INTEGRITY OF MISSION
IN THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL IN ASIA:
THE NARRATIVES OF JESUS IN THE LIVING STORIES OF ASIA

By
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INTRODUCTION
First of all I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to attend this IAMS Conference and to present a paper in this august gathering of mission thinkers. This is the very first time that I attend such a meeting. It is understandable, because I am not a missiologist. I am a member of a missionary congregation which is involved in missionary work and reflection. Some of the ideas presented here, such as prophetic dialogue, are the result of our common reflection on the mission experience of our Society in the five continents, which I try to develop further. When I first received the invitation from IAMS organizing committee, I was apprehensive about accepting it. Later on I decided to accept it for two reasons. First, this is a good occasion to have some evaluation of the missionary life and praxis of our religious Society in the light of what the experts say about mission. Secondly, as someone who comes from outside of this field of special studies, I would feel free to make an unfamiliar proposition and to ask some unusual questions to the missiologists, with the hope that such questions might arouse our creative imagination.

Let me begin by clarifying some of the basic presuppositions of this paper. First of all, we are all familiar with the different paradigms used in speaking about mission. The model used in this presentation is the paradigm of the Reign of God. Mission is first of all “missio Dei” (RM 12-20), God’s self-communication and saving act which stretches from the first creation to the new creation. The mission of the Church is a participation in this saving act of the Triune God, namely in the love of the Father made known in Christ Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit (AG 2). Since Vatican II we have become more aware that the Reign of God is a reality deeper and more extensive than the Church (LG 5). The Church’s mission is nothing else than giving witness to the Reign of God, to its universality and openness, which embraces all humanity i.e. all nations and cultures throughout history. As a sacrament of salvation in God’s hand, the Church can no longer claim that it monopolizes the whole truth and salvation as it once did. Once we acknowledge that the Reign of God is greater than the Church, we become more open and humble to recognize what God has done to different peoples, in various cultures and religions. The first act of mission, therefore, is listening with full respect to what God has done to others. This kind of awareness will slowly, but radically, transform our way of thinking and doing mission.

Secondly, I maintain a useful distinction between mission and pastoral work. Through its mission a church or a Christian community reaches out to others. In pastoral work it takes care of its own members. Of course in some cases the borderline blurs and the two fields simply overlap. David J. Bosch is correct in saying that “Mission is a multifaceted ministry, in respect of witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualization, and much more.” However, in order to maintain the distinction between mission and pastoral work, I would give one qualification to his statement. All these kinds of work become mission when we do them as an act of reaching out to others. The question is: Who are these others to whom we reach out in mission? At the time of St. Paul the others were the Gentiles, all peoples outside the Jewish community. Later in the Catholic Church the term missio ad gentes is used indicate the outreach to all other peoples outside Christian communities; and for many centuries there was a presumption that outside the Church there was no salvation. Now, however, our understanding of mission has radically changed. We realize that God’s saving act has been present and continues to be present throughout history, in various cultures and religions (RM 28-29).

3 Ibid., 512
Two things are implied in the proposition that God’s Reign is deeper and greater than the Church mentioned above. On the one hand, we believe that the Reign of God is actively present within the Church but is not identical with the Church. There are elements within the Church which are contrary to the values of the Kingdom and therefore need purification and redemption. On the other hand, we acknowledge that people of different faith communities, of different cultures and religions in their own way have experienced the saving act of God. Of course they are also in need of full redemption and ultimate salvation. Mission, therefore, is no longer a one way traffic. Just as we Christians give witness to the Reign by sharing with others our own faith-experience of God, so too the others give witness to the saving act of God in their midst and thus share with us their faith-experience. The Hindus, the Buddhists, the Moslems, the Confucians, the followers of Tao, the adherents of cosmic religions, the humanists and others can share with us their faith-experience of God and the fundamental values of their life. Mission requires as its prerequisite our readiness to listen to others and a sincere openness to share our faith with them. This will bring us to the notion and praxis of dialogue.

Thirdly, I understand Asia as a pluralistic reality. It is home to nearly two third of the world’s population with their different cultures, languages, customs, beliefs, traditions, social structures, and political systems. It is impossible to characterize Asian peoples in general with the same cultural or social category. If, for instance, one describes Asian peoples using socio-cultural characteristics like “tolerance”, “complementarity and harmony”\(^4\), another can easily contradict this statement by showing that the bloodiest ethnic and religious conflicts have been occurring all the time in different parts of Asia. The political panorama in Asia is also highly complex, ranging from democratic systems to military dictatorships, from secular models to theocratic governments. From the socio-economic point of view we find in this continent a whole range of social classes with an enormous gap between the poorest of the poor to the richest of the rich. Related to this social gap is the problem of population growth, urbanization, migration, the global market economy, malnutrition and hunger (to mention only a few). The reality of the poor in Asia remains a great challenge for humanity and a criticism to all our theology and ideology.

Asia is also the cradle of the world’s major religions and spiritual traditions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Shintoism, Zoroastrianism, Jainism, Sikhism. Christianity in Asia is a very tiny minority living among the people of other faith communities. With the exception of the Philippines, the Church in Asia is the Church in diaspora\(^5\). These small communities in diaspora have experienced many tensions, conflicts and persecutions, but they have also learned how to live peacefully with other faith communities, practicing a concrete dialogue of life with others for the common good of the whole society.

This pluralistic situation of Asia is aggravated by the fact that very often the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern paradigms of civilization exist side by side at the same time and place. It is possible the people of the same community have different horizons of understanding and world-views. For this reason the same words of the same language may have quite different meanings and connotations. I experienced this concretely during a SEDOS seminar in Rome in the year 2000. During that seminar somebody was speaking about reconciliation. All of a sudden someone from the audience retorted quite emotionally: “Please don’t use that term! It is simply a nice cover-up to appease the suffering of the victims”. For the first time I understood, not theoretically but existentially, that even basic notions like truth, justice, faith, humanity, love and so on are equivocal and can have different connotations for different people.

I will develop this paper in three steps: Listening to the Word of God, Dialogue as the Way of Mission, and the Narratives of Jesus in the living stories of Asia.

1. LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Some years ago I celebrated Mass for a religious community. For that particular occasion I used all the prayers from the poetic text of Gitanjali.\(^6\) After the Mass they thanked me for the celebration especially for the beautiful prayers. They were surprised when I told them that I simply took those prayers from the book of Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian poet, who was a Hindu. The same feeling of surprise I had when, as a young

\(^4\) Ecclesia In Asia (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II), 6

\(^5\) Mangunwijaya, Gereja Diaspora (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1999).

student, I read Bhaghawat-Gita or some beautiful part of the Holy Koran. I asked myself then: “As a Christian, should I confine my understanding of the revealed word of God only to the Christian Bible?”

In order to answer this question I would attempt to understand the Word of God in its widest sense. Every proposition about God is symbolically asserted. So, what do we mean when we speak about the word of God? In its most fundamental sense the word of God is nothing else than the self-revelation or self-manifestation of God. And the first act of revelation is the creation. “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” (Gen. 1:1). In so far as it is a self-manifestation of God the whole creation can be called the word of God. The word of God is, however, not verbal but ontological.

“The heavens declare the glory of God
the vault of heaven proclaims his handiwork
day discourses of it to day
night to night hands on the knowledge

No utterance at all, no speech,
not a sound to be heard,
but from the entire earth the design stands out
this message reaches the whole world”. (Ps. 19: 1-4)

Not only the whole creation in general, but every single creature is an ontological word.
“I say to a tree: Speak to me of God!
And suddenly it blossoms” (Nikos Kazantzakis).

Of course in theology we make a clear distinction between the Eternal Word in God and the divine self-manifestation in the creation. The prologue of the Gospel of John, however, beautifully relates the Eternal Word and the created word.

“In the beginning there was the Word:
the Word with God
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came into being,
not one thing came into being
except through him” (Jn. 1: 1-3).

It is through the mystery of incarnation that the Eternal Word became a created word. “The Word became flesh, and lived among us” (Jn. 1:14).

If indeed the whole creation can be called the word of God (and for this reason we say that the word of God is ontological rather than verbal), we may ask further: What is the first word of God addressed to me? The first word addressed to me personally is my very existence.

“It is not in heaven, so that you need to wonder, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us and bring it down to us, so that we can hear and practice it?’ Nor it is beyond the seas, so that you need to wonder, ‘Who will cross the seas for us and bring it back to us, so that we can hear and practice it?’ No, the word is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to put into practice” (Dt. 30:12-14).

The heart signifies the core of human person and the mouth refers to our ability to proclaim the word. The existential word of God is written in the very core of my existence and urges me to proclaim it just as “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19: 1). This existential word is so unique and original that in the entire universe there is no replica of this word. God is an artist who never repeats his own handiwork.

The statement about the uniqueness and originality of each ontological word is not a plea for individualistic vision of human existence and its egological structure. We learn from linguistics that every single word is

still a potential word. It becomes actual word when is related to other words in a living discourse. The same is with human existence. I actualize myself as an existential word only in relation to others.

According to Christian faith, the most original existential Word of God is Jesus Christ. He is so original and so transparent, that in him and through him the presence of God is fully manifested. Before the Gospel became written narratives of Jesus, he is the Gospel, the manifestation of God’s love and compassion. He himself is the Good News in a human person, so that everything he does, narrates, and proclaims, becomes the manifestation of God’s love reaching out to all humanity.

What is said about Jesus to a certain degree can be said also to all figures of faith in the Bible: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Moses, Miriam, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Hosea, Ester, Judith, Mary, Peter, John, James, Paul and so on. Through these people the word of God is manifested in human life. The narratives of their life were collected in the Bible and the name of God is forever connected to their names as God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Jesus of Nazareth, who now becomes your God and my God.

In the stories of these great figures we find also some important events which, in Christian belief, are considered as founding events and as such they become the moments of revelation par excellence. The call of Abraham, the exodus of Israel, the life, death and resurrection of Christ are such prominent events.

“These events found an epoch because they have the twofold characteristic of both founding a community and of delivering it from a great danger, which, moreover may take diverse forms. In such instances, to speak of revelation is to qualify the events in question as transcendent in relation to the ordinary course of history. The whole faith of Israel and of the early church is tied up here in the confession of the transcendent character of such nuclear founding and instituting events”.

With regard to the Sacred Scripture I want to say two things. In the Christian communities the Sacred Scripture is simply called the Word of God and rightly so. However, in the light of what has been said so far, I would consider the Scripture as the fixed Word of God in the written form. If we may use a simile, I would compare the Bible to a barn where we gather the grains of Word from many past generations. But these grains become the living Word of God when people in a faith community listen to the Word, appropriate its meaning, and live according to the inspiration of the Word. Then and only then does the written text of the Bible become a living Word once again.

Now about the content of the Scripture I completely agree with contemporary scholars who say that the richness of the Word of God in the Bible may never be reduced to certain dogmatic propositions. The meaning of God’s Word in the Bible must be perceived in all its richness according to the various literary genres (narrative, prophetic, prescriptive, wisdom, hymnic, and so on). Just like a poetic text proposes a multiplicity of meanings, so also the text of the Bible. It is open to a multiple interpretations with new contextualizations and re-contextualizations.

The point I want to make in broadening the notion of word of God is the following: If God manifests himself in the whole creation, in human life and history, and if the Kingdom of God is a reality deeper and much greater than the Church, then it is not difficult to acknowledge the revelation of God’s Word in other religions and cultures. Although as a Christian I believe that Jesus is the most transparent and full manifestation of God’s love for humanity, I can readily accept that God manifests himself in various ways throughout history, in many cultures and religions. In the apostolic exhortation Ecclesia in Asia of Pope John Paul II I find a beautiful sentence: “The Spirit who moved upon Asia in the time of the patriarchs and prophets, and still more powerfully in the time of Jesus Christ and the early Church, moves now among Asian Christians, strengthening the witness of their faith among the peoples, cultures, and religions of the continent”.

For me this assertion is forceful but it is still too narrow (if one understands it in an exclusive way). Instead of saying that “The Spirit moves now among Asian Christians”, I would prefer to say “The Spirit moves now among all the believers of various faith communities and among all people of good will.”

2. DIALOGUE AS THE WAY OF MISSION

9 Ibid., pp. 73-95
10 Ecclesia in Asia, p. 49
Christianity in Asia, with the exception of the Philippines, is a very small minority scattered among billions of people of other religions and convictions. This experience of living as tiny groups in diaspora cannot but teach Christians in Asia how to live with others. Many a time there have been conflicts, tensions, persecutions. And yet each time Christians learn how to survive, how to interact and to live side by side with other faith communities. More than that, they also have positive experiences of meeting many good people among the followers of other faith traditions, people with spiritual wisdom and authentic religiosity. This kind of encounter teaches them something about dialogue in a very concrete way. Long before the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) began to speak officially about the threefold dialogue\textsuperscript{11}, people had already learned how to dialogue through their actions and life.

Dialogue presupposes two things. On the subjective level it presupposes that I respect the other person as a subject with autonomy and freedom as myself. From this perspective dialogue is the basic attitude of respectful listening to others and of openness to communicate oneself to others. On the objective level it presupposes that every person and every human community has some valuable experience of the ultimate meaning of life which they can share with others. If I from my part am convinced that I can share my faith or my experience of the ultimate meaning of life in God with others, I must be prepared to listen to others as well. The ultimate Truth is always greater than my own experience and knowledge of truth, and no one, no institution, can claim to possess the whole truth.

Understood as the basic attitude of being open to others, dialogue is the only viable way of mission.

Two objections can be raised. (In fact these objections were already raised during an international meeting of missionaries). The first objection says that there is a priority of preaching the Good News. In other words, we have to proclaim the Gospel first, and then dialogue. It seems to me that this objection tends to reduce the meaning of dialogue to discussion. If, as we said, dialogue is the basic attitude of being open to others, then dialogue does not contradict the proclamation of the Gospel at all. What is necessary is that we proclaim the Good News in a dialogical way, not primarily by words but by our life. As St. Francis of Assisi used to say: “Always preach, if necessary use words”. If God respects human freedom in his act of salvation, how can we pretend to proclaim the Good News without respecting the others or without listening to their experiences?

The second objection says: “You cannot dialogue with the oppressors”. If this were true, what would be the alternative? Either you submit yourselves to the oppression (which is an immoral act) or you take arms to kill the oppressors, which means using violence against violence. I believe that we ought to dialogue even with the oppressors in order to break the circle of violence. In politics we have some shining examples of people like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela. Their lives have become a prophetic affirmation that only dialogue can transform the vicious circle of violence into a virtuous circle of justice, forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. Dialogue is another name for the Gospel message and its appeal to love even one’s enemy.

The Christian attitude of dialogue in mission is more appropriately expressed in terms of “prophetic dialogue”\textsuperscript{12}. A prophet listens and proclaims the Word of God. In the proclamation of the Word, the prophet also denounces injustice and evil practices in society which are contrary to the will of God, with the consequence that the prophet might undergo persecution and suffering. The same is true with dialogue in mission. What we are supposed to do is to listen, follow, witness and proclaim the Word of God. However, since we believe that God has spoken also to other peoples of other cultures and religions, mission means first of all listening to the Word of God coming to me through others. I let myself be addressed, be enriched, criticized and purified from my ideological and idolatrous attitude in the encounter with others. On the other hand, as far as I understand and am inspired by the Word of God coming to me through Gospel within the Christian community, I share the richness of my faith-experience, I criticize the presence of injustice and all evil elements in a culture and society which enslave people, which are contrary to the will of God. Practiced in this manner, prophetic dialogue in mission can involve risk. It is possible that a missionary, like a prophet, has to undergo persecution and martyrdom because of his or her mission.


\textsuperscript{12} In Dialogue with the Word, p. 31
In our common reflection during the General Chapter of the Divine Word Missionaries of 2000 we formulated dialogue as “an attitude of solidarity, respect, and love that is to permeate all of our activities.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 31. See also GS no. 3} There are three dimensions of dialogue according to this definition. First, through solidarity someone commits himself or herself to participating in the life destiny of others, especially with those who suffer, with the poor and marginalized\footnote{Jon Sobrino and Juan Hernandez Pico, *Theology of Christian Solidarity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: 1985).}. However, despite the best of intentions and efforts, any act of solidarity has its limits. The other remains the other; there is an aspect of alterity which one cannot enter or participate. The alterity of others necessitates the respect of the one who wants to enter and participate. The third dimension is love which binds us together in spite of the differences. At the same time, this dialogical love should be qualified by solidarity and respect. Without solidarity, love would not be credible; without respect love could easily degenerate into a paternalistic or patronizing attitude.

Who are the addressee and the addressee of mission as dialogue? If the Church is missionary by its nature, then every Christian community is the addressee of mission. However, within the Christian communities there are people who in a very special way dedicate themselves to mission and therefore are called missionaries. These people are sent in the name of the Lord by the Christian communities and they in turn remind Christian communities of their missionary call. The missionaries are the addressees of mission par excellence. However, if mission is a dialogical process, then every addressee is at the same time an addressee and vice versa.

We need further to clarify the addressees or our partners in missio ad gentes. For many years FABC has spoken about the threefold dialogue, namely dialogue with people of other cultures, with people of different religions and with the poor. Recently, however, the Divine Word Missionaries added another aspect to dialogue while proposing the concept of “fourfold prophetic dialogue”\footnote{In Dialogue with the Word, pp. 30-36.}.

\begin{itemize}
  \item[a)] Dialogue with faith seekers
  The first aspect is dialogue with faith seekers and people who have no faith community. In our contemporary world there are more and more people who do not belong to any faith community. In France, for instance, 47\% of the population describe themselves as a-religious or atheists; in Germany 38\%\footnote{Peter Huenermann gives this information in his paper presented during SEDOS Missionary Congress for the Jubilee Year, Rome, 3-8 April 2000, with the title “Evangelization of Europe?”}. (I do not know the statistical data about the situation in Asia, but I presume that in Mainland China many people have been estranged from all faith communities). In mission we reach out to all these people through our life and service, giving witness to the Reign of God’s love. We have to remember, however, that for missionaries from Asia working in Europe it is much more difficult to reach out to those new a-religious people in the post-Christian era. These people may criticize the Church and challenge us to live our faith more authentically. We need to listen to them because, as Ricoeur has shown, even atheists can help to purify our faith if we take an appropriate attitude towards their criticism\footnote{Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 440-467}.

  \item[b)] Dialogue with the poor and marginalized
  In many parts of Asia Christians live among a great mass of very poor people. Mission among the poor means being in solidarity with them, participating in their life and their struggle for a more just and humane society. From their part the poor offer us an opportunity to undergo a radical conversion. As Pieris puts it: “The poor (the destitute, the dispossessed, the displaced and the discriminated) who form the bulk of Asian peoples, plus their specific brand of cosmic religiosity constitute a school where many Christian activists re-educate themselves in the art of speaking the language of God’s reign, which is the language of liberation which God speaks through Jesus. Neither the academic nor the pastoral magisterium is conversant with this evangelical idiom.”\footnote{Aloysius Pieris, “An Asian Paradigm: Inter-religious Dialogue and Theology of Religions”, *MONTH*, April 1993, p. 130}

  \item[c)] Dialogue with people of different cultures
  The main issue in the dialogue with people of different cultures is the inculturation of the Gospel and the evangelization of cultures, which are two aspects of the same missionary dialogue. For many centuries in the
Catholic Church the universality (catholicity) of the Church tended to be identified with the uniformity of doctrines (formulated in dogmas), of rites and laws. Only after the Vatican II has there been a great movement of inculturation in order to ‘incarnate’ the Gospel message into the different languages and cultures. People now listen to the Gospel in their own language, they sing and dance and celebrate their life of faith according to their own culture. The inculturation of theology is more difficult. It is a long-term project. Only from the authentic praxis of faith can follow a local and original theological reflection because theology is nothing else but a critical reflection on our life of faith. How can we now envisage the relation between the particularity of the local Church and the catholicity of the universal Church? First of all, I assume that what we call “universal Church” is the *ecclesia ecclesiarum*, the communion of Christian communities in the Lord. I propose therefore to use the paradigm of art in order to better understand the relation between particularity and universality. In the case of art if somebody simply copies the work of another artist, he or she is not a real artist but an epigon. It is a paradoxical truth of art that the more unique and original a work of art is the more universal value it has. I think the same thing can be said about the particularity and universality of the Church. The more authentic and original the life of faith in the local churches, the more universal (catholic) value can it contribute to the communion of the Church. If, however, the local church simply imitates what is done in Rome, then it is an imitation Church, not yet an authentic Church rooted in the local soil.

On the other hand, every culture contains elements of alienation, elements which enslave people and which do not promote the well-being of humanity. The proclamation of the Gospel in such a situation, therefore, will assume the form of a prophetic criticism of and spiritual contribution to the life of a particular culture so that that culture can truly become the celebration of human life before God.

d). Dialogue with people of other religions

All great religions teach about justice, peace, solidarity, compassion, love. And yet we have learned from history that there has been a lot of enmity, hatred, conflicts, and wars among people of different religions. Many factors (social, political, racial, etc.) may play their role in provoking such conflicts. But from the religious point of view, the main reason for conflict is that the adherents of each religion tend to absolutize its particular tenets and hold the claim that only it possesses the whole truth and salvation to the exclusion of others. If we acknowledge that the Reign of God is greater than any religion and that other people in one way or another have experienced the love of God, then we would be more open to dialogue and collaboration.

Inter-religious dialogue can take various forms which together may constitute a ‘virtuous circle’. The first form is dialogue of life where people of various religions live together in the same society with tolerance and respect for each other. Secondly, through dialogue of action they collaborate on some concrete projects such as helping the victims of natural disaster, promoting human rights, improving education for poor children and so on. Thirdly, people of different religions can also pray together and share their faith. To give one example: After the big riot in Jakarta, May 13-15, 1998, where 1190 people were killed, women activists of different religions (Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism) organized several prayer meetings where they openly denounced the act of violence and prayed together for justice, reconciliation and peace in a wounded nation. Finally there can be dialogue on the theological or doctrinal level. Here very often we have institutional obstacles. For this reason a group of Islamic, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist theologians in Indonesia formed a forum of interfaith dialogue, where each participant is supposed to speak from his or her own personal reflection without officially representing any institution.

Dialogue of life and action paves the way for theological dialogue. In its turn theological dialogue should enlighten and promote dialogue of life and action.

Through creative inter-religious dialogue we may hope that people of various religious traditions can work together for a new spirituality which can inspire human beings in a post-modern world.

To end the section on dialogue, I would like to say a few words about mission as it is assumed by the missionaries from Asia. If we now compare the situation of European missionary pioneers who came to Asian countries in the past centuries and contemporary Asian missionaries who are sent to work in other countries, including in Europe and Americas, we can see a significant difference. In general terms we may say that European missionaries in the past came from a position of superiority. First of all, political superiority: They came from a colonizing country to a colonized country. This fact alone gave them a certain powerful status and authority. This authority was further assured by a special commission by the highest Church hierarchy for “plantatio ecclesiae” in the colonized region. They also enjoyed protection and certain
privileges granted to them by the colonial governments. This does not mean that they always supported or collaborated with the colonial government. On the contrary! In the case of Indonesia, for instance, they often stood at the side of the local people, learned local languages and cultures, promoted education through schools, improved health care, and defended the rights of the indigenous people.

Secondly, cultural superiority. They came from a developed country to the so-called underdeveloped country. And as children of their epoch they assumed that the Western model of modern civilization was the ideal model for all humanity. For this reason they built schools, centers of training and education using the standard and curriculum of Europe. They were also financially supported by Christian communities in their home countries for many social projects.

Thirdly, religious superiority. The missionary pioneers from Europe knew very well that they were commissioned by the hierarchy in the name of the Lord in order to preach the Gospel, to baptize people, and to make them members of the Church, and thus bring salvation to those who lived in the darkness of sin and unbelief. Inspired by the conviction that there was no salvation outside the Church, they dedicated their life to this missionary goal with vigor and militancy. Closely connected to this feeling of religious superiority was the monolithic model of theology in the Catholic Church, with the assumption that the truth of the Christian faith had been formulated once and for all in the dogmas of the Church. The missionaries then knew exactly what they had to preach to others. They learned the local language and culture in order to convey the Christian doctrine which had been formulated. Due to this conviction of religious superiority they tended to disregard and sometimes even destroyed mythic-religious elements of the traditional religions.

Now the mission situation has changed. In the last 20 years the former mission countries like India, the Philippines, Indonesia have become mission-sending countries, while Europe has come to be seen as a new mission continent as well. Or to put it more exactly: The ‘locus’ of mission now-a-days is understood no longer so much in terms of geographical territory as in terms of specific missionary situations which can be found anywhere in all continents. Can we imagine what happens when missionaries from the small island of Flores in Indonesia, from Bohol in the Philippines, or from Tamilnadu in India are sent to work in Europe or the Americas? What kind of superiority do they have? Nothing! They seem to go empty handed. And the situation has become much more difficult for them because we are now living in a pluralistic world where the monolithic model of theology has been abandoned. The very fact that they are sent empty handed is their weakness and their strength at the same time.

First of all, it is their weakness. Many of them come from a rural background with their cultural heritage in the pre-modern worldview. But very soon they enter into the modern world through education and schools. Now they are further confronted with the post-modern condition. They live in tensions between three worldviews which are not easy to harmonize. These missionaries need much more time than their predecessors not simply to learn another language and culture but also to orient themselves within the tensions and conflicts between those worldviews.

And what can they concretely do in their mission? We know that former missionaries preached the Gospel, taught catechism, and baptized people; but they were also actively involved in education, health care, and in promoting social and economic development. All these were considered integral part of their mission. Today many of these jobs have been taken over by the state or secular institutions. When new missionaries are sent from Asia to Europe or America they cannot get involved in these fields. Even in teaching catechism or preaching many local people can do better than they.

From the religious perspective, former missionaries went to the countries where mythic-religious values were still predominant, whereas new missionaries are thrown into a secularized society. It is much more difficult to preach the Gospel in the post-Christian situation.

On the other hand, this kind of weakness can and should be the strength of the new missionaries. Here is a golden opportunity to follow the example of the first disciples of Jesus who were sent empty handed but who were inspired by the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Lord. The empty handed approach is therefore possible if their heart is full of faith, with the willingness to serve others as the Lord Jesus. Through the Spirit of the Crucified and Risen Lord human weakness (in socio-political sense) is transformed into evangelical *kenosis*. This approach becomes efficacious and fruitful on two preconditions. First, it presupposes that the missionaries believe in the people to whom they are sent. If you have nothing in your hand, and if you do not have any kind of superiority, then you have to rely on the people to whom you are sent. Missionaries are
expected to work not simply for the people (from a position of superiority), but to work with the people. Above all, this approach presupposes that missionaries believe in the One who calls and sends them, and find their strength and joy in union with the Lord. It is a mission from a contemplative presence. Their “approach to mission will be marked not so much by frenetic activity but by contemplative presence among God’s people”.19

3. THE NARRATIVES OF JESUS IN THE LIVING STORIES OF ASIA
The revelation of God’s Word in the Bible is primarily given in narratives. Of course there are many literary genres in the Bible. But all the commandments, prohibitions, laws, prayers and others are comprehensible only within the narrative of founding events such as the Exodus or the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Traditionally in most countries and cultures of Asia moral and religious values are told in myths and stories.

For many centuries theology in the Catholic Church (especially in the West) has been formulated as dogmatic assertions, that is, a critical and systematic formulation of matters of faith according to a certain philosophical framework. The advantage of dogmatic theology is that the content of our faith is formulated in a clear and rational way. The disadvantage is that people tend to identify the Word of God with dogmatic propositions and thereby reduce the inexhaustible richness of the Word to certain limited verbal expressions of it.

Contemporary hermeneutics and exegesis tell us that the Word of God in the Bible is much richer than any dogmatic content that can be drawn from the biblical text. Christian message is first of all not a doctrine but a narrative of God’s saving act, be it in the Exodus event or in the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. All doctrines are to be understood in relation to the narrative. But what is important to keep in mind is that every narrative is open to multiple interpretations. It is in the process of interpretation that a story is de-contextualized and re-contextualized again and again. The living Word of God is thus reincarnated every time a believing community reads the Bible, appropriates its meaning for itself, and puts it into practice in everyday life.

Narrative is all the more important because, as Ricoeur and others have shown, the identity of a person and that of a human community is a narrative identity. Christians read the story of the Gospel and interpret their lives in the light of the Gospel story, and then they weave the story of their own and their community’s life around the Gospel model.

Narrative has another advantage in comparison to dogmatic formulation. If dogmas tend to impose one theological framework on all and therefore is monolithic, the narrative, on the contrary, tends to hold the creative tension between unity and plurality. The unity of the same story remains but every time it is read it is understood in a different way, by a different people in a different context.

Vyasa, the reputed author of Mahabharata, once said: “If you listen to a story, your life changes”. Contemporary hermeneutics rediscovers and affirms this ancient truth concerning the transformative power of the narrative. Every narrative presents a textual world, that is, a proposed world. The reader or listener participates in this textual world when he or she interprets the text. “For what must be interpreted in the text is a proposed world in which I could inhabit and wherein I could project one of my own possibilities.”21 By appropriating the world proposed by text the interpreter transforms his or her actual world (understood as the total complex of references in which one lives). Since human existence is being-in-the-world, the transformation of my world implies the transformation of my self. “The metamorphosis of the world in play is also the playful metamorphosis of the ego”.22 To give one simple example: The story of the Good Samaritan proposes a new world and a new way of human relations which is different from the actual world of Jewish people at the time of Jesus. When a Christian like Martin Luther King appropriated the proposed world of the text, he experienced the metamorphosis of his own world and his own life within the context of American society of his time, which in its turn motivated him to transform the existing structure of the society in which he actually lived.

22 Ibid., 144
Jesus tells the parables of God’s Kingdom and later the Christian communities tell the story of Jesus as the best parables of God’s presence. This is so, because when Jesus tells the stories of God’s Reign he puts himself as the faithful witness to the truth of those narratives, which amounts to committing himself fully to the struggle for the realization of God’s Reign. His suffering, death, and resurrection are the consequences of his proclamation of God’s Reign.

In the pluralistic context of Asia, within the immense ocean of the poverty and the suffering of millions and millions of people, what can the missionaries in diaspora do? I propose that the missionaries take as their main job to tell the narratives of Jesus in the living stories of Asia. However, just as in the case of Jesus of Nazareth, telling the narratives of Jesus in the full sense of the word means to put oneself as a faithful witness to the truth of these narratives, with amounts to following Jesus in the struggle for the realization of God’s Reign.

As I see it, there are several things implied in the proposal to tell the narratives of Jesus in the living stories of Asia. (1) First of all, the missionaries have to listen attentively to the narratives of Jesus. (2) In a dialogical attitude (i.e. solidarity, respect, and love) they have to listen to the concrete stories of people, especially to the stories of those who suffer. (3) They have to weave together the narratives of Jesus in the living stories of people in such a way that the narratives of Jesus receive their actuality and the stories of the suffering people are transformed into the stories of hope and liberation. (4) They are the witnesses to the truth of Jesus’ narratives. “You are witnesses to this” (Lk.24: 49).

In honor of millions of poor people in Asia, let us now invite Jesus to tell us a story.

“There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.' He said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.'

But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.' He said, 'Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Lk. 16: 19-31).

The comment of a listener:
This story of Lazarus is one of the most powerful stories ever told by that genius story-teller of Nazareth. Jesus seems to put the nuclear power into this story to disorient our ordinary way of life in order to reorient it. It is disturbing and liberating at the same time.

I propose that we listen and interpret the main characters of the story progressively in three steps.

(1) At the first step of reading we see immediately the sharp contrast between the main characters of the story. There is extreme polarization in evidence. The rich man has everything; beautiful clothes and feast every day; he has a home and a family; he has the books of Moses and the prophets – which means that he
has the religious institutions at his disposal. The poor man, in contrast, has nothing: no property, no home, no family, and was so helpless that he could not even chase away the dogs that licked his wounds.

(2). On the second reading comes a surprise! The poor has something very important which the rich does not have. He has the name: Lazarus. The rich man in the gospel story has no name. He is simple called the rich man, which means that his person is identified with his possession, with the things he owns. For him to be is to have. Perhaps a person never descends so low as when he translates his whole dreams into silver and gold. The poor Lazarus is deprived of everything but he has a name, which means he has an identity as a person. He, therefore, is able to join all those who have names, such as Abraham, the prototype of a believer.

(3). On the third level we ask: Where is God in this extreme situation of injustice and human suffering? “Where is God”, asked Ellie Wiesel in the darkest night of Auschwitz. God seems to be completely absent, as he seems to be absent in this story. He is not mentioned a single time in the narrative.

The question “Where is God” is a very ancient and a modern question. We hear it in the Psalm 42:

“I have no food but tears
day and night
as all day long I am taunted:
‘Where is your God?’”.

This question echoes ever more powerfully in the secularized society of our time. This is also an existential question in the sense that in the middle of suffering every person feels that God is absent! The question drives a believing heart to search for God in the text of the story and in the text of his own life.

The name “Lazarus” is the Latin version of Jewish name “Eleazar”. And Eleazar means “God is my help”. The name of God is grafted in the name of the poor! According to the book of Revelation (chapter 14) the name of God will be written on the face of the blessed ones on the day of ultimate salvation. But this gospel story says: The name of God is written already now on the face of the destitute Lazarus. God identifies himself with the little ones, the outcast, the anawim. “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.” (Mt. 25: 40).

This is the core of the story. But from here I want to ask two further questions: (a). What is that unbridgeable abyss between Lazarus and the rich? (b). If Eleazar means “God is my help”, for whom this help would be?

(a). There is an unbridgeable abyss…

Actually the rich man did not do any harm to Lazarus, at least nothing criminal from the legal point of view. He did not afflict Lazarus, he did not persecute him, he did not throw him out; he just did not bother him! So, according to all legal and juridical procedures the rich man had done nothing wrong. This places in even more sharper focus the helplessness of the poor, for the law of the state and of the nations stands on the side of the rich.

And yet, the rich man is guilty, ethically and religiously; not because of any legal crime he committed but precisely because he did nothing at all. At this point I remember the poignant question of Dorothee Sölle posed when she gave us a series of special lectures many years ago when I was studying in Leuven: “What was wrong with the pious middle class Christians in Germany who remained silent when hundreds and hundreds of trains passed through our towns and villages bringing six millions Jews and other deportees to the concentration camps?” This ethical question imposes itself on us with regard to the suffering and starvation of millions of people in all corners of the world.

Back to our story: Along his life the rich never recognized the poor as a person, as Eleazar with the name of God written on his face. Hence, the abyss remains unbridgeable. God has entrusted us with the freedom to say yes or no, to love the other or to reject. Only we, each of us, can bridge the gap. According to Isaiah 58: 5-9a, only when we recognize the face of the poor and take care of them, we may pray and the Lord will answer: “Here I am”.

(b). If Eleazar means “God is my help”, for whom this help would be? At the beginning I thought that his help was only for the poor. Only later on I realized that the help is offered also to us, the rich, because

23 Here I paraphrase the saying of Kahlil Gibran in Sand and Foam (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 45
through the face of the destitute God still gives us the occasion to listen to the ethico-religious call and to respond. According to Levinas my ethico-religious response can take two forms. First it takes the form of apology. I apologize because I have so much and the other so little. Today the face of the poor invades the center of our consciousness through television, radio, books, magazines, newspapers, internet, e-mail...The destitute criticize my theology, my philosophy, my ideology, my establishment, my security. To them I ask forgiveness. The second, more positive response is called 'donation'. By donation Levinas does not mean merely giving money, because one can give money simply to get rid of the beggars. Donation means to share the best of one’s life in solidarity with the others: knowledge, attention, care, and consequently also some material support, while struggling for a more just society for all. The paradox is that at the moment of donation, of sharing, I received much more from the poor, something unnamed which transforms my self into an ethical person. It is a moment of grace which relates me to the other and unites us both together in the communion with God. The gulf is bridged. Then and only then we can pray and the Lord will answer: “Here I am”. May the God of Lazarus have mercy on us!

In honor of those who suffer all kinds of injustice, let us listen to this following story:

It was early December 1997. I was invited to be a facilitator in a training session for human right activists in East Timor. There were 24 participants. During the first three days the interaction process was very difficult. There was too much feeling of anger, resentment, suspicion and woundedness which blocked the process. So, one of my colleagues asked if I could lead a prayer service and sharing, where the participants could express their traumatic feelings. In the evening we gathered in a small chapel. All of us sat on the floor in a circle. In the middle we lit a candle. It was an Advent candle. We read the beautiful text of Isaiah 35 which announced the coming of the Lord to save his people. We also read Isaiah 65: 17-25 about the new heavens and new earth. Then I asked the participants to share. Several of them talked and we listened. Then a woman, a very thin woman, stood up, walked to the middle, sat beside the candle and told us a long story of suffering. Her name was Alexandrina. We called her Adina.

When she was about 6 years old her parents were arrested by the Indonesian soldiers. Since then she never saw them again. Some eyewitnesses said that they were shot in the forest. Adina was left behind with her elder brother who had joined the Fretelin freedom fighters struggling for the independence of East Timor. Some years later her brother was captured by the Indonesian soldiers. They tortured him, cut off his penis, and let him slowly die a horrible death. Adina wept bitterly over the death of her only brother, but she swore to herself to continue the struggle. When Adina was in senior high school, the military arrested her while giving food to a young man who came to the village. They accused her of being a collaborator of Fretelin. They tortured her until she was half conscious and raped her.

At this point Adina could not continue her story. Tears filled our eyes. There was a long silence in the chapel. I do not know how long, but it seemed like ages. Then Adina gathered all her strength, see looked at me and said in a faint voice: “Father, where is that salvation promised by the Lord?” Again there was silence. I could not answer her question. Tears flowed. Slowly I raised my eyes and saw a wooden cross on the wall. I saw it and understood the solidarity of the Crucified One, but I could not utter a single word. Adina needed my solidarity, not my word. For several years I have been living with her question.

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There are millions of stories like this in Asia and many parts of the world. May the Spirit of the Lord help the disciples of Jesus in Asia to weave the narratives of Jesus with the living stories of people in Asia and thus transform the ‘Asian Drama’ into the Good News of Salvation.