

Germany: Annual Conference “Global Church and Mission” on “Eco-social Transformation and the Global Church”, 22-24 May, 2023

*Address for 23rd May 2023*

**CLIMATE CRISIS AND ECO-SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION FROM AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE**  
**Cardinal Oswald Gracias**

My dear delegates at the annual conference of the German Conference for Global Church and Mission, a very good morning to each and every one of you.

I must say that your chosen theme – *Eco-social Transformation and the Global Church* – strikes a chord and resonates with me. How apt, how timely! I often say that the root of all our problems is our inhumanity – our inhumanity to each other and our neighbours, our inhumanity to creation. The dire situation of our world today is but a manifestation of our inhumanity. This inhumanity stems from sin. And what is sin, but a failure to love, in action, God with all our heart, soul and mind, and each other as ourself.<sup>1</sup> This failure has resulted in, as Pope Francis puts it, the three vital relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself, being broken outwardly and within us.<sup>2</sup> Thus, Jesus calls us to conversion and repentance, to a righting of relationships. Our faith sets the path to restoration, and in our times, we achieve restoration through eco-social transformation. We have to first transform our own inhumanity to humanity and set aside our hopelessness and despair in order to effect an eco-social transformation in the world around us.

Today, I am immensely pleased to have the opportunity to interact with you. I have been briefed that everyone participating in this conference works for international projects of the Church or is professionally involved in relief, environmental, scientific work and in international contexts. In other words, having undergone a conversion yourself, all of you are now being the salt of the earth<sup>3</sup> and the light of the world<sup>4</sup>. You are working towards a global eco-social transformation, and for that you have my deep respect and gratitude. I truly appreciate the impact your work has had all around the world.

**Personal Experience**

I am especially thankful, because your work sowed the seeds of my own ecological conversion. Perhaps some of you may already know this, but let me tell you how Misereor put the climate crisis into focus at the FABC, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, during my term as its President. Around fifteen years ago, Misereor strongly urged the FABC into organising two key seminars on climate change. Up until then, climate change was a very abstract concept, something for scientists to deal with. Indeed, much of Asia was already severely affected by climate change, but perhaps the general public and among our Church circles, we did not really see the association between climate change and its impacts. But at those seminars, we were taken through the complexities of global warming, its causes and effects by experts within and beyond Asia. We heard testimonies of people who today we would term “climate refugees” – displaced because their home islands were engulfed by the rising sea. We were enlightened. Climate change became and remains a crisis that has to be

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<sup>1</sup> cf. *Matthew* 22:37-38

<sup>2</sup> cf. *Laudato Si’* 66

<sup>3</sup> cf. *Matthew* 5:13

<sup>4</sup> cf. *Matthew* 5:14

dealt with in the here and now, not something to be tackled in the future. We began to discern a response.

In my Archdiocese of Bombay, I established an Office for Environment in 2013, and prior to that we dedicated the year 2010 to the care of creation. As residents of the tropical coastal city that is Mumbai, we are keenly aware of the need for urgent action. I am addressing you from a linear distance of less than 500 metres from the Arabian Sea, and the very place I am in will be submerged in three to four decades<sup>5</sup> in the business-as-usual scenario! Just ten days ago, a heat wave was declared<sup>6</sup> and the temperature is still above normal. The high humidity takes a physical toll, and we are painfully conscious of the millions of poor and vulnerable in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region alone who have no air conditioners or access to other means of thermal comfort. Many of them work outdoors in blue collar jobs or in poorly ventilated spaces. This heat wave is already the fourth since March to be declared for the region by the meteorological authority.<sup>7</sup> Thanks to a good monsoon, the seven lakes supplying water to Mumbai were nearly full in October 2022.<sup>8</sup> Seven months later, the water stock has dipped below 25%.<sup>9</sup> We are anxiously awaiting the monsoon not just to replenish the water supply, but also for a respite from the heat. This is only one city. India expects a normal to below monsoon this season, however, El Niño conditions are evolving in the Pacific Ocean and climate scientists are uncertain about how much it will impact our rainy season.<sup>10</sup> In most of South Asia, El Niño heralds reduced rainfall and increased drought.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Asian Context**

The heatwave extends to Asia, with Bangladesh, Thailand, and Laos seeing, with India, record temperatures of up to 45 degrees Celsius in April.<sup>12</sup> China, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines are other Asian countries currently tracking unusually high temperatures.<sup>13</sup> The signs of the times unequivocally signal great danger. I am sure you are already aware that just this last Wednesday, the World Meteorological Organisation said that for the first time ever, global temperatures are now more likely than not to breach 1.5 degrees Celsius of warming, the long-term threshold above preindustrial levels set out in the 2015 Paris Agreement, within the next five years – a 66% chance of temporarily reaching 1.5C by 2027.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, the FABC concluded its first General Conference – called FABC 50 – which took place in Bangkok last year; and this March, we released the conference’s final document. Though the breadth and depth of Asia makes it truly difficult to understand the diversity of issues that impact this vast continent, the climate crisis which endangers our common home

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/climate-change-2050-why-mumbai-may-get-that-sinking-feeling-122111300289\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/climate-change-2050-why-mumbai-may-get-that-sinking-feeling-122111300289_1.html)

<sup>6</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/cyclone-mocha-sounds-heatwave-alert-in-konkan-and-north-maharashtra/articleshow/100215508.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://weather.com/en-IN/india/news/news/2022-10-25-monsoon-officially-departs-mumbai-lakes-98-percent-full-wettest-october>

<sup>9</sup> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/levels-of-water-in-seven-lakes-supplying-to-mumbai-dip-below-25/articleshow/99945791.cms>

<sup>10</sup> <https://thewire.in/environment/el-nino-india-temperature-rainfall>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-65631464>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/business/environment/more-likely-than-not-world-will-soon-see-15c-warming-wmo-2023-05-17/>

was identified as one of the nine major priorities.<sup>15</sup> Continuing in the path of synodality that we bishops of Asia walked during the General Conference, permit me now to quote extensively from the relevant sections of the FABC 50's Final Document, as it is their voices and the voices of the peoples and creation of Asia that the text represents. You will notice that there are barely any figures or data, this is a deliberate choice. After all, as a member of my diocese once put it, "Numbers may scream, but they don't feel." While we do not undervalue in any way the significance of robust data and evidence-based information, the synodal process is, at its core, a discernment process. A discernment process led by the Holy Spirit can never lead us astray, and it is precisely such an outcome that I present to you on behalf of the Church in Asia.

I start with how we framed the challenge of the climate crisis:

"Indeed, we recognize that a long-term challenge facing humankind in the 21st century is the human-made climate change and the associated ecological crisis. Countless people in Asia are already suffering due to weather extremes, drought, typhoons, deforestation and forest fires, and conflicts over water use. Water availability has direct consequences on the food supply. Given that Asia is home to many of the countries that are vulnerable to climate change, millions of people already suffer due to rising sea levels, air, soil and water pollution, the "throwaway mentality", the loss of biodiversity, and waste management. All of these are crimes against nature and future generations."<sup>16</sup>

At this point, I would like to interject that while the climate emergency may be the most pressing ecological concern, it is by no means the only one. Thus, the recognition of pollution, biodiversity loss and other ecological catastrophes that have an unfortunate tendency to get side-lined as the focus on climate change intensifies. We must be careful not to succumb to this pitfall.

We went on to sense that the Spirit calls us to care for our common home.<sup>17</sup> This entails:

1. Dialoguing with creation and intergenerational solidarity: "As disciples of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, we need to enter into an intensive dialogue with creation. We are stewards of creation, not its masters. We owe it to the generations ahead of us that we keep the integrity of our common home as well as guarantee the future and dignity of future generations. Intergenerational solidarity is not an option, but rather a question of justice and surviving with dignity. The environment is on loan to each generation, and we are responsible for the way we leave it for those who follow."<sup>18</sup> Here, we acknowledge our mandate of being custodians of creation, our gratitude for those before us, and our responsibility for those after it.
2. Learning to sustainably deal with creation: "We need to learn from nature, as well as from the wisdom of our indigenous people who do not regard nature as something outside of themselves but rather as a mother who nurtures them. It is from them that we all have to learn how to deal with creation in a sustainable way, because they perceive nature as an integrally interconnected system, of which we are only a part. Unfortunately today the Asian countries record the highest increase of emissions. Hence, the governments in Asia on one hand, and on the other hand, the industrialized countries, who over time have been

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<sup>15</sup> FABC 50 Bangkok Document, 30

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 58

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 71

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 104

the primary emitters of greenhouse gasses as well as the profiteers of unsustainable production models need to urgently fulfill their part of the decisions relating to the Paris Agreement of 2015.”<sup>19</sup> Here, we acknowledge that we have to open ourselves to the human and other-than-human voices we have pushed to the peripheries, our interconnectedness with creation, the tensions between the Global North and South, and highlight the urgency for action. While not explicitly stated, the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is inherent.

3. Avoiding the cost of inaction: “We also learned that the costs of inaction are far greater than the costs of action, and if we go on like the past seven years after Paris, we will come out not even at 2.5 degree Celsius with disastrous consequences, especially for the poverty stricken people in Asia and the world over. Due to the high oil and gas prices exorbitant sums have been earned through the selling of fossil fuels. It is now crucial that we do not commit the lapses of the past, but that this money earned is utilized to create renewable energy, ensure energy efficiency and develop more cost-efficient transformative technologies.”<sup>20</sup> Here, we acknowledge how costly our collective failures have been, and the necessity of low carbon development pathways, technology transfer and funding.
4. Act concretely and in solidarity: “Responding to the Holy Father’s call for ecological conversion and climate action through his Encyclical *Laudato Si*, the Magna Carta of the Church relating to climate change, the FABC 50 General Conference made a strong plea that we put an end to our ecologically irresponsible and unsustainable habits and wasteful ways of life, and raise environmental awareness through the proactive promotion of ecologically-sound solid-liquid and gaseous-waste management, repudiate models of agriculture that depend on hazardous chemical fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, and eschew industries that depend on coal and other fossil-fuel-generated energy. We vowed as well to consciously promote the generation of clean and sustainable energy throughout Asia, starting with our own institutions in our particular Churches. We will also work with our indigenous peoples throughout Asia, as well as with all forces of civil society and representatives of governments, to rehabilitate our forests, our watersheds, and our coral reefs, to conserve wildlife, sustain indigenous biodiversity, and restore the ecosystem and biome.”<sup>21</sup> This is essentially a call to action and ecological justice, with an implicit need for building resilience.
5. Act concretely and collaboratively: “The move of some Conferences of bishops and individual dioceses to divest their institutions from investments in ‘dirty energy’, such as coal and fossil-fueled power, is one concrete move the Asian Church and society must emulate. We will build awareness in our region and strive to ensure that the Churches in the industrialized countries take the lead. Besides encouraging our Parishes and Religious Congregations to do so, the *Laudato Si* Movement and all Ecclesial bodies need to draw up action plans for their local situation, as well as plans on the level of the episcopal conferences and the FABC itself. In the light of ‘*Laudato Si*’, we also resolved to redouble our efforts towards advocacy, together with the other Continental Federations of Bishops’ Conferences, and for awareness building and action backed efforts so as to alleviate the agony of our people. We will furthermore open ourselves to ecumenical and interreligious initiatives related to climate concerns and action, as well as partnerships with civil society groups. We will strive to also cooperate with Government and Non-governmental

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 105

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 107

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 108

agencies to implement the *Laudato Si* goals of the Church, the targets of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the Sustainable Development Goals of the UN.”<sup>22</sup> This is an acknowledgement of the need of global and collective action, as well as top-down and bottom-up approaches.

At this stage, I am compelled to highlight the challenge of collaborative action in Asia. In all but two countries, Christians are in the minority, facing persecution in several parts of Asia. Spearheading interreligious dialogue and cooperation with Government agencies may well be fraught with danger. Sometimes divestment is not practical – in India, for example, the Church cannot choose where and how to invest but is required to strictly adhere to investing as per government regulations.

Nevertheless, we resolved to forge new pastoral priorities and pathways in Asia:

“We will consistently heed the call to pastoral and ecological conversion in the face of the present climate emergency in a manner that is truly sensitive to “both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.” We will go out of our way to partner with agencies that are committed to reducing our carbon footprints by repudiating the use of dirty energy and promoting the generation of clean and renewable energy. In the spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, we will unite ourselves with fellow Christians, fellow believers, and all fellow human beings in protecting the earth, our common home. We will consciously call on all our institutions to resolutely divest from investments in industries that are destructive of our environment.”<sup>23</sup>

I trust that you will agree with me that the Church in Asia is calling for an eco-social transformation here.

My quoting from the Bangkok Document ends by naming the other eight priorities the Asian bishops felt called to respond to, in order to better situate the eco-social transformation in Asia: “accompany migrants, refugees, indigenous people; give special attention to the family; open new roles of leadership to women in the Asian Church; address gender issues; minister to the youth; encourage the effective use of digital technology; promote an economy based on inclusive growth in the context of urbanization and globalization; and be bridge-builders and bridges, instruments of dialogue and reconciliation in Asia”<sup>24</sup>. It is evident that we are conscious of those on the peripheries, we understand that different groups are affected differently, that our world needs an ecological economics and that if we want to achieve an eco-social transformation, we must cultivate peace.

To summarise, the Church in Asia is aware of the gravity of the socio-ecological crisis. We are living it. We are experiencing it. We must change, we must transform. We must do so holistically.

### **Inadequate Action: Potential Factors**

And herein lies our greatest challenge and our deepest pitfall – to borrow from the theme of the International Day for Biological Diversity 2023 that we marked yesterday – moving *From Agreement to Action*. While the Asian Church agrees to urgently respond to the ecological crisis, our action – as much of the action the world over – falls short. Geopolitical issues and socioeconomic factors notwithstanding, when it comes to bishops, we simply have too many responsibilities competing for priority.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 109

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 159

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 71

At times, we are hesitant. The suffragan and adjacent Diocese of Vasai has achieved a 100% rate of shroud burial, but being very mindful of the people's sentiments, I must confess to being reluctant to push this through in the Archdiocese of Bombay. However, we have initiated an exploration into biodegradable coffins. A few parishes were involved in advocacy and protests with regards to the siting of a metro car shed in a dense green area just outside the limits of Mumbai's national park. College students were imprisoned and the parish schools are receiving legal notices from the government on "issues" seemingly dredged up from more than a decade ago. This is not to say we have no ecological initiatives, but at the diocesan level we are largely restricted to awareness and conscientisation, leaving action to the parishes. When adult teenagers are arrested when all that they were doing was participating in protests against tree-felling, I fear urging advocacy. Then there is the question of funding. As I mentioned earlier, we cannot choose our investments, and it is not as simple as putting down care for creation as a line item in our budget. Regardless, several parishes and schools have implemented robust and consistent waste management programmes, and have gone in for solar energy and rainwater harvesting. My auxiliary, Bishop Allwyn D'Silva, represents the Archdiocese of Bombay on the Parishes and Dioceses Working Group of the Laudato Si' Action Platform, he just completed a term as Chairperson of the Commission for Ecology of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, and is now Chairperson of the recently established Office for Environment and Climate Change of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. He is also the Chairperson of the FABC Office of Human Development and its Climate Change Desk, a testimony and recognition of our diocesan efforts.

Sometimes, the message does not quite resonate for us. We are in Laudato Si' Week with the theme *Hope for the Earth | Hope for Humanity*. The focus of the global celebration in 2023 is the movie *The Letter* chronicling the journey to Rome of four protagonists on the forefront of environmental protection to dialogue with Pope Francis on his invitation. One of these four is an Indian teenager whose actions after the devastating floods of 2013 in the state of Uttarakhand are featured in the movie. India, and Asia for that matter, lives daily the experiences featured in *The Letter*, so the feedback I received has been very lukewarm. "What's the point? We know we have to dialogue and come together, but there's a limit to what we can do," is what I've heard. The film generates solidarity, but does not seem to be the impetus for much action here. Having established dialogue as the thrust of the FABC during the past fifty years, one of the new pathways envisaged by FABC 50 is a move from proclamation to story-telling. Beyond purely evangelical contexts, we hope that sharing our own stories of the ecological crisis fosters deeper kinship among our whole human family and opens avenues for positive impacts on our other-than-human family. Of course, evangelisation also entails evangelising of the "Gospel of Creation".

We contend with geopolitical issues and socioeconomic factors. The border state of India's Manipur has just had its worst outburst of ethnic conflict.<sup>25</sup> Vehicles, schools, churches and houses were set ablaze.<sup>26</sup> The Church has raised an appeal for humanitarian aid. Needless to say, environmental concerns are not a priority at the moment despite Manipur, as most of Northeast India, being a biodiverse and ecologically significant area. In Myanmar, we have the Rohingyas. Asia is prone to political instability. I don't want to say much, and I don't need to expound further – after all I am speaking a to German audience, who are sadly too

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.ncregister.com/news/christians-targeted-in-bloody-ethnic-conflict-in-india-s-manipur-state>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/will-die-of-hunger-not-return-to-valley-bjp-letpao-separate-state-manipur-violence-2380463-2023-05-17>

familiar with the horrors of conflict, in Europe where the war in Ukraine has been raging for over a year now.

### **Hope, Our Role and Mission as Church**

My dear delegates, the role of the Church and its mission has not diminished in any way. We are living in an increasingly unequal and inherently unsustainable world. To the powers-that-be, the innumerable human and other-than-human lives being exterminated are mere inconveniences, or even necessary losses for the maintenance of an elevated, hedonistic standard of living of an elite few. I don't want to cause an upset, but we risk being caught up in net zero while our adaptation and mitigation efforts fall nightmarishly short. We talk and research about injecting particles in the atmosphere to avert the climate crisis, and even of escaping to the Moon or to Mars. How is such absurdity, if I may describe it as such, a feasible option for all of creation? This is where our faith has much to offer the world, this is the strength of our social teaching – subsidiarity, solidarity, preferential option for the poor, care for creation – to counter our inhumanity. As we learnt from *Laudato Si'* – in beginning with a change in humanity, we address the ethical and spiritual roots of environmental problems – selfishness, greed, apathy, a disconnect with the natural world; in contrast to scientific, technological, political or market-based solutions that only address the symptoms, and cannot bring about the desperately necessary eco-social transformation.<sup>27</sup>

Always, there is hope. Recall that we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In Asia, we are seeing investments in mass public transport, we are going in for climate-resilient agriculture, and collectives and co-operatives are seeing a fair degree of success despite the seemingly insurmountable changes and a failing economy. May we continue walking in synodality, guided by the Holy Spirit and blessed by our Mother Mary, to avert the crisis and actualise the transformation.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>27</sup> cf. *Laudato Si'* 9, 144