

**Homily at the Opening Eucharist  
of the Meeting of Bishops and Women- Theologians**

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12-05-2008**

Your Excellencies, My dear Brother-Bishops and My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It is indeed a rare privilege and a distinct honour for me to be with you, and to preside over this Eucharistic Celebration, marking the opening of this unique meeting of Bishops and Women-Theologians, organized by the women's Desk of the FABC office of Laity and Family in collaboration with the FABC Office of Theological concerns. As the Chairman of the FABC Office of Laity and Family, I deem it my pleasant duty to welcome you all to this epoch-making meeting. Our gratitude goes first of all to His Excellency, Bishop Luis Tagle for his proper guidance and direction towards the organization of this meeting, and to Rev. Fr. Vimal, the Secretary of the FABC Office of Theological concerns for his untiring efforts and to Mrs. Virginia, the main driving force behind the organization of this meeting and to scores of other dedicated men and women behind the curtain, whose sweat and toil add to the meticulous perfection in organizing this meeting.

At the very outset itself, I wish to spell out the three main objectives of this meeting, which I am sure all of you are aware of. They are:

- To dispel myths about the women's movement in the Church in Asia, so that women can be given greater opportunities to be present and active in the Church's mission of love and service.
- To help Bishops be more appreciative of the contribution of women and of women - theologians to the life and mission of the Church.
- To help, the Church in Asia to uphold women's dignity and function by encouraging their role in the Church's life including her intellectual life.

These are only our hopes and aspirations, dreams and desires. We are placing all of them before God, invoking His abundant blessings upon our deliberations and discussions, so that we may discern His will and will be fortified in our efforts and initiatives for the realization of these objectives and goals. We will try our best during these days to understand the real situation of women in Asia, the difficulties and hardships they encounter; the hopes and aspirations, they cherish; the reasonable expectations they entertain in the involvement in the participatory structures of the Church. We will also try to see the subtle difference between the Asian Feminism and its counterpart in the western countries.

I am confident that the discussions and deliberations, the inputs and insights of this meeting and its emerging conclusions and inevitable convictions will certainly lead the Asian Church, to borrow Cardinal Newman's phraseology, one step forward towards the

recognition and appreciation of the contribution of women to the life and mission of the Church.

This is a rare meeting of the Bishops and women-theologians. The caption of this meeting is arresting, though-provoking and to some extent, curious. The expression 'women-theologian' may sound a bit strange and cute and many eye-brows will be raised as to what does it mean. And in fact a few weeks ago, when the details of this conference were presented in the meeting of the FABC Central Committee, someone raised this question. Who is a theologian? or when does a person qualifies himself or herself to be called a theologian?

When we speak of theologians, what comes first to our mind are usually the figures of great saints and eminent scholars like St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Rhaner, Schillebeux, Hans Kung, Ratzinger of recent times. In our major Seminaries we divide the Seminarians into two groups and call them Philosophers and Theologians, of course, meaning that they are students undergoing training in these respective disciplines. To be qualified as a theologian, some may insist that one should hold a doctorate or at least a Licentiate or a Master's degree in Theology. Well and good.

But now when I think of what is theology, I presume that, sometimes even an ordinary person can be called a theologian. Basically theology is a reflection of faith in the context of one's daily life and anyone who contributes to the development of theology is a theologian in the broad sense of the word. Our personal experience of faith, our life-situation, our talents and competence in various disciplines have a place in the process of theologizing. I would like to illustrate this point with the help of a few examples.

Besides my theological studies in the seminary, I was fortunate enough to do my advance studies in the Biblical Institutions, both in Rome and Jerusalem. This has injected in me an exalted feeling that in matters of faith I am the Guru, and that there hardly remains anything which I could learn from others. But later on, as I grew older and shoulder greater pastoral responsibility this complacent feeling has given way to practical wisdom wherein I realize that almost everyday I could learn something new, something worthwhile from many people. I have in my Archdiocese more than 1500 SCCs or Small Christian Communities. Their weekly gathering centers around the Word of God, its reflection and practical application. Sometimes I join their meetings quite informally and without prior information. And I should say that quite often I am amazed and deeply touched by the way the ordinary, simple people, often illiterate, interpret the Word of God, elicit beautiful messages and derive valuable practical lessons from the Scripture passages. Today I am all the more convinced that the Holy Spirit not only works in the Bishops, Priests and scholars, but also assists the simple, unassuming and the so called ordinary people in the proper understanding of the Word in the context of their daily life. Are these people not theologians, who contribute by their life- experiences towards a better understanding of our deposit of faith? I have no inhibition whatsoever to call them theologians, at least in the wider context of the term.

Another example could be of a young fisherman, poor, illiterate but courageous. It was reported that during his colloquy with his parish priest, prior to his marriage, he told his parish priest that Father, Son and the Holy Spirit are three gods, which naturally annoyed

the priest. But later on, I noticed him in one of our documentary films, produced by the Media Commission, depicting the hard life of the fishermen who form almost 90% of the Catholics. During the monsoon season, when the sea is rough, waves are violent and currents are unpredictable making the normal fishing process impossible, fishermen find alternative means and methods of fishing. In a particular place, there is an old bridge extending beyond the tormented waves and troubled waters. People used to drop their country craft and fishing nets and then jump into the sea. This particular youngman was also seen trying to jump into sea from the edge of the bridge. For a moment, his expression betrayed him; probably he was afraid to jump into the rough sea. But then he was seen perplexed, his eyes wandered here and there and a deep sigh from within. May be he was thinking of the miserable plight of his family. If he were to return home empty hand, his whole family will have to starve. Then the expression on his face changed, one could notice the determination on his face. He looks up to heaven, makes the sign of the Cross and plunges into the sea. It was quite obvious that he did not even bother himself by the question whether there are three gods or only one God. He might not even thought of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit as he was making the sign of the Cross. But one thing he knew that he needed the Divine assistance in the midst of such a devastating situation and placed his abject trust in God. We hesitate to call him a theologian. Is he not someone more than a theologian?

The deep faith of this poor young man, his trust in God and his readiness to risk his life for the sake of his family remind me of a little story, perhaps familiar to most of us, narrated by Tony D' Mello in his Book "The Song of the Bird".

A Bishop was travelling by a ship. The ship stopped in a remote village. As the Bishop was strolling along the seashore he came across three fishermen mending their nets. He was impressed to hear from them that they were Christians baptized by certain missionaries long ago. At the same time the Bishop was shocked to see that they knew nothing about Christian faith and did not know even the Lord's Prayer.

"What do you say, then, when you pray?" asked the Bishop. They said: "We lift our eyes to heaven and say "we are three, you are three, have mercy on us". This was something downright heretical. So the Bishop spent the whole day teaching them the Lord's prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had, and before the Bishop sailed away, he had the satisfaction of hearing them, go through the whole formula without a fault.

Months later the Bishop's ship happened to pass by those islands and the bishop was recalling with pleasure the fact that he taught the three fishermen the correct formula of the Lord's Prayer. While he was lost in thoughts, he happened to look up and notice a spot of light in the east. The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water towards the boat. The captain stopped the boat and all the sailors leaned over the rails to see this amazing sight. The Bishop recognized that these three figures are the same three fishermen from the island. They greeted the bishop and asked him to do them a favour. "What do you want?" asked the Bishop. They said: "Bishop, we are sorry to inform you that we forgot the beautiful prayer you had taught us. Please teach us the prayer again".

The Bishop, himself a theologian, felt humbled before these three fishermen and told them: "Go back to your homes, my dear friends and each time you pray say "we are three, you are three, have mercy on us". Yes, the ordinary people, though ignorant, are often much closer to God than many learned people.

The greatest theologian is Jesus Christ. Even Jesus seems to have once been defeated in argument by a poor woman. One of the touching incidents we come across in the Gospels is the conversation between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. She loved her daughter very much who was unfortunately afflicted by a demon. She was desperately in need of the cure of her daughter. She had tremendous faith in Jesus and was ready to undergo any sacrifice or humiliation to get this favour from Jesus. The Jews, on the other hand considered the Canaanites as their enemies and hated them. They were hurling contemptuous remarks on these Canaanites and went even up to the point of calling them dogs. With the intention of presenting the faith of the Canaanite woman as an example to the Jews, Jesus for a moment pretends to agree with the Jews and says, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs". Back came the reply full of faith and humility: "True, but even dogs get their share of the crumbs which fall from their master's table". Jesus' eyes lit up with joy at such indomitable faith and presenting this faith as a model to all, Jesus said to the woman: "Woman, great in your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish."

My dear friends, I hope that I am not misunderstood. I have no intention of playing down the importance of academic achievements, intellectual speculations and scholarly writings in the process of theologizing. What I am trying to underscore is that at the bottom of all theological speculations and ramifications, there should be a strong basis of child-like trust in God, purity of heart and the ability to read and interpret the signs of times in the light of faith. In all earnestness, I should say, with profound gratitude to God, that in my Archdiocese, the Gospel is effectively proclaimed, faith is kept alive, liturgy is rendered lively, meaningful and attractive and acts of charity in thousands are being carried out by and through the Small Christian Communities. I do not claim these positive traits to be unique for my Archdiocese alone. By and large, almost all dioceses in Asia can claim their achievements. Now the pertinent question is to whom shall we attribute the credit to such an amazing vibrant Church in Asia? To a large extent, the credit goes to the tens of thousands of ordinary, simple people, especially the women, whose commitment to the Church and loyalty to the Lord are unfathomable and unquestionable. To me, these simple people count much more than the illustrious theologians. At this, I am reminded of the words of Jesus: "I thank thee, Father Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to the babes" (Mt. 1, 25).

The women in Asia are today looking up to the Bishops and theologians with hope. May the outcome of this meeting and the fruits of our deliberations help the Bishops of Asia to appreciate and recognize the contribution of women towards the growth of the Church in Asia and assure the women the dawn of a new era of assuming their legitimate and rightful place and role in the Church in Asia.

Thank You  
God Bless You!