970 in Manila. That spirit has been characterized by a "three-fold dialogue": Dialogues with the poor, with diverse cultures and with the great religious traditions.

Is it too much for a lay church worker like me to dream that the congress would be genuinely Asian and not Roman, so that the churches in Asia would become truly the church of Asia which is deeply rooted in Asian soil?

[Paul Hwang is chief of the Center for Asian Theology Solidarity. The center works to build networks among Asian theologians and church activists by holding various conferences and forums under the auspices of the lay-centered Woori Theology Institute based on Seoul.]

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