

Triple dialogue of Asian church may re-evangelize the West

PENTECOST IN ASIA: A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH

By Thomas C. Fox
Orbis Books, 238 pages, \$25

Reviewed by PAUL F. KNITTER

For me, and I suspect for many NCR readers, this book could not have been better timed. Nowadays it's not easy to be a Catholic. There are the lingering odors of the scandal of priestly sexual abuse of children, overwhelmed only by the stronger odor of episcopal cover-up; more generally, there is what Garry Wills dubs "the coup" by which the present papal administration has attempted to take over the post-Vatican II church. It's hard to hope that the vision of that council will survive.

The Asian church offers such hope. In fact, one might call the Asian churches a "light to the nations" and to churches of the West. Thomas Fox's careful description of this "new way of being church" provides struggling Catholics everywhere with both inspiration and direction.

Such inspiration is grounded in what Fox, a veteran Asia reporter, identifies as the defining character of this new way of being church: dialogue. Already in its first plenary meeting in 1974, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences announced that they could be truly an Asian church only through a triple dialogue — with the poor, with cultures, and with other religions. Only by speaking with and learning from

the millions of victims of injustice, as well as the spiritualities and cultures that have nurtured their people for ages — only so could they give witness to the gospel, only so could they really understand the gospel.

Such a triple dialogue has enabled the Asian bishops to get their priorities straight. They have clearly and firmly (despite Vatican admonitions) affirmed a kingdom-centered understanding of church. The reign of God is more important than the church; the church is the servant of, a means to the end of, the reign. This means that converting others to work for the reign of God and its justice is more important than converting them to membership in the church — though the two are certainly not opposed.

Hope for the rest of the church is also found in the way the Asian bishops came to such a new vision of church: by talking to each other and by doing so in the presence of their theologians and pastoral workers. Again, dialogue, this time internal, defines the Asian church. Such dialogue was first made possible with the help of Pope Paul VI when during his 1970 Asian trek he en-

couraged the bishops to found what was to become the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences. The Asian bishops have been meeting regularly ever since.

And not just in plenaries. From the mid-1970s through the '90s, Asian bishops have also participated in social and inter-religious institutes that enabled them to live in contexts of poverty, or to talk and pray with practitioners of other faiths. Fox describes these experiences as among the most formative factors in the new way of being church: bishops who are not afraid to get their hands dirty and their spirits stretched.

From my perspective, a particularly inspiring font of hope in the Asian churches is in the gentle but persistent way the bishops and theologians have pursued their Asian vision of church, despite equally persistent opposition from the Vatican. Fox describes dramatically the curial, sometimes papal, efforts to rein in what was happening in the federation — already at its inception in 1972 ("Rome doesn't want to lose control": Cardinal Stephen

Kim Sou-hwan of Seoul), at the fifth plenary meeting in 1990 (Cardinal Jozef Tomko questioning Asia's theology of mission), and the warnings and condemnations throughout the '90s (culminating in Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's *Dominus Iesus*).

But the staunchest confrontations came in the Synod of Asian bishops in Rome in 1998. In criticizing the pre-synodal *lineamenta* (guidelines), in disagreeing, in the

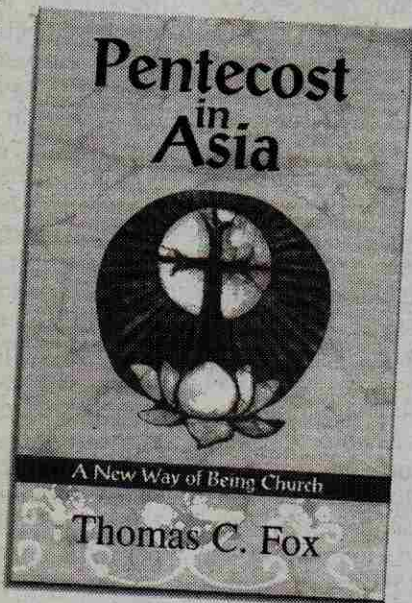
presence of the pope, with the official working document (*instrumentum laboris*), and in dealing with the official Vatican summary in the encyclical *Ecclesia in Asia*, the Asian bishops seem to have found new courage in stating what they feel is essential to being a truly Asian church. Genuine differences with Rome emerged in how to understand key doctrines — like collegiality, or the primary purpose of mission or the meaning of Christ's uniqueness.

Yet while differences are real, confrontation has been avoided. In this, the Asians offer the rest of the church not only hope but a lesson. As Fox puts it, to all the concerns of Rome, the bishops' answer was "Yes, but ... " Yes, we hear your concerns. But we have to continue to respond to the pastoral demands of being an Asian church.

Such polite, smiling resolve is grounded, Fox makes clear, in the solid fact that the majority of Asian bishops are pastors before they are prelates — and in the simple conviction that "Rome doesn't get it." Rome is West and Asia is East and at least during this pontificate, the twain will not meet. In the meantime, as one of the Asian cardinals put, "they [Rome] have filtered out our contributions. When we return to our countries, we shall also be filtering their documents."

Fox quotes an Indian layman (Joseph Kurian): Many Asian Catholics feel they "may have to take up the responsibility of re-evangelizing the church in the West." We hope so. □

Paul F. Knitter is emeritus professor of theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati.



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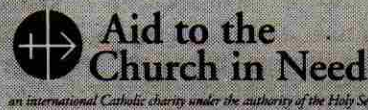
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