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## Vatican owes Asian bishops apology for bumping conference

by Thomas C. Fox

Perspective

It is sometimes said Asians are patient. Yes, perhaps, but from my experience, I also find them to be proud. They are especially proud of their cultures and rich histories. Out of this comes deep national pride.

The downside of this sense of history and pride is the pain many Asians carry as they reflect on centuries of Western colonial subjugation. In the West, this is merely something for the history books. In the East, it's a memory that can color identity and global relationships.

Among Asian Catholics, there can exist another layer of psychic angst. Catholicism in most of Asia is directly traceable to colonialism. The result is that Asian Catholics can get branded with propagating a foreign religion. This is why inculturation of the faith, finding ways to blend Catholicism with local customs and rites, has been so vital to Asian Catholic leaders in recent years. Many Asian Catholics seem to have to prove to someone they are true nationalists. This can be a heavy burden.

I mention this to help explain why the Vatican decision last month to call a consistory that conflicted with a major assembly of Asian bishops -- an assembly two years in the planning -- was so unforgivably insensitive. From any point of view, particularly from an Asian point of view, to say nothing of a Christian point of view, the decision to call a conflicting consistory was the cause of cruel humiliation.

A gathering of about 100 Asian bishops, originally scheduled for Nov. 16-25, had to be rescheduled after the Vatican announced last month it would hold the consistory in Rome to create six new cardinals.

After two years of planning, the 10th plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was to be held in Vietnam to celebrate 40 years of Asian episcopal pastoral work.

Protocol requires the Asian cardinals and other prominent Asian bishops attend the Roman consistory. One of the newly named cardinals, Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle, heads the archdiocese of Manila in the Philippines.

The Vatican announcement forced Vietnamese bishops and FABC officials to find alternative dates, causing the bishops to rearrange their calendars and reschedule flights in and out of Vietnam. It also forced the Vietnamese bishops to petition the Hanoi communist government for new visas for their guests. One can only imagine the dynamics of those awkward conversations.

After days of uncertainty, a new set of dates for the assembly was agreed upon: Dec. 10-16 in the same venue, on the grounds of a seminary 50 miles west of Ho Chi Minh City.

History helps set the context of this ecclesial blunder: It was in November 1970 Pope Paul VI visited Manila and was greeted by Asian bishops from throughout the region. It was an exciting moment, full of energy and purpose. In the wake of that meeting, the Asian bishops decided to petition Rome to form a pan-Asian federation to better handle common church challenges, both cultural and economic in nature. That move was rebuffed by the Roman Curia, who did not want another set of bishops making decisions in faraway Asia. After months of getting nowhere, the Asian bishops asked Pope Paul to intervene. They received permission, and the FABC was set to seed. Rome insisted, however, that the FABC would not deal with matters of faith and morals, only pastoral concerns. An agreement was reached.

During the last four decades, the FABC has produced a wealth of pastoral documents, stressing the importance of the local churches, inculturation and dialogue. Paper after paper stressed "the triple dialogue" with the poor, with local cultures and with local religions. As best they could and as often as possible, the Asian bishops wrote that successful evangelization requires building local churches upon local cultures, languages and practices. Witnessing to the faith became the means of spreading the faith. FABC documents reminded Western Catholics that Jesus had been an Asian and that Christianity had first grown in Asia before it ever reached Rome. Asian pride was at play here.

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Some of the forcefulness of the many pastoral documents has abated somewhat in recent years with the appointments of more conservative and precisely chosen Roman-leaning bishops throughout Asia. But FABC's rich history cannot go away.

The FABC has yielded "an impressive body of documents that are incredibly rich, amazingly visionary, and truly worth careful reading and study," wrote missionologist Fr. Stephen Bevan, a member of the Society of the Divine Word.

Let's be clear: Any Catholic gathering in Vietnam is touchy and subject to government scrutiny. Being a Catholic leader in Vietnam requires working within the constraints imposed upon the church by the Hanoi government. Organizing an assembly in Vietnam of bishops from throughout Asia is no easy task and required much negotiation. Certainly the event will get a prominent place in recorded Asian histories.

This year's 10th FABC gathering is especially noteworthy as it heralds 40 years of Asian episcopal

collaboration.

That the meeting was rescheduled days before it was to have begun will mean energy and air will have been sucked out of it when it takes place next month.

"Certainly there are a lot of inconveniences for this change," Bishop Nguyễn Văn Khảm, vice general secretary of the Vietnamese bishops' conference and part of the archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City, wrote in an email to me. "Anyway we try the best possible to adjust to the situation. I hope it is also a sign of our service and communion with the universal church and the church in Asia as well."

This was typical Asian understatement. When will Rome learn?

As long as Roman clerics govern with such insensitivity and disregard, as long as they act not unlike the Asian colonial masters of yesteryear, they will continue to humiliate and deplete the efforts of their fellow bishops in Asia to spread the faith.

I find myself asking if the Vatican would have chosen a conflicting consistory date had, say, the European bishops been meeting in Madrid? Or would the Vatican have delayed the consistory a week or two?

We Catholics have enormous respect for our popes. No one in Asia, it appears, is pointing a finger at Pope Benedict for this colossal blunder. Instead, one source told me, some have placed the blame on the shoulders of Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, "who made the decision without any consideration" of the FABC assembly. Just weeks earlier, Bertone had appointed a papal envoy to the FABC gathering, making it difficult for him to say he did not know the conflict would arise.

So for the moment, the consistory will go forward and the FABC assembly will be delayed. It is unlikely the Asian bishops will complain openly as they swallow their pride once again and get on with their missions. But the inconsiderate manners of their Roman fellow has been noted and remembered for some time to come.

An apology to the Asians is in order. But I'm not holding my breath.

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